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Contesting the Boundaries of Womanhood: Female Reformers and Sex-Workers in Memphis, 1880-1920

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Authors	Cundiff, Ashley
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Introduction

On any given day in the year 1900, Mrs. J. C. Ottinger would wake in her plush home near the bustling downtown of Memphis, Tennessee. She would dress in a long silk gown, fitted tightly to emphasize her waist, created by her corset. Upon fixing her hair and leaving her home and children in good order, Mrs. J. C. Ottinger would begin work as the corresponding secretary of the Women's Christian Association, concerned about finishing this year's annual report and bringing the many project supervisors together to ensure a productive meeting. She would spend the day socializing with her fellow reformers, discussing the latest cases at the Ella Oliver Refuge or reviewing applications to the Anne Brinkley Home. By mid-afternoon, Mrs. J.C. Ottinger might be returning to her home, visiting with her children, setting the menu for dinner, and awaiting her husband's return from work.

While Mrs. J.C. Ottinger began work at the Women's Christian Association, Dilla Bohu might be just waking at Biddie Sayer's brothel on Gayoso Street. Starting the day later because of her long evening, Dilla might begin her morning with some time to herself, reading her favorite book or drawing. Soon, breakfast would be served around noon, followed by chores such as washing the used sheets and dresses from the night before, and finally, dressing again for the next evening. Dilla's evening would just be beginning on Gayoso as Mrs. J.C. Ottinger prepared for bed just down the road. While Mrs. J.C. Ottinger slept, Dilla would be asked to entertain gentlemen in the ballroom of the brothel. Her dress would be tightly fitted and cut low to reveal her physical assets. Soon, after being chosen by one of the men, she would retire with him to her bedroom, sometimes having a client stay all night and only sleeping a few hours alone before her

day began again. Beyond the names, this scenario is fictional but it highlights the different worlds in which reformers like Mrs. J.C. Ottinger and sex-workers, like Dilla Bohu lived. Rather than simply coexisting, these women represented two competing definitions of womanhood during this period. Soon, their lives would clash over issues of morality, sexual purity, and most of all, power.

In examining the relationship between female reformers in Memphis, Tennessee and their targets, the question of power and who wields it consistently arises. At first glance, it would appear that the reformers exercised power over the sex-workers they were attempting to rescue. Yet, this answer is reductive. Both the sex-workers and reformers believed they had power. Within their separate society, prostitutes wielded power through the sale of their bodies for profit. Control of economic resources, in turn, allowed some measure of autonomy from masculine domination. But, by virtue of their occupation, sex-workers gave up power and control over a part of themselves – separating their emotional ties to their bodies in order to make money from them. Female reformers also believed they had power, which can be easily recognized by their desire to reform, which became a route to gain public influence, and thus represented resistance to the confines of domesticity. Assuming the role of reformers, these women immediately indicated their belief in their own moral superiority, by claiming that their social mores were superior to the groups they targeted. Given the negative stigma connected to prostitution, the reformers might appear to be correct – rescuing women from sex-work seems like a noble cause. Yet, in examining their motives closely, reformers utilized their power not simply to rescue sex-workers but also to enforce hegemonic norms concerning the female body and social roles. What is more, similar to sex-workers,

reformers did not acknowledge the domination forced on their own bodies through their own social mores and definitions of womanhood. The late Victorian ideal of womanhood stressed female sexual purity and exaggerated feminine characteristics, particularly in dress. Thus, despite both groups' belief that they wielded power, neither actually claimed power without cost.

Power can be defined as control over one's own individual agency and that of subordinated groups. It is more easily wielded by those in hegemonic positions – meaning those occupying the social positions of white, heterosexual, Christian men – a social truth appearing both in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century and today. In Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, she coins the term “matrix of domination,” which she defines as “intersecting oppressions,” wherein “race...class, gender, sexuality, religion, and citizenship status” are “significant [markers] of group difference.”¹ That is, gender, race, class, and sexuality function as categories of privilege and exclusion. Once an individual is demarcated as “deviant” or “different” from the empowered, he/she is then oppressed in varying degrees, depending on where he/she is situated in the hierarchy. Hill Collins' terminology is particularly useful in understanding white female reformers' focus only on other white women. A majority of the female reformers in Memphis working on sex-work eradication were white. Thus, they benefited from white privilege, however unwittingly. Identifying as white, these women employed that social position to express their superiority to prostitutes of color whom they dismissed as unredeemable. They believed in the notion of “white slavery” to justify their reform work. White slavery was

¹ Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 23.

the idea that young, white females were being lured into sex-work by other deviants for the purpose of destroying their moral purity and turning them into sexual predators. White, female reformers framed their rescue mission with this idea, claiming that they were working to save True Womanhood.² The club records of these reformers contained no information about helping African American women. Given the period, it can be assumed that clubs were segregated and as a result, it is notable that these there were not separate reform activities targeting women of color. The reformers reflected this matrix of domination as they defined by race which female bodies were to be considered deviant and morally depraved and which were worth “saving.”

Still, the matrix of domination does not fully explain the gender oppression occurring during this period. According to Hill-Collin’s theory, both reformers and prostitutes were subordinated because they were female – i.e. not male. But, in examining their relationship closely, it is apparent that it was fraught with the struggle to define womanhood. Thus, a new term needs to be employed in order to understand the ways that the meanings of womanhood were being contested between prostitutes and reformers.

Here, Michel Foucault’s idea of a “discipline” fills the intellectual gap. But before explaining this construct, Foucault’s idea of power must be acknowledged. Foucault believes that power is a coercive form of domination that exists on every level of human existence. He does not necessarily believe in the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed, wherein one group holds all the power and the other holds none. Yet,

² In her article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter coined this term to describe an ideology of gender that defined women as moral guardians of home and family, based on the presumption of their innate purity and piety. For more information see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18:2 (1966): 151-174.

power differences are fundamental to understanding the complicated relationship between reformers and their targets. Although the reformers do not hold all the power over their targets, they do have more power than the prostitutes in this particular situation by virtue of their membership in a hegemonic race and class, as white, middle-class, “respectable” women.

Foucault explains the more complicated details of this relationship better than Collins. A “discipline” as defined by Foucault is the “[method] which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility...”³ That is, the performance of certain behaviors and the presentation of one’s body through posture, clothing, or deportment are learned activities that reinforce a person’s subordination within established power relations. As such, from the madam to the lowliest prostitute, the sex-work industry had a discipline through which each person signaled their involvement in sexual commerce and thus, their place in a social hierarchy. Discipline means something different depending on a person’s social situation.⁴

Similar to Foucault’s example of the soldier being formed, prostitutes must be “made” so that “posture is gradually corrected, a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning into the automatism of habit.”⁵ Like a soldier, a prostitute is taught through attention to detail and “discipline” that she must be ready to sacrifice her body at any point.

Prostitutes are not given the same reverence as soldiers because they sacrifice their

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977) 137.

⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 139.

⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

bodies for money, not the glorified notions of heroism. Within Foucault's understanding, the body is a site of power, in a world where all bodies are made "docile" through discipline.⁶ According to Foucault, these disciplines work on the individual level, working to control the efficiency and activity of the body, and are a "constant coercion."⁷ In other words, prostitutes practiced the discipline of displaying themselves and acting in ways that they knew would invite male customers. Although a prostitute's decision to enter the sex trade sometimes reflected her own agency, this occupation was itself a symptom of women's sexual and economic subordination.

It must be acknowledged that disciplines do not solely affect those in entirely demeaning social positions, like sex-workers. Rather, disciplines can be seen at every level of life. As such, the reformers also had a discipline governing their power: True Womanhood.⁸ Utilizing Foucault's construct, it is clear that the reformers were also trained to play a constructed role in society as "docile bodies." They were obsessed with female sexual and moral purity, presenting this idea through their dress, manner, and speech. The reformers believed so greatly in their discipline that they attempted to make women, like sex-workers, conform to True Womanhood. It is here that Foucault is particularly useful in understanding the deeper reasons behind misunderstandings between reformers and their targets. Both groups of women believed their respective disciplines were necessary, and both remained caught in a web of domination that positioned women as subordinates.

Overall then, the relationship of reformer to sex-worker was fraught with competing disciplines of womanhood. Both disciplines coerced and took away power.

⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

⁸ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood."

Neither group arrived at a means to get out of this form of domination, despite their illusions. Still, with this project, I do not want to convey a post-structuralist fatalistic outlook.⁹ Rather, through employing Hill-Collins concept of the matrix of domination by gender, race, class, and Foucault's notion of "discipline," I hope to show the interplay of female agency and larger systems of hierarchical order. This study will expose those complicated relationships in the hope that they can be recognized and combated. Moreover, this thesis eradicates the binary of saintly reformers and sinful sex-workers and illustrates that both groups of women faced domination in some fashion and neither demonstrated freedom from subordination. Still, both groups contested their subordination, leaving a poignant record of female agency.

Ultimately, this project both weighs in on the historiographical debate about the nature of the Progressive era and more broadly, the implications of female subordination and lack of power during this period. Arguably, the female reformers were conservative in their efforts to eradicate prostitution, working within a construct of womanhood that lacked sexual and individual freedom on many levels. Indeed, rather than be viewed as "Progressive," the Women's Christian Association and the reformers within it, might be seen as one example of how the Progressive era was not progressive but instead, a period of imposition of manners and mores by the middle class onto the working class. What is more, the story of the reformers and sex-workers in Memphis shows the strength and

⁹ Although I utilize Foucault as a major theorist in this work, his arguments about power have often been viewed as fatalistic. He does not provide a way out of the system of power governing individual's bodies and life. As a historian, I cannot entirely remove agency from the picture, as that would be reductive. Thus, when utilizing Foucault, I employ his ideas but temper them with those of Hill-Collins, showing through this project how women, despite their subordination, worked within the system to survive and sometimes, thrive.

pervasiveness of gender hierarchies. Neither group of women could transcend the constraints of their respective worlds.

Chapter 1

The Road to Reform: Memphis, Tennessee from 1870 to 1920

Before engaging in specific discussions about prostitution and reform, the history of Memphis must be explained to demonstrate how Memphis developed during the period that the city industrialized. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, industrial success brought a double-edged sword for Memphis. It increased productivity but at the same time, increased the number of women in the working class. The migration of working-class women to the cities resulted in an increased number of sex-workers, as many young women did not have other options for economic survival. In seeing the demographics of the city, its industrial boom, and the reaction of women's clubs, it can be more easily recognized as to why, at this particular historical moment, women's clubs decided to reform prostitution.

After the Civil War, Memphis prospered more than many other Southern cities because it did not see the same destruction from the war as the rest of the South. As a port city, Memphis held a unique position on the Mississippi River, becoming a center for cotton growers to ship their products from throughout the Mississippi Delta. Unfortunately, the upward mobility of Memphis halted in the summer of 1878. By mid-July, reports of a deadly disease began to travel up river from New Orleans and within a month, a yellow fever epidemic had begun in Memphis. This disease changed the face of Memphis, TN and halted its growth significantly. In the 1878 epidemic, more than half the city's population evacuated, with only 6,000 white citizens remaining in the city. Many African Americans did not have the economic means to leave the city, so around

14,000 remained through the duration of the epidemic.¹⁰ The death toll reached 5,000 among the combined white and African-American population, a blow to the city from which it would take years to recover.

Before the Yellow Fever epidemic hit in 1878, Memphis elite women had attempted a small movement of reform. Although official women's clubs had not been developed in Memphis yet, several women stand out as the forerunners to the reform movements seen over the next twenty years. Lide and Elizabeth Meriwether were notable women's rights advocates. Elizabeth Meriwether focused on a large number of issues, including religious discrimination and suffrage.¹¹ Lide Meriwether also spoke out on several issues involving women's rights, most importantly, her critique of sexual double standards for women. Lide Meriwether, through her book *Soundings*, written in 1872, instigated the first reform movement in Memphis, trying to help female sex-workers. Discussing her experiences in Memphis with female sex-workers, Meriwether paints a bleak picture of "glare and din," where the once "beautiful faces" of sex-workers now reflect a "hard, joyless, desperate" disposition. She calls her sisters to acknowledge their "*Sister's* blood" and help these women out of their despair.¹² Meriwether goes on to say that this side of Memphis society is ignored by "polite society" and that if "one true, womanly heart shall be awakened to kindly thoughts, and deeds of charity and love; if but one lost and despairing woman could be reclaimed from sin's dark path, and brought to the glad sunlight of happiness and peace, I ask no greater reward."¹³ She

¹⁰ Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003) 63.

¹¹ Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 22-25.

¹² Lide Meriwether, *Soundings* (Memphis, TN: Boyle and Chapman Publishers, 1872) 13.

¹³ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 15-17.

points out the clear stigma attached to this work and accuses her fellow Memphians, particularly women, of not supporting their sisters in their time of need, something she saw as a Christian duty.¹⁴ Lide Meriwether can be seen as the first woman to seriously engage in a discussion about sex-work in Memphis, helping lay the groundwork for the reform movement seen at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵

By 1880 and through 1890, Memphis began rebuilding in the wake of the yellow-fever epidemic, and like the rest of the country, began to experience an industrial revolution. This revolution brought with it not only prosperity to Memphis but also increased urban progress. On May 12, 1892, the “Great Mississippi River Bridge” opened, with around 50,000 people watching the ceremony. As Beverly Bond and Janann Sherman argue in *Memphis in Black and White*, “the opening of the Great River Bridge symbolized Memphis’ emergence as a New South city.”¹⁶ By 1892, the population had almost doubled since the epidemic. Transportation was being revolutionized, with the first street cars, a new railroad, paved streets, and street lamps.¹⁷ Learning their lessons from the epidemic, Memphis city officials also cleaned up their water and sewer system.¹⁸ The cities economy was booming and soon, it became a safe, progressive place to live.

¹⁴ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 25-29 and 42-43.

¹⁵ For more information on the growing national reform movement that began during the 1880s and moved through the 1920s see Linda J. Ryndbrandt, “The “Ladies of the Club” and Caroline Bartlett Crane: Affiliation and Alienation in Progressive Social Reform,” *Gender and Society* 11, no. 2 (1997): 200-214.; Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.; Kathryn Anderson, “Practicing Feminist Politics: Emily Newell Blair and U.S. Women’s Political Choices in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 50-72.; Jill Kerr Conway, “Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870-1930,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (1971-72): 164-77.; For information on Working-Class women’s experiences see Sarah Deutsch, “Learning to Talk More like a Man: Boston Women’s Class-Bridging Organizations, 1870-1940,” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (1992): 379-404.

¹⁶ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 66.

¹⁷ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 66-67.

¹⁸ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 67.

After the city was revived, the Memphis population began to stabilize. In 1890, 44% of the population was African Americans. For the labor force, this meant that 33% of the male laborers were African American and 75% of the female laborers were African American. Despite the large numbers of African Americans in Memphis, the city remained segregated. Several “black neighborhoods that began developing in the suburbs of the city in the post-Civil War period spread outward by the late nineteenth century.”¹⁹ All of the “hospitals, schools, churches, hotels, restaurants, and cemeteries” were segregated, an aspect of Memphis society that was not likely to change soon, as African Americans were not elected to the school board from the 1880s to the 1960s.²⁰ Segregation and subordination of blacks was enforced through vigilante violence. Indeed, the 1890s marked a peak of racial violence in Memphis, including an increase in the number of lynchings of African Americans.²¹ Ida B. Wells, a crusading black journalist, saw her friend Thomas Moss lynched in front of his own grocery store because he outsold his white competitors. Protesting the violence through a column in Memphis’ newspaper, *Free Speech*, Wells faced threats of lynching as well.²² In 1890, a black women’s club movement started, in response to the lynching in Memphis.²³

Despite racial violence, Memphis continued to prosper; by the turn of the twentieth century, the city had “quadrupled in size.” In 1899, the city “annexed 12 square miles to the east and north” of the original city. This change in size also resulted

¹⁹ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 71.

²⁰ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 71.

²¹ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 72.

²² Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996) 163.

²³ For more information on the African American women’s club movement see Paula J Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984.; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1910*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.

in a change in the economy of Memphis. The downtown began to be built, with some of the first skyscrapers of the city going up. Several new mills and factories opened, providing more jobs. Unfortunately, this prosperity did not change racial divisions. African Americans were still excluded from government, segregated into separate business and residential districts, and even prevented from attending publicly sponsored events like the Tri-State Fair.²⁴ Still, African Americans, particularly those of the lower classes, did find certain places to thrive, particularly Beale Street. Blues music was in full swing, with W.C. Handy at the helm. Furthermore, by 1900, a “small but significant group of black entrepreneurs opened businesses on Beale Street as a way to gain economic independence.” Although “known for its gambling houses, music, restaurants, saloons, and other places of entertainment,” it soon became a haven for African American economic, social, and religious interests.²⁵ Beale Street flourished as the site of “Black-owned banks, funeral homes, insurance, and real estate companies, newspapers” and churches.²⁶ Still, African Americans in Memphis had less political and social influence, dealing with racism at all levels of Memphis’ social structure. For example, E.H. Crump, often known as Boss Crump, ran the political machine in Memphis for nearly 30 years; he treated African Americans with a “paternalistic attitude.” During his mayoral stint from 1909 to 1916, Crump met only “a few of their needs,” and ultimately, reflected the racist notion that “black citizens” were “inferior to whites,” having a “proper place” excluded from white society and power.²⁷

²⁴ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 78.

²⁵ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, inc., 2000) 34.

²⁶ Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 35.

²⁷ Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 30-33.

The sex-work industry in Memphis mirrored the social and economic changes that the larger society experienced, growing and shrinking according to the pressures of the outside world. As Memphis began to bounce back from its many hardships, madams began to consolidate their business on the area surrounding Gayoso Street, forming Memphis' red-light district during the 1890s to 1900. Arguably, Memphis' sex-work industry became far more centralized at the turn of the twentieth century due to migration to urban areas. Jobs drew younger men and women from rural areas to the cities to help their families. Yet, many of these younger workers did not have the ability to survive harsh city life. Working-class jobs, ranging from factory work to sales clerking, paid low wages for long hours.²⁸ This was particularly true for white women and for women of color. Nationally, African American women's work can be broken down in the following chart:

Table 1²⁹

**Occupational Distribution of African American Women Workers,
1900-1980 (in Percent)**

	1900	1930	1960	1970	1980
Agriculture	44.2	24.7	3.7	1.3	0.5
Manufacturing	2.6	8.4	15.5	19.3	18.4
Private Household Service	43.5	53.5	39.3	17.9	5.0
Service (not Private Household)	7.9	7.5	23.0	25.5	24.2
Sales	0.1	0.6	1.6	2.6	6.1
Clerical	0.1	0.6	8.0	20.7	25.8
Professional & Technical	1.2	3.4	7.8	11.4	15.2
Managerial, Administrative, & Official	0.5	1.2	1.1	1.4	4.7

Notice that most African American women from 1900 to 1930 worked in agricultural work or private household service during this period. Very few numbers can be seen in

²⁸ For more information on the working-class situation outside of Memphis, TN see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

²⁹ Amott and Mathaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 158.

the better-paid jobs like sales, administrative, or professional work. As a result, African American women workers were more susceptible to the grasp of poverty and thus, fell into sex-work because of economic desperation.

