

The Soiled Dove Takes Flight: The Introduction of Prostitutes into Common Western Mythology

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An elegant woman sits in her parlor, waiting for her next visitor. Dressed in a red satin dress and decked in pearls, she contemplates her life. Piano music drifts through the windows; a bottle of wine sits uncorked. Personifying the desires of men, this mythical prostitute runs her fingers through her long hair and waits for her love to sweep her from her life of ruin.

In the Old West time, place and circumstance coincided perfectly to introduce the mythical prostitute as a persistent element in western mythology.¹ In a west devoid of love, and femininity, and exemplified by loneliness, the exaltation of prostitutes was as much a part of the tales of the early West as miners, cowboys, and Indians.² Factors from the West such as the environment, legends, newspapers, and the frontier met Victorian and reform culture from the East to create a stereotyped and idealized image of prostitutes. In creating this myth, both East and West shaped the prostitute into a woman to personify their dreams and desires, one that would be acceptable to love. From this unique combination of factors, the soiled dove took flight.

“In the storybook presentation of the saloon woman, one finds only beauty, youth, and the tragedy of a wasted life.”³ The mythical prostitute has several identifying qualities and lifestyle choices, all of which allow the prostitute to exhibit values and actions of a proper Victorian lady. Basic characteristics of the soiled dove include beauty, wealth, an elegant environment, several admirers, jealous rivals, and, the prospect of mobility to a respectable life.⁴

In addition, the image of the prostitute – in order to satisfy the outlook of society – was pathetic in some way, thus violence was a part of the myth of the prostitute. This gave her a characteristic that society attributed with the West in general. Society further idealized these women by portraying them as a victim of violence and not its perpetrator, effectively explaining away her presence in that society.⁵

How prostitutes are viewed by society at any given time is determined by the economic, moral, and hygienic attitude of the time.⁶ In the West, economics were about striking it rich, morals were loose, and frankly, hygiene did not matter.

Here, in California, were whole new species of women, living and working not alongside emerging bourgeois neighborhoods – as, for example, prostitutes did in cities like New York – but at the very center of ... society, with few middle-class Anglo women physically present to contest newly sexualized, racialized and commercialized notions of womanhood.⁷

Perhaps the most appealing and enthralling component of the frontier was its fluidity. Its refusal to materialize in one area for long enough to be defined intrigued settlers and still attracts historians.⁸ The natural motion of restless, conflicted, and marginalized characters – including prostitutes – was towards the frontier. These groups were often fleeing authority of the restrictions of society.⁹

Chaos reigned in the early gold rush age, with social conventions thrown to the wind as farmer competed with the son of a factory owned for the same piece of gold. In this 'anything goes' time, no one was concerned about the social conventions of proper women.¹⁰ Eliza Wilson, a frontierswoman, reminisced of a dance, "and there was probably more enjoyment that night on the rough pine floors and under the flickering gleam of tallow candles, than one often finds in our social drawing-rooms..."¹¹ Prostitution came to represent the lax moral standards and happier times of the pre-moralized west.

Residents of Western cattle towns – even respectable churchgoers – could not live without knowledge of prostitution. Although the East tolerated prostitution, it was nothing like the free West, where women had permission to be so public about their profession.¹² The East confined prostitution districts to the slums, but in the red-light district of frontier towns was often Main Street.¹³ Domestic women and religious leaders had regulated behavior in the East, and blamed the prostitute for bending to sexual vice and portraying unfeminine characteristics. In the early West, if these groups existed at all, they had little voice in the affairs of the community, which allowed prostitutes to avoid the stigma placed upon them in the East.¹⁴ The West had to wait for morals: in the early years it was too rugged, the frenzy of discovery, despair and fortune making too strong, for the gentle woman of the East to soften the West with her morals, churches and domestic life.¹⁵

