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The Beginnings of an American (Sexual) Revolution

“Good evening everyone,” I said, as I walk into the classroom.

“Last week, I indicated that we would deal with a vital part of our culture; sexual mores and the role of the entertainment industry in disseminating its values throughout society as well as the impact these values may have on our lives. Our discussion this evening shouldn’t be primarily about our likes and dislikes concerning sexuality. Instead, it ought to deal with its social impact—cause and effect if you like—to the extent that this link can be established.

“When discussing sex, however, we have to be mindful of society’s tendency to stereotype behavior. At times, people assign labels among themselves indiscriminately or with the intent to discredit a value or a position without advancing any evidence or providing logical explanations that would support the name-calling.

“But as we learned last week, it’s quite tempting to start throwing mud at others once we run out of rational or empirical ammunition. Likewise, we will notice that when people start discussing sex, sometimes they end up being called various names, sexual fiends, perverts, sexually repressed or something along those lines, depending on who is assigning the labels.

“Allow me to set tonight’s discussion into perspective by letting you all know something about me. First, I’ll admit that I’m troubled, and concerned, about our very overly sexualized culture.”

“You mean sex bothers you?” asked Mr. Edson, with a smirk on his face.

“I don’t know, perhaps. That’s what I would like all of you to help me to answer tonight,” I replied. “I’d like to know whether these feelings I have are normal or not, or at the very least, I’d like to know what they indicate and whether anyone else in this class shares them with me.

“For example, days ago, I was strolling up Main Street in Annapolis, Md. I went into a store called Asylum. Yes, I know, perhaps I should have known better, but, hey, we’re talking about Niceville, USA. The store sells all sorts of skateboards and T-shirts, some of which caught both my attention and the

attention of three very young female teenagers. One of the T-shirts had the image of a teenage girl, and underneath the words, *I Did Your Boyfriend*.

"Although they pretended not to have seen it, all three began to giggle, and when I looked at them, they became embarrassed. They noticed that I, too, was embarrassed. You may remember the Capitol Hill female staffer who shouted to the world how proud she was at being a slut; young women willing to show their breasts in public for kicks; TV sitcoms that no longer leave much to one's imagination; I can go on and on, but I think you get my point. Being an open-minded person I thought I should have become accustomed to this predominant aspect of our culture. But; it seems that vulgarity and sex are everywhere, in day-time soap operas, night time TV programming, the movies, the music, in advertising.

"Am I becoming a prude? I have asked myself. Or is it a case of me having a repressed dirty mind? So, my question to you all is, what do you make of these feelings that I'm sharing with you? What do these incidents say about me? Do they reveal any interesting traits? Any abnormalities? Any virtues?"

"Yes, Ms. Bynum, go ahead."

"I think your reactions indicate that you're rather conservative."

"Very well. Anyone else?"

"Maaan, I think you are definitely sexually repressed. I mean, sir."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Edson. Should I take that as a compliment? Should I feel ashamed? Or is your remark kind of food for thought?"

"Nah, I wouldn't necessarily say you should feel ashamed. It's the way you are. But then, I wouldn't go to the extreme of being happy about it. It's one heck of a limitation to have."

"Is this something I should give some consideration?" I asked.

"Actually, it would be better if you'd give it a *lot* of consideration. That's just my opinion."

"I understand," I said, "although there's a possibility that you might be wrong."

"That's fair. However, we don't know anything about you other than what you just said. Now, if you'd be candid enough to provide us with more personal information, I think your repression will be self evident," he said, relaxing into his chair.

"That would be very helpful, Mr. Edson. I'll do my best."

"Hmm, this will be fun," said Mr. Edson, looking around at his classmates. My first observation is that you don't like to use so-called obscene words in public despite that they are part of everyday life. You still think that you're not repressed?"

"I guess we have to thank you, Mr. Edson, for providing us an example of what I just said regarding labels. You're suggesting that anyone who abstains from using obscenities in public is sexually repressed. My reason could very

well be either that I choose to respect others around me or to indicate that my vocabulary is a bit more extensive than you may believe.

“Also, it could be that I am a reformed curser and I’m now on the dry. Or, as you say, I could very well be a repressed individual. So, how do you know which of these possibilities apply to me? In line with my full disclosure policy, I will admit to having used obscene language in public.”

“You have?” he yelled out.

“Well, sort of, I use obscene language at times in the company of close friends, but I do try not to rely on this type of language in public.”

Mr. Edson seemed confused and his perplexity revealed a bit of disappointment. He looked straight at me, obviously not knowing what to say.

“Am I a Puritan, Mr. Edson?”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant to say.”

“And, I suppose you know what a Puritan is.”

“You know, one of those weirdoes who think sex is a bad thing,” he said.

“But the term *Puritan* is a loaded concept that people use rather wildly today, Mr. Edson, at times without having a complete understanding of what it means. Why don’t we take this opportunity to delve into sexual mores by discussing Puritanism? I believe one of you had a chance to look into this topic, Mr. Radusky?”

“Yes, I did,” someone called from the far end of the room.

“Very well,” I said, “Could you give us a working definition of Puritanism; what it actually meant historically, as well as what it means today?”

“I’ll try to do my best, although it’s not an easy concept to handle,” he said as he shuffled his notes, looking rather carefully over them before he began to speak.

