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Prudery and Perversion: Domination of the Sexual Body in Middle-Class Men, Women, and
Disenfranchised Bodies in Victorian England

A thesis

presented to

The faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

Of requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in History

by

Ashley M. Barnett

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Dr. John Rankin, Chair

Dr. Jennifer Adler

Dr. Stephen Fritz

Victorian, Sexuality, Gender, Power, England, Ideology

ABSTRACT

Prudery and Perversion: Domination of the Sexual Body in Middle-Class Men, Women, and Disenfranchised Bodies in Victorian England.

by

Ashley M. Barnett

This research argues that with the rise of the middle-class, Victorian England saw the development of a power model in which middle-class men, middle-class women, children and lower-class women suffered from the demands of bodily domination. Because the bodily health of middle-class men was believed to represent national health, it was imperative that he dominate his body, particularly with regard to sexual urges. Consequently, the bodies of women with whom he sought sexual release suffered from forms of bodily domination as well. Through an analysis of journals and private writings of those living in Victorian England, magazines, books, and advisory texts published during the nineteenth century, and philosophical interpretations of Victorian sexuality by historians, an image emerges in which Victorian sexuality is categorized by the need to dominate the body.

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Author

Ashley Barnett

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Victorian sexuality has been a topic of debate among historians for decades, while the notion of sexual repression saturates conventional ideas of what sex was like for the Victorians. Because the middle-class was not part of the thick historical fabric that economically enclosed and protected the aristocracy, they needed to ensure the wealth they accumulated stayed within the bounds of their own offspring. Consequently, the sexualities of middle-class men, women, and the disenfranchised bodies of lower class women and children were caught within a sexual power structure which dictated bodily domination. Because it was believed the strength of the nation relied upon the bodily health of middle-class men, ideologies formed which advocated for these men to dominate bodily urges to reach a higher intellectual form of being. In addition to his bodily domination, his wife and daughter were expected to reject the body and sexuality altogether. Middle-class women were expected to adhere to notions of innocence and submissiveness, acting as the heart of industrial society. While both genders residing in the middle-class lived under the pressure of ideologies surrounding sexuality, disenfranchised bodies of poor women and children often suffered from the excess of middle-class male sexuality which could not be spent on pure middle-class women. Although none of these Victorians had control over the social power structure which dictated how power transactions occurred in sexuality, all were caught within expectations of bodily domination in some form.

From this system, a power structure emerged around sexuality which led to domination over the body and which was ultimately exuded from the nucleus of Victorian sexuality, middle-class men. Men were expected to dominate their own bodies; while the bodies of middle-class

women were dominated by social ideologies surrounding her sexuality in relation to men. In addition to the social expectations of those in the middle-class, women and children of lower classes often had little ideological expectations for which to strive, ultimately leaving them victimized by the sexual excess of middle-class men. Although power was transferred and expressed differently for middle-class men and women and those disenfranchised bodies with whom middle-class men sought sexual release, domination of the body was central to all parties.

The male body was figuratively dominated by the state. As a consequence, the importance of man's ability to dominate himself, especially sexually, for the good of the nation and empire was paramount. For those who adhered to this ideology, the consequences could be grave. Many men felt a lack of control over their sexual urges and thusly endured painful and humiliating medical procedures developed during the spermatorrhea panic. Spermatorrhea, a specifically Victorian disease which was thought to befall men who lacked bodily dominance, led to the degeneration of the male body, leaving the sufferer drooling, crippled, and impotent. While the ideal of bodily dominance was advocated in Victorian Britain, many men rejected this model and instead relished in the sexual escapades their social standing granted them. In this, many of these men were able to utilize the social power that regulated sexuality through their domination of the female body.

While some men fell victim to social ideologies and many men rejected them, middle-class women were not granted the privilege to live a life in which the ideology surrounding her social role could so easily be forgone. In accordance with expectations of male bodily control, the middle-class woman was expected to adhere to ideologies which emphasized her purity and innocence. She could not deny her social role as the heart of English society and expect no repercussions. In this way, her bodily integrity was compromised to that of her brothers. While

ideology surrounded and often molded the lives of the middle-class, the lower classes lacked social ideology for which they could realistically strive as their social significance was miniscule. Consequently, they generally bore the brunt of the power model as they helped solidify the dominance held by the middle-class men. Rape and prostitution were common experiences for women of the lower classes and often their lack of social standing was taken advantage of.

Representations of the Victorian Body

Darwinian theories, which promoted the progressive evolution of mankind, under lied much social sentiment. We can interpret ways in which many Victorians, especially prominent Victorians like Charles Darwin himself and Herbert Spencer, conceptualized the body. Based on theories of evolution and human progression, men ought to be able to move beyond the organic matter of the body to reach a higher, more perfect rational existence. According to one Victorian commentator: “as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.”¹ The notion of “progression” pervaded Victorian culture, as the individuals, corporate bodies, and state all strove for ‘perfection.’ Victorians, inspired by Whiggish notions of history, held a linear conception of history, and therefore, assumed that there must be an “end” to the progression. However, as Darwin himself articulated, evolution and the survival of the fittest is contingent upon environmental elements and circumstance over which the competing beings generally have little or no control. Therefore, the survival or perpetuation of a particular being does not necessarily

¹ Sheelagh Strawbridge. “Darwin and Victorian social values.” In *In Search of Victorian Values: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society*, edited by Eric M. Sigsworth, 102-115. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.) 107.

connote superiority or favorability. Since Victorian interpretations were so laced with cultural biases, we can observe the pervading, largely unchallenged “common sense” that led bourgeois society to believe in the superiority of one human being over another based on a social interpretation of scientific reasoning.

During the Victorian Era, the link between body and state tightened as the health of the national body was conceptualized as contingent upon male bodily health. A relation of national health to bodily health, or the link between the body and state in general, had been around since the classical period. Roman architect, Vitruvius, “emphasized [a] symbiosis between the human body and ideal architectural forms. Closer to home, in seventeenth century London, Christopher Wren linked the re-building of London to the health of the human body when he stated that it would be a ‘shame to the nation’ and a sign of ‘the ill and untractable Humours of this Age’ if London were to be rebuilt on its old foundations.”² Further, he aimed to remodel London after William Harvey’s description of the circular blood path with roads that resembled arteries and circular piazzas which would resemble the circular paths of bloodflow which had so enticed scientists. The aim would be to move people and goods as smoothly through London as blood flowed through the body.”³

The state was continuously seen as analogous to the body into the Victorian era as different body parts represented the different roles of those comprising nineteenth-century English society. In the Victorian mapping of the social body, adult middle-class men were viewed as the Head because they ideally governed the rest of the body, dictating and directing

² Holly Tucker. *Blood Work: A Tale of Medicine and Murder in the Scientific Revolution*. (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.) 51-51.

³ Tucker, *Bloodwork*, 54.

actions of the rest of the social body. He ruled society, as well as the miniature society that was the home. The Hands, or those of the working class, were conceptualized as the “unthinking, unfeeling ‘doers,’ without characteristics of sex, age, or other identity.” Middle-class women represented the Heart and Soul of the operation, acting as the “seat of morality and tenderness.” Although ideally hidden from society, the criminal classes, paupers, beggars and the work-shy made up the “nether regions” of society and were visualized by the Victorians as “stagnant pools of moral filth.”⁴ Of course, prostitutes were also categorized as “nether regions” and were often seen as a “necessary institution which acted like a giant sewer, drawing away the distasteful but inevitable waste products of male lustfulness, leaving the middle-class household and middle-class lady “pure and unsullied.”⁵

While the meaning of the body differed vastly for different Britons during the Victorian era, all bodies were conceptualized within the framework of the socioeconomic order that characterized industrial Britain. As Leonore Davidoff argues, the same society that placed dividing forces between the sexes and between the classes also separated “physicality, [...] bodily functions in general and sexuality in particular, from the public gaze.”⁶ Similarly, certain class groups were ideally kept “from public gaze.” The body was often used as a metaphor for the social hierarchy and the organic nature of the social order, as opposed to the mechanistic interpretations of society during the eighteenth century.⁷ The head of the social body, the middle-class man, was expected to dominate himself so that he may dominate society and retain his prestige. The heart of the operation was expected to reject her body as the angel of the middle-

⁴ Leonore Davidoff. “Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick.” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. Feminist Studies, Inc. (1979. Pp. 86-141.) 89.

⁵ Davidoff, “Class and Gender in Victorian England,” 89.

⁶ Davidoff, 88.

⁷ Davidoff, 89.

class man's home, while the underlings of society, which Victorians simultaneously sought to categorize and conceal, were condemned to being nothing more than a body that acted as a menial tool in the larger organism that was English society.

Historiography of Victorian Sexuality

Michel Foucault initially challenged popular conceptions of nineteenth century sexuality by claiming that the Victorians were not repressing sexuality precisely because to force something to be hidden is to acknowledge its existence.⁸ In the 1970s and 80s, Victorian sexuality was viewed as restrained, much of this blame was placed upon the world of capitalism. During Industrialization, capitalism flourished giving those who were not born into aristocratic families an opportunity to flourish economically. Because of this economic structure, the middle-class began to develop, which was comprised of doctors, lawyers, business men, and other professionals. While those who fell into this social ranking held many privileges from their acquired wealth, pressure also ensued because it could be lost. Unlike the safety the aristocracy had in their bloodline alone, the middle-class relied on the family unit along with wise economic decisions to secure the wealth for themselves and their offspring. Consequently, men were encouraged to suppress sexual appetites, while women were expected not to have a sexual appetite at all. Those lower in the social order were often depicted as animals in their sexual desire and behavior. More recently, historians have argued that Victorian sexuality was more complicated than a system of oppression in which men and women denied their biology to the best of their ability in order to ascribe to social norms.

⁸ Michel Foucault. *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Vintage Books, 2010.)

One such challenging voice is Christopher Lane, who suggests that the materialist interpretation of Victorian sexuality so articulated by Foucault conceals psychological implications and realities of the sexual culture found during the period. So much of Foucault's argument is based on concrete evidence of things written and behaviors documented that an elusive psychological response to such a social order is reduced in significance almost completely. He argues instead that a psychoanalytic approach "offers a subtle account of the fantasies and often troubled identifications that drive a wedge between couples, friends, groups, and even communities."⁹ Both means of interpreting Victorian sexuality ultimately need to be employed to attempt to fully understand the ways in which Victorians themselves experienced it, as well as larger implications it had for society and generations to follow. While medical journals, pornography and the like reveal the extent to which Victorians obsessed over sexuality, the experience of living in such a society and the psychological impact that, as Lane argues, drove a wedge between individuals, is left silenced and unearthed if we only employ such documentation.

Sharon Marcus argues that the middle-class women, who are so often portrayed as asexual or angelic, actually experienced sexuality between one another. Because women were viewed as the object of sexual desire, women were constantly trained to view themselves and each other as erotic objects. While the patriarchal schema of Victorian society may have refused to acknowledge this sexual experience, it was one felt by Victorian women and ought to be considered today when interpreting the Victorian sexual experience. Though most history disregards earlier historical interpretations of the past, when dealing with such a subjective and

⁹ Christopher Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1999.) xiii.

elusive topic as human sexuality, it is important to consider the ways in which each society's framework dictates how Victorian sexuality is remembered.¹⁰

In his work *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*, historian Harrison Fraser unabashedly argues against the evils of capitalism and the consequent desexualization of the middle-class woman along with the simultaneous hyper-sexualization of poor and working women. The book discusses the ways in which middle-class brides had no knowledge of sexuality in marriage to the filthy living conditions of the poor and the prostitutes forced onto the streets in such conditions. Centered ultimately on unveiling the evils capitalism brought to the nations, Harrison focuses on the dark aspects of Victorian sexuality with the dichotomization of the angel and the whore. Although argument's such as Marcus's offers a new insight to a vastly complicated human experience, the aim to keep the wife virginal and the ways in which this molded women's lives cannot be muted simply because it fails to address all facets of her sexual experience.¹¹

Carol Zisowitz and Peter N. Stears challenge the idea that Victorian women were any less sexual than women of modern times. In "Victorian Sexuality: Can Historians Do it Better?" they ask: "Could it really be true that for all our hype about the sexual revolution, and the undeniable improvements in middle-class birth control knowledge and technology, the female majority, at least, is less orgasmic than their Victorian great-grandmothers? The prospect is worth considering, if only because of excessive brainwashing about our sexual prowess today."¹²

Modern culture can often be so consumed in the idea that the progression of history has led to a

¹⁰ Sharon Marcus. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. 2007.

¹¹ Fraser Harrison, *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*. (New York: Universe Books, 1977.)

¹² Carol Zisowitz Stearns, and Peter N. Stearns "Victorian Sexuality: Can Historians Do It Better?" *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 18, No. 4. (1985.): 629.

more perfect present that we remember societies of the past in a negative light for its perceived differences from our own society.

The Victorians were adjusting to a new economic structure and this undoubtedly had implications on their personal lives. However, our own belief in our sexual freedom may cause us to unjustly demonize their sexual experiences as more privately perverted or less pleasurable than our own. In accordance with this notion, it may also be true that in an attempt to undo past interpretations on Victorian pleasure, modern thinkers overemphasize the role sexuality played in their lives. While the eroticism probably was not completely muted in middle-class women and it is important to grant them their sexual autonomy, historians such as Sharon Marcus might be overreaching in their desire to grant women sexuality such that we are sexualizing past lives to an extent that would have been unrecognizable to those experiencing it, which will be more fully addressed later in this paper.

Victorian literature offers insights into Victorian sexuality. Literature may be able to reveal the subtle implications of power and sexuality between Victorians but, those who write literature can hardly be expected to reflect all sexual experiences held by those living during the period. Nonetheless, literature tells us at least what an author thought on a particular topic and what some Victorians read concerning sex. This is important because not only because it does reflect some Victorians' interpretations of sexuality, but it also offers insight to the psychological aspects of sexuality and power which advice pamphlets, magazines, pornography and medicine so frequently lack.

Nina Auerbach's book *Woman and the Demon* argues that the women who were thought to have been oppressed in their sexuality and relation to the body actually exemplified power

which can be found in many literary works. As we see later in the paper, fear of women does become a recurring theme in the historical literature. While Auerbach claims her goal is to reveal the ways in which these dark interpretations of “victim and queen, domestic angel and demonic outcast, old maid and fallen woman” actually “glorified the women it seemed to suppress,”¹³ it is difficult to say what a serpent woman in a nineteenth-century fables really reveals about interactions and power dynamics between living people. Further, in Lane’s argument for the use of psychoanalysis in interpreting Victorian sexuality in *Burdens of Intimacy*, he cites literature as well. While psychoanalytic aspects of sex are significant in gaining a holistic image of sexuality, it is unclear how much psychoanalysis can be done on the average Victorian through literary works alone. With that having been said, some novels from the period do give necessary supporting insight for modern thinkers and historians and can play a significant role in piecing together a realistic image of Victorian sexuality.

Power Transactions: Bodily Domination

Although sexuality is difficult to encapsulate effectively, this account aims to reveal the ways in which Victorians were caught under a power structure centered on dominating the body. This power structure was beyond their control but affected how they experienced sexuality. It dictated who had power and control. The term “power” in this account aims to include abstract power largely brought about by societal structure and ideals, in which bodies are not being physically manipulated but are psychologically and socially regulated. In more concrete expressions of power, middle-class men were able to manipulate female bodies on a personal level. Due to the strain put on men to control their own sexual urges, constraints were put on the

¹³ Nina Auerbach. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.) 9.

female body by men for men and cunningly veiled under illusions of inherency. Middle-class men ruled over socially inferior bodies because they resided in a culture which aimed to construct sexuality of all females in accordance with male sexuality.

Leonore Davidoff explains that women, based on class and age, were segregated from one another. The result was that women only related through man and understood themselves through their association with men. The perceptions and idealizations of women through art, pornography, advertising, literature, etc. were all created for the actor which was middle-class men. One such dichotomy is described by Cleo McNelly regarding the black and white woman. One, she claims, represents “the far pole of the myth, [...] nature, chaos, fecundity, power and joy, [...] the sense of touch, the ability to know by feeling, from within.”¹⁴ By contrast, the white woman represents the home, “civilization, but also order, constraint, sterility, pain and [...] the ability to understand by seeing, abstractly.”¹⁵ This dichotomy represents an ideal on either side that connote some kind of male pleasure, though they are different and ultimately unattainable for the women striving to achieve them. Similarly, women of the varying classes were dichotomized as the middle-class woman was the angelic, familiar representation of home, while the impoverished woman was associated with fantasy, sexuality and exploration. As will later be explored, the regulation of the female body was contingent upon her social relation to middle-class men. Females of the middle-class, working and lower classes, as well as female children were all prescribed a sexual role which involved bodily domination in order to attain an ideology or the literal domination to relieve men of sexual excess.