The West was the region of the United States with the most masculine ambience:¹⁶ the journalist Joseph Kinsey Howard described Butte Montana as 'a very bully of a city, stridently male, blusteringly profane, boisterous and boastful.' These are traits of the entire west – it was mean and male, crude and rude, loud and proud.¹⁷ In general, the West was not a place for a faint and frail woman of Victorian times. Young males constituted the majority of the mass immigration to the West in the nineteenth century, which formed a bachelor subculture that encouraged the use of the saloon, the gambling hall, and the brothel,¹⁸ and often drinking, darts and dice were all available to patron in one venue.¹⁹ Men on the frontier were not interested in morality, and instead lived by the guide of 'a short life, and a merry one.'²⁰ They sought communities where some order existed, but behavior was not regulated. Compromise was key: it was okay to have a church, just make sure that the stores – and the saloons – were open on Sunday.²¹ "The six-shooter was often the only law respected by the frontiersman," and rarely would these men enforce or even care about regulating prostitution.²² If he did, it was for financial reasons: taxes and licenses from brothels would fund the city government, while private bribes would supplement the lawmaker's income.²³

Individualism in America has allowed a laxity in regards to governmental affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed moral spirit.²⁴

The wild frontier town was truly democratic. These settlers created a system that worked for the circumstances and the society it was governing

Our population, selected from the choice young men of all the most active nations of the world... live faster than any other people. We think more promptly; a thousand times

more freely than our fathers of the East and of Europe. Our passions are stronger; our intellects keener; our prejudices weaker... We think for ourselves on religious subjects; dreading not the verdict of the village scandal-mongers, glorying in the isolation of our social position and our comparative freedom from social formalities, each cares to conform his action solely to his own will and pleasure. [25](#)

When domestic culture invaded the West with its elitist morals true democracy and the ability of Western civilization to form it's own principles were driven out 'for the good of society.

"Simple sex for cash was always an option, since gold dust and men willing to pay were rarely in short supply."[26](#) Any woman that a miner saw was beautiful, magnificent, and high class; prostitutes were wild, young, and entrepreneurial women. What on earth could a young 'panner find wrong with spending a night in her arms?[27](#) Men in the West visited prostitutes not only for sexual gratification, but also for diversion and companionship.[28](#) In a land where no one knew anyone, men were lonely for someone to talk to and others often needed to forget the disappointment of not making a million overnight. Miners, who were accustomed to spontaneous changes in fortune, felt no qualms about paying ounces of gold to sit by a beautiful woman, even if it meant many months mining.

Oh, the lust for mountain dust
Brought us lusty mountain men;
Who, through their lust for mountain women,
Quickly lost their gold again.[29](#)

The prostitute corresponded with the idea of a west ruled by sin – towns were called 'wide-open,' meaning a man could buy a drink, place a bet or visit a prostitute at any hour of any day without legal or moral consequences.[30](#) In the mining regions, prostitution just another business practice, instead of the shameful fall from respectability that the East labeled it as.[31](#) Moral societies saw prostitution in connection to violence, gambling, and drinking – a characteristic that the West relished in. These were the only delights of life.[32](#)

In larger cities, there were diversions to entertain men that did not involve alcohol, gambling, or prostitutes, but smaller 'boomtowns' had few of such. In the small town, the entertainment was always whiskey, sporting women and cards.[33](#) "Rum, Cards and Women are the epitaphs on the cowboys' graveyard. Some bunches all three, and some cuts out of the herd and rides after it till he drops..."[34](#)

Prostitutes were attracted to the West partially because of the appeal of the boomtown phenomenon. Mines opened, towns built, women came and made a bit of money, and when the mine dried up and the town died, the women could leave and had the possibility of a return to respectable life elsewhere in the West.[35](#)

The Western prostitute was, for a while, a truly American woman; someone that would not exist again until women could vote. Not only did she represent the entrepreneurial spirit, but also fluidity, the restless spirit, evolution in reaction to the environment and individualism – none of which women would experience for fifty years. The frontier was the first time that women were able to profit immensely off of being women.[36](#)

Prostitutes held such an elevated position in society that the prestige drew women to the profession – something that puzzled the East. “Hats were removed and bows executed as [the prostitutes] passed on the streets, they were mentioned politely in the press,” and welcome at society functions, such as concerts and plays.³⁷ In the early frontier, women were scarce to the point where they were almost a novelty. “What a woman was did not matter so much as the fact that she was a woman.”³⁸ In the west, one did not need to be a lady to garner the respect given to upper class women in the East.

