

New Woman, Dependent Woman: Family, the Work Community, and Working-Class Sexuality in the Progressive Era

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Although written about the 1950s, Saul Bellow's tableau of New York City from *Seize the Day* captures the same vociferousness of an urban and industrial America at the turn of the nineteenth century:

And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence—I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want.... The sidewalks were wider than any causeway; the street itself was immense, and it quaked and gleamed...¹

The economic landscape of the modern American city was undergoing a rapid corporatization; vestiges of mercantilism were replaced by the boom of corporate industry as both the industrial and retail sectors came to prominence as the bulwarks of a capital-driven society.² Furthermore, cultural modernization placed new emphasis on the heavily commercialized leisure and

¹ Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Penguin Books, 1956), ix.

² Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 38.

entertainment industries.³ The extensiveness of the entertainment realm in America's urban centers was complementary to the incipient popular notion that cosmopolitanism was a necessary facet of urban life. Moreover, the milieu of urban social life diversified the experiences of people of all classes, regardless of their respective societal contexts.⁴ While these vast social changes had significant ramifications for native-born Americans, immigrants and first generation Americans of all classes and gender, the trends of working-class women are of particular consequence. By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century women's work had moved from the private sector to the public domain. While the percentage of women in the labour force was still relatively low, this movement into industrial and retail labour simultaneously increased the competition for jobs amongst unmarried, working-class women and decreased the average age of the woman labourer.⁵

With the sexual revolution of the early twentieth century and the evolution from a conservative, Victorian America to one of Progressivism, it seemed as if the "New Woman" would supersede what were becoming increasingly anachronistic perceptions of women. While working-class women were able to broaden their social universe, they were still met by the stringent social and economic necessities of a low wage-earners' life. Thus, the Progressive Era was, in part, marked by an ideological preponderance

³ Ann Schofield, "From Sealskin and Shoddy' to 'The Pig-Headed Girl': Patriarchal Fables for Workers," in *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780-1980*, eds. C. Groneman and M.B. Norton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 115.

⁴ Peiss, *Cheap Amusement*, 9.

⁵ Susan J. Kleinberg, "The Systematic Study of Urban Women," in *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, ed. M. Cantor and B. Laurie (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 23-4; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987. For example, in a census taken in 1920, the average percent of females in the labor force between Boston, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia was 33.6%.

of independent, feminine women who imagined themselves breaking free of the social, economic and political constrictions of Victorian society. Despite the emergence of this “New Woman,” there remained the reality of a stringent, conservative model in the workplace that dictated the communal and individual actions of the working-class woman.⁶ So, how did the working-class female reconcile notions of a liberated woman, taking advantage of the opportunities of the Progressive Era, with the subtle conformity of both industrial and commercial early twentieth-century working-class life?⁷ Moreover, how did pervasive concepts of female chastity influence how working women expressed their sexuality? Was the “New Woman” bunk? While hetero- and homo-social work environments created a new definition of sexuality for working-class women, how did this sexuality manifest itself in daily working-class life? While the communal environment of factory and retail shop life offered new ways for women to express their sexuality, it is important to recognize that their sexuality was, at the same time, repressed by the assimilative function of the communal work environment.⁸ Thus, the trend towards a pleasure-oriented women’s culture was undermined by ubiquitous concepts of conservative female sexuality, a trend that was identifiably present in the workplace. This essay will focus primarily on

⁶ Carolyn Christensen Nelson, “Introduction,” in *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. C. Christensen Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), ix. In 1894 Sarah Grand introduced the term, the “New Woman” in her essay, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” published in England in the *North American Review*. She described a woman that had “solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s Sphere, and prescribed the remedy.” In Victorian ideology the separate spheres assigned to men and women was biological. Grand debunked this theory and argued that the two spheres were “a construct of society and culture” and could easily be manipulated.

⁷ Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 62.