¹⁴ Davidoff, “Class and Gender in Victorian England,” 92.

¹⁵ Davidoff, 92.

While women may not have been granted much autonomy in sexual matters, the middle-class men around whom her sexuality was orchestrated often suffered from ideological expectations as well. As his bodily health represented the health of the nation, the middle-class men endured pressure to dominate his body along with its sexual urges. For men that adhered to this ideology, the consequences of failure could be humiliating and painful. In addition to society's expectations of middle-class fellows, women also fell under an order of bodily domination. The middle-class woman was expected to live up to ideologies of femininity, virtue and virginity. As a result, sexual knowledge and experience were kept at bay from her. Because sexuality could generally not be spent on middle-class women, the lower class women became scapegoats for society's discomfort with sexuality in general. Though bodily domination was experienced very differently for these members of society, none were able to completely escape the Victorian sexual power model.

CHAPTER 2

MASTER OF ALL: THE MIDDLE-CLASS MAN'S BODILY DOMINATION OVER THE SELF AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF NATIONAL HEALTH

The strength of the nation was believed to rest upon the bodily health of middle-class men. Consequently, the ideal man was expected to be rational and in control over himself and others as the male body was not simply his own but belonged to society at large. Many theorists of the period argued that the allegedly declining national health was directly linked to male degeneration and could be aided if the male body was addressed. Although it ruled over a significant portion of the world by the mid nineteenth century, Great Britain experienced much social tumult and unrest. With the abolishment of slavery in 1838, the Indian Mutiny in 1857 and the expansion of women's property rights in 1870, the Empire and the those on the home front were challenging the established hierarchy. Samuel Smiles, author of *Self Help*, published in 1859, argued that middle-class men were intended to lead the nation. Since the masculine body could only be dominated by the state, some men failed in their ability to live up to these prescribed ideologies of control. While there were certainly men who ignored warnings of degeneration due to sexual excess, many others adhered to these doctrines and suffered the consequences upon their failure to adequately dominate the body.

If men were not deemed in control of their sexual urges, they were seen as degenerate, which could be caused by masturbation, falling prey to prostitution, and nocturnal emissions. Men were caught in a paradox: the very thing that made them manly also made them weak and less of a use to the nation state. Because semen was seen as vital to the body, an over-expenditure of it allegedly weakened men, made them prone to illness, and could even be deadly. While men had to fear negative effects of ejaculation they also had to consider that the ability

and the frequency of bedding women was an indicator of “manliness.” However, an overindulgence in this masculine vice was said to produce drooling, nervousness, weakness, impotence and in extreme cases, death. The cure for such a disease often led men to undergo harsh medical treatments by both physicians and those aiming to make a profit off of an embarrassed clientele. As the twentieth-century approached, degeneration of the masculine body into a feminine one was feared by many, as will later be explored in the medical crisis that was the spermatorrhea panic. Hierarchies were being challenged as gender, racial, and class minorities all saw laws passed in favor of their liberation. Further, the Empire faced unrest in its colonies. The desire to prevent Russian expansion led to the Second Afghan War in 1878, and then in 1881 the British were defeated at the Battle of Majuba Hill in the first Boer War. In India, the Ilbert Bill was passed which allowed Indian judges to try British offenders in the Raj, which had previously not been allowed. As Britain sought to keep their Empire intact, those at home saw this as an opportunity to fight for equal rights. Consequently, the middle-class man was challenged to uphold his honor and see the nation and his position through to a successful end.

The Rational Body

The ability to reject the body and its natural impulses was imperative for middle-class men; however, what constituted a rejection of the body was contingent and fluid. In the same breath that Darwin exclaims that women are more in line with lower orders, he also claims that in “anything requiring deep thought, reason or imagination—or merely the use of the senses and the hands, men are preeminent.”¹⁶ This does align with notions of imaginative inventiveness

¹⁶ Sheelagh Strawbridge. “Darwin and Victorian Social Values.” In *In Search of Victorian Values: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society*, edited by Eric M. Sigsworth. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.) 110.

prescribed to men but it is unclear why the “use of hands” is not seen as being part of a body in the same way savages and women use their bodies. The function of the body, it would seem by this contradiction, is not negative in itself. The function of the body is valued when it serves a financial purpose. Men were seen as industrious, using his body to propagate capitalism, business and intellect through creation, while the savage or women may use his or her body for impulsive desires.

Darwin compared civilized men to that of savages and children, claiming that “idiots are curiously fond of climbing furniture and trees—boys delight in climbing trees; idiots snarl savagely and snarling is probably more common among savages than civilized races; civilized adult males are less emotionally demonstrative than savages—they weep less, even amongst civilized European Englishmen rarely cry whereas some continentals shed tears freely.”¹⁷ In this, even non-English European men were scrutinized. In 1955 book *Darwin and Social Theory*, Kenneth Bock cites an example as to why the civilized man was seen as superior by Darwinians:

A savage will risk his own life to save a member of his own community but will be wholly indifferent about a stranger; a young and timid mother urged by the maternal instinct will, without a moment’s hesitation, run the greatest danger for her own infant, but not for a mere fellow creature. Nevertheless, many a civilized man, who never before risked his life for another, but full of courage and sympathy, has disregarded the instinct of self-preservation, and plunged at once in a torrent to save a drowning man—though a stranger.¹⁸

Although the observations made in this account may speak accurately to social conduct, it fails to address the impact social expectations have on human behavior. Women were expected to act passively and that it was not considered feminine or desirable for a woman to be strong or independent of men. Consequently, if the hypothetical scenarios brought up in the quote

¹⁷ Strawbridge, “Darwin and Victorian Social Values” 110.

¹⁸ Strawbridge, 110.

occurred, women would likely look to a man to save someone because they themselves were taught to view themselves as needing protection of men.

In their linear conception of progressive history, Victorians believed a muted body represented perfection. As Bock states, “the civilized man is able to forgo natural impulses and operate on superior nature through his mind and logic as opposed to the slavery cast on him by the demands of the body.”¹⁹ Further, through his emphasis on the savage and the idiot’s desires to “climb” and the sense of smell being “more highly developed in the dark races of man than in the white civilized races” as well as the human foot gradually losing its prehensile power which is “less the case amongst savages”²⁰ we get a sense of the desire to reject the body. The ability to utilize the body (through climbing) and possessing heightened senses is seen as representing a lower order of mankind.

Revealing much about expectations in the shift of male bodily control are murder cases in Victorian England which involved crimes of passion to punish a straying wife. Many men of lower classes who murdered their wives for unfaithfulness were given reduced sentences by juries because it was a crime of passion. As the era progressed, however, men working within the judicial system began to lose sympathy for perpetrators of passionate crimes. Many officials opted instead for total control over one’s mind and body and the ability to restrain one’s anger and impassioned desires regardless of circumstance, though the public was not so quick to follow the sentiment.

In the story of George Hall, we can see the opposing social standards of middle-class men who demanded rationality against the social and feminine interpretations of the same crime,

¹⁹ Strawbridge, ‘Darwin and Victorian Social Values,’ 110.

²⁰ Strawbridge, 110.

which find sympathy with the murderer. George Hall was a jeweler's stamper who had fallen in love with a young woman with whom he had sung in the church choir and subsequently wed.²¹ Shortly after the wedding, Hall's young bride fled the marriage and struck up an affair with an Irish lover. Unable to come to grips with the situation, Hall murdered his young love. While Hall was found guilty at trial the support he received from the public is astonishing. He was portrayed as a good, sober man who loved his wife dearly and only reacted to the heartbreak she brought him with her infidelity. A petition for his release was signed by some 69,000 people. Women of all classes sympathized with a man who felt so passionately drawn to his wife that he could not tolerate her infidelity.

While the public may have been sympathetic to the plight of a good, sober husband losing his temper at his philandering wife, elites were not so quick to share in the emotional sentiment. The abundant public sympathy felt for Hall "confronted rising hostility to violent husbands among the professional men who staffed the judicial bench and the higher reaches of the Home Office, and a growing desire to sweep away any appeals to the unwritten law they associated with less civilized centuries."²² With a growing concern regarding family life and daily violence among the educated and those within the legal establishment, new notions of manliness and male honor emerged. They believed that despite the fact that this man was overcome with emotion, he ought to be able to restrain himself and refrain from breaking the law. Judges were attempting to make violence against women, regardless of provocation, "beyond the pale of acceptability."²³ Interestingly, while this shift in perspective ultimately

²¹ Martin J. Wiener, "The Sad Story of George Hill: Adultery, Murder and the Politics of Mercy in Mid-Victorian England." *Social History*, Vol. 24, No. 2. (1999). Pp. 174-195.

²² Wiener, "The Sad Story of George Hall," 185.

²³ Wiener, 185.

proved beneficial to women as it made it more likely that these husbands would be punished, it was not in itself for the good of the woman. The issue at hand, as with many of the examples found in this chapter, centered on the man's ability to dominate his emotions. While in many cases the domination of the male body regarding interaction with women was sexual, crimes of passion revealed the extent to which men were expected to control himself in all manners, especially when dealing with women.

Bodily Domination and the Degenerate Male

Since the male body represented the health of the nation, its masculinity became most significant during times of national strife or imperial insecurity. As Smiles argued, the middle class had responsibility for maintaining a good society, as opposed to the aristocracy, in this new capitalist structure.²⁴ Within the social confines of Victorian existence, all bodies were organized and categorized based on the ability to thrive as a nation. While the body of the woman was arranged in accordance with her relation to man in this system, a man's body was orchestrated ideologically in its relation to the nation itself. Consequently, his intellectual power was vital over his animalistic side—the body.

Fears over the progress of humanity encouraged scholars to countenance the fact that humans may be devolving. One key sign of this degeneration, according to Zionist leader and physician Max Nordau, was the femininity found in the arts. Nordau claimed that “unmanly emotionalism” was “a key indicator of society's ill health” and that “there existed a relationship between unhealthy male body and the wider body politic.”²⁵ Not only did this interpretation of

²⁴ Andrew Smith. *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle*. (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004.) 19.

²⁵ Smith, *Victorian Demons*, 16.

the male body place larger expectations and a need for societal control over the individual body itself, it further divides the sexes while highlighting the undesirability of womanliness on a large scale. Havelock Ellis, an English physician who studied human sexuality, found representations of gender appropriation in art, though he differed from Nordau in that he believed art was fundamentally masculine. Whereas the creative man does, woman simply is. In accordance with this was the notion that men could deny their biology whereas women could not.²⁶ Although this account harps on the natural strengths of the man, it still includes a grim appreciation of the male body and disconnects man from his worldly representation as something to be subjugated and dominated.

Charles Kingsley argued that men could find the strength to dominate desire through Christianity. Kingsley was a clergyman of the Anglican Church and famous writer of his time, then in 1848 he became a founding member of the Christian Socialist Society, which he thought could alleviate the wrongs of industrialism through Christianity.²⁷ He argued that while the male body was naturally degenerate, the cities led to further degeneration through their temptation of men on many levels, including sexuality.²⁸ Samuel Smiles further argued the significance of the male body in national health, though with a different set of beliefs surrounding the duties and ideals of man's mastery over his body. Smiles declared that men had to become gentleman and argued for the significance of the middle-class, as opposed to the aristocracy, for the creation of a good society.²⁹ He went on to say that "the character of the "true gentleman" contrasts with the base, potentially degenerate demands of the male body."³⁰ Like Nordau, Smiles was appealing to

²⁶ Smith, *Victorian Demons*, 29.

²⁷ "Charles Kingsley: Clergyman and Writer" Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed October 2016 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Kingsley>.

²⁸ Smith, *Victorian Demons*, 23.

²⁹ Smith, 18.

³⁰ Smith, 19.

a notion of degeneration among men, though he is claiming that the male body itself is degenerate and a man must rise beyond these physical constraints to become a gentleman. In this account, man's domination over the natural impulses of the body is imperative, especially with regard to sexuality.

While middle-class men held power over others in their sexuality, they too felt the pressure of the power they possessed. Fear of the degenerative male body only grew with the nearing of the twentieth-century and masculine sexuality regulated and organized to fit the needs to the social economic structure. So, while many of these men did in fact experience pleasure from their sexual liberties, they also encountered the grief associated with a fear of bodily failure. Because of this belief, sexuality was heavily regulated through social pressures even in privacy. Masturbation was continuously warned against, as well as too much sex or sex through inappropriate means such as prostitution. Everything that young boys in their boarding schools to grown men inside and outside of the home did sexually was socially regulated. In the nineteenth century, the Hippocratic notion that semen was a vital bodily fluid was still held. Semen was believed to be a rare fraction of the blood—one part in forty generally³¹—which was extracted from testicles. The strain it put on the system in production supposedly made its expenditure debilitating. Consequently, a theory sexual regulation was employed in order to keep this vital bodily fluid at a healthy level.

As Samuel Smiles claimed, a man's body was not his own stating: “the virtuous body is only seen in action when it is working, exercising, fighting. It is never a private body...”³² This statement signifies a sentiment held by at least some Britons during the era that a man's body did

³¹ Michael Mason. *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.), 209.

³² Smith, *Victorian Demons*, 20.

not belong to him in private or otherwise, but rather it was an extension of the nation and ought to be exercised for the benefit of the nation. Rampant prostitution, especially in the city, meant that young bachelors and husbands alike were constantly surrounded by women who were hustling out their bodies to the sexually constrained middle-class fellows. Although it has often been perceived that prostitutes were victims of an oppressive society, it seems that their existence created a very real struggle for their clientele. Prostitutes were often sent to the streets in a desperate attempt to make enough wages to manage herself and possibly her family. Although many accounts can be conjured up to portray this existence as degrading and miserable, men who had access to such sexual leisure often suffered from this structure as well. Because they were expected to have control over their body, unauthorized sexual urges led to psychological turmoil and occasionally medical intervention. As Max Weber's analysis concluded, sexuality was not socially constructive, rather it was the opposite. He argued that sex was "the drive that most firmly binds man to the animal level...Rational ascetic, alertness, self-control and methodical planning of life are threatened the most by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organization...the more rationalized the rest of society becomes, the more eroticized sexuality becomes."³³ This socially deemed threat to rationality led men to deal with sexual urges in very serious ways.

This epidemic was best expressed by the spermatorrhea panic, in which it was considered an actual disease to ejaculate too frequently, be it from masturbation, nocturnal emissions, or an overactive sex drive. In William Acton's book *The Function and Disorder of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological,*

³³ Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. (1979), 90.

Social and Moral Relations, he warns men of the horrors and necessary guilt of nocturnal emissions or “pollutions.”³⁴ He stated that if a man, while he was awake, “who has not debased and enervated his will is perfectly able to keep his thoughts entirely pure,” then it should follow that “power of keeping his dreaming thoughts pure, if he goes the right way to work.”³⁵ Further, when men complain that they have no control over that which they dream, he told them that they were mistaken or that was simply not the case. Acton claimed that “those who have studied the connection between thoughts during waking hours and dreams during sleep, know that they are closely connected. The character is the same sleeping or waking...if a man has allowed his thoughts during the day to rest upon libidinous subjects, he finds his mind at night full of lascivious dreams...a will which in our waking hours we have not exercised in repressing sexual desires, will not, when we fall asleep, preserve us from carrying the sleeping echo of our waking thoughts farther than we dared to do in the daytime.”³⁶ These words of advice further connoted to men that blame would be placed on the possessor of such impure urges precisely because prevention of degeneration lied within his capabilities if he be a worthy English gentleman.

As Elizabeth Stephens argues, the degeneration of a man’s body was seen in his becoming more akin to a woman, especially in the spermatorrhea panic. The panic represented men’s inability to take control with the “leakiness that characterizes spermatorrhea.”³⁷ Further, differing from the ideas of “seminal weakness or regulations surrounding masturbation” of the earlier centuries, “spermatorrhea did not simply evoke sexual incontinence or excess; instead, it

³⁴ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*. (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 2009.) 24.

³⁵ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, 24.

³⁶ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, 24.

³⁷ Elizabeth Stephens. “Pathologizing Leaky Male Bodies: Spermatorrhea in Nineteenth-Century British Medicine and Popular Anatomical Museums.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. Vol. 17. No. 3. The University of Texas Press. (2008.) 437.

raised the fear of an uncontrollable ooze traditionally associated with female corporeality.”³⁸ In many ways, females were supposed to be akin to animals and lower orders of humans. Evidence of this could be found in the process of menstruation. She passively let her body perform its functions, or passively be consumed by man, without any kind of active responsibility for her physical experience.

