



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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Luke Fildes
(1843-1927)
The Doctor
1891

23-09 SOCIAL REALISM AND VICTORIAN MORALITY

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This talk moves through the social fabric of Victorian Britain as artists chose to paint it — not the grand sweep of history or the flattery of portraiture, but the doctor at the bedside, the seamstress at two in the morning, the fallen woman beneath Waterloo Bridge. From Wilkie and Frith to Millais, Watts, and Holman Hunt, we examine how genre painting became a vehicle for moral argument, documentary urgency, and, occasionally, quiet political courage.



Luke Fildes (1843-1927)
The Doctor
1891
Tate Britain, London

Luke Fildes (1843-1927), *The Doctor*, 1891, Tate Britain, London

Genre painting sat between portraiture and history painting in the academic hierarchy, yet by the mid-nineteenth century it had become a vehicle for documenting brutal urban realities, and no single work illustrates that tension more sharply than **Luke Fildes's *The Doctor***. Fildes, born in Liverpool in 1843, came from radical stock — his grandmother **Mary Fildes** was injured at **Peterloo**. Trained as an illustrator, he brought a journalist's eye to social subject painting. When **Sir Henry Tate** commissioned a work in 1890, Fildes drew on personal grief: the death of his infant son Philip Luke in 1877, and the quiet devotion of their physician, **Dr Gustavus Murray**. The painting shows a night vigil at the critical hour before dawn. The shaft of light breaking through the cottage window signals the child's imminent recovery. The doctor's pose — still, watchful, authoritative — deliberately recalls **Michelangelo's Lorenzo de' Medici**, nicknamed Il Pensieroso, The Thoughtful One. The implication is clear: the doctor occupies a thinking class, and the ragged parents are dependent on him for physical salvation as they depend on their priest for spiritual redemption. Exhibited at the **Royal Academy in 1891**, an engraving sold over a million copies in America alone, making it one of the most profitable prints Agnew's ever produced.

Notes

In this talk I combine subject painting also called genre painting, that is, those that tell a story with Social Realism, those that tell a story about the poor. A genre painting can be about any everyday subject and social realism concerns serious social issues.

All such paintings were very popular throughout the Victorian period and took many forms.

This is *The Doctor* by Luke Fildes. It tells a story, shows the lives of the poor and represents an everyday scene that includes a child. It has been described as sentimental but what lifts a work of art from the 'merely' sentimental is a better understanding of the social circumstances and intent behind the painting. An academic reading is much more difficult if we become 'entangled' in the emotions of a work. Here we see a night vigil beside a child. When I saw this painting at the Tate with a group of art historians the feminist view was that it shows the power of the male doctor. The way he sits reminds us of Lorenzo de' Medici carved by Michelangelo (1520-1534, tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, containing figures of Dawn and Dusk). The figure has been nicknamed *Il Pensieroso*, 'The Thoughtful One'. The implication is that the doctor is a different class, a thinking class, and the poor people are dependent on him for physical salvation as they depend on their priest for religious salvation.

In 1890, Sir Henry Tate (1819-98) commissioned a painting from Luke Fildes, the subject of which was left to his own discretion. The artist chose to recall a personal tragedy of his own, when in 1877 his first son, Philip Luke, had died at the age of one in his Kensington home. Fildes' son and biographer wrote, 'The character and bearing of their doctor throughout the time of their anxiety, made a deep impression on my parents. Dr. Murray became a symbol of professional devotion which would one day inspire the painting of *The Doctor*'.

Fildes's painting was also inspired by the professional devotion of Dr Gustavus Murray who treated him. But this work shows the moment when a child shows the first sign of recovery. The redeeming light of dawn is shining on the child. In order to make the picture convincing Fildes constructed a cottage interior in his studio. He began work at dawn each day to catch the

exact light conditions. The image of an ordinary doctor's quiet heroism was a huge success with the late-Victorian public

Fildes chose a rustic interior with the boy's father resting his hand on the shoulder of his wife whose hands are clasped in prayer. The man is bravely looking into the face of the thoughtful doctor trying to read any sign of recovery. They are poor, there is a scrap of carpet on the floor and their clothes are ragged but the child has been given medicine and the bowl and the jug of water used to try to reduce his temperature. The scraps of paper on the floor could be prescriptions made out by the doctor and now taken. Fildes described the shaft of daylight as signifying the imminent recovery of the child. He wrote,

'At the cottage window the dawn begins to steal in – the dawn that is the critical time of all deadly illnesses – and with it the parents again take hope into their hearts, the mother hiding her face to escape giving vent to her emotion, the father laying his hand on the shoulder of his wife in encouragement of the first glimmerings of the joy which is to follow'.

A year later it was exhibited at the Royal Academy and an engraving was published that sold more than a million copies in America alone. It became one of the most profitable prints Agnews had ever produced. Tate paid Fildes £3,000 for the painting and he donated it and 56 other pictures as a gift to the nation in 1897 and it became that start of the Tate collection.

Is Sentimental Art Unforgiveable?

Why do many critics and art historians find sentimental Victorian art unforgiveable? It might be that art historians look down on art that appeals to popular taste or because the emotional themes – childhood and especially child death, forsaken love, animals, sunsets, heart-rending stories and pathetic scenes – now seem hackneyed or trivialised. It is sentimental and so trivialises deep human emotions. Sentiment reduces all emotions to comfort and warmth. In the 18th century sentimentality was the reliance on feelings as a guide to truth and was much in vogue among the polite. By the end of the 19th century it was seen as false and in modern times, as Oscar Wilde said, 'A sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it'.

The term 'sentimental' is often associated with Victorian genre painting but I will show that many paintings concerned social issues and morality.

Alternatively, it could be that we see Victorian subject painting as trying to manipulate us by the use of emotion and manipulative images. We are used to being manipulated by advertising as so Victorian art could be seen as debased by similar motives. In this case not for commercial gain but to persuade us that the religious, social and political systems are in our best interests. For example, the 'deserving poor' are shown in a way that convinces us that everything is being done to correct the situation.

Some later critics and art historians even believe that all painting that tries to tell a story is dishonest because it is not the job of the medium. Each art should focus on what best suits the medium so story telling is the task of writing and painting should be concerned with putting colours on a flat surface.

Sir (Samuel) Luke Fildes (1843–1927)

- Illustrator and genre and portrait painter, was born on 18 October 1843 at 22 Standish Street, Liverpool, the fourth of the ten children.
- His grandmother, Mary Fildes, was a radical reformer (Manchester Female Reformers Society) who was injured at the Peterloo massacre.
- Trained as an illustrator. Government Art Training School and RA School.
- Influenced by Millais.
- Five large social realist paintings, praised for their realism but criticized as inappropriate subject matter for fine art.
- Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward (exh. RA, 1874; Royal Holloway College, Egham), 23 freezing adults, children and babies waiting for food and a bed.
- The Widower (National Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; reduced version, 1902, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), man looking after five children, one sick
- Return of a Penitent (1879, City Hall, Cardiff), a young woman returns to find the old cottage deserted
- The Village Wedding (ex Christies, 12 June 1992), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1883, young newly marrieds walking down the street followed by wedding guests

- The Doctor (exh. RA, 1891; Tate collection)
- Friend Henry Woods (1846-1921, painter and illustrator, Neo-Venetian School, RA 1893), married his sister Fanny had six children.
- Compassionate, caring, loving, affectionate.
- 1879 associate RA, 1887 RA, knighted 1906.
- Admired by Van Gogh, took up portrait painting late in life and his main rival was John Singer Sargent.
- Fellow social realist painters included Frank Holl and Hubert von Herkomer, also David Wilkie and Thomas Faed and later Richard Redgrave and George Frederick Watts.



David Wilkie (1785-1841)
The Village Holiday
1809-11
Tate Britain

David Wilkie (1785-1841), *The Village Holiday*, 1809-11, Tate Britain

David Wilkie painted **Village Festival** in **1812**, and its shifting sequence of titles — from Public-House Door through Alehouse Door to *Village Holiday* — tells you exactly how anxiously he calibrated his audience. The final title nodded deliberately to **David Teniers the Younger**, the Flemish painter of common life whose influence shaped Wilkie from his Edinburgh training onward. Born in Fife in **1785**, the son of a minister, Wilkie arrived in London aged twenty with no money and enormous ambition. By **1807**, President of the Royal Academy **Benjamin West** already considered him a great painter, and the collector **John Julius Angerstein** bought **Village Festival** for **900 guineas**. After Angerstein's death, the British government purchased thirty-eight of his finest works to form the founding collection of the **National Gallery**. The painting poses a sharp moral question about drink beneath a surface of warm, crowded sociability. A wife and daughter fight to pull a husband away from his companions; a sot raises a bottle with a face the **Saturday Magazine** called absolutely perfect; the landlord pours ale while keeping himself just sober enough to make his guests tipsy. Wilkie was lionised, knighted in **1836**, appointed Painter in Ordinary to three successive monarchs, and is now almost entirely forgotten.

Notes

Let us begin with everyday life by David Wilkie, a master of the genre.

Wilkie first called the painting Public-House Door, then Alehouse Door (more polite), then Village Holiday and finally Village Festival (a title often used by Teniers).

Scottish born David Wilkie became a star of the London art world. Much admired for his moralising and humorous narratives of everyday life. He is virtually unknown today. This is about virtue and vice, in this case drink.

It was exhibited in 1812 and bought by John Julius Angerstein, an important collector, for 900 guineas. After his death 38 of his finest paintings were bought by the British government to form the nucleus of the collection of the National Gallery. Until the National Gallery was built in Trafalgar Square, the works were displayed in his town house in Pall Mall.

Sir George Beaumont bought The Blind Fiddler in 1808 for 50 guineas and then wrote to Wilkie enclosing a cheque for an additional £50 as the rising fame of Wilkie made Beaumont feel in his debt. Wilkie returned the cheque although only three years previously he had been so poor he considered returning to Scotland.

Bio:David Wilkie (1785-1841)

Born in Fife, the son of a Reverend. Trained in Edinburgh and painted in the style of David Teniers the Younger (Flemish, Antwerp, 900 paintings) stories of common life.

Went to London 1805 aged 20 and enrolled in RA School. No money so turned to portraiture and a genre subject was commissioned and accepted by the RA and hung in prime position.

Patron Sir George Beaumont, by 1807 President Benjamin West already considered him a great painter.

ARA 1809 RA 1811.

In 1820 he was commissioned by the Duke of Wellington to paint Chelsea Pensioners (1822) for which he paid 1,200 guineas cash.

His mother and eldest brother died in 1824 and his other older brother died in 1825. Both brothers left children to be taken care of. He had long been prone to nervous illness, brought on by anxiety and by 1825 he had become

too tense paint and he travelled abroad.

His European travels resulted in a looser less detailed style.

He was made Painter in Ordinary to George IV (following Thomas Lawrence) and William IV the same year (1830) and then Queen Victoria. He found portraits difficult and failed with Victoria.

He was knighted in 1836 and made chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in 1841.

He went to the Holy Land in 1840 and made many sketches and his style may have changed again on his return but he died suddenly on the steamer home and was buried at sea.

He never married and was a private man.