“In a frontiersman’s vocabulary, the term lady was not necessarily linked with manners and morals. It implied old-fashioned qualities of charity, faith, energy, generosity, cleanliness and loyalty to friends.”³⁹

Said of Julia Bulette, famed Comstock whore, ‘She brought airs and graces where comparative barbarism had reigned and the minors accorded her an homage that elsewhere would have been the prerogative of a great lady.’⁴⁰

Women from all over the world came to the American west, attracted by the easy access to wealth, the suspension of morals and the scarcity of their own sex.⁴¹ “Many a woman had gone west to escape poverty and was tempted into moral ruin by the fast life and ready flow of gold.”⁴² Prostitution, like all marketable commodities, was governed by the overriding principle of supply and demand. In the early west, the supply was low and the demand high, making the product worth more.⁴³ Many women, especially the uneducated, drifted into prostitution as a matter of economic survival.⁴⁴

For women of the nineteenth century, the soiled dove of the frontier represented one of the few ‘whole’ women of the time: she was seen as inherently bad by definition, but at the same time was imagined as kind, warm and independent.⁴⁵ The ideal of the successful western prostitute was appealing to many women. Here was a woman who achieved what seemed like true financial independence in an age where few women could support themselves. Most of the criteria used to assess class in America had no bearing on the west or the prostitute; Family, education, and religion simply did not matter.⁴⁶ Prostitution was the only profession in America where women could choose their own destiny, regardless of where they were from.

If women wanted to involve themselves in the social life of a town, they risked condemnation, since the social centers of towns were bars and saloons, where the only women allowed were prostitutes.⁴⁷ Alma Muentzer, whose father had owned a bar in Butte Montana, said that a bar The California Bear had featured “booths for the ladies,” but “you weren’t a lady if you went in.”⁴⁸

Visibility was a necessary part of prostitution, no matter where or when, but instead of walking the streets as advertisement; prostitutes in San Francisco maintained visibility by throwing balls or hosting dinner parties, functions that traditionally assigned to the upper-class women of society. Prostitutes were the most elegantly dressed women on the West coast. Anytime they went out, even just to walk on the street, they took the care to be as fashionable as possible.⁴⁹

To take full advantage of their opportunities, prostitutes had to stay at the edge of the frontier. It was only at the beginning of settlements that they could act as independent agents. As soon as a city was established, male-dominated organized crime would take control and entrepreneurial opportunities would disappear.⁵⁰ The prostitutes’ life dictated

that she live in an uncivilized area with a skewed ratio of men to women to be truly successful. When the frontier closed, the impact on the profession was enormous: the environmental factors that the myth survived on were gone, and so was the infamous woman. However, myths tend to outlive their base, especially when a culture – like Victorianism – is attached to the ideals that the myth represents.

An interesting aspect to the building of the myth of frontier women was the press. Prostitutes were seen by some newspapers as unacceptable failures – and were mocked with phrases like ‘the fallen ones’ ‘a hideous excuse for a women,’ ‘strumpets’ and ‘things calling themselves women.’⁵¹ Newspapers often served as the voice of the respectable community in frontier towns, bringing attention to issues that the local government refused to address. The newspapers would mock the deaths of prostitutes, their fights, and the abuse that they suffered at the hands of their husbands, clients, or pimps. “Attitudes of ridicule, scorn, humor or maudlin sentimentality permeated newspapers reports [about prostitution].” The press would often publish obituaries about prostitutes that had left the towns, playing heavily on the theme of nostalgia. “The ex-resident had become a paragon of honesty, despite her lost virtue. Her reputation soared to heights it had never enjoyed during her stay in the community.”⁵² An article from the Butte Miner reported on a man killing his prostitute wife,

The poor fallen woman made the last sacrifice it was in her power to make – the sacrifice of her life through her love for the man whom she had cheerfully supported from the gains of her arduous calling.⁵³

Despite that the intention of these was to mock, stories told or newspaper articles written often reinforced the mythical attributes of prostitutes. East received these reports at face value, not knowing the circumstances of the women. “A persistent story of [a] cow town west concerns a newspaper editor in the late 1800s, who planned to reprint stories about ‘fallen women.’ The first story reached the typesetter who advised the editor not to publish it because the woman had married a prominent man still living in the community.”⁵⁴ In addition, some newspapers used the language of the west: ‘soiled doves’ and ‘abandoned women,’ promoting the mystique of sexuality. As a result, the newspapers played the role of publicity agent for the prostitute. “The resulting attention portrayed prostitutes as symbols of forbidden eroticism and not as needy workers of the frontier.”⁵⁵

