Unmasking Men of Cloth: Hidden Histories, Neo-Victorianism, and Edward Marston's *Murder on the Brighton Express*

Gunjan Kumar Jha and Shreya Bhattacharji

Abstract

Edward Marston's historical crime fiction, *Murder on the Brighton Express* (2008), revolves around clergy sexual misconduct in Victorian England and societal responses to such acts. This article examines how Marston uncovers certain hidden histories, thereby dissecting the many intersections of crime and justice, religion, sexuality, class, and gender. The article takes into account two infamous real-life cases of Victorian clergy misconduct and draws parallels to certain twenty-first-century instances. It examines how Marston reinterprets, re-engages, and re-examines the concealed histories of the Victorian era revealing it to be far more transgressive than acknowledged. Marston exposes these acts, condemns them, and covertly sparks conversations about their prevalence even in contemporary society. The article, finally, attempts to position *Murder on the Brighton Express*, which foregrounds an alternative view of the nineteenth century, within the genre of neo-Victorian fiction.

Keywords: Crime, Historical Crime Fiction, Neo-Victorianism, Religion, Sexuality, Victorian Age

Introduction

Historical crime fiction, a genre that seamlessly blends the intrigue of criminal investigations with the rich tapestry of bygone eras, offers readers a unique opportunity to traverse time and immerse themselves in the complexities of different historical periods. Authors adept at this craft meticulously research the social, political, religious, and cultural landscapes of the past, weaving a narrative that not only captures the essence of a bygone era but also enthrals readers with compelling crime-solving narratives. Historical crime fiction has witnessed a notable resurgence in recent years. Currently, crime and detective fiction form the best-selling genre. This is reflected in sales figures, which, according to Alison Flood from the Guardian, have dramatically increased post-lockdown in Britain.[1] Historical detective fiction "has developed into the fastest growing type of crime fiction."[2] With the publication of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in 1980, there "has been the veritable explosion of crime fiction placed in a historical setting."[3] Barry Forshaw (1948-), a writer, who uses the term "Historical Noir" for

Gunjan Kumar Jha is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of English Studies, Central University of Jharkhand. Email: gunjan6850.jha@gmail.com.
Shreya Bhattacharji is Professor, Department of English Studies, and Dean, School of Language, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi, India. Email: bhattacharjishreya@gmail.com.

[1] Alison Flood, "Crime fiction boom as book sales rocket past 2019 levels", *The Guardian*, 7 July (2020). At: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/07/fiction-boom-as-book-sales-rocket-past-2019-levels.

[2] Ray B. Browne, "Historical Crime and Detection", in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, eds. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 223.

[3] Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen, *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 146-147.

the genre, also asserts that with "the publication of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael novels (beginning in 1977), the genre began to awaken commercial interest among a variety of publishers."[4] Writers of historical crime fiction explore a wide range of periods and settings, spanning from Ancient Rome to Tudor England, the nineteenth century– when crime fiction first emerged, and even into the twentieth century as late as the 1970s. The Crime Writers' Association's "Historical Dagger" award underscores the growing recognition of historical crime fiction. This award is given to "the best historical crime novel, first published in the UK in English during the judging period, set in any period up to fifty years prior to the year in which the award will be made. For novels that involve passages set later than this time period, at least three quarters of the book should be set in an earlier period."[5] This establishes clear criteria for the genre. Within this resurgence of historical crime fiction, the subgenre of neo-Victorian historical crime fiction stands out, transporting readers to the Victorian era while weaving gripping tales of mystery and suspense. This reflects a cultural fascination with the Victorian era. The Victorian era, with its blend of social upheaval, technological advancements, and rigid societal norms, provides an ideal backdrop for crime fiction. The era's societal tensions and scientific innovations, coupled with the emergence of detective policing set the stage for gripping narratives that explore crime, justice, and the human condition. This article studies the world of historical crime fiction and uses certain key concepts of neo-Victorianism to shed light on the more obscure aspects of Victorian Britain.

During the Victorian age, sex was a taboo topic; an act, of course, indulged in but seldom, if ever, openly discussed in polite society. The revelation that a priest, much respected and revered, could indulge in sexual liberties, would have caused a scandal that the Victorian society could never forgive. Such liberties would have certainly horrified but more importantly remained unbelievable to the majority. An entire narrative hinges on such little talked about acts of sexual deviance in *Murder on the Brighton Express* (2008), the fifth book in the famous "Railway Detective Series", a historical crime fiction series by contemporary writer, Edward Marston (b. 1940). This article examines how Marston uncovers certain hidden histories, thereby dissecting the many intersections of crime and justice, religion, sexuality, class, and gender. Through an analysis of Marston's representation of Victorian society in general and its religious life in particular, it would attempt to penetrate the religion-sexuality interface. Through this analysis, it will examine the sexual scandals of the time, particularly acts of misconduct involving men in cassocks and the societal response to such acts of sexual misdemeanour. Marston, through perceptive research and analysis, has attempted to unearth unpalatable truths that are seldom talked about in any literary genre. Most scholars, be they Victorian or contemporary, shy of such depictions. The article takes into account two infamous real-life cases of Victorian clergy misconduct and draws parallels to certain twenty-first century instances. It examines how Marston reinterprets, re-engages, and re-examines the concealed histories of the Victorian era, revealing it to be more transgressive than usually acknowledged. Marston exposes these acts, condemns them, and covertly sparks conversations

[4] Barry Forshaw, *Historical Noir: The Pocket Essential Guide to Fiction, Film and TV* (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2018).
[5] *The Crime Writers' Association.* At: https://thecwa.co.uk/awards-and-competitions/the-daggers/historical-dagger/.

about their prevalence in contemporary society. The article, finally, positions *Murder on the Brighton Express,* which foregrounds an alternative view of the nineteenth century, within the genre of neo-Victorian fiction.