⁸ Kathy Peiss, “‘Charity Girls’ and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. A. Snitsnow, C. Stansell and St. Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 76; Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 68.

the major economic centers of the American Northeast. While the feminine sexuality of working-class women will be discussed on a broader geographical scale, some of the focus will surround conditions in New York City. Furthermore, it will seek to intertwine sociological constructions of these working women with the reality of the urban working-class environment. While working-class trends transcended gender, class and race, as there was a common experience, different ethnicities had their own cultural definitions of sexuality. Thus, as Elizabeth Alice Clement suggests, it is important to negate the notion of a "monolithic 'working' and 'middle' [class]."⁹ Also, the historiographical implications of the primary documents must be kept in mind. Social reformers and those writing investigative commissions for the state were typically middle-class and are inherently biased. Therefore, the line between what was considered respectable and promiscuous is muddled and conceptions of female chastity were subjective.¹⁰

Integral to this study is an explanation of how the image of the woman began to change at the turn-of-the-nineteenth century. The common Victorian portrayal of a woman required her to be respectable rather than promiscuous, virtuous rather than depraved; essentially a lady:

Our ladies ... soar to rule the hearts of their worshippers, and secure obedience by the scepter of affection.... Is not everything managed by female influence? ... A woman is nobody. A wife is everything. A pretty girl is equal to ten thousand men, and a mother is, next to God, all powerful ... therefore, under the influence of the most serious "sober second thoughts," are resolved to maintain their rights as wives, belles, virgins, and mothers, and not as women.¹¹

⁹ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁰ Peiss, "'Charity for Girls' and City Pleasures," 74-75.

¹¹ *Philadelphia Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, in Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), 8.

While the boundaries imposed on the female sex were ostensibly benign and venerable, women were stripped of any independence or individualism. Victorian women were imbued with a sense of maternalism and were confined to a cult of domesticity that inhibited any ambition of a fruitful foray into the public sphere.¹² However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, and in the context of a thriving industrial economy, general conceptions of subservience and obsequiousness that had dictated the social and economic roles of women were beginning to deteriorate in favour of an acknowledgement that a more liberal and equitable place for women in society was necessary. A number of factors contributed to the proliferation of the notion that women could free themselves from the generated norms of the Victorian conscience. The industrialization of labour, immigration, and the social reform movement all created new opportunities for women to express their socio-sexual inclinations. Although the “New Woman” was, at its nascence, a middle- to upper-class construction, it became a common thread in universal conceptions of femininity.

Boyd Winchester, a Southern male lawyer, wrote in 1902 that “from the darkness of ignorance and servitude woman has passed into the open light of equal freedom.”¹³ Winchester’s pseudo-definition of the “New Woman” called for the abandonment of the imposed inferiority and ignorance of women but still required that a woman’s inherent “tenderness”, or “womanliness” be recognized.¹⁴ He derided the concept of the “New Woman” as a caricature, explaining that equal opportunity did not require the

¹² Laura S. Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue: The Social Reformers and the ‘Girl Problem,’ 1890-1920,” *Social Service Review* 7:3 (September 2000), 437.

¹³ Boyd Winchester, “The Eternal Feminine,” [*Arena* 27 (April 1902): 367-73] in *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. C. Christensen Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 176. Boyd Winchester (1836-1923) practiced law in Louisville, Kentucky. From 1869 to 1873 he was the representative from Kentucky to Congress. From 1885-1889 he was the Minister Resident and Consult General to Switzerland.

¹⁴ Winchester, “The Eternal Feminine,” 177.

woman to prove herself as a man, but rather to “claim her own sphere.”¹⁵ As ideological constraints loosened, a malleable definition of female sexual respectability and virtue began to emerge.¹⁶ As Kathy Peiss explains, “Many young women defined themselves sharply against the freer sexuality of their pleasure-seeking sisters, associating ‘respectability’ firmly with premarital chastity and circumspect behavior.”¹⁷ There was a greater need to negotiate the respectability of sexual encounters in terms of specific motivations. Were women pursuing a freer sexuality purely for sexual delectation? Or, was the primary incentive to find a husband?¹⁸ Either way, female morality and exhibitions of sexuality came under cultural scrutiny. This cultural anxiety was borne out of demographic trends that revealed a prevalence of divorce and illegitimacy.¹⁹ Moreover, of increasing importance was the portrait of the woman as more vulnerable and susceptible to vice in the context of a congested urban and industrial society.²⁰ As Jane Addams, a prominent social reformer, explained, “Only the modern city has offered at one and the same time every possible stimulation for the lower nature and every opportunity for secret vice.”²¹ Addams, and her contemporaries in the social reform movement, suggested that domesticity was the most logical way to save the newly sexualized, young, unmarried, working-class female from social ruination:²² “She is in peril which threatens the ruin of her whole life; and the situation demands immediate attention ... [her] only hope of rescue seems to lie in prompt removal from old

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Peiss, “‘Charity for Girls’ and City Pleasures,” 84.