Often myths and legends about prostitutes served to reinforce the concepts the East believed the West to represent. Women such as Cattle Kate, a famed rancher and cow thief, exemplified Western characteristics onto the feminine persona. While Cattle Kate did not actually steal the cattle – instead, cowboys stole cattle and traded them to her for sex – her story set an example of the power of the prostitute in the West. Adding to this was the fable that authorities never prosecuted her, because “It was not an Old West policy to punish prostitutes.”⁵⁶

Ah Toy, the famed ‘first’ Chinese prostitute in San Francisco, exhibited none of the qualities of a Victorian woman. Described as having a slender body and laughing eyes,⁵⁷ she was not pious, nor pure, nor submissive.⁵⁸ While she was successful because she did not adhere to the classic qualities of Chinese women, she was still impressed with qualities of the myth. “White men would line up and pay an ounce of gold just to look at

Ah Toy.” Ah Toy, “was quite selective in her associations, was liberally patronized by white men, and made a great deal of money.”⁵⁹ In 1857, Ah Toy packed her bags and returned to China, fitting the mythological end of a return to morality. In fact, she returned to America later and died in poverty; but this did not receive publicity: according to the world (and agreeing with the myth), she got out.⁶⁰ Cities would advertise their famed prostitutes, ballooning tales about them – reemphasizing the glamour of the profession.⁶¹ In 1896, Phoenix had quite a reputation. A merchant, S. I. Robert, living in a small town outside Phoenix said, “Phoenix had a population of about 900 people. Their chief industry was gambling, liquor and wild women resorts. It was a hell of a town, a Mecca for all the underworld of the Southwest.”⁶²

Nowhere was the frontier and all its wildness more represented than in California in 1849 – 1852. The frenzy of the gold strike inspired a migration West of a magnitude never before experienced by America. This migration inspired tales and legends that flowed East. The eastern culture, eager for news of the West, was puzzled at these tales of wonton sin and often took them at face value. In addition, there had never been a time in history nor a place where prostitutes had been so idolized as in California. “[G]old dust was plentier than pleasure, pleasure more enticing than virtue. Fortune was the horse, youth in the saddle, dissipation the track, and desire the spur. Let none wonder that the time was the best ever made.”⁶³

While California did not invent prostitution, the gold-rush experience, with its racially mixed population, surplus of young males and rambunctious economy, foreshadowed the elevated status that prostitutes would hold on all other miner frontiers that followed.⁶⁴

The gold rush population was almost entirely young men, who had a very difficult time finding female companionship, whatever their intentions. In 1849, there were 50 men for every one woman in California. Men had few choices: compete for the very few respectable women available, look homeward, or turn to the loving – and expensive – arms of a prostitute.⁶⁵

The miners came in forty-nine
The whores in fifty-one
And when they got together
They made a native son.⁶⁶

California had the unique quality of urban vitality but with the addition of rural isolation. For prostitutes, this meant an increased market for their supply and appeal of life without condemnation.⁶⁷ Entrepreneurship was almost a mania in San Francisco during the Gold Rush, even for some women.⁶⁸ Women that refused to bow to immorality had few options of self-started success, but for women willing to buy into the risk – and the mentality of the time – there were the profits of prostitution or brothel and saloon management.

To sit with you near the bar or a card table, a girl charges one ounce [of gold, about \$16] an evening... and if you wanted anything more from these nymphs, you had to pay fifteen to twenty ounces [\$240 - \$320].[69](#)

In the first few years of the gold rush, prostitutes no longer had to live in a degraded position in society. Instead, society admired prostitutes as the women they were, not how they made their money.[70](#) “There was no country in the world no represented in San Francisco by at least one prostitute.”[71](#) When three hundred French prostitutes sailed into San Francisco, one miner said, “Gads, what rich cargo. They will be worth their weight in gold... the imports of California are richer than the exports.”[72](#)

It is too much to expect from weak male human nature in California, that a man ever so correctly inclined, would prefer the lean arm of a bonneted, ugly, board shaped specimen of a descendent of the puritans, to a rosy-checked, full formed, sprightly and elegant Spaniard or Frenchwoman.[73](#)

Prostitutes formed a part of the first wave of gold seekers in 1949.[74](#) While many of the men that came to mines were inexperienced and knew nothing of gold mining, the majority of the first prostitutes to come to California were professionals who know the trade from top to bottom.[75](#) Professional prostitutes took advantage of the high numbers of lustful lonely men and the lax morals, and achieved from these the financial rewards and elevated status. These were professionals and they knew their trade: what men wanted and needed to hear was their business. As a result, while these may have not been the most beautiful women, in their customer’s eyes they were goddesses.

