

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL CHANGE FOR MORALISTIC ART

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Art throughout history has never been created in a vacuum – the art produced within a society will always contain a reflection of that society itself, and whether that reflection is complimentary or not depends on the society and the message the artist is trying to convey. Changing social and political conditions often affect the content of art, as well as any message or moralistic ideology it is trying to promote, and this is never truer than in societies experiencing rapid social reform or empowering those of lower or disenfranchised classes. This paper will focus on three specific time periods – the Dutch Republic in the 17th century, and Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries, with particular emphasis on the Victorian era – tracing the influence of Dutch genre painting through William Hogarth in 18th century Britain to the Pre-Raphaelites and Social Realists of the 19th century, and analyze several specific works produced during these eras to illustrate the social and political changes that were contemporary to the artists creating the work – including Jan Steen’s “The Effects of Intemperance” and “The Dissolute Company,” William Hogarth’s “A Harlot’s Progress,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Found,” William Holman Hunt’s “The Awakening Conscience,” George Frederick Watts’ “Found Drowned,” and Augustus Egg’s “Past and Present.”

The sixteenth century was a time of extreme religious unrest throughout Europe. Following the Protestant Reformation in Western and Northern Europe, a series of religious wars broke out in a number of states, including the Low Countries, where the harsh persecution of Protestants by Philip II, the Spanish king and Holy Roman Emperor in control of the Lowlands territory, led to the Dutch War

for Independence in 1568 and the recognition of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (or Dutch Republic) as a sovereign nation by the Spanish in 1648¹. The Catholic remnants of the war, Spanish-held royalist Flanders and the surrounding provinces, continued to produce works of art and literature reflective of the Baroque style popular in most of Catholic Europe, particularly Italy². The Dutch Republic, however, moved away from the drama and excessive religious imagery of the Baroque period, which had been shaped by the Catholic Counter-Reformation and went against Calvinist beliefs about icons and religious decoration, and towards smaller portrait, genre, and landscape painting more suited to their religion and lifestyle. The culture and social class structures that developed within the republic were unlike most of Europe at the time – based on wealth, something easily acquired by merchants involved in trade with Asia and imperial colonies, rather than hereditary aristocratic titles and land, which enlarged the variety of art patrons – and as a result of this and certain Calvinist beliefs that will be explored momentarily Dutch patrons of the arts were very unlike the patrons in Italy and other Catholic nations³. Calvinism was a faith predicated on the idea of predestination, defined as the belief that:

God chooses a limited number of elect and allows many others to remain on the path of condemnation. When God initiates faith, no one can resist divine

¹ Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson Learning), 406.

² Helen Gardener and Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning), 581.

³ If, in fact, the work of art had a patron at all. The Dutch art market functioned on speculation, which naturally set it apart from the commission-driven art communities of virtually every other European nation of the period.

will, and election is confirmed in one's heart through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴

In other words, God in his omniscience has chosen the eternal destiny of every person both saved and damned, and those chosen to be saved will do the will of him. Humans do not know which person belongs to each category, though, which allowed room for continued evangelism and preaching and encouraged strict ethical behavior. Despite such a severe faith being the basis of Dutch culture, toleration for other faiths and ideologies was an integral part of Dutch society⁵, possibly because of this rejection of heritable hierarchy and the remembered persecution Protestants had experienced under the rule of a Spanish Catholic king, as was intellectualism. From their Northern Renaissance painting heritage, the Dutch took a deep appreciation for realism and minute natural detail, and this realism turned Dutch eyes towards not only natural landscapes, but also scenes of every day life – or genre scenes – that revealed the homes, people, and events of the Dutch Republic. From Calvinism came a strict moral code and the notion that material wealth in life was a sign of God's favor and a person's status as someone destined to be "saved." This, encouraged by the overall prosperity of the Dutch Republic in trade, produced upper and middle class traditions that affected the content of that century's art.

Within this culture, still very much finding its own identity as a Protestant nation, a number of talented and unique artists flourished. Without the steady work provided by churches and religious institutions commissioning works of extreme

⁴ John B. Roney, "Review of *Calvin's Calvinism: Treatises on the Eternal Predestination of God & the Secret Providence of God* by John Calvin," 609.