Notes

Although was seen this as a painting with a moral message concerning the evils of drink at the time and during the nineteenth century it is described as a jolly, friendly scene of an inn that reviewers would love to visit.

Writers point out the attractive landlady, the skill with which the landlord pours the foaming beer into a glass and the jolly black man having a joke with him.

A different description was provided by The Saturday Magazine, 1842, Volume 20, page 50,

This picture represents the circumstances likely to occur at the door of a village alehouse on a warm summer evening when the labours of the day are done and its fatigues have tempted some of the villagers to take something more than their needful repose.

It consists of three principal groups and several subordinate ones scattered about the scene in a somewhat unskilful and unsatisfactory manner, as far as relates to mere composition, but full of the most rich and admirable detail.

The centre group represents contest between two parties a set of half tipsy merry-makers and a village housewife and her daughter as to which shall get possession of the person of an idle husband, whom the latter have come to fetch home. There is a homely and pathetic truth in the expression of the wife that is delightful. Anybody but Wilkie would have made her a shrew. The

imploing expression of the daughter-which is conveyed by the air and attitude alone, her face not being seen-is also admirable.

These are richly but perhaps somewhat too forcibly contrasted with the coarse merriment of the boozers who wish to retain their companion. The principal figure in this group the husband is the last expressive part of it. It seems a matter nearly of indifference to him whether the contest is decided for go or stay. The colouring of this group is exquisite in every part: perhaps superior to any thing else from the hand of this artist The left-hand group of the three is even more rich in the expression appropriate to the subject, than the one just described. The face of the sot who is holding up the bottle is absolutely perfect. It is unquestionably superior in its way to any one face that has proceeded from the pencil of any artist living or dead with the exception of two or three others by Wilkie himself.

That of the landlord also who is pouring out the ale and who seems to contrive to keep himself just sober enough to make his guests tipsy is no less true than rich. The black who is the third of this group is not so good he is not black but red. It is very rare to see this artist sacrifice truth to harmony of effect: he had better left the head out altogether than have done so in this instance.

The third principal division of the composition occupying the right corner contains two or three exquisite morceaux both of colouring and expression. The girl holding the fat infant is an admirable study, designed with infinite ease, and coloured with great sweetness. Indeed the colouring of many parts of this picture in breadth sweetness and purity is perhaps superior to any other from this painter, whose forte certainly does not lie in that department of his art. And, in fact, it is only of individual parts that the above is true even with regard to this picture.

As a whole it is scattered, confused and unsatisfactory in this respect. The only other portion of this group which requires particular mention, is the face, figure and whole deportment of the nice old woman who is just finding her idle drunken son half asleep behind the horse trough. The sight, painful as it evidently is to her, is scarcely capable of moving her from that staid gravity

which becomes her age and character, for she is evidently one of the matronly oracles of the village, and perhaps the schoolmistress.

The secondary groups in this picture do not demand any detailed description. The fault of this work and it is a great one is a want of unity and compression in the composition and consequently a want of general compactness and singleness of effect. Unlike one of Teniers' great works of this kind, it tells like two or three different pictures, instead of like one consistent and necessarily connected whole. The immense size of the buildings as compared with that of the figures increases this defect. The work however, displays infinite talent, both of mind and of hand; but certainly more of the latter than of the former.



David Wilkie (1785–1841)
**Chelsea Pensioners
 Reading the Waterloo
 Dispatch**
 1818–1822
 97 x 158 cm
 Wellington Museum,
 Apsley House

David Wilkie (1785–1841), *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch*, 1818–1822, 97 x 158 cm, Wellington Museum, Apsley House

Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch, painted by **David Wilkie**, was commissioned by the **Duke of Wellington** in August 1816 and exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in **1822**. The crowds it drew were so vast that a restraining rail had to be installed — the first time this measure was ever taken at the Academy; the next occasion was **William Powell Frith's** *Derby Day* in 1858. Wellington paid Wilkie **1,200 guineas**, and the publishers matched that sum for print reproduction rights — figures that reflect the painting's extraordinary public appeal. The work fuses **genre painting** with **history painting**, setting a recent battlefield triumph among ordinary people in contemporary dress. The scene is set outside the Duke of York public house in Chelsea, with the **Royal Hospital Chelsea** visible to the left. A **Chelsea Pensioner** reads the *Waterloo Gazette* aloud — a dispatch Wellington himself wrote on **19 June 1815**, published in the *London Gazette* three days later. Around him, Wilkie assembles a cross-section of lived military history: a pregnant soldier's wife anxious for news, a black bandsman from the **1st Foot Guards** who witnessed the execution of **Louis XVI** in **1793**, and veterans stretching back to the **Seven Years War**.

Notes

It was commissioned by Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington in August 1816 and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1822. After the exhibition Wilkie asked, and was paid, 1,200 guineas, an exceptionally high fee. He was paid another 1,200 guineas by the publishers for the right to reproduce the painting as a print

It was so popular that a rail had to be installed to hold back the crowds, the first time this had happened. The next time was for Frith's Derby Day in 1858. This is a combination of genre painting and history painting and shows a historic event in contemporary clothing.

It shows the Duke of York public house in Jew's Row off King's Road Chelsea opposite the Royal Hospital Chelsea shown on the left.

It shows one soldier reading the 'Waterloo gazette', a dispatch written by the Duke of Wellington immediately after the battle on 18 June 1815. The dispatch was dated 19 June and was printed in the London Gazette on 22 June. The paper gave a numbered guide to all the main characters in the painting including the Chelsea pensioner reading the dispatch, who was at the Battle of Quebec with General Wolfe in 1759. A pregnant soldier's wife is shown waiting for news of his fate, a veteran is shown eating an oyster despite this being illegal in June, a black bandsman from the 1st Foot Guards who witnessed the execution of Louis XVI in 1793 and an old soldier who fought with the marquis of Granby in the Seven Years War in the 1750s and 60s.

William Powell Frith (1819-1909), *Ramsgate Sands*
(*Life at the Seaside*), 1852-1854



William Powell Frith (1819-1909), *Ramsgate Sands* (*Life at the Seaside*), 1852-1854

William Powell Frith painted **Ramsgate Sands** in 1854 after a family holiday there three years earlier, and it marked a decisive turn in British art. Where Frith had previously depicted figures from history or literature, here he turned his eye to the contemporary Victorian crowd — a bold commercial and artistic gamble that paid off spectacularly. Fellow artists were scornful: one dismissed it as "a piece of vulgar Cockney business." The public disagreed entirely. The **Royal Academy** installed a guard rail to hold back the crowds, one of six Frith earned across his career. **Messrs Lloyd** bought it directly from the artist and sold it that same year to **Queen Victoria** for one thousand pounds. Frith retained the reproduction rights and earned as much as three thousand pounds from print sales alone — a sign of his sharp business instincts. The painting reflects a society reshaped by the **railway**, which first reached Ramsgate in **1846**, bringing mixed classes, ages, and occupations together on the same beach. Frith organised the scene carefully: class distinctions remain intact, seven women are shown reading, and no vulgarity intrudes. He included a self-portrait on the far right and his daughter paddling at the centre. Fifteen years before **Claude Monet** painted modern urban life, Frith was already making a fortune from it.

Notes

Before Ramsgate Sands Frith depicted figures from history or literature but this was the first time the contemporary Victorian crowd had been painted. The idea of painting modern life was a revolutionary idea of the Impressionists inspired by the writing of Charles Baudelaire but Frith's pictures predates the Impressionists by twenty years.

Many of Frith's fellow artists were against the idea of painting modern-life and one called it 'a piece of vulgar Cockney business' and another 'a tissue of vulgarity'. However, the public loved it and it was an immediate an enormous success. It was one of the few paintings at the Royal Academy for which a guard rail had to be installed to keep the public back – the ultimate sign of success. In all, Frith had six guard rails over the years.

It was bought from the artist by Messrs Lloyd who sold it to Queen Victoria the same year, 1854, for £1,000, the same price he paid but he retained reproduction rights and Frith may have earned as much as £3,000 from the sales. Although this was the price they paid they retained engravings and print rights so it was a highly lucrative deal. Victoria had stayed in Albion House (built 1789) in Ramsgate before she became Queen. This is the highest house in the middle of Frith's painting. Victoria stayed in Ramsgate aged 16 she nearly died of typhoid and Sir John Conroy forced a pen into her hand to try to force her to sign authority to him, she resisted.

Victoria had also entered the sea from a bathing machine in Osborne, Isle of Wight for the first time in 1847. She wrote in her

'drove down to the beach with my maid & went into the bathing machines, where I undressed & bathed in the sea (for the 1st time in my life), a very nice bathing woman attended me. I thought it delightful till I put my head under water, when I thought I should be stifled.'

Queen Victoria's Journal, 30 July 1847

It was inspired by a holiday Frith and his family took to Ramsgate in 1851. He always painted from real people and liked to use friends and family as he found professional models often turned up drunk and had no sense of responsibility. The artist included a self-portrait (peeping over the shoulder of the man on the far right), while the little girl paddling in the centre staring directly at the painter is thought to have been his daughter. He also shows

himself, if I display his portrait can you find him?

My professor at the Courtauld devoted a large part of her doctoral thesis to this painting and she examined and analysed every person and their social role within society. Seaside holidays or weekends had become possible with the advent of the railway. Trains first reach Ramsgate in 1846 and although it involved changing at Canterbury the old station was in the centre of the town near the beach.

The bathing machines had a curtain that could be lowered to sea level but men were allowed to bathe nude until the 1860s. Some resorts employed a dipper whose job was to push people under water and then help them back into the bathing machine. The machine was developed in Margate about 1750 when most people bathed naked. Legal segregation of bathing areas ended in 1901 and the machines became extinct by 1820. Poorer people from London came to the seaside by train and as they could not afford bathing machines they often bathed naked. In 1874 a rector wrote in his diary that he had to adopt the detestable custom of bathing in drawers, he wrote, 'If ladies don't like to see men naked why don't they keep away from the sight?' Boys and young men would bathe naked even in the Edwardian Era but middle class girls and women always had to be fully covered with clothes that did not expose their shape.

Frith is showing a world of mixed sexes, ages, classes and occupations but he maintains the important class distinctions and generally the lower classes are shown as deferential and respectful. There is an intellectual air among the entertainment and seven women are reading books. One man is an idler and another appears to be flirting and two people are potentially voyeurs with telescopes watching women bathing. However, one is an old man and the other a young girl. No bathers are shown in the painting and there are no coarse or vulgar displays.

Granite Obelisk (known as the Royal Tooth Pick) erected 1822 to commemorate the departure (1820) and safe return of King George IV from Ramsgate Harbour. He was so pleased with his reception he named it a 'Royal Harbour' (the only one). Beyond the obelisk is the Royal Harbour, important during the Napoleonic Wars. The first railway was 1846.

Augustus Pugin, George du Maurier, James Tissot, Vincent van Gogh, Wilkie Collins and Jane Austen stayed in the town.

Frith went on to paint many other scenes of everyday life such as *The Derby Day* (1858) and *The Railway Station* (1862) for which Frith was paid an astonishing 8,000 guineas.

So 15 years before Claude Monet (1840-1926) was brave enough to paint a modern-life railway station (*La gare Saint-Lazare*, 1877) Frith was making a fortune from the same daring subject matter.

