The Evolving Representation of Sex Workers in Literature and Popular Media in the 19th to 21st Centuries

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The "dominant narrative" is a construct shaped by a combination of cultural hegemony, media framing, and the sociological processes of stigmatization. Scholars such as Antonio Gramsci (the Italian Marxist known for his *Prison Notebooks* and other works on cultural hegemony), Erving Goffman (Canadian-American author of 1963's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*), and Judith Butler (the iconic poststructuralist gender theorist) provide critical frameworks for understanding how dominant narratives emerge and operate: they are not mere reflections of societal attitudes but deliberate constructions that serve to maintain existing power dynamics. In this context, media representations, moral reform movements, and medical authorities all collaborated to enforce and perpetuate these narratives, portraying marginalized groups, including sex workers, as threats to societal norms.

In the 19th century, the dominant narrative emphasized the plight and misfortune of sex workers characterized by moral degradation and victimization. The portrayal of sex workers in popular culture centered around the idea of sex workers as fallen women and objects of charity in need of salvation, either through religious or moral reform, and described them as incapable of making informed autonomous choices. Medical authorities actively constructed and perpetuated this narrative, reinforcing their legitimacy by categorizing various marginalized groups, including sex workers, as the “other”: incompetent, diseased, and contagious. This act of “othering” in turn gave rise to the pathologization of sex workers, portraying them as sources of contagion and moral decay, and suggested that medical professionals, public health officials, and moral reformers were legitimate in their concerns regarding the moral and physical fortitude of sex workers, legitimizing further state intervention in their careers, up to and including forced detainment and sterilization. The construction of medical authority during this time was directly

related to the emerging power of the medical establishment, which sought to define its own legitimacy by contrasting itself against those deemed unhealthy or morally corrupt.

The image of the prostitute as a public health risk, shaped by the rise of media and popular culture in the 19th century, reflected a new appetite for visual and narrative depictions of societal 'others.' This period saw the monetization of sex not only through direct transactions but also through its representation in print culture, which capitalized on public fascination with vice and moral decay. By presenting prostitutes as vectors of disease and moral corruption, the medical community leveraged this image to solidify their authority, framing themselves as protectors of the social order. These narratives resonated with a broader societal interest in defining and controlling marginalized groups, reinforcing the idea of sex work as both a threat and a spectacle for consumption.

Another distinct period of discourse surrounding sex work, characterized by a focus on empowerment and liberation, emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, with debates centering on the power of women to choose sex work as a legitimate profession and as a form of sexual expression. Sex workers, particularly those in Western countries, began to claim their own voices and define their own identities, rejecting the paternalistic ‘pity’ view that they were merely victims needing rescue. In the 21st century, the discourse has evolved further, marked by the normalization of sex work and its recognition as a potential source of professional engagement and personal autonomy, expression, and fulfilment. Organizations like SWOP (Sex Workers Outreach Project, founded by former exotic dancer and full-service sex worker Robyn Few in 2003) have played a pivotal role in advocating for decriminalization and labor protections, holding public demonstrations and organizing events like the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. Publications such as *Revolting Prostitutes* by academics and

former sex workers Juno Mac and Molly Smith have further articulated the complexities of sex work in modern economies, critiquing both capitalist commodification and restrictive legal frameworks.

Simultaneously, legislative changes in various countries have highlighted differing approaches to sex work. In New Zealand, the 2003 Prostitution Reform Act decriminalized sex work, granting labor protections to sex workers and framing it as a legitimate profession. This contrasts with the Nordic model adopted in countries like Sweden, which criminalizes the purchase of sex but not the act of selling it (a framework that advocates argue still marginalizes sex workers by limiting their economic opportunities and stigmatizing their labor). The proliferation of digital platforms has also transformed sex work, enabling workers to engage with clients directly while bypassing traditional intermediaries. Websites and apps have offered sex workers greater control over their working conditions, yet they have also introduced new vulnerabilities, such as increased surveillance and dependence on tech companies.