Further, masturbation was thought to lead to a host of physical detriments outside of feminization. In men, it could lead to “staring vacantly into space, with an open, drooling mouth, and a senseless, idiotic smile upon his face.”³⁹ In *The Sexual System and Its Derangements*, written in 1875 by Dr. Emery C. Abbey, there is a visual comparison of the aging of an unhealthy masturbator, and his well-behaved counterpart. The onanist is hunched down with a somewhat disfigured face even at the age of sixteen. As he progresses, he is forced to walk with a cane by age fifty, apparently struggling to even walk. The other man, conversely, is walking upright, well dressed, seemingly caught in a healthy stride from ages twenty-one to seventy.⁴⁰

In order to keep this “disease” under control, some men would submit to painful and invasive procedures. The body had become medicalized in Britain’s attempt to incorporate it into the structure in the most nationally beneficial way possible. Because of this, men were led to fear the malfunction of the body in the form of untamed bodily urges and were led into the physician’s office in a desperate attempt to regain control of one’s own nature. As Ellen Bayuk Rosenman discusses in *Unauthorized Pleasures*, quacks were able to easily infiltrate the trade because “these frightened men formed a captive audience, too desperate for help to question the

³⁸ Stephens, 438.

³⁹ Marie Mulvey-Roberts. *Dangerous Bodies: Historicizing the Gothic Corporeal*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2016.) 104.

⁴⁰ Mulvey-Roberts, 105.

doctors' fees or prescriptions, and too fearful of being 'outed' as masturbators or sex fiends to resist extortion."⁴¹

The issue was unfortunately cyclical, however. An overactive sex drive led to impotence, but treatment would reinvigorate the sex drive, causing the patient to fall ill again.⁴² The magical extent to which a man was allowed to experience his own sexuality seemed elusive and treatments to rid patients of spermatorrhea were intended to lessen the sex drive in an ironic attempt to prevent impotence. In some cases, for example, the penis was "pierced with metal rings and coated with chemical irritants"⁴³ until it could not even be touched. This method was utilized in order to prevent men from masturbating, but it was complained that it was difficult to "induce patients to repeat it."⁴⁴ In another treatment, cauterization, a "catheter was passed through the urethra to empty the bladder; then a bougie, a thin metal instrument with a ball on the end, was coated with a caustic substance, usually nitrate of silver, and passed through the same canal."⁴⁵ This tactic was utilized to damage nerve endings, making the patient less susceptible to excitement, and therefore, hopefully able to control over one's bodily urges. This account reveals the dark side of the privilege of power, as men were not only expected to dominate others, but they were expected to dominate their own bodies as well.

Juxtaposing the eternal perfection of bodily performance and the fear of degeneration, Steven Marcus sets up the dichotomy of the sexual world which Acton is presenting and of the world of pornography, in which pornography put itself on the map as an industry all its own in

⁴¹ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman. *Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience*. (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2003.) 32.

⁴² Rosenman, 23.

⁴³ Rosenman, 26.

⁴⁴ Rosenman, 26.

⁴⁵ Rosenman, 26.

The Other Victorians. Both view the body and its sexual functions as mechanistic but in Acton's world, the real world as it were, there is shame and a need for control and domination over the machine lest men should fall prey to its malfunctions. In pornography, on the other hand, there is only perfection in its mechanical function with enduring and everlasting virility and pleasure, as well as continuous semen and energy. In Marcus's words, in both

there is a similar split or divided consciousness; both are dominated by the logic of fantasy and association rather than by the logic of events or of consecutive thought. Both are also worlds without psychology; they are worlds of organs and physiology in which everything is convertible into matter. That is to say, both represent a primitive form of materialism. In pornography, this fantasy purports to be subversive and liberating. In Acton's work it represents itself as grimly scientific and ineluctably tragic.⁴⁶

In both scenarios, while depicting male sexuality and physical functionality, remove the personhood from the actor. The mechanics of his body are the extent to which he exists and whether his body remains strong and everlasting or weak and malfunctioning, his identity is completely subsumed in the mechanics of the body without a mind.

The sexuality of young males was also grossly regulated on a social level and shame was associated with much of the initial sexual impulses felt by young middle-class boys. Similar to the horror spoken of regarding spermatorrhea, William Acton also warned of the repercussions that would surely ensue if boys fell victim to perverted thoughts and forms of self-pleasure. Acton begins with the claim that "in a state of health no sexual impression should ever affect a child's mind or body. All its vital energy should be employed in building up the growing frame, in storing up external impressions, and education the brain to receive them. During a well-regulated childhood, and in the case of ordinary temperaments, there is no temptation to infringe

⁴⁶ Steven Marcus. *The Other Victorians*, 32.

this primary law of nature.”⁴⁷ In this quote we can see a preparation for young males to become the rational, controlling man who is capable of dominating himself and his underlings for the good of English society at large. As Steven Marcus points out, the book is clearly directed at an urban middle-class society, “for only among those classes could there be found that combination of circumstances—living conditions, ideology, estrangement from traditional knowledge—which made possible a belief in the asexuality of childhood.”⁴⁸

According to Acton, the causes of a young boy’s precocious sexual urges include a “hereditary disposition, ‘irritation of the rectum arising from worms,’ bed-wetting, irritation of the ‘glans penis arising from the collection of secretion under the prepuce [...] flogging of the buttocks...”⁴⁹ Acton further argues that the foreskin is dangerous for moral reasons because “it affords an additional surface for the excitement of the reflex action, and aggravates an instinct rather than supplies a want.”⁵⁰ It is also suggested that reading “classical works” can incite these sexual urges in boys as “he reads in them of the pleasures, nothing of the penalties, of sexual indulgences. He is not intuitively aware that, if the sexual desires are excited, it will require greater power of will to master them than falls to the lot of most lads; that if indulged in, the man will and must pay the penalty from the errors of the boy; [...] that an awful risk attends abnormal substitutes for sexual intercourse; and that self-indulgence, long pursued, tends ultimately, if carried far enough, to early death or self-destruction.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Steven Marcus *The Other Victorians*, 13.

⁴⁸ Steven Marcus, 15.

⁴⁹ Steven Marcus, 15.

⁵⁰ Steven Marcus, 15.

⁵¹ Steven Marcus, 16-17.

Similar to the warnings given to men regarding the development of spermatorrhea, Acton describes the boy who habitually masturbates:

The frame is stunted and weak, the muscles undeveloped, the eye is sunken and heavy, the complexion is sallow, past, or covered with spots of acne, the hands are damp and cold, and the skin moist. The boy shuns the society of others, creeps about alone, joins with repugnance in the amusements of his schoolfellows. He cannot look any one in the face, and becomes careless in dress and uncleanly in person. His intellect has become sluggish and enfeebled, and if his evil habits are persisted in, he may end in becoming a driveling idiot or a peevish valetudinarian. Such boys are to be seen in all stages of degeneration, but what we have described is but the result towards which they all are tending.⁵²

Such accounts, as with describing the deformities found in adult men and women from masturbation, harms young boys in two ways. It makes them feel guilty for possessing natural desires, especially leaving them with a feeling a guilt when those urges are given into. This interpretation of bodily dominance for such young men would have undoubtedly led to an unhealthy view of sexuality, the body and the self. Because his body was not his own, its exploration could only be viewed through a lens of effects left on the nation. In addition to instilling guilt and shame, it would have also led to a prejudice against those young boys who naturally fell out of the bounds of normality. If a boy naturally had a sallow complexion or trouble looking others in the face, he could now be considered a pervert because it was reasoned such impure actions led to such characteristics.

To avoid these horrors, Acton advocated for continence. Continence, as he describes it, was not only avoiding sex but “controlling all sexual excitement” and it “is complete control over the passions, exercised by one who knows their power, and who, but for his steady will, not only cold, but would indulge them.”⁵³ For the boy who masturbates, “the large expenditure of semen, has exhausted the vital force;” the continent boy, however, has not “expended that vital

⁵² Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, 19.

⁵³ Steven Marcus, 23.

fluid, semen, or exhausted his nervous energy, and his youthful vigor has been employed for its legitimate purpose, namely, in building up his growing frame.”⁵⁴ Similarly, this account gives social precedence to those who have “youthful vigor,” while simultaneously blaming those who do not possess this bodily strength because of their sexual perversion and irresponsibility.

Tying the sexual struggles and repercussions of the middle-class English boy to the man, Acton explained that if a boy learned his lessons and did not take in such abominable behaviors as those listed above, he might reach adulthood with the ability to experience virility. This attribute “seems necessary to give a man that consciousness of his dignity, of his character as head and ruler and of his importance, which is absolutely essential to the well-being of the family, and through it, of society itself. It is a power, a privilege, of which the man is, and should be, proud...”⁵⁵ Just in this account which reflects William Acton’s advice regarding sexuality in males, we can see the national struggle to find a balance between the strong, sexual male leader and the perverted, backwards, social illness.

As we can see in Elizabeth Stephens’s argument regarding fear of spermatorrhea and the philosophies of nineteenth-century European thinkers near the fin de siècle like Otto Weininger and Max Nordau, the fear of degenerating into a form of womanhood saturated fears of national demise. The genre of Victorian Gothic signifies this alarm in many of its tales and a fear towards the fin de siècle of gender queer, homoerotic, racial ambiguity emerges. A weakening nation was the subject of the British narrative as it were, and fears of an “other” expand during its trying times. The other gaining strength is those adhering to queerness and indigenous peoples of the

⁵⁴ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, 21.

⁵⁵ Steven Marcus, 25.

colonies who were simultaneously challenging Britain's stronghold. The powerful heterosexual, wealthy, English man is now faced with a fearsome other.⁵⁶

Fear of the Other

In the Victorian era, especially nearing the end of the century, fear of the other becomes more paramount as England struggles to maintain its imperial network. Referencing the trouble encountered in the latter half of Victoria's reign and further alluding to fears represented in the Gothic narrative, Harrison Fraser argues that "the emancipation movement [of women] must be accounted one of the forces that did most to exacerbate the prevailing atmosphere of fearfulness" because men were in a state of "acute anxiety brought on by the instability of the economy and their own diminished prosperity."⁵⁷ In 1867 the Second Reform Act is passed, which enabled one-third of adult males to vote in Parliamentary elections and, while women had gained some property rights, the women's suffrage campaign began gaining more momentum in the 1880s. These social changes, along with wars and rebellions occurring during Victoria's reign, reminded middle-class men that their social power may be waning.

Conveying the extent to which middle class men feared their own inability to control their bodies as early as 1836 was a book entitled *The Beauty of Woman*, in which Alexander Walker described to men how they could avoid falling victim to the alluring temptress on the city streets.⁵⁸ In it, he claimed that one ought to be able to dissect the image of a woman the way one might interpret and critique the aesthetic beauty of a Greek statue. He even went so far as to warn men of the particular ways women will make themselves more attractive. Examples of

⁵⁶ Ardel Thomas, "Queer Victorian Gothic," In *The Victorian Gothic*. Edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press. 2012.

⁵⁷ Fraser Harrison. *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*. (Universe Books, New York. 1977.) 65.

⁵⁸ Rosenman, *Unauthorized Pleasures*, 60.

these were the kinds of clothes she would wear to accentuate her body in order to make it seem more pleasing on the outside, when really her naked body would not be so enticing. Make-up, Walker claimed, was another way in which these seductresses would fool men into thinking they were more beautiful than they were. While this book and its purpose seem peculiar to modern audiences, the methods surrounding sexuality utilized by an individual woman force men to see past the woman herself to interpret sexuality in the abstract on her person. This would lead men to believe they want her when they really only want the embodiment of sex.

As these fears emerged, Gothic narratives aimed to expose underlying Victorian fears. In *The Grey Woman* (1861) we see a woman fleeing an abusive husband to find solace in the arms of another woman, and in *The Woman in White* (1859) we see a manly spinster come to the aid of a young bride who expected to sign her property rights away to her husband. In both tales, the powerful heterosexual male is challenged and demonized. In the former, we see an abused woman flee her husband to find sanctuary in the arms of a cross-dressing woman.⁵⁹ Similarly, the protagonist pretends to be lower class, distorting class reference and gender significance. Similarly, the latter tale centers on a woman who is asked to sign over property rights to her husband until saved by a masculine spinster.⁶⁰ As the middle-class man was in fear of his own bodily degeneration and national degeneration, the Gothic narrative strove to bring about the demise of his unquestioningly glorified existence. In both tales, men are either abusive or at least no heroes of the damsel in distress, while women who embody traditionally unfeminine (or undesirable) characteristics embody the tale's saving grace.

⁵⁹ Thomas, "Queer Victorian Gothic," 147.

⁶⁰ Thomas, 147.

During this time of social unrest, artists began painting images of women which obscured her genitalia. In the painting “Venus Disrobing for the Bath,” Frederic Leighton portrayed a woman unnaturally twisting “her body around the axis of her waist, so that her rib-cage, breasts and shoulders which form one plane appear to have been wrenched away from the other plane formed by her pelvis and hips.”⁶¹ This distortion is common in images of the ideal woman, largely paying homage to the idealized ancient Greeks. Though the breasts are always plainly seen in these images, the female sexual organs are covered and minimized. As Fraser argues, this is because they stimulate different emotional responses on the part of the male.⁶² While “breasts are visual emblems of maternity, and therefore of femininity; their softness and roundness, their appearance of having been added to the basic human form, serve as a reminder of woman’s comparative physical frailty.” The genitals, however, represent “an interiorized possibility; the sexual function of the vagina is to be penetrated, it promises to enclose the male organ, and in this respect, offers a challenge, for its promise cannot be fulfilled unless potency is achieved and sustained”⁶³ on the part of the male.

Because men sought to subjugate women but feared their inability to do so during this time, artists visually castrated women of threatening pubic areas. By making women cover their genitalia, a sense of shame is conveyed, “calculated to soothe male fear and gratify the masculine thirst for superiority.”⁶⁴ While Fraser’s entire argument centers on the effects of capitalism and the oppression the economic structure ensued, it does seem plausible that because men were in fear of losing their social position, their superiority over women and lower classes was crucial.

⁶¹ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 81.

⁶² Harrison, 82.

⁶³ Harrison, 82.

⁶⁴ Harrison, 82.

While oppression is demonized, and rightly so, the fear experienced by the Head of the new middle-class is understandable. Because their position in society was not granted by blood, means to keep their standings were put in place and rebellion of the granted inferiors would have been alarming and frustrating.

Conclusion

For middle-class men, the rational body was paramount, consequently, serious regulation was placed on his body in general, but especially with regard to sexuality. As we can see in scholarly interpretations of national health, men operated under the pressure of possessing bodies which represented national welfare. The middle-class men constituted the nucleus of the British enterprise, in which his industry, businesses and education kept the nation and empire afloat. Because of his new found significance, scholars were quick to create documents announcing his potential demise, while doctors urgently prescribed methods to prevent it. To keep the body under control, many men would submit to painful procedures in order that they may save themselves from the degeneration into womanhood that spermatorrhea was sure to bring about. Highlighting this fear, books and art were produced representing ways in which men may avoid the temptations of the female body, while also attempting to remove the power of the female body. While middle-class men were privileged undoubtedly in their sexuality, they too suffered the brunt of the socio-economic structure that made up Victorian Britain as they desperately fought to maintain their social standings as representatives of the nation.

CHAPTER 3

VANISHING THE VICTORIAN BODY: IDEOLOGICAL DOMINATION OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN'S BODY AND SEXUALITY

The sexuality of middle-class women has been increasingly used to explore power dynamics and the way in which sexuality shaped life in past societies. In Britain, in which the power structure was centered on the middle-class man, though not always to his benefit, middle-class women had little ownership over their own body. Women's bodies were deemed inferior, and knowledge of the body was kept from them. Consequently, middle-class women were faced with impossible sexual expectations in which a virtuous angel was confronted with male physical desire. As a result, her body was dominated and regulated as society saw fit, outside of the grasp of her own subjecthood.

Inferiority of the Female Body

In the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The male is only a male at times; the female is a female all her life and can never forget her sex."⁶⁵ Rousseau's statement succinctly captures what it means to be an other, embodying and having the constant awareness of that which sets one apart from the subject. Within their own existence, anyone has subjecthood and agency; however, as Rousseau articulates, the meaning of womanhood in the Victorian context was categorized by her relation to men. Consequently, her existence could never emerge from the shadow of being the 'other.' Her sexuality was thusly regulated around ideas of middle-class

⁶⁵ John Tosh. "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain." *History Workshops*, No. 38. Oxford University Press. 1994. 180.

men which led to a disconnect between Victorian middle-class women and their reproducing, sexual bodies.