Key point: an important painting that reflected Victorian life

William Powell Frith (1819-1909)

Born in Yorkshire to a house steward and cook and his parents took a keen interest in art.

He was sent to school in Dover where he indulged in drawing.

His formal training was at the Sass Academy and then the RA School in 1837 (aged 18).

His father died and his mother moved to London and he made money portrait painting (Lincolnshire farmers at 5-15 guineas).

Member of the Clique, which included Augustus Egg, Richard Dadd and Henry O'Neil and rapidly established himself as a genre painter.

His painting was at odds with the RA but his character and incident, sparkling detail and high finish made his work popular and suitable for engraving.

1840 travelled abroad and had his first painting exhibited at the RA.

ARA 1845 and RA 1852 (aged 33).

He was friends with Charles Dickens and centre of the literary life of London.

In 1851 he visited Ramsgate and decided to take a commercial risk investing in *Ramsgate Sands* (*Life at the Seaside*) and it was a success and sold to Lloyd then Queen Victoria for £1,000.

His second panorama, *Derby Day* was a stroke of genius, few paintings have ever earned such universal acclaim.

He had a wife with 12 children and a mistress with 7.

He was an artist with a well developed business sense and he remained in the news throughout his life.

Six of his paintings had to be railed off and his three most important works, *Ramsgate Sands*, *Derby Day*, and *The Railway Station*.

He was criticized for his artistic philistinism by John Ruskin, Whistler and Oscar Wilde, and later Roger Fry and he was a staunch reactionary criticising the Aesthetic Movement, Oscar Wilde and Impressionism.

William Powell Frith (1819–1909)
The Derby Day, 1856–58, 140.5 x
264 cm, Tate Britain



William Powell Frith (1819–1909), *The Derby Day*, 1856–58, 140.5 x 264 cm, Tate Britain

Four years after **Ramsgate Sands** established his reputation, **William Powell Frith** turned his eye to the racecourse. **The Derby Day**, completed in **1858**, began with a sketch made at Epsom in **1856**, after which the chemist and amateur artist **Jacob Bell** commissioned a large canvas for fifteen hundred pounds. Frith hired models for every major figure, including a jockey and an acrobat, and employed a photographer to shoot groups of figures from the roof of a cab. The result was so compelling at the **Royal Academy** exhibition that a protective rail had to be installed — only the second time that had occurred, the first being for **David Wilkie's** *Chelsea Pensioners* in **1822**. The painting presents nearly a hundred distinct social types, distinguished by clothing and physiognomy. On the left, a thimble-rigger fleeces city gentlemen outside the **Reform Club** tent. At centre, an acrobat's hungry boy ignores the performance, transfixed by a champagne picnic. A thief lifts a gold watch from an oblivious bystander. Fashionable courtesans, street vendors, beggars, and aristocrats press together along the rail, the grandstand rising behind them — the whole spectacle of Victorian class laid bare in a single afternoon.

Notes

Four years later, based on the success of Ramsgate Sands, Frith painted The Derby Day. Christie's described this as 'arguably the definitive example of Victorian modern-life genre'.

On the basis of a sketch made after a visit to Epsom in 1856, Frith was commissioned by Jacob Bell, a chemist and amateur artist, to paint a large 5-6 foot canvas for £1,500. Later, Frith painted a smaller version many years later which is in the Manchester Art Gallery.

He hired models for all the major figures, including a jockey and an acrobat, and paid a photographer to take 'as many queer groups of figures as he could' from the roof of a cab.

The painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1858, where it became so popular that a rail was needed protect it from the thronging crowds (only the second time that a rail was installed at the Royal Academy exhibition: the first was in 1822 for David Wilkie's The Chelsea Pensioners reading the Waterloo Dispatch).

There is a cross-section of Victorian Society. On the left is the tent of the Reform Club where rich city gentlemen surround the table of a 'thimble-rigger' who is busy cheating them. Further left, a young country man in smock is being held back by his woman to prevent him from joining in as an accomplice tempts him to play by showing him the note he was just won. In the centre, an acrobat is ready to perform with his son, but the attention of the thin young boy has been distracted by a lavish picnic banquet that is being laid out. Spectators throng behind, drinking champagne in their carriages, with the racecourse grandstand visible in the background. At the far right, a well-dressed man leans against the carriage of his young mistress. Echoing her position, a high class prostitute in brown riding clothes is on the extreme left, one of many seen that could be seen each day riding in Hyde Park. To the right, a thief can be seen stealing a gold watch from a man with his hands in his pockets. Also visible are a group of musicians, and a group of beggars, and street vendors selling their wares.

One of the best known Victorian courtesans was Catherine 'Skittles' Walters (1839-1920), a fashion trendsetter and horsewoman who was associated with intellectuals, political leaders, aristocrats and a member of the Royal Family.

One art historian has identified almost one hundred distinct social types distinguished by Frith by their clothing and physiognomy.

References

Wikipedia

Tate Gallery



William Collins (1788-1847)
Rustic Civility
 1833
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London

William Collins (1788-1847), *Rustic Civility*, 1833, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Sentimental depictions of poor children formed one strand of social realism, and their popularity with collectors rested on a careful condition: the children had to appear civil. **William Collins**, working in the first half of the nineteenth century, was a genre painter whose reputation at the time exceeded that of **Turner** and **Constable**. Elected a Royal Academician in **1820**, he exhibited at the Academy every year from 1807 to 1846, submitting 124 pictures in total. He travelled widely through Britain and Italy, and his journeys fed a body of work centred on landscapes and rustic scenes, with children as a recurring subject. In this painting, three poor children hold a gate open for a gentleman whose presence we read only through his shadow. Poor children had typically been shown at work, but here they enjoy leisure and display an instinctive deference. Collins was a Tory who opposed the **Reform Bill**, and the painting makes a direct political argument: the poor are contented, orderly, and naturally subservient, so have no need of the vote. The context matters. In **1840**, one in six children died before their first birthday, and a third before the age of five. Chronic malnutrition left working-class children visibly stunted — factory boys averaged five feet three inches at eighteen. Collins erases all of that to make his case.

Notes

The other type of social realism were sentimental scenes of children particularly poor children. They were popular with collectors and the public and poor children being shown at leisure was acceptable if they were civil.

Child Mortality

The important thing to realise is that in 1840, 1 in 6 children died before the age of one and one third before five. In slums half of all children died before the age of five. Parents loved their children as much as today and without contraception most women were more or less permanently pregnant. This meant everyone was in mourning, had been in mourning or had friends in mourning for dead children.

Surprisingly, if we remove child mortality then, despite what you often read, life expectancy was similar to today. Degenerative disease was very low compared to today (e.g. heart diseases, cancer, dementia, diabetes, arthritis). The reason was that everyone had a lot of exercise and a healthy diet. People did not die of degenerative diseases but of infections that can be cured today.

The general view was that children were naturally infidels and had to be taught Christian values. This meant they had to be rescued from the poor. Children were treated very strictly and subject to punishments that historians now class as torture. Children who worked in factories were on average six inches shorter than those who did not and the average eighteen-year old factory boy was five feet three inches tall.

One study of the poor in Bolton (1834) found of a total weekly wage of £1 8s 5d over £1 was spent on food, thirty pounds of bread, twenty pounds of potatoes and three pounds of flour. 3s 5d went on rent including coal. Other items included cheese, butter, bacon, meat, sugar, tea, salt, soap, candles and tobacco but all small quantities. Their diet was deficient in protein, iron and vitamin C. Note that there were no green vegetables, they did not become available until the 1850s.

As a result the children of the poor were stunted, might suffer from vitamin deficiencies such as rickets and as a result looked very different from the children of the wealthy. It was not until the twentieth century that children of

different social backgrounds began to develop in a similar way.

In this painting, we see three rustic children holding a gate open for a gentleman whose presence is indicated by his shadow. Poor children had generally been shown at work, for example in Gainsborough's pictures of children, but here they are at leisure. They are also displaying a natural civility. This painting is not ironic, Collins was a Tory and opposed to the Reform Bill and what this picture is saying is that the poor do not need the vote as they are well off, have leisure time and are naturally subservient to gentlemen.

William John Thomas Collins (1788-1847)

William Collins was a genre painter whose work was more highly valued than that of Turner or Constable.

He trained at the Royal Academy School and went on to become a popular painter of landscapes and rustic genre scenes.

He travelled extensively in Britain and abroad, particularly in Italy, and these journeys are reflected in the subjects of his pictures.

He was particularly fond of representing children.

He became an RA in 1820 (aged 32) and exhibited at the RA every year from 1807 to 1846 (39 years, 124 pictures).

He married the sister of Margaret Sarah Carpenter (1793-1872), a British portrait painter who was very famous in her time but unknown today. She exhibited at the RA from 1818 to 1866 (48 years) and was awarded a £100 a year pension by Queen Victoria.

The eldest of his two sons was William Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) the novelist and author of *The Woman in White* (1859) and his other son Charles Allston Collins (1828-1873) the Pre-Raphaelite painter whose *Convent Thoughts* was attacked in *The Times* but defended by Ruskin and who gave up painting in 1857 as it gave him stomach pains (he died of stomach cancer in 1873).



John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
My Second Sermon
1864
Guildhall Art Gallery

John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *My Second Sermon*, 1864, Guildhall Art Gallery

By the 1860s, the Victorians had constructed childhood as a distinct and charged phase of human life, and **John Everett Millais** sat at the centre of that cultural project. His painting **My First Sermon**, exhibited at the **Royal Academy in 1863**, showed his five-year-old daughter **Effie** alert in a high-backed pew at All Saints Church, Kingston-on-Thames, which Millais rushed to paint in December 1862 before the pews were removed. Its companion, **My Second Sermon**, showed the same child asleep, the novelty of church thoroughly exhausted. The Archbishop of Canterbury cited it at the Royal Academy Banquet as a warning against lengthy sermons, and both works were reproduced widely as prints. Robert Polhemus, writing in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, identifies a pattern running across Victorian imagery of children: these pictures intensify adult fascination with childhood, honour it as a time of innocence, identify it with faith, and simultaneously frame it as vulnerable and time-doomed. The child becomes a figure requiring vigilant adult protection, whose early experience predicts later life. The cumulative effect, across Millais and his contemporaries, is to transform the child into a screen onto which adults project fantasies of **innocence, morality, and nostalgia** — a projection that still shapes how

Western culture understands **childhood** today.

Notes

Key point: by the 1860s 'childhood' as we understand it today had been created by the Victorians

John Everett Millais

The model was Millais' five-year old daughter Effie and she is sitting in one of the old high-backed pews in All Saints Church, Kingston-on-Thames, which Millais hurried to paint in December 1862 shortly before they were removed. The Art Journal wrote, 'One of the happiest works this artist has ever painted'.

After the success of My First Sermon at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1863, Millais painted a companion showing the same little girl - his daughter Effie - after the novelty has worn off. In his speech at the next Royal Academy Banquet, the Archbishop of Canterbury claimed it as a warning against 'the evil of lengthy sermons and drowsy discourses'.

