

City Girls: Representations of Female Labour in Margaret Harkness's 1880s Writings

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This article examines Margaret Harkness's contribution to representations of gendered urban labour in the late nineteenth century, with a particular focus on her portrayal of unskilled and precariously employed female workers – or “city girls” – in both her fiction and non-fiction. Through a close reading of Harkness's slum novels, including *A City Girl* (1887), *Out of Work* (1888), *In Darkest London* (1891) and *A Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890), as well as journalistic pieces such as “Girl Labour in the City” (1888) and *Toilers in London* (1889), the article explores the narrative and aesthetic strategies Harkness uses to depict the structural disempowerment, economic marginalisation, and epistemological deprivation experienced by working-class women in late-Victorian cities. The article argues that Harkness's refusal to imbue her characters with psychological depth or conventional interiority, often criticised by scholars as artistic failure, should instead be understood as a deliberate formal intervention. By flattening subjectivity and emphasising disorientation and opacity, Harkness resists middle-class realist and naturalist modes of representation, offering instead a more politically and structurally attuned portrayal of female unskilled work. Rather than embodying moral growth or agency, Harkness's characters exist on the margins of intelligibility and action, a narrative choice that speaks to the limited tools and frameworks available to them for making sense of their exploitation.

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Over the past few decades, Margaret Elise Harkness (1854–1923) has re-emerged as a significant figure of late-Victorian literary and social history. Once remembered primarily (often in a footnote) as the somehow obscure recipient of an 1888 letter by Friedrich Engels,¹ Harkness is now widely recognised for her intense activity as a writer and social activist and for her unrelenting engagement with the conditions of the urban poor, with a peculiar focus on unskilled and casual workers. Today, Harkness is best known for the “slum fiction” she published in the late 1880s, using the pseudonym “John Law”: the London trilogy *A City Girl* (1887), *Out of Work* (1888), and *In Darkest London* (1891; originally published as *Captain Lobe* in 1889) but also the less-studied novel *A Manchester Shirt Maker* (1890).

The critical resurgence of Harkness has been supported by a wave of scholarly editions and reprints of her work (Law 1990; Harkness 2009; Law 2015; Harkness 2017; Harkness 2021), as well as by renewed biographical research and archival discoveries that have led to the attribution to her of previously anonymous writings (Elkiss 2019). Inspired by Harkness’s interest in urban poverty and by her numerous connections in the London socialist and radical networks of the 1880s – including figures such as Beatrice Potter (later Webb), Olive Schreiner, Eleanor Marx, Annie Besant, Tom Mann and John Burns – scholars have examined her work within a wide range of intersecting contexts. Harkness’s texts have thus been read as part of the early socialist literary tradition² (Keating 1971, 239–45; Goode 1982; Hapgood 1996; Breton 2010); as a contribution to New Woman and early feminist discourse (Bjørhovde 1987, 59–86; Nord 1995, 181–97; Ledger 1997, 43–50; Beaumont 2007); and, more broadly, as an example of the convergence between fiction and political activism in the 1880s and early 1890s. More recently, critics have turned to the formal and generic complexity of Harkness’s writings, arguing that her work invites scholars to “push and reform critical boundaries” (Janssen and Robertson 2019, 7) and participates in distinctive ways in late-Victorian debates on realism, representation, and working-class subjectivity (Sparks 2017; Cameron 2020).

Taking its cue from this body of scholarship, this article intends to shed light on Harkness’s valuable contribution to representations of gendered urban labour at the end of the nineteenth century. Focusing on figures of female workers or “city girls” in her writings, I situate Harkness’s engagement with female work within the broader social and political landscape of the 1880s and early 1890s, drawing attention to the different narrative and aesthetic strategies she adopts in her non-fiction and fiction. While her journalistic writings occasionally adopt the sentimental tone typical of late-Victorian social investigation, they also demonstrate a marked interest in female independence and a clear awareness that poverty is rooted in structural inequality rather than personal moral failure. On the other hand, her fiction more effectively unsettles the dominant narratives that marginalise working-class women in late-Victorian realist and naturalist

1 Engels’s letter, often cited for its mixed assessment of *A City Girl* (it praises the novel while criticising its portrayal of the working class as overly passive; see below) is reproduced in both recent editions of the text (in Law 2015, 133–35; in Harkness 2017, 132–34). The edition by Mutch also includes Harkness’s brief response to Engels (Law 2015, 136).

2 As most critics observe, Harkness’s participation in socialist literature was unorthodox and at times controversial, not unlike her short-lived involvement with the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Soon after gaining membership to SDF (in 1887 or 1888), Harkness’s dissatisfaction with the organisation became manifest in 1888, when some of her articles in *Justice* sparked controversy; by September 1889 she had already resigned her membership (Bellamy and Kaspar 1987, 105; Elkiss 2019, 25).

novels, thereby offering alternative ways of representing the precarious conditions of urban gendered labour.