Casting women into this social position was rooted in the division of the world into mind and matter. This dualism was accepted and reflected in Western societies since its philosophical birth by Rene Descartes, but the nineteenth century now used scientific inquiries to more aptly support the notion.⁶⁶ The idea that nature could be dominated by rationality, which belonged to men, flourished. Sexual appetites were part of nature and therefore were in need of control by the rational thinker. Because women were a part of the natural worldly “matter,” her sexuality could not be in her command but, like the beast and the lower classes, ran rampant. This notion led to the idea that lower class women were whores, but since it seemingly troubled the intellects to think of “their women” in such a manner, her sexuality had to be blotted out altogether, erased from society and the private lives of men. As society readily agreed that a woman’s rationality could not match up to that of a man’s, the viewing of female sexuality as innocent and without passion became a social and moral necessity.⁶⁷

What bodies represented on a practical, functional level was the extent to which an individual had progressed evolutionarily against the most presumably advanced standard—the white English man. Long before the Victorians, scientific logic had been utilized to reinforce notions of inferiority between the sexes. In the fourth century B.C., Aristotle claimed that “the female sex was a deformity of nature” explaining that since women were colder and weaker, they “had insufficient heat to transform the menstrual blood into the more perfect form of semen.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall. *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary studies of gender in the nineteenth century*. (London: Routledge, 1989.), 8.

⁶⁷ Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 10.

⁶⁸ Cynthia Eagle Russett,. *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*. Harvard University Press, London. 1989. P. 3.

Further, women did not provide seed during conception, only “the material substance and the place of incubation” while the man “supplied the form and the efficient cause.”⁶⁹ In a similar fashion, in the second century C.E., Galen argued for women’s inferiority because of their apparent natural weakness in relation to men. Then in the sixteenth century, Rene Descartes claimed that the male “semen endowed the offspring with a soul.”⁷⁰ This mode of thinking permeated Western thought for centuries, but the Victorians believed they could back up these socially prescribed intuitions with reason and scientific studies.

Slightly preceding the Victorian era, in the eighteenth century the bones of humans were studied in an attempt to prove how inferior everyone was to European men. Anatomist Samuel Thomas von Soemmering believed that race was more than skin deep and aimed to prove this intuition by studying skeletons and skulls. It was reasoned that if it could be proven that racial differences existed in the permanency of the skeleton, it could be further proved that race penetrated the entire body of an organism. He believed that the “cold facts” of anatomy revealed that blacks were closer to apes.⁷¹ Clearly, these studies were conducted with the expectation that social norms would be affirmed and supported; the entire purpose of the study was to prove the legitimacy of the oppression already in place. In addition to the comparing of bones of men of other races (not women of other races), the skulls of Caucasian women were also studied. Female Caucasian skulls were compared to male Caucasian skulls, whose skulls were in turn compared to everyone else.⁷² From this we can see that white European man was the standard and the pinnacle against which every other human would be measured.

⁶⁹ Russett, *Sexual Science*. 3.

⁷⁰ Russet, 3.

⁷¹ Londa Schiebinger. “The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1990. 395.

⁷² Schienbinger, 396.

During Victoria's reign, Britain showed off its technological innovativeness in the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851 where the Empire could shine. The railway boom began in Britain with the opening of the London-Birmingham line in 1838 with subsequent bridges construction making the nation more easily traversed than ever before.⁷³ Similarly, advances had been made in science and health. French biologist Louis Pasteur's germ theory and subsequent pasteurization, as well as Professor Joseph Lister's new insight to antiseptics altered hygiene. In addition to these advances, science also aimed to understand and re-establish human ranking. Darwin released *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 which introduced the theory of evolution to society at large.

The principle of "survival of the fittest" led to notions of racial and sexual superiority as well as a disdain for social welfare. Victorians believed that those who were naturally superior would inevitably surpass lesser beings, society was progressing, therefore, "evolutionary change should be cultivated and nurtured."⁷⁴ Further, it was thought that those superior beings had a responsibility to govern and protect the "race" on a national level. This sentiment gave rise to the White Man's Burden, which suggested that European men had an obligation to provide for less developed nations. Similar to the obligation European men imagined he had to other races, so too was an obligation conjured up for the protection and regulation of the woman, who was considered a less perfect form of human in comparison to her male counterpart.

⁷³ Tubular Bridge opened in 1850 to provide railway link from north Wales up the nation to ferries headed to Ireland; Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Saltash railway bridge is the first suspension bridge is built in 1859 giving easies access to Western England.

⁷⁴ Sheelagh Strawbridge, "Darwin and Victorian social values." In *In Search of Victorian Values: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society*, edited by Eric M. Sigsworth, 102-115. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988. 3.

During the Victorian period, Darwin's theories of evolution were recast to justify modes of oppression, including the inferiority of women. In the 1880s, Scottish biologist Patrick Geddes sought to uncover the hidden mysteries of the differences between men and women. He claimed that the "hungry, active cell becomes flagellate sperm, while the quiescent, well-fed one becomes the ovum."⁷⁵ Based on this account, it was reasoned that the most basic levels of human development dictated that men expend energy by being the aggressive moving, working, doers of society and women conserved energy by being calm and passive. Because of arguments such as this one, it was further reasoned that the roles of men and women were dictated by the most basic forms of biology and therefore, were not able to be challenged or altered.

Studies such as phrenology, facial angle, and other studies of the structure of the skull and head helped to scientifically legitimize oppression and divide humanity. One contributor of the *Anthropological Review* in 1868 claimed that prognathism, or protrusion of the jaw, is the "most palpable mark of an inferior organization" and linked women to primitive peoples. He states: "We so often find in ancient female skulls so decided a prognathism that they almost resemble the Ethiopian skulls, and have been mistaken for them."⁷⁶ In this account, the inferiority of primitive peoples was completely taken for granted. Further, there is an understanding that stating that women shared commonalities with savages, they too were inferior to white men. French anthropologists Paul Broca and Paul Topinard emphasized the significance of the cephalic index, devised by Anders Adolph Retzius, a Swedish anthropologist.⁷⁷ The cephalic index was the "ratio of skull length to skull breadth" and it divided humans into three

⁷⁵ Fraser Harrison. "The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality". Universe Books, New York. 1977. 92.

⁷⁶ Russett. *Sexual Science*. 32.

⁷⁷ Russet, 32.

categories: the dolichocephalic or “long-heads,” the brachycephali or “broad-heads,” and the mesaticephali, or “middle-heads.”⁷⁸ Europeans were generally thought to be middle-heads, making mesaticephalis superior. It became difficult to figure in certain ethnicities to fit their superiority claims using the model, such as the Mongols fitting into the brachycephali categorization as well as women. Topinard tried to salvage the index by stating that women were more brachycephali than dolichocephalic humans, but less so than white men. Because of these discrepancies, however, the cephalic index was eventually regarded as incapable of deciphering the differences between the sexes.⁷⁹

As we have seen, the middle-class woman represented the metaphorical heart or soul of the social body. She was the seat of morality and occupied an angelic presence in an otherwise harsh world. Interestingly, this analogy between a body and society portrays middle-class women as a part of the body that ultimately does not exist. Of course all bodies consist of an organ which regulates blood flow; however, a separation has been made between said organ and the source of feeling which counters logic. A heartache does not represent a ping of pain in chest, it signifies sadness. Notions of love and nurture may seem an innate aspect of the human experience; they are not in fact a part of the mechanics of a living body. While all bodies clearly possess a head, hands, and “nether regions,” the notion of the metaphorical heart is an invention of human imagination to represent an unknowable and elusive aspect of life—love. This must have impacted, at least to some degree, the ways in which middle-class women were taught to relate to their bodies, bodies that were expected to represent something outside of time and space, something figurative.

⁷⁸ Russet, *Sexual Science*, 33.

⁷⁹ Russet, *Sexual Science*, 33.

Beyond the need to suppress the female body, doctors began viewing it in terms of reproduction only, leaving their own bodily experiences as being defined as separate from men.⁸⁰ As a consequence, women's sexuality and reproductive health became the subject of scientific scrutiny, which was, as we will see later in this paper, a knowledge almost completely denied to the women themselves, and was contingent upon cultural biases which sought to maintain the dividing line between the genders.⁸¹ John Stuart Mill proposed a more egalitarian construction of sexual relations but these philosophies were thought harmful to society. It was further suggested by medical authorities that "the ideas which would exalt culture above motherhood are suicidal and should be abandoned. It will not do to say women should have a choice."⁸² The discrepancies in Victorian ideologies, however, ran rampant and reveal the extent to which her body was dominated. Since the significance of motherhood was stressed by Victorians, it seems it would follow that the mother figure would not be deemed so incapable in every other aspect of life. It further does not follow that she ought to be kept in the dark regarding the world and her own body. As mentioned in the heart representation of the woman, her role in society was illusory; she was brought up to be something that did not and could not exist and when the trouble of merging her reality with fanatical conceptions of womanhood left her unsettled, Victorian society quickly threw around labels of insanity and instability.

The female reproductive body itself was cast with a bleak shadow as gynecology and psychiatry took ownership of it and displaced its natural function with labels of hysteria and instability. The "growing stress on the morbid character of what had earlier been considered natural functions" led to an abundance of diagnoses and warnings regarding female health and

⁸⁰ Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 132.

⁸¹ Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*., 133.

⁸² Mendus and Rendall, 133..

maintenance.⁸³ The “irritable uterus” was a concept that spoke to the shifts in moody women experienced at certain points of their menstrual cycle. As the interworking of hormonal balances were unknown, this seeming hysteria caused alarm to men of the medical world. Although medicine and the physicians practice did not become so common until the nineteenth century, as early as 1797 Martha Mears attempted to overturn misconceptions about pregnant women. In response to notions of the irritable uterus, Mears exclaimed, “what physicians term irritability, [...] is but an increased sensibility of the womb, after it has received its precious deposit.”⁸⁴ Mears’ argument was not heeded as the menstrual cycle itself seemed to be a damning trait, enduring which tied women relentlessly to the natural world, keeping them in bounds, forever denied access to the hierarchical world of intellect.

John Burns, who eventually became a professor of midwifery in Glasgow, argued that since “women, at the menstrual period, are more subject than at other times to spasmodic and hysterical complaints [and] as the female system is more irritable during menstruation,” women should refrain from “indigestible foods, dancing in warm rooms, sudden exposure to cold [in case] troublesome affections develop.”⁸⁵ Mental health and fear of insanity were directly linked to menstruation as well with the suffocating intersection of gynecology and psychiatry. Further these arguments were used in debates regarding women’s right to education.⁸⁶ Psychiatrist T. S. Clouston warned:

The regular normal performance of the reproductive functions is of the highest importance to the mental soundness of the female. Disturbed menstruation is a constant danger to the mental stability of some women; nay, the occurrence of

⁸³ Anne Digby. “Women’s Biological Straightjacket.” In *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary studies of gender in the nineteenth century*, edited by Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, 192-220. London: Routledge, 1989. 196.

⁸⁴ Digby, “Women’s Biological Straightjacket,” 196.

⁸⁵ Digby, 197

⁸⁶ Digby, 198.

normal menstruation is attended with some risk in many unstable brains. The actual outbreak of mental disease, or its worst paroxysms, is coincident with the menstrual period in a very large number of women indeed.⁸⁷

In such accounts, we are reminded of terror felt by men in the spermatorrhea panic and the pervading need to dominate the body and its sexual functions. Further, women's sexuality and menstruation were used to link them to animals, as those like Thomas Girdwood equated women's menstruation with animals in heat.⁸⁸ The long standing belief that women were most fertile and most interested in sex during menstruation was based on this analogy with animals. In an alarming animalistic interpretation of female sexual pleasure, it was believed that a "powerful distaste for intercourse"—including rape—would be no hindrance to female sexual excitement once contact with the genitalia is made.⁸⁹ As we will see in later examples of pornography and abuses of lower class women, female sexual pleasure was socially construed as animalistic and therefore, her bodily integrity was often compromised.

Women were not privileged to have access to knowledge of their bodies, but beyond that, the physical regulation of the body did not belong to them either. As society adjusted to a rise in familial significance and economical changes, women's bodies were caught in the crossfire. Politicians, doctors, and husbands all scrambled to claim dominance over her, leaving her with elusive social interpretations of her own body and sexuality.

Repression of the Sexual Body

In his work *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*, historian Harrison Fraser discusses the lack of knowledge women had about sexuality upon marriage because of the extent

⁸⁷ Digby, 198.

⁸⁸ Michael Mason. *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.) 196

⁸⁹ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 196.

to which women were expected not to connect with their bodies or be aware of their sexual experiences. In one scenario, a young bride felt there was something missing from her marriage, although she cannot pinpoint what it is. Trained in botany, she decided to do research to discover what it is that could be wrong with her marriage. She discovered from her reading at the British Library that she and her husband should have consummated the marriage.⁹⁰ This story is telling on a couple of levels. One, the grown woman was so completely unaware of an aspect of biological existence as well as (apparently) feelings of sexuality within her own body. Even if the woman experienced sexuality, it was clearly so muted from her life that she would not have been able to interpret the feelings she had, or understand how she ought to behave in accordance with sexual urges.

Based on tales such as this one, it can be reasoned that it would have been a shock for women to bare all for their husbands on their wedding night. As Leonore Davidoff argues, a “young, dependent, almost child-like wife was portrayed as the ideal in fiction, etchings, songs, and poetry.”⁹¹ While girls saw marriage as a means to happiness, French novelist Honore de Balzac responded with the sobering revelation that “marriage can be considered in political, civil and moral terms, as a law, a contract, and an institution.”⁹² As his books went on to advise, he warned to “never begin a marriage with rape.” As Nicole Ward Jouve suggests, crude and brutal bridegrooms were by no means in short supply, but even the “nice ones” would have had difficulty given the “ignorance, passivity and sometimes terror of their brides.”⁹³ These

⁹⁰ Harrison, Fraser. “The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality.” Universe Books, New York. 1977. 50-51.

⁹¹ Joanna de Groot, “Sex and ‘Race’: The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century.” In *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary studies of gender in the nineteenth century*, edited by Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, 192-220. (London: Routledge, 1989.) 98.

⁹² Jouve, 27.

⁹³ Jouve, “Balzac’s A Daughter of Eve and the Apple of Knowledge.” 28.

contradicting notions of what it meant to be a person in the world undoubtedly led to emotional turmoil for women. While they were taught in studies of virtue and morality, they were thrust into a world in which the objects of their knowledge are shown no adherence yet an explicit duality was expected of young women of the bourgeois ranks.

Women's sexual innocence was strongly entwined with her political ignorance. For a woman to question her subordination on a social level, she had necessarily to challenge discourses of femininity and female sexuality.⁹⁴ Biblical conceptions of what it meant "to know" cropped up in nineteenth century debates. God told Adam and Eve that they would become like Gods, knowing good and evil. The Bible further discusses Adam as *knowing* Eve. In the first sense, "to know" represents having knowledge of; in the second sense it represents sexuality between people. This duality of knowledge, "through which the full subject-hood of the adult might be attained," suggests Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, "is one which pervades nineteenth century discourses on gender."⁹⁵ Because the two were so inextricably linked, women fighting for rights in the public sphere had necessarily to overturn constructions of femininity and female sexuality. Consequently, innocence became valued as it represented knowing nothing; to merely be informed about sexuality for women was not permissible or safe for the well-being of society.

Since it was expected that men dominate their sexual urges, those who induced these erotic notions had to be handled accordingly. Working class women were a threat because they preyed on the natural desires of men to earn a living. Even if a man sought to stay within the confines of the moral etiquette of bourgeois sexual culture, he would still be tested regularly by women whose livelihood, and often times family, relied on her ability to lure in lustful

⁹⁴ Mendus and Rendell, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 2.

⁹⁵ Mendus and Rendell, 7.

onlookers. Men often partook in the erotic power they possessed. Because men needed an outlet for sexual desire, yet the middle-class woman had to remain respectable, blame often fell on lower class women for the evils of sexuality in the society in general. Because blame could be placed on working-class girls, middle-class women were expected to be virtuous, moral and angelic—regardless of whether or not she actually was or wanted to be.