⁵ Spielvogel, 444.

devotion, Dutch painters turned their attention to revealing their moral and religious beliefs in other ways. Jan Steen, and other painters like him, combined the Northern Renaissance tradition of symbols and emblem books with the figures typically portrayed in genre painting to create a moral lesson for their audiences. Jan Steen's "The Effects of Intemperance," is a commentary on the consequences of alcohol use, something deeply tied to the abstinent sobriety taught by the Calvinist faith and other Protestant sects of the time. The painting shows a cluster of figures, primary among them a woman to the left in a fine outfit of shimmering pink fabrics who has fallen asleep after partaking in wine whose pocket is being picked by a small child, and another woman in a blue and green outfit offering wine to a parrot, clearly intoxicated as well. Scattered between these two women are bunches of grapes, toppled wine decanters, and pieces of bread and cheese, indicative of their overindulgence. The figures behind the two women are younger, and show "[as] in many other paintings by Steen, it is the foolishness of their elders that encourages the children to misbehave."⁶ In the far background, an older man is seducing an intoxicated younger woman, the girl sitting upon his lap at a garden table. These figures create a clear narrative within the painting for the viewer – alcohol has consequences.

This is not to say that the only social commentary that Dutch painters partook in was to caution against drinking, but that any avenue to sin was to be avoided. Likewise, another of Jan Steen's works, "The Merry Company on a Terrace," portrays a group of revelers who are not only partaking in drink, but other sins that

⁶ The National Gallery, London, "The Effects of Intemperance," <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-steen-the-effects-of-intemperance>

good Protestants would have attempted to avoid. The central woman looks directly at the viewer, her pose outwardly seductive, and other figures are shown engaging in various wicked activities, like music and gambling. Margaretta Salinger suggests that this painting is similar in content, composition, and symbolism to the more famous Steen work, "The Dissolute Company," sometimes also referred to as "The World Upside Down,"⁷ which is perhaps a better example of a household run amok due to the negligence of Protestant ideals and, more directly, the laxity of the woman in running her household. Though Steen may have not believed in it himself⁸, this moralism was, as indicated above, popular in the Dutch Republic because of recent social and political changes for the country. The break away from Catholicism created a society truly invested in its burgeoning Protestant identity, which bled through to other spheres of everyday life, like art.

Painting of this period in the Dutch Republic would eventually come to influence artists in Great Britain, but first the prejudice toward Netherlandish painting in the art world would have to be overcome. Harry Thomas Mount explains, "As an example of bad practice Netherlandish painting played an important role in the art theory of this period, usually as a negative contrast to Italian history painting."⁹ The Low Countries and England had exchanged art and culture for centuries before, since the Medieval period, but while it was collected by certain monarchs and aristocrats, Netherlandish works were not considered as fine as

⁷ Margaretta Salinger, "Jan Steen's Merry Company," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* XVII, no. 5 (1959): 123.

⁸ Salinger, 124.

⁹ Harry Thomas Mount, *The Reception of Dutch Genre Painting in England, 1695-1829* (London: 1991), 1.

Italian or even French by the general art community¹⁰. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, that had changed, and whatever the British opinion of Dutch art throughout the early eighteenth century, it was at least widely available to artists like William Hogarth, who took much inspiration from the low class subject matter and moralistic intent of genre paintings.

Within the same period that this discussion of Netherlandish art was taking place, Britain was also experiencing religious uncertainty. To fully explain the complexities of English religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would take more space than this paper has available, so only the most relevant events will be touched upon here. When the Catholic King James II came to the throne, England was thrown into a constitutional crisis. Protestants were horrified as James II put into positions of power fellow Catholics and disbanded laws that had barred Catholics from government offices, but held back from rebellion with the knowledge that James II's two daughters, first in line for the throne, were both Protestants. However, when James II produced a male heir who he vowed to raise Catholic, "the specter of a Catholic hereditary monarchy loomed large."¹¹ Enter William of Orange, a prince of the Dutch Republic married to James II's daughter Mary, who staged a coup with the full cooperation of several English noblemen and usurped the throne. In quick succession, Mary and William were instated as the rightful rulers of England, the Bill of Rights was put into place, and the Toleration Act of 1689 was put into place which did much to quell the religious persecution and unrest in England and turn the culture towards other, humanist pursuits.