Neo-Victorianism and Historical Crime Fiction

Neo-Victorianism emerged as a cultural movement that sought to reinterpret, reimagine, and sometimes critique the Victorian period in the context of contemporary concerns. In last thirty years or so, it has captured the imagination of individuals across various artistic and academic realms. A dedicated journal in the form of *Neo-Victorian Studies* began in 2008. Brenda Ayres and Sarah. E. Maier allude to "[t]he majestic trio of neo-Victorian novels - *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles, and *Possession* (1990) by A. S. Byatt" as "the reference for beginning of this particular "ism" although any narrative of the Victorians after the age could, in the right context, be neo-Victorian."[6] There have been several attempts to define and lay the parameters of the genre. The term "neo-Victorian" was first proposed by Dana Shiller in 1997 as "at once characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel."[7] Cora Kaplan, who calls neo-Victorianism as 'Victoriana,' "includes the self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself."[8] In similar vein, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn describes the Neo-Victorian artistic movement as "to be part of … neo-Victorianism … texts (literary, filmic, audio-visual) must in some respects be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians."[9]

These definitions of neo-Victorianism emphasize postmodernist historiographic metafictional, self-conscious, and self-reflexive strategies, thus excluding many historical crime fictions which have the Victorian setting. But recently, other critics and writers like Jessica Cox and Marie-Luise Kohlke argue in favour of a more inclusive definition to encompass a wider range of texts in the genre. Cox divides neo-Victorian into two categories: "creative works that in some way engage with Victorian literature and culture, and scholarly works that seek to explore the shifting relationship with the Victorian period since its close in 1901, often through a critical investigation of Neo-Victorian creative works."[10] Kohlke advocates neo-Victorian "as a generic and integrative umbrella term to encompass virtually all historical fiction related to the nineteenth century, irrespective of authors' or characters' nationalities, the plots' geographical settings, the language of composition or, indeed, the

[6] Brenda Ayres and Sarah E. Maier (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Neo-Victorianism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), p. 2.
[7] Dana Shiller, "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel", *Studies in the Novel,* vol. 29, no. 4 (1997), p. 538.
[8] Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 3.
[9] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.
[10] Jessica Cox, "Neo-Victorianism", *Oxford Bibliographies*, April 24 (2012). At: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199799558/obo-9780199799558-0083.xml.

extent of narratives' self-consciousness, postmodernism, adaptivity or otherwise."[11] This shows that the "neo-Victorian project is still in the process of disciplinary differentiation and comprises a larger body of primary sources."[12] Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann, too, broadened their conceptualization of neo-Victorianism to suggest "thinking much more diversely and much less homogenistically about the spaces it inhabits as part of a wider cultural memory."[13] Thus, scope of neo-Victorianism now includes "virtually any literary, filmic, or cultural text [that] may signal our contemporary investment in Victorian modes, ideologies, and problems."[14]

This movement has found a significant niche within historical crime fiction, with authors reimagining the Victorian era using a contemporary lens. Neo-Victorian historical crime fiction not only captures the essence of the period but also offers a fresh perspective on its social issues and characters. Several authors have contributed to the resurgence of historical crime fiction, with a particular focus on the Victorian era. Notable examples include Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1994) set in 1896 New York, where a group of experts employs early forensic techniques to catch a serial killer. Anne Perry's "Thomas Pitt" series (1979-), set in Victorian England, explores class divisions and societal constraints as her detective protagonist navigates the complexities of crime. Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) transports readers to Victorian London, where a tale of deception and crime unfolds against the backdrop of societal expectations. These authors, among others, skilfully blend historical accuracy with imaginative storytelling, creating a bridge between the past and the present.[15] Neo-Victorian historical crime fiction often explores themes such as gender roles, class struggles, and the impact of technological advancements on crime-solving. The intersection of historical accuracy and contemporary perspectives allows authors to interrogate issues that resonate with present day readers while remaining true to the Victorian ethos.

As one continues to explore the mysteries of the past through literature, historical crime fiction remains a compelling gateway to understanding and appreciating the complexities of the Victorian era. Heilmann and Llewellyn also specify that neo-Victorianism "seeks to advance an alternative view of the nineteenth century."[16] The article presents this alternate view of Victorian Society as represented by Edward Marston in *Murder on the Brighton Express* proving that "the Victorian age was much more 'deviant' than it is actually depicted, perceived and supposed to be."[17] By combining the allure of criminal investigations with the backdrop of the Victorian era, Marston has crafted a detective series that not only captivates readers with

[11] Marie-Luise Kohlke, "Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal", in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, eds. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 27.
[12] Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (eds), *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 2.
[13] Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann, "The Victorians now: global reflections on neo-Victorianism", *Critical Quarterly,* vol. 55, no. 1 (2013), p. 29.
[14] Molly Clark Hillard, "Neo-Victorian", *Victorian Literature and Culture,* vol. 46, no. 3/4 (2018), p. 780.
[15] Caleb Carr, *The Alienist* (New York: Random House, 1994); the series begins with Anne Perry*, The Cater Street Hangman* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979); and Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).
[16] Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism,* p. 7.
[17] Saverio Tomaiuolo, *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 5.

gripping narratives, but also prompts reflection on the enduring themes of crime, justice, class, morality, race, and societal norms about religion, family, marriage, and sexuality. He employs the tropes and conventions of neo-Victorian fiction to reinterpret, re-engage and re-examine aspects of the Victorian era which are hidden and unfamiliar to twenty-first century readers.

Two Celebrated Clerics from Victorian Age and their Sexual Adventures

The Victorian era, often characterized by its strict moral codes and social propriety, was paradoxically a time rife with undercurrents of personal and societal contradictions. While many upheld the era's stringent expectations, others navigated the complexities of their desires and duties in ways that intrigue many. Among these cases are those of two celebrated clerics, that of Giovanni Giacinto Achilli (1803-1860)[18] and Monsignor Thomas John Capel (1836-1911),[19] whose sexual activities were largely kept hidden from their contemporaries.

Achilli was an Italian Roman Catholic Dominican friar who faced multiple accusations of sexual abuse. In 1840, he was accused of sexual misconduct, including the rape of a 15-year-old girl in Naples. In 1842, Achilli converted to Protestantism and later moved to London in 1847. By 1848, he was accused of encouraging his fellow preachers to engage in fornication. In 1851, John Henry Newman (1801-1890), a Catholic priest who later became a Cardinal, accused Achilli of committing sexual offences, including the rape or assault of four of his own domestic servants and another young woman. Achilli denied these allegations and filed a libel suit against Newman. Although Newman was convicted of libel in June 1852, Achilli's reputation suffered significantly. In 1853, Achilli moved to America and worked on translating the New Testament into Italian. In 1859, he was again accused of adultery, this time with a governess named Mary Bogue. In 1860, Achilli disappeared after leaving a suicide note.