Prostitution was one of the few venues for women to satisfy the gold bug that bit the country in the mid-1800s; only these women used their bodies instead of a pick and shovel.[76](#) The materialistic drive of society in the West did not just affect men – women also wanted new clothes, a house and a good life. The ‘get rich quick’ mentality of the miners in the west was only available to women through very narrow venues: laundry, cooking, marriage, or prostitution. In 1887, a survey of 300 prostitutes found that they made \$5 to \$7 a night, compared to the \$1.50 to \$3 a week for domestic services, or the \$75 a say for a washerwoman, making “the wages of sin... fairly attractive.”[77](#) In 1966, a seamstress could possibly make \$3 a day, working 12 to 15 hours, if she found the work.[78](#)

The phrase ‘prostitute with a heart of gold’ originates in San Francisco, and was documented during a series of events that started with Bella Cora, a famed prostitute, attending a play with her husband Charles Cora. The couple sat behind US Marshall Richardson and his wife, who objected to sitting so close to the sinful couple. First she demanded to the couple that they leave, and when they would not, appealed to the manager of the theater. The manager refused to involve himself, and Mr. and Mrs. Richardson left. Two days later, the men met at a saloon, and got in a fight that ended in Cora shooting and killing the Marshall. Bella immediately hired the best lawyers and then tried to bribe the jury. When this was discovered, her lawyers used the phrase ‘prostitute with a heart of gold’ to justify Bella’s dedication to her friend and lover.[79](#) Soon the background was forgotten, and the East coast adopted the phrase to give prostitutes womanly values.

A different stereotype that mythologized in connection with California was that of the Chinese prostitute. In the myth she is exotic, beautiful, submissive, a slave to her evil master, kidnapped from China, and has a man to marry her, civilize her, and bring her back to moral purity. Chinese prostitutes were the “archetype of female bondage and degradation.”⁸⁰ Known as baak hakk chai, or a hundred men’s wife, and loungei, a woman always holding her legs up,⁸¹ the numbers and tales of Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco were largely over exaggerated.

White Americans knew little about Chinese prostitutes daily lives. Living shrouded in a cloak of mystery, myths abounded, such as the vaginal opening of the Chinese ran ‘east-west’ instead of ‘north-south’ like white women.⁸² Because whites did not understand Chinese kinship rules, when a man and woman living together were not directly related, the woman was labeled as a prostitute, which flooded the census statistics.⁸³

There were several reasons for the importation of Chinese women to be prostitutes, including customs, United States laws, financial reasons, and the nature of the destination. Tradition bound many Chinese men to leave their families in the homeland, rather than plant their seeds in the ‘white devils’ country. Chinese customs dictates that a woman serve her in-laws and if necessary, act as her husband’s substitute in the event of a death to perform the mandatory burial and mourning rights.⁸⁴ As a result, many Chinese men spent years of their lives – sometimes their whole lives – without female companionship. This population missed women, and had no choice but to frequent prostitutes for sexual fulfillment. ⁸⁵ “The demand for Chinese prostitutes by both Chinese and white men intersected with an available supply of young women sold into servitude by impoverished families in China.”⁸⁶ Also, Chinese women had a common goal of many prostitutes: they sought the “land that flowed with gold, where [one] could make big money, and return to China a rich woman.”⁸⁷

The American stereotype of the typical Chinese women fit well into the Victorian concept of the female: passive and submissive. At the same time, the myth of the enslaved Chinese prostitute fit well with the progressive attitude of prostitution exploiting women.⁸⁸

“By the beginning of the twentieth century, the isolation and self-contained lifestyle that had once existed in many area of the American West had disappeared.”⁸⁹ The West was pierced with technology and industry. With these changes came civilized families who built farms, villages, towns and cities – all with churches. The members of these churches all had puritan prejudices and orthodoxy clinging like cobwebs in the backs of their mind. The days of wonton sinful enjoyment were over. ⁹⁰

Newer western communities in particular found prostituted flaunting their attractions abroad, to the distress of the conservative and the moral. ⁹¹

Before any real presence of domestic women on the frontier, women were women never mind what they did. When ‘good’ women began to arrive on the frontier, they enlightened society as to the faults of the prostitutes, and the prostitutes immediately lost status. In the west, domestic women continued to hold the same place in society as they held in the East: the moral cornerstones, the churchgoers, and the regulators of ethics.⁹² Words like duty and virtue, with which the Victorian culture was laden, served as bullets

to pierce the soul of the frontier culture, affectively devaluing the prostitute back to the bottom rungs of society.

