


The Naked Anthropologist

Dr Laura Agustin on Migration, Trafficking and Sex

Letter from the prostitute that didn't want saving, 1858

14 February 2012 in [sex work](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [18 comments](#) |  [print](#)

[Like](#) 153 [Tweet](#) 59



(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/HollSeamstresses.jpg>) Prostitution, referred to under headings like The Great Social Evil or A Delicate Question, was a common topic of comment in *The Times* of London in the mid-19th century. The different points of view expressed have always seemed to me very similar to what we hear today, except for rhetorical style. Some anonymous letters purported to come from prostitutes themselves, and opinions differed as to whether they were genuine or written by campaigners.

(http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/hannah_cullwick.jpg) One letter, from 24 February and referred to the other day vis-a-vis [Charles Dickens's Rescue fantasy](#) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/fallen-women-including-the-one-who-refused-to-be-saved-by-charles-dickens>), feels very genuine to me



because I recognise its tone and the points made from writings by and conversations with contemporary sex workers. Dickens thought it was genuine as well but appears not to have clocked that the writer condemns the Rescuers (I can hear her saying *fuck off* quite clearly).

She distinguishes herself from complainers like a previous letter-writer prostitute, and from the seduced-and-abandoned sort of woman, acknowledging that both exist but not in the enormous numbers moralists

were claiming. She despises lazy women who think prostitution will be easy, as well as married women who take up the trade. She is anti-foreigner, recommending the police deport non-English prostitutes, and she thinks removing a lot of prostitutes from the street is not a bad idea. She scoffs at the exaggerated statistics thrown about (at the time, the unfounded number was 80,000 prostitutes in London (19th-century-techniques-for-counting-prostitutes-same-problem-as-today)). She suggests that the term *victim* be applied to the horrendously paid workers who carry out more respectable occupations available to women at the time (such as those in these posed photos) and defends those who also sell sex from the label *prostitute*.

She's a woman with a mind of her own. The full letter is long; skip to the bold if you don't want to read it all. My favourite bits are in **red**.

(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Lady.jpg>) 24 February 1858, **The Times**

Sir, Another 'Unfortunate', but of a class entirely different from the one who has already instructed the public in your columns, presumes to address you. **I am a stranger to all the fine sentiments which still linger in the bosom of your correspondent.** I have none of those youthful recollections which, contrasting her early days with her present life, aggravate the misery of the latter.

My parents did not give me any education; they did not instil into my mind virtuous precepts nor set me a good example. **All my experiences in early life were gleaned among associates who knew nothing of the laws of God** but by dim tradition and faint report, and whose chiefest triumphs of wisdom consisted in **picking their way through the paths of destitution in which they were cast by cunning evasion or in open defiance of the laws of man.**

I do not think of my parents (long in their graves) with any such compunctions as your correspondent describes. They gave me in their lifetime, according to their means and knowledge, and as they had probably received from their parents, shelter and protection, mixed with curses and caresses. I received all as a matter of course, and, knowing nothing better, was content in that kind of contentedness which springs from insensibility; I returned their affection in like kind as they gave it to me. As long as they lived, I looked up to them as my parents. **I assisted them in their poverty, and made them comfortable. They looked on me and I on them with pride, for I was proud to be able to minister to their wants; and as for shame, although they knew perfectly well the means by which I obtained money, I do assure**



you, Sir, that by them, as by myself, my success was regarded as the reward of a proper ambition, and was a source of real pleasure and gratification.

Let me tell you something of my parents. My father's most profitable occupation was brickmaking. When not employed at this, he did anything he could get to do. **My mother worked with him in the brickfield, and so did I and a progeny of brothers and sisters;** for somehow or other, although my parents occupied a very unimportant space in the world, it pleased God to make them fruitful. We all slept in the same room. There were few privacies, few family secrets in our house.

Father and mother both loved drink. In the household expenses, had accounts been kept, gin or beer would have been the heaviest items. **We, the children, were indulged occasionally with a drop, but my honoured parents reserved to themselves the exclusive privilege of getting drunk,** 'and they were the same as their parents had been'. I give you a chapter of the history of common life which may be stereotyped as the history of generation upon generation.

We knew not anything of religion. Sometimes when a neighbour died we went to the burial, and thus got within a few steps of the church. If a grand funeral chanced to fall in our way we went to see that, too—the fine black horses and nodding plumes—as we went to see the soldiers when we could for a lark. No parson ever came near us. The place where we lived was too dirty for nicely-shod gentlemen. 'The Publicans and Sinners' of our circumscribed, but thickly populated locality had no 'friend' among them.