John Capel was "the most popular Catholic ecclesiastic in England"[20] in the 1870s, known for his compelling public speaking and charm. In 1874, Cardinal Manning appointed him Rector of Catholic University College in Kensington. However, Capel's public image masked a series of troubling accusations. In 1870, two American sisters claimed Capel had acted immodestly toward one of them in Rome. In 1873, a French priest accused him of 'criminal intercourse' with a servant and a governess. In 1875, a 23-year-old woman named Mary Stourton accused Capel of exploiting her vulnerability. Capel denied all charges and launched personal attacks against his accusers, portraying Stourton as a vindictive, sexually licentious woman. On 5 December 1878, Capel was accused of attempting to debauch a servant, Lucy Stevens, and engaging in "lecheries" with her mistress, Mrs Emily Bellew.[21] In January 1879, a Diocesan Commission was formed to investigate acts of 'criminal intercourse' with Stourton and Bellew, and of taking 'indecent liberties' with Stevens. Notably, the

[18] Achilli's sexual misconduct is chronicled in Matthew Parris, "Giacinto Achilli: A profligate under a cowl," *The Great Unfrocked: Two Thousand Years of Church Scandal* (London: Robson Books, 1999), pp. 25-32; George Morris, *Confession and Intimacy in England, 1851-1913*, Cambridge University (PhD. Dissertation, 2022).
[19] For more details about John Capel's sexual escapades see Timothy Verhoeven, "Sexual Scandal and Catholicism in Victorian England: The Case of Monsignor Thomas John Capel", *The English Historical Review,* vol. 137, no. 586, June (2022), pp. 823–846; Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England, 1851-1913."
[20] Verhoeven, "Sexual Scandal and Catholicism", p. 829.
[21] Verhoeven, "Sexual Scandal and Catholicism", p. 833.

investigation began only when women from respectable middle-class families were involved. Thus, with regard to Stevens, a servant, the charge of 'indecent liberty' was used. This clearly highlights the era's class-based discrimination. In September 1878, Bellew survived a train accident. She was on a passenger train that collided with several goods wagons at Sittingbourne, Kent. Five people were killed. Bellew suffered broken ribs, but Capel continued his visits to her house. This incident may have inspired author Edward Marston's present work.

Capel was also suspected of financial misconduct at the Catholic University college. To save the reputation of the college and avoid scandal, Manning offered Capel two options: submit to his authority without appealing to Rome or leave England to avoid damaging publicity. Capel refused and appealed to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Sacred Faith (Propaganda) in Rome,[22] to overturn the verdict of the Diocesan Commission. After his appeal failed, he sought a new trial from the *Holy Office of the Inquisition*.[23] In 1882, the *Inquisition* found the charges against Capel "not proven" but recommended he remain in Rome for reflection before a supervised reintegration into the ministry. Despite this, Manning prevented Capel's return to Kensington. It was Rome's desire that silence be maintained, instructing Cardinal Manning specifically to ensure that no additional stories appeared in the press. Eventually, Capel was sent to the United States in 1883, where he initially received a warm welcome. However, in October 1886, newspapers reported that Capel was living with a woman named Alice M. Valensin on her Californian ranch. To avoid scandal, Rome suspended Capel, barring him from performing Mass and administering sacraments. Capel's reputation was ruined, and he lived in obscurity until his death in 1911.

Marston may have drawn inspiration from the sexual escapades of these two prominent Victorian clerics. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben observe, "much neo-Victorian writing has been concerned with uncovering the dark underbelly of Victorian respectability;"[24] *Murder on the Brighton Express* reveals this concealed and sinister aspect of Victorian society.

Marston's *Murder on the Brighton Express*

Murder on the Brighton Express takes place in 1854, Reverend Ezra Follis, a clergyman, blesses the Brighton Express before it departs from London Bridge Station. However, the train unexpectedly collides with a goods train, resulting in the deaths of six people and injuring many others. Inspector Robert Colbeck, the titular Railway Detective of the series and his assistant, Sergeant Victor Leeming of Scotland Yard, rush to investigate the collision only to unearth an unpalatable fact. A gruesome train accident had been meticulously planned and executed with a single man as target. Among those who may have been targeted are Giles Thornhill, a Member of Parliament for Brighton; Horace Bardwell, a former managing director of the London Brighton and South Coast Railway (LB & SCR) with his own share of enemies; and

[22] England was a mission territory under the authority of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Sacred Faith (Propaganda) in Rome, which oversaw its administration, organization, and matters of clerical discipline.
[23] *The Holy Office of the Inquisition*, a Vatican Congregation, was established to address heresy but its authority extended to matters of faith, including clerical sexual misconduct.
[24] Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* (New York: Rodopi, 2011), p. 6.

Ezra Follis, a much-respected clergyman, the Rector of St Dunstan's. As the detectives delve further into each person's past and present, it becomes evident that this treacherous scheme is far more complex than it first appears. There are several suspects such as Heinrich Freytag, a foreigner from Berlin, Matthew Shanklin, senior employee at LB & SCR who later joins London and North West Railway, Dick Chiffney, a platelayer, and Jack Rye, a porter. Alexander Jamieson, a naval officer from the ship HMS Grampus, is another possible suspect.

Colbeck finds it difficult to apprehend the criminal. At this point, the railway turntable,[25] adding authenticity to the historical setting, plays a crucial role in Colbeck's investigation of the perplexing train accident. With his detailed knowledge of the workings of a turntable, Colbeck is able to connect seemingly unrelated events and suspects. This shows Colbeck's method of deduction, which involves attention to minutest of details. It resembles the Holmesian method of 'deductive reasoning,' rational deduction with perception and knowledge that is "drawing from a set of existent theories to explain new events."[26] Colbeck had been looking in the wrong direction, initially believing that Mr Bardwell or Mr Thornhill was the target on the express. Rather than focusing on business and politics, he now uses the idea of the turntable to shift his attention towards religion, and to focus on Reverend Follis.

Follis is "a diminutive figure of middle years, jaunty, dapper and good-humoured."[27] He is "a great scholar… but he showed no disdain or condescension to those of lesser intelligence."[28] Follis catches the Brighton Express every Friday evening. He blesses the train which meets with an accident. He also gets injured in the crash. Follis was also actively involved in political matters, which led Thornhill to label him as "a turbulent priest"[29] and "a renegade priest."[30] Follis is also shrewd and intuitive. This is evident in his being able to detect the illicit affair between Terence Giddens and Daisy Perriam, his co-passengers on the fateful train. Colbeck explicitly acknowledges these qualities, complimenting Follis by calling him a "shrewd detective."[31] Follis' response is insightful: "If you'd sat by as many sad deathbeds as I have, and settled as many bitter marital disputes, and listened to as many tearful confessions of wickedness and folly, you'd become acutely sensitive to human behaviour."[32] Follis offers a glimpse into the experiences that have honed his keen observational skills. He attributes his sensitivity, understanding of human emotions, and complexities of relationships to his extensive personal encounters with human suffering and moral failings.