Given the economic difficulties faced by the working classes, the rise of sex-work during this period as a centralized business makes sense. Although all of women's reasons for becoming prostitutes cannot be divined, one of the known causes was financial desperation. Sex-work, although physically and socially demeaning, provided a larger income than the average factory job, clerking position, or domestic service.³⁰

Despite its apparent affluence, prostitution clearly depended upon social toleration in Memphis – a dependence that would eventually lead to its downfall by 1920. During the late nineteenth century, Madams worked with local authorities, paying off the necessary parties and thus, avoiding sanction for their activities. Yet, by the turn of the century, Memphis' elite women began to form women's clubs, mimicking the nations' growing social consciousness. Women's clubs in Memphis were formed for many reasons, ranging from women's desire to socialize, to their desire to make changes in their cities. Several small reform groups formed in an effort to better Memphis. Some of these groups included the Women's Christian Association, the Nineteenth Century Club, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.³¹ The aforementioned clubs, boasting members from Memphis' white, female elite, worked to eradicate prostitution, improve city life, and prevent the sale and consumption of alcohol. Subsequently, the sex-work

³⁰ Evidence for the amount of money sex-workers received can be seen throughout Madeleine. In the beginning Madeleine, made less money (Around 10 dollars a week) but went up to around 500 a week. Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing) 64 and 204-205. (Publishing year is unavailable).

³¹ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 31-77.

industry could no longer work as easily with authorities to persist, but instead, had to be far more careful about their actions.

The elite women of Memphis did not view prostitution as an arena for female entrepreneurship or economic independence. Many female moral reformers believed in the idea of “white slavery.” This term was developed by a particular type of moral reformer who argued that single, white women from rural areas were in grave danger of being duped into prostitution by predatory men if they moved to urban centers. Moral reformers instilled fear in white society and thus, a passion to save the pure innocence of white women susceptible to sex-work, resulting in racialized reform. The term “white slavery” allowed reformers to believe that white women were not voluntarily prostitutes. For non-white sex workers, this added another social stigma, enhancing their oppression and preventing them from gaining help from reformers to get out of the business.³²

Although they still flourished by 1910, it was obvious that sex-work was no longer viewed as a necessary evil in Memphis. The all-white brothels were the first to be eradicated, reflecting the racialized understanding of the female body by reformers in Memphis. By 1920, all sex-workers were forced to go underground and thus, to the historian, they became largely undetectable. The national census manuscripts from 1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920, reflect the growth and fall of prostitution in Memphis.³³ Thus, while the elite women of Memphis struggled to find a place in the public sphere, they did so at the cost of working-class women in the sex-trade.

³² For more information on “white slavery,” see Mara L. Keire, “The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States, 1907-1917” *Journal of Social History* 35:1 (2001): 5-41. Or Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982).

³³ The 1890 census burned in a fire. As a result, the information from this census is not available to historians for further research of this period.

It was in this atmosphere of racial segregation, economic prosperity, and the emergence of the blues, that the reform movements of Memphis developed. Like the rest of the country, Memphis' industrial boom resulted in an increasing need for reform. Memphis' middle to upper class women stepped up to the challenge. Seeing reform as an opportunity to unthreateningly enter into the public sphere, Memphis women, following the national trend, began to form groups that would help them morally influence the city. Reform projects included everything from temperance to the "city beautiful" movement and park reform.³⁴

Two female groups worked specifically on prostitution: The Women's Christian Association (WCA) and the Nineteenth Century Club. The Women's Christian Association formed nationally in 1869. Its initial purpose, one that it held throughout its tenure in Memphis, was "to address problems faced by women in a newly urban, industrial America." Their first president, Elizabeth Fisher Johnson, developed a local chapter in 1875.³⁵ Given their mission statement, prostitution became a likely reform project. They were the founders of the Ella Oliver Refuge, a home for former sex-workers whom they sought to rescue from the evil ways of prostitution.³⁶ The Women's Christian Association continued to work throughout the late 19th to early 20th century in Memphis to reform prostitution and other issues plaguing young, white, working-class women in Memphis. There is no evidence to suggest that the WCA addressed the plight of African American prostitutes. It is likely that their focus on white prostitutes reflected the racial segregation of the era.

³⁴ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 2 and 5.

³⁵ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 31.

³⁶ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 40-41.

The other important women's club of this period was the Nineteenth Century Club. Founded in 1890, its initial purpose was to provide an intellectual and social location for Memphis' elite women who thirsted for knowledge. Elise Massey Selden founded the club. Unlike the Women's Christian Association, the Nineteenth Century Club did not directly work on the reform of prostitution. Rather, given its status as an upper-class club, it preferred not to become involved in messy reform projects that challenged its members' understanding of women's place in society. So, instead of becoming directly involved, they simply assisted the Women's Christian Association. For example, when the WCA continued to run into obstacles with the police force, the Nineteenth Century Club stepped in to give their weighty voice to the situation, asking the police force to cooperate with the WCA in the reform of prostitution.³⁷

Both of these women's groups represented a change in hegemonic understandings of womanhood. Women and reform in Memphis mimicked the larger society, in that women were no longer solely confined to the home in the middle to upper class America. They believed in their supposed moral superiority and decided to utilize their influence to try and make Memphis a better city to live in. In some ways, these women definitely succeeded. By 1910, Memphis citizens began to listen to female reformers and pay attention to issues like sex work on Gayoso Street. One of the turning points in prostitution reform came on October 16, 1913. Governor Hooper had returned to Memphis and in a speech, he compelled "local authorities to enforce" a "statewide law...called the "Nuisance Act."" This act, passed in 1913, "provided for the suppression of saloons, houses of prostitution, and gambling establishments by

³⁷ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 91.

injunction.”³⁸ Slowly, prostitution would vanish from the sight of respectable society in Memphis.

Overall then, a short history of Memphis during this period serves to lay the groundwork for the events of the late 19th to early 20th century. The 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic halted the first reform movement in Memphis and it did not begin again until the city regained its footing. Memphis boomed, like most of the rest of the country in the 1880s and 1890s, increasing their capitalistic enterprise and becoming progressive in their urban development. This industrial boom resulted in necessary reform, as Memphis’ women saw the many social ills ignored and yet caused by the capitalistic city. The Women’s Christian Association and the Nineteenth Century Club were the two main women’s clubs to focus on prostitution reform. The history of Memphis demonstrates both the growth of prostitution with the city’s economic boom, and the resulting clash between ideals of womanhood as both reformers and sex-workers fought for their identities to prevail.

³⁸ William D. Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957) 174.

Chapter 2

Gender and Sexuality in Memphis, TN during the Progressive Era

To some, gender and sexuality are given identities, static aspects of human nature, but when examined historically, it becomes clear that constructions of gender and sexuality change according to societies' social mores and consciousness.³⁹ This chapter will seek to understand American constructions of gender and sexuality from the late 1800s to the early 1900s in Memphis. Utilizing newspaper advertisements and stories, the expectations for mainstream white, middle and upper class gender roles and sexuality will be outlined. This information will later inform discussion of the relationship between sex workers and their reformers during this period. Most reformers clearly followed the mainstream norms of gender and sexuality during this period. Although working in the public sphere, these women believed in an ideology of womanhood that confined women to the domestic role, relying on men to provide economic support. Late Victorian gender ideology also described women as chaste before marriage and faithful within marriage. There was no place for female sexual activity outside of marriage. In contrast, sex-workers defined womanhood for themselves in a way that embraced both economic self-support and non-marital sexual activity, a definition that served to widen the gap between these two entities as they clashed during Progressive era. But, before this relationship can be truly analyzed, the white female reformers and mainstream white Memphians' understanding of gender and sexuality must be analyzed.

³⁹ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 28. Joan Scott, in her book *Gender and the Politics of History*, wrote about the necessity for historians to examine gender and sexuality in the historical narrative. Rather than assuming what roles men and women played in a certain period or how their sexuality affected their lives, historians must actively seek these answers and outline the historical understanding of these identities before embarking on any other type of analysis.

One can think of both gender and sexuality as ways to produce meaning. For the layperson, this means that gender and sexuality are identities assigned to individuals by outside forces in order to define, confine, and make sense of a person's existence. For example, when born, a child is assigned a sex, which then defines his/her gender. If a child is born with female anatomy, they are assigned the feminine gender, dressed in pink, called "sweetheart," and typically, given a gender specific name. In order to outwardly demonstrate her gender and avoid the constant question of their baby's sex, parents will typically dress the child in feminine clothing, tape bows to her hairless head, and inundate the child with dolls, play kitchen sets, and other typically "feminine" material props. Similarly, that same child is assumed to be heterosexual from birth. The trades taught to the child from birth are meant to fit them perfectly for a marriage to a man. The young girl takes on gender specific tasks in society, like cooking and cleaning alongside her mother. In contrast, the girl's hypothetical brother would be helping the father in the yard or the garage, mowing or fixing the car. These tasks are taught to create partners that would compliment one another in heterosexual marriage. Similarly, sexual mores were constructed to support heterosexual marriage in specific ways.

In her essay, "Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920," Judith L. Stephens explores the historical idea of gender in the Progressive era. Beginning in the 1800s, Stephens builds upon other scholarly sources to claim that "female reformers of the Progressive era openly embraced the moral hegemony nineteenth-century ideology bestowed upon middle-class women."⁴⁰ This ideology included women putting "religion, family, and a sense of moral duty" before

⁴⁰ Judith L. Stephens, "Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920," *Theatre Journal* 41, no.1 (1989), in Jstor [database on-line], accessed January 3, 2008, 3.

themselves. She discusses the importance of separate spheres during this period, in which men were relegated to the public sphere and women were relegated to private spheres, except in areas of important moral issues, for which they could enter public life as reformers.⁴¹ As Stephens points out, the process of appropriating traditional feminine values of moral superiority to enter the public sphere turned into a double edge sword for the women's movement of the period. It allowed women more freedom in the public sphere but it denied them full civil equality, since it affirmed female identity as separate and complementary to men, and thus left women's legal subordination unchallenged. By using the ideology of separate spheres, Stephens contends that women limited their "opportunities and power."⁴² Although Stephens' essay had a larger purpose for understanding gender as it applied to literature and drama, her background on the history of gender ideology is particularly useful for understanding traditional social norms for women in Memphis.

Another author, Kathryn Kish Sklar argues during the 1860s and 1870s that women's power lay in "the ability of women to speak for national welfare" in her article, "Organized Womanhood: Archival Sources on Women and Progressive Reform." By 1880, women had both the power of being the nation's moral guardians and the support derived from their relationships with one another, a political sisterhood institutionalized through women's clubs and reform groups. Sklar believes that this combination allowed for the success of these women during the Progressive era.⁴³ In understanding gender for Memphis female reformers, it must be noted that while in some ways women during this

⁴¹ Stephens, *Gender Ideology*, 3.

⁴² Stephens, *Gender Ideology*, 4.

⁴³ Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Organized Womanhood: Archival Sources on Women and Progressive Reform," *The Journal of American History* 75, no.1 (1988), in Jstor [database on-line], accessed January 3, 2008, 3.

era claimed elements of moral leadership in society, in other ways they remained subjugated to men's power. This contradiction will be revealed in Memphis culture through advertising and articles in the *Commercial Appeal* from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

Sexuality was a far more complicated issue during this period. Beyond heterosexual expectations, men and women had certain behavioral expectations concerning their sexual activity. For men, society often assumed sexuality to be a given and natural behavior, largely out of male control. As complementary opposites, women were expected to be the moral police of sexual purity, both protecting their own innocence and ensuring that they did not tempt men to act immorally. In her book, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, Mary E. Odem discusses the increased focus on sexual purity among young women in the Progressive era. Odem argues that middle to upper class female reformers began to police sexual behavior among adolescent girls through several different campaigns.⁴⁴ Similar to the double-edge sword perpetuated by the ideology of women's moral superiority, this campaign defined female sexual behavior as an activity in need of extreme control. In Memphis in 1900, the Women's Christian Association opened the Ella Oliver Refuge. Although meant to be a haven for prostitutes wanting to be reformed, the refuge instead became a home representing hegemonic notions of womanhood, race, and sexuality. In the application for admission to the refuge, women were forced to disclose all their sexual activity as sex workers. If a woman had gone back to prostitution more than once in her lifetime she was rejected. Similarly, if she

⁴⁴ Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 1-8.

were pregnant but promised to leave prostitution, she could live in the house.⁴⁵ The reformers believed these behavioral standards preserved female purity and showed which women truly desired to be reformed. These standards became uniform for the purity reform movement nationwide, and also became racialized, as far more African American women were turned away from refuge homes nationwide than white women. Sexual purity and worth was associated with whiteness and defined by hegemonic notions of womanhood.⁴⁶ When examining the clashing relationship between female moral reformers in Memphis and with the prostitutes they wished to reform, Odem's work makes it clear how different the sexual standards of the two groups nationwide were.

In *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman work to open the parameters of sexual history. They begin by attempting to define sexuality. They argue that it has been "associated with a range of human activities and values" such as the "procreation of children, the attainment of physical pleasure (eroticism), recreation or sport, personal intimacy, spiritual transcendence, or power over others."⁴⁷ Their book covers an extensive history of American sexuality but this definition is particularly useful for this project. Specifically, understanding sexuality as a power relationship clearly demonstrates the issues being expressed in the clash of values between reformers and their female targets in the sex trade. For reformers, female sexuality was acceptable only within a power relationship with one man, in which they were dominated, as will be demonstrated later in the paper. Consequently, the reformers feared the usurping of this definition of social order that prostitutes embodied, believing

⁴⁵ "Policy of the Board," *Commercial Appeal*, January 8, 1932.

⁴⁶ Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

⁴⁷ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1988) xv.

that many sex-workers, particularly non-white prostitutes, were hypersexual and predator-like.

In the late 19th to early 20th century Memphis, images of men and women in newspaper advertising suggest that gender was a particularly restrictive identity, particularly for women. Both men and women were expected to fulfill certain gender roles and the fulfillment of these gender roles resulted in social and cultural awards and acceptance. Taking Michel Foucault's work into account, gender was a "discipline" or set of behaviors, which individuals of this particular society were taught, to demonstrate their gender for cultural acceptance. How an individual carried themselves and presented their body affected how the rest of society perceived them. What is more, simple ideas about carriage and presentation of the body often reflected larger understandings of the male and female mind, and subsequently, the acceptable behavior they could partake in.⁴⁸

Figure 1



For men, carriage and presentation often took the forms of appearing masterful, proud, strong, and in control. Ironically, there are not many advertisements dealing with men's

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977) 137.

clothing or appearance in the same way that there are for women. But, one recurring advertisement in the *Commercial Appeal* demonstrates one aspect of the expectations for men during this period. A small advertisement, titled “Round Shoulders,” was for Dutro & Hewitt, a company selling shoulder braces. Its tag line reads, “Round shoulders are not possible when using our improved shoulder braces. They are chest expanders...”⁴⁹ Beyond the obvious purpose for the shoulder braces, the tag line implies that by having straight shoulders, a man will have more pride, puffing out his chest and feeling stronger than before. The phrase “chest expanders,” suggests more than just straightening men’s back and shoulder but also widening their entire being, making the man more formidable, having them take up more space, and show more strength. As such, the advertisement demonstrates one aspect of men’s performative gender role, in which they are supposed to have straight, proud shoulders- demonstrating their mastery over their world.

In contrast, women were expected to have a different type of carriage, one that diminished their power rather than bolstered it. In the *Commercial Appeal*, several advertisements present the corset as an answer for any woman not able to present the perfect female body. One such advertisement was for WB erect form corsets.⁵⁰ The advertisement, in contrast to the male back brace, takes up a quarter of the page, with a large woman wearing a lacy corset and slip. The image is sexually charged, showing her curves amply and even a trace of cleavage. The tag line reads:

“The erect form perfects an imperfect figure. Its lines are your lines. It follows the contour of the person, correcting ill grace here and there- but never inflicting harm or discomfort. You *must* have the special style meant just for you. Ask your dealer for *your* model.”

⁴⁹ “Round Shoulders,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

⁵⁰ “WB Erect Form Corsets,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 13, 1902.

Starting with the first line, the corset was meant to “perfect an imperfect figure” but do so, by following “the contour of the person.” Frankly, this portion contradicts itself. First, women during this period were being told that the figure they were born with was “imperfect” and that to correct this, they must wear a brace that crushes their waist, organs, and skin into 18 inches with whalebone and laces.

Figure 2



This “perfect” figure is impossible to have without the corset but the advertisement still claims that they are not attempting to change the female body into something it is not. They stress that the corset fits the individual, constantly utilizing the pronoun “you.” Rather than instill pride in women through bodily appearance of power like the male shoulder brace, the corset diminishes women’s ability to function. It results in difficulty in breathing, moving, or eating- all fundamental aspects to human existence. Thus, when women wear the corset, they become less human and less powerful. They literally and physically have less freedom than men because of the corset’s restrictions, making them

more submissive, and subsequently, subjugated to male power just through the gendered presentation of their bodies.

Both of these advertisements demonstrate the performative aspect of gender. Neither men nor women have perfect bodies according to their assigned gender and they both must work to correct their bodies to fit their gender roles. Yet, in this process of correcting, men are given more power than women- solidifying the hierarchy within this binary relationship, in which women were subordinate.

Given this subjugated role, women must be persuaded to maintain their particular gender identity. As such, there are several more aspects of the newspaper devoted to reinforcing women's particular social role, ranging from the socialite section, in which the proper way to debut a young girl to society is constantly reviewed, to the advertisements presenting standards for women's proper skin, clothes, and hair. Given the advertisement for the corset, it might seem that women have a simple appearance- a highly sexualized female body that they must dress after putting on the corset. However, looking at the *Commercial Appeal*, dressing the female body is a complicated business. In the social section in the Sunday *Commercial Appeal*, women were given a space to discuss matters of female interest. One article, titled "Toilets that Speak: Soul and Temperament of the Wearer Declared," discusses the importance of wearing the right gown in public for women. The article starts by declaring, "more character, poetry, and delicate sentiment can be expressed by an evening gown than any other costume a woman wears."⁵¹ According to this article, women's character was determined by their clothing. For example, the author believes that women who wear blue are often "sincere...unassuming...and not a bit grasping in their methods"; whereas, women who

⁵¹ "Toilets that Speak, *Commercial Appeal*, April 14, 1902.

wear red are thirsting for “attention.”⁵² These descriptions discourage women from self-assertion, either verbally or visually.

Figure 3



The implication is that women should be demure and passive, waiting to be noticed. So, what is the correct way to dress according to this article? Obviously, blue would be preferable to red but most importantly, a woman's clothing must express both feminine curves and also modesty. It is a balancing game. One picture inserted into the article shows a woman wearing a tight dress, drawn against her corseted body, showing her curves but also her elegance and demure nature. The author believes the dress is both “quiet” and “elegant,” showing that women must strike a balance between the two characteristics, both of them modest.⁵³

Other aspects of presenting the female body in turn-of-the-century Memphis include having perfect skin and hair. One advertisement for a skin cream states, “a skin

⁵² “Toilets that Speak, *Commercial Appeal*, April 14, 1902. See Figure 3.

⁵³ “Toilets that Speak, *Commercial Appeal*, April 14, 1902.

of beauty is a joy forever.”⁵⁴ Obviously trying to sell their product, the advertisers shamelessly attach beautiful skin to lifelong happiness.

Figure 4



This suggests that women were once again told by the hegemonic culture that their happiness lay in being beautiful according to the standards described in this paper. Looking deeper, this also implies that women do not necessarily find fulfillment through intellectual or spiritual stimulation but instead, receive it through being a beautiful woman. This advertisement defines women’s worth through their desirability to men: the more a woman drew a man’s gaze, the more worth she had. This was another passive role. If women were beautiful, they could then attract men and become wives and mothers, which, during this period, was their prescribed role for happiness. Similarly, another advertisement for Cuticura soap, intends its product to be used by “women and women only, especially mothers.” In an attempt to flatter their target audience, the advertisements claims that women “are the most competent to appreciate the purity, sweetness, and delicacy of Cuticura Soap and to discuss new uses for it daily.”⁵⁵ Thus, the advertisers equate women’s abilities of this period to be largely limited to the uses of

⁵⁴ “A Skin of Beauty is a Joy Forever,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 12, 1900.