“An Indefatigable Student of Social Conditions:” Margaret Harkness and Women’s Work in the City

Harkness’s lifelong concern with the conditions of working women in metropolitan cities was not merely a matter of intellectual or political interest, but it was also rooted in the personal and professional choices that shaped her life. Raised in Worcestershire as the daughter of an Anglican rector with some high-society connections – which, however, were “more prestigious than useful” (Bellamy and Kaspar 1987, 103) – Harkness moved to London in her early twenties to work as a nurse, but soon decided to give up her job at the hospital to become a professional writer. A letter to her second cousin Beatrice Potter from these early London years confirms that Harkness was fully aware that her desire to pursue a career as an independent and unmarried working woman would result in familial opposition, isolation, and financial constraints: “few women have enough character to live an unmarried life, and not sink into a nobody, or still worse into a financial nuisance” (quoted in Elkiss 2019, 20).

Harkness’s refusal of conventional gender roles was reinforced through the encounter with a group of congenial female “brain worker[s],” to use Beatrice Potter’s phrase (Nord 1995, 189). After obtaining a Reader’s Pass to the British Museum, Harkness entered the circle of intellectual women who gathered in its Reading Room during the early 1880s, including Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, Annie Besant, Amy Levy and Clementina Black. It was here that Harkness began to read widely about socialism and to conduct research for her earliest writings – a form of personal liberation through self-education that is presented as a privilege in her novel *In Darkest London*, when the labour mistress’s crude grasp of socialist ideas is attributed (albeit with a dash of characteristic sarcasm) to the fact that “she lives away from the British Museum Reading-Room, where she might graze in a herd of like-minded women” (Harkness 2009, 89).

At the same time, like other women activists, Harkness developed an increasing interest in documenting the lives of the urban poor: especially, to use her own caustic words, those belonging to “a class below the unskilled labourers; I mean the scum of our population that haunts the slums of our great cities” (Law 1891, 377). Harkness’s attention to this often-overlooked segment of the working class was not merely theoretical. As is now well known, she became actively involved in key campaigns supporting marginalised labourers: most notably, the 1888 matchgirls’ strike at Bryant & May, in collaboration with Marx and Besant (Brake and Demour 2009, 79-80; Elkiss 2019, 25), and the 1889 dockworkers’ strike, in whose resolution she played an active role (Janssen 2017, 166-67).

Harkness’s ongoing commitment to female and casualised labour is further testified by her decision to move into the Katharine Buildings in Aldgate, a philanthropic house complex that accommodated some of the poorest inhabitants of London’s East End and that would provide the inspiration for the setting of her first slum novel, *A City Girl*. In doing so, she engaged in a form of social observation that echoed the practices of middle- and upper-class female “slum travellers” (Ross 2007): namely, women who entered impoverished urban spaces to observe, document and possibly improve living conditions. Although the ambivalent politics of Victorian middle-class “slumming” has been exposed as self-serving and ultimately reinforcing the class boundaries it purports

to transgress, Harkness was part of a group of women activists who viewed their documentary work as “an effective instrument for exposing and also mobilising protest against the endemic abuses of capitalism” (Koven 2004, 169). Unlike earlier “lady slummers” like Octavia Hill, for the younger generation including Potter, Harkness and Black the point of their activity while residing among the poor “was not policing the tenants or bringing moral enlightenment to their lives but rather observing and analysing their positions in society in relation to the objective circumstances that had determined them” (Nord 1995, 189). Such an approach, grounded in observation and attentive to systemic forces, would also underpin Harkness’s works.

Even a cursory look at her journalistic pieces reveals that the question of women’s work was central to Harkness from the very beginning of her career as a professional writer. Her first known publication was the article “Women as Civil Servants” (1881), which appeared in the liberal journal *The Nineteenth Century*, while a later piece for *Justice* – the organ of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) – was devoted to “Girl Labour in the City” (1888). The significance of Harkness’s investigation in the 1880s is underscored by the fact that her article for *Justice* was quoted verbatim in the section on Britain of *Women Wage-Earners: Their Past, Their Present and Their Future* (1893), a pioneering study of female labour by American social reformer Helen Campbell, who describes Harkness as “an indefatigable student of social conditions” (1893, 153-57). After the success of her first novel *A City Girl* in 1887, Harkness was asked to contribute to *The British Weekly*, where she published a series of journalistic sketches entitled “Tempted London: Young Men” (1887-88), followed in 1888 by a counterpart series on female workers, “Tempted London: Young Women.” In a later interview, Harkness recalled with amusement that the editor had initially assumed “John Law” to be a male writer and invited him to write about young men; when she revealed her identity in person, the misunderstanding was met with laughter, and she appears to have suggested covering the experiences of young women instead (Anon. 1890, 2). Both series were then reprinted in book-form with the titles *Tempted London: Young Men* (1888) and *Toilers in London or Inquiries Concerning Female Labour in The Metropolis* (1889) respectively.

While Harkness’s journalism often reproduces the sentimental and sensational tropes of late-Victorian social investigation, it nonetheless gestures towards a more sympathetic and politically aware portrayal of unskilled female workers. On the one hand, these texts align with both the condition-of-England novels and investigative journalism by eliciting a strong emotional response in readers, “calculated to build support for regulations to address horrific working conditions” (August 2013, xix). To achieve this, Harkness’s journalistic articles rely on narrative strategies designed to provoke compassion and outrage: for instance, the narrator refers to girl labourers as “poor things” (Harkness 1888, 5; *British Weekly* Commissioners 1889, 182), and observes that “[t]he stories these girls tell of their privations must touch the stoniest heart” (*British Weekly* Commissioners 1889, 178). The efficacy of this affective approach is even thematised in the book through the example of the Commissioner who, after witnessing the dire conditions in which a woman box maker lives and works, remarks that “she will never be able to look at a bright green square box in a draper’s shop without recalling that woman’s face, and the frightened eyes” (44).