The transitions between these phases were driven by multiple, interlocking factors. In the 19th century, the rise of print culture played a significant role in establishing the narrative of the fallen woman. The expansion of literacy and the proliferation of printed materials (including moralistic pamphlets, religious tracts, and pornography) created an audience eager for sensationalized accounts of vice and redemption. Medical professionals and social reformers also leveraged the power of print to cement their authority, using these platforms to disseminate ideas about public health and morality that pathologized sex work. The shift towards the "power" narrative in the 20th century was driven in part by broader social movements, including the rise of feminism and labor rights advocacy. Second-wave feminists in the 1960s and 1970s began to challenge traditional gender roles and argue for bodily autonomy, which included the right of

women to choose sex work. The sexual revolution also played a key role, as it encouraged more open discussions about sexuality and began to dismantle some of the moral taboos surrounding sex work. However, this period was also marked by tension within the feminist movement, as not all feminists agreed on whether sex work could be empowering or was inherently exploitative. The transition to the "play" phase in the 21st century has been facilitated by technological change, particularly the advent of the internet and social media. These technologies have enabled sex workers to represent themselves, build communities, and advocate for their rights without relying on mainstream media, which has often been hostile or indifferent to their perspectives. The internet has also transformed the sex industry itself, creating new forms of labor like webcam-based pornography, which allows for greater autonomy and control over working conditions. This technological shift has also contributed to the "self-commodification" of sex workers, who market themselves directly to clients and cultivate personal brands. This genre of self-representation (autobiographical, entrepreneurial, and mediated through digital platforms) has been instrumental in reshaping public perceptions of sex work. This shift towards self-representation and empowerment is also marked by a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, the ability to market oneself and take control of one's image can be empowering, offering sex workers a degree of autonomy that was previously unattainable. On the other hand, the necessity of self-commodification places sex workers squarely within the logic of late capitalism, which values individuals based on their productivity and marketability. This creates a tension between the desire to resist commodification and the need to participate in it in order to survive. The question of whether the market is a source of power or oppression remains unresolved, as sex workers navigate the complexities of autonomy, exploitation, and the demands of a capitalist economy.

In 2005, Canadian sociologists Helga Kristin Hallgrimsdottir, Rachel Phillips, and Cecilia Benoit conducted a study (detailed in their paper “Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social Stigma and Media Narratives of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005”) which aimed to understand how media narratives compared to the lived experiences of sex workers in Victoria, B.C. Though their sources were geographically limited to Victoria, the findings provide crucial insights into broader issues surrounding sex work and media representation. They first analyzed 425 articles from the Victoria Times Colonist to identify recurring themes and narrative patterns, focusing particularly on how sex workers were framed within the text, then conducted interviews with 201 sex workers from Victoria, including 160 cisgender women, 5 transgender women, and 36 men, delving into the realities of their daily work. Their study found that media coverage of sex workers largely revolved around three major themes: contagion, culpability, and victimhood. The 'contagion' theme was prevalent in the 1980s, during which sex workers were frequently depicted as vectors of societal decay (specifically as carriers of sexually transmitted infections like AIDS) and as being closely linked to criminality and moral corruption. This theme reinforced the longstanding trope of sex workers as public health threats, framing their presence as a danger to both moral and physical health within the community. The theme of ‘culpability’ emerged alongside this narrative, attributing responsibility to sex workers themselves for their condition, portraying them as individuals whose moral failings led them to their current situation. These depictions emphasized individual moral responsibility, framing sex workers as undeserving of social support or empathy. In the 1990s, a shift occurred in media representation towards the theme of ‘victimhood.’ Sex workers were increasingly depicted as helpless victims caught in a web of exploitation, driven by clients, pimps, and global trafficking networks. This narrative positioned sex workers as individuals without agency, coerced into the

trade by exploitative forces beyond their control. While the victimhood narrative was less denigrating in some respects than the earlier contagion and culpability narratives, it still painted sex workers as lacking autonomy, reducing them to passive subjects in need of rescue.

Contrary to the print news media's focus on coercion and trafficking, which implicitly positions the presumed middle-class reader as the potential protagonist of the narrative, who would be either a potential rescuer, punisher, or even victim of moral depravity themselves, the interviewees filtered everything through a strictly autobiographical frame, placing little expectations on their audiences. Many interviewees emphasized that they entered the industry of their own volition, often because they faced barriers to mainstream employment or experienced economic instability. In sharp contrast to the sensationalized nature of the profession in the media, the interviewees described the day-to-day of their work as mundane, highlighting the ordinary aspects of their work and their motivations. There was a huge discrepancy between the one-dimensional portrayal of sex workers in the media as either "fallen" individuals, morally corrupt and beyond redemption, or as victims in need of rescue, often focusing solely on female workers involved in street-based sex work, and the complexity of the lived experiences of transgender and male sex workers who frequently exercised agency and control over their work conditions, with some finding benefits in the flexibility their work provided. This study illustrates the importance of first-person biographical narratives about what it is to be a sex worker, as the true nature of the industry has been obfuscated by the media's smokescreen of pathologization, vilification, and denigration.