My Second Sermon followed on the phenomenal success of Millais' painting My First Sermon. One critic noted: 'Everybody is rejoiced to recognise, sitting in the same place as last year, the little girl, now dear to many a heart, who then was listening...in rapt attention.' Both images were widely reproduced as prints.

The Creation of the Modern Child

Millais and other artists painted many pictures of children which have caused art historians (Robert Polhemus in Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination discussing Millais's The Woodman's Daughter based on Coventry Patmore's poem in which Maud gets pregnant by the squire's son and commits suicide) to make a number of general points:

They create a new relationship between adults and children which intensifies the fascination with childhood.

They express a strong cultural desire to idolize and aestheticize children.

They often identify faith with childhood.

They honour childhood as a time of innocence and potential virtue.

They make the well-being of children a touchstone of good.

They portray children as desirable but time-doomed and a menaced state of being.

They present children as adorable but also vulnerable requiring vigilant adult concern.

They often eroticize and sexualize childhood (although not in these paintings), for example, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Through the Looking-Glass* or Millais's *Cherry Ripe*.

They imply a child's experience is a predictor for later life.

They place children in a narrative that extends beyond childhood and so conceives it retrospectively implying psychoanalytic insight.

They turn ideas about 'proper' social station and class division into problems.

The overall effect is to treat the child as an object onto which adult fantasies of innocence, morality, faith and nostalgia are projected.

Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859)
A Scene from Tristram Shandy
(*'Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman'*)
1829-30, exhibited 1831



Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859), *A Scene from Tristram Shandy* (*'Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman'*), 1829-30, exhibited 1831

Literary subjects drove strong commercial demand, and engravers found a ready market in scenes from beloved novels — a point worth keeping in mind as we turn to this work by **Charles Robert Leslie**. Born in London in 1794 to American parents, Leslie returned to America for his early education before sailing back to London in 1811. He entered the **Royal Academy Schools**, won two silver medals, and became a full Academician by 1826. A close friend of **John Constable**, he later wrote the standard biography of that painter, alongside his practical **Handbook for Young Painters**. Influenced early by **Benjamin West** and **Fuseli**, he soon abandoned high art for genre scenes drawn from Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Sterne. This painting takes its subject from **Laurence Sterne's** **Tristram Shandy**, published between 1760 and 1767. The widow Wadman lures the innocent, military-obsessed **Uncle Toby** by feigning a speck of dust in her eye, drawing him into intimate proximity. Sterne frames her as a daughter of Eve — a deliberate signal to his readers. The scene embeds the **eighteenth-century conviction** that women, widows especially, are perpetual sexual aggressors, while men remain dangerously vulnerable to their designs.

Notes

Literary subjects were very common and there was demand for engravings that illustrated well-known scenes from novels, poems and historic events. Large paintings illustrating an historic events that expresses a noble feeling are history paintings but there are many less inspired subjects.

The painting illustrates an incident from Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-7). Tristram's uncle, Toby, is a veteran of the siege of Namur (the French captured Namur, Spanish Netherlands, now Belgium, in 1692 during the Nine Years War and Allied forces recaptured it in 1695) where he received a nasty groin injury. His hobby is re-enacting historic sieges in miniature in his garden particularly the Siege of Namur, all of which he masterminds from his sentry box. Toby's neighbour, the widow Wadman, is in love with Toby and lays siege to his heart. She is described as 'A daughter of Eve' and she captures him by complaining that she has a speck of dust in her eye. Toby is forced to look, but sees nothing even though he looks 'with twice the good-nature that ever Galileo look'd for a spot in the sun'. But her eye was, 'full of gentle salutations - and soft responses...like the last low accent of an expiring saint'. Her seduction succeeds and he falls in love.

Uncle Toby is an innocent whose mind turns to military campaigns and Widow Wadman cannot think of anything other than sex. They represents to eighteenth-century belief that the sexual act is debilitating for men but not for women and that women are perpetually obsessed with sex, particular widows who have experienced it. In the end their relationship comes to an end because Widow Wadman is concerned that Uncle Toby's groin injury may prevent a full relationship. In the nineteenth century some women were regarded as seducers and so all women were potentially still dangerous to men but wives were expected to be pure and perform the sexual act as a duty. This was reinforced by religion teaching that the sexual act did not and should not involve pleasure and its sole purpose was procreation.

Leslie was a popular genre painter, modelling his work on that of Hogarth and Wilkie.

Bio:Leslie

Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859)

Friend of John Constable (1776-1837).

Leslie was an English genre painter, who was born in London of American parents and returned to America for his education.

In America he was considered 'a marvel and a prodigy' who needed to be sent to London to become 'a finished miracle'.

He left for London in 1811, aged 18, was admitted to the Royal Academy School and won two silver medals.

In 1821 (aged 27) he was made an Associate Royal Academician and in 1826 a Royal Academician.

He was influenced by Benjamin West and Fuseli and started painting high art but he quickly switched to painting genre painting mostly from great masters of fiction such as Shakespeare and Cervantes.

Wrote A Handbook for Young Painters and The Life of Constable



William Holman Hunt (1827–1910)
The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro during the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry (The Eve of St. Agnes)
 1847–57
 Guildhall Art Gallery

William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), *The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro during the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry (The Eve of St. Agnes)*, 1847–57, Guildhall Art Gallery

Exhibited at the Royal Academy and admired by **Rossetti**, this work drew him and **Holman Hunt** into a close friendship and shared studio — making it a direct bridge into the Pre-Raphaelite moment. **William Holman Hunt** was a founder member of the **Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood**, established in **1848** alongside Rossetti and **Millais**, and remained the most rigorous in his commitment to its principles. His source here is **John Keats's poem of 1820**, in which young Madeline believes that on **St Agnes Eve**, the twentieth of January, a ritual performed at bedtime will conjure a vision of her future husband. Porphyro, her lover and her family's enemy, hides in her chamber, watches her sleep, prepares a feast, and when she wakes, half-dreaming, they resolve to flee together across the southern moors. Hunt depicts the couple at the door, stealing away in silence. Madeline presses her hand to Porphyro's chest, a gesture that tells the dog he is a friend and not an intruder to bark at. The **heightened colour**, precise detail, and medieval literary subject all mark this out as unmistakably **Pre-Raphaelite** in spirit — remarkable given that Hunt began the canvas in February 1848, months before the Brotherhood itself was formed.

Notes

Begun in February 1848 before the Brotherhood was founded in September. Exhibited at the RA exhibition and admired by Rossetti which led to them becoming close friends and sharing a studio. The cramped picture space, bright colours, naturalism and detail prefigured the work of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Key point: literary subjects could be painted in the Pre-Raphaelite style

The Eve of St. Agnes

Holman Hunt was a founder member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with Rossetti and Millais. He was the one that stayed most true to its aims.

In John Keats poem *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1820) a young maiden called Madeline is in love with a young man called Porphyro. It is January 20th, the day before the feast of St. Agnes, the patron saint of virgins. St Agnes was a young Roman girl, martyred in the fourth century for her faith. There was a superstition that a girl could see her future husband on St Agnes Eve if she followed a certain ritual when going to bed. She would dream of the man and he would prepare a feast for her. Her family are sworn enemies of his family and on the evening her family engages in an alcoholic revelry that can be seen in the background. Porphyro rides to the castle and persuades an elderly woman to hide him in Madeleine's bedroom. He watches her prepare for bed and fall asleep and then creeps out to prepare a feast. Madeline wakes and sees the man she has been dreaming about and half asleep invites him to bed. She fully wakes, realizes her mistake and says she cannot hate him for his deception. They both agree to flee across the southern moors where Porphyro promises her a home.

Here we see Holman Hunt has caught the moment when both are downstairs opening the door and trying not to make a noise. I think they are both looking at the dog which is looking at them. He is a stranger so the dog could bark and wake everyone but she lays her hand on his chest to signify he is a friend.

The painting is interesting as it was started before the Pre-Raphaelite movement began (which was September 1848) and yet it has many of the features such as heightened colour, cleanly delineated detail and a medieval

subject.

John Keats

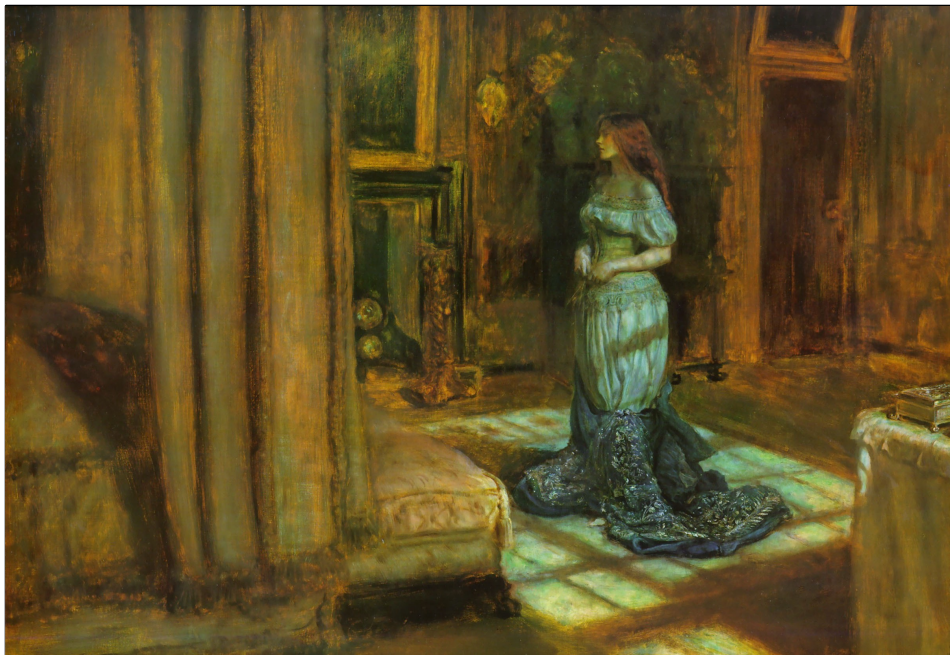
John Keats (1795–1821, aged 26) was an English Romantic poet. He was one of the main figures of the second generation of Romantic poets along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley despite his work having been in publication for only four years before his death.

Although his poems were not generally well received by critics during his life, his reputation grew after his death, so that by the end of the 19th century, he had become one of the most beloved of all English poets. He had a significant influence on a diverse range of poets and writers. Jorge Luis Borges stated that his first encounter with Keats was the most significant literary experience of his life.

The poetry of Keats is characterised by sensual imagery most notably in the series of odes. Today his poems and letters are some of the most popular and most analysed in English literature.

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The three founders were joined by William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens and Thomas Woolner to form the seven-member "brotherhood".



John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
The Eve of Saint Agnes
1863
Royal Collection

John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, 1863, Royal Collection

Shifting from the waterside tragedy of Ophelia, we now see how **Millais** returned to **Keats** at a very different moment in his career. Where Ophelia announced the Pre-Raphaelite programme in meticulous outdoor detail, this interior scene reveals a painter who had moved toward looser, more atmospheric handling. **The Eve of St Agnes**, painted in 1863, takes its subject from Keats's poem of 1819, in which **Madeline** performs a ritual on St Agnes's Eve to dream of her future husband. Her lover **Porphyro** is hidden in the room, watching, as she undresses in the moonlight, unaware of his presence. Millais worked at night in the **King's Room at Knole** in Kent, observing the actual fall of moonlight to achieve the blue-green pool that suspends Madeline at the foot of her bed. His wife **Effie** modelled for the figure, and her jewel-like dress, rendered with the close attention of his earlier work, contrasts deliberately with the rapid brushwork that surrounds her. That tension between precision and freedom mirrors the poem's own suspension between waking and dreaming. Keats writes that Madeline dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled — and Millais holds her, and us, exactly at that threshold.

