



Title of Paper: **The Victorian Child as Sexual Being: The Secret That Ought to Be Revealed**

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Section: Articles

Date of Publication: August, 2013

Issue: Volume 1, Number 1

Abstract:

The article explores the late-nineteenth century rhetoric of childhood innocence and corruption within two apparently rather different sets of sources: the literary crusade against child masturbation and William Stead's exposé of juvenile prostitution in London. Although structured by the contrasting notions of space and class, these texts demonstrate the ubiquity of ideas about child's hidden sexuality – and the need to detect it.

Keywords: Victorian child; subject of sexuality; crusade against masturbation; William Stead; Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon; detective fiction; sexualization of innocence; juvenile prostitution; hidden sexuality

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Despite the loud official protestations about children's innocence, our Victorian ancestors managed to make their concept of the erotic depend on the child, just as their idea of the child was based on their notions of sexual attraction.

James R. Kincaid (52)

For twentieth-century scholars, childhood arose as a problematic construct changing significantly from age to age. Philippe Ariès famously claimed that the modern “child” was, in a sense, a historical “invention” that grew into being in the seventeenth century. Before that period, being a “child” had been determined in economic rather than social or biological terms; entering the labor force, which often happened as early as the age of six, signified the beginning of adulthood. Thus, there was no “awareness of the particular nature [...] which distinguish[ed] the child from the adult” (Ariès 128). This “particular nature” was elaborated on by the Romantics and resulted in the Romantic cult of the child as innocent, natural, and unspoiled. The legislative invention of childhood in Britain can be traced through the set of the Factory Acts (1833–1901), which aimed at limiting the hours children could work, and the Elementary Education Acts (1870–1893), which introduced compulsory schooling. Both legislations demarcated the age limits of non-adulthood and specified the distinguishing needs of this period of life.

One may argue that the most striking Victorian contribution to the construct of childhood consisted in the creation of a peculiar link between children and sexuality. Undoubtedly, this link underwent ample development in the twentieth century. This paper investigates how the emerging late-nineteenth century notion of a child's sexuality related to two social campaigns that focused on children, particularly, the crusade against masturbation and the exposé of juvenile prostitution in London. The anti-masturbatory campaigners verbalized their anxieties in a “rash of texts” (Foucault 233), including handbooks for parents and adolescents about the catastrophic consequences of the “solitary vice” (Barker; Lyttelton), instructions for tutors explaining how to care for masturbators (Baden-Powell), and tracts by doctors promising a cure (“Sexual Disorders”). The well-known “new journalist” William T. Stead unmasked the subterranean sexual market in children in a sensational series of articles “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”, published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885. This range of sources does not claim to be exhaustive or representative; however, the scope allows focusing on the use of language and interpreting specific techniques performed by the authors. Understandably, scholars discuss the issues raised by the texts separately. This article argues that in spite of crucial differences between these sets of sources, their not so obvious similarities help to distinguish conceptions and procedures involved in the process of fashioning the child as a subject of sexuality.

Indeed, it is far easier to see why the chosen texts should not be drawn together than to justify such a comparison. It is necessary to take into account dissimilarities between the publications, starting with the class distinction. Stead's “Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon” relates to the late nineteenth-century tradition of slumming; in other words, it belongs to the literature of urban exploration, which boldly stated the problems of the working class. In particular, the author draws attention to the



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subterranean sex trade in poor “daughters of the people.” Stead finds subjects for his narrative in the “City of the Plain” where “the tribute in maidens” is levied “by the vices of the rich upon the necessities of the poor.” On the contrary, the anti-masturbatory treatises are concerned with children brought up in “refined home[s],” with offsprings of upper- and middle-class families (Lyttelton 93). Possible stimuli to giving way to self-defilement, as they are specified in the handbooks, are strongly suggestive of well-off domestic settings: “The temptation may arise from physical causes, such as eating rich foods, sleeping on the back in a soft bed with too many blankets on,” etc. (Baden-Powell 359). The class conditionality is particularly expressive when the authors proceed to prescribing diets: they usually insist on avoiding “excessive meat-eating,” “rich pastry,” abundant suppers (Barker 25). Apparently, children of the Stead’s story, those readily sold for a sovereign by their drunken parents, are not familiar with the problem of an “over-stimulating” dietary pattern. According to Thomas Laqueur, it was only at the turn of the century that the problem of the rich was introduced to the classes “well bellow those who might ha[ve] read the earlier authors”; in the 1900s, masturbation came to constitute a danger not only for an individual but the nation in general (47, 51). Such texts as *Training of the Young in the Laws of Sex* and *Scouting for Boys* should be read in the context of the Empire: when half of the soldiers called up for the Boer War (1899–1902) were found unfit, juvenile onanism became an explanatory principle of the “deterioration of [the] race” (Baden-Powell 208). The assertion of the habit as a universal cause of every singular ill will be discussed further in the study.