“According to what I found out, Puritanism originates in Sixteen Century England, following the initial stages of the Reformation, as an attempt to purify Protestantism of what Puritans deemed were excesses due to moral laxity and theological deviations.

“Nonetheless, despite its British origin, Puritanism is largely based on the religious views of John Calvin, a Frenchman who had lived in Switzerland decades earlier, and who had become a major participant in the Reformation. He viewed human nature as being sinful, the result of man’s Original Sin, caused largely, well, by woman.

“Once human innocence had been shattered, Calvinism argued that the human body had become an impediment to man’s most important activity on earth, his quest for the spirit and for God. Given this view, it’s not surprising that the only possibility Calvin saw for human beings to do good came from severely disciplining their bodies and their entire selves.”

“Interesting, but how does his views on God relate to human sexuality?”

“Calvin’s ideas provided the foundation for the major components of Puri-

tan sexuality; man is weak; woman is the seductress and a major cause of evil; the human mind and the body must constantly be focused on earthly activities that do not detract from the path of righteousness; intolerance is an acceptable practice with regard to belief and behavior; censorship of "harmful" religious literature is a duty, which meant that persecution and cruelty became the almost inevitable tools of the trade at times."

"Tough life," I said.

"Well, from what I was able to gather, the Puritan's outlook on life wasn't too joyful, at least by our standards. For example, at one point during Cromwell's regime, Puritans persuaded Parliament to approve a law making Christmas day, perhaps the happiest of all holidays, a solemn day of fasting and atonement. Other practices such as, festivals, dancing around the Maypole, music, the art of stained glass, and religious images, were prohibited because they would impede communication with God.

"And, to the extent that one's values condition one's behavior, it wouldn't be hard to understand the Puritan's zealotry for persecution and intolerance. Sermons stressing the sinfulness of the flesh and the fear of hell and eternal damnation reinforced this outlook on life at the time.¹ Pretty strict, I think."

"Is it safe to say that Mr. Radusky, much of this view made it to the New World?" I asked.

"Yes, a great deal, I must say. I found that the Puritan influence is noted through the numerous churches Puritans had established in the New England territories by the mid Seventeenth Century. Also, Puritanism exerted its influence in education, politics, economics, and the social arena. And, although its moral authority on views about sexual behavior already had been replaced by more permissive sexual mores by mid twentieth century, in seventeenth century colonial America, Puritanism guided and often dictated social behavior in matters of speech, morality, education, and politics."

"So, how would you characterize Puritan sexuality at the time?"

"Kind of oppressive," he replied. "The guilt-ridden mentality; its prohibition of simple pleasures; its sinful view of the flesh and the corrupting tendencies of sex, even between lawfully married couples; its self-righteous predisposition to protect the masses from evil influences; these attitudes gave birth to the mores of the time. "That doesn't mean that *all* Puritans possessed this outlook. But such were the social and religious values permeating the culture at the time."

"Would you then conclude that Puritanism was very negative and destructive of human relations?" I queried.

"Well, in my view, most social, religious, political, or cultural movements tend to be accompanied by excesses. Nonetheless, despite that Puritanism extended into areas other than morality and sexual behavior, I don't think that anyone conducting an objective research of this period could make such an

assertion.

“Besides, social movements undergo transformation through time. Methods and attitudes change. And even when mores might have brought adverse consequences, say in sex-related matters, we have to look at the positive impact Puritanism had in other areas.

“For example, this is something I found on the topic:

Puritan attitudes and ethos continued to exert an influence on American society. They made a virtue of qualities that made for economic success—self-reliance, frugality, industry, and energy—and through them influenced modern social and economic life. Their concern for education was important in the development of the United States, and the idea of congregational democratic church government was carried into the political life of the state as a source of modern democracy.²

“So, these ethos weren’t negative for human relations in general, but if we narrow down your question, Dr. Planas, to the impact of Puritanism on sexual behavior in the New World, that’s a different story. Being mindful of its contemporary detractors, I think it can be said that Puritanism painted a distorted—even misguided picture—of human nature.

“Further, to the extent that we think that the basic premises of the Puritan views on sex are incorrect, we may expect the beliefs that sprout from them to give us a somewhat warped view of human sexuality. As a result, the negativism, even the pejorative connotation Puritanism elicits today, is understandable, for it has left a bad taste in people’s mouths.”

“Thank you, that should suffice,” I said. “I believe that I’m now in a better position to reply to Mr. Edson as to whether or not I’m a Puritan when it comes to sex. Wasn’t that your question, Mr. Edson?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Very well, according to what you had said, if I were a Puritan or a sexually repressed person, I would be biased against sex, at least as defined by what Puritanism stands for today. Nonetheless, I can tell you, categorically, that my attitude toward sex is the opposite of Puritanism. I regard the human body as a wonderful gift from God. I see beauty in it, and far from being a symptom of the moral decay of society, I view sex as a pleasurable means to love and to create life.

“Moreover, as opposed to Puritanism, I believe that women ought to be able to enjoy sex the same as men do. In sex-related matters, Puritanism brought about unnecessary emotional, psychological, and physical hardship to women, and to men, too, for these views conditioned men to distort human sexuality.

“Also, I don’t approach life with a gloomy attitude as Calvin may have done. Instead, I search for joy and laughter every day, feeling within me not so

much the fear of hell as God's love being the guiding force in my life.

"On the other hand, I'm sure that almost everyone will agree that the human body can be a source of lust that, along with greed, avarice, hatred, or pride, can degrade our humanity as well as hurt other people."