The story of George Hall and his murdered fallen angel reveal a ghastly reality to the extent to which the angel in the home was valued and the demands placed on women to be virtuous with regard to their sexual aggressions. In Victorian times into modern times, extramarital affairs have been generally looked down upon. However, in the nineteenth century, men commonly sought sexual release and company outside of the marital bed and were generally expected to do so. It is apparent that a woman exploring emotion and sexuality outside of this union was abhorrent based on society's response to the trial of George Hall. Abundant sympathy was held for him; as Martin Wiener states, his actions were almost deemed as virtuous in those circumstances. As one British paper put it, "The very sensitiveness of his nature created the furious and ungovernable passion under the influence of which he committed the homicidal act."⁹⁶

The story of Hall does not stand on its own. Other men who were accused of the same crime, provided they were not belligerent drunkards, were granted much sympathy from the public. Upon the time of Hall's eventual release, another petition was given 50,000 signatures to release James Lloyd, a man who was previously "sober, quiet and industrious," who stabbed his

⁹⁶ Martin J. Wiener, "The Sad Story of George Hill: Adultery, Murder and the Politics of Mercy in Mid-Victorian England." *Social History*, Vol. 24, No. 2. Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1999. 181.

wife to death for being unfaithful.⁹⁷ Another man merely suspected that his wife had been unfaithful and fatally attacked her with a fireplace poker and a razor.⁹⁸ Although the man lacked proof, the jury only convicted him of manslaughter. Similar to the story of Hall, Henry King's wife left him and refused his pleas to return home. Eventually King discovered her with another man and stabbed her to death with a chisel. The counsel at his murder trial suggested the murder was at most manslaughter. When the jury eventually settled on an acquittal, the conclusion was met with "scattered applause."⁹⁹

These instances reflect the commonly held sentiment that a woman who deviated from the notion of angel in the home ought to be punished but it also reveals that society responded positively to a man exhibiting strong emotions if it is for the purpose of putting a woman "in her place." Though the men in these scenarios were not themselves quite of bourgeois status, their stories reveal the extent to which middle-class expectations and standards permeated society at large, especially seeping into working and lower classes. *The Times* commented that there were murders [Hall being one of them] "in which the slayer appears to be scarcely less a victim than the slain."¹⁰⁰ The newspaper further poses the question: "Who can read the tale of this domestic tragedy without a sentiment of compassion for the murderer?"¹⁰¹ Female sexuality had to be regulated for the sake of maintaining appropriate family units in a culture that was now dependent upon them. For men, this meant their wives ought not seek pleasure outside of the home lest they should suffer grave consequences. What appears to initially be bore out of practicality for societal well-being seeped into the collective consciousness and buried itself in

⁹⁷ Wiener, "The Sad Story of George Hall," 194.

⁹⁸ Wiener, 183.

⁹⁹ Wiener, 183.

¹⁰⁰ Wiener, 181.

¹⁰¹ Wiener, 181.

intuition such that a woman may be murdered and sympathy is given to the perpetrator of her demise. In this sense, a woman's body belonged not only to her husband, but to society as a whole.

Experience of the Sexual Body

As historian Joanna de Groot acknowledges, "the framework of women's history has extended beyond exclusive concern with female subordination to explore the many and diverse forms of subversion, accommodation, and resistance which women developed in order to deal with their situation."¹⁰² While this alteration in the ways historians view and present female historical figures is significant, this is not an expansion of any kind of study but rather, a different study altogether, although clearly related and intersecting. To observe an overarching systematic network of human order which leads to the retarded mobility of particular individuals is different from investigating ways in which particular people dealt with their societal placement and the ways in which they asserted their own will at some level. An awareness seems to have suddenly arisen in the practice of history that historians ought not portray those of the past as mere victims of the subject, so we scramble to find the ways in which we can reveal the subjecthood of the oppressed. While this is necessary, historians must not ignore the actual structural boundaries that had been put in place culturally and legally merely because there had been projection of the will at some level. That is to say, just because we can reveal ways in which those who were oppressed in the past found ways to assert their will at some level, the legal and cultural barriers placed around such individuals cannot be forgotten or made to seem less severe.

¹⁰² De Groot, "Sex and Race," 89.

Since sexuality was seen as being a manly endeavor in general, the way women felt about their own sexuality, or lack thereof, was unimportant so long as it was not interfering with the power men had over sexuality. The interpretations of female sexuality during the Victorian era among historians are quite vast and brings much insight to the subject. However, an overarching theme to all of these interpretations is the notion of man as possessor of sexual power and women molded accordingly. As it was presumed, the sexuality of the lady was by no means synonymous with that of her male counterpart.

Similarly, Michael Mason states in *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* that William Acton's remark that women "are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind" should be interpreted as a mere remark, because this statement was only made to ease the worried minds of those whose impotence may make them fear marriage.¹⁰³ He goes on to argue for the insignificance of the statement because it does not align with other comments made regarding female sexuality by Acton. For these reasons, the comment should not hold so much significance. While I agree that the points made in the argument reveal that Acton, and probably many more Victorians, did not believe that women lacked a sex drive, its significance still stands precisely because the contradictory statement was made for male satisfaction in response to their own bodily insecurity. In this way, women's bodies were still being socially constructed and manipulated to fit a male sexual agenda with its shifts and changes. Her actual sexual reality is muted, as it so often was, for men.

Differing from mainstream interpretations of bourgeois sexuality, in *Between Women*, Marcus argues that women indeed did enjoy their sexualities and that erotic interaction between

¹⁰³ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 195.

women existed on a continuum. Further, she argues, the eroticism experienced between women ought not to be merely regarded as lesbianism, for the subtleties of woman-watching and admiration of the female body were more layered and complex than that. As women were so eroticized in Victorian culture, women were taught to dissect the beauty of woman to become the desirable object. However, according to Marcus, the act of becoming the sexual object and having to learn what was desirable in other sexual objects in viewing, led women to experience eroticism between one another, although overt lesbianism was not, though sometimes, the case. Victorian fashion “iconography disproves the still influential claims that men look and women are looked at, that only male viewers enjoy corporeal spectacles of femininity, that voyeuristic scopophilia is split from exhibitionistic fetishism, and that the beholder must choose between desire or identification.”¹⁰⁴ The commonality between fashion plates and pornography is presented as evidence of this eroticization. She states the commonalities between dressing up a woman for the pleasure of the viewer, although one (fashion plate) is for a female audience, and the other (pornography) is intended for a male audience. Consequently, both men and women are constantly looking at the female body and expression as an object to be desired. While both outlets are intended for very different purposes, they both train men and women to view women as such.

This interpretation is significant when considering the relationship people had to their own bodies because it refigures the notions held about female sexuality and experience produced by the continuously haunting ideals of the angel in home. Although it does seem necessary to begin to bridge the gap between Victorian ideals and Victorian experiences, the most useful

¹⁰⁴ Sharon Marcus. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. 2007, 135.

insight gained from this account is that women's biology was not so foreign to the biology we know of women today merely because of the constraints put on her during the nineteenth-century. This account, however much it aims to liberate the female libido, still represents the ways in which masculine power was deeply entwined and in control of the female sexual experience.

If Marcus's account is accurate, it still does not remove the qualifiers of male sexual domination over female sexuality. The parallels made between pornography designed for men and fashion plates designed for women pays homage to the fact that her existence was not separable from male sexuality. The ways in which she was trained to view herself and other women stemmed directly from the sexual power men held and it further produced results for male satisfaction, regardless of her enjoyment in the process. Although the possibility that women experienced erotic notions because of this viewing/being viewed erotic manipulation, it does not detract from the fact that the orchestration of the sexual threads that wove society together was founded on, encouraged and assisted male sexual power.

While Marcus's argument sheds a new, much needed light on female sexuality during the era, it does fall short on some accounts. When looking into the past, it is important to not merely victimize past figures who were oppressed or objectified, but rather to uncover and disclose the modes through which they indeed were subjects, regardless of this appreciation by their own society. In this way, *Between Women*, makes modern historians of gender reconsider the sexual experience of middle-class women during this time, however, that is not to say that their sexual suppression can be overturned. Firstly, it is difficult to say whether or not women experienced this eroticizing of themselves and other women and thusly interpreted it as sexual or erotic. Further, while it seems plausible that the argument makes sense to modern readers, we cannot

forget that we are viewing the issue through a modern lens which has been constructed around exploring sexuality and uncovering subconscious aspects of sexual urges. It is also important to consider the ramifications of being socially restricted from being acknowledged as a sexual being; to have a sexuality but to be reduced to an ornament for male sexuality.

Similarly, the notion of women being made aware of their objectification is argued as being without a sexual benefit for women. As John Berger argues in his book *Ways of Seeing*, mirrors were often used in images of women as a symbol of their vanity; however, he states to the painter: “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting ‘Vanity’, thus condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on to say that the real purpose of using a mirror was to make the woman view herself first and foremost as a sight. In this way, she is being trained to view herself as something to be seen, as opposed to being a viewer herself. As in the philosophical phenomenon of the keyhole, in which Jean Paul Sartre spoke of the realization and sudden shift in perception when one realizes they are not the subject of the world that they are perceiving¹⁰⁶, but suddenly realize they are an object in another’s world. For Victorian women, her entire life was expected to be the object of another’s reality, she was never granted the ability to look through the keyhole without another perceiving her. The utilization of a reflection in late-Victorian art of the female form was common. In English artist Frederick Leighton’s “The Bath of Psyche,” there is an enormous pool by the disrobing woman, which she calmly stares into at her own reflection. Also in “The Frigidarium” we see a thinly robed

¹⁰⁵ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 85.

¹⁰⁶ “Sartre’s Being & Nothingness: The Bible of Existentialism?,” Philosophy Now, last modified 2005. Accessed September 4, 2016, https://philosophynow.org/issues/53/Sartres_Being_and_Nothingness_The_Bible_of_Existentialism

woman, also glaring at her own reflection in a pool. Berger goes on to state that in the majority of these nude paintings, the subject is aware of her spectator and the spectator is understood to be a man. “Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity...Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.”¹⁰⁷

While both of these accounts remark on the experience of becoming an object, one is far more positive while granting the women subjectivity within their objectification. Both of these notions are significant when exploring sexuality experienced by middle-class women because, as Christopher Lane points out, the psychoanalytic elements to Victorian sexuality cannot be traced with mere concrete accounts, legalities and published social accounts on the ideal. Forcing particular members of society into sexual objectification can simultaneously cause them sexual pleasure and be destructive in other ways. In Berger’s argument, women are being made guilty of the sexual stimuluses created by men by committing vanity at the sight of their own sexual being, whereas in Marcus’s account this did in fact occur and was enjoyable on the part of the real women looking into the mirror at her nude, seducing image.

In addition to the seemingly erotic experiences of middle class women that Marcus cites, there are accounts of women being disconnected from their sexuality and sheltered from sexuality in general. Accounts such as these unravel Marcus’s argument to an extent because the erotic experiences of women in Victorian England mean little when the women themselves could not own them. Unlike with very literal power men often had over the bodies of lower-class women, the bodies of middle-class women were often under the power of male sexuality

¹⁰⁷ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 84.

figuratively. The social structure rendered her unable even to be able to pose a question regarding her sexual status. What is more, the tale of the young botanist is alarming precisely because she was an educated woman, particularly with regard to living organisms. One has to wonder if in fact it was her biology that led her to believe that something was missing in her marriage. These types of private thoughts are impossible to completely grasp, and, as Marcus pointed out, they were probably not overtly understood or reflected upon by the women experiencing them.

While men were encouraged to have control over their bodies, the bodies of their women were often times construed as ornamental. As a young bachelor revealed this sentiment bluntly, stating: “of course at a certain age, when you have a house and so on, you get a wife as a part of its furniture, and find her a very comfortable institution; but I doubt greatly whether there were ever many men who had thoughts worth recounting, who told those thoughts to their wives at first, or who expected them to appreciate them.”¹⁰⁸ Obviously this statement cannot reflect every marriage between middle-class men and women, yet the matter-of-fact manner with which he presents his case speaks to the cultural representations of what the “wife” was. She was not physically manipulated in blunt, erotic manners the way the poor woman was, but she had forgone bodily possession as well in accordance with the ideal that men ought to control sexual urges. His sexual power is made clear through the seizure of hers.

In a more literal way, women’s bodies were physically manipulated through corsetry and gynecology. Though both practices, the body was altered such that it may more appropriately fit the needs and standards of male suitors and society at large. Supporting opposite sides of the

¹⁰⁸ John Tosh. *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 110.

same coin, corsetry aimed to sexualize the female figure, while much of gynecology was focused on desexualizing her subjective desires. The female body was also controlled and manipulated in the name of sexual desire through the use of corsets, especially in the nineteenth century. Prior to the nineteenth century, boys as well as girls wore corsets, as they were thought to be ornamental, worn on the outside of clothing.¹⁰⁹ However, with the Victorian era came the gendered interpretation of corsetry and the manipulation of female bodies. Despite the fact that the use of corsetry made many middle-class women ill and there were numerous publications advising against its use, corsets remained a large part of middle-class femininity into the twentieth century.¹¹⁰ Not only did the corset manipulate the natural female curves to a painful characterization of herself, but it made it increasingly difficult to move at all. This, of course, encouraged women to be delicate ladies who ought not physically strain themselves. As historian Leigh Summers articulates, the corsets longevity may have been because of its dual ability to make women seem submissive, delicate and virginal while also overtly sexualizing their appearance.¹¹¹

During this time, as mentioned above, a backlash and fear of women gaining power overwhelmed the public. Just as men feared they would become more like women through degeneration, the nation feared women would become more like men. Miss Sanford stated that “there is something unfeminine in independence. [...] It is contrary to nature and therefore it offends...”¹¹² Once again Britons manipulated concepts of nature to promote social desires. While nature is being referenced as to why women ought not to gain independence, the British

¹⁰⁹ Leigh Summers. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Oxford: Oxford International Publishers Ltd., 2001. 63.

¹¹⁰ Summers, 121.

¹¹¹ Summers, 122.

¹¹² Summers, 67.

are simultaneously attempting to pull the colonial “savages” away from nature into a more civilized state of being. Further, there was a fear that women who sought an education would become “semi-women or mental hermaphrodites.”¹¹³ The logic begs the question why these roles were so easily altered, making strict gender prescriptions necessary if they were natural. This weak understanding and argument for the status quo left the English in a moral panic with the fluctuating boundaries of societal norms on the verge of collapse.

The medical profession sought to conquer the female anatomy as well. It thusly turned its attention to charting female sexuality and above all, highlighting the biological differences between men and women such that the female identity was completely defined by her otherness to men.¹¹⁴ As Anne Digby states, the medical profession created “a new female atlas...in which provisional frontiers of new countries of frailty, disease, and nervous instability were charted.”¹¹⁵ The emergence of gynecology also promoted a disconnected control over the female body by male physicians. Since the practice of gynecology emerged from the practice of the midwife, its respectability was somewhat tainted. Further, it was unique in the blossoming medical community because it was gender specific.¹¹⁶ A practice was thus developed in which men regulated and advised bodies that were not only depicted as the other, but made inferior as well. Consequently, its plausible to think interpretations and regulations put on the female body were made based on the ways in which it would most benefit society and culture.

British physicians studied the effects of hysterectomies and ovariectomies and women’s sexual responses. Rather than make these inquiries to the women themselves however, their

¹¹³ Summers, 67.

¹¹⁴ Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 12.

¹¹⁵ Mendus and Rendall, 12.

¹¹⁶ Marie Mulvey-Roberts. *Dangerous Bodies: Historicizing the Gothic Corporeal*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2016. 120.

husbands were asked how much pleasure their wives got from intercourse.¹¹⁷ According to the research of gynecologist Lawson Tait, the removal of the womb and ovaries had no effect on female sexual pleasure.¹¹⁸ Of the eight men he asked, two reported wives with “distinctively aggressive” sexual appetites, three men described their wives sexuality as “perfectly satisfactory,” two others claimed her sexuality to be merely satisfactory, and one man said his wife showed “little desire for intercourse.”¹¹⁹ With these mostly positive responses from husbands, Tait concluded that hysterectomies and ovariectomies did not alter sexual appetites.

It is noteworthy that women’s sexual experiences were only considered and viewed through the satisfaction of her husband. It is unclear whether women simply pretended to enjoy sex with their husbands or if the husband’s perception of her enjoyment was already severely skewed because her pleasure was of little significance to him. Women themselves could merely give responses they felt they ought to or their idea of satisfactory could grossly differ from that of modern interpretation precisely because of the socio-psychological restraints placed on her sexual identity. Nonetheless, the fact that gynecological societies sought male commentary to reveal female satisfaction exposes the way society and medicine viewed the female body and her ability to interpret it.