Our neighbourhood furnished many subjects to the treadmill, the hulks, and the colonies, and some to the gallows. We lived with the fear of those things, and not with the fear of God before our eyes.

I was a very pretty child, and had a sweet voice; of course I used to sing. Most London boys and girls of the lower classes sing. **'My face is my fortune, kind sir,** she said', was the ditty on which I bestowed most pains, and my father and mother would wink knowingly as I sang it. The latter would also tell me how pretty she was when young, and how she sang, and what a fool she had been, and how well she might have done had she been wise.

Frequently we had quite a stir in our colony. **Some young lady who had quitted the paternal restraints, or perhaps, had started off, none knew whither or how, to seek her fortune, would reappear among us with a profusion of ribands, fine clothes, and lots of cash. Visiting the neighbours, treating indiscriminately, was the order of the day on such occasions, without any more definite information of the means by which the dazzling transformation had been effected than could be conveyed by knowing winks and the words 'luck' and 'friends'.** Then she would disappear and leave us in our dirt, penury, and obscurity. You cannot conceive, Sir, how our ambition was stirred by these visitations.

Now commences an important era in my life. I was a fine, robust, healthy girl, 13 years of age. I had larked with the boys of my own age. I had

huddled with them, boys and girls together, all night long in our common haunts. **I had seen much and heard abundantly of the mysteries of the sexes. To me such things had been matters of common sight and common talk.** For some time I had coquetted on the verge of a strong curiosity, and a natural desire, and without a particle of affection, scarce a partiality, **I lost—what? not my virtue, for I never had any.**

That which is commonly, but untruly called virtue, I gave away. You reverend Mr Philanthropist—what call you virtue? Is it not the principle, the essence, which keeps watch and ward over the conduct, the substance, the materiality? No such principle ever kept watch and ward over me, and I repeat that I never lost that which I never had – my virtue.

According to my own ideas at the time I only extended my rightful enjoyments. Opportunity was not long wanting to put my newly acquired knowledge to profitable use. **In the commencement of my fifteenth year one of our be-ribanded visitors took me off, and introduced me to the great world, and thus commenced my career as what you better classes call a prostitute.** I cannot say that I felt any other shame than the bashfulness of a novice introduced to strange society. **Remarkable for good looks, and no less so for good temper, I gained money, dressed gaily, and soon agreeably astonished my parents and old neighbours by making a descent upon them.**

Passing over the vicissitudes of my course, **alternating between reckless gaiety and extreme destitution, I improved myself greatly; and at the age of 15 was living partly under the protection of one who thought he discovered that I had talent, and some good qualities as well as beauty, who treated me more kindly and considerately than I had ever before been treated,** and thus drew from me something like a feeling of regard, but not sufficiently strong to lift me to that sense of my position which the so-called virtuous and respectable members of society seem to entertain. Under the protection of this gentleman, and encouraged by him, **I commenced the work of my education;** that portion of education which is comprised in some knowledge of my own language and the ordinary accomplishments of my sex; moral science, as I believe it is called, has always been an enigma to me, and is so to this day. **I suppose it is because I am one of those who, as Rousseau says, are 'born to be prostitutes'.**

Common honesty I believe in rigidly. I have always paid my debts, and, though I say it, I have always been charitable to my fellow creatures. **I have not neglected my duty to my family. I supported my parents while they lived, and buried them decently when they died. I paid a celebrated lawyer heavily for defending unsuccessfully my eldest brother,** who had the folly to be caught in the commission of a robbery. I forgave him the offence against the law in the theft, and the offence against discretion in being caught. This cost me some effort, for I always abhorred stealing. **I apprenticed my younger brother to a good trade,** and helped him into a little business. Drink frustrated my efforts in his behalf. Through the influence of a very influential gentleman, a very particular friend of mine, he is now a well-conducted member of the police. **My sisters, whose early life was in all respects the**

counterpart of my own, I brought out and started in the world. The elder of the two is kept by a nobleman, the next by an officer in the army; the third has not yet come to years of discretion, and is 'having her fling' before she settles down.