At the same time, however, even as Harkness mobilises these conventional strategies, she also manages to unsettle the moral hierarchies underpinning them. A striking example of this tension emerges in her recurrent comments on cleanliness and filth. At times, she echoes familiar Victorian assumptions that linked domestic hygiene to respectability, thereby reproducing the distinction between the “deserving” and

“undeserving” poor, as in the example of the room of a severely impoverished woman who is nevertheless eager to find work, and which is described as presenting “a *strange* picture of cleanliness” (48, my emphasis). Elsewhere, however, she turns descriptions of filthy lodgings into critiques of structural deprivation, rejecting narratives of individual moral failure. At one point, the narrator asks: “how can a woman too poor to possess brush, broom, or pail clean her room? How can she even wash her face or hands?” (44), thus directing readers toward the material conditions that impair personal agency and dignity.

This attitude also shapes Harkness’s treatment of prostitution, another prominent concern of late-Victorian social investigation. While she sometimes frames prostitution through Victorian moral codes, she also complicates familiar narratives of temptation and ruin by situating sex work within a broader economic context. Thus, if the narrator expresses moral outrage when landlords pretend to ignore that their lodgers use their property to conduct the “one trade in London that has no slack time for women” (188), on the other hand prostitution is understood as the inevitable result of structural poverty: “[t]hese girls must live. Their wages are low” (192). The refusal to consider prostitution as deriving from individual moral failure becomes more explicit in the novel *In Darkest London*, when the character of the labour mistress bluntly points out that “[v]irtue is easy enough when a woman has plenty to eat, and a character to keep, but it’s quite a different thing when a girl is starving” (Harkness 2009, 101).

This approach to social concerns reflects a broader tendency in Harkness’s work to situate women’s lives within the structural conditions of poverty and labour exploitation. Attention to this aspect may help us reassess the import of Harkness’s engagement with the specifically gendered concerns of urban labour. Feminist scholars have often argued that her gender politics, particularly as articulated in her non-fiction, was limited by the tensions between socialism and early feminism, thereby making her writings, to use Sally Ledger’s words, “not quite as politically subversive as its social critique in places promises” (1997, 49). For instance, Deborah Nord has observed that “the consciousness and representation of female experience and conflict were displaced into a genderless politics” (1995, 197); in a similar vein, Eileen Sypher has dismissed the potential of Harkness’s radical portrayals of women as ineffective because ultimately stifled by the desire not to alienate her middle-class readers (1993, 120-21).

However, a closer look at Harkness’s non-fiction reveals that she was specifically interested in (as well as acutely aware of) the gendered dynamics underpinning the exploitation of urban labour. Her writings repeatedly expose how unregulated capitalist competition drives down wages for women while simultaneously excluding many men from the labour market. For example, the sketch-like structure of her articles allows her to vividly depict households where entire families depend on female earnings, even when those wages are kept at a “starvation rate of payment” (*British Weekly* Commissioners 1889, 46) and must undergo the fluctuations typical of precarious employment and sweated work. This structural imbalance, where women’s underpaid work sustains families while men are left jobless and economically insignificant, is a recurring concern of Harkness’s writings. Her fiction dramatises this dynamic further, often portraying female breadwinners alongside “loafers” who rely on women’s meagre wages, such as Nelly’s brother in *A City Girl* or Jos of *Out of Work*, who is forced to live off the Squirrel’s money. As Glyn Salton-Cox argues, in this respect Harkness’s fiction may even be recognised as anticipating the future trends of neoliberal casualisation and feminisation of labour that characterise our own time (2018).

Far from presenting this exploitation as inevitable, Harkness's non-fiction also points towards possibilities beyond mere documentation. While exposing the structures of gendered exploitation, her articles also register admiration for women who find in work a means of asserting independence from traditional family roles. This is the case of female labourers like Miss O., a young match-girl who is praised for her resourcefulness but also for being "independent-minded" and for "not find[ing] marriage per se an attraction" (*British Weekly Commissioners* 1889, 40) – though her motherly attitude toward a little girl she has taken in is equally highlighted. Examples like this suggest that, despite harsh conditions, urban employment could sometimes offer city girls a measure of autonomy and personal agency. This aspect is also foregrounded in her fiction, when the protagonist of *A City Girl* can enjoy a degree of independence as well as the freedom to "come and go at all hours of day and night without comment" (Harkness 2017, 71) because of her position as the sweater's "best hand" (66) and as the only provider of her parasitic family.

In addition, her texts recognise the importance of collective forms of resistance. Harkness frequently highlights the camaraderie among factory girls, who pride themselves on being "their own mistresses, and [...] fiercely resent interference on the part of parents, pastors, masters, or any one else" (*British Weekly Commissioners* 1889, 175) but are eager to help each other, as was the case when the matchgirls working for Bryant & May endured the deprivation of wages during the strike because they "were determined to stand together at all costs" (176). The workers' readiness to establish "a commune of food, clothes, and halfpence" (176) is fictionalised in *In Darkest London* when the factory girls prevent a lame girl from being left unemployed by doing work in her place and lending money to her, because they know her family relies on her wage (Harkness 2009, 80–84). Beside solidarity among workers, *Toilers in London* also stresses the fruitful cooperation between female labourers and women activists like Clementina Black, who can assist with the formation of Trade Unions and other forms of organised labour (*British Weekly Commissioners* 1889, 185).