Apart from the class distinction, the “Maiden Tribute” and the anti-masturbatory tracts are structured by contrasting notions of space. On the one hand, masturbation is a domestic vice. In his course of lectures dedicated to the nineteenth-century construction of the abnormal individual, Michel Foucault points out that the agitation is drawn to a closed, claustrophobic microcell around the child’s body; it is “the great family drama of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [...] with its beds, its sheets, the night, the lamps, its stealthy approaches, its odors, and the carefully inspected stains on the sheets” (247). As for the educational institutions, the instructors also recommend creating compact and transparent spaces to enable constant surveillance of children and their habits. On the other hand, the stage for the “Maiden Tribute” is the vast “London Inferno.” The result of Stead’s expedition is a map of the “inverted” city of sexual crimes which comprises common ideas of East End alien mores and West End half-concealed dissolution. The map includes dirty streets where virgins are purchased for a price of five pounds and padded underground chambers of fashionable villas where maidens are violated. Therefore, the external setting within which the sex trafficking in children takes place operates as the opposite of the bourgeois private space where adults exercise control and supervision over the child’s sexual body.

However, even within these contrasting spatial dimensions a certain similarity of approaches is discernable. The author of the “earnest warning” to women and girls concerning the consequences of “the secret sin of Self-abuse” Priscilla Barker teaches her readers that “genital organs are, so to speak, the physical centre of the female organism, the metropolis of her whole economy” (13). It is essential to take notice of the metaphor “metropolis” which indicates the “private parts” of the body that must



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not be contaminated by vice. In general, it was the dramatically expanding and changing London metropolis that became associated with sexual threat, promiscuity, and degeneracy in the late-Victorian Britain. The author of the *Secret Book* continues: “rebellion in the metropolis then spreads injury throughout everywhere else” (13). Here, her rhetoric resembles that of William Stead who warns his readers about the possible consequences of turning poor girls into sexual “slaves”: “Unless the levying of the maiden-tribute in London is shorn of its worst abuses [...], resentment, which might be appeased by reform, may hereafter be the virus of a social revolution.”

Thus, the middle-class anxieties regarding urban disarray associated with London’s sexual immorality overlap peculiarly with the middle-class bedroom anxieties concentrated on the child’s “secret sin.” Taking into account that domestic staff, those proletarians incorporated by the middle-class household, is often made responsible for acquirement of the “bad habit” by bourgeois children, one might speculate that the bourgeois child’s sexuality is construed as an introjection of the street vice. The image of the masturbator’s “polluted” body reflects the image of the city colonized by virus-like social ills. The alarming fusion of children and sexuality appears to circulate both on the grand scale of the Modern Babylon and on the micro-level of the child’s room, bed, and body. While Stead outlines the geography of sexual criminality in “London Brotheldom,” spotting evidence of sexual “abuses” against children, the anti-masturbatory crusaders are also preoccupied with mapping the sites of the “abuse”; what is more, a child’s body is construed as the field for their map-making. The tracts on the dangers of masturbation are packed with checklists of bodily signs. For instance, Barker informs her readers: “The terrible demon of lust [...] scruples not to brand his bestial mark even upon the appearance of our girls. The face loses its colour, and the eye grows dull, heavy, and weak, the hands feel soft and clammy, and often the smell of the feet is unbearable” (8).

Accordingly, mapping the city and the body of vice is one of the approaches shared by the campaigners against child prostitution in London and child masturbation in the private space of the bourgeois home. Further, this study will argue that there is a group of common practices performed and described by the authors of the texts under discussion. However, it is necessary first to delineate the child’s image which was developed within the campaigns’ textual output.

One striking feature that again unites the texts is the representation of children as sexually ignorant and innocent. Indeed, it is crucial for Stead to stress that “the ignorance of these girls is almost incredible.” The readers are repeatedly told that children do not understand the nature of the act, they “only dimly comprehend what it all means.” However, Deborah Gorham points out that this sexual ignorance did not necessarily correspond to experiences of the late-Victorian children of the poor. It is unlikely that juvenile purity was subjected to a close watch by the working parents. As Gorham underlines, the twelve-year-olds were supposed to enter the labour market, and some of them participated in prostitution consciously, “because their choices were so limited” (355). Stead’s decision to represent young prostitutes as sexually ignorant and forced into the sexual market by evil individual seducers was a lesser challenge for the middle-class notion of childhood as depository of virtues.