⁵⁵ Cuticura Soap, *Commercial Appeal*, January 20, 1900.

soap and also, attempts to draw their audience through utilizing descriptors of ideal womanhood: “purity, sweetness, and delicacy.”

Figure 5



During this period, female sexuality and sexual expression were on the verge of a transition from restrictive to more open practices, but this was limited to the working class. For the upper echelons of society, female sexuality, like gender, was something to restrict through moral standards that confined women far more than men. As is evident by women’s clothing styles, women were fashioned into sexual objects, meant to be looked at, but not meant to be actively sexual. The soap advertisement’s image of “purity” further reinforced this norm, suggesting that good women were asexual. In contrast, men were encouraged to be sexual, at all costs.

Throughout the *Commercial Appeal*, several advertisements present the issue of male impotency and suggest certain solutions. Titled “Perfect Manhood,” one advertisement touts a five-day treatment to give back men’s ability to engage in sexual activity. Its tag line is “for lost manhood,” suggesting that manhood is closely linked to

sexual virility during this period.⁵⁶ Another product, by Cook Medical Company, jumps off the page with a large printed question: “Is Manhood Ever Lost?”⁵⁷ So, once again, the companies selling products to cure male impotency connect manhood to active sexual expression. This suggests that larger society also connects these two ideas, as the advertisers would not be able to sell their products if their targets would not buy into the ideas they are selling. The advertisement ends by claiming that its product will “restore... a man’s pride, a man’s power, a man’s privilege.”⁵⁸ Thus, it is quite clear during this period that one expression of male power lies in their active sexuality.⁵⁹

Figure 6

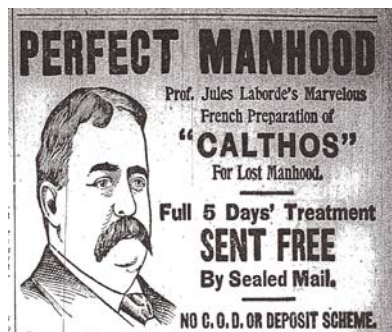


Figure 7



⁵⁶ “Perfect Manhood,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

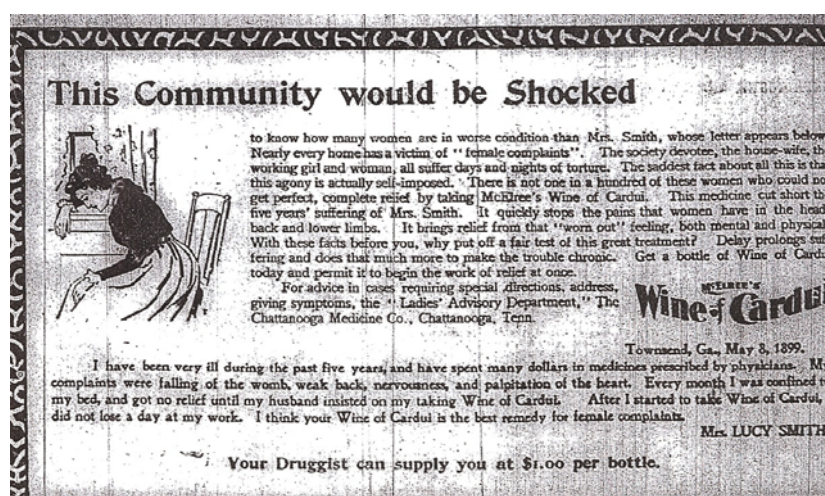
⁵⁷ “Is Manhood Ever Lost?,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

⁵⁸ “Is Manhood Ever Lost?,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

⁵⁹ To explore ideas about masculinity during this period see Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities In Modern America* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998). Or Sylvia D. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002).

In contrast, from sampling of different advertisements, women do not have the same power that men do to express their sexuality. In fact, women's sexuality lies mainly in the reproductive realm- highlighting the maternal role, rather than the sexual role. There are several advertisements dealing with alleviating the pain of menstruation. One such advertisement, for Wine of Cardui, begins with the headline: "This Community would be Shocked."

Figure 8

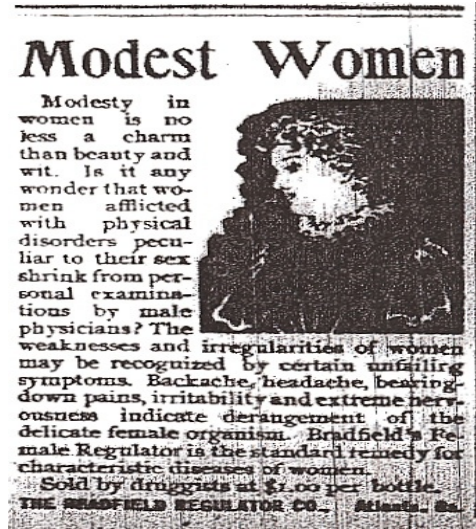


It claims that the pain and suffering resulting from menstruation are hidden from the community at large and desperately need addressing.⁶⁰ Another advertisement, titled "Modest Woman," which refers to menstruation as the "weakness and irregularities of women."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Wine of Cardui, *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

⁶¹ "Modest Woman," *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

Figure 9



Selling the Bradfield Regulator, the product claims that women constantly suffer from “backache, headache, bearing down pains, irritability, and extreme nervousness indicate derangement of the delicate female organism.”⁶² As this advertisement demonstrates, women were considered delicate, with easily disordered reproductive organs. They were not necessarily sexual beings, but rather, viewed as creatures plagued by reproductive issues. Another product being sold was the “Dr. William’s Pink Pills for Pale People.”

Figure 10



⁶² “Bradfield Regulator,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 14, 1900.

This product claimed to cure health problems brought about by female menstruation.

This advertisement argues that the pain caused by female menstruation results in

“neglected families and unhappy homes.”⁶³ This last quotation suggests a sinister result

from women crippled by female biology, in that during their menstrual cycle, women appear to be terrible mothers and wives. Bed-ridden, women could not be active mother figures, nor could they serve their husband’s sexual needs, leaving their homes

“unhappy.” Thus, it is clear that unlike men, female sexuality is connected entirely to reproduction and pleasing others- alleviating the pains of it, in order to be better mothers and sexually active vessels for their husband’s enjoyment.

Any other mention of female sexuality comes in the form of a warning. Women during this period were told to be careful to abstain from sex until marriage. Women were taught to defend female purity no matter the cost. One article, titled, “Evils of Tight Clothing,” discusses the problems with the corset and sexualization of women.⁶⁴ The article explains the negative effects of the corset, including its highly sexualizing effect and its effect on health, which includes increased obesity and pain. Thus, compared to the advertisements for female appearance discussed earlier, it is clear that women were sold confusing messages about their appearance and proper sexual behavior. As demonstrated by the advertisements and articles dealing with sexuality, women do not own their own sexual behavior outside of reproductive activities. Unlike men, they do not find power in sexual behavior but instead, they are slaves to their reproductive roles, and servants to their husbands physical needs.

⁶³ “Dr. William’s Pink Pills for Pale People,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1900.

⁶⁴ Margaret S. Brigga, “Evils of Tight Clothing,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 16, 1902.

Ultimately then, late 19th to early 20th century Memphis' society constructed gender and sexual identities for men and women differently. Through advertising, society bolstered men's confidence, shaping their gender identity as strong and powerful individuals, reliant only upon themselves. Similarly, men were expected to be sexually active, drawing a sense of power from their sexual expression. In contrast, women during this period had far more restrictive roles to play. Their gender identities focused on performing femininity by wearing restrictive, yet sexual clothing and paying extreme attention to their outward appearance as a passive route toward achieving worth by becoming objects of the male gaze. Furthermore, women were expected to remain sexually pure and to walk the fine line between being sexually desirable for men while not appearing immoral. Memphis female moral reformers would buy into this ideology of womanhood. They only stepped into the public sphere to reform prostitution because they believed it threatened the definition of womanhood they had embraced. Sex-workers violated traditional gender and sexual mores embraced by the Memphis white, middle and upper classes in almost every way. That is, sex-workers practiced economic independence by marketing their sexuality outside of marriage, thus violating Victorian norms of economic dependence on husbands and chastity outside of marriage. As such, female moral reformers saw it as their job to stop this immoral trade, resulting in a major clash between these two entities.

Chapter 3

Like a Soldier She is Disciplined: Sexual-Commerce on Gayoso Street

When walking downtown in Memphis, the sounds of blues cry from Beale Street and signs point tourists toward Elvis Presley's furniture shop. In the midst of these known landmarks, Gayoso Street seems irrelevant. It no longer glows with a red hue nor do the sounds of piano music drift from its houses. Yet, this was the hub of the red-light district in Memphis from 1900 to 1920. From the Mississippi River to Fourth street along Gayoso, women sold their wares and men shopped. Madams shouted to potential customers, flaunting their new silk dresses and young girls. Arguably, the Progressive era in Memphis marked a period of increased urban reform, but on Gayoso Street reform and its peddlers were one item not voluntarily bought. Although prostitution is obviously a demeaning occupation for the female body, considering its growth in Memphis along with the industrial boom, it was also one of the only fields in which women operated virtually independent from men and were able to earn a large amount of money to pay for their expenses and their families' expenses. Prostitutes in Memphis were not simply fallen women. Rather, the majority of the time, their social location resulted from economic hardship and heartbreaking familial situations. These women were friends, mothers, artists, educators, entrepreneurs and, most of all, human beings who affected the social, political, and economic structure of Memphis from 1875 to 1920. Through clarifying the "discipline" or rules of behavior of prostitution, and its conflicts with hegemonic norms, this chapter will create a picture of the red-light district in Memphis – its rise and fall – and present a portrait of the many women who spent their lives on and around Gayoso Street. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate the make-up of the sex-

trade in Memphis, showing the type of women involved in their trade, their beliefs about the trade, and hopefully, painting a picture of the separate world they created for themselves outside of hegemonic womanhood that the reformers believed in.

Recent scholarship on prostitution in the United States suggests that during the late 19th and early 20th century the sex-work industry boomed throughout the country and subsequently, resulted in a rise in moral reform. Historians show sympathy for the sex-worker and create a new dialogue through which sex-work can be understood. According to Marilyn Wood Hill, women dominated the sex-work industry, running the houses and the business. Given the societal constraints on women during this period, sex-work represented the one area where women worked largely independent of male influence. Hill focuses her work on the relationships between female prostitutes in New York City. Hill points to a separate culture that those involved in the commercialization of sex created, as a system of support for one another. She talks about the acceptance of women as leaders within the public sphere, pointing to the powerful influence of madams and their ownership of brothels.⁶⁵ These findings led her to argue that “prostitution and its historical conditions offered a “significant degree of autonomy and control in their [lower-class women involved in sexual commerce] professional lives.”⁶⁶ As in New York City, female entrepreneurship in the red light district was allowed and even flourished in Memphis from 1900 to 1910. The majority of madams were females. Furthermore, madams in Memphis were connected to a larger social network of sex-work throughout the region, trading workers (i.e. prostitutes) with brothels as far away as Maine to ensure their houses had fresh staff for their male patrons. Subsequently,

⁶⁵ Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sister's Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 324.

⁶⁶ Hill, *Their Sister's Keepers*, 324.

brothels on Gayoso Street not only challenged Memphis' community morality but also its societal structure.⁶⁷

Laura Hapke, in her article "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," also turns a sympathetic eye to the prostitute of the Progressive era. Utilizing newspapers and literature of the period, Hapke points out contrasting perceptions of white prostitutes and non-white prostitutes. Hapke argues that these dual perceptions seeped into the goals of women's reform clubs, arguing that "reformers" would insist "on seduction" as the cause of prostitution but they would only allow this kind word to apply to the wealthier, white prostitutes.⁶⁸ Hapke describes how reporters portrayed prostitutes subordinated by race or class in animalistic terms. Hapke works against these stereotypes of the period by opening up the identity of non-white prostitutes to include their roles as mothers, friends, and workers. She talks about their tough working conditions, the ways in which these women died, and the lack of concern by the society around them.⁶⁹ Her work provides a basis for the process of humanizing the sex-worker during this period, not just as a villain, but as a human being.

Similarly, Kevin Mumford, in his book *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*, discusses the realities of the existence of white slavery during the progressive era and the effects of it on reform. He argues that the idea of "white slavery" did not extend to African American women. Rather, moral reformers viewed African American women as hypersexual and predatory.

⁶⁷ This information can be gathered from the United States National Census records. "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

⁶⁸ Laura Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker: Images and Realities," *Mid-America* 65, no. 3 (1983): 155-156.

⁶⁹ Hapke, "The Late Nineteenth-Century American Streetwalker," 157 and 159.

This was one legacy of slavery, in that the image of black women as over-sexualized had been used to justify the white master's sexual abuse of their female slaves. Female reformers who based their understanding of morality on True Womanhood and Victorian sexual ideals viewed African-Americans as sexually dangerous. This was reflected both in the punishment of African-American men who had interracial relations with white women, and in reformers' focus on reforming white women prostitutes, over African-American prostitutes. Ultimately, by the 1910s, Mumford found that "black women were disproportionately represented among the ranks of prostitutes" in both Chicago and New York as a result of this racialized reform.⁷⁰ Similar results can be seen on a smaller scale in Memphis.

Other authors add further to the history of sex-work at the turn of the century- one pioneer being Judith Walkowitz. In her book *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, she creates a complicated construct, which is described by reviewer Graham Russell Hodges as "a multilayered discourse with poststructuralism to demonstrate that sexuality was a contested site for struggles of class, gender, and race."⁷¹ She theorizes that the female body is a site of contested values. Subsequently, she argues that prostitution was one area where issues and values concerning the female body surfaced and clashed. This concept is particularly poignant when examining the structure of morality that sex-workers created for themselves, a moral universe different than that prescribed by elite female reformers.

⁷⁰ Mumford, *Interzones*, 20, 14, 16-17, 38.

⁷¹ Graham Russell Hodges, "Flaneurs, Prostitutes, and Historians: Sexual Commerce and Representation in the Nineteenth Century Metropolis," *Journal of Urban History*, 23, No. 4 (1997): 496-497.; Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Kevin Mumford also explores the developing sex-districts and leisure culture of New York and Chicago in the early twentieth century, using a concept he titles “interzones.” Mumford defines “interzones” as areas where “cultural, sexual, and social interchange” took place. These interzones were locations of social and cultural subversion, where race, class, and moral norms were turned on their heads. In Memphis, Gayoso Street and its surrounding cross-streets represents one of these interzones. Specifically, in the Memphis red-light district, men and women met and transacted business, engaging in sexual relations, in which women acted independently, outside the norm of female subordination within marriage. Given this status, it becomes clear why when the moral consciousness of Memphis was raised that the red-light district immediately became targeted: it was subversive and threatening.

Similarly, Alan Hunt, in his essay “Regulating Heterosocial Space: Sexual Politics in the Early Twentieth Century,” introduces the concept of “heterosocial space” in the cities as “the shifting and changing sites where young women and men come into contact” and have the possibility of engaging in sexual activity.⁷² Through examining vice commission reports from 1902 to 1919 in the United States and Canada, he discusses the different levels of reform and reaction during this period. Hunt claims that the vice reports, although different in their method, all had similar purposes, which was to highlight and abolish “commercialized vice.” He then states that vice reports typified the institutional control of “heterosocial space” during the Progressive era. Hunt asserts that the reforms aimed at stopping prostitution were more than simply moral repugnance at the act. Instead, prostitution became “an organizing metaphor” for unacceptable gender

⁷² Alan Hunt, “Regulating Heterosocial Space: Sexual Politics in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 15, no. 1 (2002): 1-2.

behavior and a target “for moralization and regulation.”⁷³ In Memphis, Gayoso Street acts as the “heterosocial space” in which moral reformers attempted to control female sexuality and morality.

Finally, Kathy Peiss, in her book *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure Time in Turn of the Century New York*, discusses the development of a separate working class culture during this period. Although Peiss does not discuss prostitution in great detail, she demonstrates the development of a separate working class culture through the growth of leisure activity, which informs reasons behind entering prostitution and the moral judgments surrounding it. Peiss argues that in locations like theatres and saloons, the working class socialized together, defining their own understanding of gender, race, and class. Their ideas about gender and sexuality were particularly subversive to hegemonic society as they were more fluid than Victorian ideals.⁷⁴ Women were allowed to explore their sexuality and the working-class had a particular understanding of what separated their own sexual exploration from a sex-worker. Peiss discusses the experiences of working-class girls, who would go on dates and trade sexual favors to their male escorts, who then paid their way into the theatre or dance hall. She points out that these girls did not view themselves as prostitutes but instead, were known as “charity girls” because they did not accept money for sexual acts, only gifts, favors, and attention from men.⁷⁵ Similar to their understanding of sex-worker’s morality, moral reformers did not understand working-class morality either.

⁷³ Hunt, “Regulating Heterosocial Space,” 2.

⁷⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

⁷⁵ Peiss, 110,

Overall then, historians have highlighted several important themes. First, Walkowitz places the female body at the center of contested values during this period. Second, Hill and Peiss call for investigation of subcultures that defined alternative sexual mores, and raise the issue of female control over sexual commerce and expression. Third, Hunt and Mumford create concepts of a distinctive urban social space where the sexes interacted in ways that challenged conventional gender norms and morality. Finally, Hapke and Mumford demonstrate the existence of racialized attitudes towards sex workers during this period. All of these different concepts can be demonstrated within Memphis' historical experience with prostitution and reform.

The sex-work industry in Memphis mirrored the social and economic changes that the larger society experienced, growing and shrinking according to the pressures of the outside world. Until the yellow fever crisis of 1878, prostitution in Memphis boomed. Houses of ill repute were located throughout the river city. However, following the yellow fever epidemic and a small social reform movement, sex-work began to wane. From the 1890s to 1900, as Memphis began to bounce back from its population loss, madams began to consolidate their business on the area surrounding Gayoso Street, forming Memphis' red-light district.

In 1875, sex-work in Memphis was not centralized on one street. Rather, it appeared to be relegated to several different houses. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that prostitution in Memphis included 18 houses and over 90 inmates in 1874. This was an apparent increase from 1873 where only there were only 60 sex-workers reported to be

working in Memphis.⁷⁶ Houses were reported to be scattered on Main, Madison, Second, Washington, and Adams.

The *Commercial Appeal* also reported on the police involvement in prostitution in Memphis during the late 1870s to the 1880s. Highlighting one particular house of ill repute, the *Appeal* named Frank Gordon⁷⁷ as the landlady of a large brothel on number 7 Adams Street. Apparently, on August 24, 1875, police had been called to the house over a reported “domestic disturbance.” One of the proprietors, Albert Johnson, had apparently attacked Gordon, leaving Gordon “with a black eye and a swollen face.”⁷⁸

This incident, along with evidence of a symbiotic relationship with the law enforcement, incited middle and upper class residents of Memphis to react to the growing problem of prostitution in Memphis. Citizens began to work within the county government to try and eradicate prostitution and sever its relationship with local law enforcement. In August of 1875, citizens “presented a petition to the honorable mayor and councilmen of Memphis complaining of the three houses of prostitution on Washington just west of Second and one of the corner.” These citizens wanted the city government to address the issue instead of trying “to protect these nuisances.”⁷⁹ The *Commercial Appeal* also reported that the majority of Memphis residents supported Mayor John Loague’s war on sex-work, which started in 1874. The *Appeal* stated that although they “sympathize with the poor creatures (prostitutes) and will take their side when they are mistreated...we do not believe in allowing them to locate and carry on

⁷⁶ “News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: February 13, 1874,” *Commercial Appeal*, 13 February 1974, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

⁷⁷ The gender of Frank Gordon is hard to determine. The article calls Gordon “the mistress” of the establishment but the name Frank suggests that Gordon is in fact a man.