"Fine," he said, "but you still haven't answered me. Are you sexually repressed?"

"After what I've said, I don't know what you mean by being sexually repressed, Mr. Edson. Frankly, sex is great, the more so with the person you love. Do I repress my sexual instincts? I guess there are moments when I realize that it wouldn't be prudent or sane of me to go after every woman I like, so in those instances, yes, I suppose that I do repress the desire. Is that bad? What do you think?"

"Well, I usually hit on women I like, so . . ."

"No matter where you are? No matter whether it's the boss' wife or your best friend's girl friend?"

"No, I guess not," he said.

"That's what I meant, Mr. Edson. That means that even you repress sexual behavior. Do you consider your attitude abnormal?"

"Well, no!" he snapped back. "But what about sex-related movies and literature?" asked Mr. Edson. "I mean, how do you react to them?"

"Do you mean whether these movies would stimulate my libido? Yes, they would, insofar as I have a healthy body and mind, and in the same way that a mountain might stimulate my sense of adventure and the urge to climb it. However, I must admit that while I suffer from this *abnormality* of liking beautiful women, I'm disturbed by pornography, even if I were to derive pleasure from its content."

"But why? Aren't you contradicting yourself?"

"Mr. Edson, I would enjoy becoming a millionaire, but I would steal to become rich. There's beauty in the human body, so liking it seems sort of normal. But when you transform the human person into a profit-making tool, theft takes place."

"But you can't have one without the other," he argued. "So which way do you lean?"

"It's a tremendous sacrifice, as you must understand, Mr. Edson, but I would try to give up on pornography," I replied.

"How could you possibly compare the two situations?" he asked. "Stealing is illegal, pornography isn't."

"You have a point, Mr. Edson, pornography isn't illegal even though pornography is stealing; you're taking away something from a person, even if it appears that the victim is allowing you to do so. That's the degrading part of pornography, that it treats sex as a commodity for the sole purpose of stimulating one's libido, and without any regard to social consequences. Such a pleasurable combination of sex and money doesn't allow us to notice the

degradation. You see, money is palpable and while dignity is not.

“I’ll go even further, I can understand the human desire for sex; we all have it. What’s difficult for me to understand is the public exhibition of sex. Initially, I thought that only animals copulate in public, not only because they don’t know any better—since they’re animals—but perhaps because they don’t have the privacy of their own rooms, and they have no sense of shame. Therefore, animals have no inhibitions.”

“You say that sex is not degrading, but that public sex is. Why? What degradation are you talking about, sir?”

“I don’t think I will be able to explain it to you in a way that you might understand. Remember, you couldn’t understand how vulgarity could hurt and offend people, until it hurt you. In love, sex is about intimacy; it’s about caring; it’s about binding pleasure and commitment; it’s about reproduction, too. When you subject sex to pornography, the concept of love is degraded.”

“How so?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Michael,” Ms. Vanhurst leaped into the fire, “one of our most preferred phrases in our culture is, *let’s make love*. Do you really think that it means that people are in love? Since when is love made? Open your eyes! He’s saying that sex in public puts us closer to the animals. The problem is that some people don’t mind behaving like animals, particularly when they get paid for doing so.”

“I get it, okay? Don’t you all start getting on my case again,” he said. “Now, if I may continue, there are other traits that demonstrate a Puritan behavior: intolerance, persecution, censorship. How do you fare on these, sir?”

“Let’s see. Regarding intolerance, I will say that I have a great deal of tolerance toward other peoples’ views and opinions, no matter how radical or unpleasant, if they are held with conviction and with honesty. I’m unsympathetic toward sexist or racist comments or behavior that is criminal, unjust, or immoral.”

“Does that mean that you would engage in persecution?” he asked in a sardonic tone.

“I would always try to operate within the confines of the law and remain well within a Jeffersonian tradition of political behavior. As to censorship, I will ask that I be allowed to defer discussion of this topic until later on. Censorship or restricting freedom of speech is central to the issues of pornography, obscenity, and profanity, issues we’ll be discussing this evening and next week.

“Satisfied Mr. Edson?” I asked.

“I guess,” he said, finally giving up on his quest to prove himself right.

“Good, then, why don’t we turn to you, Mr. Dickerson. I believe that you will bring us up to date from Puritanism into Victorian America.”

“Actually, my research unveiled the fact that Puritanism never disappeared

completely from English culture,” he began. “The Victorian character was born within a loose framework of Puritan beliefs, yet it successfully transformed Puritanism into its own blend of values and attitudes. For the most part, the excesses of persecution and physical cruelty had abated in America, although it hadn’t completely disappeared. The fear of hell and eternal damnation as forces that would compel behavior, although not extinguished, were now tempered by strict adherence to public decorum. New mores began to surface that would eventually define the Victorian ideal of proper social behavior.”

“More specifically, Mr. Dickerson, how did Victorian mores affect the concept of love and sexual behavior?” I asked.

“For one, romance wasn’t shunned,” he replied, “but it was strictly regulated by a set of rules. Human sexuality, women, and the human body were still viewed as sources of evil, but less so than earlier. The emphasis now wasn’t so much on the sinfulness of human nature as on the positive role that virtue could play in individual and social behavior.

