

A Feminist Exploration of Depictions of Prostitution in Canadian Literature

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Metamorphosis, Spring 2012

In Morley Callaghan's Depression era novel, *Such is My Beloved*, a priest befriends two prostitutes who are seen as some of the lowest people in the city. This is a complex matter; although priests and prostitutes existed in Toronto in the 1930s, they were not often seen together. With his experience as a crime reporter with the *Toronto Star*, Callaghan enables the reader to see a true depiction of the social tensions and concerns of the time. *Such is My Beloved* deals with prostitution from the viewpoint of a progressive high society woman, a priest, a Marxist, a female police magistrate, and also from the view of the prostitutes themselves. Through Father Dowling, we have concern for the aspects of society he cares about. He is concerned with eugenics and the views that the feminists¹ of his day had on prostitutes, who were considered to be "feeble-minded". The women's movement of this time period was made up of people who almost unanimously believed that women who were sexually expressive, even within marriage, were morally inferior or ill.² Sex was for the purpose of creating children, and was barely seen as acceptable in a marriage relationship.³ Morley Callaghan explores these different viewpoints as Father Dowling muses about them throughout the novel, and concludes that despite the conventional wisdom of the church and the thinking of feminists themselves, prostitution has a purpose and enables those who cannot make money in any other way to survive in hard times.

This essay will specifically look at interactions between feminism and prostitution, and reveal contemporary feminist approaches to prostitution. I will be looking at major feminist works, including *In Times Like These*, by Nellie McClung, first published in 1915; *Sex, Love, and Morality*, a book by William J. Robinson that challenges views that feminists were expressing at the time of its publication in 1928; and Emily Murphy's "Sterilization of the Insane," published in 1932. I will be using de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which was influential in starting the second wave of feminism, as a tool to explore prostitution using feminist theory. I will examine the influences that feminist views and beliefs expressed in these references had on prostitution and the portrayal of prostitutes in *Such is My Beloved*, which was written and set in the 1930s.

The women's movement in the 1920s and 30s was not tolerant of prostitution. This grew out of the fear of the white slave trade, in which young girls and women were trapped in brothels and forced to service men. *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls*, which was published in 1910, describes this abuse: "Once within the door of the house of shame, escape is well-nigh impossible. Locked doors, barred windows, withheld street garments prevent escape, while drugs and brutality do their debasing, enslaving, crushing work."⁴ Feminists and church workers believed that there was an urgent need for the white slave trade to be stopped, and the girls

involved to be freed. However, they had no pity for the woman who had gone into prostitution of her own free will. Feminists and religious groups were in complete agreement on this matter; they believed that they could and should work together to help women get out of sexual slavery.⁵

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, moral reforms were happening in Canada. Those advocating the rights of women were recognizing the white slave trade and doing everything in their power to stop it. Social and moral reforms were seen as linked. Doctors also became leaders in the movement.⁶ It was doctors who spoke of the evils of sexual immorality and venereal disease as “a symptom of a social disorder.”⁷ Most people agreed that there were problems with sexual immorality in the early 1900s. A number of male and female doctors emphasized the importance of morality by writing books designed to teach men, boys, women, and girls how to live proper, moral lives. It was virtually unheard of for doctors and church workers to disagree on the subject of morality; since so much emphasis was placed on social purity, it was likely that doctors were spreading religious as well as scientific views.⁸ Arthur W. Beall, for example, who was the first to teach sex hygiene in schools in Ontario, had two basic themes within his lectures. The first was the idea that “...the body is ‘a living temple’ owned by God, not by the individual ‘tenant’ who happens to live in it, and so it ought to be kept clean. The other theme is that to indulge in sexual vice, tobacco, or drink is to be ‘unpatriotic.’”⁹ One of the greatest concerns of the social purity movement was prostitution; it was known as *the* social evil, and “...the fight against it was an ongoing campaign that was guaranteed to unify an otherwise diverse movement.”¹⁰ Although people had different ideas on what should be done with prostitutes, the very fact that they were all thinking about the same “problem” unified them and brought them together.¹¹

The Age of Light, Soap, and Water specifically deals with the social purity movement in Toronto in the 1910’s, where *Such is My Beloved* is set. Brothels in Toronto were kept to a minimum by a morality police. There was also no formal red light district. Even though there were houses of ill repute, they were often cracked down upon by police and so were more spread out than in other cities.¹² As a former reporter, Morley Callaghan understood the city and appropriately placed Ronnie and Midge in a run-down hotel. Although it was considered a bawdyhouse, only Ronnie and Midge lived there and worked out of the hotel room. This segregation and the fear that the girls felt every time they saw a policeman on the streets is true to what Toronto would have been like in the 1930’s.