However, his empathy and insight are not purely altruistic or benign. Follis appears to exploit his understanding of human vulnerability for his personal gain. As a respected figure, a man of cloth, and a scholar, he wields a certain authority. Also, his position grants him access to his congregants both within and without the church walls. Additionally, the intimate confessions of his congregants make him privy to their secrets. This privileged position, combined with his deep understanding of human nature, allows him to manipulate and take

[25] These mechanical devices were designed for turning around or reversing engines and cars that could not move backwards due to lack of proper arrangements at stations or depots.
[26] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), p. 86.
[27] Edward Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express* (Croydon: Allison & Busby, 2009), p. 10.
[28] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 101.
[29] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 297.
[30] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 297.
[31] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 123.
[32] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 123.

advantage of vulnerable women within his parish. There is a pivotal moment in the narrative when Colbeck senses the deviant nature of Follis. Follis instead of condemning the illicit affair between Giddens and Perriam, displays an uncharacteristic tolerance: "God has punished them enough for their sins. I don't feel they deserve the additional penalty of my disapproval. Given their condition, they'll get nothing but sympathy from me."[33] While most clergymen would have found such a relationship scandalous and morally unacceptable, Follis chooses to be lenient. Follis' ability to easily detect and tolerate such behaviour hints at his similar indulgences. Much like the real-life clergymen Achilli and Capel, who were accused of sexual misconduct with multiple women, the fictional clergyman Ezra Follis is revealed to have been involved in numerous immoral acts. As the story progresses, his inappropriate relationships with several women, including Amy Walcott, Mrs Ellen Ashmore, Dorothea Jamieson, and Marion Inigo, come to light, exposing a clear pattern of exploitation and abuse.

It is crucial to examine the methods Follis uses to gain the trust of women and seduce them. 'Targeting' and 'grooming' are his tools to trap women into sexual relationships. As Margaret Kennedy[34] defines, "Targeting is the choosing by clergy exploiters of women for sexual exploitation. Grooming is how clergy engage women through behaviours, which deceive and confuse them."[35] Kennedy explains 'targeting' as the intentional selection of specific women for sexual exploitation by clergy exploiters. The use of this is clearly notable in the cases of Achilli and Capel. Achilli mostly victimised servants, governesses, and prostitutes, thus, poor, and vulnerable women.[36] Capel too targeted women who were mostly servants, and governesses. Capel also targeted certain vulnerable women from the upper class. Emily Bellew had divorced her first husband but then married John Bellew who died in 1874. Stourton, "driven by the misery of home, ran away with a married man;"[37] the man raped her and left her estranged. Thus, both Bellew and Stourton were alone, isolated, in need of help and a companion, therefore easy targets of Capel. In *Murder on the Brighton Express*, Follis, too, carefully identifies and chooses his victims. He targets those women who are vulnerable, in need of help, seeking spiritual guidance, grieving a loss, or feeling lonely and thus potentially open to a relationship with him.

'Grooming,' on the other hand, involves a series of behaviours designed to gain the victim's trust and create an emotional or psychological dependency on the exploiter. This process is marked by deception and confusion, making it harder for the victim to recognize the exploitative nature of the relationship. Stourton is a classic example of such grooming by Capel. She is singularly confused about her feelings for him. On the one hand, she complains to Cardinal Manning about Capel, "no one on earth, not the basest man could have more

[33] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 124.
[34] Dr Margaret Kennedy is the founder and coordinator of Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors (MACSAS). She is a survivor of clerical abuse and a highly respected expert in the field of clerical sexual abuse. See Margaret Kennedy, "Sexual Abuse of Women by Priests and Ministers to Whom They Go for Pastoral Care and Support", *Feminist Theology,* vol. 11, no. 2 (2003), pp. 226-235; Margaret Kennedy, "The Well From Which We Drink Is Poisoned: Clergy Sexual Exploitation of Adult Women", London Metropolitan University (PhD. Dissertation, 2009). She studies clergy sexual exploitation of women in the UK and Ireland, from the victims' perspective.
[35] Kennedy, "The Well From Which We Drink Is Poisoned", p. 104.
[36] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England".
[37] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 107

deliberately or in a more heartless way done all in his power to harm me still more."[38] On the other, she calls Capel her "true friend" and admits that "she was tragically dependent" on him.[39] In the novel, Follis employs tactics such as expressing concern, showing care, and offering admiration to get close to his targeted women, giving them extra attention and making them feel special and valued. He exploits their vulnerability, grooming them in a way that makes them gradually succumb to his inappropriate approaches. Diana Garland further elucidates 'grooming' as "a process whereby the religious leader breaks down a woman's defenses, making her feel special—perhaps by pointing out her spiritual gifts—or in other ways using his position as a religious leader to develop a close relationship with her and isolate her from others."[40] Follis often gifts these women books, mostly anthologies of poems, and uses religious language to disguise his sexual advances.

Follis leverages his role as a spiritual leader to speak of God and for God, so much so that these vulnerable women gradually lose their discerning abilities. As Garland notes, "[b]ecause of the unusual level of trust that women place in religious leaders, offenders are able to deprive their victims of their usual resources for discernment, good judgment, and action."[41] The influence of such charismatic and authoritative figures can be so overpowering that the victims may not even realize they are being sexually exploited. They remain unaware of such manipulations, primarily due to the perpetrator's skill in disguising his actions as genuine care, spiritual guidance, or other seemingly benevolent behaviour. Over time, Follis continues to manipulate his victims, they become deeply ensnared in his net. They visualize Follis as a compassionate and caring religious figure, and are unable to recognize his ulterior motives. His religious authority combined with the slow, subtle nature of his grooming, make the women develop an unusually high level of trust in Follis. Eventually, he gains their confidence, seduces them, and continues to sexually exploit them.

Follis' first victim, whom the readers encounter is Amy Walcott, who is on the flower rota at St Dunstan's. Amy revers Ezra Follis. She greatly admires his many qualities, including his exceptional scholarship, and the fact that he treats everyone with equal respect. Deeply indebted to Follis for his unwavering support during the extended period of mourning following her mother's death, Amy devotes herself completely to the church and especially its rector, offering her time and energy generously.[42] Her acute vulnerability at this stage makes Follis target her. The relationship between Follis and Amy becomes a complex blend of power and vulnerability. When Follis is injured in the train accident, she becomes anxious and pleads with him to let her help. In response, Follis asks her to read the first Psalm from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which is, "BLESSED is the man that hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners: and hath not sat in the seat of the scornful."[43] This request serves Follis two purposes: first, it elevates him to a godly position. Second, under the cloak of godliness he starts grooming her. Garland points out that "grooming is essentially seduction in

[38] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 107.
[39] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 110.
[40] Diana Garland, "Don't Call It an Affair: Understanding and Preventing Clergy Sexual Misconduct", in *Clergy Sexual Abuse: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Claire M. Renzetti and Sandra Yocum (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2013), p. 123.
[41] Garland, "Don't Call It an Affair", p. 124.
[42] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 104.
[43] Psalm 1:1, taken from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