“Perhaps the most novel concept introduced by Victorian beliefs was that of sex being understood in terms of love, hence as something sacred. Now, this was somewhat radical, for it countered, to some extent, the traditional view of sex as a source of immorality. Overall, the Victorian Age, as one source points out, stood for *social conduct governed by strict rules, formal manners, and rigidly defined gender roles*. Relations between the sexes were hedged about with sexual prudery and an intense concern for maintaining the appearance of propriety in public.³”

“I have the impression that despite these novel changes, even today, Puritanism continues to be identified with Victorian views,” I said. “Am I correct, and if so, could you tell us why?”

“You’re right, sir. Actually, critics of Puritanism were the first ones to distort the meaning of the term itself. We can’t lose sight of the fact that over a century had passed between the demise of the Puritan movement in England and the birth of its cousin, Victorian society, in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. And yet, in spite of their subtle differences, the two terms, *Puritan* and *Victorian*, have continued to be used, almost interchangeably.”

“To what do you attribute this phenomenon?” I asked.

“There’s a very detailed publication describing Victorian society which records a significant clash between Victorian values and a loose social and political coalition that was emerging in the United States during the nineteenth century. This coalition of critics eventually succeeded in questioning the validity of Victorian beliefs in sexual-related matters and in ridding them of their preeminence in America.

“According to the book’s author, Rochelle Gurstein, the Victorian Age was characterized by rigidly demarcated boundaries separating the private sphere

from the public, and by a view of sex in terms of a love-lust equation.⁴ Since sex was viewed as being inextricably related to love, Victorians believed that sex wasn't a topic that could or should be discussed in public, lest it would somehow result in its degradation. Simply put, public presentations or writings about sex were considered improper, disrespectful, and indecent.

"Of course, not all of society behaved accordingly. Writings dealing with sex education, literary works by authors such as Emile Zola, sleazy-type publications containing obscene matters, and gossip stories were being published. These publications, in the eyes of Victorians, were *polluting and contaminating* the social environment."⁵

"Needless to say, Victorians reacted vigorously and were temporarily successful in containing these publications. Their efforts culminated with Congressional passage of the Tariff Act of 1842, restricting trade in sex-related matters deemed obscene, the adoption by lower federal courts of the Hicklin Test in 1868 that would define and, thus allow, the censoring of obscene material, and approval in 1873 of the Comstock Act making it illegal to send sex-related material in the mails."⁶

"In turn, these Victorian laws elicited a strong reaction by an assortment of groups made up of *liberal-minded* physicians, artists, writers, lawyers, and publishers who used the judicial system to reverse the status-quo.⁷ In the end, these groups were successful in casting aside traditional religious and moral values through court decisions, giving way to more permissive values regarding the publication of sex-related matters."

"Mr. Dickerson," I called out. "May I ask, in this struggle between the ones who favored hiding sex and the ones who insisted in bringing it out into the public, what were the strategy and tactics that these liberal groups used? What made them so successful?"

"The way I see it, the reformers were arguing in favor of an idea whose time had come. Reformers were attacking a view on human sexuality that was hardly in tune with how we're made as human beings. Victorians had taken sex-related matters to an extreme by setting the limits of the private sphere too narrow. Since according to Victorians, sex was related to love, in their desire to protect love, they dictated that a great deal of sex-related material was to be off limits to the public. Ironically, but precisely because of their obstinacy and narrow-mindedness, their extremism brought about, in my view, an opposite reaction that, eventually, brought pornography into our society."

"I see, please, could you elaborate on that point?" I asked.

"Well, we must remember that at the beginning of this ideological struggle, obscenity issues had little if anything to do with words, depictions of crude sexual behavior, or *pornography* as we understand the term today. Instead, obscenity during Victorian times had to do with issues that more properly related to the medical field, such as sex education, hygiene, birth control and the like. So,

you have, for example, Ezra Heywood, a notorious free-lover according to Gurstein, who in 1880 wrote that he didn't believe there were such things as obscene words.

"Heywood believed that *obscenity was the product of dirty thoughts, unclean habits, and dishonest actions relative to body forces.* ⁸ Personally, I don't agree with Heywood's view; I don't see dirty thoughts in any of you, yet quite a few of you insist there is obscenity in words. However, it doesn't seem that Heywood was advocating the use of the F—word or any other indecent word. I think he was arguing in favor of allowing the printed word in its non-obscene use. He said, *the sex organs and their associative uses have fit, proper, explicit, expressive English names; why not have character enough to use them and no longer be ashamed of your own creative use and destiny?*⁹ In effect, all he was in favor of was for calling the male organ the penis and the female organ the vagina.

"Victorians, meanwhile, objected to the public use of these terms because doing so would degrade the intimacy of sex.¹⁰ In turn, sex reformers viewed Victorian values as extremism, and setting themselves as a vanguard of progress, they rose in opposition. In Gurstein's words:

*For advocates of exposure (sex reformers), this was a debate about the place of democracy, science, and new technologies in modern life. They questioned whether the reticent sensibility had miscarried, and whether its notion of public and private were in keeping with the most progressive tendencies of the time... In the name of truth and liberty, enthusiasts of exposure extended the Enlightenment commitment of flooding light into dark places to matters previously believed to be either private or not worthy of public consideration ... And by speaking in the name of progress, they indicted privacy for blocking the light of emancipation and in so doing, successfully discredited the discourse of reticence as a language of cover-up and repression.*¹¹

"Of course, Victorians wouldn't go away quietly. Their foremost defender, Special Prosecutor Anthony Comstock, fought back with *repeated arrests, trials, and prison terms.*¹² But Comstock conducted himself with such a self-righteous attitude that he played into the hands of the reformers who successfully ridiculed his actions by identifying them with the worst Puritanism had to offer.¹³

"The result was that, by this time, *Puritanism* had become a pejoratively loaded term that, according to Gurstein, stood for *philistine, backward, or repressed* behavior.¹⁴ In other words, anyone in favor of suppressing or censoring sex-related information, from the so-called inoffensive stuff by today's standards, such as sex education material, to what was patently obscene, would be accused of being a Puritan. To these critics, Puritans and Victorians were all the same. In the end, the party of exposure, the reformers, won the war, as Victorians were soundly defeated in the courts."