¹⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue,” 436.

²⁰ Ibid., 438.

²¹ Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 105.

²² Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue,” 443.

surroundings and associates.”²³

Ann Schofield explains that with the effervescence of industrial capitalism, “an additional polarity further defined women’s secondary status: the evolution of separate, noncompeting labour markets labelled ‘male’ and ‘female’.”²⁴ In concordance with the increased commodification of labour at the turn of the nineteenth century, women’s work was not seen as an obligatory practice. Rather, women relied on the pragmatism of the labour market to secure jobs; they were valued as workers only when it served employers economically.²⁵ But, as notions of sex began to change, particularly in the workplace, women “self-internalized” their image, thus establishing solidarity on the issue of a woman free to make her own choices.²⁶ So, it is amongst the working class where the social and economic independence of the Progressive Era manifested itself most clearly.²⁷ As a result, new arenas (both in and out of the workplace) for the expression of female sexuality challenged the conservative conceptions of femininity.

Between 1870 and 1920 the number of women in the labour force increased from 1.72 million to 8.28 million.²⁸ The demographics, especially amongst female factory and retail sales workers, indicate that the large majority of these women were adolescent. In a statistical survey of 4017 women employed in the manufacturing industry in New York, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia conducted in 1915 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 71%

²³ Sophonisba P. Breckinridge and Edith Abbott, *The Delinquent Child and the Home: A Study of the Delinquent Wards of the Juneville Court of Chicago* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1912), 41.

²⁴ Ann Schofield, “From ‘Sealskin and Shoddy’ to ‘Pig-Headed Girl,’” 115.

²⁵ Kleinberg, “Systematic Study of Urban Women,” 23.

²⁶ Caroline F. Ware, “Introduction,” in *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, eds. M. Cantor and B. Laurie (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 16-18.

²⁷ Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue,” 438.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

of women were between the ages sixteen and twenty-four.²⁹ It is within this contextual prevalence of young, unmarried working-class women that the intricacies of workplace sexuality become visible. While a tableau of the communality of workplace culture is necessary, it would be prudent to first examine the roots of conservative femininity that were instilled in young, working-class women before they even sought out work. In the first three decades of the twentieth century 10-25 percent of working-class women lived outside of their immediate family.³⁰ The socio-cultural implications of living at home or on one's own were significant. To live at home had an air of respectability while a woman that lived alone was vulnerable to accusations of sordid behaviour. Moreover, the paltriness of the woman's wage usually forced independent women into living in dangerous and suspect areas.³¹ That is not to say that working-class women did not rely on the family dynamic for economic protection and emotional and psychological stability anyway. Social service centers and religious institutions in working-class living areas were reluctant to help sustain independent women bordering on destitution because it was unprofitable.³² To some, however, the possession of a family identity ostensibly made it easier to have a social life and engage in romance. As Tentler explains, "Life outside the family was difficult for women because extra-familial institutions did not offer them the emotional security, the social status, the easy personal identity of family membership."³³ The importance of a familial association was illustrated by the New York State Factory Investigating Commission in 1915:

²⁹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Summary of the Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*. Women in Industry Series No. 5, Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor Statistics No. 175 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), 16.

³⁰ Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

³² *Ibid.* Because these independent, working-class women were so poor there was no money to be made even by offering "singles" rooms.

³³ *Ibid.*, 135.

Many girls prefer to live with private families. "I live with a missus" is the recurring explanation of an immigrant shop girl. To her this is the nearest approach to home—for it is not unwonted that the "Missus" is a relative or friend, "landsluete"—it is more respectable, more safe than living totally apart from kith and kin. Moreover the family, which is so often driving the world from the door, will time and again countenance a falling behind in the board bill, when the girl is out of work. "Don't I know what it means to be out of a job" many a kindly woman will say. "She is like my own child. How could I put her out? The little we have will have to go a bit further for a while." On the other hand the girls repay in kind, giving their services in every conceivable way. To quote Jennie, who lives very closely: "When I don't work I look after the three children and the home. My Missus was deserted by her husband. She depends lots on my rent. Now I must go and live with my sister, because her husband is out of work. But first I must find someone to take this room."³⁴

From this, it becomes apparent that working-class women who lived in a family atmosphere adopted conservative values about femininity. Additionally, by 1910 wage-earning working-class women were making between \$9 and \$10 a week. Wage earning gave young, unmarried a sense of independence from the confines of family as well as a new motivation to explore areas of entertainment.³⁵ However, this independence was just a facade. While those who lived independently had to commit a substantial por-

³³ *Ibid.*, 135

³⁴ Marie S. Orenstein, "How the Working Girl of New York Lives," New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report Transmitted to Legislature*, February 15, 1915, Senate Doc. 43, vol. 4, app. 2 (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1915), 1700-1701.