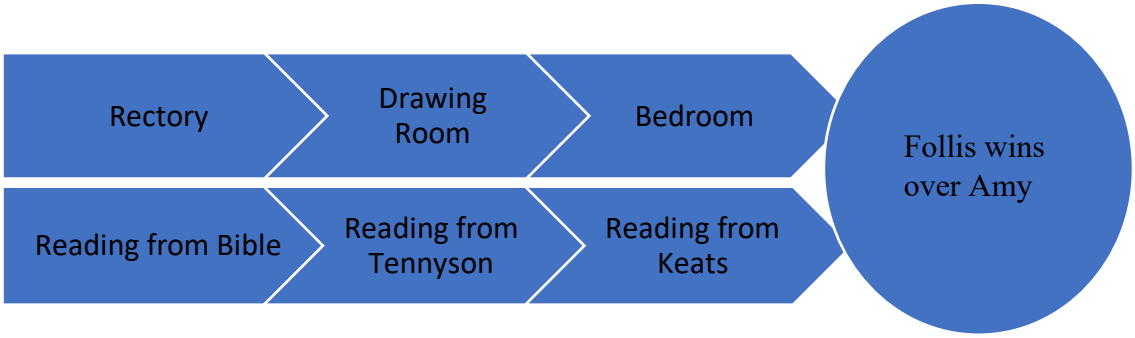
a relationship in which he [religious leader] holds spiritual power over her [victims].”[44] Follis initiates Amy’s grooming by lending her special books, usually anthologies of love poems, first by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and then by John Keats.

She develops feelings for the rector and tries to get closer to him. She is unaware of the rector’s intention, and how he is grooming her. Amy tries to spend time alone with Follis. She gets the opportunity once in his rectory. Follis asks her to read *The Lady of Shalott* but she is “cruelly disappointed” and “deeply hurt” by the sudden arrival of Colbeck and his lover, Madeleine.[45] Follis too, often visits Amy’s house, looking for opportunities to be alone with her; yet when they are alone in her drawing room, her maid is present in the kitchen. Finally, Follis succeeds in entering her bedroom. He tries to minimize Amy’s concerns and doubts about the appropriateness of them being together in the bedroom. “There’s no need to be frightened,’ he said, moving away so that they were yards apart.” He reassures her: ‘No harm will come to you, Amy. I wouldn’t hurt you for the world … I’ll sit here.”[46] His reassurances include not just verbal promises but also physical actions, such as moving away and offering to sit down, which are meant to make Amy feel safe. He wins her faith by saying, ‘If you feel embarrassed, you can keep the dressing gown on.’[47] Asking Amy to keep her dressing gown on addresses her potential feelings of embarrassment. Simultaneously, he succeeds in making her aware that he respects her boundaries. While Follis’ actions appear kind and reassuring, there is an underlying current of emotional manipulation. He leverages his charisma and the trust associated with his position to gain her compliance. Follis’ language is gentle and comforting, aimed at diffusing Amy’s fears. Phrases like “No harm will come to you” and “I wouldn’t hurt you for the world” are designed to build her trust. Despite the soothing tone, the subtle coercion in Follis’ language cannot be ignored. Follis’ repetition of reassurances and his emphasis on not wanting to hurt her suggest his need to convince her, indicating that her initial instincts may have been valid.

Amy’s initial concerns and doubts about the appropriateness of being alone with Follis, indicates both her sense of apprehension and her position of vulnerability. But, convinced of the kind nature of charismatic Follis, she surrenders, “I don’t want to let you down.”[48] Her desire not to disappoint him, suggests a shift from fear to trust. Amy’s internal conflict about the appropriateness of the situation is overcome by Follis’ persuasive charisma. Her final statement, “I don’t want to let you down,” highlights her desire to meet his expectations, which can be interpreted as a form of submission to a person of religious superiority. Amy’s transition from fear to submission illustrates how authority and charisma can influence and override personal doubts and concerns.

The parallelism in Follis’ moves to win over Amy is striking:

[44] Garland, “Don’t Call It an Affair,” p. 124.
[45] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 176.
[46] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, pp. 291-292.
[47] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 292.
[48] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 292.



From his rectory he manages to enter her drawing room and then her bedroom; and from asking her first to read from the Bible, to read from Tennyson, and then Keats, he finally wins Amy.

Follis, simultaneously, targets Mrs Ellen Ashmore, his housekeeper, employing his ploys to ensnare her at a critical point in her life. As she mourns the death of her husband, Follis steps into her life as the priest-counsellor. In this time of grief and vulnerability, Ellen is in desperate need of support, and Follis seizes this opportunity. She is deeply grateful for his assistance and submits to his influence. Follis is "a born orator, able to inspire the minds and arouse the emotions of those who heard him."[49] He begins her grooming by flattery: "'You're much more than a housekeeper to me. You're a friend, a companion, a nurse and I don't know what else… I always have you to offer love and support. That means a great deal to me…. Your devotion has been heartening'."[50] This admiration-flattery psychological dynamic between an offender and a woman is very significant. The offender uses admiration as a tool to manipulate women, particularly focusing on its emotional and spiritual impact on the victims. By complimenting a woman's devotion, he creates a sense of validation for her and establishes a connection with himself. This tactic is particularly insidious as it preys on both, a woman's vulnerabilities and, also her spiritual beliefs. It makes her feel seen and valued in a deeply personal and spiritual way. This admiration intoxicates a woman, giving her an emotional high that significantly boosts her self-esteem.

The power dynamics at play are to be noted. This boost to self-esteem, by being favoured by a religious leader, underscores how the offender's perceived authority can enhance the impact of his manipulative tactics. The woman may feel more special and validated because the admiration comes from someone with religious authority. Ultimately, the offender's admiration is a form of emotional exploitation. By leveraging the victim's spiritual beliefs and insecurities, the offender constructs a bond that makes the victim feel valued and significant, masking the manipulative and potentially harmful nature of the relationship. Follis is a case in point. His admiration makes Ellen feel validated, allowing him to finally possess her: "We've been through so much together that I'll never part with you now. You're mine, Ellen – you always will be…" and "…Then he kissed her full on the lips."[51] The promise of never leaving the victim or a promise to marry her or start a new life with her is again a tactic applied by religious offenders to their advantage.[52] Follis uses this strategy to sexually exploit his housekeeper, Ellen Ashmore. Follis here seems to mirror the approach of Capel in seducing

[49] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 100.
[50] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 327.
[51] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 328.
[52] Garland, "Don't Call It an Affair", p. 140.