Once families began to predominate in and around the frontier, the maintenance of traditional marital restrictions on sexual activity became an important part of community identity.⁹³

For domestic women, migration west meant leaving the traditional social and economic power networks of the East.⁹⁴ However, they were not long in rebuilding these connections. The domestic women of the west bonded together: friendships and associations grew and soon these groups added moral concerns such as prostitution to their interests.⁹⁵ While the good women of the west had suffered from the lack of societal structures, prostitutes had thrived off of this absence and were driven back into condemnation with the reemergence of these structures.

There are compelling reasons for the rise of the myth from the West. Yet there were also factors from the moral and proper East that contributed to the introduction of prostitution into mythology. Largely based on their condemnation of and confusion over the status of prostitutes, Victorian America struggled with the concepts to which the wild and sinful West subscribed. In their effort to understand and regulate the West, moral elites of the East accepted the soiled dove mythology and incorporated it into their mythology of the West. On the other hand, reformers and women's rights advocates embraced this image in an attempt to exemplify the characteristics they felt she represented: the male dominating the female into slavery. Both of these cultures and movements contributed greatly to the building and propagating of the myth of the Western prostitute.

[The saloons in Portland] ...were hurdy-gurdy houses and dancehalls and temples of Aphrodite that far overshadowed the simple efforts at disorderliness that poor old Madam Hamilton brought up from San Francisco a decade before Satan claimed the transient population for his own.⁹⁶

Victorianism marked a close cultural relationship between America and England. Fredrick Jackson Turner identified this connection, and marked the West as a break in this tie. In America, Victorian society dominated economic, social, and political institutions, controlled laws, and determined social standards. The lower classes were required to adopt Victorian values for the hope of upward mobility.⁹⁷ But the prostitute had no chance: her job was in direct conflict with the sexual values of the Victorian culture and she had no hope of a return to respectability. It was often this society that the frontiersman and woman were fleeing by moving West.

In the 1800s, women had little except their chastity to bring to a marriage. Women were to remain pure until a wife, and even then, according to Victorian ideals, women were not supposed to actively seek sexual relations unless it led to procreation.⁹⁸ William Acton published *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in America* in 1860. In it, he conveyed the ideal Victorian attitudes towards sex, "The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally."⁹⁹ As a result, 'sexual passions became associated almost exclusively with the male, with prostitutes and women of the

lower classes.”¹⁰⁰ Do doubt Victorian women did have sexual passions, but the idea existed that they did not.¹⁰¹ As a result, society as a whole saw women who have sexual desire; especially sexual power, such as prostitutes, as abnormal and these groups were marginalized.

The cult of domesticity and the exaltation of motherhood were important new ideas that emerged with the Victorian culture.¹⁰² The new emphasis on ‘a good mother’ worked to further condemn the prostitute, who often neglected, abused or mistreated their children and were without the resources to be the mothers America expected. In order to justify how the Western culture could embrace such a woman, the Victorian idea of the barroom queen never had children. “The cult of domesticity played a major part in enhancing the dignity of women.”¹⁰³ Victorian women recognized this, and did not understand why a woman would choose a lifestyle did not embrace this new ideology, or why men would appreciate a woman who did not act like a lady.

The Victorian emphasis on a rational order in society serves to explain why the east felt necessary to create a prostitution myth. To justify the elevated position the whore held in Western society, Victorians needed to know how she became a prostitute and why she was so popular. When they could not answer these questions, they created a myth that was an effective tool in puzzling out the prostitute. “To some extent, the Victorian preoccupation with order probably reflected a need for psychological stability amidst the rapid changes occurring during the nineteenth century.”¹⁰⁴

Prostitution violated these ethics, and Victorians refused to believe that the Western culture would permit the common prostitute to publicly demonstrate her defiance to culture and morality. The prostitute allowed to do such a thing must be extraordinary. Often Victorian culture conflicted with the fast changing American society. It was so in the West: there the whore was queen, advertised and exalted. The Victorian culture valued public images and actions, and was puzzled with the West choice to advocate its sin.¹⁰⁵ Eastern America needed to categorize and rationalize the prostitute to fit with their English principles, for everything the western prostitute represented violated the core beliefs of a Victorian East.