The anti-masturbatory treatises also deal with children who, formerly, are innocent and ignorant of their sexuality. As Foucault notices, the child’s pure nature is



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“exonerated” from the “phenomenon of masturbation”; the first impulse to self-pollution is usually attributed to pure chance, such as accidental stimulation, or to seduction by adults (243). In her tract, Barker draws attention to the “ignorant and helpless condition” of children who should be watched over and saved from “contracting habits” (5). Lyttelton echoes this, pointing out “an absolutely defenceless state of mind” in which a boy may “catch contamination” and do “untold harm to himself and others” (93–94).

To sum up, it was crucial to retain the inherited from the Romantics aura of child’s innocence in the Victorian texts talking about sexuality. It seems fair to suggest that this discursive insistence had a number of long-lasting effects on the evolving notion of childhood. First of all, the idealization of child’s innocence enabled the child’s eroticization. As James Kincaid makes clear, “at one point theological trope, in the nineteenth century [innocence] became more and more firmly attached to this world and to this world’s sexuality.” Prized and worshipped, it became “a consumer product, an article to possess,” and a promise of reward (15). The Romantic image of the uncorrupted, unspoiled, and unsophisticated child was alienated from the adult world and constituted as grownup’s “other.” Children’s lack of adult qualities made them an empty and suitable screen for erotic projection. As Louise A. Jackson states, “[T]he metaphorical significance of ‘innocence’ is dependent on the sense that it is about to be ruined or lost” (115). The binary opposition, and at the same time, the unavoidable echo of purity, is corruption. Jackson explicates how Stead’s “Maiden Tribute” exploits a “fetishised language of innocence/experience” and hereby eroticizes vulnerable victims of the “white slave trade” (114). In his lurid descriptions of young girls involved in the sexual market, Stead uses the definitions “singularly attractive in [their] childish innocence,” “inexperienced,” “timid,” “little things,” and suchlike. In detailing their sufferings, in noting their “helpless, startled screams,” the journalist himself balances at the edge of contemporary pornography.

Secondly, as a result of the emphasis put on their “helpless state,” middle- and working-class children alike were constructed as potential victims wanting protection. In fact, children had to be rescued from individuals who desired to outrage their innocence and also from contamination that could be caused by children’s own unintentional actions. In the epigraph to her tract, Barker cites Bishop Butler: “Thus it is plainly conceivable that creatures without blemish, as they came out of the hands of God, may be in danger of going wrong: and so they may stand in need of the security of virtuous habits, additional to the moral principle wrought into their nature by Him.”

This image of a not-yet-fallen, potentially damaged child gives adults the right to exercise unprecedented control and surveillance over the child’s sexual body. In his description of anti-onanistic appliances, such as genital tissues saturated with tartar- emetic ointment or zinc sulfate lotion, the *Lancet* medical expert in sexual disorders literally encourages parents “to guard the [masturbator’s] penis for a time against improper manipulations” (159). In the “Maiden Tribute,” the problem of guidance and protection is even more evident. Jackson proves that the representation of the passive, defenceless girl-victim in Stead’s text serves to introduce her binary opposite, namely, the chivalric masculine rescuer (112–116).



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Having defined the set of connotations with which the image of the sexualized child was invested, this study will now retrace by what means this image was constructed. In other words, it is necessary to turn to the methods the campaigners shared in their explorations of the sphere where ideas of childhood and sexuality suddenly overlapped. In fact, the sum of common practices correlates these texts to another type of literature which gained remarkable popularity in the late nineteenth century, notably, detective fiction. The detective logic, which not only structured the texts, but also arranged experience of individuals, is crucial for understanding the set of emerging cultural meanings around children and sexuality that was not exhausted in the Victorian era.

In “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, Carlo Ginzburg draws attention to the parallels between the methods of private detectives, experts in art attribution, philologists and physicians. Their work is based on the examination of minor, marginal details, which can appear to be of no significance to uninterested observers. However, professional decipherment allows constructing “from apparently insignificant experimental data a complex reality” which has been previously unapproachable (103). Ginzburg argues that this “model of medical semiotics” can be traced back to the deciphering of the gods’ messages by a soothsayer or, even, to the reading of animal tracks by a Neolithic hunter (102). The same “conjectural” or “presumptive” approach to knowledge was used by campaigners concerned with the investigations of children’s sexuality.