As Michael Mason argues, the fact that gynecologists such as Tait divorced a woman’s sexual pleasure from her reproductive capacity “tends to grant her right to sexual pleasure for its own sake.”¹²⁰ This speaks volumes considering many publications speaking against such notions, however, this may also be interpreted as gynecological surgeons using these powers to take

¹¹⁷ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 175.

¹¹⁸ Mason., 176.

¹¹⁹ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 176.

¹²⁰ Mason, 178.

illegitimate authority over women's physical being.¹²¹ Further, since Tait did not question his patients themselves, only their husbands, further evidence is presented that attitudes that affirmed sexuality in women really only served the sexual gratification of men.¹²² Along with Tait, Isaac Baker Brown performed clitoridectomies, which, he told his patients and their husbands, would not eliminate sexual pleasure, but would merely reduce the act of masturbation.¹²³ As with the catch-22's of the spermatorrhea panic, it was believed that women could only conceive if they achieved orgasm. However, clitoridectomies were performed to curb potential for female arousal.

It was further held that if a woman's "love" went ungratified following consequent enlargement of the ovaries, "hypertrophy," or enlargement of the uterus, of the womb may result.¹²⁴ With these beliefs that orgasm led to ovulation and that a woman may suffer from hypertrophy of the womb if her husband failed to satisfy her gives Fraser's argument more weight. Female sexuality—especially of those women who would become bourgeois mothers—in a woman was so important and necessary to her physical duty to reproduce yet this desire could only be turned into the conception of a baby if a man fulfilled his duties. As Fraser argues, and Acton led men to believe was the case, the female libido was consequently silenced and made to seem nonexistent so as to not shake the confidence of masculine authority.

Since orgasm and sexual pleasure were linked with child production, Mason argues that the joyless interpretation of Victorian housewives' sexual experience must be false. He states, rather, that because of the connection between organism and conception, women worried about pregnancy actively tried to avoid sexual pleasure.¹²⁵ This interpretation is reasonable but it may

¹²¹ Mason, 178.

¹²² Mason, 178.

¹²³ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 197.

¹²⁴ Mason, 201.

¹²⁵ Mason, 203.

also be overlooking main modes of sexual repression during the era. Firstly, merely because restraints were put on female sexuality, that does not mean one could argue that her biological pleasure during intercourse ceased to exist. As far as female pleasure was concerned, however, her pleasure was supposed to be ignited by a husband, so this theory of sexuality could not have led to a healthy relationship for women to their bodies or to their sexuality. Even when her sexuality is acknowledged in existence, when at times it was wholly forgotten, it was heavily revolved around men, particularly her husband. This alone takes her sexuality out of her hands and places it in her husband's. So, while I would agree with Mason that middle class women's sexuality ought not be remembered as nonexistent, but it has to be appreciated that the social restraints put on it had to have had a psychological response which yielded less than favorable biological results.

Further curbing the freedom of female sexual arousal, the belief that masturbation caused insanity in women, including epilepsy and schizophrenia, became common in the 1860s and remained so until the turn of the century.¹²⁶ As we can see in the teachings of John Harvey Kellogg, masturbation was renounced very seriously for religious reasons and scientific reasoning. Although Kellogg was Christian and advocated for abstinence, he also feared epileptic fits were a potential repercussion of masturbation. He argued that if a youth indulged in masturbation they would suffer from involuntary orgasms in public, similar to an epileptic seizure.¹²⁷ Masturbation was further believed to lead to undesirable physical characteristics, like premature aging for women, as well as defeminize them. The act of masturbation was thought to

¹²⁶ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 205.

¹²⁷ Marie Mulvey-Roberts. *Dangerous Bodies: Historicizing the Gothic Corporeal*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2016. 102.

cause women to have a more sexual appetite and to consume, more food, both of which were associated with masculinity.¹²⁸

These social truths not only led to an unhealthy view of human sexuality and a disconnect from one's own sexuality, they also would have led to further prejudice of those who physically did not meet social expectations. Those women, like the men condemned to spermatorrhea, who naturally looked aged due to hard times, disfigured from birth or unfeminine by genetics could now be construed as sexual perverts who caused their physical appearance by their deplorable behavior. Unlike spermatorrhea, in which case no actual illness was suffered by the men, the effects of schizophrenia or epilepsy would be felt and would impact the life of the sufferer. Since it was commonly thought that the women brought this state of being on themselves through impure actions, it can be assumed little sympathy or understanding would have been given to such psychological woes. Rather, the more severe the mental instability, the more blame worthy the woman would have been for excessive sin. As this belief was detrimental to women who did suffer from psychotic illnesses, it was also damaging for all women's ability to relate to their body sexually. Women could not explore their sexuality because they were made to believe it would lead to psychosis.

On a related but somewhat conflicting note, it was also thought that a lack of expression of female sexuality was detrimental to her health, claiming it could lead to hysteria, cancer, syphilis, and shorten a women's life in general. Of course it was expected that this drive only be fulfilled upon marriage (thus reinforcing the unnatural and damaging existence of the Old Maid). Once married, it was thought to be dangerous for a woman to be aroused by her husband but left

¹²⁸ Mulvey-Roberts, 100.

unfulfilled.¹²⁹ Female sexuality is so difficult to grasp for modern thinkers because the Victorians were trying so desperately to put a natural impulse into a highly specified social box. She was deemed asexual because sexuality possessed a dark undertone that was best not ascribed to or associated with wives and mothers. However, based on the amount of medical documentation and published warning regarding her sexuality, we can infer that in many ways women were viewed as naturally sexually deviant.

The commonality of sexual mutilation had increased and in women it was to reserve marriage, according to the father of clitoridectomy, Isaac Baker Brown.¹³⁰ In 1898, Dr. David Gilliam, in defense of the removal of female sex organs, stated: “Why do we alter our colts and calves? Not that we expect to abate strength or endurance, not yet to render them less intelligent: but that we may make them tractable and trustworthy, that we may convert them into faithful servants.”¹³¹ Gilliam’s comparison of women to farm animals demonstrates not only what he thought of women but that they existed to serve men.

In 1871, Nicholas Francis Cooke, a professor of medicine from Rhode Island, described the demise of a woman from masturbating in his work *Satan in Society*. The book aimed to highlight the troubles in society that could be interpreted as causing spiritual demise from a medical point of view. The work covered male and female masturbation, abortion, consequences of a lack of religion in women and more.¹³² In it he warned:

A general condition of languor, weakness and loss of flesh; the absence of freshness and beauty, of colour from the complexion...livid physiognomy, a bluish circle around the eyes which are sunken, dull and spiritless; a sad expression, dry cough,

¹²⁹ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, 217.

¹³⁰ Marie Mulvey-Roberts. *Dangerous Bodies*, 94.

¹³¹ Mulvey-Roberts, 95.

¹³² Nicholas Francis Cooke, *Satan in Society: By a Physician*. Chicago: J.S. Goodman & Co., 1874.

oppression and panting on the least exertion, [and] the appearance of incipient consumption.¹³³

It was important to stop women from masturbating, according to Marie Mulvey-Roberts, because they were breaking down the already weakening gender divide, since masturbation was predominately associated with men. In 1870, women were granted rights to obtain some property after marriage, which had all automatically gone to her husband before. Into the 1880s, the women's suffrage campaign began gaining more momentum, challenging the gender divide further. Although castration and clitoridectomy were employed to deter masturbation which was said to lead to the feminization of men and masculinizing of women, the medical community presented these procedures as preventions against disease.¹³⁴ Isaac Baker Brown described the decline of the masturbating woman as initially falling into hysteria, later deteriorating into spinal irritation, hysterical epilepsy, cataleptic fits, epileptic fits, idiocy and mania, with death as the "direct climax of the series."¹³⁵

Revealing an urgency in society's downfall, Marie Mulvey-Roberts shows the ways in which the moral failings of real women through masturbation were thought to lead to degeneration and the evil awakening of a vampire-like woman. In *Dracula*, the female vampires crave the blood of children, perverting maternal instinct into something selfish and dark, similarly, masturbation was thought to hinder a woman's ability to bear children. In both scenarios, this horrendous act prevents women from reaching their highest level of being. In a more directly linked comparison, Dr. Brown discusses a case in which a young masturbating

¹³³ Mulvey-Roberts, 99.

¹³⁴ Mulvey-Roberts, *Dangerous Bodies*, 100.

¹³⁵ Mulvey-Roberts., 101-02.

woman does exhibit vampire-like desires.¹³⁶ According to his books describing his case studies, there was a young woman who suffered from incessant masturbation and eventually fell into a hysterical blood-thirst as a consequence. According to Brown, before having a clitoridectomy, the patient attacked the surgeon and attempted to bite off the matron's hand. She suffered a seizure, fell into a coma-like state only to awake exclaiming that she wanted blood, particularly one of a child. She goes on to state that she gives into this desire on occasion by sucking the wounds of children.¹³⁷

While middle-class women were able to avoid some of the physical domination experienced by poor women and children, the social structure which dictated how she may experience her sexuality, reinforcing that it must be as muted as possible. If a woman explored sexuality outside of her marital bed and husband, she was categorized as instable. Consequently, women were doomed to live within the confines of identity placed on her by the British community, left to provide a virginal, unsullied body to her husband and keeper.

Conclusion

The sexuality and livelihood of middle-class women was severely regulated and structured in Victorian England. In some conflicting ways, women were expected to be innocent in appearance and public behavior while simultaneously arousing her husband with a knowledge of sexual fulfillment. Her body was physically manipulated to please men visually, while the practice of gynecology was reserved for manipulating her body such that her sex drive was of no threat to men and the social order. Although it was thought throughout the nineteenth century

¹³⁶ Mulvey-Roberts., 101.

¹³⁷ Mulvey-Roberts, *Dangerous Bodies*, 101.

that pregnancy was dependent upon her orgasm, her ability to achieve sexual pleasure was severely disabled. With an inability to attain knowledge of her own body and the incessant social suppression of her sexuality, the middle-class woman may have enjoyed the luxuries of wealth but natural pleasures were kept beyond the bounds of her subjectivity.

While historians battle over the extent to which Victorians were sexually repressed or their responsibility in bringing about the “sex-negative culture” that has been rebelled against,¹³⁸ my aim is to rather reveal the extent to which bodies were dominated. While the argument can be made that Victorian women were more sexually liberated than we imagine, as Stears suggests, there was a power model in place which rendered her body outside of herself such that she could not have related to in authentically.

¹³⁸ Steven Seidman. “The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure: Victorian Sexuality Reconsidered.” *Journal of Social History*, Vol 24, No. 1. 1990. 47.

CHAPTER 4

MANIPULATED FLESH: THE MIDDLE-CLASS MAN'S BODILY DOMINATION OF DISENFRANCHISED BODIES

The lower orders of society were conceptualized as the “thinking, unfeeling doers of society” or the unspeakable “nether regions” whose existence society sought to ignore as well as simultaneously use. Because they were assumed to occupy such lowly positions in the social hierarchy, lower class women and children could be manipulated for middle-class men’s sexual pleasure and social agenda. While middle class men and women existed under the weight of ideologies, there was no social standard for which lower class women ought to strive. Consequently, bodily domination could take place on a very literal level in which men of higher ranks were able to use the system to their sexual advantage through the manipulation of the disenfranchised bodies.

Prized Virginity in the Hypersexualized

Regardless of class, an idealized woman was virtuous and virginal. Consequently, a virginal woman was desirable and ought not be squandered on undeserving men, regardless of her class. As one commentator explained the pity of lower class girls losing their virginity to boys of their own social rank, he claimed: “A virginity taken by a street boy of sixteen is like a pearl cast before swine.”¹³⁹ This statement, simple as it may be, is telling on two fronts. Firstly, the suggestion that it is such a pity for these poor girls to have their virginity taken by poor boys implies that only a wealthy man was worthy of a young virgin body. This notion almost

¹³⁹ Fraser Harrison. *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*. (Universe Books, New York. 1977.) 240.

commodifies the young woman's body while simultaneously announcing the degradation of the lower classes. Further, this statement reveals the extent to which purity was valued in women. Those men who possessed the most sexual freedom were deemed the only ones deserving of such a desirable trait.

Because virginity and innocence were not only prized in women but expected of them, when the upper class men considered prostitution and all its evil, women were generally blamed for their role in the sinful business. William Acton compiled a list of reasons why women fell into prostitution, and while he does acknowledge poverty being a cause, "extreme poverty" falls at the bottom of his list. At the top of the list, connoting the most common reason for a fall into the dangerous trade, was "natural desire" followed by "natural sinfulness." Claiming that women become prostitutes because of their "natural desire" not only ignores economic circumstances that rendered such employment necessary, but it also propagated the notion that women (of lower classes) were hypersexual, making sexual abuse of any kind less severe, if an issue at all. Nearly all of Acton's reasons portrayed women as blameworthy and somehow innately inferior. He further claims that "the preferment of indolent ease to labour" and "the inability to obtain a living by honest means consequent on a fall from virtue."¹⁴⁰ In this way, the male aggressor maintained his power because blame could be placed on the prostitutes themselves. Further, it ignores women who genuinely did suffer from a life of prostitution and shame because it portrayed all women who would stoop to such lowly means of income as being sinful and not worthy of care regardless.

¹⁴⁰ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 227.

In contrast to upper class women, who were asexual and virtuous, a healthy working class girl, after passing “through the period of puberty, [had] an almost constant desire for copulation.”¹⁴¹ Although commonly portrayed as sexual aggressors, they were also painted as victims. According to power loom weaver, Thomas Leonard, due to women’s “inefficiency,” women were “at the mercy of lustful onlookers” and, consequently, “many young women were reduced to public prostitution.”¹⁴² Although women were being portrayed both as in need of protection and concurrently the seed of demise for the working men, in both situations women’s ability to utilize their bodies for their own survival was stifled and manipulated by male sexuality. If women could be portrayed as wicked seducers who are merely falling prey to their own desires, the men who kept the lower classes poor could also be the same men to keep the prostitutes in business, with no guilt of blame for themselves.

In addition to the manipulation of lower class women, young girls were not exempt from such maltreatment. Because they too offered up a vulnerable body with which many men could do as they pleased, Victorian England was not unfamiliar with child prostitution as well as the portrayal of young girls in erotic imagery and pornography. What constituted childhood itself was ambiguous in the nineteenth century, however, as the age of consent was raised from twelve to eventually sixteen. Whatever the legal age at which a young girl could be bedded, men eroticized those who hovered over the boundary of childhood and womanhood. Her frailty and innocence was admired as it was contrasted to her ability to sexually excite.

Although women of the lower classes, which constituted the “unthinking, unfeeling doers” as well as the “nether regions” of society and were consistently hypersexualized by

¹⁴¹ Carolyn Malone, “Gendered Discourses and the Making of Protective Labor Legislation in England, 1830-1914.” *Journal of British Studies*, 45; Cambridge University Press, (2006). P. 171.

¹⁴² Malone, “Gendered Discourses,” 170.

middle-class men, a façade of innocence was still desired. Virginity and youth were prized when middle-class men sought out to find young working women to sleep with. She could embody the desirability of the pure Victorian woman all the while possessing a luring sexuality because she ultimately could be had, unlike her wealthier counterparts.

Sexual Manipulation of Disenfranchised Bodies

In cases like that of Arthur Munby, a middle-class man with a particular fondness for working-class girls, the female body and the disfigured body are to be used for his own pleasure, compromising bodily integrity under the power of male dominance. Arthur Munby kept a detailed diary of his encounters, making his story crucial for reconstructing sexual relations of the era. Munby's diary demonstrates a clear preference for lower class women, and while Munby doesn't recount these encounters in obviously sexual ways, the level of eroticization provided by domination over the female anatomy is clearly present. Because of his standing in society as a wealthy man, they did not question his advances. Generally, Munby could manipulate these women into his pleasing him on a multitude of levels, including posing for photographs for him, cleaning for him, and in the case of Hannah Cullwick, marrying him. He reveled in the ways in which he could go up to a poor, working class girl and ask her about herself and her life and it seemed to not even phase her. Munby commonly likened working class girls to that of domesticated animals, serving the man who had broken them in. Not only does this analogy connote "lowliness and degradation," as states feminist historian Leonore Davidoff," but also a brute strength and dumb loyalty expressed through love and service."¹⁴³ In poetry written by Munby, women are compared to horses, an elephant, dogs, cows, and one "ebony slave girl" is

¹⁴³ Leonore Davidoff. "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1979. 113.

made to eat out of a bowl on the ground on all fours.¹⁴⁴ While Munby was never overtly mean to the young women, it is clear by such passages he was obsessed with his ability to incite their degradation.