⁷⁸ “News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 25, 1875,” *Commercial Appeal*, 25 August 1975, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

⁷⁹ “News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 4, 1875,” *Commercial Appeal*, 4 August 1975,

their business in the heart of the city.” The *Appeal* argued that the women and children of Memphis should not have to be subjected to such harsh and degrading activity within the heart of the city.⁸⁰ Still, this reform movement did not make it far because of the yellow fever epidemic, which hit the city in 1878.

One of the more famous of these early houses was The Mansion on Gayoso Street, run by Annie Cook. Located at 34 Gayoso Street, Cook’s home became famous. Her house is the only brothel labeled on the fire insurance map from 1880 and became a landmark among the eighteen different houses of prostitution. In 1875, she had several girls in her brothel including Blanche McGhee, Mary Calahan, Susan Bradford, and Lorena Meade. But, Cook fell upon hard times at the end of the 1870s, as did most of Memphis. A yellow fever epidemic wiped out a large portion of the population, including some of Cook’s girls and several of her clients. Yet she refused to fall victim to the disease. Instead, Cook turned her famous brothel, “The Mansion,” into a small yellow fever hospital for victims on and around Gayoso Street. She and several of her girls nursed sick patients, shrugging off the social stigma brought by sex-work to become community volunteers. Annie Cook died of yellow fever as a result of her generosity in 1879. Afterwards, the sex industry in Memphis took several years to rebound.

This is clearly evident by the census reports for 1880, where only one brothel can be clearly identified from Auction Street to Gayoso Street. Still, this one brothel demonstrates what remained in Memphis in the aftermath of the epidemic. Kate Cunna, a 28-year-old white, female from Pennsylvania, ran the house. Although her story as to how she came into sex-work remains unknown, it is clear that she was literate, spoke

⁸⁰ “News of Bygone Days 100 Years Ago: August 14,1874,” Commercial Appeal, 14 August 1974, The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

English, and could write. She also rented the house that she ran her business in and had no children. Given the fact that she rented rather than owned her establishment, Cunna was likely of a lower economic class in Memphis. Cunna was the madam of a large house on Gayoso Street that housed eight girls. All of the girls living in her house were white, literate, could write, and were single. No children lived in the house and none of the inhabitants had ever had any children. The ages of sex-workers in Kate Cunna's house ranged from 19 to 30. The inhabitants also came from 8 different states including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia.⁸¹ This wide range of states suggests that despite the epidemic in Memphis, a network of sex-workers remained intact across the East and Midwest of the United States. In a narrative written around the turn of the century, Madeleine, a white prostitute from the Midwest, speaks about her experiences. No matter a woman's age, her "shelf life" in a brothel was rarely longer than 2 years. Because the same patrons often solicited the same houses, girls that lived in a house for longer than two years were considered to be old, even if they were only in their early twenties. Consequently, madams set up a system with other madams across the country in which they would exchange prostitutes in order to get new blood for their establishments.⁸² As a result, many houses represented several different states like Kate Cunna's house on Gayoso.

Cunna's house, in 1880, also challenges several stereotypes commonly held about prostitutes. First, this entire brothel is white. This is not say that African-American prostitutes did not exist in Memphis. Rather, it reflects the class privilege bestowed on whites and the racial segregation of the period. Thus, it is not surprising the brothel does

⁸¹ "1880 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 79-1279, Enumeration District 141, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

⁸² Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography*, 42.

not also have African American women working in it as well. Finally, the literacy rate of these sex-workers is astounding. For every sex-worker to be able to read and write is quite surprising. It is a commonly held notion that sex-workers were extremely ignorant and forced into the occupation as a result. The 1880 census of Gayoso Street clearly contradicts this notion.

Still, the census records of 1880 demonstrate that there was not a centralized sex work industry in Memphis during this period, as only one house can be located on Gayoso Street. This was most likely the result of recent reform and the recent epidemic. By 1900, however, the sex-work industry would look far different than it did in 1880.

In the year 1900, 18 brothels can be clearly identified within the United States census records, which included around 150 sex-workers in total.⁸³ Obviously, this is a much larger number than seen in 1880 and it demonstrates the extreme growth that both the city of Memphis had done since 1880 and the growth of the sex-work industry as well. When Norma Wallace, a sex-worker based in Louisiana, visited Memphis at the beginning of the twentieth century, she described it as “wide open then, with big-time gambling and bootlegging.”⁸⁴ A majority of this activity occurred on Gayoso Street and the area surrounding it. According to the Census, majority of the brothels were on Gayoso Street but also on its many cross streets, including Hernando, Desoto, and Monroe Street.

The census records also include far more information than where brothels were located. The brothels were segregated by race, with the majority being all-white brothels.

⁸³ “1900 United States Census Records,” Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

⁸⁴ Christine Wiltz, *The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001) 8.

Every single sex-worker on these census records, black and white, was literate and could write. All of the sex-workers themselves were single and most are childless. Those who did have children did not have them living with them. In contrast, about four of the seventeen madams were married and had children. Some of these children were living with the madams, suggesting that they did not view their lifestyle or homes as being morally corrupt like the reformers thought, but rather, as places fit for children. The average age of the sex-worker was twenty-eight. The youngest sex worker was sixteen and the oldest was thirty. Every madam but one rented her establishment.⁸⁵ This final point suggests that there were owners, not involved in prostitution, that benefited from the sex-trade. It could also mean a type of economic hierarchy in the red-light district, with building owners at the top, followed by madams, sex workers, and finally, the servants within the brothels. This hierarchy mirrors the larger society and places sex work and its employers within the larger economic structure of Memphis.

Two brothels represent the average establishments seen in the census records. Biddie Sayer, a white woman, ran the first. Walking down Gayoso Street in 1900, a person would pass several establishments including laundries, hotels, saloons, and brothels. Sayer's place was located at 111 Gayoso Street. The memoir of a young woman, Norma Wallace, recounted seeing several different characters on Gayoso Street. Norma Wallace described men ranging from a 60-year-old doctor to a young and handsome bootlegger. This variety of characters captivated Norma as it did many other patrons and visitors to Memphis.

⁸⁵ "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

To gain a clearer look at what a consolidated red light district looked like at the turn of the century, Storyville in New Orleans, Louisiana provides an extreme example. Storyville was the location to which New Orleans authorities relegated prostitution and subsequently, regulated its growth. It was much larger than the area in Memphis but had similar characteristics.⁸⁶ First, Storyville had several houses, each boasting a different attraction, ranging from sexual circus acts to certain types of prostitutes, such as a house featuring all mulatto women. Second, Storyville also boasted popular forms of entertainment, including lots of music. In fact, some have argued that jazz was so influential in New Orleans because of brothels. During this period, each madam employed a musician to play in the ballroom or parlor, where the prostitutes entertained their clients before moving to private rooms. These musicians were called “professors.”⁸⁷ Given their locations, these musicians were given certain musical freedom and were allowed to experiment. Consequently, music pouring from the doors of these houses of ill repute was often the most innovative and risk-taking music of this period. In fact, Louis Armstrong started his career shadowing a “professor” in Storyville as a young boy.⁸⁸

Similarly, brothels in Memphis also boasted certain characters to bring patrons to their establishments. One woman, a sex-worker from a brothel run by Anita Blanco, who went only by the name “Sapho,” (likely referencing the sexually expressive Greek female poet) and was known by “her ability to relieve her gentleman callers of large sums of

⁸⁶ *Storyville: The Naked Dance*, documentary, directed by Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris (Shanachie Studios, 9/12/ 2000).

⁸⁷ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 92.

⁸⁸ *Storyville: The Naked Dance*, documentary, directed by Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris (Shanachie Studios, 9/12/ 2000).

money.”⁸⁹ Another prostitute, Eva Furgerson, was known for her “varied life as an actress and a medical freak.” She was born in the West Indies and “her specialty was to run a hatpin through her cheeks and tongue without showing any signs of pain.”⁹⁰ This abnormal behavior added to the image of the debauchery for which Gayoso Street was known.

Thus, when potential patrons walked down Gayoso Street in 1900, they would probably see Biddie Sayers outside her establishment, standing erect like a soldier, guarding her house. She would be dressed in an expensive silk dress and dripping with costume jewelry. Oftentimes, the madam would be the oldest female in her establishment and sometimes, the most beautiful.⁹¹ Biddie Sayers was the oldest in her brothel. She would stand just inside her door, bidding potential patrons to come into her house. Music would be wafting from the main ballroom and several girls would be waiting to please the patrons who decided to enter. She might tell a passerby about her youngest girl, 18-year-old Dilla Bohu, a homegrown beauty from Tennessee. Or, she might boast about her oldest girl, 28 year old Flora Howard from Illinois. If she had a new girl, Biddie Sayers would ensure that any of her regular patrons would meet the new prostitute to see if they liked her. As soon as the brothel had filled with enough patrons, Biddie would leave her post at the door and see to the clients inside. It appeared that brothels had strict rules and madams would rarely, if ever, become involved in sexual activity along with her girls. The madam was not in the brothel during the parties to please anyone sexually but instead, to maintain peace, ensure safety, and to make money,

⁸⁹ William D. Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957) 90.

⁹⁰ Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era*, 90.

⁹¹ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.

largely through the sale of alcohol. She had a job and that job defined her existence, dominated her body, mind, and life.⁹²

At the time that the 1900 census was taken, Biddie Sayers was 44 years old. She was white, as were all of the girls she employed within her establishment. According to the census, she was the landlady of her establishment and none of her female boarders had recorded jobs.⁹³ Her brothel included single, young women, ranging in age from 17 to 28. The girls come from several states including Tennessee, Arkansas, Ohio, Illinois, Mississippi and Maryland. Biddie Sayers was from Maryland. She rented her establishment at 111 Gayoso and it was one of the largest brothels in her surrounding neighborhood. Like most prostitutes in Memphis, Biddie Sayers and all of the girls working for her were literate and could write. None of the members of her brothel were immigrants and they could all speak English. Biddie Sayer's establishment is similar to other white brothels around her but it was not indicative of those establishments housing only African American women.⁹⁴

One of the famous establishments during 1900 was the "Stanley Club" at 121 Gayoso Street, run by Grace Stanley. She and her entire house were African American. The club was known for its "expensive furnishings and a proper regard for amenities." Grace Stanley was known for being "one of the most notorious women in Memphis, and it was commonly held that she was the possessor of great wealth."⁹⁵ In fact, Grace Stanley was the only madam who owned her establishment and did not rent it. She was a

⁹² Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.

⁹³ Given the location of the house and the status of the women at Biddie Sayer's house, it can be assumed that the only means they had to pay for their rent was prostitution.

⁹⁴ "1900 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

⁹⁵ Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era*, 90.

successful entrepreneur. There could be many reasons for her economic prosperity, including the lure of the supposed exotic nature of African American sex-workers, or that she was not targeted by the white authorities for reform or censure because of her race. Her business can be better understood by turning to Madeleine's narrative. When discussing her first house in Kansas City, Madeleine talks about the economic aspects of urban prostitution. She claims, "the elements of success in this business do not differ from the elements of success in any other." In fact, "competition is keen and bitter" and "advertising is as large an element as in any other business, and since the usual avenues of successful exploitation are closed to the profession, the adage that the best advertisement is a pleased customer is doubly true" in prostitution.⁹⁶

Grace Stanley was also different from the white brothels in that along with the five prostitutes she employed, she had her family working for her as hotel waiters and porters, including her mother, two half brothers, nephew and niece. Her niece, 15-year-old Effie Linton, even attended school while she lived at the brothel in 1900. White madams rarely had their families living with them and also, rarely had extra employees living in the house like maids or waiters. This suggests that the African American community did not necessarily relegate sex workers to the margins of society like the white community. Rather, as suggested by the family living Grace Stanley, perhaps they allowed for traditional family ties even within these non-traditional homes.

Grace Stanley's establishment is also useful for interpreting the census records. Like other brothels, Grace Stanley is only given the occupation of "landlady" within the census record and all the young sex workers she employed had no "occupation" listed. Grace Stanley had much younger girls working in her establishment, ranging only from

⁹⁶ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 72.

17 to 23. Many of the white brothels had older women, past 25, working in them, but Stanley's Club and other African American brothels did not. Although the reasons for this are not clear, it could have do with the overall health care situation during this period, in that women of color, no matter their occupation, had lower health care opportunities than white women of any occupation. As such, the white women might live longer even within the harsh environment of a brothel. All of the inhabitants of Grace Stanley's household were literate and could write. They were from all different states, including Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee.⁹⁷ Yet, within the *Commercial Appeal*, Stanley is identified as a notorious madam on Gayoso Street. Subsequently, her example gives credence to the assumption that these other landladies who have single, female boarders without jobs according to the Census records are in fact, part of the sexual commerce industry in Memphis. Overall then, prostitution in Memphis thrived at the turn of the century. Several houses existed and Gayoso Street was the hub of the red-light district in Memphis.

Many things had changed in Memphis by 1910. In ten years, the red-light district had changed significantly. Even within the small sample of figures discussed earlier, two were already dead: Grace Stanley and Eva Furgerson. Both were murdered, showing the risky nature of sex-work. One figure that remained the same between 1900 and 1910 was Biddie Sayers. She had moved her brothel to 219 Gayoso Street and had all new girls working for her. But the greatest change was the lack of toleration that Memphis' elite now had for prostitution. Majority of the country had started reform projects in mass numbers and Memphis followed suit, with prostitution being one occupation some

⁹⁷“1900 United States Census Records,” Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 623-1597, Enumeration District 70, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

women's clubs hoped to eradicate in Memphis. Subsequently, the 1910 census records tell a far different and shorter story than in 1900 about sex-work in Memphis.

Overall, the number of prostitutes in 1910 seems to be far less than in 1900. According to the census records, the average age of the sex worker in 1910 was 22, six years younger than in 1900. The youngest sex worker in the census records was 14 and the oldest was 28. As in 1900, almost all of the sex workers were literate and could write. A major difference though was the change in race of the sex workers. In 1900, there were far more all white brothels. By 1910, there were only a few all white brothels and most had either mixed races or all African American females employed in red-light district. This is an extremely significant change, particularly considering the critique of reformers during this period. A majority of the sex workers were single and most did not have children. Similar to 1900, any women who had children only had them living with them if they lived within African American brothels.⁹⁸

One interesting difference between the census records between 1900 and 1910 was the way in which the majority of these women were identified. In 1900, the census taker did not record occupations for sex workers. In contrast, the census takers in 1910, at first wrote that the prostitutes were simply boarders with nothing written under occupation or wrote "none" under occupation. Then, these initial entries were crossed out and replaced with the generic "worker" and sometimes, with "none." This was true for majority of the women identified to live in brothels during this period. These changes to the original documents of the census records suggest not only a local concern with prostitution but also a national one. It is obvious that the census takers did not want the

⁹⁸ "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

records to suggest that there were prostitutes and thus, they tried to cover it up. If women were given the occupation of “boarder,” it would have been easier to assume that these women were prostitutes. Although saying “none” is not much better, it still shows that they did not want to think that women paid for their board by being boarders i.e. sex-workers. This was not the case in 1900 and this change mirrors the growth in social consciousness that both the nation and Memphis had undergone between 1900 and 1910.⁹⁹

Two brothels demonstrate the type of brothels and sex workers in Memphis in 1910. Maude Bernstein ran the first and her establishment was located around 200 Gayoso Street, near Biddie Sayer’s new location.¹⁰⁰ She was a 19-year-old white woman from California. She was one of the younger madams, being the same age as several of the women working for her. Still, this did not seem to be unusual. Norma Wallace was also quite young when she first became a madam.¹⁰¹ Maude Bernstein’s house had seven prostitutes in it, ranging in age from 16 to 27. The girls came from several different states, including Alabama, Texas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Iowa. All of the girls were white and literate. None of the girls had children and they were all single.¹⁰²

In contrast, Mattie Rey’s establishment has a different feel than Maude Bernstein’s brothel. She was the madam of a household with four sex-workers in it but her household also included her daughter and two grandsons. All of the women in the

⁹⁹ “1910 United States Census Records,” Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

¹⁰⁰ The exact address is illegible but her establishment is located right before 211 and 219 Gayoso Street.

¹⁰¹ Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 30.

¹⁰² “1910 United States Census Records,” Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

house were African American and were identified as such in the census records. Like Grace Stanley, Mattie's establishment includes more than simply sex-workers. It includes her family. This is particularly important for understanding the differences between African American and white women of the same economic class. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, in *Living in, Living Out: African American Domesticity and the Great Migration*, demonstrates the importance of familial connections to the African-American community. She shows how whenever young African-American women were sent to work in the city, they always lived with family members, sent money back to their family, and considered time spent with their family of the utmost importance.¹⁰³ Thus, as the census records demonstrate, both in 1900 and 1910, this system of kinship ties even reached the lowest rungs of society, influencing the ways in which African-American women set up their brothels. All of the women appear to be literate and can write- a fact that seems to be true for almost every sex worker identified within the census.¹⁰⁴ The youngest woman working for Mattie is 16 and the oldest is 28.

One consistent aspect of the census records from 1880 to 1910 is the relatively narrow and young age bracket for sex-workers. This age group appears to be relatively normal for the period but what happened to these sex-workers past the age of 30? Turning to Madeleine's narrative, it appears that prostitutes rarely had many choices but these choices included becoming a madam, marrying a patron if one is lucky, or death. When Madeleine first enters into the industry, she thought that "prostitutes never lived

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Clark Lewis, *Living in, Living Out: African American Domesticity and the Great Migration* (New York: Kodansha America, 1996) 147-172.

¹⁰⁴ "1910 United States Census Records," Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll 624-1519, Enumeration District 118, found in The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Central Public Library.

longer than seven years.” Her friend replied, “There is no such luck.”¹⁰⁵ Madeleine’s friends’ response suggests that prostitution was a high-risk behavior during this period, causing pain both emotionally and physically for the sex-worker. If she did not die of a sexually transmitted disease or at the hand of one of her clients, the emotional psyche of a sex-worker suffered. Arguably, it was not a life that any individual would desire but instead, needed to survive in the harsh economic climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States.

Overall, between 1900 and 1910, two changes can be seen in the census records. The first is a significantly lower number of sex workers and brothels in Memphis. The second is far less segregated establishments and far more African American sex workers in comparison to 1900 and the number of white prostitutes in 1910. By 1920, there are no detectable brothels on or around Gayoso Street. It seems that the sexual commerce industry was forced to decentralize and move underground as a result of the reform process in Memphis.

Although the census records provide a clear picture of sex-work in Memphis, these records do leave some questions unanswered. A closer look at two first-hand narratives serves to fill in the gaps the census records leave and to humanize the prostitute during this period. Written by sex-workers living at some point in New Orleans, Memphis, and Saint Louis, these narratives bring light to prostitute’s reasons for entering and leaving the industry, the “discipline” of the industry, the prostitute’s moral

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 61.

understanding of prostitution, and even their reactions to the moral reformers of the period.¹⁰⁶

Sex-workers during this time had several different reasons for entering sexual commerce but often their experiences reflect common themes: dysfunctional family lives, poverty, and economic responsibilities that could not be fulfilled by factory or domestic work. Madeleine, the alleged author of *Madeleine: An Autobiography*¹⁰⁷, was born into a middle class, white family in the mid-west. Her childhood was marked by tragedy, which ultimately effected her decision to enter into the sex-work industry. She was a part of a large family and at first, she claims that “no [child] could have begun life under more auspicious conditions.”¹⁰⁸ She was educated, learning to read, write, and appreciate great bodies of literature, art, and religious texts. Yet, this all changed when her father was labeled the town drunk. Madeleine’s family went from respectable to abominable in the matter of a year. Madeleine experienced this pain acutely because her father chose her as his outlet when he was inebriated. She claimed that “if anyone crossed him when he was drunk [she] made vicarious atonement.”¹⁰⁹ As her father was the sole breadwinner for the family, his alcoholism drove the family into poverty, forcing them to leave the family farm and move to a small house in a poor neighborhood.¹¹⁰ Madeleine and her siblings were taken out of school when she was 13 and she was forced to remain home, helping out with the family as much as she could.