Ladies are not plenty. There are a great many in all mining towns who are near the form of a woman, but o so fallen and vile, a living, burning shame to the sex that they have so disgraced.¹⁰⁶

Prostitutes showed no evidence of Victorian womanliness. Sexually active, these women also lived without true families, fought, cursed, and were aggressive and outspoken.¹⁰⁷ Shamefully employed, these women violated the concept of separate public and private lives by enjoying a position in the center of society. She was not pure, nor sexually complacent; she did not hide her disgrace, as she was required in the East; she reined as queen of the western town and was exalted and worshiped by men. Partially to justify and partially to understand, the Eastern Victorian society created a myth – the soiled dove – that exemplified womanly characteristics that they understood.

There were two principle groups that intersected with the Victorian culture but formed their own image of the soiled dove were women reformers and suffrage workers. Women such as Susan B. Anthony took a radical stance on the sexual slavery of women and what it represented about society.

The howl [against suffrage for women] comes from the men who know that when women get their rights they will be able to live honestly and not compelled to sell themselves for bread, either in or out of marriage.[108](#)

After the civil war, reformers turned from slavery and the plight of the blacks to the slavery of women through sex: prostitution. Prostitution reduced human relations to mere economic exchanges, just as slavery had taken the humanity from African Americans and turned them into property to be bought and sold. Similar to slavery, prostitution denied basic human dignity.[109](#)

Girls in this way fall everyday,
And have been falling for ages,
Who is to blame? You know his name,
It's the boss that pays starvation wages.[110](#)

This group who saw the connection between low wages and despair, between supply and demand in prostitution and used these economic principles to condemn slavery, just as free labor had been used to condemn slavery.[111](#)

Attacking prostitution was a way for women to raise awareness of other women's issues: economic vulnerability, sexual double standards, the lack of women's rights under the law and the lack of respect for women in society.[112](#) While these reformers still condemned prostitutes for their acts, they also viewed her as a victim of evil men and social injustice.[113](#) Women's rights crusaders enhanced the image of 'fallen angels' by telling stories of women turning to prostitution to support an invalid sister or their father who failed in business.[114](#)

I was an honest women till my husband died. I can put my hand on my heart and swear it. But I was penniless, and a baby to keep. The world has drove me about so. When I want food, I must go to the streets.[115](#)

Caroline Dall, a women's suffrage crusader and abolitionist, exemplifies the attitude advocated by reformers when speaking of prostitutes.

You should remember that, in 9 cases out of 12, she sold herself, not to vice, but what seemed, at least, to her longing heart, like love. Put yourself in her place. Think of what it would be like to slave soul and body, day after day, for a crust and a cup of cold water. Not so much would your failing body crave one tender look, one loving word... how strong would the temptation be when one above you pleaded for affection! See how like an angel of light this demon would descend. Oh my sisters! You have never read this story right. Such as a woman is no monster, only a gentle hearted creature, unsupported by God's law, unrestrained by self-control.[116](#)

Through their effort to control and end prostitution, reformers of the 1800's presented a memorable image of the prostitute to Eastern society. She was a victim, somehow not at fault. This, along with the myths of the gold rush, red-light districts and the elegant woman of the saloon, led to a unique image of prostitution, which forms an integral part

of the western legend. Attitudes soon changed in the East and West as the sin of sexuality became more pronounced, but the myth remained.

The forces that came together to create the myth of the soiled dove were unique: never again would such freedom and restriction exist in America at the same time. The sectional divide in morals between the East and West could have resulted in conflict over the image of the prostitute, but instead the East chose to accept what it understood or admired about the fallen women and exemplify her in order to understand the entire West. The creation of the soiled dove served as a tool for the Old East to understand and eventually reclaim the New West. It was not the factors of the West alone, but a combination of all the forces of society and nature working together that crafted the soiled dove into a permanent fixture in western American mythology.

Notes

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