“And what were the major implications of this victory in the courts? Was this the beginning of the demise of Victorian views on sexuality?” I asked.

“To a large extent, yes it was, and in my view that was not entirely bad. However, the Victorian defeat also meant that, eventually, pornography would be let out of the closet and into the mainstream of society with almost full protection of the law.

“What’s interesting is that these critics attacked the Victorian mentality while relying on tactics similar to what Dr. Planas had mentioned at the beginning of the class. They denigrated Victorian values by referring to everyone who objected to a more sexually open society as *Puritans*, extremists, and anti-progress. What has happened since then is that the pejorative connotation of this term has survived through the years within the context of sex-related matters. Nowadays, the term *Puritan* is still used pejoratively to debunk legitimate concerns brought about by pornography.”

Sitting on the edge of his seat and frantically waving his hand, Captain Francis no longer could remain quiet. “Forgive me, Mr. Dickerson, you call Victorians narrow-minded and you nearly blame them for bringing about pornography. I don’t understand; in reality, what was so wrong about Victorian views? How bad was it?”

“How bad was it?” he responded. “I myself asked that question after reading Gurstein’s book. As a matter of fact, I find it interesting that in her explanation of the demise of Victorian values, Gurstein would subtly suggest that society could have saved itself from the evil of pornography had Victorian values stayed untouched and unquestioned.

“Frankly, I have my doubts. Gurstein’s book, in my view, only gives you an impressive, although partial, flavor of Victorian views. Gurstein interprets Victorians, but we would have to transport ourselves to that era to really feel what people went through, and the best way to do it, Captain, as you have requested, is to give you a taste of Victorian medicine.

“I realize you may think that I’m exaggerating. I can assure you that I’m not making up any of what you’re about to hear. I came across a most encyclopedic work on Victorian sexuality by authors John and Robin Haller, which describes in detail what Victorian America must have been like. The authors stress the significance the Victorian physician had attained as someone who had the moral and scientific credibility that allowed him or her to establish mores that even today continue to exert their influence in society. As a result, the physician’s consultation room had become, *like the priest’s confessional, the minister’s study, or the lawyer’s office, and physicians themselves.*¹⁵

“The Hallers point out that *for Victorian America, sexual promiscuity was an ominous indication of national decay.* It represented a pandering to the lower instincts, a lessening of family structure, and a serious weakening of society’s order and stability.¹⁶ Because it was seen in terms of love, the primary function

of sex was procreation. Nonetheless, because it was, after all, the product of passion, sex was also viewed as an obstacle to morality and virtue.¹⁷

“For example, the authors indicate that Sylvester Graham, M.D., operating on the basis of his belief that *an ounce of semen equaled nearly forty ounces of blood*, held that excessive sex led to increased incidence of debility, skin and lung diseases, headaches, nervousness, and weakness of the brain. So, in order to maintain a healthy body, he set the frequency of intercourse at twelve times per year. This view, by the way, was shared by many other Victorian physicians as well.¹⁸

“Another physician, Rufus Griswold (1880), suggested that frigidity was a *virtue to be cultivated, and sexual coldness a condition to be desired*.¹⁹

“It gets better. In *What a Young Wife Ought to Know* (1908), Emma Drake recommended that women needed to remain *cold, passive, and indifferent to the husband's sexual impulses*, lest it would denigrate her role as wife.²⁰ Mary Wood-Allen, M.D., the national superintendent of the Purity Department of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, wrote in *Marriage; Its Duties and Privileges* (1901) that women likely had intercourse with their husbands *without a particle of sex desire*.²¹ And, in the ‘Believe It Or Not’ department, Alexander Walker (1839) somehow concluded that *voluptuous spasms* in the woman during intercourse *caused a weakness and relaxation which tended to make her barren*.²²

“Oh my Lord! The poor women; what they must have gone through!” Ms. Lewis almost cried.

“Poor women? Poor men! Don't leave *us* out,” exclaimed Mr. Brandon.

“Sorry, but you guys weren't the main victims; women were, in more ways than one,” replied Ms. Lewis. “You see, there were women who couldn't or wouldn't abide by these rigid rules. Many were poor, and they found an outlet to their economic and mental predicaments through prostitution. And who exactly helped to prostitute these women? Many were husbands who couldn't channel their sexual desires or even love their wives physically. These men had an alternative sexual outlet in prostitution. As for women? For them it was either prostitution or nothing.”

“Very good point, Ms. Lewis,” I say. “One would only hope that the day will come when men would be sensitive enough to understand a woman's point of view and defend it as intensely as Ms. Lewis has done. Okay, let's go on, Mr. Dickerson.”