¹⁰⁶ In utilizing the term ““discipline”,” I am invoking Foucault’s definition of this word. Foucault, *“discipline” and Punishment*, 137.

¹⁰⁷ The author of this autobiography is unknown. It is published as being written by an anonymous sex worker during the latter part of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. She details her experiences from her childhood to her involvement as a prostitute through her role as a madam in her own brothel. Although the sex-worker goes by Madeleine, she describes how she acquired this name on page 40 of her memoir, as like most girls in the business, she did not want to be recognized.

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 7.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 8.

Soon, Madeleine became exposed to the world of sex-work, although she did not enter into it right away. She had a violent, alcoholic father, an over-burdened mother, and no friends. Subsequently, as Madeleine puts it, she became “fair game for any predacious male who might be attracted by [her] youthful face or [her] well-developed figure.”¹¹¹ Many of Madeleine’s father’s former friends began to make advances toward her. She discusses how she tried desperately to avoid falling prey to their advances but because of her “environment and social isolation” she “lost the battle.”¹¹² She fell victim to the advances of these men, losing her virginity and consistently becoming plagued by sexual attention.

Eventually, the economic hardships of her family became too great for her mother to bear alone and at 17, Madeleine was sent to live with a former servant in St. Louis to get a factory job and help support her family. Madeleine was given the job of “check-girl,” which consisted of “checking out bundles of work to the machine-workers and in checking in the finished product.”¹¹³ The hours were extremely long and the pay was only five dollars a week, two dollars of which went to board and the rest to her family at home. Soon, after months of poor health, Madeleine discovered she was pregnant.¹¹⁴ Not wanting her mother to know and attempting to keep her families’ reputation from further damage, Madeleine left the family friend with whom she had boarded. She had twelve dollars saved after three months in St. Louis and not a single friend to turn to. Because she did not want to be found, Madeleine could not take another factory job and she could not get a job in a department store because she did not have the clothes to be a

¹¹¹ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 10.

¹¹² Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 11.

¹¹³ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 16-17.

sales girl. Subsequently, Madeleine was homeless and poor. She did not immediately enter into the sex-work industry but at first, became a “kept woman.”

After a day of being solicited by dangerous men on the street, who she refused, a benevolent man whom she never names eventually saved Madeleine. He provided food, shelter, and even bought her clothing. In return, Madeleine became his personal prostitute. Madeleine contracted a venereal disease from her host and was forced to enter a treatment facility in Kansas City for three weeks. After she was released, Madeleine did not return to her host because she could not hide her pregnancy from him any longer. As such, she decided to remain in Kansas City. After days of moral debate with herself, Madeleine decided to become a member of a local brothel run by a madam she calls Miss Laura. She claimed that she “knew this monster which is called poverty, in all its soul-destroying aspects” and although she “felt sure that human degradation could go no farther” than sex-work, she believed it was her only option.¹¹⁵ This was Madeleine’s descent into sex-work. She did not enter into the industry because she was morally corrupt or because she was forced to as a “white slave.” Rather, Madeleine was forced to enter sex-work for economic survival. Her story speaks to the few choices women of this period had. If a woman was not of the upper classes, her choices were few and as Madeleine demonstrates, they barely allowed for survival.

Still, Madeleine’s story was not necessarily the normative. In fact, Norma Wallace, an African American sex-worker from Louisiana, tells a much different story about her entrance into prostitution than Madeleine. Like Madeleine, Wallace had a troubled upbringing. Living in New Orleans, her mother enjoyed partying and often left Norma alone for several weeks with her younger brother Elmo. Norma changed her story

¹¹⁵ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 53-54.

several times but at one point, she claimed that her mother actually put her onto the streets to become a prostitute but this story cannot be confirmed.¹¹⁶ Norma only went to school for two years and like Madeleine, she physically developed early, making her subject to the gaze of older men. Arguably, Norma's "parents' actions had set her on a life course from which there would be no return." They divorced when she was 12 and by 14, she had her first experience as a sex-worker.

After Norma's parents divorced, her mother sent her to Memphis and this is where Norma Wallace claims that she had "her first experience as a streetwalker."¹¹⁷ When she first moved to Memphis, her cousins took her site seeing and walked her "past the ritzy Gayoso Hotel" and it was here that "Norma saw her first hustling girls ("spectacular ladies" she called them)" and she was immediately "fascinated." Realizing that she had something men wanted, Norma decided to capitalize on her well-developed body and utilize her "irrepressible personality" to her advantage. Thus, she exploits men's attraction to her for economic support. Norma's first client was a man named Dr. Silvester. He was around 60 years old and was a veterinarian. When she picked up Dr. Silvester, she asked him to take her to the Gayoso hotel for dinner. She told him she was 17 but she was actually only 14 years old. She was a virgin and decided to trick Dr. Silvester into thinking she would sleep with him. He "kept" her for a few weeks, waiting for her to give in to his advances but she never did. Eventually, Dr. Silvester left Norma and she met a new man: Andy Wallace. She fell in love with Wallace and even took his last name. Wallace was known for being a womanizer and the two fought incessantly,

¹¹⁶ Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 6.

¹¹⁷ Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 7.

resulting in Norma being shot by Wallace. Yet, as she puts it, she “also got a seven-carat diamond ring.”¹¹⁸

Norma Wallace’s story represents a different type of entrance into prostitution than Madeleine. Although she had a troubled childhood, Wallace never blamed her entrance into prostitution on those experiences. Rather, she presents her occupation more like a conscious choice. She was drawn to the glamour of the Gayoso hotel, the liquor, the gambling, and frivolity and she knew she had a commodity that would make her money: her body and personality. Norma Wallace’s entrance into prostitution was not because of her hyper-sexualized or predatory nature. Rather, it was the result of her choosing to capitalize on her body as an economic resource. She did not consider this to be predatory behavior but instead, given her economic and social location, she did not have many options to make money. She knew that men, including white men, would want her sexually and she traded on that. As she made clear, she never went after men. Instead, they came to her. Thus, Norma Wallace defined an alternative morality that sanctioned women’s use of their own bodies for commerce.

The narratives also give important insight into the sex-workers understanding of the morality of their actions. Female moral reformers believed prostitution to be completely depraved. Believing in True Womanhood, elite moral reformers of Memphis and other cities understood the actions of sex-workers to be entirely outside the moral boundaries of what a woman should have been- pure, chaste if single, and asexual if married.

Madeleine never viewed herself as being absolutely depraved. Whenever she first entered sex-work, she was known for her “holier-than though attitude” because she never

¹¹⁸ Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 8-9.

considered herself to be as depraved as the other girls.¹¹⁹ She refused to allow prostitution to entirely corrupt her and thus, set certain rules for herself that she rarely broke. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of Madeleine's autobiography is her continued insistence that she was not as degraded as other sex-workers. In fact, Madeleine even judges some women for their licentious lifestyle. Throughout most of her career as a prostitute, Madeleine refuses to drink, become involved with drugs, or wear make-up and brightly colored clothing in public. Madeleine understood that she could maintain her outward respectability if she maintained certain physical and cultural standards. She believed that those women who chose to flaunt their lifestyles (make-up and brightly colored and gaudy dresses were marks of prostitution in public) were deplorable. In describing women in the same brothel as herself, she critiques their flashy ways:

In becoming the inmate of a luxuriously appointed, high-priced house of ill fame they had been promoted in the social scale. They had always known vice, but they had not always known luxury, and they assumed the garb and the air of grandes dames without making the least effort to fit themselves for the role they placed. I do not recall having ever seen a book or magazine in the hands of one of these women. They read the daily papers, or at least such parts of the papers as appealed to them, and they attended the theatres, garbed in costly garments and painted up like circus-riders. Their interest however was not in the play, but in the clothes of the women players and in the personality of the men of the stage. The discussion which followed their visits to the theater were always upon these topics; or they would talk of their men acquaintances whom they had seen escorting other women; they might offer a shrewd guess that the men would be down to the house later that night.¹²⁰

In fact, when she kept her own brothel in Canada, she forbade her girls from acting in such a fashion and punished them for doing so.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 69.

¹²⁰ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.

¹²¹ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 172.

Moral reformers did not share her understanding of her own moral position. Rather, they viewed every prostitute as being morally deplorable, no matter their appearance, furthering the bridge between these two entities. Madeleine knew that her actions as a sex-worker separated her from the average female during this period and placed her outside the ideas of True Womanhood. Thus, Madeleine hid her true profession from her family for several years, trying to preserve her name and hopefully, her mother's view of her. In one poignant scene, Madeleine discusses her mother's situation after she had visited her home. After seeing her mother's deplorable condition, as a single mother, living in squalor and starvation with several little children, Madeleine asserts that "as far as [she] could see, virtue was no better rewarded than vice."¹²² Not only because of her own experience but also because of her mother's, Madeleine was disillusioned with the promise of True Womanhood. She saw it only benefit the wealthy and understood that the lower classes did not have the same understanding of morality.

Both Madeleine and Norma Wallace illustrate the gap between prostitute's alternative moral universe, and the norms promoted by moral reformers of the period. Madeleine holds complete disdain for the reformers. She sees how they do not understand the moral structure of the sex work industry and how their beliefs hinder their reformation process. In particular, Madeleine speaks about the existence of white slavery:

I saw them all, the lost sisterhood of the nations. I met them in Europe and in the Orient; in Canada and in Mexico. And I met more American women than those of another nation, for they were in every city and every land that I visited. I met the public prostitute, the clandestine prostitute, and the occasional prostitute. I met the trusting girl who had been betrayed, and the unfaithful wife. I met the college woman, and the illiterate child of the slums. I met the deserted wife and the wife of the profligate; the girl from the sheltered home and the girl who had

¹²² Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 60.

been allowed to run wild; the girl who had sold her honor for bread, and the girl who had sold it for luxury and fine clothes. I met the girl who should have been a nun, and those others who were “predestined by ancient conditions” for the life of the harlot. But the one girl I never met in all these years and in all the cities and the countries that I visited was the pure girl who had been trapped and violated and sold into slavery, and held a prisoner unable to effect her escape- the so-called “white slave.”¹²³

Thus, as Madeleine clearly points out, the moral reformers did not fully understand the experiences of a sex-worker. From the words of a prostitute, the reformers’ crusade, the so-called eradication of white slavery, was not needed because white slavery as the reformers painted it did not exist.

Norma Wallace had a different view of the reformers. She just thought they were a nuisance and like Madeleine, knew that reformers would not understand the morality of the sex work industry. Whenever reformers attempted to reform Wallace’s businesses and eventually got through to the government, Wallace continued to operate her businesses illegally. She did not view their moral judgments on her establishments to be relevant.¹²⁴ Both sex-workers reveal the fundamental fault of the reform movement to eradicate prostitution: the reformers did not see the complexity of a matrix of power ordered by gender, race, and class hierarchies influencing both themselves and the women they were trying to help. Part of their blindness probably resulted from their inability to recognize their own subordination within the early twentieth century society of Memphis and instead, considering their position to be superior to those of the sex-workers in all ways.

Both narratives also explain the process of learning and/or shirking a set of alternate behaviors that defined prostitution. Madeleine’s story is the clearest. When

¹²³ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 145-146.

¹²⁴ Wiltz, *Last Madam*, 77-82.

Madeleine first enters the sex-work industry, she discusses the process of becoming fit to be a sex-worker, ranging from changing her attitude to her appearance. Madeleine's story demonstrates the process of learning the performance of a role, within the subculture of the red light district. Madeleine claims that "the process of education was painfully slow."¹²⁵ She had to learn several different rules, which included but were not limited to 1) The "unwritten law that girls must not compete by unfair methods."¹²⁶, 2) keep the schedule: Parlor hours were from 8 pm until 4 am, "the rising-bell rang at twelve-thirty; breakfast was at one" and the girls were to be ready for the next evening.¹²⁷ 3) Always collect money. 4) Never show repugnance for any activity occurring in the house. 5) Always be cordial. and 6) Always pay the madam her share.¹²⁸ Madeleine claimed that "when [she] had just succeeded in mastering one of the rules, and had resolved to make a practical application of it, [she] would stumble over another one that [she] had not learned."¹²⁹ The consequences for not following the rules were particularly harsh. Madeleine tells stories of how when she first began she had a difficult time making her clients pay her and she said that "'discipline" required that [she] pay for the time consumed," as it was her responsibility to get the money.¹³⁰ As Foucault points out, the "disciplines" or identifying behaviors of prostitution were self-enforced. A sex-worker had to enforce these rules on herself if she desired to succeed, something that Madeleine learned with difficulty.

¹²⁵ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 45.

¹²⁶ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 43.

¹²⁷ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 43.

¹²⁸ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 44-45.

¹²⁹ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 45.

¹³⁰ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 45.

Still, the aforementioned rules only applied to how the sex-workers behaved. A whole new set of rules dictate the appearance of a prostitute, reflecting Foucault's theory that "discipline," or tacit rules of behavior, works on the levels of both activity and appearance.¹³¹ Madeleine describes her frustrations with the required appearance for women of this subculture. She only had "street clothes" when she first came to live at Miss Laura's brothel, so she was forced to borrow a dress for the evenings. She describes how she was put in a "red robe of Grecian design which left [her] arms bare and exposed much of [her] chest and shoulders." Then, her "abundant hair" was "dressed...in a Greek Knot with bands" and Bessie, a fellow sex-worker, began to "paint" her face with make-up. Madeleine immediately refused to have "make-up" put on her face, claiming that even if she was becoming a prostitute, she would not bear its marks.¹³² So, as Madeleine began her descent into sex-work, she had to learn the performative behaviors of this business, decorating her body in such a fashion that she was constantly coerced by this industry's rules. These "disciplines" were not natural to her, and as Madeleine states, "No girl is plunged suddenly from a life of virtue into a life of prostitution. For whatsoever may have been the contributory causes, each girl who enters a house has gone through a period of moral attrition before she takes this seemingly fatal step."¹³³

A different set of rules applied to the madam of the establishment. After she established her own brothel in Canada, Madeleine discusses in her memoir how the madam had to establish authority, both with the girls she employed and the patrons soliciting them. Madeleine viewed it as her job to use "all of [her] diplomacy and patience to soothe" the men at her parties. Any time a man decided to turn his attentions

¹³¹ Foucault, "*discipline*" and *Punish*, 137.

¹³² Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 39.

¹³³ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 46.

onto Madeleine, she would immediately divert him with one of her girls.¹³⁴ Thus, Foucault's understanding of "discipline" as a set of performative behaviors used to negotiate power relations also influenced the madam of a house. Because the madam was technically in charge, within traditional understandings of power, she would be holding most of it. Yet, the madam had to work with the norms of patriarchal authority, by avoiding confrontation with male clients. Madeleine makes this clear by discussing the dress of the many different madams in a house. She describes "Madam C" who, obsessed with money, dresses "in heavy brocade or velvet, with jewels flashing her hands and her hearts, her throat and her breast" to demonstrate her affluence and position of authority. In this respect, "Madam C" performed the appearance of wealth, and thus, of power and authority, reaching "eagerly forth to clutch [client's] money and hold it in a grasp of steel."¹³⁵ Furthermore, the madam's job of placating male customers reinforced the dominance of men over women within the brothel. Like the sex-worker and the reformer, the madam was not free, despite her economic freedom.

Understanding these "disciplines," or performative behaviors within the subculture of the demimonde is essential to understanding power relations and conflicts between reformers and the reformed. For many moral reformers in Memphis for instance, non-white sex-workers were never viewed as victims of circumstance. Rather, they were viewed by much of the middle to upper class society as predators, naturally predisposed to hijack men's moral judgment and force them into immoral activities. Yet, as Madeleine points out, the process of becoming a supposed sexual predator is not natural but learned. What is more, it must be clear, that these women within the sex-

¹³⁴ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 163.

¹³⁵ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 72.

work industry, not only deal with the “discipline” of prostitution but also the “disciplines” or behavioral norms of society at large and the power of this hegemony. It is important to realize that when exploring the relationship between reformers and the reformed, the different “disciplines,” ranging from those learned by sex-workers to those learned by Victorian socialites, are fundamental to understanding their interactions and misunderstandings.

Ultimately then, sex-workers during this period were not far removed from the average woman. As Madeleine puts it: “the inmates were the average American girls from average American homes, and, barring their occupation, they were no different from other women of the same station in which they were born.”¹³⁶ These women were mothers, sisters, and even wives. They were entrepreneurs, entertainers, artists, and students. The census records demonstrate that these women were educated, no matter their race or age and from all over the country. They had to learn a “discipline” in the acts and rules of sex-work – it was not a natural activity for these women to engage in. These facts were not something acknowledged by social reformers. Rather, because prostitutes lived outside the boundaries of True Womanhood, elite reformers in Memphis rarely understand their plight, harping on “white slavery” rather than the class or race divisions of their capitalistic, factory driven city, or the gender hierarchies that characterized late Victorian society. When walking down Gayoso Street, the female moral reformers did not liken the meticulous dress, erect stance, and firm hand of the madam to that of a soldier, despite their similarities. Instead, they saw a sexual predator, plotting to destroy white femininity and sexual purity.

¹³⁶ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.

Chapter 4

The Women's Christian Association and Reform in Memphis

“The reformer of the present day, by every cheering, hopeful word, by every gentle, loving deed of his life, unhesitatingly answers this question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”
“Yea verily!”

But there is another class of earth’s lost and ruined children far more to be pitied than he who has “tarried long at the wine.” For *him* there is *always hope*...But for *her* there is no look of love, no word of hope, no hand of friendship, no quiet home, no strong, true heart to lean upon, no light, pattering feet to meet her, no prattling tongue to lisp her name. Deserted, branded, and accursed- a plague-spot and a leper, for whom it is almost deemed a crime to pray.”¹³⁷

Lide Meriwether, *Soundings*

Lide Meriwether, a female reformer and women’s rights activist in Memphis from the 1850s to the 1880s, wrote *Soundings* to raise the consciousness of women in Memphis about the “double standard and hypocrisy” that “genteel society” held towards sex-work and the women involved in it.¹³⁸ Describing sex-workers in Memphis as the “accursed,” Meriwether employs the tone of a preacher, informing her congregation of a great wrong against humanity that they must right. *Soundings*, published in 1872, instigated the first round of prostitution reform in Memphis. Rather than blame the sex worker, who in Meriwether’s eyes does not have the individual ability to lift herself out of despair, Meriwether places blame for the plight of the Memphis prostitute on the city’s elite class for shunning and ignoring this unfortunate class of women. Unfortunately, this sympathetic viewpoint did not seem to be shared by most of Memphis’ elite and the subsequent reformers. Rather, Memphis female reformers saw prostitution reform in moral terms, as sin in need of redemption. As a result, women’s reform groups such as the Women’s Christian Association instigated reforms that made the female body a site

¹³⁷ Lide Meriwether, *Soundings* (Memphis, TN: Boyle and Chapman Publishers, 1872) 10-12. *Soundings*, 10-12 *Soundings*- by Lide Meriwether

¹³⁸ Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 27.

of social control, causing their understanding of sex-work, the female body, and the definition of woman to clash with those of the prostitutes they were attempting to help.