Notes

Millais's Change in Style

I am showing another painting of the same poem to illustrate how Millais's style changed from his earlier Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as *Ophelia*.

Keats's protagonist, Madeline, is unaware that her lover, Porphyro, is hidden in the room. Later the poem tells how Porphyro wakes Madeline and they daringly elope on the following day. Millais was inspired by the descriptive and evocative language of Keats's poem. In the painting, the artist expresses the tension between romantic and sensual love, suspending Madeline in a pool of blue-green moonlight at the foot of her bed in anticipation of her vision.

Millais worked at night in the King's Room at Knole in Kent to create a moonlit interior for Madeline, from Keats's *The Eve of St Agnes* (1819). His model for Madeline was his wife Effie. Her detailed jewel-like dress contrasts with the rapid brush-work elsewhere in the picture. Millais spent three and a half days at Knole and completed the picture in his London studio.

The relevant section from the poem is:

Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.



George Frederic Watts (1817-1904)
Found Drowned!
c. 1848-50
Watts Gallery, Compton

George Frederic Watts (1817-1904), *Found Drowned!*, c. 1848-50, Watts Gallery, Compton

Victorian society constructed womanhood around a paradox: women were expected to embody purity and innocence, yet were simultaneously regarded as dangerously emotional and requiring male protection. The home became their prescribed sanctuary, a space insulated from urban corruption. Poor women, however, could not remain cloistered, and their visible presence in public life made them targets of suspicion and moral anxiety. The **1834 Poor Law Act** placed full responsibility for illegitimate children on their mothers, and women unable to support themselves faced the workhouse. Rather than deterring extra-marital pregnancy, the Act intensified pressure on vulnerable women towards prostitution — what reformers, clergy, and journalists came to call "**The Great Social Evil**". It is within this context that **George Frederic Watts** painted **Found Drowned**, one of four social realist works completed between **1848 and 1850**. Set beneath **Waterloo Bridge**, notorious for suicide, the composition shows a woman apparently just pulled from the **Thames**, her feet still in the water. A heart-shaped locket in her hand indicates a story of romantic abandonment. Her outstretched pose, illuminated face, and a star overhead cast her as a martyr. The industrialised south bank visible in the distance frames her poverty against the machinery of capitalist wealth. **Henry**

Mayhew, writing in **London Labour and the London Poor**, estimated fifty thousand prostitutes in London — a figure that registers the full scale of the crisis Watts was documenting.

Notes

A favourite subject of the Victorians was the 'fallen women'. They were obsessed with the fallen woman. Women were expected to be pure and innocent yet were believed to be driven by emotion, like children. As a consequence it was believed they had to be protected by men and the best place for them was in the home where they could not come into contact with any influences that would lead them astray.

Poor women were a problem as they had to mix in the world so they were expected to be innocent and work in safe professions such as sewing.

The 1834 Poor Law Act made illegitimate children the sole responsibility of their mothers until they were 16 years old. If mothers of such children were unable to support themselves and their offspring, they would have to enter the workhouse. The 1834 Act, it was hoped, would make the consequences sufficiently unattractive to deter women from risking extra-marital pregnancy but it added to the pressure on such women to become prostitutes.

From 1841 to 1870 there was a dramatic increase in the perception of the problem of prostitution. Census data revealed there were 750,000 more women than men in the country and it became a social issue as to how to deal with the problem of what to do with these women who would never be able to find a husband.

Beginning in the late 1840s, major news organisations, clergymen, and single women became increasingly concerned about prostitution, which came to be known as "The Great Social Evil".

While the Magdalene Asylums had been "reforming" prostitutes since the mid-18th century, the years between 1848 and 1870 saw a veritable explosion in the number of institutions working to "reclaim" these "fallen women" from the streets and retrain them for entry into respectable society — usually for work as domestic servants. The theme of prostitution and the "fallen woman" (any woman who has had sexual intercourse out of marriage) became a staple feature of mid-Victorian literature and politics.

Parliament passed the first of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864 (which allowed the local constabulary to force any woman suspected of venereal

disease to submit to its inspection).

In the eighteenth century men were believed to be debilitated by the sexual act but women were thought to have no restraint. In the Victorian period there was a new emphasis on female purity which was connected to the role of women as homemakers. The home became a space free from the pollution and corruption of the city. In this respect, the prostitute came to have symbolic significance as the embodiment of the polluted and corrupt.

Found Drowned! was painted by George Frederic Watts after he returned from Italy but it was not exhibited for 20 years.

This is one of four social realist pictures that Watts painted between 1848 and 1850.

Under a Dry Arch c. 1845-50, the most brutal. In London 1 person out of 20 had no food or shelter.

The Irish Famine c. 1845-50

The Seamstress c. 1845-50

'Found Drowned' is a legal term used in a coroner's inquest and the heading used in newspapers to report bodies that had been found in the Thames who were typically women. This woman looks as if she has just been pulled from the Thames as her feet are still in the water.

There is a chain and heart shaped locket in her hand suggesting the cause of her suicide. The setting is under Waterloo Bridge, well known for illegal suicide and the drama is increased by her outstretched pose, illuminated face and the star which suggest she is a martyr to the injustice of the way in which women were treated in society.

Her plain clothes suggest poverty and in the distance we see the heavily industrialised south bank near Hungerford Bridge contrasting the wealth of capitalism with the despair brought about her poverty.

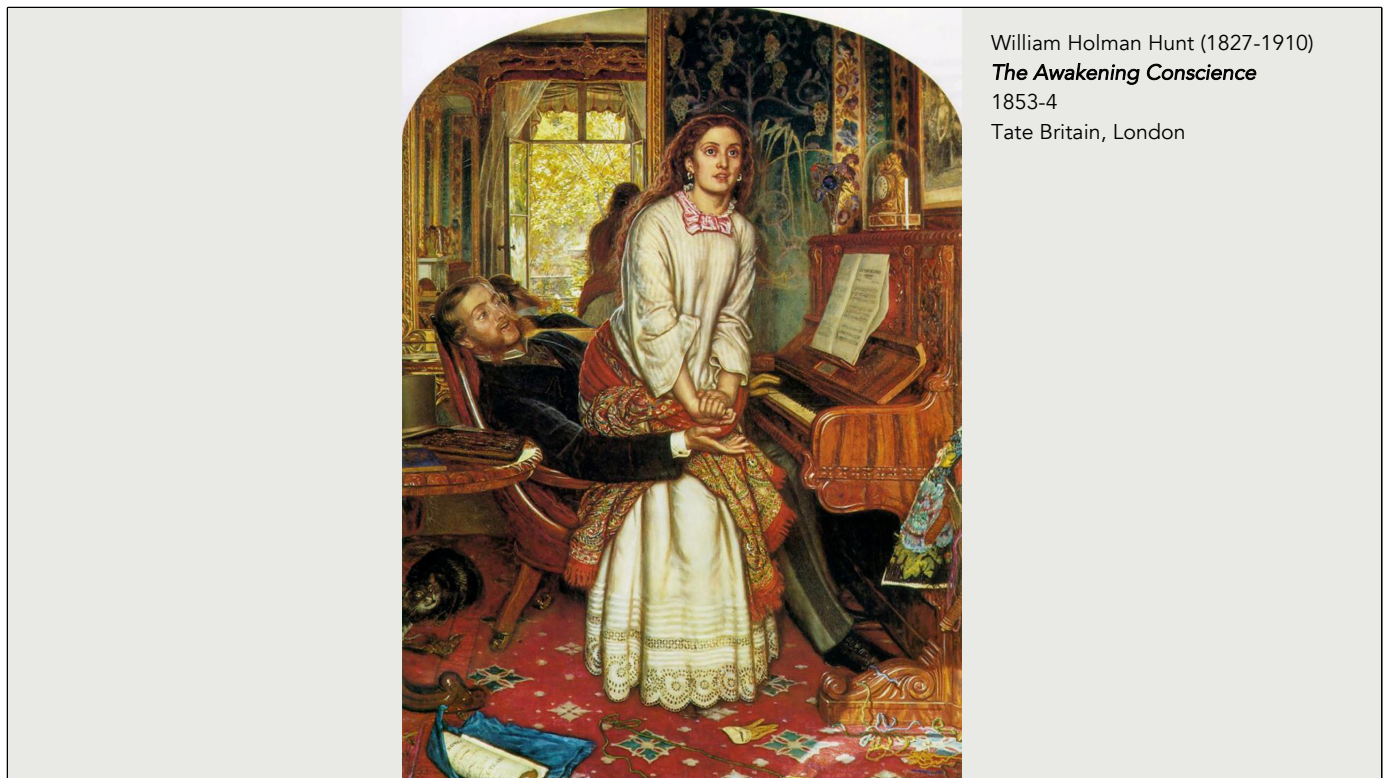
This was one fate that befell a woman that had fallen on hard times. The other was prostitution which was the other scandal in Victorian London.

Henry Mayhew (1812-1887), London Labour and the London Poor (1851, 4th volume 1861 on prostitutes, thieves and beggars), detailed interviews first published in the Morning Chronicle. A significant part of the population had no fixed abode, outsiders and migrants teemed through the streets. All

goods were transported by cart, there were thousands of street traders called costermongers. He describes now obsolete trades such as gathering snails for food, collecting dog dung for tanneries (pure finders) and sewer-hunters who such for metal. See <https://archive.org/details/londonlabourlond04mayh>

Mayhew estimates the number of prostitutes as 50,000 in 1793 when the population was 1 million. The police estimate 8,000 and the Bishop of Exeter 80,000. 50,000 in 1 million is 1 in 10 of all women (including children). 105 women were born to every 100 men, which is 50,000 per million excess women who cannot earn a living.

Key point: Watts painted four social realist paintings between 1848 and 1850



William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853-4, Tate Britain, London

Rooted in the moral seriousness of **Pre-Raphaelite painting**, **William Holman Hunt's** **The Awakening Conscience** of **1853** draws its text from Proverbs, grounding its imagery in scriptural authority. The scene is set in a rented St John's Wood room — the kind a gentleman kept for his mistress — where a young woman rises suddenly from her lover's lap, her gaze caught by the garden reflected in the mirror behind her: God's creation, and the possibility of redemption, signalled by a shaft of sunlight falling across her figure. Every object in the room carries moral weight. A cat toys with a broken-winged bird; a discarded glove warns of the likely fate awaiting a cast-off kept woman; tangled yarn signifies the trap she inhabits. **John Ruskin**, writing to **The Times** in **1854**, fixed on the hem of her white dress and imagined it soiled by the streets she might yet walk. The model was **Annie Miller**, a barmaid Hunt met when she was fifteen and whom he hoped to marry. Their relationship collapsed during his absence in the Middle East, and she eventually married Captain Thomas Thomson in **1863**, dying aged ninety in Shoreham-by-Sea, her reputation, by most accounts, intact.