¹⁰ Mount, 113.

¹¹Spielvogel,, 449.

Likewise, the Age of Enlightenment, which developed as an intellectual movement in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, concurrently with – and as a result of – many of the religious conflicts of the era, promoted a social and political movement towards individualism and the inborn rights of man, with emphasis placed on replacing the mysticism and superstition of religion with reason. Necessarily, these events conspired to create a Britain in the 18th century increasingly turning towards societal reform and concerned by social problems within the country.

William Hogarth, born only a decade after the Glorious Revolution, painted subject matters both moralistic and satiric – a reflection of the social climate at the time. His series of six etchings titled, “Marriage a la Mode,” has become one of the most famous satirical works of art ever produced. A commentary on the undesirability of arranged marriages and the consequences of a lack of good Christian morals, “Marriage a la Mode” follows a couple whose betrothal is arranged by their fathers. Venereal disease, adultery, monetary ruin, and eventual death all befall the couple as a result of their immorality and the arranged marriage that forced them together. A better example for the purposes of this paper would be Hogarth’s six plate series entitled “A Harlot’s Progress,” which follows the story of a young woman who arrives in London from the English countryside and becomes a prostitute, a narrative that would have been a familiar “journalistic convention” in the mid-eighteenth century¹².

¹² Tate Britain, “Hogarth: Hogarth’s Modern Moral Series. A Harlot’s Progress.”

In plate one, entitled “Moll Hackabout arrives in London at the Bell Inn, Cheapside,” Moll, the young woman, has just arrived from the country, her plain and modest clothing denoting her innocence. The woman with whom she is talking, identified as a representation of the real woman Elizabeth Needham, the infamous runner of a brothel in mid-century London, has black spots on her to signify her venereal disease and disrepute. The gesture ‘Mother’ Needham makes towards Moll’s face implies she is complimenting her beauty, and perhaps suggesting Moll’s future career. The second and third plates, entitled respectively, “Moll is now a kept woman, the mistress of a wealthy merchant,” and “Moll has gone from kept woman to prostitute,” show the aftermath of the first plate: Moll’s “fall” from moral society into disrepute, first as a kept woman with ambiguous morals who has slept with another man (and who already shows the black sores of syphilis) , and then as a common prostitute with very little material wealth to her name who is soon to be arrested.

The succeeding plate, “Moll beats hemp in Bridewell Prison,” illustrates the lawful consequences of Moll becoming a prostitute. She is not only imprisoned, but she has been pressed into hard labor – and if she refuses her work, the implication is that she will be put in the stocks like the person whose hands we see below the slogan “Better to Work than Stand thus.” Plates five and six, “Moll dying of syphilis” and “Moll’s wake” illustrate the physical and moral consequences of Moll becoming a prostitute. Moll’s fall into prostitution has given her syphilis, and the quack doctors attending her have little actual care for the suffering she is experiencing, instead debating their methods of “curing” her while Moll’s illegitimate son sits

nearby¹³. The final in the series is Moll's wake, which is attended somewhat well, but by people who show very little actual care towards Moll's death. Other prostitutes with syphilitic black sores do not appear bothered by the reminder of their own mortality, and in fact some are attempting to seduce the men present. Moll's son sits near the focal point of the work, bringing audience attention to him and his possible significance as a continuation of the cycle Moll became embroiled in when she turned to prostitution. Though Hogarth does place some of the blame for this cycle on society in his work, there is also a heavy-handed emphasis on the personal responsibility of Moll in her own tragic story. Hogarth, through gesture and facial expression, implies that prostitutes ply their trade not out of necessity but want. Moll taking a lover for want of sex while she is a kept woman and the joviality of the prostitutes attending Moll's wake both implicate the women in their own downfall.

