Courtesans and Streetwalkers in 19th Century France

- In the 19th century in France, many women had little choice in what they became, especially if they found themselves abandoned by their family for any reason, which most often was getting pregnant while unmarried.

- There were two distinct classes of prostitutes in 19th century France. Fantine is of the first class, the streetworkers or brothel [house for prostitution] workers. Here are some facts about streetworkers and brothel workers:

  1. This type of lifestyle was not out of choice, but necessity because they were poor, had a family to support, or had been abandoned by their family.

  2. They did not lead a pampered lifestyle, nor did they have just one man interested in them, but hundreds of men waiting to use them.

  3. They were often assaulted by male antagonists and these crimes often went unreported.

  4. They had to be smart to avoid the police, who had a “Morals Brigade” who did nothing but police the prostitutes to make sure they were registered.

  5. They had to register with the police, have a yearly medical examination for venereal disease, and could be arrested by the Morals Brigade if they did not show for their examination or if they did not register.

  6. When registering as a prostitute, women had to answer questions like: Are you married, widowed, or celibate? Are your mother and father living, and what do they do for a living? Why did you leave your parents? Do you have children and where do you keep them? Have you been arrested before? Have you been a prostitute before? Do you have any diseases? What kind of education have you received?

  7. The brothel workers had a better life than the streetwalkers, as they were protected by a mistress of the house and were guaranteed a place to sleep and food to eat.

- The higher class of prostitutes were the Courtesans and Lorettes, such as Victor Hugo’s mistress, Juliette. Here are some of the differences that gave them a better life than the streetwalkers:

  1. They often chose their own lovers and were very pampered, receiving fine clothes, jewelry, and gifts from their lovers.

  2. They stuck with one lover at a time until a better offer came along or until they were dumped by their lover.

  3. They were usually safe from physical attack.

  4. They were immune from the law, as they were not visible to the majority of French society.

  5. They often held another job, unlike streetwalkers or brothel workers, who were not allowed to hold any other job because they were despised by society.