Notes

The Awakening Conscience

The inspiration for this painting was Proverbs: 'As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, so is he that singeth songs to an heavy heart'.

Some critics misinterpreted this painting, one thought it was a brother and sister playing the piano but the real meaning was quickly determined. It is a gentleman with his mistress (she does not wear a wedding ring) in the room he has rented for their meetings. Hunt hired a room at Woodbine Villa, 7 Alpha Place, St John's Wood to provide an authentic interior.

As they play the piano and sing Thomas Moore's *Oft in the Stilly Night* together she has a sudden spiritual revelation. She gazes into the garden reflected in the mirror representing God's work on earth and redemption is possible signified by the ray of sunlight in front of her.

The painting is full of symbolic elements that are intended to be read.

The cat toying with the broken winged bird symbolizes her plight,

The man's discarded glove warns that the likely fate of a cast off mistress is prostitution.

The tangled skein of yarn signifies the complex situation in which she is trapped.

Ruskin wrote to *The Times* on 25 May 1854, 'the very hem of the poor girl's dress, at which the painter has laboured so closely, thread by thread, has story in it, if we think how soon its pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her outcast feet failing in the street'.

The model is Annie Miller (1835-1925), a barmaid Hunt met when she was 15. He fell in love with her and wanted to marry her but only if she educated herself when her was away in the Middle East. When he was away and contrary to his instructions she sat for Dante Gabriel Rossetti and this caused a rift between them on Hunt's return. She became involved with 7th Viscount Ranelagh (pronounced ran-er-lah) and Hunt broke off their engagement. She was going to sue for breach of promise but Ranelagh's cousin Captain Thomas Thomson fell in love with her. And they married in 1863. Years later Hunt met her on Richmond Hill 'a buxom matron with a carriage full of children'. She died aged 90 in Shoreham-by-Sea. It is not known whether she became 'gay' (i.e. a prostitute) but one art historian (Jan Marsh) believes it is likely she remained 'pure'.



Augustus Egg (1816-1863)
Past and Present No. 1 - Misfortune
 1858
 Tate Britain, London

Augustus Egg (1816-1863), *Past and Present No. 1 - Misfortune*, 1858, Tate Britain, London

Augustus Egg, born in London in 1816 and elected Royal Academician in 1860, painted **Past and Present** as a moral triptych exhibited at the **Royal Academy in 1858**. A friend and philosophical ally of **Charles Dickens**, Egg shared Dickens's instinct to blend popular appeal with pointed social commentary, working consciously in the tradition of **Hogarth**. This opening panel shows the moment of discovery. The husband holds a letter confirming his wife's adultery and crushes a miniature of her lover beneath his foot. The symbolism is dense and deliberate: a house of cards collapses atop a novel by **Balzac**, writer of adultery; a cut apple lies divided on the floor, one half fallen, the other stabbed; the two paintings above — one labelled **The Fall**, one a shipwreck by **Clarkson Stanfield** labelled **Abandoned** — anticipate the family's ruin. The mirror behind reflects an open door: her departure is already written. Egg was influenced here by **Holman Hunt's** **The Awakening Conscience** of 1853. The wife's bracelets suggest shackles. As **Caroline Norton** wrote, the faults of women are visited as sins, the sins of men are not even visited as faults. Egg makes that double standard visible.

Notes

The same fate could befall a married woman if she was unfaithful.

The following is taken from the Tate's description of the painting. 'The theme of the triptych is the discovery of the woman's infidelity and its consequences. In this first scene the wife lies prostrate at her husband's feet, while he sits grimly at the table and their children (the older girl modelled by William Frith's daughter) play cards in the background. The husband is holding a letter, evidence of his wife's adultery, and simultaneously crushes a miniature of her lover under his foot. The setting is an ordinary middle-class drawing room, but closer observation reveals that the room is full of symbols.

Egg was clearly influenced in his approach by Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* of 1853 (Manchester City Art Galleries).

The house of cards is collapsing, signifying the breakdown of the couple's marriage. The cards are supported by a novel by Balzac - a specialist in the theme of adultery.

An apple has been cut in two, the one half (representing the wife) has fallen to the floor, the other (representing the husband) has been stabbed to the core.

As a parallel, the two pictures on the wall depict the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (labelled *The Fall*); and a shipwreck by Clarkson Stanfield (labelled *Abandoned*). The couple's individual portraits hang beneath the appropriate image.

In the background of the picture the mirror reflects an open door, denoting the woman's impending departure from the home.

The position of her arms and the bracelets round her wrists give the impression that she is shackled. In Victorian England a man could safely take a mistress without fear of recrimination, but for a woman to be unfaithful was an unforgivable crime. As Caroline Norton, an early feminist, wrote, 'the faults of women are visited as sins, the sins of men are not even visited as faults' (quote in Lambourne, p.374).

The set of pictures was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858 with no title, but with the subtitle, "August the 4th - Have just heard that B - has been

dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!"

Bio:Egg

Augustus Leopold Egg (1816-1863) was born in London. His father was a wealthy, well-known gunsmith who had emigrated from Alsace. He was educated at the Royal Academy School and became an Academician in 1860. He was known for his dedication and fair mindedness and organised exhibitions for fellow artists. He was a member of a group of artists known as The Clique and he is best known for this modern triptych, Past and Present, which depicts the breakup of a middle-class Victorian family. He was a friend of Charles Dickens and like him sought to combine popularity with moral and social activism following in the footsteps of Hogarth. Unlike most members of The Clique he admired the Pre-Raphaelites. He was always in poor health and travelled to warmer climates in Europe. Dickens described Egg as a "dear gentle little fellow," "always sweet-tempered, humorous, conscientious, thoroughly good, and thoroughly beloved." In a 1953 radio interview, novelist Evelyn Waugh was asked "What painters do you admire most?". He answered "Augustus Egg I'd put among the highest."



Augustus Egg (1816-1863)
Past and Present No. 2 - Prayer
 1858
 Tate Britain, London

Augustus Egg (1816-1863), *Past and Present No. 2 - Prayer*, 1858, Tate Britain, London

The scene shifts to the aftermath of grief. Several years have passed, and **loss** has reshaped everything in this sparse, darkened bedroom. The husband is newly dead, and his absence structures the entire composition. The younger child kneels on the floor in a white nightgown, face buried in the lap of the elder, who now wears **black mourning dress** and sits turned toward the window. Outside, rooftops recede beneath a **clouded moon** — the only light in an otherwise compressed, airless space. The elder child does not weep. Her gaze moves outward, neither seeking comfort nor offering it directly, caught instead in something more suspended: the specific blankness that follows acute loss. **Susan Casteras** identifies this affective register across Victorian narrative painting as a calculated refusal of melodrama, a restraint that intensifies rather than diminishes emotional weight. On the wall behind them, the same small paired **portraits** from the earlier scene remain — husband and wife, still together in effigy. The painter places them there deliberately. They anchor the room to a before, making the children's grief legible not merely as sorrow but as the precise, irreversible knowledge that a complete world no longer exists.

Notes

The second painting shows a night scene, several years later, in a dark and sparsely-furnished bedroom shortly after the death of the heartbroken husband. The children are older now: the younger one kneels in a white nightgown, weeping into the lap of the elder, who sits in a black mourning dress, looking out of a window at rooftops and a clouded moon. The same small portraits of the husband and the wife decorate the bedroom wall.



Augustus Egg (1816–1863)
Past and Present No. 3 - Despair
 1858
 Tate Britain, London

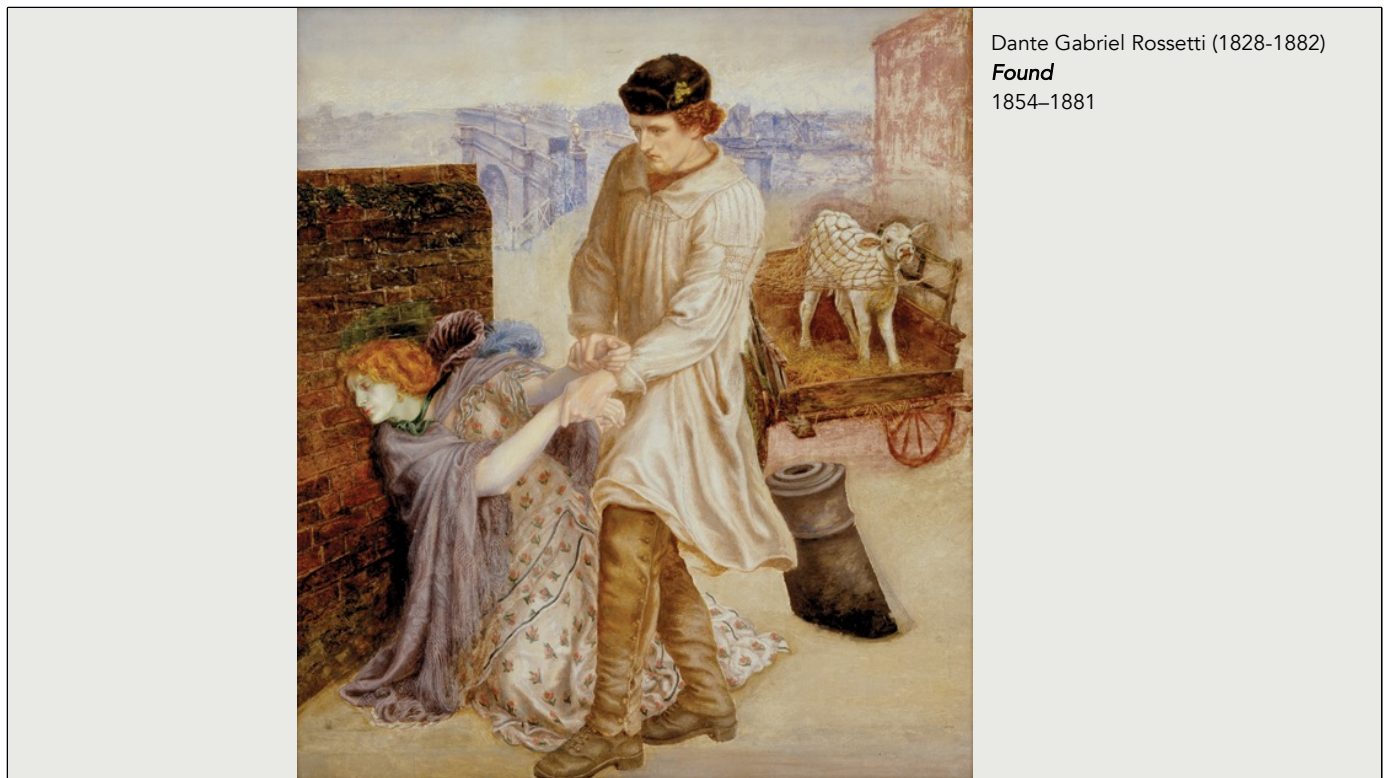
Augustus Egg (1816–1863), *Past and Present No. 3 - Despair*, 1858, Tate Britain, London

Continuing from that second nocturnal scene, the same cloud and moon confirm this is the same evening, the narrative driven forward through a single night. The fallen wife now rests beneath the **Adelphi Arches** beside the **River Thames**, collapsed among detritus and shadow. She clutches a bundle of rags from which protrude the emaciated legs of an infant — asleep or dead, the fruit of her ruin. The posters plastered on the wall do sharp moral work: **Tom Taylor's** **Victims** and **Tom Parry's** **The Cure for Love** advertise tales of unhappy marriages, while **Pleasure Excursions to Paris** echoes the **Balzac** novel glimpsed in the first painting. She gazes upward from the gutter toward the moon and stars, a gesture that refuses complete despair even at the lowest point. The Thames as destination for fallen women runs through mid-Victorian art and literature as a sustained preoccupation. **Thomas Hood's** 1844 poem **The Bridge of Sighs** provided the defining image, and **Dante Gabriel Rossetti**, **G F Watts** in **Found Drowned**, and **Abraham Solomon** in **Drowned! Drowned!** all drew on that same symbolic current, transforming the river into a site of both judgement and grief.