Meriwether begins her diatribe by describing the process of leaving her “quiet home” and entering the “city’s glare and din.” Rather than characterize Memphis as the growing metropolis many saw before the 1878 yellow fever epidemic, Meriwether saw only the plight of the prostitute. She claims that as she walks through the city, “the faces of these nameless unfortunates flit by me by the score- brilliant, beautiful faces they are, to, sometimes, but like no other faces under Heaven- hard, joyless, desperate; no light, no love, no peace, no freshness there.” This description demonstrates the extreme disconnect between sex workers and the elite women of Memphis. First, the women are quite clearly “nameless.” Despite Meriwether’s heart for the reform of these women, she does not see them as individuals. Second, even though these women have “beautiful” features, all Meriwether can see is how they do not fit into the prevailing notion of womanhood during this period. They neither practice chastity outside of marriage, nor sexual fidelity within marriage. To Meriwether, these women are “hard” without “freshness,” joy, or “love.” She goes on to call these women “lost soul[s].”¹³⁹

Yet, even with this description, Meriwether does not want the sex workers to be blamed for their plight but instead, indicts her fellow elite women of Memphis. Rather than trying to insult the prostitute, Meriwether wants to elicit pity from the readers of her book, when she intended to be elite women who would soon be joining reform movements. In a dogmatic tone, Meriwether states: “earth, and air, and sky, seem filled with one mighty voice reverberating, thunder-toned, in my ears: “Shall God care for *yours*, if you care not for *them*? Behold! The voice of thy *Sister’s* blood crieth unto me

¹³⁹ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 13.

from the ground!”¹⁴⁰ Meriwether appeals to Christian notions of charity, calling on fortunate women to be their less fortunate sister’s keepers. The women she speaks to are wealthy, religious, and have the means to make a difference in the lives of their fellow “sisters” as Meriwether calls the prostitutes. Yet, they do not. She argues that even though “polite society” ignores the plight of the sex worker, elite women cannot.¹⁴¹ To her, the situation has become dire and it would be a spiritual trespass to ignore the necessary reforms that need to be instigated. Before embarking on the rest of her book, Meriwether makes one last call for reform of prostitution in Memphis. She states:

“Some good may be done by even the most humble effort; and if but one true, womanly heart shall be awakened to kindly thoughts, and deeds of charity and love; if but one lost and despairing woman could be reclaimed from sin’s dark path, and brought back to the glad sunlight of happiness and peace, I ask no greater reward.”¹⁴²

Thus, she calls on the upper class women to reach out to prostitutes, and redeem them from sin. Meriwether then tries to humanize the prostitutes she describes earlier in her book. She starts by telling the story of a young girl, named Ella, a prostitute who killed herself because of her extreme despair. Meriwether utilizes this horror story to further her crusade to instigate reform in Memphis. Later, she tells another story titled, “Lost Louise.” This story was about a young girl betrayed by an American boy in Paris. After falling in love, she became pregnant and the boy left her to deal with the child alone. Having an illegitimate child during this period was stigmatized. Meriwether describes the agony Louise went through because her child did not have a father’s name for their surname. Because of her situation, Louise was shunned, could not find honest work, and was forced, for survival, to enter the world of prostitution. She leads a life of

¹⁴⁰ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 13.

¹⁴¹ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 15.

¹⁴² Meriwether, *Soundings*, 17.

despair and because her child knows nothing else, she also entered prostitution.¹⁴³

Meriwether presents this story to argue that many women are forced into a life of sin because of their social situation, and thus implies they are worthy of redemption.

Furthermore, by adding the information on Louise's child, Meriwether attempts to draw out the sympathies of mothers in Memphis, making a case for the reform of prostitution to prevent children of prostitutes from entering that world as well. This idea would be embodied later in the reform work of the Memphis Women's and Young Women's Christian Association.

Yet, not all of the anecdotes Meriwether tells end badly. One story, titled "Plucked from the Burning," tells about the charity of an elderly widow and how it shaped the life of a one young prostitute's young daughter. Meriwether does not give a location or a time for this story, allowing it to apply universally to all female readers. The young daughter of a sex worker was kicked out of a brothel after her mother died and she could not pay her way. Meriwether describes the brothel as a wicked place, where money, greed, and sexual competition rule, and there is no place for maternal instinct, love, or grace. The orphaned daughter went to the wealthier portion of town, knocking on doors and begging for food. She was turned away at every door except the house of the widow. An elderly woman, the widow had already raised her children, but they had grown up and moved away and her husband had died. She had a small sum of money to live on and enjoyed her simple existence. But, when the poor orphan knocked on door, and she saw the ravages of prostitution on her face, the widow could not turn her away. Instead, the widow adopted the orphan, and gave her a home. She sent her to school, dressed her in beautiful clothing, and turned her into a lady. She took her to church and

¹⁴³ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 35.

showed her the wickedness of her mother's ways, but made it clear that the sins of her mother did not have to be on her own soul. The orphaned daughter grew into a fine young woman and when she came of age, she had several suitors lined up to marry her. The widow was able to marry the orphaned daughter into a prominent family, making her both a wife and an elite lady.¹⁴⁴ Meriwether cites this story as a shining example of Christian charity and love. As the anecdote demonstrates, sex workers and their offspring do not have to be sinners and damned to a joyless existence. Rather, good, Christian women can save souls through reforming sex workers with Christian principles and some etiquette lessons. She asks: "And think you, reader, how much blame rests upon the world in this matter?"¹⁴⁵

Meriwether goes on to theorize about the inequality seen on many different levels in Memphis. She compares the fallen woman to the male alcoholic and argues that the male alcoholic was given preferential treatment by society. The male alcoholic, despite his sins, could easily be redeemed in Memphis society during this period. If he confessed and changed his ways through the help of religion, he could re-enter a respectable place in society. Yet, fallen women, if they enter sex-work at any point in their lives, were ostracized and forever hated by everyone, including their own gender. Even their children would be criticized and viewed as spawns of sin. Meriwether points out how unfair this parallel was. She argues that if society treated drunken men in the same fashion they treat sex-workers, than there would be a much greater problem with alcoholism. Significantly, Meriwether critiqued a double moral standard that defend women as unredeemable.

¹⁴⁴ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 24.

Trying to incite pity among elite women for the sex-worker, Meriwether elaborated: “Is the power of the master-passion of humanity *a less temptation* than the sparkle of the wine-cup or the rattle of the dice?”¹⁴⁶ Here, it is clear that Meriwether views sexuality as both a “temptation” and a “master-passion,” which implies that rather than simply being born into an unfortunate social location, sex-workers fell into prostitution because men and women alike can fall prey to the “master passion.” Reformers like Meriwether saw prostitution as succumbing to sexual passion. But, despite her implied critique of a moral double standard, her thinking did not match that of prostitutes themselves.

As demonstrated by the many stories told by Madeleine, the Midwest prostitute, it was rare for sex-workers to enter prostitution because they desired sex. According to Madeleine, they were forced into that world because of economic or social despair. When speaking with a client, he asks her how she entered that particular “notorious joint” and she responded that it was “imperative for [her] to make money” and taking respectable work, like being a sales clerk did not pay enough to survive.¹⁴⁷ Although noble in her intentions, Meriwether appears to not completely understand the subjects she hopes to reform. Unlike the orphaned prostitute saved by the widow, most sex-workers did not necessarily fall into sex work because of a lack of moral strength, and Christianity would not necessarily save them from the despairs of poverty and starvation. As future reform groups impassioned by Meriwether’s call demonstrate, religion could become a tool for social control.

¹⁴⁶ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 27.

¹⁴⁷ Anonymous, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing) 42. (Publishing year is unavailable),106.

Meriwether closes her book with a plan to reform. She argues that any groups hoping to reform prostitution can only do so if they catch prostitutes early in their careers. She argues that women who have been in the business for too long are unsalvageable, because those women are either ill or filled with so much despair that the only project for a reformer would be to “smooth the way of the sufferer to the tomb.”¹⁴⁸ Yet, for girls who have only been in the business a short while, reformers have the ability through religion and love to “administer the restoring draught in *the first stage of the disease*,” allowing “health and bloom and beauty” to “be restored.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, Meriwether sets the stage for reformers to begin defining which female behaviors would be valued and which would not. Although Meriwether only discriminates against age in this call, reformers had a much longer list employed in their reform process, including sexual practices, marital status, and parental status. Meriwether finishes off this plan with one last call to arms:

“My sisters, will you not try it? Will you hush the cruel taunt, the sweeping anathema, and the bitter sarcasm? Will you look up on your lost and despairing sister with the eye of pity? Will you gladden her weary heart with the smile of kindness, and strengthen her palsied arm with the strong, cheerful words or encouragement and hope? Will you take her by the hand, and lead her out from the midnight darkness, and the bleak desert of sin and shame, into the glad sunlight of hope, into the green pastures of Christian duty, and beside the still waters of abiding peace?”¹⁵⁰

Once again, Meriwether, despite her sympathy for sex-workers, utilizes the rhetoric of sin to describe their lives as a “bleak desert of sin and shame” and contrasts the sex-workers

¹⁴⁸ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 29.

¹⁴⁹ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 28.

¹⁵⁰ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 29.

with the reformers, who were the “glad sunlight of hope.”¹⁵¹ Middle and upper-class Memphis women responded to Meriwether’s call for the moral reform of fallen women.

Elizabeth Fisher Johnson founded the Women’s Christian Association (WCA) in April of 1875, drawing up the bylaws and Constitution in that first year.¹⁵² The Constitution states that “any woman of good moral character, desiring to engage in Christian work, or contribute to the same, may become a member of the Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association of Memphis, Tennessee.”¹⁵³ As the “brainchild” of Elizabeth Fisher Johnson, the WCA reflected Johnson’s persona.

Figure 11: Elizabeth Fisher Johnson

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Elizabeth Fisher Johnson attended a boarding school in Macon, Georgia “that was run by teachers trained at Emma Willard schools in New York and South Hadley, Massachusetts.” Lide Meriwether claimed that this type of training allowed Johnson to follow Willard’s example by “taking charge of the world when it was off track and attempting to set it straight again.” Johnson was also Presbyterian. In her book *Elite*

¹⁵¹ Meriwether, *Soundings*, 29.

¹⁵² Wedell, *Elite Women*, 31.

¹⁵³ Constitution and By Laws of the Women’s Christian Association, “Women’s Christian Association Annual Report, 1901,” 44.

Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915, Marsha Wedell argues that “evangelical theological tenets, which stressed personal experience and individual worth, had potentially liberating implications for women, easing their movement out of the home and into the public sphere.”¹⁵⁴ The WCA represented the start of the women’s movement in Memphis, drawing women out of the private sphere and into the public for the sake of maintaining morality and cleansing the sins of the city. The name was changed from the Women’s Christian Association to the Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association (WYWCA) in 1898.¹⁵⁵

The women of the organization set up their bureaucracy in a systematic fashion that reinforced their identity as moral guardians. First, in establishing their title, the women refused to allow it to go forward without the word Christian within it. The national organization from which the WCA stemmed from held the motto: “everything we do is religious.” The board members of the WCA were members of several different Christian denominations through Memphis including Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopalian.¹⁵⁶ The women believed that this interdenominational membership “was considered...to be one of their greatest strengths. Next, the WCA divided the city into districts that each had a chairman and a committee to serve the people within each section of the city. They wanted to acquaint themselves with the particular conditions of each section of the city, particularly focusing on the plight of the poor. They also

¹⁵⁴ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 32.

¹⁵⁵ Ellen M. Watson, “History of the Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association of Memphis, TN,” in “Women’s Christian Association Annual Report, 1901,” 7.

¹⁵⁶ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 35.

immediately opened an “Intelligence Office,” which served as a referral location for less fortunate women in need of housing or jobs.¹⁵⁷

Each year, Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in published yearbooks describing their yearly activity. In the 1901 publication, Ellen M. Watson included a history of the organization, reflecting both their purpose and their bias. She states that as a Christian organization, the YWCA “can have no higher aim than the spiritual benefit of those for whom it cares.”¹⁵⁸ The second aim of the organization is to be “a service for the good of women, and it is carried on wholly by women.” She describes the scope of the service the YWCA engages in as bettering anything that “affects the physical, moral, mental, or spiritual well-being of” women.¹⁵⁹

After being founded in 1875, the YWCA narrowed the scope that Watson describes to specific endeavors. First, the group worked to provide “relief” for “the poor and destitute.” They did this through getting to know the poor “personally,” inviting them to Church, giving them “material aid,” and inviting “the children to the Sabbath schools.” Taking the “idea of our Saviour’s, “I was a stranger and ye took me in,” the YWCA established “the Intelligence Office and temporary lodging rooms.” The office served to organize a search for employment and homes for women and children. The lodging house was meant to be a temporary “refuge for homeless women and children.” Watson proudly asserts that they were among the first to provide aid through a civilian group to this “class” of people. Then the YWCA opened a lunchroom, which in Watson’s words, was “where hungry waifs were fed.” Finally, the YWCA boldly opened a “Reformatory Mission,” called the “Commandment’s house” in December of

¹⁵⁷ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 36.

¹⁵⁸ Watson, “History,” 7.

¹⁵⁹ Watson, “History,” 7.

1876. The Home was meant “for the moral and social regeneration of “erring women” and “it was commonly referred to as the “Navy Yard Mission.”¹⁶⁰ This house expanded into a permanent location on Alabama Street and took a new name in 1880: The Mission House.¹⁶¹ This mission, according to Watson, received much “prejudice” but their goal was not to please society but instead, “rescue souls and bodies from the grasp of the evil one, and win them for Christ.”¹⁶² Within the first year of being an organization in Memphis and only four years after the publication of Meriwether’s *Soundings*, the WYWCA had taken on the call to reform sex-work, not only saving souls, but in Watson’s words, saving the female body. This goal subsequently resulted in the WYWCA becoming a policing force surrounding the female body, utilizing their influence and reform process to try to impose definitions of the female body that conformed to traditional notions of womanhood. This process identifies the female body as a site of social control during this period.

In February of 1883, the Women’s Christian Association was officially incorporated. Through this process, the WYWCA reaffirmed their goals, outlining them as such:

“Providing for the physical, moral, and spiritual welfare of women and children; the maintenance of homes, and a house of refuge for fallen women and for general missionary work.”

Many respectable women signed the charter, although none so elite that their names still bedeck street signs in Memphis today. Watson contends that their most prominent and effective members were Mrs. A.H. Douglass, G. W. Fisher, M. T. Williamson, Mad. Louise Trudeau, S. A. Smithwick, S. A. Surprise, M. J. Schabell, and Annie Fisher, who

¹⁶⁰ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 37-38.

¹⁶¹ Watson, “History,” 8 and 11.

¹⁶² Watson, “History,” 8.

was also a charter member along with Elizabeth F. Johnson (founder), Ellen Watson (author of the history), Milly Campbell, Sarah Brown, Fanny Jobe, Mary Wormeley, Francis Hall, Mary Francis Godwin, and Mary H. Latham.¹⁶³

After the death of their founder and first president, Elizabeth Johnson, the WYWCA fell on some difficult times, fighting to stay afloat. Still, their “Mission Home” was the one area they refused to compromise support for. In 1883, the home had a resident staff, including a matron, Mrs. Kate Darragh, an assistant, Miss Stewart, and a teacher, Mrs. S.A. Means. Watson stated that with such a talented staff, the WYWCA felt as though “every soul brought within its influence would receive a blessing if open to one.”¹⁶⁴ During this period, the home housed 68 people, 40 of whom were children. Soon, though, the WYWCA decided to separate the adults and children, renting another house in Fort Pickering, to be run by Mrs. M. E. Wormeley and Mrs. Kate Darragh.¹⁶⁵ Within the records, it is not clear whether the children were separated from their parents, but it seems that the population of the Fort Pickering home was of both orphans and children of sex-workers.¹⁶⁶

The WYWCA next opened, in 1887, a boarding house for young women moving from the rural country to the city. Watson discusses the importance of having such homes for these women. During this time, the population was greatly increasing in Memphis and there were a “large number of young women coming to the city seeking employment, determined upon a course of independent self-support, as strangers, without means at their command.” The WYWCA wanted to prevent the girls from becoming

¹⁶³ Watson, “History,” 11.

¹⁶⁴ Watson, “History,” 12.

¹⁶⁵ Watson, “History,” 12 and 15.

¹⁶⁶ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 38.

“exposed to temptations and without protection.” They became the parent to the many women susceptible to such a fate.¹⁶⁷ It is clear that what the WYWCA feared was that these women would fall into the life of sex-work. Reformers believed that many of these women, due to poverty and separation from family life, could be easily tempted by what reformers believed was the fast-paced, party-like environment of a brothel. Alcohol, silk dresses, and male attention, not to mention the duplicitous madams that sought fresh bodies for their businesses, called these young women out of a life of moral decency and into the hands of the devil himself. Madeleine represented such a woman, even being described by her client as a “nice girl” who fell into this life of disrepair, although Madeleine did not view herself in this same fashion.¹⁶⁸ So, they opened the Anne Brinkley home to prevent this fate from overtaking innocent, young women, further institutionalizing their control over the female body.¹⁶⁹

Ironically, around this same time, the WYWCA had also opened a “refuge” home, which as Watson states, was a “reformatory for unfortunate friendless women,” also known as prostitutes. In the end of her short history of the WYWCA, Watson mentions the refuge home among one of the “objects” receiving “the most earnest efforts of the Association” by 1901.¹⁷⁰ As the original Mission Home met with prejudice, so must have the refuge, which would explain its absence from most of the history she wrote about. Still, in true Christian, bureaucratic fashion, the women of the WYWCA put in place organizations aimed at saving young women from an immoral fate.

¹⁶⁷ Watson, “History,” 16.

¹⁶⁸ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 106.

¹⁶⁹ Watson, “History,” 19.

¹⁷⁰ Watson, “History,” 20.

Figure 12: Ella Oliver Refuge

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The process of reforming sex-workers who entered the Ella Oliver Refuge Home, also known as the Ella Oliver Refuge, included repentance, job training, and social training. Inscribed on the doorway of the home was this: “We might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge, to lay hold upon the hope set before us,” setting the tone for the supposed purpose of the home.¹⁷¹ The Refuge served both as a safe house for some sex-workers to give birth to a child and for others to get job training. The residents were mostly trained in house work, as the “intelligence office” only really got calls for workers who were trained as domestics. To the WYWCA, this served not only to prepare women for future, respectable employment but possibly even to be productive wives in their own households. The household work they were taught included house cleaning, sewing, and laundry. The Refuge even opened a “laundry for profit” to help offset the costs of the Refuge. The women of the WCA hoped that this “combination of strong religious faith and the ability to perform at least some type of honest work would ensure individual survival once a girl left the Refuge.”¹⁷²

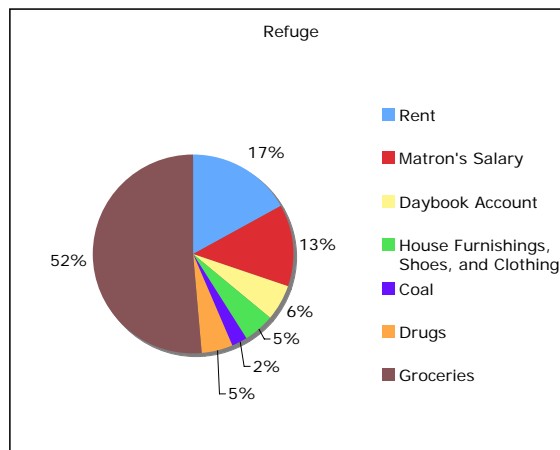
¹⁷¹ From Hebrews vi., Found in *Evening Appeal*, 1-10-33.

¹⁷² Wedell, *Elite Women*, 39.