“Very well. I don't know if I mentioned that Gurstein indicates in her book that Victorians opposed the reading of romantic novels when these involved sex-related matters, either because of the graphic and obscene description of physical love or because they dealt with the public description of love, pure and simple.

“I asked myself what possible motives could Victorian physicians and other moralists have in banning the romantic novel. Well, John W. Kellogg, M.D.,

(1883) famous for founding the Kellogg cereal company, asserted that the *reading of a character to stimulate the emotions and rouse the passions may produce or increase a tendency to uterine congestion, which may in turn give rise to a great variety of maladies, including all the different forms of [womb] displacement.*²³ Catherine Ester Beecher (1855) and Joseph Greer (1902) also condemned novel reading because it could lead to *excessive excitement* of certain body organs and to disease.²⁴

“Then, you have Orson S. Fowler (1856) and others, who, according to the Hallers, opposed *children’s parties, staying up late, puppy love, hot drinks, (boarding-school fooleries), loose conversation, (the drama of the ballroom), and talk of beaux, love, or marriage* since they contributed to *unnatural sexual development.*²⁵

“When it comes to courtship, no hanky-panky was allowed. This is how the Hallers summarized Victorian courtship:

*[I]n all relations with the wooer, the girl was never to participate in any rude plays that would make her vulnerable to a kiss. She was not to permit men to squeeze or hold her hand ... sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let not your eagerness to see any-thing induce you to place your head close to another person’s. To allow herself to fall prey to the evils of blighted love [would weaken] not only her modesty but also her most important organs.*²⁶

“Another Victorian physician pointed out the danger of falling in love without following the above guidelines:

*[The breasts of the woman in love would] rise and fall with every breath, and gently quiver at every step. But when the male suitor broke off the relationship (usually as a result of the woman’s immodest actions), he destroyed her charm and attractiveness, and because of the perfect reciprocity which exists between the mental and physical sexuality, he crippled the physical organs of her sex, causing deterioration as well as disease.*²⁷

“You break up with a guy and your sex organs become crippled? Come on, this is not medicine!” Ms. Vanhurst erupted.

“I know what you’re thinking, Ms. Vanhurst.” Mr. Dickerson laughed, “but this is what happens when a serious topic like human sexuality becomes ideologically driven.

“But, hang on, I am leaving the best for last. As you may recall, Victorian physicians and moralists sought to restrict sexual intercourse to a minimum, and mostly for the purpose of procreation. So, what happened if the man or the woman would fall prey to passion? What if desire was simply too strong at times? What were they to do? Our Victorian friends, never too shy to provide

enlightening recommendations, had two solutions: the first one was for the couple to keep separate bedrooms. Actually, this view was quite popular during the nineteenth century, according to the Hallers, *as a means to contain the passionate nature of the male's appetite*.²⁸

“The idea of a wall separating a loving couple was to avoid *familiarity, which even in married life, breeds contempt*. And if the husband were to become real lustful, Sylvanus Stall wrote in, *What A Young Husband Ought To Know*, the couple *had better by all means occupy separate beds and different apartments, with a lock on the communicating door, the keys in the wife's possession*.²⁹

“J.H. Greer, M.D., author of *Woman Know Thyself; Female Diseases, Their Prevention and Cure*, even dared to add, *no matter who else sleep together, husband and wife should not*. And Dio Lewis, M.D., (1871) pulled no punches and came straight to the point: the bed, he said,

*Is the most ingenious of all possible devices to stimulate and inflame the carnal passion. No bed is large enough for two persons. If brides only knew the great risk they run of losing the most precious of all earthly possessions—the love of their husbands—they would struggle as resolutely to secure extreme temperance after marriage as they do to maintain complete abstinence before the ceremony. The best means to this end is the separate bed.*³⁰

“The second advice Victorian moralists offered to tame sexuality, was none other than marital continence or voluntarily abstaining from any sexual activity. Continence played an important role in Victorian times, largely because most Victorian doctors and moralists were opposed to birth-control practices. Allowing birth-control would lead to increase sexual activity outside of procreation, which according to our Victorian friends, was both morally wrong and physically harmful.

“For Victorians who issued such guidance, completely abstaining from having intercourse was a logical conclusion derived from their beliefs on sex. After all, sexual activity was regarded as a *lower nature* instinct. Only lesser individuals would allow themselves to give in to this desire. Those who were educated were required to have their *higher nature* involved in a constant struggle with their *lower nature* in order to lead a virtuous life and strengthen their physical and mental well-being. All that accumulated semen and vital energy could then be diverted *to the mental and moral force of the man*, as one author observed.³¹”

“Mr Dickerson, may I say something?” interrupted Captain Francis. “You seem to suggest that sex is not a lower instinct? Isn't this an instinct we share with animals?”

Ms. Vanhurst didn't allow Mr. Dickerson to reply. “Captain, I don't think Mr. Dickerson is denying that sex isn't an instinct we share with animals.

Humans and animals have other similar characteristics, such as eating and bowel movement, but that doesn't mean that we should stop ingesting food or become constipated. Just think of the incredibly stressful circumstances that men and women were placed in because of ideological stupidities that . . ."

"Ms. Vanhurst!" I interrupted. "Please! That's enough. No more put downs! It doesn't accomplish anything except to alienate those whom you are seeking to persuade."

"I apologize," she said. "You're right. It's just that, , I'm human."