Considering all these examples, the question of women's work in the city emerges as a central preoccupation of Harkness's work as an activist and as a writer. Although the article "Girl Labour in the City" concludes by subsuming the "girl-labour question" within the broader labour movement – "I know that the girl-labour question is but a portion of the larger labour question, that nothing can be done for them at present" (Harkness 1888, 5) – *Toilers of London*, written from a position of independence from (and, increasingly, dissatisfaction with) the political ideology of the SDF, expresses specific impatience with the deferral of urgent structural reform on behalf of women. Indeed, the article collection issues a clear call for collective (state) intervention:

Low wages, slack times, the rush and drive of competition, the over-population, which produces a "lost-in-the-mass" sort of feeling, cannot be altered by a few benevolent people and religious societies. These facts require the careful consideration and prompt action of those who boast of progress and science. (*British Weekly Commissioners*, 194–95)

The same concerns about systemic inequality and collective resistance are taken up in Harkness's fictional texts, where they are reimagined through different narrative forms. Building on the documentary insights of her non-fiction, her novels pursue more formally complex strategies aimed at representing working-class city girls while resisting the marginalising perspective embedded in middle-class realist and naturalist conventions.

In Search of a Genre for Gendered Unskilled Labour

As already indicated by some examples in the earlier discussion of gendered labour in Harkness's journalism, her fiction is in constant dialogue with her non-fiction. This blending of modes reflects a broader tendency in late nineteenth-century socialist literature, which often relied on a "hybrid form" combining documentary detail with fictional narrative (Mutch 2013, xii). In Harkness's case, however, this hybridisation has frequently been interpreted as a limitation. On the one hand, as noted by Ann Oakley, Harkness's "habit of crossing genres" has contributed to her exclusion from histories of methodological research and early sociological studies (2018, 15). On the other, the aesthetic value of her novels has been overshadowed by the belief that "ultimately interest in Margaret Harkness is ideological" (Keating 1971, 245), which has encouraged critics to focus primarily on the political or sociological ideas expressed in her novels. Harkness herself actually seemed to confirm this view when she famously said: "They tell me I lose sight of art in my zeal to enforce a purpose. But I care nothing for art: my purpose is all" (Anon. 1890, 2).

And yet, this view risks overlooking the significance of her choice to write novels rather than confining herself to journalistic reportage or sociological documentation. Thus, instead of signalling a weakness or her inadequacy as a literary author, Harkness's decision to cast political ideas or documentary data in fictional form can actually be read as underscoring scholars' need to attend to the aesthetic strategies through which the novels articulate those concerns. As Tabitha Sparks points out, "Harkness hitched her observations to the vehicle of fiction, which would convey her readers across the factual divide, whether she chose to join that excursion or not" (in Harkness 2017, 27). In other words, her fictional texts inevitably invite us to read them not merely as documentary records but as narrative experiments that reframe how working-class life – and, especially, women's labour – can be represented.

The attention to form and narrative experimentation may also help us reassess Friedrich Engels's well-known criticism of Harkness's first novel, *A City Girl*. In his letter, Engels called the novel "*ein kleines Kunstwerk*,"³ arguing that it "exhibit[ed] the courage of the true artist" (in Harkness 2017, 132, emphasis in the original); at the same time, he objected to what he perceived as the representation of the working class as "a passive mass, unable to help itself and not even making any attempt at striving to help itself" (133). From Engels' perspective, the main limitation of *A City Girl* arises from the novel's refusal to dramatize collective political agency. Although Engels conceded that "nowhere in the civilised world are the working people less actively resistant, more passively submitting to fate, more *hébétés* than in the East End of London" (134, emphasis in the original), he nonetheless found Harkness's novel lacking. In his view, it failed to portray the political awakening of the working class and thus fell short of the model of social realism he envisioned for literature aligned with the socialist cause.

However, Engels's critique overlooks the specificity of Harkness's chosen focus. Rather than representing the organised labour movements or the more politically active strata of the working class, *A City Girl*, like Harkness's other slum novels, centres on the most precarious and marginalised urban workers: casual labourers, underemployed men, and, crucially, women in unskilled occupations and sweated work. These were the people

³ "a little work of art."

who, as we read in *Out of Work*, are described as having “fallen out of the ranks,” while “the great army [marched] on without taking any notice of them, without asking why they had fallen out, and where they were going to” (Law 1990, 49). For this section of the working population, collective resistance was structurally difficult, hindered by irregular employment, economic vulnerability, and social isolation. Thus, the narrative strategies Engels expected from Harkness’s novel – a form of realism focused on “the fights of the militant proletariat” (in Harkness 2017, 133) – were ill-suited to represent the life and work experience of the most marginalised among the urban poor. From this perspective, Harkness’s forms of fiction may be seen less as political or artistic failure than as attempts to develop alternative modes of writing *A Realistic Story* – the subtitle she chose for two of her slum novels⁴ – while capturing the fragmentation, precarity, and gendered exploitation of the life and work of her city girls.