Now, what if I am a prostitute, what business has society to abuse me? Have I received any favours at the hands of society? If I am a hideous cancer in society, are not the causes of the disease to be sought in the rottenness of the carcass? Am I not its legitimate child; no bastard, Sir? Why does my unnatural parent repudiate me, and **what has society ever done for me, that I should do anything for it, and what have I ever done against society that it should drive me into a corner and crush me to the earth?** I have neither stolen (at least since I was a child), nor murdered, nor defrauded. **I earn my money and pay my way**, and try to do good with it, according to my ideas of good. I do not get drunk, nor fight, nor create uproar in the streets or out of them. I do not use bad language. I do not offend the public eye by open indecencies. I go to the Opera, I go to Almack's, I go to the theatres, I go to quiet, well-conducted casinos, I go to all the places of public amusement, behaving myself with as much propriety as society can exact. **I pay business visits to my tradespeople, the most fashionable of the West-end. My milliners, my silkmercers, my bootmakers, know, all of them, who I am and how I live, and they solicit my patronage as earnestly and cringingly as if I were Madam, the Lady of the right rev, patron of the Society for the Suppression of Vice.** They find my money as good and my pay better (for we are robbed on every hand) than that of Madam, my Lady; and, if all the circumstances and conditions of our lives had been reversed, would Madam, my Lady, have done better or been better than I?

I speak of others as well as for myself, for the very great majority, nearly all the real undisguised prostitutes in London, spring from my class, and are made by and under pretty much such conditions of life as I have narrated, and particularly by untutored and unrestrained intercourse of the sexes in early life. We come from the dregs of society, as our so-called betters term it. What business has society to have dregs—such dregs as we? **You railers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, you the pious, the moral, the respectable, as you call yourselves, who stand on your smooth and pleasant side of the great gulf you have dug and keep between yourselves and the dregs, why don't you bridge it over, or fill it up, and by some humane and generous process absorb us into your leavened mass, until we become interpenetrated with goodness like yourselves?** What have we to be ashamed of, we who do not know what shame is—the shame you mean?

I conduct myself prudently, and defy you and your policemen too. **Why stand you there mouthing with sleek face about morality? What is morality? Will you make us responsible for what we never knew? Teach us what is right and tutor us in what is good before you punish us for doing wrong. We who are the real prostitutes of the true natural growth of society, and no impostors, will not be judged by 'One more unfortunate', nor measured by any standard of her setting up.** She is a mere chance intruder in our ranks, and has no

business there. She does understand what shame means and knows all about it, at least so it seems, and if she has a particle left, let her accept 'Amicus's' kind offer as soon as possible.

Like 'One more unfortunate' **there are other intruders among us—a few, very few, 'victims of seduction'. But seduction is not the root of the evil—scarcely a fibre of the root. A rigorous law should be passed and rigorously carried out to punish seduction, but it will not perceptibly thin the ranks of prostitution.** Seduction is the common story of numbers of well brought up, who never were seduced, and who are voluntary and inexcusable profligates. **Vanity and idleness send us a large body of recruits. Servant girls, who wish to ape their mistress' finery, and whose wages won't permit them to do so honestly—these set up seduction as their excuse. Married women, who have no respect for their husbands, and are not content with their lawful earnings, these are the worst among us, and it is a pity they cannot be picked out and punished. They have no principle of any kind and are a disgrace to us.** If I were a married woman I would be true to my husband. I speak for my class, the regular standing army of the force.

Gentlemen of philanthropic societies and members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice may build reformatories and open houses of refuge and Magdalen asylums, and 'Amicus' may save occasionally a 'fallen sister' who can prevail on herself to be saved; but we who never were sisters—who never had any relationship, part, interest, or communion with the large family of this world's virtues, moralities, and proprieties—**we, who are not fallen, but were always down**—who never had any virtue to lose—we who are the natural growth of things, and are constantly ripening for the harvest—who, interspersed in our little, but swarming colonies throughout the kingdom at large, hold the source of supply and keep it fruitful—**what do they propose to do with us? Cannot society devise some plan to reach us?**

'One more unfortunate' proposes a 'skimming' progress. But what of the great bubbling cauldron? Remove from the streets a score or two of 'foreign women', and 'double as many English', and you diminish the competition of those that remain; the quiet, clever, cunning cajolers described by 'One more unfortunate'. You hide a prurient pimple of the 'great sin' with a patch of that plaster known as the 'observance of propriety', and nothing more. You 'miss' the evil, but it is existent still. **After all it is something to save the eye from offence, so remove them; and not only a score or two, but something like two hundred foreign women, whose open and disgusting indecencies and practices have contributed more than anything else to bring on our heads the present storm of indignation. It is rare that English women, even prostitutes, give cause of gross public offence. Cannot they be packed off to their own countries** with their base, filthy and filthy- living men, whom they maintain, and clothe, and feed, to superintend their fortunes, and who are a still greater disgrace to London than these women are?