"Then become more so," I countered. "If you want to argue the point, rely on reasonable arguments, present facts! Remember to aim at the opponent's views, not at his character. Please, go on, Mr. Dickerson."

"Thank you. I hate to make this a lengthy presentation, but it's important that we let Victorians do the talking."

"No, man, this stuff is great!" Mr. Edson called out, followed by several affirmations throughout the class.

Mr. Dickerson acknowledged their support and continued, "It seems that in their attempt to regulate human sexuality, even love became the victim of some Victorians. According to Henry Rose in *An Inagural Dissertation on the Effects of the Passions upon the Body* (1794), falling in love had its negative consequences, something that we all know too well, except that I've never heard it described quite like this:

[W]hen love becomes deeper seated, it disturbs the serenity of the mind, and the general economy of the body—the countenance then becomes hung over with languor, the eyes indicate some remarkable desire; the breast rises and falls like the disturbed waters of the ocean, with deep and languishing sighs. The body becomes effeminated, and it unlocks every manly power of the soul. The afflicted person is particularly agitated when in presence of the beloved object. The heart leaps, and its Systole and Dyastole is repeated with increased rapidity; the pulse performs an inordinate action; the countenance at first is suffused with redness and then suddenly becomes pale.

In proportion to the vehemence of the passion, these symptoms are increased, and when violently excited, fever attended with great heat, palpitation of the heart, and a sense of burning through the whole circulatory system, have been the consequences. Sometimes breathing is laborious, the eyes are veiled with a cloud of mist, and the body is covered with a cold sweat. No passion so imperceptibly undermines the constitution as the one now under consideration; debility, the predisposing cause and mother of almost every disease, to which the human species is liable, inevitably follows: that pleasant languor, which at first was so welcome to the body, at length proves to be its destroyer. From the beginning the induced debility and

*effeminacy, the various perturbations, which immediately follow, cannot be sustained without the greatest agitation of both body and mind.*³²

“Woow,” remarked Mr. Edson. “That’s sheer sexual poetry!”

“But Rose wasn’t the only one. Another physician, Mary Wood-Allen, offered this interesting view about the human body: it should always be *held in thought as a sacred temple.*”³³

“Forgive me for just a second,” says Ms. Lewis. “But, not only were these physicians off the mark when it came to human sexuality; they relied on God and religion to push forth their agenda as a means to impose their views.”

“Good point,” I said. “Not only that; by using God to back up their much distorted views on sexuality, these physicians were giving God and religion a bad name, as if God had never intended for sex to be pleasurable and a means to express love and care for the other person.

“Nonetheless, I think we need to balance our views regarding the human body. If we overemphasize the sacredness of the human body, think about it; it would be rather difficult to engage in sexual intercourse in the presence of the divine.”

After the laughter quieted down, I continued, “Having said this, upholding the human body as sacred might be socially and morally useful, for if the human body were to be more highly regarded, it could lead to a decline in pornography and prostitution.”

“I agree,” replied Mr. Dickerson, “although it seems that the good doctor had something different in mind. Her goal was that if the human body were to be regarded as sacred, then women wouldn’t try to dress sexy, and men would stop salivating over their looks. In other words, men and women could actually *mingle without a thought of sex in their minds.*”³⁴

“Thank you, Mr. Dickerson,” I said. “Good presentation. I agree that quoting from original sources provides added credibility to your arguments. Any questions? Yes, Ms. Vanhurst.”

“I can’t imagine that these views lasted as long as they did, and I don’t see how we as a society allowed these beliefs to go on. I mean, the incredible emotional and physical burden on individuals and on married couples!”

“You’re referring to the enduring characteristics of mores,” I remarked. “They do tend to last, Ms. Vanhurst, sometimes for centuries. I think we should be glad that Victorian sexuality was finally questioned. At the same time, I think we all agree that our society has gone from one end of the spectrum to the other. Yesterday, we were living under a sexually repressed culture; today we live in a sexually indulging society. Gurstein herself suggests, and I believe that she’s correct, that sex is one of your proverbial slippery slope issues, a Pandora’s box, the forbidden fruit that, once eaten, can change an ideal paradise into a Sodom and Gomorrah. Today’s society certainly gives some validity to her contention.

“Having said this, we have to ask ourselves: are we better off having questioned Victorian views or should we have kept a Victorian understanding of human sexuality? Somewhat in defense of Victorian values, Gurstein underlines the fact that despite all that has been written about sex in the late twentieth century by serious educators, moralists, and physicians, sex education hasn’t been what sex-reformers promised it would be. As evidence, she points out to today’s high rates of sexually transmissible diseases, teenage pregnancy, and abortion. I think that we may have to agree with her on this point as well.

“On the other hand, can we say that the information we have acquired through a more sexually-opened society hasn’t helped many people to attain a more mature psychological understanding of one’s own sexuality? Has it not helped many on family planning and teenage pregnancy and disease prevention? Can we then afford to stop this information?”

“If I may, sir, as a side note, I was very surprised to read that none other than Margaret Sanger, the founder of what eventually became the Planned Parenthood organization, was among the group of *liberal* sex reformers at the time. Ironically, Sanger was blaming a *puritanical* government for its censorship of sex education material that kept women ignorant of matters that affected their lives, something that had contributed to *the hundreds of thousands of abortions being performed in America each year* which she described as *a disgrace to civilization*.³⁵”

“Yes, truly ironic.” I remarked.

