AP Euro: Chapter 23 – **Prostitution in Victorian London**

**As cities grew, many women living** without family support turned to prostitution to survive. The increase in prostitution led to the spread of venereal disease, prompting public health officials to call for laws against prostitutes. In England, the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s allowed police to arrest women on suspicion of prostitution. Men who frequented prostitutes were rarely charged, however, and a public outcry against the laws led to their repeal and a more sympathetic view of prostitution by the end of the century. In the meantime, journalists such as Henry Mayhew began to interview prostitutes in an effort to understand their plight. This excerpt, which tells the story of a young London prostitute, was published in Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* in 1862.

**Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor:*** The narrative which follows—that of a prostitute, sleeping in the low-lodging houses, where boys and girls are huddled promiscuously together, discloses a system of depravity, atrocity, and enormity, which certainly cannot be paralleled in any nation, however, barbarous, nor in any age, however “dark.”… A good-looking girl of sixteen gave me the following awful statement:

*“I am an orphan. When I was ten I was sent to service as maid of all-work, in a small tradesman's family. It was a hard place, and my mistress used me very cruelly, beating me often. When I had been in place three weeks, my mother died; my father having died … years before. I stood my mistress's ill-treatment for about six months. She beat me with sticks as well as her hands. I was black and blue, and at last I ran away. I got to Mrs. ——, a low lodging-house. I didn't know before that there was such a place.…*

*“During this time I used to see boys and girls from ten and twelve years old sleeping together, but understood nothing wrong. I had never heard of such places before I ran away. I can neither read nor write. My mother was a good woman, and I wish I'd had her to run away to.…*

*“At the month's end, when I was beat out, I met with a young man of fifteen—I myself was going on twelve years old—and he persuaded me to take up with him. I stayed with him three months in the same lodging house, living with him as his wife, though we were mere children, and being true to him. At the three months' end he was taken up for picking pockets, and got six months. I was sorry, for he was kind to me; … [I] was forced to go into the streets for a living. I continued walking the streets for three years, sometimes making a good deal of money, sometimes none, feasting one day and starving the next.…*

*“I lodged all this time at a lodging-house in Kent-street. They were all thieves and bad girls. I have known between three and four dozen boys and girls sleep in one room. The beds were filth and full of vermin.…*

*“At the house where I am [now] it is 3d. a night; but at Mrs. ——'s it is 1d. and 2d. a night, and just the same goings on. Many a girl—nearly all of them—goes out into the streets from this penny and twopenny house, to get money for their favourite boys by prostitution. If the girl cannot get money she must steal something, or will be beaten by her ‘chap’ when she comes home.”*

**Historical Thinking Skill Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence**

* **What was Mayhew's purpose in publishing this account? How accurate do you think it is? Why?**

Source: Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: Cyclopedia of the Conditions and Earnings of Those that Will Work, Those that Cannot Work, and Those that Will Not Work* (London: Charles Griffin & Co., 1862) Vol. 1, pp. 458–460