While first-person narratives from the perspectives of sex workers have been around at least since John Cleland first published the fictional erotic novel "Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure" in 1748, there was a distinct lack of printed literature about the sex industry written by

someone who was familiar with the trade beyond potentially buying sex themselves. Throughout the 19th century, the figure of the prostitute was still largely vilified, denigrated, and ultimately pitied, always needing someone else to speak for her.

The rise of print culture in the 19th century led to a major rise in publications that both reflected and shaped the prevailing attitudes toward sex work. Erotic novels and other pornographic content became increasingly available to a literate public, offering conflicting portrayals of sex work: they both titillated audiences with depictions of the sex industry and reinforced narratives of moral decline and societal threat. The audience was then caught between fascination and condemnation, something that mirrored broader social tensions surrounding gender, labor, and gendered labor. Harriette Wilson, a Regency-era courtesan best known for becoming the mistress of William, Lord Craven, at age 15, provides a notable early example of a sex worker writing about her own life. In 1825, she published her memoirs, a groundbreaking move within the context of early 19th-century Britain—a time when moral respectability and rigid class structures heavily shaped public attitudes toward women's sexuality. Wilson's memoirs are remarkable for their candidness and their resistance to easy categorization. She refuses to portray herself as either a groomed victim or as an especially empowered figure. In the introductory paragraph of her text, she declines to provide her audience with an answer about "why or how" she took her position as Lord Craven's mistress, instead speculating for them and suggesting that it might be "love, or the severity of my father, the depravity of my own heart, or the winning arts of the noble lord." Her tone exemplifies an early form of self-representation that challenges societal norms, refusing to conform to simplistic narratives of victimization or empowerment. This defiance is significant given the era's deeply entrenched gendered hierarchies and the moralistic scrutiny faced by women who stepped outside conventional roles.

Wilson's memoirs, published in an era when literacy rates were climbing and print culture was thriving, simultaneously exploited and critiqued the voyeuristic appetite of her audience. Her text operates as both a reflection of and a resistance to the rigid moral binaries of her time, prefiguring later narratives in the 20th and 21st centuries that similarly grapple with self-commodification and societal expectations.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, autobiographical accounts of the lives of sex workers were often relegated to private correspondence, archived collections, or other restricted spaces, far removed from public discourse. A compelling example of this phenomenon is The Maimie Papers, published in 1997 and edited by Ruth Rosen. These papers began as a series of letters exchanged between Mamie Pinzer, a Jewish sex worker operating in the early 20th-century United States, and a Bostonian philanthropist. Set against the backdrop of the Progressive Era, Pinzer's correspondence provides a vivid portrait of her struggles, motivations, and resilience. What makes The Maimie Papers particularly valuable is their ability to humanize a figure often depicted solely through the lens of societal condemnation. The letters reveal Pinzer's acute awareness of the stigma surrounding her profession and her efforts to navigate a world that sought to define her worth through moralistic judgments. Her experiences highlight the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity in shaping the lives of sex workers during this period. The Progressive Era's reform movements, while ostensibly aimed at improving social conditions, frequently targeted sex workers for surveillance, incarceration, and forced rehabilitation. Against this oppressive backdrop, Pinzer's letters serve as a poignant counter-narrative, asserting her agency and challenging the dehumanizing narratives that sought to erase her voice. The eventual publication of The Maimie Papers in the late 20th century reflects a broader academic and cultural movement to recover marginalized voices and critique

the historical frameworks that silenced them, like the Progressive Era's anti-vice campaigns and the closures of red-light districts.

Ruth Rosen's editorial work, along with her seminal book The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918 (1982), underscores the importance of these rediscovered narratives in reshaping our understanding of sex work and its socio-historical contexts. Rosen's work highlights how prostitution was framed within broader social concerns, including the burgeoning Progressive Era reform movements, and how the voices of sex workers were systematically suppressed by moral reformers, medical authorities, and law enforcement agencies in favor of narratives that emphasized moral rescue and reform. During World War I, the U.S. government launched a widespread campaign against prostitution, particularly near military bases, as part of its efforts to maintain troop discipline and prevent the spread of venereal diseases. This campaign led to the closure of red-light districts and the increased surveillance and criminalization of sex workers. The rhetoric used during this period was heavily moralistic, portraying sex workers as a threat to national security and public health. Ruth Rosen's The Lost Sisterhood details how this period saw a concerted effort to control and reform sex workers, often through missions or "rescue homes," where women were subjected to forced medical treatments and moral rehabilitation programs. During both World Wars, the U.S. government became an active stakeholder in debates surrounding prostitution, with a focus on controlling venereal diseases among military personnel. In World War I, efforts to maintain troop discipline and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections led to the closure of red-light districts near military bases and the increased surveillance and criminalization of sex workers. This trend intensified during World War II, when the federal government implemented widespread public health campaigns, such as mandatory medical examinations and the forced