Only a few short decades after Hogarth's death, Queen Victoria took the throne in Britain, which began one of the longest reigns of a monarch in Britain's history. Lasting until 1901, the Victorian Era, as it would come to be called, spanned not only an extremely long period of time, but also many societal changes. These changes were precipitated by the Industrial Revolution, which threatened and eventually dismantled the traditional power structures of Britain, including the male-dominated workforce, wealth controlled by heritable aristocratic title or trade merchants, and patriarchal concepts of family. Labor, housing, and gender reforms were passed in quick succession and, in particular, the rapidity of change that

¹³ Tate Britain.

affected Britain in the 19th century changed the woman's place and role in society indefinitely.

The Victorian Era in Britain also saw the passage of a number of laws that were both for and against women. The first of these laws to be passed was the Infant Custody Act in 1839, which stated that, for the first time, women had the right under the law to petition the courts for custody for children under the age of seven. Mary Lyndon Shanley recalls the case of Caroline Norton, a woman who was instrumental in the passing of this landmark legislation:

The trial for [accused adultery] was quickly followed by Caroline's discovery that the law could not help her to be reunited with her children. Under the common law father had absolute right to custody of their children. Repeated efforts to gain access to her children availed Caroline nothing. So great was her distress, and so clear was the legal rule that kept her children from her, that Caroline set out to change the law.¹⁴

This was followed in 1857 by the Matrimonial Causes Act, which allowed women to petition for divorce if her husband were abusive or cruel. Both of these laws were landmarks, as they made it possible for women to not only leave abusive husbands, but if necessary, to make sure their children were safe, as well. They did not entirely cure the double standard that plagued gendered politics in the 19th century, as the burden of proof was still on women to provide evidence of a husband's cruelty, while a man was not required to, but they revolutionized politics for years to follow and opened the metaphorical door to more legislation. In 1870, the Married

¹⁴Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton: 1993), 25.

Women's Property Act was passed, allowing married women to retain any wages or property that they had gained since their marriage, although still allowing their husbands to retain any wages or property that the women had entered with into the marriage. The following year, in 1871, women won the right to vote in municipal elections, giving them a voice in their government for the first time. These laws gave women freedoms that they had never enjoyed before and made them more autonomous people in their own right and, simultaneously, threatened the privilege of white males enough for a resulting backlash in art and literature.

Before this sudden surge of legislation, women had very little recourse, if any, should their marriage be a violent one, and outside of matrimony, jobs for women were scarce. Many women turned to prostitution out of necessity, as most other avenues of survival were closed to them. Prostitution became a topic of much discussion in the 19th century, even more so than it had been at the time of Hogarth's "A Harlot's Progress." The same conventions still held true, however, in that prostitutes were often considered women of ill repute who had fallen from society, country girls seduced into sexual immorality as Hogarth had illustrated. The changing social conventions surrounding women, however, and – later in the century – prostitutes specifically, affected the way artists of the time portrayed them. Linda Nochlin, in her article *Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman*, intimates that "in the context of a whole range of nineteenth-century attempts to invent a secular pictorial imagery of the fallen woman, a pressing social and moral,

as well as often personal, contemporary issue,¹⁵ the depiction of fallen women by artists – she mentions Dante Gabriel Rossetti in particular – had to shift away from Christian moralism to societal moralism, meaning that Christianity, though still very much significant in 19th century Britain, was no longer adequate reason for collective condemnation by society as a whole.

A far cry from the moralistic judgment of Hogarth, many of the artists of the Victorian era chose to represent prostitutes in a way that – at least in part, though the burden of the sin and redemption from it was still placed principally on the woman – revealed or castigated the cruelty society showed them. The attached reproduction shows one of the unfinished oil versions of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Found," a rare attempt by Rossetti at portraying contemporary subject matter rather than the "medievalism" that was a more common theme for him. The central figure in this work is a man who Rossetti calls a "drover,¹⁶" or a person who moves animals over long distances, who is tightly grasping the wrists of a woman fallen against a textured brick wall. His face is a mask of concern, but his stance is confrontational and the flutter of his tunic suggests he has stepped into the woman's personal space quickly. The figure of the woman is contorted to press her face against the brick wall, her knees facing forward while her upper body strains away from the man's grip on her wrists. Her face, added later by Rossetti and fashioned after his mistress and model Fanny Cornforth, is tight with shame at seeing her former lover and cast slightly green in comparison to the rest of her visible flesh –

¹⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman," *The Art Bulletin* 60, no. 1 (1978), 139.