Notes

The third painting is also a night scene. The details of the cloud and moon show it is the same evening as depicted in the second painting. The fallen wife is resting in the detritus-strewn shadows beneath the Adelphi Arches, by the River Thames. She clutches a bundle of rags from which protrude the emaciated legs of an infant, perhaps the fruit of her affair, either asleep or dead. Posters on the wall ironically advertise two contemporary plays, 'Victims' by Tom Taylor and 'The Cure for Love' by Tom Parry, both tales of unhappy marriages, and also 'Pleasure excursions to Paris', perhaps a reference to the novel by Balzac in the first picture. She looks up from her place in the gutter to the moon and stars above.

A similarly watery destination for fallen women was depicted in Rossetti's *Found*, GF Watts's *Found Drowned* and Abraham Solomon's *Drowned! Drowned!*, all inspired by Thomas Hood's 1844 poem, *The Bridge of Sighs*.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Found
 1854–1881

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), *Found*, 1854–1881

Dante Gabriel Rossetti conceived **Found** in **1851**, and it stands as his only painting to directly confront prostitution. A drover arriving in the city with a calf recognises a former sweetheart crouched on the pavement, a fallen woman who turns her face from him to the wall. The fallen woman was a charged figure in **Victorian** culture. Society defined female virtue almost entirely through chastity, and rapid urbanisation had filled cities with women pushed into prostitution by poverty and the near-total absence of respectable employment outside marriage. Estimates of London's prostitutes ranged from seven thousand to eighty thousand, depending on who was counting. The calf is doing serious symbolic work. It explains the drover's presence in the city, but **Ford Madox Brown**, writing in his diary in **1854**, recorded how obsessively Rossetti laboured over it, painting hair by hair in the manner of **Albrecht Dürer**. The animal is innocent, bound, and bound for slaughter — its fate mirroring the woman's and sharpening the painting's central question: is she rejecting salvation, accepting her ruin, or simply unable to escape, like the calf itself? Rossetti published a companion poem, also titled **Found**, in **1881**, but the canvas itself was never finished.

Notes

The theme of the fallen woman was becoming increasingly popular at the time that Rossetti began his picture *Found*. Conceived in 1851, it was described by Helen Rossetti as follows,

"A young drover from the country, while driving a calf to market, recognizes in a fallen woman on the pavement, his former sweetheart. He tries to raise her from where she crouches on the ground, but with closed eyes she turns her face from him to the wall."

Although unfinished this is considered one of his most important works and it is the only one to tackle the problem of prostitution.

Ford Madox Brown noted in his diary Rossetti's difficulties in painting the calf in November 1854, "he paints it in all like Albert Durer (sic) hair by hair & seems incapable of any breadth ... From want of habit I see nature bothers him—but it is sweetly drawn & felt."

The calf's role in the painting is two-fold. First, it explains why the farmer has come to the city. But more importantly, its situation as "an innocent animal trapped and on its way to be sold" parallels the woman's and raises questions on the woman's state of mind. "Is the prostitute rejecting salvation or is she accepting it; or is she repentant but unable to escape her fate, like the calf?"

Rossetti published a poem called *Found* as a companion piece in 1881.

Notes

The fall is described in Genesis Chapter 3 and in John Milton *Paradise Lost* (1667).

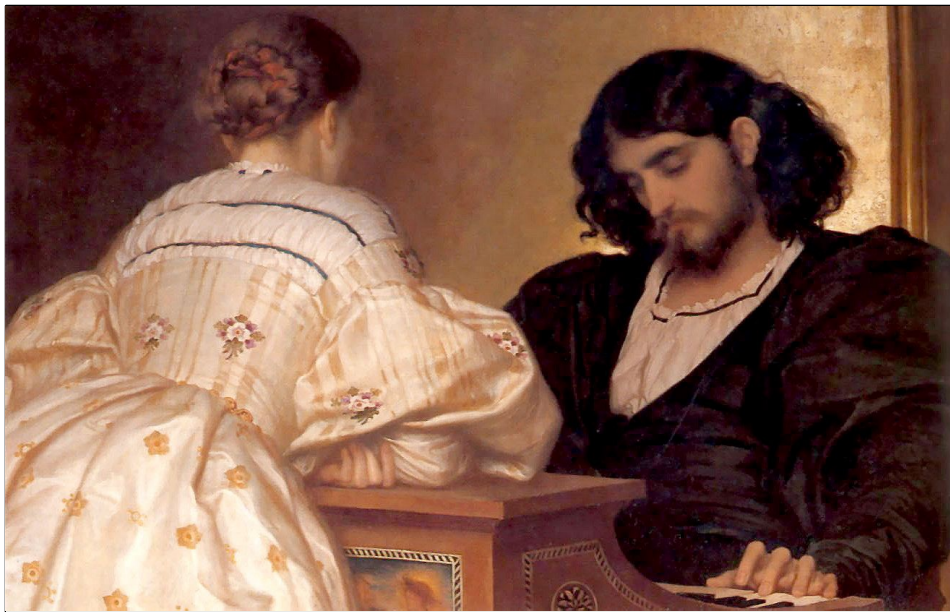
God creates Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. God places them in the Garden of Eden and forbids them to eat fruit from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil". The serpent tempts Eve to eat fruit from the forbidden tree, which she shares with Adam and they immediately become ashamed of their nakedness. Subsequently, God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and places cherubim to guard the entrance, so that Adam and Eve will not eat from the "tree of life".

In Victorian society a fallen woman was one who had lost her chastity. Women had few employment opportunities outside marriage and so in times of financial hardship some women turned to prostitution. More generally it was a woman who transgressed social norms such as by being educated or

eccentric or, for example, female dancers and performers.

As a result of rapid urbanisation there were many prostitutes in cities.

Estimates vary from 7,000 (Police Department) to 80,000 (Society for the Suppression of Vice).



Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)
The Golden Hours
1864
Private collection

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), *The Golden Hours*, 1864, Private collection

This painting quietly but insistently repositions the woman at the centre of its visual hierarchy. She stands higher in the picture, closer to the viewer, her clothing dominating through both colour and volume. The man, by contrast, occupies a lesser space, absorbed in what Victorian culture considered a feminine pursuit — amateur music-making — his soft garments and **Christ-like beard** reinforcing an air of gentle passivity. That beard proved contentious. **William Michael Rossetti**, brother of Dante Gabriel, condemned the male figure for his effeminacy, writing that a man engaged in the sentimental occupation of playing music needed to be kept up to the point of manliness rather than down to that of suavity. Effeminate, in this period, meant emotionally soft and insufficiently robust — not a comment on sexuality, which as a category barely existed in public discourse before the eighteen-nineties. **Frederic Leighton** trained across Europe under the history painter **Eduard von Steinle** and the Italian landscapist **Giovanni Costa**, before encountering Ingres and Delacroix in Paris. That cosmopolitan formation fed directly into his willingness to stage conventional gender positions in unconventional arrangements. **Charles Darwin**, in ***The Descent of Man*** published in 1871, noted that the male beard is a sexually selected characteristic — evidence, in effect, of female power to choose.

Notes

This is a painting that presents (or may be presenting) women in a different light. The title suggests a quiet interlude with a couple playing and listening to the piano together. However, the woman is higher in the picture than the man, closer to the picture plane, dominates the man in terms of the colour of her clothes and the volume of her presence. The man is engaged in what was a female pursuit (unless the musician was professional). He has a Christ-like face and beard and the soft clothes and what looks like a blouse.

Critics had a problem with the man. One of the most serious criticisms of a man was that he was effeminate. This did not mean homosexual, a term that was not used until the end of the century. It meant that the man had female aspects such as being over emotional, not robust and manly. The critic William Michael Rossetti (1829-1919), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's brother, wrote, 'the total impression of the picture appears to us to be marred by the effeminate type of the man, who, being engaged in the comparatively sentimental occupation of playing music, needed to be kept up to the point of manliness rather than down to that of suavity.'

Key point: a painting that may be presenting women in a different light

Frederic Leighton

Frederic Leighton was an English painter and sculptor. His works depicted historical, biblical and classical subject matter. Leighton was bearer of the shortest-lived peerage in history; after only one day his hereditary peerage ended with his death.

He was born in Scarborough and was educated at University College, London and was then artistically trained on the continent in Germany (Eduard von Steinle, 1810-1886, history painter, member of the Nazarene movement, preferred to work in Frankfurt) and Italy (Giovanni Costa, 1826-1903, also known as 'Nino Costa', Italian landscape painter and patriotic revolutionary, worked in Rome where he established a lifelong friendship with Leighton and Florence). Leighton studied in Florence and painted the Cimabue Madonna and then Paris (1855-9) where he met Ingres, Delacroix, Corot and Millet. Returned to London in 1860 and met the Pre-Raphaelites and became an associate RA by 1864 and president by 1878 when he was knighted.

An interesting angle on the painting was provided by Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) in which he points out that the male beard is an example of a sexually selected characteristic, like the peacock's tail and it therefore demonstrates the power of women to select their mate.



Richard Redgrave (1804-1888)
The Sempstress
1846

Richard Redgrave (1804-1888), *The Sempstress*, 1846

Turning now to representations of the poor, **Richard Redgrave's** painting **The Sempstress**, exhibited at the **Royal Academy in 1844**, stands as the founding work of social realist painting in Victorian England. The scene is set at two-thirty in the morning. Moonlight streaks the sky, and lit windows opposite signal that the same exhausted labour is repeating itself across London. The seamstress's eyes are swollen and inflamed from close work by candlelight. A morsel of food on the plate shows she cannot stop to eat, and medicine bottles on the mantelpiece, one labelled from **Middlesex Hospital**, confirm she is seriously unwell. Redgrave's personal investment in the subject was direct. His sister had been forced into service as a governess, fell ill, and died while the family nursed her. The painting responded to **Thomas Hood's** poem **The Song of the Shirt**, published in **Punch** in **1843**, which Thackeray called the most startling lyric in the language. It was set to music, preached in sermons, and brought to the stage. Redgrave understood that the subject needed artistic respectability to be accepted. The interior borrows from **seventeenth-century Dutch** painting, and the upturned swollen eyes echo **Baroque** imagery of swooning saints. The strategy worked, and a new category of campaigning art was established.