Lucy Stevens, a servant. Capel flatters Stevens by admiring her beauty and professing his love for her. He reassures her not to be afraid and promises "fine clothes and a good marriage."[53]

Dorothea Jamieson, the lonely wife of Captain Alexander Jamieson, a naval officer serving on the HMS Grampus, is also a target of Follis. Like her real-life counterparts Mary Stourton and Emily Bellew, Dorothea belongs to the upper class. Dorothea is described as "a handsome woman in her late thirties, noted for her elegance and widely respected in the community."[54] While Captain Jamieson is "away at sea a great deal,"[55] she visits St Dunstan's regularly. Eventually, she falls for Ezra Follis' charms, and a romance blossoms between them. She begins spending "Thursday of every week"[56] in London with Follis at his house, which rescues "her from long, lonely months when she was on her own."[57] Dorothea views her relationship with Follis as a romantic affair. It is important to note here that Dorothea, and to some extent Amy Walcott, and even Ellen Ashmore, think that their relationship with Follis is consensual. All three women fail to recognise Follis' subtle grooming. Follis being a spiritual leader, excellent orator, and charismatic, controls their power of discernment and judgement and makes each woman believe that that her relationship with him is based on mutual consent. They fail to understand that "when persons with power—including social workers, counsellors, pastors, seminary professors and administrators, and religious employers—attempt to seduce into sexual relationships those over whom they have power, the relationship cannot be defined as consensual."[58]

The Follis-Dorothea relationship successfully debunks the façade of Victorian morality and respectability. Alexander Jamieson has his suspicions about Dorothea. He holds her captive and tortures her; "[t]he collision between two trains had precipitated a marital crisis."[59] The collision actually rocks the lives of two women, first Giddens and then Dorothea. In the introductory chapter of the book *Neo-Victorian Families- Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* (2011), Kohlke and Gutleben remark that it is through the ideals of home and family that "we like to remember the Victorians and re-imagine them in neo-Victorian fictions, frequently in the problematic terms of failed, abusive, or disintegrating families."[60] Marston seeks to reinterpret and rediscover the presence of these and other anomalies in the Victorian age.

Captain Jamieson shocks Dorothea by his disclosure of the secret affair between Follis and Marion Inigo, his former housekeeper. He tells her that Inigo was "never actually married. Marion Inigo used to spend Thursday night at that very same house with the Rector of St Dunstan's. She lives in London now, bringing up their child in the cottage he bought her."[61] Dorothea cannot accept Follis' affair with a woman from the servant class. Thus, without any more pretence of innocence, she says "'Ezra would never look at a woman like Marion Inigo. He got rid of her because she was becoming too familiar… She was nothing but a servant'."[62]

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[53] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 115.
[54] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 360.
[55] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 360.
[56] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 363.
[57] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, pp. 365-66.
[58] Garland, "Don't Call It an Affair", p. 119.
[59] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 132.
[60] Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Families*, p. 2.
[61] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 365.
[62] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 365.

This statement of Dorothea serves three purposes: it confirms Jamieson's suspicion about his wife's affair with the Rector; it deflates the narrative of unwanted familiarity constructed by Ezra Follis about the former housekeeper; and lastly, it foregrounds Follis' strategy. He conducts multiple illicit relationships simultaneously, cheating each woman by making her feel she is the only one and special. Her statement also brings attention to the class consciousness and class hierarchy of the age. Dorothea, a lady from respectable, upper middle-class society, is herself engaged in an affair with Follis, but a woman from servant class having a relationship with Follis is unacceptable to her. Here fiction seems to parallel real life dynamics. "The revelation of Capel's behaviour towards Lucy Stevens," her own servant makes Emily Bellew sever her relationship with "the celebrity priest."[63] Bellew is disgusted by Capel's involvement with both her and someone of lower social standing, finding his affair with Stevens intolerable.

Madeleine Andrews, the daughter of Caleb Andrews, an engine driver, and Colbeck's love interest, also falls under the Rector's unsettling gaze. Colbeck introduces her to Follis and leaves her alone at St. Dunstan's with him. The Rector then asks her to read a specific verse from the Bible; "And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."[64] Madeleine is uneasy and disturbed; she does not understand why Colbeck brought her to meet the Rector or why she was asked to read that particular verse. Colbeck later explains that the Rector misinterpreted the word 'charity,' which means love, in a physical, rather than a broader sense.[65] Marston, through this incident, offers a layered critique of how a person of religious standing can misinterpret and manipulate biblical scriptures to justify his improper behaviour. He shows how religious or moral terms can be twisted to excuse unethical behaviour. He highlights the danger of selective interpretation, where individuals pick and choose aspects of a concept to align with their desires while ignoring its comprehensive, true essence. By focusing solely on its physical aspects, the rector reduces the complex, multifaceted concept of 'charity' to mere carnal desire. This indicates a fundamental misunderstanding or deliberate misrepresentation of the word's meaning to suit personal interests. Later, when confronted about his actions, the rector defends them as "crimes of passion."[66] This defence is problematic because it attempts to romanticize or justify morally and ethically dubious behaviour. It suggests that the rector is trying to cloak his transgressions under the guise of intense, uncontrollable emotion, which undermines the severity of his actions. Achilli, the real-life clergyman, also attempts to defend his sexual misconducts by rationalizing his behaviour. He claims that his conduct is not sinful, and justifies his relationship with a married prostitute by framing it as "his duty, as a clergyman, to continue his protection to her."[67]

Through his portrayal, Marston seems to expose religious leaders like Follis and Achilli, who are able to cloak their moral failings, perhaps even to themselves, under the guise of passion or duty. Madeleine is jolted to know that she had been left alone with a womanizer in the guise of a clergyman. Colbeck assures her that she was "in no danger … especially when

[63] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 116.
[64] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 184.
[65] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 379.
[66] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 380.
[67] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 52.

you were on consecrated ground."[68] He consoles her saying, "I'm sure that he had no impure thoughts inside his church. He reserved those for elsewhere."[69] Yet he also tells that, "And at that point, of course, I was unaware of how unholy his private life actually was."[70] Madeleine is thus used by both Colbeck and Follis. By Colbeck to confirm his "suspicion that Ezra Follis was far more interested in women than someone in his position ought to be."[71] And by Follis to derive pleasure from listening to a "female voice … so much kinder on the ear than the rasping diction of men,"[72] be it of Madeleine's or of Amy Walcott's.

As the story unfolds, the readers get to know that Ezra Follis has not only abused these four women but as Jamieson says Follis is a "philanderer"[73] and had "other conquests"[74] too. Follis "had seduced a string of women before."[75] And for his secret Thursday nights he even had a love nest in London. He returned on the Brighton Express every Friday. To Jamieson, the express had come to symbolise his wife's infidelity; thus, he wanted to destroy both, the train, and the rector.