¹⁶ *The Pre-Raphaelites*, (London: 1984), 265.

whether this is intentional on the part of Rossetti in an attempt to emphasize the woman's shame or merely a result of the unfinished nature of the painting, it is impossible to say. Behind these two central figures, the drover's cart sits stationary with a white calf strapped in by rope netting, the symbolism of which will be explored momentarily. Even further into the background, the sketchy outlines of a bridge and buildings can be seen, lit dimly with lanterns and the implication of the rising dawn.

Rossetti described the scene in a letter to William Holman Hunt, "[The drover] had just come up with her and she, recognizing him, has sunk under her shame upon her knees, against the wall of a raised churchyard in the foreground, while he stands holding her hands as he seized them, half in bewilderment and half guarding her from doing herself a hurt.¹⁷" The calf's importance, then, becomes as a reflection of the prostitute's status as a bought-and-sold commodity, as it too as to be sold at market¹⁸, but it also – perhaps without the intent Rossetti put behind the previous explanation – reflects the natural idea of a woman as property of a man. Martha Vicinus in her book *Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* submits Rossetti could never finish the painting because "[his] own attitudes toward women, even so-called fallen women [...] were far more sympathetic than the smug reprimand to erring women that *Found* suggests" and that the calf could intimate the restrictions "the drover would impose on a wife to force her compliance and

¹⁷ *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 265.

¹⁸ *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 265.

submission[.]¹⁹” This coincides with the theory put forth by George P. Landow, which suggests that Rossetti paralleled the woman in the painting with Christ, because Victorians “commonly considered the thousands of prostitutes walking the streets of London, and often dying there, as the sacrificial victims of the new age” who “[w]ith their pains...were expiating not their own sins, but those of all men.²⁰” Rossetti’s sympathy towards the plight of the prostitute only went as far as his socialization allowed – while he does not imply that fallen women were responsible for their plight, or that they reveled in it as Hogarth did, he still implies a need for redemption and shame in the woman.

William Holman Hunt’s “The Awakening Conscience,” differs greatly in mood from Rossetti’s “Found,” but also takes a tone of sympathy towards fallen women. The focal woman of the painting is captured in the state between standing and sitting, her face caught in a similar contradiction of guilt and excitement. Her hands are clasped together tightly in front of her hips, fingers curled around each other as if to stop her from reaching out for something. The mirror behind her on the wall gives a hint as to what, reflecting a beautifully sunlit garden that represents the woman’s lost virtue, though it is indicated by the ray of light hitting the floor in the foreground that redemption is possible should the woman hope to achieve it. The man upon whose lap she had just been sitting is stretched out indolently, his feet nearly touching the pedals of the wooden piano to the right while he reclines in the chair carelessly. He is gesturing at the woman, attempting no doubt to get her to sit back down and continue whatever activity they had been involved in. The

¹⁹ *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 69.

²⁰ George P. Landow, “Hidden Iconography in *Found* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.”

surrounding room is decked out in gaudy reds and golds, with objects scattered across the floor carelessly and a piano with sheet music upon it sitting to the right. Tangled threads by the foot of the piano represent the entrapment of the girl by societal expectations and the discarded white glove signifies the fate of prostitution that awaits her should her lover cast her out. This captured moment shows a kept woman – a woman who, much like a prostitute, was paid for sexual and romantic companionship, but in the form of a place to live and finery rather than only cash – realizes the immorality of her lifestyle. “[S]he is motivated by memories of a more innocent life and love, presumably inspired by a sentimental song the pair have just been singing,” Lisa Vogel explains²¹. Hunt’s moral portrayal of this scene does not, however, allow the male figure to escape his own culpability in this scenario, unlike many other portrayals of fallen women contemporary to this work. Edward Lear wrote to Hunt commenting on this fact, “...it is an artificial lie that a woman should so suffer and lose all, while he who led her...encounters no share of evil from his acts,²²” a radical notion in the social climes of the time, undoubtedly.