Engels’s critique also invites us to consider the wider literary conventions Harkness was writing against. Victorian realism and late-Victorian naturalism, which inspired in the 1880s and 1890s a wave of English “slum novels,”⁵ claimed an objective perspective on poverty and urban life, but these modes tended to reflect middle-class assumptions about social order, morality, and progress (Keating 1971, 55–85). In the naturalist and slum novel especially, working-class characters were depicted either as objects of unflinching examination or as figures of fascination or pity. Often, they were reduced to social types whose degradation could be examined and explained through heredity or vice. Such representations not only marginalised working-class subjectivities but also reinforced hierarchies of class and gender by filtering the lives of the poor through the detached gaze of the (mostly male) middle-class character or observer.

In contrast to late-Victorian novels addressing urban poverty, Harkness’s fiction appears to resist this perspective. While drawing on techniques of social investigation which were adopted also by slum novelists – and while publishing her first novel with Vizetelly, who would soon be prosecuted for translating in English Émile Zola’s naturalist works – Harkness refuses to treat her city girls and other working-class characters as pitiful, titillating spectacles or, conversely, as seemingly objective specimens for middle-class scrutiny or moral enlightenment. Instead, she experiments with alternative strategies of representation that foreground the precariousness, fragmentation, and gendered dimensions of casualised labour. By rejecting conventional representations of working-class subjectivity, Harkness attempts to shift attention away from the middle-class gaze and towards the lived experience of marginalised female labourers, thus allowing them to emerge on their own terms.

On the Precarity of City Girls’ Life and Work: Harkness’s “Types”

There is another section of Engels’s letter to Harkness that deserves closer attention, particularly for the light it sheds on Harkness’s aesthetic choices. In it, Engels

⁴ Interestingly, the subtitle *A Realistic Story* does not feature only in *A City Girl*, but also in the last of Harkness’s slum novels, *A Manchester Shirtmaker: A Realistic Story of To-Day*, published in 1890 and focusing on another cast of characters made of unskilled and extremely poor workers. We may thus suppose that Engels’s criticism in 1888 did not hinder Harkness from proposing her texts as examples of literary realism.

⁵ Among the works that may be compared and contrasted to Harkness’s own slum fiction we may recall George Gissing’s *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Unclassed* (1884); Walter Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882); Arthur Morrison’s *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and *A Child of the Jago* (1896); and Somerset Maugham’s *Liza of Lambeth* (1897).

articulates what has since become a canonical and oft-quoted definition of realism: “Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances” (in Harkness 2017, 132-33). Although he goes on to say that what fails to be typical in *A City Girl* is less the characters themselves than “the circumstances which surround them and make them act” (133), his broader critique hinges on the perceived passivity of working-class individuals, who lack agency and momentum and form a subdued and rather helpless mass.

Later critics have echoed this view, dismissing Nelly Ambrose, the novel’s protagonist, as passive, emotionally flat, or lacking psychological depth. The plot, which follows Nelly’s seduction by Arthur Grant – a middle-class would-be radical and aspiring writer – her subsequent pregnancy, the loss of employment, and her eventual refuge in a “Rescue Home” of the Salvation Army, has often been seen as offering too little in the way of subjective depth or dramatic self-assertion. Nelly’s apparent lack of agency (if not interiority altogether) has been read as a failure of literary craft and as evidence that Harkness’s political aims came at the expense of artistic expression.

However, such critiques often overlook the assumptions embedded in the realist tradition itself – particularly its middle-class definitions of character, selfhood, and development. As Sparks has persuasively argued (2017), the expectation that characters like Nelly should display psychological complexity, introspection, and interior growth reflects a novelistic model that is itself classed: if subjectivity, in this tradition, is understood as coherent, self-conscious, and evolving, this desired subjectivity is inevitably the product of leisure, literacy, and the cultural capital required for reflection and narrative self-fashioning. To impose such a model on a working-class character like Nelly would distort her subjectivity, as emblematised in *A City Girl* through the somewhat cryptic assertion that a psychological novel would be “an epitome of Arthur Grant” (Harkness 2017, 73): like the bourgeois seducer who appropriates and exploits Nelly’s working-class body, a novelistic form centred on the psychologically deep character would perpetrate Nelly’s objectification and marginalisation. Instead, Harkness opts for the “representation of a consciousness untrained by narrative and its cumulative formation of modern selfhood as an idiosyncratic, predictive, and intentional construct” (Sparks 2017, 622).

Seen in this light, Nelly’s passivity is not simply a failure of form or a lack of authorial skill. Rather, it emerges as a formal strategy designed to reject the representation of gendered working-class experience through the lenses of inner feelings or interiorised self-realisation. Nelly’s emotional opacity and apparent passivity reflect not just her individual circumstances but the structural conditions of economic vulnerability and social marginalisation that shape her limited range of action. What Harkness offers, then, is not a conventional portrait of a “typical” character in the sense intended by Engels, but a subtle redefinition of typicality: namely, one that refutes “deep” emotional and moral interiority and centres instead on “flatness” as the result of fragmentation, alienation, and the muted textures of precarity – the constitutive elements of working-class life, not exclusively but especially weighing on female labourers.