Notes

We now come to representations of the poor and this is the first to show the poor realistically. It is *The Sempstress* by Richard Redgrave.

The Sempstress

This painting is the fountain head of a whole tradition of social realist painting in Victorian England.

This painting is based on a poem of the same name and the two had a profound effect.

You can see it is 2:30 in the morning and the sky is streaked with moonlight. The lit windows opposite indicate that the same thing is happening all over London. The seamstress's eyes are swollen and inflamed as she must do close work by the light of a candle. The morsel of food on the plate indicates she has to eat while she is working and on the mantelpiece you can see medicine bottles. One has a label saying 'The Mixture' and it is supplied by Middlesex Hospital so she is unwell.

This is one of the first paintings in which art is used to campaign for the poor. Richard Redgrave did not come from a wealthy family and his sister had been forced to leave home and find a job as a governess. She became ill when in service and had to be nursed by his family until she died. It was painted in 1843, the year that *Punch* appeared and in the Christmas issues there was a poem that struck a nerve. By Thomas Hood and called *The Song of the Shirt*. It began:

With fingers weary and worn
With eyelids heavy and red
A Woman sat, in unwomanly rags
Plying her needle and thread –
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt"

The verse that inspired Redgrave. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1844 (this is the 1846 version). The poem continues that she is sewing a shirt

but also her own shroud.

Redgrave was an Academician, art director of the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A), received the cross of the Legion of Honour and was surveyor of crown pictures for 24 years and produced a 34 volume catalogue. He declined a knighthood in 1869.

It is impossible today to understand the impact it had. Thackeray described it as 'the most startling lyric in our language'. It was set to music, the subject of a play and of many sermons. Sempstresses often went blind and if a single stitch was wrong their wages were docked. Articles appeared saying British citizens were being subjected to a form of slavery and a German living in England called Friedrich Engels showed a study he had written of the horrors of the situation to a friend living in Paris called Karl Marx.

Redgrave had created a new category of painting but it is not based on visiting the poor but the interior is borrowed from a 17th-century Dutch work and the swollen eyes looking heavenward is typical of many Baroque images of swooning saints. Redgrave realised that unless he made the subject respectable it would not be accepted. He succeeded brilliantly.



George Frederic Watts (1817–1904)
Irish Famine
1850
Watts Gallery, Compton

George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), *Irish Famine*, 1850, Watts Gallery, Compton

Having seen *Found Drowned*, we turn now to another of **Watts's** four social realist paintings from **1848 to 1850**, all shown only in private. The backdrop is the **Irish Great Famine**, which between 1846 and 1850 killed one million people and drove a further million to emigrate — roughly a quarter of the entire population. Potato blight was the immediate cause, yet Ireland continued exporting dozens of shiploads of food daily to Britain, far exceeding what was needed to feed its own people. Historians including **Christine Kinealy** argue this constitutes genocide, and the catastrophe seeded the movement that eventually delivered Irish independence. Watts travelled to Ireland during this period alongside the poet **Aubrey de Vere**, his own declining health and emotional turmoil sharpening his eye for social suffering. He had fallen deeply in love with **Virginia Pattle**, one of eight remarkable sisters whose family connections stretched across Victorian intellectual and artistic life. Virginia married Viscount Eastnor, and the loss registered in Watts's work. One sister, **Julia Margaret Cameron**, born in 1815, became a pioneering photographer. Another sister's granddaughter was **Virginia Woolf** — a lineage that threads directly from the Pattle circle through to **modernist** literature itself.

Notes

We have seen *Found Drowned*. This is another of the four social realist paintings of 1848-50. They were only shown privately.

The Irish Great Famine was from 1846 to 1850 and resulted in the deaths of 1 million and the emigration of a further million, about 20-25% of the population. The cause was potato blight but Ireland was still exporting 30-50 shiploads of food a day to Britain, more than enough to feed the population. Some historians therefore describe it as genocide and it eventually led to Irish independence in the next century (1921, law 1922, David Lloyd George and Michael Collins).

Watts' falling spirits and ill health fed into a series of social realist canvases depicting problems of Victorian society at the time.

He fell in love with Virginia Pattle but she married Viscount Eastnor and Watts travelled to Ireland with the poet Aubrey de Vere.

Virginia was one of the eight Pattle sisters (Adeline (eldest), Eliza, Julia, Sara, Maria, Louisa, Virginia and Sophia). Julia Pattle (the 'ugly duckling') married Charles Cameron and took up photography in her later life. Maria married John Jackson and one of their children, born in India, was Julia Prinsep Duckworth Stephen (née Jackson), a renowned beauty, niece of Julia Margaret Cameron and mother of Virginia Woolf. Her parents had both been married previously so she grew up with brothers and sisters from three marriages. Julia had first married Herbert Duckworth and Sir Leslie Stephen had first married Harriet Marian (Minny) Thackeray, a daughter of William Thackeray (novelist who wrote *Vanity Fair*).



John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
The Blind Girl
 1856
 Birmingham

John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *The Blind Girl*, 1856, Birmingham

John Everett Millais painted **The Blind Girl** in **1856**, the same year as **Autumn Leaves**, and critics including **John Ruskin** regarded the two works as the peak of his achievement. The scene shows two itinerant sisters resting by a roadside near **Winchelsea** after a rainstorm, one of them a musician with a concertina on her lap. A sign reading "Pity the Blind" hangs around the sightless girl's neck, and a tortoiseshell butterfly rests on her shawl — its presence tells us she has been sitting motionless long enough to become part of the landscape she cannot see. The painting operates as an allegory of the senses, anchored by the **double rainbow** arching above her. Millais originally painted both arcs identically, then corrected the outer one for scientific accuracy: a secondary rainbow forms through a double internal reflection, reversing the colour sequence so that red sits on the inside. The darkened band of sky between the two arcs is **Alexander's Band**, first described by **Alexander of Aphrodisias** around **200 CE**. The rainbow also carries Biblical weight, invoking God's covenant with creation from **Genesis 9:16** — a promise the girl must take entirely on faith.

Notes

The Blind Girl

Two itinerant beggars assumed to be sisters.

One is a musician with a concertina on her lap and they are resting by the wayside after a rainstorm before travelling to Winchelsea, visible in the background.

It has been interpreted as an allegory of the senses and the rainbow has been interpreted in Biblical terms as a sign of God's covenant (Genesis 9:16 'Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth').

A tortoiseshell butterfly rests on the blind girl's shawl, implying that she is holding herself extremely still. The sheet around her neck is captioned "Pity the Blind".

Some critics believe this and Autumn Leaves (also of 1856) to be Millais's finest works.

Notes

Note that a double rainbow is rare and caused by a double reflection in each rain drop. Because of the double reflection the colours of the secondary rainbow are inverted with red on the inside. Millais originally painted both rainbows the same and then altered one for scientific accuracy. The area between the two rainbows should be darker than the rest of the sky. This is called Alexander's band, after Alexander of Aphrodisias (200 CE, taught in Athens and wrote commentaries on Aristotle's work) who first described it



Frank Holl (1845-1888)
Newgate, Committed for Trial
 1878
 Royal Holloway, Egham

Frank Holl (1845-1888), *Newgate, Committed for Trial*, 1878, Royal Holloway, Egham

Frank Holl emerged from a dynasty of Academicians for whom art carried a social obligation. His father and grandfather both exhibited at the Royal Academy, and that lineage shaped his unflinching attention to working-class suffering. When **The Graphic** launched in 1869 as a weekly illustrated newspaper, its editor recruited Holl alongside **Luke Fildes**, **Hubert von Herkomer**, and **John Millais** to document Victorian social conditions with documentary honesty. In 1878 the paper sent Holl into **Newgate Prison**, where he already knew the Governor, and the result was this painting exhibited at the Royal Academy that same year. The scene is the visiting cage, where two layers of iron bars prevent any physical contact between prisoners and families, while a guard patrols the gap between them. On the left, a bank clerk sentenced to five years for embezzlement stands wide-eyed beside a working-class wife whose expression suggests she has heard his excuses before. The fur-clad woman to the right reads as his mother, her presence hinting at a family rupture caused by the marriage itself. **Vincent van Gogh** admired Holl's wood engravings precisely for this quality — real people rendered without sentimentality. One contemporary critic wrote that the characters felt so genuine that each carried a story of ruined ambitions and

broken home ties. Holl died aged forty-three, largely forgotten.

Notes

Frank Holl

Frank Holl's father and grandfather were Academicians and the family was committed to using art to highlight the problems of the poor.

Holl worked in Newgate prison and got to know the Governor. In 1869 a new, weekly illustrated newspaper was launched called *The Graphic*. It used leading artists like Frank Holl, Luke Fildes (pronounced to rhyme with 'childs'), Hubert von Herkomer and John Millais and writers such as George Elliot, Thomas Hardy and Anthony Trollope. It explored social subjects, such as the plight of the poor and in 1878 commissioned Frank Holl to illustrate Newgate Prison.

This scene shows 'the cage' where prisoners could meet visitors after sentencing. There are two lots of bars to the prison and the visitors cannot touch each other and a guard patrols between them.

The man on the left is a bank clerk who has just been sentenced to five years penal servitude for embezzlement. Holl characterises him as a weak man from a genteel background, while the wife is working class. He has a look of wide-eyed innocence but the look of his wife suggest she may have heard it all before. The grand lady on the right in furs and jewels may be the young bank clerk's mother. It may be that the young bank clerk was cut-off by his rich family for marrying beneath him and so he may have embezzled the money in order to raise his wife to a level acceptable to his family. We do not know if his mother will now relent and make amends by looking after her grandchildren and daughter-in-law.

The second prisoner looks desperate but his wife seems resigned to his fate. He is like a caged animal who lunges against the bars that prevent him from attacking the woman who has turned him in. She and the baby are safely protected from his alcoholic abuse as long as he is in prison.

The painting received mixed reviews when it was exhibited at the Royal

Academy in 1878 but one critic summed up what we see before us, writing:
'...The characters are so real in this fine work that one feels there is a story to be told of ruined ambitions, of broken home ties, of devotion scorned and trampled underfoot....'

Wood engravings of Holl's work were admired by Vincent van Gogh as he painted the poor as real people. He was extremely popular until the end of the 1870s when the Art for Art's Sake movement made it difficult to sell harrowing scenes of poverty and death. It became difficult for those Academicians who specialized in painting pictures of dead babies. Holl abandoned this type of painting in the 1880s and took up portrait painting. He died when he was only 43 and was forgotten within a few years. Holl did not engage in histrionic scenes but in restraint and he often expressed emotion by the look on a woman's face.



Frank Holl (1845-1888)
Newgate, Committed
for Trial
1878

23-09 SOCIAL REALISM AND VICTORIAN MORALITY

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK



This talk has traced how Victorian artists navigated the tension between academic convention and social conscience, from Wilkie's carefully titled genre scenes and Frith's crowded modern leisure to the stark moral narratives of Egg, Watts, and Holman Hunt. We have seen how Luke Fildes, Redgrave, and Holl turned documentary observation into campaigning art, and how paintings of women, children, and the poor both reflected and contested the period's deepest anxieties about class, virtue, and reform.



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