Despite more positive portrayals of prostitutes in art and generally in culture, a rise in venereal disease in the 1840s compounded by the lingering belief in “physiological pollution” by fallen women served to shift perceptions of prostitutes enough for the quiet passage of legislation designed to specifically target these women by Parliament: the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864. This act, the first of four laws that would span the period between 1864 and 1886 with increasingly

²¹ Lise Vogel, “Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness,” *Feminist Studies* 2, No. 1 (1974), 33.

²² *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 121.

severe consequences for prostitutes, was an attempt at its heart to control the spread of venereal disease in the military²³. It allowed police officers the authority to arrest any woman he believed was a prostitute, and if the magistrate who the officer brought her before agreed, she was forced to submit to a medical examination. Found to be suffering from a venereal disease, she could be detained at a hospital for upwards of three months without much choice, and “at the discretion of the physician [sic] in charge,” which largely meant she had no autonomy within the hospital and could be subject to any kind of horror the doctor wished to act upon her²⁴. If she refused, knowing the life that awaited her in the hospital, she was jailed and could be set for hard labor.

Prostitution’s unquestionable illegality in Britain before these acts had led to jail time in previous periods, but the medical violation of women’s bodies had not, and the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Act told a tale of a Britain that was willing to strip autonomy from women, and that saw women’s bodies as not belonging exclusively to them. It also highlighted the double standard between men and women even further – the men who sought out and paid to sleep with these diseased prostitutes were never punished for the crime outside of the likelihood of them contracting a disease themselves. Society did not, for the most part, ostracize them or force them to give up bodily autonomy in order to treat the problem of prostitution at its real source: supply of prostitutes would never have existed if not for the demands of men.

²³ Margaret Hamilton, “Opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1864-1886,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 10, No. 1 (1978), 14.

²⁴ Hamilton, 14.

After the passage of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864, some artists began to show more outright sympathy towards the plight of prostitutes in Britain, in particular George Frederick Watts, who painted "Found Drowned" around 1850. This painting, which may seem eerie to modern audiences, would have been immediately comprehensible to contemporary audiences. Linda Nochlin explains:

The interpretation of the causes of the young woman's suicide would seem obvious to the nineteenth-century viewer, and were manifestly connected with Thomas Hood's widely known poem on the subject, "The Bridge of Sighs" of 1844, which is closely related: the victim was understood to have done away with herself because of poverty and consequent falling, for some women still a fate worse than death.²⁵

The composition of the work is simple: a woman at the foreground, laid out on her back with her arms fallen loosely to her sides. Her hair and dress have the heavy texture of something waterlogged, and she is obviously dead. Light falls upon her chest, face, and arms, but her legs, still half in the murky water of the river behind her, the stone bridge framing her, and the outline of London buildings behind her are in darkness – which could signify the more sympathetic view of Watts towards this figure, if the light represents salvation, as was tradition in Western art for centuries.

Augustus Egg painted a three-part series of works which inspired commentary from William Holman Hunt regarding suicide by a fallen woman. "Past and Present" deals with the discovery by a husband of a woman's infidelity and the

²⁵ Nochlin, 143.

resulting consequences to the family and her and reveals the continuing culture in Victorian society of demonizing women who, in their view, were immoral despite those like Watts who tended to have a more sympathetic view. The first painting, popularly titled “The Infidelity Discovered,” shows the discovery. The setting of the work is somewhat sumptuous and implies the family is well-to-do, then denoting the woman as a middle class housewife, meant to inhabit the ideal, angelic stereotype. The wife is prostrate on the carpet, her hands clenched tightly together in either prayer or plea showing off the gold bracelets around both of her wrists and further emphasizing her stature – as well as giving the impression of shackles²⁶. The audience cannot see the woman’s face, but her posture implies desperation. The husband, seated above her in a chair at the table, holds a piece of paper – likely that which had revealed her infidelity to him – in a clenched fist while under his foot he crushes a figurine representative of the woman’s lover²⁷. His expression is grim and unforgiving, providing the viewer with a glimpse of what is to come. Their children play off to the left, oblivious to what is happening except for the turn of one of the girl’s heads, as though she is just hearing the sound of her mother crying.