Indeed, while Engels judged *A City Girl* as lacking in typological force, Harkness’s fiction works extensively with types, although in ways that are idiosyncratic and at times deliberately unsettling. Her slum novels systematically reject the deep characterisation associated with realism by replacing psychologically developed characters with flat types that are used to resist the dominant cultural representations of working-class female labourers that circulated in Victorian literature and journalism.

Nelly Ambrose, who ekes out a living by sewing trousers for a sweater and is seduced by Arthur Grant out of his boredom with his comfortable West End life, offers a compelling case in point. Although the plot of *A City Girl* appears to align with the sentimentalised figure of the seamstress and the moralised narrative of the fallen woman – two of the most pervasive cultural scripts in Victorian representations of impoverished city girls – Harkness subverts these expectations by denying Nelly the emotional interiority and developmental arc that would conventionally encourage readerly affective response.

Where readers familiar with the trope of the seamstress would anticipate the character of the pitiable needlewoman – a visually iconic (Edelstein 1980) and emotionally charged figure in both popular and literary culture (Alexander 2003, 136–81) – Harkness dismantles this sentimental construction, which is centred, as she says in her non-fiction *Toilers of London*, on “a person much to be pitied, working in a garret, and living on next to nothing” (*British Weekly Commissioners* 1889, 236). In contrast, Nelly’s long hours at the sewing machine are mentioned only in passing, while the novel devotes far more attention to the protagonist’s frequent movements across the city streets. Likewise, although Nelly’s story includes poverty and seduction, it avoids the familiar trajectory of the fallen woman. Rather than prompting pathetic descriptions, Nelly’s pregnancy, her abandonment, and the birth of her son are implied or simply acknowledged in the text, never explicitly remarked upon: they just seem to happen to her, unfolding without pathos or moral commentary. Even the novel’s conclusion confirms this formal strategy: instead of the conventionally tragic or redemptive death by drowning commonly found in the fallen woman narratives, *A City Girl* ends with an ambivalent happy ending, in which Nelly rather passively (and unconvincingly) agrees to leave the East End with her working-class fiancé, George.

If Nelly’s story makes use of the passive, flat type to resist the Victorian tropes of the seamstress and the fallen woman, *Out of Work* offers an equally striking attempt to represent working-class subjectivity without reproducing bourgeois literary modes. This is especially visible in its portrayal of “the Squirrel,” a young street flower seller whose very anonymity points to her exemplary function. That she remains unnamed is telling: she is not developed as an individual character but rather presented as a recognisable “type,” drawn from visual and literary traditions that sentimentalised and objectified impoverished street-working girls. As Judith Walkowitz has shown, flower sellers in late-Victorian London were typically seen through a dual lens of aestheticization and moral ambiguity: celebrated for their “picturesque” femininity but also suspected of sliding easily into prostitution. In Walkowitz’s words, flower girls are figures “of an endangered femininity, which could rapidly descend from picturesque innocence to innocence under threat” (1998, 21). Harkness draws on this cultural recognisability while simultaneously resisting it. Unlike the Victorian sentimental or moralising portrayals of flower girls, *Out of Work* presents the Squirrel as a deliberately flat figure, with no family ties, personal history, or interior monologue. At one point, she is even framed as a sketch for artists – as though she had stepped directly out of the visual typologies of the popular *London Cries* series: “many an artist would have brought out his sketch-book [...], for the Squirrel’s face looked strangely pathetic, and by her side was a basket full of autumn roses and mignonette” (Law 1990, 188).

Yet the novel also complicates this aesthetic flattening and objectification by offering fleeting and yet sympathetic glimpses of the girl’s daily life, such as her acts of generosity toward Jos, the sympathy she elicits from fellow flower girls and Covent

Garden passers-by, and her nomadic and yet at times intensely poetic life in the streets of London. Rather than projecting onto her the moral depth and intense emotional life of realist novels, *Out of Work* prefers to leave the Squirrel unmoored, denying the readers any stable framework for interpreting her type. As she is drawn toward the Thames in the novel's final pages, she dissolves into the indistinct mass of marginal lives consumed by the city's flows, recalling fallen women without being one – “the souls of unborn babies, whose mothers had been drowned [...] cooed in [her] ears” (266). Moreover, her anonymous death does not offer easy closure, as it blurs conventional distinctions between agency and abandonment, relief and despair.

As we have seen, the Squirrel's nameless, typical identity and visual flatness exemplify a broader narrative strategy in Harkness's fiction: namely, the refusal to endow working-class characters with the psychological interiority or narrative control generally reserved for middle-class protagonists. Yet this refusal should not be mistaken for narrative negligence: rather, Harkness deploys the flatness, opacity, and confusion of her “types” as expressive devices that reveal how her characters' subjectivities are shaped (and deeply constrained) by structural disempowerment, limited education, and emotional deprivation. Throughout her slum novels, characters frequently appear disoriented, drifting through the streets of the metropolis as they seek employment or relief, as if unable to choose or direct their paths. This sense of *dérive* is not the symptom of a lack of agency in some essential sense, but rather the effect of the epistemological deprivation that bars them from fully understanding or articulating their conditions. If George, the caretaker in *A City Girl* (and Nelly's sweetheart) repeatedly voices his “puzzled” and “perplexed” responses to the shifting structures of urban life and labour (Harkness 2017, 56), among Harkness's unskilled female workers this inability to grasp the forces shaping their precarity and marginalisation is even more pronounced, highlighting the particularly gendered dimensions of structural alienation in the late-Victorian city.