³⁵ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 51.

tion of their wage to rent, food and clothing, those who lived with families contributed nearly all of their earnings to the family and were left with very little to spend on social activities.³⁶ According to economist Claudia Goldin, 86 percent of young women living with their own families gave all of their earnings to their parents.³⁷ Therefore, the family had oblique control over a woman's sexuality as a way of inhibiting her exploration and expression in heterosexual environments. The sexual liberation of the working-class female was linked inextricably to economic dependence.³⁸ These women were very much imbued not only with female sexual limitations but with their own socio-economic realities, and it is important to examine how this translated into the workplace community where social, economic and sexual autonomy were impacting the way in which femininity was defined.

The workplace community was inherently paradoxical. As Leslie Woodcock Tentler explains, "Young women brought to the job conservative values about femininity learned at home and in school. And in their very struggle for adolescent independence, they reinforced for one another and ultimately conservative orientation to their lives as women."³⁹ So, the workplace was a place where young, unmarried working-class women could acquire a sense of independence simply by exposure to the socio-sexual narratives of their peers.⁴⁰ However, because of the transient state of women's labor and the potential divisibility of the female workplace community there was a tendency to establish a code of behavioral norms, and furthermore, a structure of conformity based around the discussion of social relations.⁴¹ Social life was of singular importance in extraneous workroom discussion; social functions, clothing, romantic interests all superseded interest in labour

³⁶ Peiss, "Charity Girls' and City Pleasures," 80-81.

³⁷ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 51.

³⁸ Abrams, "Guardians of Virtue," 439.

³⁹ Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 68, 71.

concerns such as wages or working conditions.⁴² Mrs. Van Vorst, a Chicago factory worker, provides insight into the usual areas of discussion amongst females in the workplace:

The subjects are the same as elsewhere—dress, young men, entertainment. The girls have “beaux” and “steady beaux.” The expression, “Who is she going with?” means who is her steady beau. “I’ve got Jim Smith now, but I don’t know whether I’ll keep him,” means that Jim Smith is on trial as a beau and may become a “steady.” They go to Sunday night subscription dances and arrive Monday morning looking years older than on Sunday, after having danced until early morning. “There’s nothing so smart for a ball,” the mundane of my team tells us, “as a black skirt and white silk waist.”⁴³

While it may seem that working-class women used discussion of their social lives as an escape from the monotony of factory routine, sexually stereotyped values still developed from the conformity of the work community. Mrs. Van Vorst lamented:

I long to be in the hum and whirl of the busy workroom. Two days of leisure without resources or amusements make clear to me how the sociability of factory life, the freedom from personal demands, the escape from self can prove a distraction to those who have no mental occupation, no money to spend on diversion. It is easier to submit to factory government which commands five hundred girls with one law valid for all...⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 71.

⁴³ Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst, *The Woman Who Toils: Being the Experiences of Two Gentlewomen as Factory Girls* (Toronto: George N. Morang, Co. Limited, 1903), 132-33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

Again, a dichotomy develops in the way in which the meaning of femininity was translated to these unmarried working-class women. Femininity was conveyed in a decidedly romantic way. Women would gossip about the social atmosphere outside of the factory or store, gregariously comparing tales of dancehalls, nickelodeons and encounters with the opposite sex.⁴⁵ However, the benefits of this gossip were illusory. The camaraderie and intimacy that were created from discussion of same social experiences were fleeting because of the high turnover rates in female employment.⁴⁶ Therefore, what became the most realistic possibility of liberation from the mores of working-class life, and the most convenient way to material prosperity, was marriage. There was a prevailing belief that marriage was a reprieve from the difficulties of wage labour.⁴⁷ For example, women were much more eager to work in environments where there would be strong heterosocial interaction—such as department stores—because there was greater potential to meet a mate.⁴⁸ Along conservative lines, marriage would offer financial stability. Interestingly, Tentler parallels the romanticism of married life with liberal sexual expression in the workplace: “Perhaps collective fantasies about the possibilities of matrimony helped to obscure for the young the still harsh realities of early twentieth-century working-class life, endowing domesticity with a romantic glow.”⁴⁹

This concept was reinforced by the early twentieth-century social reform movement. Instead of focusing attention on the economic practicalities of marriage, social reformers saw matrimony as a way of curbing the perceived destitution and sexual improprieties of the working-class woman. Addams said that “the long hours, the lack of comforts, the low pay, the absence of recreation,

⁴⁵ Schofield, “From ‘Sealskin and Shoddy’ to ‘The Pig-Headed Girl,’” 115.