“And what about pornography, the unintended consequence of the demise of Victorian beliefs; how valuable has it been all this time? What have been its redeeming social qualities? Which are the significant values that pornography and obscenity have provided about relationships, love, and sex that we are called to accept in the name of freedom of speech?”

I was surprised that no one made any comments.

“I’m glad to hear you defending openness and sex education,” says Ms. Vanhurst. “It’s quite refreshing. Not that I think you’re that conservative, or sexually repressed for that matter. And, yet, what I find interesting, and quite paradoxical, is how yesterday’s liberal sex reformers would view you, sir. Take for example, Theodore Schroeder, an influential writer who according to Gurstein successfully debunked obscenity laws through his writings. Schroeder said, and I quote, *all obscenity is in the viewing mind, not the book or the picture*. He added, *the immorality resulting from reading a book—or watching a porno movie, we may add—depends not upon its obscenity but upon the abnormality of the reading mind—or the watching eyes—which the book—or movie] does not create, but simply reveals*.³⁶

“Now, I don’t believe there’s any empirical evidence that would validate this assertion, but if it were true, Dr. Planas, it would indicate that you are immoral

and you must have a sick mind for seeing vulgarity and obscenity in the examples you presented to us at the beginning of class. Further, sir, according to Schroeder, you may suffer from *milder forms of monomania arising due to a lost perspective, imposed by perverse education*. You also seem to suffer from another medical condition that Schroeder called *hyperaesthesia*, which Gurstein restates as *an oversensitivity to anything remotely relating to sex, such as the shock men allegedly felt on seeing a woman's shoe displayed in a shop window*.³⁷ In modern terminology, I am afraid, sir, that, according to nineteenth century sex reformers, you're a dirty old man."

I sat back on the chair, questioning my decision to teach this course. *monomania* and *hyperaesthesia*? I didn't even know what that meant. And yet, she had made her point.

"Ms. Vanhurst, I thank you for your diagnosis," I said. "I promise that I will look up those terms in the dictionary just to see how seriously ill I may be.

"Kidding aside, I hope you all can appreciate my dilemma: how am I to argue in favor of a sense of decorum, of decency, if on account of my values, others will refer to me as a pervert, or say that I suffer from pathological disorders, or that I am a Puritan?

"And if I were to be this sick individual, according to Mr. Schroeder's criteria, how would he have characterized a Howard Stern for bringing two sisters to his show and offering them one thousand dollars to get naked and to kiss each other while he described the action to his audience?

"Granted, lack of shame isn't a pathological disease, in which case we have to conclude that there is no perversion in those Jerry Springer's shows that demean people. It's only entertainment, people will say. So, according to those liberal sex-reformers' standards of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I am the deviate while the Sterns and the Springers, being free of all sexual hang ups and shame, are morally upright individuals, despite their making a living by titillating and humiliating people.

"I hope all of you will now understand how I feel. Am I the one who has it wrong? In my mind Puritanism and Victorianism represented unfortunate adulterations of human sexuality, which is why, as a society, we needed and welcomed additional information. Puritanism and Victorianism had distorted the concept of love and human sexuality, both in men and women.

"That notwithstanding, let me ask, is demanding a sense of public decorum and respect for the public the equivalent of being sexually repressed? Is sustaining a healthy view of unrepressed sex with the person you love the same thing as being a Puritan or a Victorian? Does being against prostitution and pornography make you a Puritan and a Victorian? If we cannot make these distinctions as a society, I think we have a serious problem."

As I look around at their reactions, I can't say I'm displeased with their contributions tonight. They stayed interested, even though I didn't expect that I per-

suaded them of how I feel regarding the damaging influence of our entertainment culture. They have to see it for themselves. They need hard data. They need logical arguments. And above all, they need to do it by themselves.

“Okay, I think this is going to be all for tonight,” I said as we all stood to leave. “Next time, we will continue with this topic by taking a close look at how we entertain ourselves today; how far we have come since the demise of Victorian society, and the price we have paid to get to where we are today. I believe that Ms. Williamson, Ms. Bynum, and Mr. Hunt will handle the presentations. Have a good evening.”

Endnotes

¹ Durant Will, Durant Ariel, *The Age of Reason Begins*, The Story of Civilization, Part VII (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), pp. 190-191.

² Puritanism: Influence on American Society, *Encyclopedia.com*.

³ “Victoria and the Victorians,” The Longman Anthology, British Literature, <http://occawlonline.pearsoned.com/bookbind/pubbooks/damroschawl/chapter6/>

⁴ Gurstein, Rochelle, *The Repeal of Reticence*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), p. 12-13, p.30.

⁵ Pallen Condé Benoist, in *Ibid*, p. 53; pp. 52-55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Chs. 2 & 3.

⁸ Gurstein, p. 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

¹⁵ Haller, John S. and Robin, M, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. ix-x.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁷ This is how the Hallers put it:

Love, like nature, proceeded according to an established set of laws and principles which, when carefully observed, would prevent the sexes from yielding to the lower passions, Love had a certain order and harmony which manifested the infinite wisdom of the Deity and which, when platonic, appeared to express its most perfect form.... [S]o the purpose of sex was less a means of personal enjoyment than a specialized function of race and national development .Ibid.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 108-109.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 124-125.

³² Ibid., p. 126.

³³ Ibid., p. 128.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gurstein, p. 96.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 102.