In 1901, the corresponding secretary, Mrs. J. C. Ottinger, wrote a report concerning the activities of the organization for that year. The two main focuses by this time were the Refuge, which had been moved to its permanent home on 903 Walker Avenue, and the newly renovated Anne Brinkley Home which was the residential home for respectable, single, working women. Ottinger does make a note of the success of the homes, claiming that they had turned many applicants away from the home because so many applied. She makes a case that the “Christian women of Memphis” need “to give more earnest support to this noble cause which should appeal to every kindly heart.”¹⁷³

Each year, the Women’s Christian Association also provided annual reports on their use of funds, and the social services they ran. In 1901, spending on the refuge could be broken into this pie chart, as follows:

Chart 1: Spending of the Ella Oliver Refuge



As Chart 1 demonstrates, a majority of the spending went into groceries for the home, followed by rent, and then the matron’s salary. The breakdown of spending for the

¹⁷³ Mrs. J.C. Ottinger, “Report of Recording Secretary,” in “27th Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association: 1900-1901,” 23.

home provides some insight into what went on within the home. In particular, the need to spend 5% of the budget on house furnishings, shoes, and clothing gives some indication that most of the women entering into this home did not have a lot of personal possessions. Or, their personal possessions were probably not acceptable for the life of women outside the sex trade. In particular, Madeleine discusses in detail the process of buying all new clothing to wear inside the brothel but not necessarily on the street, unless one wants to be recognized as a sex-worker. She describes the women who work with her in Madam C's home as "American born children" who had "always known vice" but not "luxury." As a result, they dressed in "costly garments" and went out on the town, luring new customers while enjoying a show at the theatre.¹⁷⁴ In order to fit into this work environment, Madeleine also had to have garments made but she never wore them in public like her fellow co-workers, as she had a difference sense of respectability than some others. She describes the process of buying such clothes after she enters Miss Allen's Brothel, having to "wear- a brocade of somber hue, trimmed in costly lace" until she had made enough money at the house to pay for her own garments, such clothing marked her as a sex-worker and as a result, would be unacceptable within the Refuge home.¹⁷⁵ What is more, relegating part of the WCA's budget to dressing their clients respectably was another facet of exercising control over the female body through regulating women's appearances.

The Annual Reports also include reviews of the work of each home written by its committee Chair. By 1901, Mrs. Jesse Brown reported that the Refuge Home had helped around 1,000 children and 1,300 "misguided girls." The report also states that by helping

¹⁷⁴ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 115.

¹⁷⁵ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 126.

these girls, they have “saved” them “from a life worse than death,” with “many of them now leading lives of usefulness, happy in the love of a compassionate Saviour.”¹⁷⁶

Furthermore, Brown used the report as an opportunity to once again, call for other women in Memphis to join in on this work. She argues that the work the WYWCA does with the Refuge was spiritually rewarding. She asks:

“Could the Christian women of our city realize how what might have been an irrevocably ruined life can be redeemed by timely assistance from the effects of a first transgression, a sin possibly not of settled principle, and be made a source of power in the salvation of others...what can present to women a more pressing our greater field of work for our dear Lord than the building up of poor, weak bodies in broken lives, establishing habits of righteousness in those of her own sex who, having lost their moorings, are seemingly inevitably drifting into eternal ruin but for the timely assistance of a helping hand”¹⁷⁷

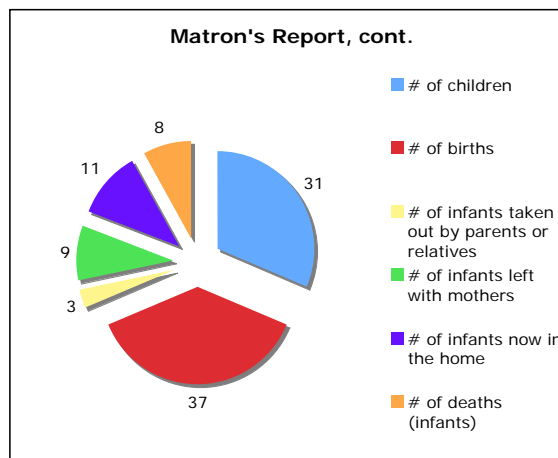
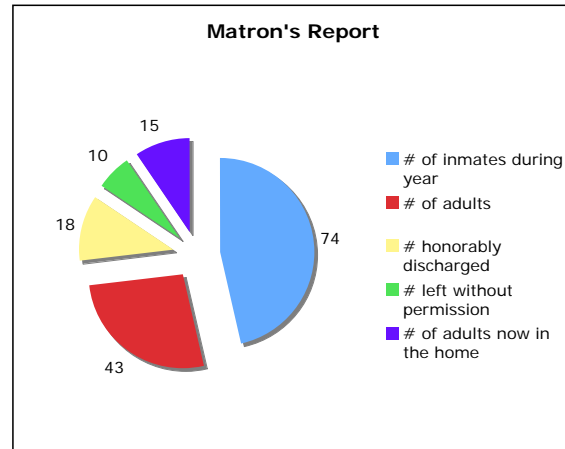
Once again, the WYWCA appears to claim that moving into sex-work for women is a result of poor moral strength. Furthermore, by referencing the prostitutes “bodies,” Brown identified the control of female sexuality as a way to assert hegemonic notions of womanhood, defining the sexual prostitute’s body as weak and in need of reform.

Given this entire report of the Refuge Home, it is interesting that Brown does not go into any more detail about the types of girls they were trying to help. Who were they? All the report provides in detail is numbers through the Matron’s Report:

¹⁷⁶ Mrs. Jesse Brown, “Review of Refuge Home Work,” in 27th Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association: 1900-1901,” 28.

¹⁷⁷ Watson, “History,” 31.

Chart 2: Matron's Report of the Ella Oliver Refuge



These numbers do provide some solid information about the sex-workers staying in the Refuge House. First, there were 74 people in the house, which the WYWCA called “inmates.” The *Commercial Appeal* also utilized the term “inmate” to describe sex-workers in Memphis in 1874. It seems to imply that the women were not voluntary members of brothels but rather, prisoners. Yet, the WYWCA used the same term, “inmate” to describe the reformed women. If the women were there voluntarily, why

were they termed “inmates?”¹⁷⁸ Use of this term by women reformers implies the element of social control in their work. After all, they were the keepers of these “inmates.”

Only 74 of these “inmates” were actually adults, while 31 were children. As such, it is clear that many of the sex-workers the house took in were mothers. Indeed, the WYWCA kept an entire separate group of information dealing with the children of “inmates.” In one year, there were 8 infant deaths, 37 births, and 11 still living in the home. Other key information in these numbers is the number of women who were “honorably discharged,” 18. The term “honorably discharged” suggests they succeeded in becoming respectable women, just as a young man during this period might have succeeded in becoming a proper soldier. However, it also appears that not all the women were happy at the Refuge, as 10 left without permission. These are just the numbers from 1901, but they provide an excellent jumping off point from which to examine the rest of the information in succeeding annual reports.

Rather than expand on the information she provides about the “inmates,” Brown goes into a diatribe about how rewarding it is to help women who have “sinned.” She claims that “the sinful woman is an outcast, homeless, and friendless” but thankfully, God “had builded [a] Home of Refuge where she can go and learn of Him, be saved from her sins, be built up into respectable womanhood through the influence of God’s Children, who know Him as the God of Love.” It is probably not so surprising that sex-workers in Memphis did not necessarily respond well to this type of reform. Instead of offering help for the sake of helping women out of the cycle of selling their own bodies

¹⁷⁸ “100 Years Ago, News of Bygone Days,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1874.

for survival, the women of the WYWCA first judge them as sinners and then only provided help in the form of Christian proselytizing.

So what happened to those women who had been “honorably discharged” from the Refuge house? The WYWCA either provided a job for the women through their “Information Office” or the women were sent to live with relatives.¹⁷⁹ Other than that statement, the WCA does not provide much more information on the lives of the women who passed through the Refuge.

The annual yearbooks from the years 1901 to 1907 reflect a growing reform movement in Memphis, representative the Progressive era. As Mrs. Jesse Brown states in the beginning of her 1902 Refuge Home Committee Report, “the desire in the present day to raise the fallen and help the friendless is growing.”¹⁸⁰ In this report, she even included a success story from the Refuge. Louemma Angel, a former resident of the Refuge House, “found her Saviour in the forgiveness of her sins,” while being reformed by the members of the WYWCA. A picture is included in the annual report of a beautiful, reformed woman. She stands daintily, clad in white, with a veil to match, a striking image of physical purity. The ladies of WYWCA consider her their most prized success story, as her son, whom she birthed at the Refuge House was a successful student in Saint Louis and she had become a missionary in Bombay, India. Apparently she wrote letters home to the organization; Mrs. Jesse Brown described her words as “so filled with the beautiful faith of a consecrated life, given in service to Him who died for her, prove a benediction, an inspiration to renewed effort.”¹⁸¹ So, for the WYWCA, Louemma Angel

¹⁷⁹ Wedell, *Elite Women*, 40.

¹⁸⁰ Mrs. Jesse Brown, “Review of Refuge Home Work,” in 28th Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association: 1900-1901,” 16.

¹⁸¹ Brown, “Review of Refuge Home Work,” 17.

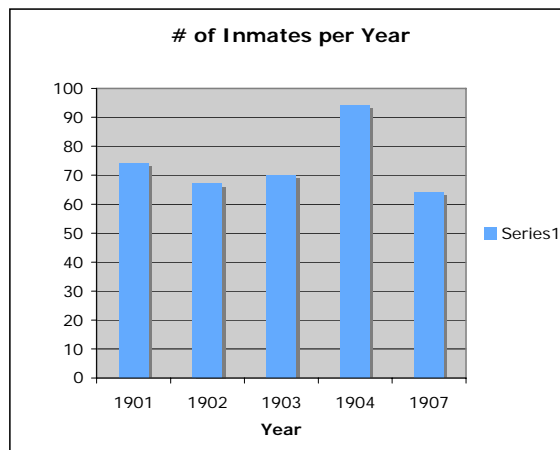
has become the paradigm of Christian womanhood. Her change in dress and manner signifies the control the WYWCA had over the female body. She now represented Christian chastity and piety rather than sexuality and entrepreneurship. Thus, she symbolizes the goal of the refuge: acknowledging sin, redeeming one's self, and subsequently, adhering to the standard of female morality that the WYWCA inscribed on the female body.

Figures 13 and 14

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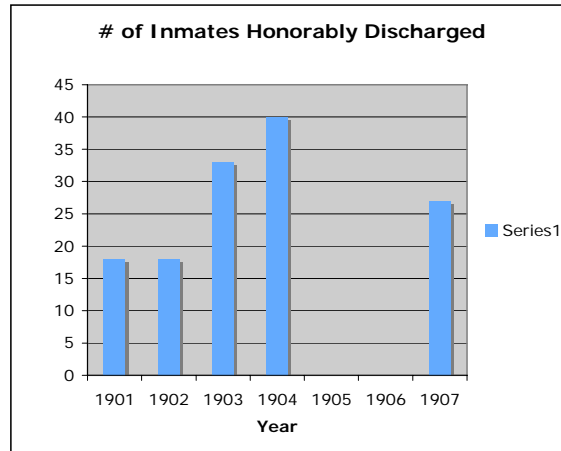
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More information about the state and influence of WYWCA can be seen within more statistics. It seems that the WYWCA clung to numbers as proof of their efforts.

Chart 3: Number of Inmates Per Year in Ella Oliver Refuge¹⁸²

As Chart 3 demonstrates, the number of sex-workers entering the Refuge House does not change very much, varying between 65 and 70, though in 1904, the number of sex-workers spiked upward to over 90. Unfortunately, there was not any information on the number of sex-workers in the Refuge House in 1905 and 1906. The chairman chose to leave it out of the annual report. Still, it is clear that there are not that many changes to the number of “inmates.”

¹⁸² Pulled from the Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, and 1907.

Chart 4: # of Inmates Honorably Discharged from Ella Oliver Refuge¹⁸³

In Chart 4, the number of “inmates” within the Refuge home discharged with honor is recorded. 1905 and 1906 have no number, as the Annual Report changed that year, leaving out the statistics of the Refuge. Clearly, between 1901 and 1904, the Refuge seemed to be discharging more women honorably, although it is not clear why, or whether that trend continued.

Chart 5: # of Inmates Who Left Without Permission¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Pulled from the Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, and 1907.

¹⁸⁴ Pulled from the Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, and 1907.

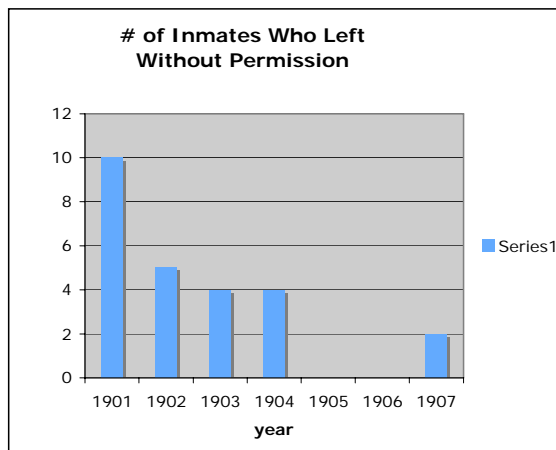


Chart 5 depicts the number of “inmates” who decided to leave the Refuge house without permission. The annual reports are not clear about this phenomenon, leaving only numbers available to the researcher but once again, only for the years 1901 to 1904 and 1907. Interestingly, the scale is much smaller than that for Figure 4. The maximum number of girls leaving without permission was 10, which occurred in 1901, which was far smaller than the 40 girls who were honorably discharged in 1907 from the same home. Does this mean that the Refuge was successful in discharging women honorably from their home? Possibly. But, it is also not a fair measure, as the sample given by the records is inconsistent and rather small. Furthermore, what was an honorable woman to the WYWCA? Some answers lie in another mission run by the organization: the Anne Brinkley House.

Anne Brinkley House

Early Version

New House in the 1900s

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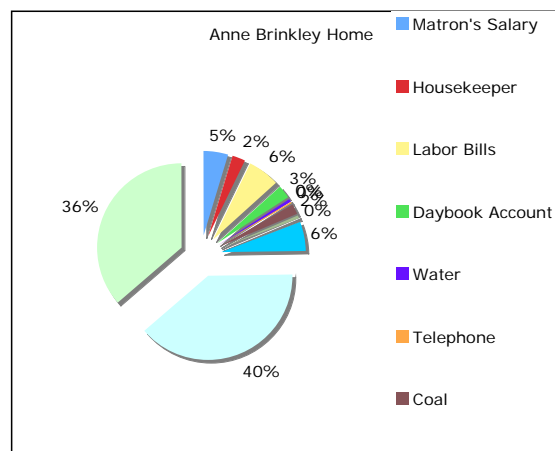
The chairman of this home, Mrs. W. F. Taylor, also wrote several annual reports, starting in 1901, shorter than Mrs. Jesse Brown's, but just as informative. She wrote that the Anne Brinkley Home was intended to house young women and maintain their chastity and health. "Suitable rules govern the Home, and each girl is required to guard its honor by her conduct and conversation."¹⁸⁵ A matron was employed to make sure these rules were followed and with her "Christian manner, seeks to win them to a higher and nobler life." The Home could house 50 girls comfortably.

The spending of the home was similar to that of the Refuge, except that no money was budgeted for shoes and clothing. Presumably, "inmates" of the Brinkley home did not require a new appearance, since they did not come from the ranks of prostitutes. As discussed earlier, the Ella Oliver Refuge did engage in redressing its occupants, removing

¹⁸⁵ Mrs. W.F. Taylor, "Report of Anne Brinkley Home," in 27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 36.

the tainted clothing that signaled a sex-worker and replacing it with the clothing of respectable women. Presumably, the women admitted into the Anne Brinkley Home were already of a respectable status and as such, did not need to be re-clothed.

Chart 6: Spending of the Anne Brinkley House¹⁸⁶



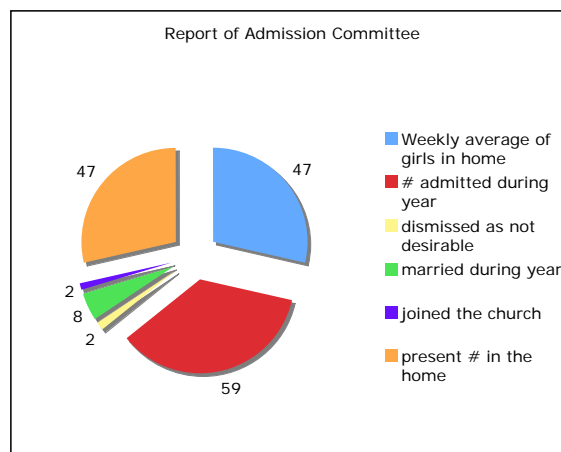
As Chart 6 shows, most of the money is spent on the upkeep of the house and feeding the girls within. Unlike the Refuge, the committee does not spend money on dressing the girls or buying furniture for them. These differences result from the different purposes of the home. One interesting note, though, is that the matron of the Anne Brinkley home is paid a significant amount more than the matron of the Refuge, despite the fact that fewer

¹⁸⁶ "Treasurer's Annual report for Year Ending Nov. 1, 1901," in 27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 24.

women live in the home. This could possibly be a reflection of the WYWCA's focus on prevention over reformation. The Brinkley Home prevented the female body from falling into disrepair, at least according to their own standards. If they can prevent the girls from losing their moral strength at all, than they have less work for themselves in the long run. As such, they might pay the matron of the boarding house more to ensure that she was strict about the rules and the enforcement of Christian morality.

Like the Refuge Report, the boarding house also provides numbers on the girls in their house. However, as Chart 7 shows, the categories were far different than those of the Refuge House.

Chart 7: Report of Anne Brinkley House Admission Committee¹⁸⁷



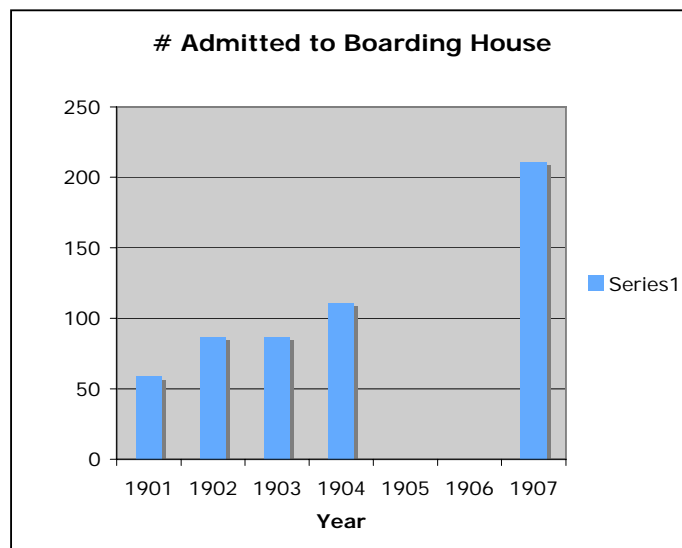
Rather than recording the number of girls having children or the number of deaths, the report for the Anne Brinkley boarding home records the number of girls who got married or joined a church, two measures of normative white womanhood. As the chapter on gender and sexuality in Memphis demonstrates, women who exhibited sexual purity were considered superior to those who did not. Part of this might be because both marriage

¹⁸⁷ Mrs. C.N. Bell, "Report of Admission Committee," in 27th Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association: 1900-1901," 39.

and the Church were institutions that policed and imprisoned female sexuality. This once again ties the WYWCA to the business of sin prevention. As a Christian organization, their reform and prevention work was steeped in religious ideology. Obviously, the standards of this home reflect what the women of the WYWCA view as acceptable behavior for young women and most likely, what they viewed as success when “honorably discharging” a member of the Refuge home.

Over the course of the years 1901 to 1907, the trends within the Anne Brinkley house can be analyzed, to better understand their purpose and success. Chart 8 shows the overall number of women admitted to the home between 1901 and 1907.