⁴⁶ Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 72. Among other things, this included seasonal employment.

⁴⁷ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 45.

⁴⁸ Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 73.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

the sense of 'good times' all about which she cannot share" contributed to the working-class woman's increased inclination towards both emotional and physical escapism.⁵⁰ The realities of factory and retail labour and domestic housework led social reformers of the time to believe that marriage—the "safe port of domesticity"—was best for young, unmarried working-class women.⁵¹ Therefore, it becomes apparent that the communal work environment was repressive in the face of the progressive women's movement. Strong emphasis on maintaining a traditional social structure placed errant sexual and romantic behaviour as dangerous to the "natural" order.⁵²

Two questions of particular importance to this study are: How did communal work environments allow women to express their sexuality? Subsequently, how did female sexuality manifest itself in working-class life? The sexually-segregated workplace allowed for a heightened sexual consciousness, especially amongst women, and provided a private atmosphere for what came to be relatively suggestive and profane talk.⁵³ A study of department store clerks in 1914 noted the crudeness of conversation:

While it is true that the general attitude toward men and sex relations was normal, all the investigators admitted a freedom of speech frequently verging upon the vulgar, but since there was very little evidence of any actual immorality, this can probably be likened to the same spirit which prompts the telling of risqué stories in other circles.⁵⁴

This workplace discourse on sexuality was between both married and single and experienced and green women. The social free-

⁵⁰ Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, 77.

⁵¹ Abrams, "Guardians of Virtue," 445.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 448.

⁵³ Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures," 80.

⁵⁴ Frances Donovan, *The Woman Who Waits* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 42., quoted in Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures," 80.

doms of a sex-segregated workplace allowed for women to openly discuss their heterosocial relationships and despite the refinement that was associated with holding a job, particularly for those working in the retail industry, working women embraced the opportunity to communicate their sexual pursuits and educate each other on the nuances of finding a man.⁵⁵ Moreover, the nature of the work itself had considerable impact on how sexuality was manifested. New labour patterns, such as the explosion of the garment trade, not only contributed to sex-typing but created different expectations in the workplace.⁵⁶ Retail and factory labour was preferred amongst young, unmarried, American-born women because it was more of a contractual obligation; work was for a set period of time unlike domestic service, which left little time for leisurely and personal endeavours.⁵⁷ For example, by 1912 New York had past legislation establishing a nine-hour work day and fifty-hour work week for women.⁵⁸ Kathy Peiss explains that this, and similar legislation, was passed in order to “safeguard women’s health and reproductive capacities.”⁵⁹ Was the workload lightened not only to preserve the chastity of female sexuality but also so that women could function as they were supposed to? Mrs. Van Vorst recorded a dialogue that would suggest that women did not have ample time to pursue leisure on top of their work obligations, leaving them fatigued and unproductive:

“I was out to a ball last night,” the young one says. “I stayed so late I didn’t feel a bit like getting up this morning.” “That’s nothing,” another retorts. “There’s hardly an

⁵⁵ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 50.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 43. This was the standard even into the 1920s. It marked a progressive trend beginning in 1880 that saw women’s work days shortened hourly. In 1885 women worked ten to seventeen hours per day and by 1911 studies showed that “almost two-third of... female wage-earners worked less than ten hours daily.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

evening we don't have company at the house, music or somethin'; I never get enough rest."⁶⁰

Because of what was bred in the workplace, sexual expression became an embedded part of social familiarity. The conflicting realities of workplace labour and traditional family tenets disabled working-class women from aptly negotiating an appropriate meaning of chastity in their daily lives.⁶¹ Very simply, the inequitable conditions of labour, along with a newfound sense of sexuality, pushed women to explore that sexuality outside of the workplace.⁶²