First of all, the detective narrative tends to stress energy and determination of the protagonist on whom the outcome of the affair depends. Similarly, adults are instructed to track down children’s sexuality with all their resolution. Alfred Dyer, in *Facts for Men*, urges “preachers, parents and teachers” not to “shrink from their duty,” as its neglect will result in the utter ruin of young lives (Barker 8). Priscilla Barker meets the inquiry heroically: although the topic “is one of extreme delicacy,” she is compelled to “take up the burden putting pen to paper on the subject” (8). Like an audacious detective, William Stead plunges into London’s underworld: “For four weeks, aided by two or three coadjutors of whose devotion and self-sacrifice, combined with a rare instinct for investigation and a singular personal fearlessness, I cannot speak too highly, I have been exploring the London Inferno.” In addition, the adventurous mode of this passage and the manifested “rare instinct for investigation” liken the journalist to a hunter for crimes. So like a hunter, Stead reads bestial tracks of the “modern Minotaur.” He pursues purchasers of virgins, running across their “traces constantly” in the “subterranean realm.”

Moreover, in their search for evidence, the anti-masturbatory campaigners, as well as Stead, successfully employed the juridical practice of interrogation. In fact, the “Maiden Tribute” draws on testimonies of child sexual market players, “direct and confidential communication with brothel-keepers,” and questionings of victims. Likewise, the *Lancet* medical expert in sexual disorders singles out careful interrogation of young masturbators as extremely important and states that “the power of a practitioner to discover the truth will greatly depend upon the possession of a tact in examination” (159).

Furthermore, the techniques applied by the urban explorers, supervisors of masturbators, and private detectives include collection of evidence that is



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imperceptible to the uninterested majority, e.g. the reading of bodily signs as clues. It is especially relevant in case of masturbation which was, as Foucault frames it, subjected to somatization and pathologization, and placed “at the origin of an indefinite series of physical disorders whose effects may be felt in every form and at every age of life” (327). A sample set of masturbation results can be found in a typical text of the genre, *The Private Medical Friend*: “loss of memory–premature decay–imbecility–insanity–suicide” (Smith 15). To prevent this chain of consequences, “parents must read their child’s body like a blazon” (Foucault 245). The bad habit gives itself away in seemingly insignificant, discreet, and inclusive bodily signs and unconsidered details. “Another victim came into my notice whose infatuating habit betrayed itself in sweaty, clammy hands, striking feet, and mouth full of saliva,” states the author of the *Secret Book* (Barker 9). Barker’s infallible and momentary insights concerning victims of self-offence are similar to Sherlock Holmes experiences when dealing with culprits. The authoress recalls: “The first moment I looked at her, I felt that I had before me a fearful victim of Self-abuse” (Barker 8). The collection of evidence becomes even more scientific when the “family drama” opens to medical expertise. Doctors advise relatives to examine bodily substances in search for more precise and undeniable tracks of the crime: “It is possible to attain an approach to certainty by careful examination of the urine for spermatozoa. If the urine were collected daily for a week, and its lowest stratum explored microscopically, after due time for subsidence, seminal emission, if occurring, would almost always be *detected*” (“Sexual Disorders” 159). The vocabulary used by the physician again links medical methods with a detective's investigative techniques.

As far as the “Maiden Tribute” is concerned, Stead’s collection of clues reveals an attempt to apply scientific principles in his report. However, his justification is sociological rather than medical. He “obtains sufficient evidence as to the reality of the crime,” gathering names, dates, and localities. In fact, amendment of methods of observation, data collection, and accumulation of precise case records were characteristic of the late nineteenth-century urban investigators. Stead strives for conflating statistical language of scientific charity and genre principles of the New Journalism, which promoted sensationalism and emphasized personal appeal to the readers.

Finally, the decisive feature of detective fiction is a mystery lying in the heart of the plot. In the discourses concerned, a child’s sexuality is also construed as a paradoxical secret that ought to be revealed. As Foucault clarifies, the paradox which structures moral panic around child masturbation is that it is represented as a universal habit which, nevertheless, is “said to be an unknown or ignored practice that no one has spoken about, that no one knows and whose secret is never revealed” (59). Titles of the popular treatises, such as *The Secret Book*, speak for themselves. Baden-Powell acknowledges with some irritation “the prudish mystery” and “secrecy” with which “the important question” of adolescent masturbation is “veiled” (359). According to Foucault, the general formula of the discourse is “almost no one knows what everyone does” (59). Disturbed parents, doctors, and tutors are actually driven in the investigations by the desire to discover this universal secret of child’s sexuality at the origin of every problem. For example, in a disclosure story of a “terrible victim of kleptomania,” Barker foresees that onanism is at the root of the recurrent urge to steal:



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“My experience told me that there must be a hidden cause for this strange infatuation [‘kleptomania’], and consequently, I felt bound to investigate as to the habits of the child. It was the same old story” (13).