Here, it is also interesting to note how Marston reads the criminal psyche. He presents Captain Jamieson, who is motivated by personal revenge and executes a massive train accident just to kill one person. The author then presents Dick Chiffney, a hardcore criminal, who commits crimes for money and lust. The author also delves into the psyche of Heinrich Freytag, who wants to kill Giles Thornhill, a politician vocal against immigrants. Finally, another potential victim is Ezra Follis, a sexual pervert in cassock, who derives pleasure even from listening to a female voice reading the Bible. Marston has structured the plot so well that until the very last pages the reader is unaware about the real nature of different characters.

Finally, Follis' crimes come to light. Marston delineates the responses of different characters to the crimes committed by a man of cloth. Edward Tallis, the superintendent at Scotland Yard, Leeming and Colbeck converse about the case. Superintendent Tallis decrees that "[i]f it were left to me, a certain clergyman should dangle beside him [Captain Jamieson]. The rector should not go unpunished."[76] Colbeck intervenes saying that the rector has "been adequately punished, … His ministry is over and he'll leave Brighton with his reputation in tatters."[77] Leeming points out that the rector "was shot as well" and reminds them that "His shoulder will never be the same again."[78] Colbeck comments:

> That's only a physical wound, Victor. The mental scars will never heal. Mr Follis was stricken with guilt when he realised the pain and misery his actions had indirectly caused. Imagine how he must feel about the way that Mrs Jamieson was treated by her

[68] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 380.
[69] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 379.
[70] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 380.
[71] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 380.
[72] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 185.
[73] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 264.
[74] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 365.
[75] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 365.
[76] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 375.
[77] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 375.
[78] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 376.

> husband,' Colbeck went on. 'That was Mr Follis's doing and he's accepted the full blame.[79]

This conversation illustrates the prevailing mindset of structured patriarchal Victorian society. Detective Colbeck, representing the rational, educated, upper middle-class segment of society, believes that Follis has received sufficient punishment in tarnishing his reputation and losing his ministry. This reflects a societal tendency to consider social and professional disgrace as adequate retribution for certain transgressions. Colbeck also emphasizes the emotional toll on Follis, particularly in light of Dorothea's mistreatment by her husband.

His sympathy towards Follis, despite his behaviour as a womanizer, highlights a complex moral landscape where personal suffering can evoke sympathy even for those who have committed serious wrongs. This is rooted in the rational and compassionate values of the time, suggesting that Victorian society could be lenient towards individuals who experienced personal downfall and showed remorse. Similarly, Leeming's sympathy for Follis further underscores this leniency. This collective sympathy allows Follis, the true cause of the train accident, to escape legal punishment. The Victorian society depicted here seems to prioritize personal guilt and remorse over formal legal consequences, demonstrating a form of justice based on emotional and social penalties rather than strict legal retribution. In summary, the conversation sheds light on Victorian society, its legal system, and values, where a clergyman involved in sexual misconducts may use to his advantage personal and societal disgrace, coupled with seemingly genuine remorse, to evade legal punishment. The society too, allows the religious leader to escape the legal consequences of his behaviour. This portrayal resembles the two real life cases of Achilli and Capel discussed earlier. When their deeds come to light, none of them are legally punished. It is notable that the focus is not truly on holding the clergy accountable. Rather than Achilli being tried for his misconduct, it is Newman who faces trial for libel. Similarly, Capel faces no repercussions from Manning, despite serious complaints against him.[80] He is allowed to continue his priesthood. In fact, Manning even appoints Capel as rector of Kensington College. Later, when a Diocesan committee is set up by Manning to investigate his misconducts, Capel relocates to Rome. Rome ultimately finds him 'not guilty.' However, to supress any public attention, in lieu of punishment, both Achilli and Capel were exiled to America. In America, both were again found to have indulged in sexual misconducts. Again, none of them were legally punished. Achilli is said to have committed suicide. Capel was just barred from performing mass.

Both cases reveal how women, especially victims, were marginalized and deprived of voice or agency in Victorian society. As Morris notes, "the women appearing in court were suspect and unreliable because they were women and because they were poor."[81] The conversation among Tallis, Colbeck, and Leeming points to this fact about Victorian society. Everyone talks about the perpetrator Follis but no one talks or seems interested about the women who were abused by him. Women like Ashmore, Walcott, Dorothea, Inigo who were the real victims, hardly got justice. The novel through the portrayal of these women, shows how deeply patriarchal structures were ingrained in Victorian society. The women of the era

[79] Marston, *Murder on the Brighton Express*, p. 376.
[80] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 107.
[81] Morris, "Confession and intimacy in England", p. 44.

were conditioned in such a way that none of them even realised that they had been 'targeted,' and 'groomed' before being sexually abused by the clergyman. Diana Garland's research substantiates this claim; most of the victims whom she interviewed identified "the experience they had with their religious leaders as romantic affairs."[82] In the book too, the readers see that the four women were ready to go to any length to please Follis.

Twenty-First Century Clergy Sexual Misconducts

The prevalence of sexual misconduct within the clergy, as discussed in Marston's *Murder on the Brighton Express*, continues to be a reality in contemporary times, demonstrating that while societal awareness may have increased, the nature of such abuse and the responses to it remain strikingly unchanged. Acts of twenty-first century clergy sexual misconducts remain a persistent and pervasive issue within religious institutions, echoing both in historical crime writing and contemporary reports. Barry Forshaw observes that "historical crime writing holds up a (distorting) mirror to nature: constantly finding provocative or ironic congruences with the present, but reminding us how much (and how little) the human race has changed."[83] Forshaw's observation that historical crime writing mirrors societal issues, albeit in a distorted fashion, both in the past and by implication in the present, remains highly relevant.

A survey conducted by MACSAS (Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors), a UK based organization to support the abused, *THE STONES CRY OUT* (2011), underscores the scale of the problem. It documents that a significant number of calls to the MACSAS helpline are from women who were sexually abused or exploited by male clergy.[84] Margaret Kennedy, the founder of MACSAS, in her doctoral thesis further illuminates this issue, documenting the experiences of 63 women in the UK and Ireland who suffered various forms of sexual exploitation by clergy members. Her research exposes the manipulative tactics employed by clergy, including grooming, offering gifts, and emotional manipulation, which often left the victims confused, believing they were in a "love relationship."[85] Meanwhile, 19 out of the 63 women studied could not identify their experiences as either love or abuse. This proves that not much has changed from the Victorian era till now. The tactics used by contemporary clergy resemble those of the fictional Follis.