Hurling big figures at us, it is said that there are 80,000 of us in London alone—which is a monstrous falsehood—and of those

80,000, poor hardworking sewing girls, sewing women, are numbered in by thousands, and called indiscriminately prostitutes; writing, preaching, speechifying, that they have lost their virtue too.

It is a cruel calumny to call them in mass prostitutes; and, as for their virtue, they lose it as one loses his watch who is robbed by the highway thief. Their virtue is the watch, and society is the thief. **These poor women toiling on starvation wages, while penury, misery, and famine clutch them by the throat and say, 'Render up your body or die'.**

Admire this magnificent shop in this fashionable street; its front, fittings, and decorations cost no less than a thousand pounds. **The respectable master of the establishment keeps his carriage and lives in his country-house. He has daughters too; his patronesses are fine ladies, the choicest impersonations of society. Do they think, as they admire the taste and elegance of that tradesman's show, of the poor creatures who wrought it, and what they were paid for it? Do they reflect on the weary toiling fingers, on the eyes dim with watching, on the bowels yearning with hunger, on the bended frames, on the broken constitutions, on poor human nature driven to its coldest corner and reduced to its narrowest means in the production of these luxuries and adornments?** This is an old story! **Would it not be truer and more charitable to call these poor souls 'victims' ?**—some gentler, some more humane name than prostitute—to soften by some Christian expression if you cannot better the un-Christian system, the opprobrium of a fate to which society has driven them by the direst straits? What business has society to point its finger in scorn, to raise its voice in reprobation of them? Are they not its children, born of the cold indifference, of its callous selfishness, of its cruel pride?

Sir, I have trespassed on your patience beyond limit, and yet much remains to be said. . . The difficulty of dealing with the evil is not so great as society considers it. Setting aside 'the sin', we are not so bad as we are thought to be. The difficulty is for society to set itself, with the necessary earnestness, self-humiliation, and self-denial, to the work. **To deprive us of proper and harmless amusements, to subject us in mass to the pressure of force—of force wielded, for the most part, by ignorant, and often by brutal men—is only to add the cruelty of active persecution to the cruelty of passive indifference which made us as we are.**

I remain, your humble servant, *Another Unfortunate*.

Dickens was probably misled at the beginning by the author's clear-headedness about the poverty and immorality of her early life. But it's little wonder he backed off from any rescue attempt (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/fallen-women-including-the-one-who-refused-to-be-saved-by-charles-dickens>) once he did understand.

—*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*

 (http://www.addtoany.com/share_save?url=http

http://www.addtoany.com/share_save?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lauraagustin.com%2Fletter-from-the-prostitute-that-didnt-

[want-saving-1858&title=Letter%20from%20the%20prostitute%20that%20didnt-want-saving-1858&description=Dr%20Laura%20Agust%C3%ADn%20on%20Migration%20and%20Sex\)](#)

Tags: [Europe](#), [history](#), [rescue industry](#)

18 comments

[Comments feed for this article](#)

Trackback link: <http://www.lauraagustin.com/letter-from-the-prostitute-that-didnt-want-saving-1858/trackback>

RS on [14 February 2012 at 11:53](#)

What a BRILLIANT Profound letter. Applies to so many issues truly... deep.

THANK YOU again Laura for doing what you do. 😊

[Reply](#)

pokey on [14 February 2012 at 16:06](#)

Oh laura you dug this up and now we all can read it thank you and wth best wishes

pokey

[Reply](#)

Cate Bowman on [14 February 2012 at 17:07](#)

This letter is incredible. Author unfortunate makes think I should just give up as a writer—what eloquence! Thank you for sharing.

[Reply](#)

Craig Spence on [14 February 2012 at 17:54](#)

The most articulate and convincing statement from a prostitute's perspective I have ever read. Are there any clues in this letter to indicate who the writer might have been? Can we hope that anyone with this command of ideas and language, and this level of passion for her subject, might have written more, especially as she indicates there is so much more to say? Thank you for finding and sharing this.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [14 February 2012 at 22:52](#)

perhaps she did publish other things, but I think the identity of the writer of this letter is not known. the times editor at the time might have known, at least charles dickens thought so, if you read the previous blog post.