While many women had limited motivations in their socio-sexual activity, such as the basic pursuit for entertainment, others were able to use their sexuality for economic gain. The mid-nineteenth-century archetype of the Victorian "rowdy girl" was the forerunner of what was to become the Progressive Era pleasure-oriented working woman.⁶³ Especially amongst immigrant families, where the social structures were still traditional and the women wholly domesticated, young working-class women began exploring their sexuality through cultural entertainment. The social reform movement at the turn-of-the-nineteenth century tried to curb the upsurge in sexual expression by implementing moralistic conceptions of chastity and working toward the containment of "wayward girls."⁶⁴ Social reformers such as Addams and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge suggested that sex and other immoral behavior offset hardships of the workplace, like low wages and long hours. For example, at the end of a long day, suffering from fatigue and depression, a woman might be inclined to allow a man to "take her home", too weak to resist the temptation.⁶⁵ However,

⁶⁰ Van Vorst and Van Vorst, *The Woman Who Toils*, 23.

⁶¹ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 110.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁴ Abrams, "Guardians of Virtue," 443, 447.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 448.

social reformers chose not to place blame on the women themselves as this would skew the conceptions of chastity were intrinsic to a woman's nature. As Peiss explains, "Although the social reformers may have acknowledged a female sex instinct, they still characterized young women's sexual experiences as divorced or alienated from innate desire. This contradiction reflects their deep attachment to Victorian ideas about "proper" womanhood, including the archetype of the asexual wife and mother."⁶⁶ Ostensibly, women were not responsible for their sexual conduct; it was the immorality of undomesticated social activity that would have a significant impact on the chastity of working-class women.⁶⁷

While working-class women pursued suspect behaviour to break away from the patriarchal vexations of the family and the workplace, they also did so to define themselves as independent and self-sustainable, creating a feminine identity vastly different from that of their matriarchal forebears.⁶⁸ However, because young, unmarried working-class did not always have the financial wherewithal to survive in a pleasure-oriented culture they had to turn to morally ambiguous methods of pursuing fun. Thus, they used their sexuality to their advantage. Perhaps the most prevalent apotheosis is that of the "charity girl." The "charity girl" subscribed to the process of treating; that is, in return for entertainment—dinner, dancing, the theatre—they provided sexual favours, both platonic and not. George Kneeland, a New York vice reformer in the 1920s found that "charity girls" "offer themselves to strangers, not for money, but for presents, attention and pleasure, and, most important, a yielding to sex desire."⁶⁹ Of course,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kathy Peiss, "Gender Relations and Working-Class Leisure: New York City, 1880-1920," in *To Toil the Livelong Day": Americas Women at Work, 1780-1980* eds. C. Groneman and M.B. Norton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 109.

⁶⁹ George J. Kneeland, "Memorandum on the Relationship between Low Wages and the Vice Problem," New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report of the Factory Investigating Commission*, February 15, 1915, Senate Doc. 43, vol. 1, app. 3 (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1915), 403.

there was a fine line between treating and prostitution, although “charity girls” did not take money in exchange for sexual favours.⁷⁰ Instead, they “were eager to see life, have better clothes, [and] more excitement.”⁷¹ This seemingly outward expression of liberal sexuality must be seen in the context of the continued female dependency on an able provider; just as a woman would turn to her family for socio-economic stability, she could now turn to a male companion for similar gains.⁷² Thus, the realities of working-class life had significant impact on how young, unmarried working-class women expressed their sexuality outside of the workplace. Active social participation usually required a companion for economic support. Regardless of its questionable morality in conservative eyes, treating was just another example of female atavism to traditional feminine constructions.⁷³

The realities of the workplace and the socio-sexual actions of women in an increasingly pleasure-oriented culture forced young, unmarried working-class women to find new ways to express their sexuality. However, conservative feminine constrictions continued to play a role in how femininity was constructed in the face of the burgeoning sexual movement. The dualism of the working-class female experience was such that women could obtain a level of autonomy through actions such as treating but ultimately, thanks to the ubiquitous conception of chastity that was chronically assigned to women, and material dependency, both in the pursuit of marriage and entertainment, women were limited in their social and economic freedom.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Peiss, “‘Charity Girls’ and City Pleasures,” 81.

⁷¹ Kneeland, “Low Wages and the Vice Problem,” *Fourth Report*, 407.

⁷² Peiss, “Gender Relations and Working-Class Leisure,” 110.

⁷³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 114.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*