detention of women suspected of engaging in sex work. These campaigns framed sex workers as public health risks and threats to national security, reinforcing existing stigmas while expanding state authority over women's bodies. The results of this shift included a deeper entrenchment of moral and medical authority in the policing of sex work, including the entrenchment of the military and the federal government. However, these measures also spurred debates about civil liberties and public health that continue to shape discussions about sex work policy today.

Second wave feminism, a reaction to the push to situate women firmly back inside the domestic sphere post-World War II, spawned new, empowerment-focused forms of discourse surrounding sex work. COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics, a sex worker's rights organization founded in the early 1970s and extending through the closure of Margo St. James's St James Infirmary clinic in 2023) was instrumental in challenging the dominant discourse around prostitution, confronting both the legal establishment and elements of the feminist movement that viewed sex work as inherently exploitative. COYOTE's approach was to use the language of labor rights and civil rights, positioning sex work within broader conversations about economic justice, autonomy, and human rights. COYOTE also addressed issues of public health, particularly during the AIDS crisis, advocating against the scapegoating of sex workers and promoting safer sex practices within the industry. Central to COYOTE's activism was the confrontation of what founding member Gail Pheterson identifies as the "whore stigma."

This stigma functions as a mechanism of social control, delineating "good women" from "bad women" and reinforcing societal norms of respectability. Pheterson argues that the existence of the stigmatized "whore" is foundational to maintaining these binaries, ensuring that any transgression of sexual or economic autonomy is delegitimized. COYOTE's advocacy aimed to dismantle these binaries by reframing sex work as a legitimate profession. Unfortunately, due

to the deep entrenchment of respectability politics in societal attitudes toward sex work, where even progressive narratives can inadvertently sustain the systems they seek to disrupt, efforts to position sex workers as respectable and empowered individuals risk reinforcing the framework that necessitates the existence of the "whore" as a counterpoint. COYOTE's work, therefore, highlights both the potential and the limitations of advocacy within a framework still shaped by societal stigma and moral binaries.

The 1980s introduced a significant shift in the context and representation of sex work, driven by technological advancements and cultural transformations. The rise of cable television, the widespread adoption of VHS technology, and the emergence of "phone sex" services reshaped the industry, moving the focus away from streetwalking and brothels to a more complex, media-mediated environment. Pornographic films, made widely accessible through VHS rentals and purchases, began to supplant traditional prostitution as the consumer item of choice. These changes not only expanded the visibility of sexual labor but also transformed its cultural significance, as mediated forms of sex work became increasingly commodified and detached from physical interaction. This detachment and commodification was only exacerbated by the rise of the internet, popularized in the late 1990s and early 2000s and only growing more mainstream since, which revolutionized the narrative around sex work by providing a platform for sex workers to communicate directly with the public, bypassing traditional media filters and social gatekeepers that often distorted or silenced their voices. Before the advent of digital platforms, sex workers had limited opportunities to represent themselves without external mediation. The rise of the internet allowed sex workers to create online forums where they could share their personal insights in their own words. This direct communication allowed for a more diverse portrayal. Activists like Juno Mac and Molly Smith have utilized digital platforms to

amplify their advocacy and by leveraging online platforms, they have disseminated their research and perspectives to a global audience.

The discourse surrounding sex work reveals profound ambivalence about the role of the market. On the one hand, many leftist scholars paradoxically endorse the integration of sex work into a labor framework that is deeply rooted in free-market capitalist principles, presenting the market as a 'woman's friend' when women are engaging in it. This endorsement is striking given the broader anticapitalist critiques from the same leftist scholars. This pro-capitalist stance seems strange amongst their otherwise critical approach to systemic commodification and inequality. Simultaneously, more conservative commentators often critique the commodification of sex work, a perspective that reflects discomfort with the application of capitalist logic to intimate human interactions. These opposing views underscore a paradox central to the theorization of the market's role in sex work. Leftist endorsements of sex work within the labor system implicitly validate capitalist principles of commodification, while conservative critiques invoke an idealized vision of sexuality (a stance that can verge on anti-capitalist in its rejection of commodification). Ultimately, the evolution of sex work narratives reflects the ongoing struggle to reconcile autonomy, labor, and morality within a system that simultaneously empowers and exploits.

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