Chart 8: # Admitted to Anne Brinkley House¹⁸⁸



This chart shows that more women were admitted to the home steadily over the course of 6 years. This could be due to the growing influence of the home or to the growing need

¹⁸⁸ Pulled from the Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, and 1907.

for the home. As the city grew and job possibilities opened, the Anne Brinkley House also grew.

Although they kept records of both the numbers of residents who joined the church and the number of women who were married while staying at the house, these records were not consistently kept. Although the annual reports record the number of women who joined the church for 1901 and 1902, they do not continue to do so after that point. Similarly, the number of women married was omitted from 1905 and 1906 reports.

Chart 9: # of Girls Married While in the Anne Brinkley House¹⁸⁹

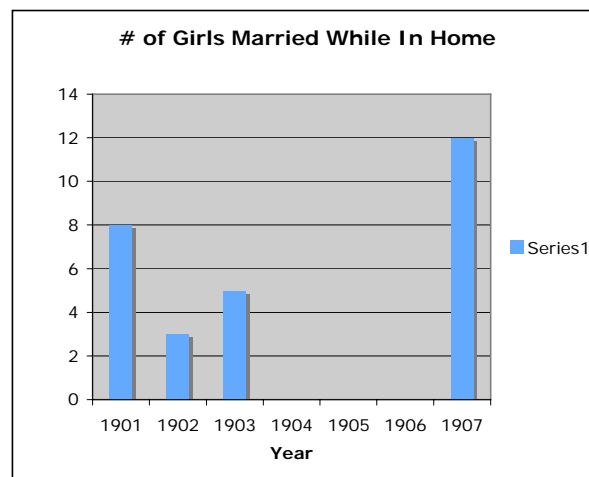


Chart 9 demonstrates that the number of residents who married fluctuated over the years. Overall, the odds of being married while living in the home were not great. First, the pool is much smaller, topping at 12 in 1907, which was also the year that the around 220 women were admitted to the home, the most over that period.

¹⁸⁹ Pulled from the Year Book of the Woman's and Young Woman's Christian Association, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1907.

One significant comparison is the number of girls married to the number dismissed. Although it is not clear what “dismissed” meant, given the other categories of data provided in the records, including those who left voluntarily, it seems that “dismissed” refers to those women removed from the home for violating the rules.

Chart 10: # of Girls Dismissed from the Anne Brinkley House¹⁹⁰

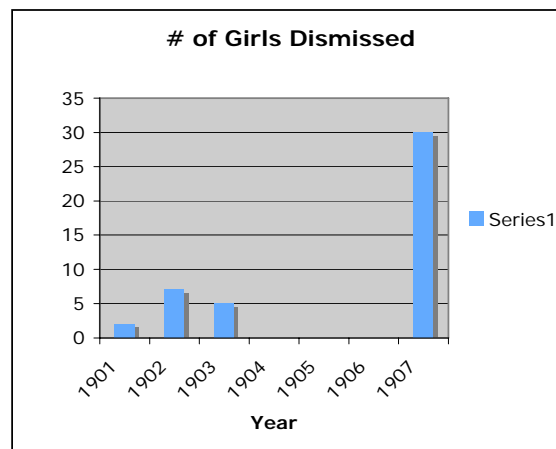


Chart 10 shows that although the number of residents dismissed stays small between 1901 and 1903, but 1907 showed an all time high of women dismissed from the home, more than the number married. Furthermore, figure 10 also shows that records were

¹⁹⁰ Pulled from the Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1907.

incomplete, this time from 1904 to 1906. What could this mean? Were the women of the WYWCA simply poorly organized and inconsistent with their record keeping? Possibly but it could also be a possibility that the women of the WYWCA did not want to admit any failures.

One way of examining the WYWCA would be to contrast their policies for admitting women to their different homes, and for admitting members to their organization. In the history written by Ellen Watson, she mentions that the WYWCA did not give “help” without an “investigation” into the client they were helping.¹⁹¹ What does an “investigation” mean? The WYWCA does not provide any information in their annual reports, by-laws, or Constitution on what the standards were for acceptance into either the Refuge Home or the Anne Brinkley House. Were some girls simply not allowed in at all? For example, in the Anne Brinkley House in 1902-1903, 129 applications were submitted to the WYWCA and 37 were not accepted into the house.¹⁹² Between 1904 and 1907, 197 girls were rejected.¹⁹³ The report does not give any information on the reasons why the girls were rejected from the home. Despite these rejections, Mrs. Jesse Brown, in 1901, reported that the Refuge had helped around 1300 girls. The numbers in the annual reports, however, do not reflect such a grandiose number. Similarly, the numbers in the reports for the Refuge Home do not even include information on whether the girls were applying to the home, if any were rejected, if they were recruited, or any information on how the home gained any members at all. The details of their admissions policy have been lost in the haze of civic pride. On March 12,

¹⁹¹ Watson, “History,” 8.

¹⁹² C.E. Lots, “Report of Matron Anne Brinkley Home” in “Twenty-Ninth Year Book of the Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association,” 26.

¹⁹³ In the later reports, such numbers are not provided

1924, the *Commercial Appeal* reported that “hundreds of girls have found sanctuary at this refuge, shielded from the hypocritical scorn of society. There they have found new hope, new courage, and have gone out again into the world with heads held high.”¹⁹⁴

In the Report of the Recording Secretary of 1901, Mrs. J. C. Ottinger stated that applications to both the Refuge and the Anne Brinkley House had greatly increased and as a result, “properly indorsed applicants have necessarily been turned away, because there was not room to receive them.”¹⁹⁵ From this statement, it must be noted that the WYWCA had “indorsed applicants,” meaning applicants that fit certain standards for admission. Although none of the official documents of the WYWCA state what these guidelines might be, a statement concerning the policy of the board for the Refuge house in the *Commercial Appeal* sheds light on the subject.

“The home is for reconstruction of young lives, physically and spiritually, and not a lying- in hospital for prostitutes. It is not open to second offenders or married offenders. Caring for such cases, the board feels, but encourages prostitution. This policy of the Ella Oliver board may be termed an “artificial distinction” by social workers, but to those who are devoting their services to this type of work, it is very real.”¹⁹⁶

This statement provides a significant amount of information. First, by referring to “a lying- in hospital for prostitutes,” the statement distinguishes the Refuge home from those hospitals where sex-workers were welcome when they needed medical help, including abortions, medicine for sexually transmitted diseases, and birthing. In her memoir, Madeline spends time in such a place, where she receives treatment for a sexually transmitted disease.¹⁹⁷ Although the hospital did not reform her, it did save her

¹⁹⁴ *Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1924.

¹⁹⁵ Mrs. J.C. Ottinger, “Report of the Recording Secretary,” in 27th Year Book of the Woman’s and Young Woman’s Christian Association: 1900-1901,” 23.

¹⁹⁶ “Policy of the Board,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 8, 1932.

¹⁹⁷ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 51.

life and her child's life- both noble endeavors. But, the WYWCA would not engage in the non-judgmental care of "immoral" women. Second, the statement clarifies which women would be termed unacceptable. Any sex-workers who had been found to be repeat offenders were not welcome in the Refuge.

Finally, the women of the WYWCA make a distinction between worthy prostitutes and those undeserving of help, namely "Second offenders" and "married offenders." By stating that this home was for those who desired to be reformed, both "physically and spiritually," the statement makes it clear that women there just for physical care without moral redemption were not welcome at the Refuge. This raised several questions. If the woman was recorded under the Census or by the police as a sex-worker more than once, was she not welcome? Did they bar her if she had been a delinquent from the Refuge? Or if she had been known to receive money for a sexual act more than once? Certainly, if the sex-worker was married she was not welcome. This probably refers to the "kept" woman, who sustained an ongoing relationship that included love, but not marriage. Madeleine describes several instances in which she either lived with a man she loved or another one of her fellow sex-workers did. This could be lucrative for the sex-worker, providing her with economic support. In some cases, it also led to the man in the arrangement asking the woman to marry him. Usually this occurred because the man wanted to "save" the woman he loved from sex-work and keep her for himself. Thus, it is significant that the Refuge would refuse these women. Apparently, long-term liaisons were only sanctified if it was between two Christian individuals, who courted in a chaste fashion, and wound up married.

In fact, Madeleine articulated an alternative moral universe, different from these reformers. She did not represent the lewd sex-worker that the reformers envisioned. Instead, she had her own version of moral standards. Madeleine saw salvation in some of her relationships. She rarely fully named the men she stayed with but referred to one, Paul, who proposed marriage several times. He lived in Montana and always came to her side when she was in trouble. For example, when her child died, he came to her from Montana to Chicago immediately, prompting her to call him her “salvation.”¹⁹⁸ Madeleine refused to marry him because to her, it would be a loss of independence. She did not view this as being improper behavior but instead had her own code of morality, viewing herself as holding the middle ground between puritanical, True Womanhood and sexual perversity.

Here, it becomes clear that not every sex-worker would be invited to be reformed at the Ella Oliver Refuge. In comparing these standards to the census records on sex-workers, it seems that many of the women would not be eligible, since many were either repeat offenders, mothers, or married women, all of whom would have been rejected by the Refuge. The WYWCA’s standards for admission thus reinforce the evidence for their agenda of social control.

Placing the WYWCA in the larger historiography, this organization seems to support the argument that the Progressive era was not “progressive” but instead, conservative. One such argument comes from Jill Kerr Conway¹⁹⁹ who attempts to

¹⁹⁸ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 200.

¹⁹⁹ Although Conway speaks directly to my project, her scholarship is a bit outdated (largely in the late 1970s to 1980s). Another key person to examine would be Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (Canada: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1967). To see some more modern work with similar ideas, examine Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999). Or Neil Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: A Grassroots History of the Progressive Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

answer why feminism declined in the period after suffrage was gained. In two landmark essays, Conway argues that female social activists of the Progressive Era did not take their cause far enough and simply perpetuated previously conceived stereotypes of the female gender, reaffirming the merits of inequality. Through buying into traditional notions of True Womanhood, the majority of these social reformers in the Progressive era did not promote the idea of gender equality or even support suffrage.²⁰⁰ Conway separates female activists in this period into two separate groups. In her article “Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870-1930,” she divides women into “the sage or prophetess who claimed access to hidden wisdom by virtue of feminine insights” and “the professional expert or the scientist, a social identity highly esteemed in American culture but sexually neutral.”²⁰¹ These distinctions allow Conway to address the questions surrounding the effects that gaining suffrage had on first wave feminism. In particular, she makes an argument as to why first wave feminism became politically inactive after suffrage was gained. She claims that during the period from 1870 to 1930, the sage/conservative-sentimental reformers of the Progressive era overtook the women’s movement. In particular, “the sage had great resonance for American popular culture” because she did not challenge existing gender roles. She claims that because they failed to dramatize another “model of feminine excellence besides the gentle, intuitive woman,” their influence waned. With this foundation, “only a drastic reformation of the issues

²⁰⁰ Jill Kerr Conway, “Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870-1930.” *Journal of Social History* 5:2 (1971-72): 164-77.; Jill Kerr Conway, “Utopian Dream or Dystopian Nightmare?: Nineteenth-Century Feminist Ideas about Inequality,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 96:2 (1986): 285-94.

²⁰¹ Conway, “Women Reformers and American Culture, 167. She takes this paradigm in a different direction in her article “Utopian Dream or Dystopian Nightmare?,” where women are divided into the “utopian-radical, concerned with changing the social and cultural boundaries of the gender system in profound ways” and the “conservative-sentimental,” who were “concerned with elaborating and expanding women’s claim to authority and influence *because* they function only in the domestic sphere and were excluded from the moral hazards of male life. Conway, “Utopian Dream or Dystopian Nightmare?,” 294.

surrounding the question of sameness or difference between women and men seemed likely to alter this pattern.”²⁰²

Similarly, the women of the WYWCA did not drastically alter their own social location through reform. Although moving into the public sphere, the women of the WYWCA championed traditional gender roles through their reform work. This process was evident in their budgets and standards of admission in both the Ella Oliver Refuge and the Anne Brinkley House. These women viewed their own definition of womanhood to be the superior definition. As such, they attempted to train other women in their ways, through domestic job training, dressing correctly, and spiritual overhauls. Obviously, attempting to help sex-workers out of the cycle of sex-work is an admirable goal but it cannot be termed progressive during this era. Instead, the women of the WYWCA were essentially conservative in their reform process, appearing more like the sage/conservative-sentimental reformer Conway points out.

Ultimately, the women of the Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association created an institution that served to police the female body and define womanhood in religious terms. Their homes, both the Ella Oliver Refuge and Anne Brinkley House, demonstrated their understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behavior for women, condemning sexual behavior outside of marriage, as well as alcohol, parties, and even some clothing. To their organization, such boundaries were necessary during a period that saw extreme urban growth and with it, a growth of sex-work in Memphis. But, the WYWCA’s understandings of womanhood and the boundaries on the body it imposed, demonstrated why these reformers clashed with the identities of the sex-workers, drawing resentment rather than praise. The WYWCA saw the sex-worker and

²⁰² Conway, “Women Reformers and American Culture,” 168, 174- 175.

any woman who fell into that life path as morally weak and impure, falling into prostitution for love of crude behavior rather than economic need. In light of Madeleine's narrative, such a picture was not accurate though unfortunately, it won out. The WYWCA and later reform groups were successful in slowly eradicating sex-work; the city of Memphis took notice, and eventually passed laws that prevented sex workers from remaining in the red light district. What becomes evident from the WYWCA records was that female reformers were more interested in controlling prevailing definitions of womanhood and the female body than actually helping the sex-worker. Arguably, if the women of the WYWCA had been able to step outside of their own conservative definitions of womanhood, they might have been able to produce a more progressive policy and lasting legacy of gender equality. Unfortunately, this did not occur. By policing prostitutes and unmarried women's behavior and appearance, these reformers did not offer salvation but instead, a forced version of middle-class gendered respectability in which women who identified with alternative definitions of femininity would remain imprisoned and condemned.

Conclusion

“I went into my room and, without turning on the light, undressed and lay down as far from the man as I could, every nerve of me tingling with the dreaded anticipation of his awakening. I wanted to creep out of bed and pray to be spared the further pollution of his horrible hands and his loathsome body. Olga told me who he was, a man whose name was famous in “big business” and whose beautiful wife was a leader of society. I lay there questioning my Creator. Why had He made beasts like this? Why, since man and woman were created for each other, had He made their desires so dissimilar? Why should one class of women be able to dwell in luxurious seclusion from the trials of life, while another class performed their loathsome tasks? Surely His wisdom had *not* decreed that one set of women should live in degradation and in the end should perish that others might live in security, preserve their frapped chastity, and in the end be saved.”²⁰³

- Madeleine-

Here, Madeleine set up two classes of women: the prostitute and the socialite.

Why should these women live so separately? As Madeleine asked, why should one class of women live in luxury while the other “performed their loathsome tasks?” Her questions reflect the mindset of an outsider to the womanhood of the middle to upper class, white culture of the late 19th to early 20th century. She witnessed the injustice that some women should have the ability to maintain an aspect of individual self-hood and power over their bodies. She did not understand why all women should not have that power and what is more, she did not understand why some women might not wield that power if it was given to them. To survive, Madeleine created a separate set of social mores for herself and her fellow workers. The middle to upper-class definition of womanhood clashed with her occupation at every level as she had to make herself into a hyper-sexualized body, utilized for the pleasure of others rather than herself in order to achieve economic self-support. In response, Madeleine took control of small aspects of her life to maintain self-hood. From choosing not to drink alcohol to refusing to wear make-up or silk dresses in public (the mark of the sex-worker during this period),

²⁰³ Anonymous, *Madeleine*, 142.

Madeleine understood herself to not be abominable, and to maintain self-respect. She loathed her position as a sex-worker but worked within this system to define an alternative female self.

Examining the sex-worker through the lenses of Hill-Collins and Foucault, the prostitute during this period experienced domination on several levels. Because of her class and sometimes her race, the sex-worker became dominated within her own gender, subordinated to the elite white women of her society. To survive, sex-workers like Madeleine engaged in the “discipline” of prostitution, learning the trade through controlling their bodies, appearance, and even, minds in order to handle the demands of their occupations. They also created alternative moral codes, holding on to certain aspects of their self-hood even within the depths of the “discipline” of prostitution. Arguably, this demonstrates a small record of personal agency left by sex-workers like Madeleine. Unfortunately, such actions did not allow women like Madeleine to leave the life of the prostitute but looking at these women through a historical lens, they also cannot be labeled as sexual predators or lustful sinners. The historical record clearly demonstrates that instead, these women were far more than simply sex-workers. They were artists, students, mothers, sisters, friends, and individuals attempting to survive in a social location dominated by outside society. With what little information is left about these women, it must be acknowledged that prostitutes like Madeleine presented an alternative social code that if appropriated by larger society, might have given women more power over their own bodies and sexual behavior. Unfortunately, as an outsider dominated by a pervasive gendered structure, their voices were not heard by their elite sisters or society at large.

Yet, the reformers like those women of the WYWCA cannot be blamed for failing to hear the sex-workers cry. They also existed within a dominant structure of power in which they were subordinated because of their gender. These women identified the constraints and subordination of the sex-worker and attempted to lend a helping hand. To do so, they had to build a separate institution, the WYWCA. Unfortunately, they built this institution within the structures of dominant society. Rather than challenge traditional notions of womanhood among the elite, they championed them through reform. Attempting to help the prostitute, the women of the WYWCA trained the women they deemed worthy in the gendered role of a domestic servant or wife. Overhauling prostitutes' bodies and spirituality, the WYWCA believed it successfully brought sex-workers out of subordination and gave them the tools to be free. This was not the case. Instead, like themselves, they brought the reformed prostitute into yet another set of dominating disciplines of womanhood, the subordination of wives to husbands, and the constraints of middle class female dress that symbolized their subservient position within mainstream society as a whole. Obviously, there were benefits to no longer having to work within the discipline of sex-work but these reformed women were not given control over their bodies. Instead, they were placed in the same shackles that the women of the WYWCA wore, even if they were unaware of it.

These conclusions are not meant to claim that women during this period did not leave a record of agency. Arguably, both the sex-worker and the reformer left poignant records of agency. But, these conclusions do suggest that gender hierarchies and domination were pervasive during this period. Even with separate institution building and the prominent social location of an elite class and race, women of the WYWCA

could not escape the dominant structures of gender and achieve full control over their own bodies and selves. Obviously, neither could the sex-workers.

Ultimately then, this project engages in the historiographical debate on the Progressive era. As the information on reformers demonstrates, the WYWCA was one example of how the Progressive era actually represented a conservative period of reform, in which women battled one another to define the boundaries of womanhood. Given their race and class, reformers won this battle but in doing so, they demonstrated their essentially conservative ideologies. Rather than challenge mainstream hegemonic definitions of womanhood, they submitted to them and reproduced them in their reform targets. What is more, both the sex-worker and the reformer demonstrated the levels of subordination during this period and the tenacity of gender subordination through “disciplines.”

Speaking to the larger notion of social change, this project ultimately demonstrates the difficulties of fighting for gender equality, even with separate institution building. Both groups of women, the sex-workers and reformers, demonstrated the desire to enact change and expand female autonomy but neither fully succeeded in this endeavor. Arguably, part of this result might have been from the lack of a clearly defined feminist agenda during this period. The women did not have a language of equality to appropriate. As such, these women had to work within the pervasive norms of late nineteenth to twentieth century society, creating separate “disciplines” to survive or separate “institutions” to enact change but ultimately, remaining subordinated to a larger force of gendered structures. Neither fully identified the source of oppression that

constrained them. Although bleak, this picture speaks to current activists attempting to enact change toward a more equal society today.

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