As Leonore Davidoff points out, this quality possessed by Munby was “at least partly of his position as a dominating middle-class man, who for sixpence could feel a girl’s palm and for a shilling could take her to a photographer to have her picture taken in whatever pose he chose to put her.”¹⁴⁵ The extent to which Munby could get young, working class girls to entertain him is astonishingly grim. There is much documentation of Munby getting pleasure from watching Hannah, a milk maid who later becomes Munby’s wife, perform laborious, dirty, household chores. One instance in particular, in which Munby had Cullwick rub “her cheeks on some dirty boxes of [his] until her face was black,”¹⁴⁶ reveals the extent to which Hannah’s servitude was eroticized by Munby.

In Munby’s diary, he describes liking to see Hannah when she filthy, or, as he termed it, covered “in her dirt.”¹⁴⁷ Hannah was further forced to wear a chained collar around her neck, to which Arthur alone held the key. His arousal through domination seems obvious but the desire to see Hannah “in her dirt” may also come from the pleasure in seeing her use her body. Victorian ideals adamantly emphasized the mind and the soul and perpetuated a rejection of the body itself. Women of Munby’s class were instructed to associate as little as possible with the functions of the body, perhaps leaving lower class women more desirable sexually. While Munby clearly had an affinity for the young woman, his power laid in the fact that he possessed the ability to

¹⁴⁴ Davidoff, “Class and Gender” 113.

¹⁴⁵ Davidoff, 105.

¹⁴⁶ Barry Reay. *Watching Hannah: Sexuality, Horror and Bodily De-formation in Victorian England*. (Reaktion Books Ltd, London. 2002.) 27.

¹⁴⁷ Davidoff, 113.

manipulate the situation however he chose and his awareness that his young bride held little social power to dictate circumstances on her own.

The summation of Cullwick's role in society is made by a statement Munby himself wrote in his diary: "She who washes dishes and makes beds can remove all traces of her own presence."¹⁴⁸ In the passage, Munby is simply acknowledging her ability to vanish in front of guests of the middle-class home as it was deemed appropriate for the help to be as unseen as possible. However, the quote is disturbing because of its overarching implications and truths about the working-class experience in general. They were non entities for those who employed them, existing as simply a means to an end. It was not important to notice them because they brought no value in themselves, they merely existed as conductors of value—having a clean home, food on the table, etc. In Munby's case, however, he is not merely speaking of his servants, he is speaking of his wife. Part of Munby's fascination and desire towards his own partner was her ability to be a nonentity to his peers.

Munby's power is most exemplified in his interaction with Harriet Langdon. Harriet's face had been eaten away by lupus which condemned her to wearing a veil to hide its hideousness for the rest of her life. Munby would force Harriet to lift her veil to him or to strangers so he could experience her hideousness in contrast to her beautiful frame and hair, or so that he may enjoy watching others' horror as the unsightly face was revealed. Further, Langdon's nose had been completely eaten away by the disease, leaving a hole where a nose ought to be. Munby, in his fascination, once "used the handle of a toothbrush to probe the hole in [her] face,"¹⁴⁹ describing how the "handle sunk in to a depth of several inches, 'as if to the very centre

¹⁴⁸ Carol Mavor. *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*. (Duke University Press. Durham. 1995.) 78.

¹⁴⁹ Reay, *Watching Hannah*, 46.

of her head.”¹⁵⁰ Although Munby never overtly expresses sexuality when speaking of the young woman, he consistently refers to her beauty and the ways in which the horror and deformation of her face set up a stark contrast rendering the beauty of her frame all the more enticing.¹⁵¹ Similar to Marian Holcombe in *The Woman in White*, Langdon’s hideous face is said, by Munby, to make the beauty of the rest of her frame more tantalizing and more feminine as the antithesis of beauty is sharply juxtaposed with feminine delicacy all in one enthralling figure over which Munby can obsess. In situations dealing with women such as these, it is difficult to tell whether or not the sexual undertones are born from the notion of power over the body of the woman, or if these erotic urges exist regardless and are only visible because of the power these men have over the bodies of inferior women.

Regardless, the masculine sexual experience is saturated with notions of power over the female body. The further the female is from the “ideal” Victorian woman, the more it seems his power over her increases and thus, sexuality can be exploited and revealed in ways that it could not have been when dealing with “respectable” ladies. Munby was never mean to Langdon, but certainly incited her discomfort for his own pleasure. In the case of Harriett, her sense of the body as the self seems to have been completely demolished and destroyed. Not only by the fact that she is a woman (the object of masculine desire), she is impoverished and she is severely diseased.

On a less obvious level is what her body represents and the differences in meanings between bodies based on an array of qualifiers. The body is often seen as the home of the soul and its necessary being in the world makes its protection and autonomy in the world all the more

¹⁵⁰ Reay, *Watching Hannah*, 46.

¹⁵¹ Reay, 46.

significant. Unlike the mind, the spirit, or other identifiers as the “self,” the body is open to the world around it and other selves have access to it in literal terms. Culturally, societies have given significance to the body as an entity apart from the world and deeply entwined with the possessor of it. Social codes have been constructed which dictate the extent to which others may experience each other’s bodies at will and these codes are severely contingent upon social statuses. As we can see in man’s desperation to be master of his own body, he is the only threat to his bodily integrity. He ought to be in control of all aspects of himself so the largest worry he may face with regard to the body is his own inability to manage it appropriately. There is already an understanding and strict social codes that dictate his body is his own and may not be used by other members of society based on his or her desires.

This sense of bodily integrity is understood throughout society but many walk through life with the understanding that theirs is going to be compromised. Slavery, of course, is the extreme end of the spectrum, in which it is socially understood that these individuals have no right whatsoever over this worldly extension of the self. The notion of the significance of ownership over one’s own body and the connection of the spiritual/intellectual self to the body is expressed very differently for women—particularly lower class women in this situation. Based on the way in which Munby approached these women, as well as the ways in which the women accepted the treatment at hand reveals much of the power women had over their own bodies and the power of a man’s sexual desire—whether it be a product of the power itself or not.

Those in possession of a diseased body were granted particularly miniscule amounts of bodily control and power and it was instead handed to more privileged members of society and the uses they demanded. Joseph Merrick is a well-known example of a severely disfigured body in Victorian England and through his life, his encounters with other humans made it clear that he

was not going to be granted bodily integrity in this culture. He eventually ended up as a circus freak for pay as well as a medical spectacle from which doctors could learn.¹⁵² In both of these modes of existence, Merrick's body was put on display for the use of others—be it from entertainment or the prospect of gathering new data regarding the biology of mankind. He succumbed to this treatment, very similarly to Langdon, and simply let these actions be done to him because his sense of bodily integrity had been compromised by the norms of Victorian culture to which he was so harshly subjected. While those claiming ownership over Merrick's body through their unquestioned manipulation of it sought to desexualize Merrick as much as possible, Langdon's body was manipulated for the satisfaction of the masculine erotic experience.

Few accounts represent the power and sexualization of working class women as much as Munby's story but an account of one man's erotic life entitled *My Secret Life* rivals it with tales of sexual demands being consistently met for the bourgeois manipulator. Written under the pseudonym of "Walter," the tale exposes, supposedly, one middle-class man's sexual encounters, from his loss of virginity to the time at which the eleven volume series was released. Interestingly, power dynamics are not so easily distinguished at the loss of Walter's virginity, as a prostitute seems to hold power to incite feelings of inferiority in Walter. After accompanying his cousin to a brothel and having difficulty performing himself, Walter observes his cousin and finishes the task. Walter possesses the financial privilege of purchasing a woman of his choice, yet his bodily mastery fails him in his attempt to have her. Following his initial shyness at the

¹⁵² Andrew Smith. *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.) 46.

hands of a prostitute, Walter is released into the world as a powerful, libidinous young man with the ability to realize his erotic desires.

Further conveying the essence of power characterizing the wealthy man's walk through life, Walter and his cousin exemplify the ease with which these men had lower class women of choice, as workers and prostitutes were quite often interchangeable. After he and his cousin decide to go have a "shove," they walk down the lane near the Town-Hall where they stumble upon lace makers. When the girls saw the two gentlemen looking at them, they nodded in compliance, to which Walter's cousin replied: "Let's try them."¹⁵³ We can clearly see the ease with which these men acquired women as if shopping for an expendable commodity. Force or a visible expression of power hardly seems necessary as the young ladies generally comply instantaneously. We can also tell that the state of the girls themselves was of no concern to Walter or his cousin and bedding a poor working girl was merely a matter of strolling the streets to find a desirable one.

While some young women may have desired to have a wealthy man momentarily purchase them, many young women suffered emotional and physical consequences. One young woman who worked sewing buttons on shirts was forced to the streets after the arrival of her first child. While she had been able to manage on her work wages, it was not possible for her to survive as well as feed her child on those wages. As she told her story, she sobbed with her hands covering her face. She explained that she "went to the streets solely to get a living for [herself] and child," and vowed: "If I had been able to get it otherwise I would have done so...it

¹⁵³ Fraser Harrison. *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*. (Universe Books, New York. 1977), 231-232.

was the low price paid for my labour that drove me to prostitution.”¹⁵⁴ The mother goes on to describe the horrendous living conditions of her practice beyond the emotional distress it wrought: “Sometimes I should be out all night in the rain, and sell nothing at all, me and my child together; and when we didn’t get anything that way we used to sit in a shed, for I was too fatigued with my baby to stand, and I was so poor I couldn’t have even a night’s lodging upon credit. One night in the depth of winter his legs froze to my side.”¹⁵⁵

In another scenario, Walter impregnates two sisters who were hired as maids by his mother. The younger of which threatens suicide upon the realization that she is pregnant and ultimately leaves her job, while the older of the two sisters induces an abortion. Although causing the two to lose their jobs, Walter merely paid to place the girls in lodging then shipped the girls off to Canada. Despite the actual consequences suffered by servants, Walter had convinced himself that servants thought about sex constantly and “took cock on the quiet and were proud of having a gentleman cover them.”¹⁵⁶ When their innate desires were not enough, however, he found that gifts served to persuade the girls nonetheless. Upon reading many of his accounts, it is easy to see control and domination in Walter’s interaction with women. Although the system was obviously set up such that Walter had the ability to dominate poor girls for sexual pleasure through monetary means, it is a possibility that a large amount of the women he encountered did act as though they were delighted at the prospect of romance with the young bachelor. Such an enterprise would have been far less plausible if women did not play an active role in the transaction. What is a clearer indicator of power is the ease with which Walter

¹⁵⁴ Harrison, 231.

¹⁵⁵ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 231-32.

¹⁵⁶ Harrison, 264.

acquires and discards women, as if they are something to be bought and sold, completely removing their personhood from them.

Although power is evident in the interactions Walter has with women around him, as Ellen Bayuk Roseman argues, power over women may be an expression of Walter's desire to have masculinity himself. In school, boys with whom Walter played rugby continuously compared the size of their penises. Further, while exploring one another's bodies for sexual pleasure, the young boys also compared their own bodies to one another, leaving Walter to judge his own body and ridicule those boys less endowed than himself. Because of these experiences as a young boy, Walter grows to feel insecure about the size of his own member, always asking prostitutes "My prick's not a very big one, is it?" To which the women undoubtedly responded positively such that their paying client may feel at ease with his own bodily integrity. So, while Walter's behavior with many of the women he discusses exemplifies dominance and degradation, the power display present is layered in significance. The women themselves are being overpowered by wealthier men, but the men are responding to a perceived lack of power within themselves and responding by displaying an overemphasis of power on that which is otherized and outside of one's own body.

Sexualizing the Female Child

Children played an interesting role in the elusive dynamics of male sexuality. Often sought to be desexualized altogether, they were occasionally made especially erotic because of this. Childhood, as Carol Mavor, a professor of visual arts, explains, it "produced souvenirs of a

time and place that never was—a true Neverland.”¹⁵⁷ It was conceptualized as a period of time when the human being, before reaching full development, resided in a state of innocence and purity with no tainted urges from the incessant body and no malicious awareness to bring sin to the world. England seemed to be unable to pinpoint when this golden age of innocence faded into the adulthood and the laws mirrored this discrepancy. The age of consent in England was raised in 1875 from twelve to thirteen, and ten years following was raised further from thirteen to sixteen.

While many chose to see children as innocent, Sigmund Freud described failures to appropriately conceptualize childhood in Victorian culture as he stated:

To suppose that children have no sexual life—sexual excitations and needs and a kind of satisfaction—but suddenly acquire it between the ages of twelve and fourteen, would (quite apart from any observations) be as improbably, and indeed senseless, biologically as to suppose that they brought no genitals with them into the world and only grew them at the time of puberty. What does awaken in them at this time is the reproductive function, which makes use for its purposes of physical and mental material already present. You are committing the error of confusing sexuality with reproduction and by doing so you are blocking your path to understanding of sexuality.¹⁵⁸

Female children were admired for their innocence but still made the object of voyeurism and male sexual desire. Davidoff points out the obvious paradox between the notion that girls are innately pure and innocent and the belief that they have to be kept in the innocent state of ignorance. This paradox reveals the friction present when male sexual desire directly conflicts with social sexual ideologies. The girl child was created to be innocent and virtuous because ideally, she did not incite male sexual urges. She further needed to be kept in the dark because she did incite male sexual urges. Another reason this dichotomy may have developed was

¹⁵⁷ Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*. (Durham: Duke University Press. 1995.) 2.

¹⁵⁸ Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, 2.

because they were desirable for men, they were deemed conceptually evil. They were also presented as innocent, however, to perpetuate man's perceived dominance over the situation and the lack of threat they posed. Further, this paradox may exist because young girls were perceived as being innocent which made them ideal for creating the most erotic scenarios in pornography. They were supposed to be untouched and undesired, so their presence in porn may have been utilized because it was taboo.

It is difficult to say exactly how Victorians would have thought of little girls as the conception of childhood itself was vague. As Carol Mavor explores in *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and loss in Victorian Photographs*, little girls were occasionally made the object of alluring images which sexual undertones lie just beyond the grasp of offense. Lewis Carroll, for instance, claimed to not view little girls in a sexual way at all, but rather admired their pure innocent beauty. However, when one looks at the images of the children, their lounging postures resemble a seductress, though the intention may have been subconscious. Lewis Carroll's *Portrait of Evelyn Hatch* displays a girl who appears to be no more than ten years of age simultaneously innocently and seductively lying nude and gazing at the viewer.¹⁵⁹ In another image titled *Cherry Ripe*, we see a young girl, who appears to be a doll, gazing presumably at the painter. Her eyes and lips pop as if adorned with make-up and her tiny white finger stick out from her long, black lacey gloves. She is positioned to appear innocent but she is adorned as a woman with long dark curls falling around her face and her hem of her dress pulled up slightly. In addition to the image itself, since cherries have often held connotations of female sexuality, and ripeness represents an objects readiness to be had, it seems that the title itself plays

¹⁵⁹ Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, 12.

with idea that this girl may or may not be at a point at which she may be “had” by the viewers although her figure leaves her desirable.

While some attempt to view the image as innocent because it is a child, Nina Auerbach finds power in the child, claiming “the eroticism, along with the passionate and seditious powers this had come to imply, belongs to the child; the artist merely understands it.”¹⁶⁰ Working within a modern framework that emphasizes the frailty and innocence of children, it is somewhat difficult to sympathize with or understand Auerbach’s approach. Even when socially constructed notions of childhood innocence are forgone, the children in the images were granted no power. They were officially under the care of an adult and would not have even been able to keep the money from the images for themselves. Further, girls were granted no freedom over their sexuality even when it was legal for men to bed them. The Offenses Against Person Act made it a felony to have intercourse with a girl under ten years of age, but it was only considered a misdemeanor to have intercourse with a girl between the ages of ten and twelve. In addition, if a girl under sixteen years of age entered a relationship, her guardian could charge the man with “depriving them of the services of their daughter,”¹⁶¹ and guardians could prevent women up to the age of twenty-one from marrying provided she possessed property.¹⁶² While there is some kind of power transaction taking place between an alluring girl and her viewer, accounts like Auerbach’s seems too celebratory of a power that was elusive and figurative at best.

In more concrete scenarios, Victorian Britain was familiar with child prostitution. In neighborhoods like Waterloo, children “whiningly plucked at the sleeves of passers-by, pleading for pennies in the same breath as they confided obscenities in the hope of titillating a potential

¹⁶⁰ Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, 13.

¹⁶¹ Mavor, 13.