Thus, for example, numbed by poverty and despair, Mary Dillon, the protagonist of *A Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890), is unable to grasp the moral or legal consequences of killing her baby daughter. As she wanders through a churchyard with the child's little coffin in her arms, she fails to register her act as criminal, or even to remember that she cannot bury the corpse without notice. While the narrator suggests that “she must have lost her reason” (Law 1890, 124-25), elsewhere the text offers a more nuanced explanation – one that aligns with the broader narrative of disorientation that defines the experience of Harkness's vulnerable city girls:

She did not seem to realise even then, what she had been doing. She was one of the many people, who live and die without once grasping the facts of existence, who spend life in a sort of dream, in which they see men and women like trees, walking; a shadowy little creature actuated by one wish, namely: To enjoy, the Sunshine of Happiness; “a pauper brat,” whose idea had been, that if she could not be happy herself, then her child MUST be, SHOULD be happy. (Law 1890, 111, emphasis in the original)

Confronted with what Harkness denounces in her article “Girl Labour in the City” as a “competitive system” that preys especially harshly on female labourers – “if they slip, no one gives them a second chance, they are kicked and spat upon by the public” (Harkness 1888, 5) – the city girls of her slum fiction are rendered not just passive, but epistemologically adrift. Lacking the tools to conceptualise oppression, they are turned

into hopeless onlookers, merely witnessing what happens to them, but unable to narrate their lives through conventional frameworks of agency, morality, or class consciousness.

This disorientation runs through the fabric of Harkness's slum fiction. In *A City Girl*, it comes into sharp focus when Nelly, standing unseen in the street and looking through the window at the (apparently) idyllic picture of Mr. Grant's West-End domestic comfort, condenses her emotional response into the seemingly incongruous remark that, when he had been with her, the man "had looked as men looked at 'sweethearts,' not as men look at babies" (Harkness 2017, 85). Rather than signalling romantic longing, the line expresses Nelly's inability to articulate the violence of abandonment in any socially legible terms. She cannot frame her experience through familiar emotional registers of betrayal or injustice; instead, her words offer a displaced and rather opaque comparison, exposing her alienation from the codes of domesticity and care that define Grant's world but remain inaccessible to her. A similar moment occurs in *Out of Work*, where the Squirrel's strange attraction to the sphinxes along the Victoria Embankment crystallises her wonder and alienation. Initially, the sphinxes seem to embody a kind of serene acceptance of the world's incomprehensible mystery for marginalised people like herself, their "unfathomable smile" offering the comfort of detached permanence (Law 1990, 256). But when she is confronted with the horror of Jos's abandonment, that same smile becomes a sinister emblem of indifference and finality – an inscrutable stillness that no longer consoles but instead draws her toward the embrace of the river.

In contrast to the emotional disorientation experienced by Mary Dillon, Nelly Ambrose and the Squirrel, Jane Hardy – the labour mistress of *In Darkest London* – offers a different but equally significant variation on the figure of the female labourer who is prevented from understanding (and thus resisting) the structures of her oppression. Metafictionally introduced to readers as the newly emerging character of "the strong-minded proletarian spinster" (Harkness 2009, 89) who "will be put in the novelists' character-box, and be made to dance with their other puppets" (90), the labour mistress does not share the confusion or dream-like detachment of the other city girls, but appears equally constrained, materially as well as culturally. When the chapter devoted to her opens with the claim that "[s]he would attend women's rights meetings if she knew where they take place, and agitate for the enfranchisement of her sex if she knew how to agitate" (89), the text suggests that political passivity is not a matter of temperament but the result of structural exclusion. As an unskilled female labourer based in the East End, she has neither the leisure to read nor the social networks through which political consciousness and collective action might be fostered. This lack of access is not simply logistical but reflects deeper structural barriers that shape what is legible or imaginable for working-class women. In this sense, Harkness's representation of disempowered female subjects resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of cultural capital and symbolic domination: namely, the idea that aesthetic and political agency depend on internalised dispositions and access to legitimised forms of knowledge, both of which are class-contingent (1984). Further, Harkness's portrayal of the "type" of the labour mistress may also read as a pointed critique of equal-rights feminism and its implicit class bias: without addressing the structural disadvantages that bar working-class women from public participation – conditions such as poverty, overwork, social isolation – calls for enfranchisement risk speaking only to those already equipped with the tools of self-representation.

While the labour mistress exemplifies the constraints placed on working-class women by limited material access, cultural capital, and time, her situation raises a larger

question that has been latent throughout this discussion. If Harkness's fiction is so deeply attuned to alienation, disorientation, and the flattening effects of structural oppression, we may ask then what (if any) forms of resistance remain possible? In other words, what might lie beyond the passivity and epistemological confusion that so often define her female labourers?