Within the “Maiden Tribute,” secrecy also operates as a fundamental narrative tool. The sexual trade in children is represented by Stead as a blind spot of London urban life, the vice, as pervasive, being carried out at every turn, and yet, “unnoticed and unchecked”. According to Stead, sexual criminality “flourishes in all its branches on every side to an extent of which even those specially engaged in rescue work have but little idea. Those who are constantly engaged in its practice naturally deny its existence.”

Stead discovers these secret crimes in the “strange, inverted world” of “the same, yet not the same” city. The principle of the open, “hyperobtrusive” secret, ready to be discovered by an ambitious investigator, is a universal detective trope which can be found, for example, in Edgar Allan Poe’s famous story “The Purloined Letter”, written in 1844. Significantly, the story is a part of Poe’s trilogy about detective C. Auguste Dupin, which is considered a starting point of the genre, while the main character is believed to have given some prominent features to Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (Muller and Richardson ix). Poe’s story focuses on a secret letter that has been stolen from the boudoir of an unnamed royal person by ominous Minister D. Although it is well known that the thief keeps his loot at home, the police fail to detect the letter in the Minister’s house in spite of all the scrutinizing efforts. The ingenious private detective, however, recognizes that the villain disguised the document by turning it, “as a glove, inside out” and leaving it “full in the view of every visitor” (Poe 22). Similarly, the sensational disclosure of the juvenile sex trade, full in the view of the big-city dwellers but strangely unnoticed by them, is performed by Stead.

To sum up, it was essential to represent the sexuality of children in terms of secrecy and revelation, or, to refer to the rhetoric of the New Journalism, to create a “sensation.” As for “sensation,” the Oxford English Dictionary gives two meanings of the word. It can signify both “the production of violent emotion as an aim in works of literature or art” and “physical affection [...] related to a particular condition of some portion of the bodily organism, or a particular impression received by one of the organs of sense”. Within the discourse which clamorously discovers the child in the domain of sexuality, the sensational borders on sensual. It reminds one of the conception of eroticized childish innocence. As Kincaid observes, Victorians “were discovering the benefits of taking the position that a sexualized child was a mystery for [them], and a monstrosity, too.” This mechanism was only fully developed in the twentieth century with the “advent of Freud” and the scandalous sexualization of infants (Kincaid 55). It is necessary to mention that Freud’s “detective” method is one of the case studies presented by Ginzburg in the “Evidential Paradigm.”¹ According

¹ Ginzburg draws attention to the fact that Freud acknowledged the connection between technique of psychoanalysis and method of an art connoisseur Giovanni Morelli. Morelli urged to examine such “marginal” details of a painting as fingernails, earlobes, toes, etc., for more accurate attribution. In “The Moses of Michelangelo”, Freud states that psychoanalysis, too, “is accustomed to divine secrets and concealed things from unconsidered or unnoticed details, from the rubbish heap, as it were, of our observation” (Ginzburg 99).



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to Kincaid, psychoanalysis further deepened the idea of the child as an amalgam of sex and asexuality: “by sexualizing the infant,” Freud meets the notion of children as seducers of adults; and then, by “making sexuality merely ‘latent’ in the slightly older child”, he maintains the aura of innocence which construes the child as an object of desire (15–16). To portray the issue in Elleke Boehmer’s terms, children became commonly imagined as “sexually uncommitted and yet brimming with dangerous energies—energies that require[d] channeling in ways that [would] be pleasing and yet manageable for adults” (300). Thus, children were managed, surveilled, medicalized, and, concurrently, sexualized.

The double-faced concern with the child’s purity has had its long-lasting effects. With the multiplication of discourses addressing the issue of protection of children, the process of objectification of children also went on. The twentieth century saw the deployment of Freud’s and Klein’s psychoanalytic theories of childhood sexuality as well as the marketing exploitation of the child’s appeal as well as continuing moral panic about sexual abuse against children. In conclusion, I would like to cite a literary anecdote about, arguably, the most famous apologist of the erotic vision of children in the twentieth century. When asked about scenes from the historical past he would like to see on film, Vladimir Nabokov named, among others, Lewis Carroll’s notorious picnics with his child-friends and the wedding of Edgar A. Poe to his thirteen-years-old-cousin (Hall 275). Playfully enough, the author of the scandalous *Lolita* merged child-loving and detective tradition, emblemized by Poe, in one sentence. By re-assessing two sets of the late-nineteenth-century’s debates about the child as a subject of sexuality, this study has attempted to explicate their relation to detective rhetoric and evidential approach to knowledge.

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