¹⁶² Mavor, 20.

client.”¹⁶³ Exemplifying the centrality of power to middle-class male sexuality was their obsession with young women or girls. This power was presented in tales of actual experience and pornography. In one pornographic tale, the sexual flirtation with the line of too young or just old enough is made clear. Young “Miss Curious,” as she is so aptly named, who is only twelve years old is presented as lusting after her father’s servant, Henry. In the tale, the girl trips and a stake enters her, after which Henry comes to the rescue. Later, Henry sneaks into the room of the sleeping girl, who happens to be unknowingly exposed, to take her virginity. When she awakes, he hides himself. She demands he reveal himself again to “complete her education,” and thusly re-excites him. The tale ultimately ends with the young Miss Curious losing her virginity.¹⁶⁴

This story exemplifies domination and power on a multiplicity of levels. One is obviously the young woman’s age. Although the age of consent was twelve, it is no surprise that the story centers on a girl who is just within the threshold of legality. Beyond that, in the story, Miss Curious is socially the superior of Henry, though on a sexual level, as a man, he seems to be her superior at every part of the story: he rescues, attempts to rape and ultimately seduces her. The fact that she is asleep and exposed unconsciously represents the extent to which she is ultimately helpless to the whim of her perpetrator. Her body becomes available for use outside of her possession of it. As she lies exposed, the young man attempts to, what modern society would call, rape her. Rape represents the ultimate forgoing of possession of one’s own being as its integrity is compromised and barriers are destroyed and broken through penetration. When the girl awakes, she demands he finishing educating her (as she is a virgin with little sexual

¹⁶³ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 226.

¹⁶⁴ Steven Marcus. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*. (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London. 2009) 59.

knowledge), which also points to his superiority over her as well as emphasizes her youthful innocence.

What is ultimately the most disturbing aspect of this power model is the fact that she is pleased at his aim to take advantage of her body. A repercussion for the man seems inconceivable as the girl wakes in delight at her own bodily compromise. As discussed earlier, pornography contrasted the actual biology of men in which the body could fail. As in the art of castrated women, pornographic tales such as this one embodies male domination and security. The young woman is innocent, so she could not challenge man's bodily inadequacies because she has no other experience; she is also young, making her easily manipulated and used by an elder male. Although the tale is very erotic, man has no challenge present in the story, nothing to make him feel as though he and his masculinity would not be enough. He eternally embodies virility.

We can see this kind of domination of young girls in scenarios presented by the infamous Walter as well. He describes strolling down the street when suddenly a very young lady catches his eye and lures him in. In his description of the encounter he refers to the girl as the "little one." When asked if she will allow the man to come in and kiss her, she obliges, ushering Walter into an abysmal environment which the poor family called home. He remarks: "Had I known I should have been horrified at entering such a hole, but in my lust I thought of nothing but the young girl, her smallness and freshness. She looked fifteen years of age."¹⁶⁵ While the young girl leaves the room to retrieve a "French letter," or condom, her mother, who has a baby suckling her breast, attempts to excuse her daughter's behavior by telling Walter, "she

¹⁶⁵ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 223.

must live, and she's better at home doing that, than doing it away from me."¹⁶⁶ The sense of shame and regret seems to continuously hang in the air in the lives surrounding prostitution, particularly if the prostitute is quite young and perhaps has recently given up on the dream that she may avoid the trade through honest work.

While many young girls may not have expressed dismay at the approaching of an older, wealthier suitor, it did occasionally happen. Walter tells of such a scenario in which he, being acquaintances with an old couple who owned a tenement house, told the wife he would pay her if she could secure him a virgin. Although virgins were few, the old one claimed, "I think I know a steady little gal, whose mother's just died, her father ain't no good."¹⁶⁷ The old woman did indeed find the girl, the oldest of the children and looking for any means of providing for her younger siblings. Walter's encounter with the young girl follows:

[The girl] was brought to the house, and proved to be 'a nice little girl.' Walter sent out for gin, and the old woman, winking pointedly, left them alone. 'The girl took my kisses very well, never said a word, so getting on by degrees I talked to her. I would give her a shilling. She did not say a word, stood still, my arm round her waist, but broke away in tears saying, 'Oh! No, sir,--I would rather not sir---I'm much obliged to you sir, but I would rather not sir,--oh! Let me go, let me go.' The old woman came in and, winning again at Walter, led her away. Half an hour later the girl had composed herself and was brought to him a second time. I had more gin, the old woman left us, the girl had another shilling, and felt me, but she cried out when I attempted to feel her, and I never had her."¹⁶⁸

While Walter ultimately never has the young woman/girl, power in bourgeois male sexuality overwhelms this story. The child herself is brought to the sexual needs of a man because her family is so poor and she sees it as her own obligation to look after her siblings following her mother's death. Walter is able to and willingly does take advantage of the girl's fragile life and

¹⁶⁶ Harrison, 224.

¹⁶⁷ Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, 262.

¹⁶⁸ Harrison, 262.

trying times to suit his own pleasure without ever acknowledging or expressing sympathy for her struggle. As Fraser Harrison puts it, Walter's cruelty "lay not in his behavior, which for him was relatively gentle, but in his refusal to discriminate between a pathetic child and an adult, professional prostitute."¹⁶⁹ He was unable to see human beings beyond the extent to which they could gratify him sexually. Despite the harshness of their circumstances or the miserable proceedings of their lives, Walter related to them as if they were objects to be used and discarded on a whim. All of those he encountered were an extension of his perceptual reality and he could not conceive of their possessing an identity and experience beyond his, nor did he care to.

Beyond the girl, much power is present with his relation to the old woman as well. All though she is happily (seemingly) compliant throughout the exchange, she goes about securing a virgin for him upon request because he has money. It is unclear what the woman said to the young girl when she took her out of the room and calmed her down. It is possible that the old lady felt some remorse for the situation she was inflicting on the young woman, or perhaps she had been made used to the trials and tribulations of life as an impoverished Englishwoman so she simply viewed it as an aspect of life the young girl would have to get used to sooner or later.

On the edge of legality, her innocence made poor female children all the more alluring for many men of higher ranks. She was prostituted on the city streets of Victorian England, showcased in pornography, and seductively placed in paintings and photographs. Female children of the lower classes retained the innocence so desired in Victorian women in general, while her youth made her non-threatening to the virility and power of middle-class men. Unlike her wealthier counterparts, however, poor female children could actually be sexually had by

¹⁶⁹ Harrison, 263.

more her affluent and powerful suitors, unlike the protected women and children of the middle-class.

Conclusion

The bodies of lower class women and children lost bodily integrity when manipulated for the agenda and pleasure of middle-class men. Her body was not her own; her mobility severely retarded, leaving her to make a living in demeaning ways. Although the men discussed did not themselves create this overarching power structure, it was organized such that they were granted the ability to possess and discard bodies of certain members of society with ease. While many men were able to forgo idealistic celibacy, the social power given to poor women and children translated directly to their sexual experience and often held a causal link with their sexuality. As the denial of sexuality in middle-class women was interwoven with her power as angel of a bourgeois home, the sexuality of working class females often reveals an effort to gain social power through the manipulation of masculine desires. If a middle-class women expressed sexuality in this structure, she may lose power; but often times an expression of sexuality was all a poor woman could do to gain a sense of power. Children were unfortunately not excluded from this structure. Young girls frequently sold their sexuality or they were showcased in pornography and imagery for the sexual lore of bourgeois men. Middle-class men often did not play a direct hand in the sexual oppression and regulation of disenfranchised bodies, but this order of control allowed him the ability to forgo societal standards and utilize the bodies of others for his own satisfaction.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The middle-class man and the women with whom he sexually interacted, existed within a power structure that dictated bodily domination. Although this manipulation, control and regulation of the body was experienced very differently for middle-class men, middle-class women, and the disenfranchised bodies of lower class women and children, all suffered from prescriptions of bodily domination outside of their control. Middle-class men were expected to have control over their own body and sexuality while the middle-class woman was expected to be pure and virginal throughout her life. Consequently, impoverished women of all ages were frequently utilized to drain society of middle-class men's sexual excess.

The male body was dominated by the state, who emphasized his need to be in control. For those who adhered to this ideology, the consequences were often severe. Many men felt a lack of control over their sexual urges and thusly endured painful and humiliating medical treatments developed for spermatorrhea. While the ideal of bodily dominance was advocated in Victorian Britain, many men rejected this model and instead relished in the sexual escapades their social standing granted them. Those men who were able to disregard social expectations regarding his sexuality often acted as a means through which the social power that regulated sexuality could be held, allowing him to dominate women.

While some men fell victim to the social ideologies that dictated his own bodily domination, and many men rejected them, middle-class women were not granted the privilege to reject her social role so easily. In this way, her bodily integrity was compromised to that of her male counterparts. While ideology surrounded and often molded the lives of the middle-class,

the lower class had less social expectations to which they would adhere as their social significance was minuscule. Consequently, they were generally utilized by middle-class men sexually as they helped solidify his dominance. Because these women/girls were not in a socioeconomic circumstance to deny their seducer, men were able to manipulate working class bodies freely and this freedom is expressed in documentation of their lives.

Recently, historians have interpreted sexuality as a potentially all-engrossing force that can be manipulated, experienced, funneled, and channeled in a multiplicity of ways. The notions that the Victorians were prudish or that middle-class women were asexual are now seen as too simplistic. What society aims for or idolizes, what is actually done, what is actually felt, how we feel about what is felt and done, and the subconscious desires and drives of sexuality are all factors influencing sexuality. It is necessary to step away from the conceptualization of sexuality as the mere act of sex and rather understand it as a force to live. The survival of mankind depends on a force of desire to keep the species alive and while it is widely accepted that the desire and instinct to live is ever present and all-consuming, sexuality cannot be separated from this umbrella of desires that encompasses the will to live. Similarly, the understanding of dynamics surrounding eroticism and sexuality are much more fluid, subconscious and elusive than sex itself. When exploring power dynamics in Victorian sexuality, there is a multiplicity of avenues in which sexuality was felt, experienced, and manipulated that were sometimes overtly sexual and other times intangibly erotic.

The dynamics of Victorian sexuality are difficult to grasp but all of the scholarship leading up to this point has been helpful in piecing together this obscure puzzle. What does seem to be clearly present is a power structure that dictated the sexualities of middle-class men and the women with whom he found sexual interest. While middle-class men themselves may not have

always been privy to the experience of this power, their sexuality and the nation's need to tame and regulate their sexuality in accordance with their new found status saturated Victorian sexuality with power struggles. Men ideally had power over their own bodies, consequently a necessity for power over the middle-class woman's body in accordance with ideals of male sexuality developed.

Throughout this study, the conception of how we should interpret this power dynamic in Victorian sexuality has arisen from numerous historians. The traditional dichotomy between the subject and object, the powerful and the overpowered, the abuser and the abused is reconsidered in modern interpretation of social dynamics in general. In *Pleasures Taken*, Carol Mavor alludes to this sentiment, using Merleau-Ponty's philosophy surrounding the necessary fact of one's concealing an aspect of the relation through one's revealing of another.¹⁷⁰ An example of a glove is used to express that while one side of the glove is visible, the perceiver knows the other side exists without that side needing a perceiver of its own. Further, when one side of the glove is exposed and viewed, the other side of the glove is being felt by the hand within it. Similar to the glove, when exploring power possessed by Arthur Munby in his relation to working-class women, or the power held by middle-class men in general, one is simultaneously concealing power and subjecthood possessed by lower-class women and the life that they necessarily willed to some degree is shadowed by their unmovable objectivity in the dominating subject's world.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to reveal the fluidity of human relations by stating that people themselves do not exist as positives in the world; rather, they are empty spaces in which something will happen—a stage on which an act will take place. This notion of concealing and

¹⁷⁰ Carol Mavor. *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*. (Duke University Press. Durham. 1995.) 81.

revealing can be used to interpret the photographs of Hannah Cullwick “in her dirt” and understand who is actually empowered by the images. The photographs, argues Mavor, can be interpreted as a product of Munby’s fantasies, or they can be interpreted as portraits that prefigure modern feminist imagery of women working.¹⁷¹ In a certain interpretation of power relations, looking through a lens of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, because Hannah becomes invisible through her work and social ranking, she becomes an observer only--not the object of another’s observation, but making others the object of her perception. In this way the subject/object dichotomy is challenged, or at least its flaws are revealed.¹⁷²

While it is true there are problems with viewing power relations and all of their interconnectedness as a subject/object dichotomy in which there is only an oppressor and the oppressed, the other end of the spectrum is flawed as well. It is possible that our 180-degree shift and desire to build up victims of the past led us to overlook the actual circumstances of an experiencer who lacked socially constructed power. While retelling history such that muted actors can regain subjectivity is important to truly understand their experience, attempting to grant them power such that they are on par with more powerful people of their time may conceal their social oppression during their lifetime and the consequences thereof. It is difficult to judge because it takes a certain amount of privilege to be in a position to categorize said power in question.

When considering power dynamics in the Victorian sexual structure, it is important to realize that people exist within their power and it is unrealistic to expect them to operate according to another established power dynamic. In the research conducted to complete this

¹⁷¹ Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, 80.

¹⁷² Mavor, 80.

analysis of an overarching power within which Victorians themselves operated but over which they had little control, many stories were unveiled that would be considered horrifying in modern culture. When considering the lives of individuals touched on in this paper, their actions undoubtedly reflect their existence within their allotted power. For middle-class men, while many of their actions seem deplorable today and many laws have been put in place to prevent them from occurring in modern society, men who had access to such sexual liberty would not have foreseen generally a shift in social policy or an illumination of the evil in their actions based on a standard two-hundred years in the future. Similarly, men who suffered from spermatorrhea would have experienced an immense amount of personal anguish because they genuinely believed in warnings regarding their own bodily demise due to a lack of sexual restraint. Often when reviewing historical accounts, the suffering of such individuals might be overlooked because such a disorder is not recognized today. Realistically, however, the ideal of a physical impossibility would have been exhausting for any person to live up to.

While middle-class men may have relished, or even suffered or relished under the power structure enforced on society, middle-class women found little power within sexuality itself. It may not have been such a sacrifice, however, simply because her power outweighed so many other members of Victorian society. She may not have been sexually liberated but it is plausible that this was a small price to pay to be master over children and the lower classes. When considering the lower class women and children, often times behavior was resorted to that could not pass moral standards of their own era or present day. However, they were allotted little power socially so sexuality was one means by which they could exercise power over those who dominated them in every other respect. Women and children who opted for such employment may be pitied or judged by contemporary standards but this was one of the few ways in which

they were able to exercise any power. So while the conditions themselves may have been unfavorable for many in the society, the behaviors of those residing in such an enterprise have to be explored with the understanding that people cannot exist outside of their power within a given social system.

While uncovering dynamics of past sexual cultures is significant in itself, the most important aspect of understanding power relations and social constructions of power frameworks is the extent to which middle-class Victorian influence can be seen in modern culture. Sexuality, though this seems to slowly be shifting, seems to often be portrayed as a man's enterprise in which women may be displayed but women rarely hold the role of the primary actor. Because of the allotted sexualities given to the genders, women are continuously dichotomized in modern culture, though perhaps to a lesser extent, to hold roles as the angel of the home or perpetually promiscuous. Further, the desexualization of children Steven Marcus attributes to middle-class Victorian society mirrors that of our own nearly identically. It is particularly interesting to note this phenomenon's emergence into modern suburbia. While these families exist as cohesive family units in a pseudo-utopian circumstance, there still seems to be a disconnect with reality found among middle-classes that sprang from the new middle-class Victorians. The ideologies, living conditions and disconnect from traditional knowledge that led the urban middle-class to believe in the asexuality of childhood still permeates much of suburban American culture in which women and especially children cannot safely be presented as anything other than innocent and void of sexuality.

Although Victorians themselves did not dictate the barriers of their power structure, their sexuality was regulated and dictated accordingly. Middle-class men were intended to be capable of surpassing the slavery of bodily demands to reach a higher, intellectual self. For those men

that adhered to this ideology, failing to attain such bodily dominance could lead to a miserable and embarrassing existence. Many men, however, denied the necessity to regulate and suppress sexual urges, and rather explored the sexual power granted to them by the lack of social or sexual power given to women. Consequently, middle-class women often had to neglect a large part of her sexually, especially when it was not surrounding her husband. Those of lower ranks did not have the privilege of an admirable social role and their bodies were consequently utilized by men of the middle-class. Though all individuals fought to exercise power in some way, middle-class men, their wives, fallen women, and children all operated under a sexual power structure that ultimately dictated the ways in which they experienced and expressed bodily domination.

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