As fleeting or fragile as they may be, Harkness does offer glimpses of solidarity and collective strength – moments through which disempowerment is not simply exposed or diagnosed but also confronted. Arguably, one way Harkness finds to explore this tension between oppression and resistance is through the sensory representation of the city, particularly its soundscape. As Ruth Livesey notes, Harkness's fiction unsettles the dominance of sight that characterises realist and naturalist novels by introducing what she terms an “aural, disintegrative principle” (2019, 113), capturing the overwhelming and unceasing noise of the city. Far from being presented as background detail, this cacophony comes to structure experience. Harkness's slum novels tend to privilege the heterogeneous and disharmonious voices of her urban poor; indeed, even the characterisation of her emotionally flat types often relies on the repetition of phrases that come to identify them more than interiority, such as George's persistent desire to “better himself” in *A City Girl* (Harkness 2017, 55), or the labour mistress's repeated (and disturbing) formula that “a leetle pressure of the finger and thumb on the windpipe when they're just born” would be “the best way” to avoid the inevitable plight of working-class women in London (Harkness 2009, 82).

In *A City Girl*, the noises of the East End are a source of suffocation and alienation for Nelly, whose life is continuously filled with the intrusive, harsh clamour of the Buildings. Thus, it is not surprising that her attraction to Mr. Grant seems inseparable from the fantasy of running away from the unpleasant noises surrounding her in her ordinary life: “her thought flew away from the Buildings to a pair of blue eyes that had looked sympathetically into her face that evening, and a voice that was like music compared with Whitechapel voices” (Harkness 2017, 64). Significantly, the novel's sparse and cryptic seduction scene is not framed by emotional or moral tension, but by Mr. Grant's offer of escape from the noises of the East End. Indeed, the man's voice literally becomes music as he sings a song that thematises the seductive appeal of the night's silence – “Vraiment / C'est charmant / Cette nuit / Hors du bruit”⁶ (77).

However, in *A Manchester Shirt Maker*, Harkness's final slum novel, noise takes on a more dynamic and politically charged function. When Mary visits a factory in search of employment, she is initially disoriented by the alienating atmosphere of the place: “[t]he noise made her quite bewildered. She stood looking up and down the long rows of workers, watching the hands that seemed to move with magical quickness” (Law 1890, 56). Yet, soon this confusion is turned into something entirely different. In a remarkable scene, the factory girls, recognising a threat to their employment in the arrival of a Jewish sweater, begin to turn the very noise of their labour into a tool of collective strength. In the anticipation of their protest, the girls' laughter and talking manage to rise above the hum of the machine:

Sometimes a girl stopped her machine for a minute, and rattled her old meat-tin with a laugh, that ended in a chuckle of merriment. Her companions threw approving glances towards her, and then the laughing and talking became so loud,

⁶ “Truly / It's charming / This night / Beyond the noise.”

that the machinery seemed to make only a sort of whirring accompaniment to the voices of the girls and women. (57)

Rather than a source of alienation, here the noise is strategically appropriated by the factory girls to marshal action. When they finally confront the intruder, “rattling the reels of cotton and the scissors, crying louder: ‘Sweater! Sweater!’” (59), sound has been transformed into a medium of collective resistance and solidarity. Here, aural disarray becomes organised protest; what once bewildered is now wielded. As a result, the disempowering noise of the factory is repurposed as a collective, embodied assertion of agency. Harkness does not romanticise this resistance, but she does signal that solidarity, even if momentary or improvised, is possible – emerging not in spite of urban precarity, but from within it.

Conclusion: Finding Form for City Girls

Harkness’s contribution to the representation of gendered labour at the end of the nineteenth century lies not only in the subjects she chooses – urban working-class women employed in precarious, unregulated, and morally scrutinised forms of labour – but also in the narrative strategies she deploys to render their experiences legible. Across both her fiction and non-fiction, Harkness is acutely aware of the structural inequalities that shape the lives of city girls: not merely the exploitative conditions of their work, but also their exclusion from education, political discourse, and dominant cultural narratives. Her article “Girl Labour in the City” is particularly forceful in this regard, exposing the moral double standards, limited opportunities, and social abandonment that female labourers routinely face. But these themes are not confined to polemic. In her fiction, Harkness builds on the insights of her journalistic writings, using narrative form itself to register the emotional opacity, disorientation, and limited expressive means available to her characters.

What critics have often dismissed as aesthetic flatness or narrative failure can be recognised instead as a formal commitment to representing working-class women on their own terms, rejecting sentimentalisation, middle-class interiority, and the traditional developmental arc of moral reform. By revising and destabilising dominant cultural types such as the seamstress, the fallen woman, or the flower girl, Harkness refuses to objectify her female subjects, while also resisting the illusion of full narrative coherence or resolution. Although her city girls are not agents of heroic transformation, neither are they mere victims: rather, they are sympathetically represented as they drift away, adapt, endure, and occasionally resist.

If, for much of her work, structural constraint and epistemological disorientation dominate, Harkness also gestures toward the possibility of solidarity and collective strength. Whether in the proto-feminist frustrations of the labour mistress, the solidarity among unskilled labourers or the aural mobilisation of the factory girls in *A Manchester Shirtmaker*, Harkness’s fiction imagines moments in which the alienation, confusion, and noise of urban life might be repurposed as instruments of resistance. In this (as in so much else) her writing offers an original and politically engaged model for representing gendered labour – one that still speaks powerfully to debates about visibility, voice, and the narrative politics of class.

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