The Church's response to these allegations has been largely inadequate and self-serving. Both the MACSAS report and Kennedy's research illustrate a pattern where the Church tends to protect the alleged perpetrators, minimize the offenses, and blame the victims. This is often done by downplaying the severity of the misconduct, referring to cases as mere "affairs," "adultery," or breaches of celibacy, rather than acknowledging them as acts of exploitation and abuse.[86] Such responses not only undermine the gravity of the offenses but also perpetuate a culture of impunity and silence in religious institutions. The MACSAS Survey concluded that,

[82] Garland, "Don't Call It an Affair", p. 134.
[83] Forshaw, *Historical Noir.*
[84] The MACSAS report contains a detailed study of the Church responses towards clergy sexual abuse in the UK. See Anne Lawrence, *THE STONES CRY OUT: REPORT ON THE MACSAS SURVEY 2010* (MACSAS, 2011).
[85] Kennedy, "The Well From Which We Drink Is Poisoned", p. 230.
[86] Kennedy, "The Well From Which We Drink Is Poisoned", p. 232.

> little if anything is done about it by either church authorities or the criminal justice system when the abuse is reported. Often the victims are vilified, hounded from their parishes, or quite simply ignored. Where there have been actions taken against a priest these fall short of laicising/deposing the priest from Holy Orders or removing his license, even when there have been multiple allegations shown to be true. Priests are either moved to other dioceses or parishes or on the rare occasion, banned from public ministry but allowed to remain as priests and move around the country without supervision or restriction.[87]

This conclusion parallels both the two real-life cases of Achilli and Capel, and the fictional case of Follis. Achilli and Capel were not legally punished and were moved to America. Similarly, in the novel, Follis was left almost unpunished. Recent works and reports continue to highlight these systemic failures. Andrew Graystone's 2022 book, *Falling Among Thieves: Understanding and Responding to Church-related Abuse*, criticizes the Church of England's approach to abuse as being "managerialist, chaotic, and ineffective,"[88] reflecting a bureaucratic rather than a compassionate or justice-oriented response. Similarly, Professor Alexis Jay's 2024 report, "The Future of Church Safeguarding,"[89] reveals widespread dissatisfaction among victims and survivors with the Church's safeguarding services. The report highlights that 64% of victims were unsatisfied with the support they received, with dissatisfaction rising to 70% concerning the outcomes of the safeguarding processes.

This bleak twenty-first century scenario might have compelled Marston to explore the subject of clergy sexual misconduct in *Murder on the Brighton Express*. The presence of such sexual offenders, and similar societal responses to them in Victorian as also in twenty-first century England resonates with Edward Said's contention that "what animates such appeals [to the past] is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past is really past, over and done with, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms."[90] Marston's choice of setting the novel in Victorian England and hinging the story on the many sexual misconducts of a religious figure thus, seems a deliberate move to shed light on the issue of clergy sexual misconduct very much prevalent in the twenty-first century.

The crime genre often serves as a platform for "exposing, denouncing, and addressing social and political injustice, often as a response to specific political and social climates experienced by the authors."[91] Marston, as a contemporary writer, presents an alternate history of the Victorian age highlighting the hidden issues of clergy sexual misconduct of the era. Through his portrayal of such sensitive issues, Marston forces readers to confront

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[87] Lawrence, *THE STONES CRY OUT*, p. 125.
[88] Andrew Graystone, *Falling among Thieves: Understanding and Responding to Church-related Abuse* (UK: Temple Tracts, 2022), p. 2.
[89] "The Future of Church Safeguarding" (2024) is a report by Professor Alexis Jay, the former chair of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). The report offers recommendations for creating an independent safeguarding and scrutiny body for the Church of England. Survey included 1,078 participants, consisting of victims and survivors, clergy, church officers, and volunteers. The respondents were 51% female, 47% male, and 1% identified as other.
[90] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 3.
[91] Barbara Pezzotti, *Investigating Italy's Past Through Historical Crime Fiction, Films and TV Series: Murder in the Age of Chaos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 4.

uncomfortable realities and challenges them to take a stand against those who abuse their positions of power.

Conclusion

The sexual abuse and exploitation of women by clergy, religious figures, and senior church officials have largely gone unnoticed and have been underreported in public discourse. Figures like Achilli and Capel effectively concealed their misdeeds from the Victorian public, aided by the Church attempting to suppress any such case that surfaced to protect its own reputation. Marston writes about clerical sexual misconduct in nineteenth-century England, a subject that, at that time, would have been unreportable, aggressively covered up by the Church, and left largely unwritten due to the pressure of societal norms. This was a period when even a rational and sensitive Colbeck could view guilt over a train crash as sufficient punishment for Follis. Women, particularly victims of sexual abuse, had almost no voice and were largely ignored. In *Murder on the Brighton Express*, Marston explores the religion-sexuality interface along with the intricate dynamics of family and societal values, simultaneously critiquing Victorian ideals of class and gender and mirroring contemporary struggles.

Thus, Marston exposes the unsavoury facets of Victorian society hidden beneath its veneer of respectability and morality. He, thereby, draws an alternate view of Victorian society, much like authors of neo-Victorian fiction. As Jessica Cox notes, "In neo-Victorian narratives, it is the Victorian age itself which is 'constantly reinterpreted', as writers (and readers) return again and again to its 'crimes' and 'mysteries'", complicating contemporary understandings of the past.[92] Marston's lens offers a more nuanced and layered portrayal of Victorian society, exposing its contradictions and hidden moral failures. *Murder on the Brighton Express* as a Neo-Victorian fiction approaches "the Victorians not simply as our ancestors, but also as our sometimes uncomfortable (and unforeseen) mirror-image"[93] and succeeds "in showing that, alongside a canonical view of the Victorian age… there were 'deviant' idiosyncrasies and impulses that coexisted with those same values."[94] Marston unearths the lesser palatable truths of the era, revealing clergy sexual misconduct, family crises, and social tensions that coexisted with more accepted values. Locating the text at the intersection of religion, sexuality, crime, and detection, he addresses, though implicitly, the issues of deviance, family and marital crisis, social hierarchy, class, race, and gender, thus constructing a richly authentic and multifaceted view of the Victorian age. Thus, *Murder on the Brighton Express,* though a prototypical historical detective novel also merits inclusion in the genre of neo-Victorian fiction, that not only reveals the hidden truths of a bygone era, but also holds up a mirror to the present, reminding the reader that beneath society's polished exterior, the same wound festers.

[92] Jessica Cox, *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 100.
[93] Tomaiuolo, *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture*, p. 3.
[94] Tomaiuolo, *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture*, p. 4.