[Reply](#)

Ki on [14 February 2012 at 21:26](#)

Wow this is the best fuck off letter ever.

What an old story – a woman who is given little or nothing from society, maybe just the “choice” to survive or not, and who uses her wits and her and body to rise well beyond survival becoming a spokesperson for human decency. Inspiring!

[Reply](#)

Nina on [15 February 2012 at 15:58](#)

The fact that she entered this “profession” at the age of 15 doesn’t shock you even a little bit? Doesn’t give you a hint as to the “free choice” that isn’t there? Doesn’t make you feel sorry for the child whose childhood was stolen from her by men much older than her, who took advantage of her distress?

[Reply](#)

laura agustin on [15 February 2012 at 20:35](#)

Who said anything about ‘free choice’? In 19th-century England, a person 15 years old was not considered a child except in highly privileged families. Childhood is not an objective state. And if you take the trouble to read calmly, the writer describes not feeling deprived of anything in the sense you mean. It’s her testimony that matters to me.

[Reply](#)

Aphrodite Phoenix on [16 February 2012 at 13:07](#)

Like everyone else says, thank you so much for what you do. Please feel free to email me at my book site. I would love to have a dialogue with you.

A. Phoenix

[Reply](#)

JR on [18 February 2012 at 07:10](#)

Great post. Thanks. Reminded me of Walt Whitman’s poem, “To a Common Prostitute,” which was written, I believe, just a few years before this letter was published. Though it sounds like he was answering to her letter.

“Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature,

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,

Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to

rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.”

[Reply](#)

laura agustin on [18 February 2012 at 12:43](#)

I think we can take it they were all in one great long cultural conversation about prostitution, making points and seemingly

answering each other without necessarily having read each other's specific writings. The English term in law was *common prostitute* until quite recently.

[Reply](#)

Pingback from [\(un\)fallen woman « telling the flesh](#) on [23 February 2012 at 02:21](#)

Pingback from [Nothing To Be Ashamed Of – ErosBlog: The Sex Blog](#) on [24 February 2012 at 16:41](#)

Pingback from [That Was the Week That Was \(#7\) « The Honest Courtesan](#) on [24 February 2012 at 17:45](#)

Pingback from [After the Lies, Feminists Continue War on Prostitution | Anti-Feminist Theory of Feminism, Male Sexuality, Men's Rights](#) on [27 February 2012 at 22:54](#)

amanicdroid on [2 March 2012 at 16:43](#)

Thank you for finding and republishing this letter but the red and black bolding weren't necessary. She was a fine writer capable of incensing me without the sharp jabs to the eye.

[Reply](#)

A. Crowley on [3 March 2012 at 07:27](#)

I honor the daughter of Babalon in her fierceness and pride! Her words here, in which Light, Life, Love and Liberty so brightly shine, light the way to the cremation ground in which the Old Aeon should be burned and its ashes of false morality scattered to the wind.

[Reply](#)

Pingback from [Thai Sex Workers: Anti-trafficking Rescues Are Our Biggest Problem | ColdWarfare](#) on [16 March 2012 at 12:10](#)

Reply

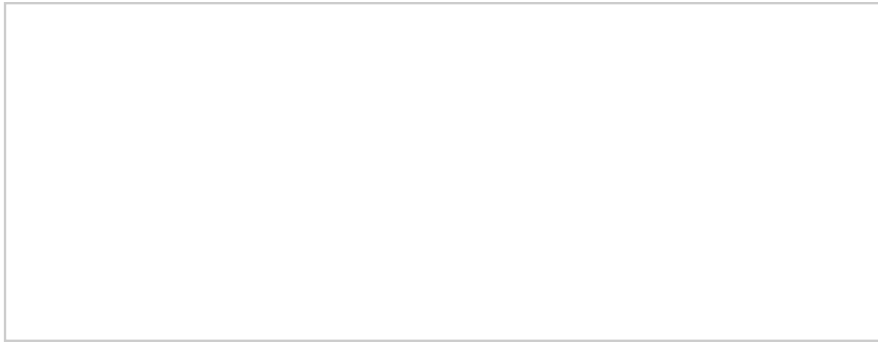
Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Name *

Email *

Website

Your comment



You may use these [HTML](#) tags and attributes: `` `<abbr title="">` `<acronym title="">` `` `<blockquote cite="">` `<cite>` `<code>` `<del datetime="">` `` `<i>` `<q cite="">` `<strike>` ``

Post Comment