The second painting, “The Abandoned Daughters,” is much sparser in its content. The sole figures are the daughters rendered in the first painting, grown up without their parents, who are pictured in the portraits on the wall. The room is Spartan in furnishing, and the colors chosen by Egg are muted, brown, and dark, further emphasizing the emotions of pity and sadness the viewer is supposed to feel upon seeing this piece. The audience would have known the story of these orphans

²⁶ Tate Modern, “Past and Present, No. 1.”

²⁷ Tate Modern, “Past and Present, No. 1.”

and that the father was now dead due to the caption placed under it by Egg himself, which read:

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!²⁸

This quote also explains the third painting, "Wife Abandoned by Her Lover with Her Bastard Child," in which the wife from the first work is shown huddled under a dark bridge at night. She is sitting against the back of a small wooden boat, her gaze cast out over it to the river and sky beyond. The opposite side of the picture is crowded with a pile of rocks, further emphasizing that the place she is seated is not meant to be a shelter.

On the surface, this series smacks of moralistic superiority. However, upon looking closer at the paintings and in taking William Holman Hunt's quotes – which will be explored momentarily – defending this series into context, the moralism of the painting falters. In the third painting, a closer inspection of the posters on the wall behind the wife's head reveals a hidden message. "VICTIMS," reads the poster closest to the wife, "A CURE OF LOVE." Egg, painting in an era that valued symbolism and minute detail in art, would not have placed these words here accidentally, so it is certain he meant for his words to be read as not a castigation of the wife, but a castigation of society. In a society which was eager to demonize women who gave into sexual desire and sentence them to death, Egg portrayed a common story in

²⁸ Tate Modern, "Past and Present, No. 2."

“Past and Present,” with some degree of compassion, criticizing, perhaps, the tendency for self-professed Christians to not practice the teachings of Christ in granting forgiveness and love to those in need. William Holman Hunt, in defending Egg’s series, said, “...it is by no means a matter of course that when a woman sins she should die in misery,²⁹” a progressive view by most Victorian standards.

Whatever the true intentions of Egg when painting this series, Hunt’s quote alone shows the progression from Hogarth’s “A Harlot’s Progress,” wherein Moll’s death had been portrayed without mercy, to the Victorian era.

The Dutch Republic of the 17th century, a new country created by a war for Protestant religious freedom against the Spanish, revealed in its art Calvinist moral values by way of genre painters like Jan Steen, who illustrated the degradation of family life by sin in the absence of strong Christian behavior. Britain in the 18th century had just been through its own religious conflicts, overthrowing a Catholic monarch to instate a Protestant one, and extending more religious freedoms to various dissenting religious groups. The Age of Enlightenment which reached its peak in the mid-18th century turned British society towards a path of social reform, secularism, and freer general criticism. William Hogarth’s satiric engravings used this new freedom of criticism to mock the society in which he lived and show the objectionable nature of prostitution in Britain. Industrialization and social reform for women hit Victorian Britain in the 19th century, and as a result art focused increasingly on the idea of the fallen woman, struggling to come to terms with the amount of blame which could be placed on the woman herself versus what should

²⁹ George P. Landow, *Replete With Meaning: William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*, Chapter One.

truly be placed on the society that had produced her in works like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Found" and Augustus Egg's "Past and Present." As illustrated by the examples of art provided, societal change and reform has a major impact on the content and creation of art.



Jan Steen, "The Effects of Intemperance" (c. 1665)



William Hogarth, "A Harlot's Progress" Plates 1 and 6 (1731-32)



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Found" (1853-82)



William Holman Hunt, "The Awakening Conscience" (1853)



Augustus Leopold Egg, "Past and Present, No. 3" (1858)

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