Callaghan steps back from the social views of the time when he writes *Such is My Beloved*. In doing this, he also challenges and critiques them. Ronnie and Midge are segregated; they are living in poverty in a run-down hotel that is charging them just enough to keep them indebted but not enough so that they have to leave. Callaghan enables the reader to see what he is really getting at; the social problems that were prominent in the 1930s were not being answered in ways that made sense. Callaghan also critiques the idea that it is because of moral depravity or feeble-mindedness that girls go into prostitution.

As Father Dowling realizes that prostitution is the only way for Ronnie and Midge to stay alive, we also come to understand this. In the 1930’s, there was a very real economic strain that was placed on the lower classes of society, and it was unfair that single women were expected to provide for themselves in reputable jobs when there was a lack of respectable jobs for women. When jobs could be found, they did not pay women enough. Statistics Canada reports that in manufacturing industries in 1934, women were paid on average \$11.80 a week, whereas men were paid on average \$20.31 a week.¹³ For single women, and especially those who had children, prostitution was economically the best option even when other “respectable” work could be

found. Even when women worked respectable jobs, they could have trouble maintaining themselves with the little income they made. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir explains that when a trade is open, women will inevitably go into it.¹⁴ In the 1930's, prostitution was one of the only options for women who were not married. Ronnie and Midge also come to realize this as they slowly slip into prostitution. As the reader becomes familiar with the two prostitutes through Father Dowling, we learn that Midge has exhausted relationships in vain, and that Ronnie's hours have been reduced until she is relying on sexual favours to help subsidize her income from working in the department store. Eventually, they both become fulltime prostitutes because it is the only option that is available to them.

Although some prostitutes of the time may have been wealthy, lazy women who did not care to work, most were not. However, many people, including the church leaders and feminists of the time, did not understand this. When Father Dowling meets Ronnie and Midge, he sees a discrepancy between the view of prostitutes he is presented with in the sermons he had heard in seminary and what prostitution really was for most whores. From what the church has told him about prostitutes, Father Dowling believes them to be wealthy, upper class women who are able to derive income from men in return for sexual favours. He is sure that they are lazy and willing to live immoral lifestyles so that they do not have to work. In *Hetty Dorval*, which is set in a similar time period to *Such is My Beloved*, Ethel Wilson describes Hetty, who is similar to what Father Anglin and Mrs. Robison would have understood to be a prostitute. Hetty is a wealthy woman who is constantly going from man to man in order to gain more power and prestige. She does not accept money directly for her sexual favours, but instead attracts men strategically. She marries rich men who are about to die, or breaks up marriages to acquire rich keepers in order to get the wealth or power that she wants. She lives a rich life, does not work, and chooses to live in a secluded environment because she dislikes being around others. She lives off the men she preys upon. This is the image that the word "prostitute" brought to mind in the 1930s; hence, Father Dowling's idea of a prostitute is not someone who is dressed in rags, living out of a hotel, and barely managing to survive on the dollar or two that a man would give her to have sex with him.

Although the feminists of the time period acknowledged that the common streetwalker existed, they understood her to be either feeble-minded, since she was not able to stay out of prostitution, or morally degenerate for consciously choosing to become a prostitute and staying in this profession. Feminists pushed for prostitutes to be segregated from the rest of society. They did not see these women and girls as people who were unable to support themselves and had to go into prostitution because there was no other choice. They also did not consider the fact that some prostitutes were in the trade as a way of sexually expressing or empowering themselves.

Early feminists also were, for the most part, advocates of eugenics. Interest in eugenics had existed since the 1800s, but after the First World War it became especially popular in Canada because so many of the nation's healthy young men had died in the war. People began to fear that only the weak and feeble-minded were left. The increased interest in eugenics influenced people in the early 1900s to see prostitutes and the sexually immoral as among the feeble-minded.¹⁵ By the 1930s, eugenics was widespread, and this made it difficult for feminists to see prostitutes as human beings who had needs and feelings. Those considered feeble-minded included the poor, criminals, the mentally handicapped, and the sexually immoral.¹⁶ Eugenicists like Emily Murphy, who was also a leading suffragette and feminist, were particularly concerned that the "feeble-minded" were reproducing faster than the "human thoroughbreds". Eugenicists believed that both morality and immorality were passed down, and that prostitutes would pass

down their degenerate morals to their offspring. Feminists fought for laws enabling the sterilization of the feeble-minded or “insane”; Murphy was connected to the passing of Alberta’s Sexual Sterilization Act in 1928.

Feminists in the 1930s were especially knowledgeable on the subject of eugenics. *Such is My Beloved* gives the reader an excellent example of a eugenicist’s attitude to prostitution. Mrs. Robison is a wealthy lady whom Father Dowling thinks to be quite progressive for her time. It is even likely that she considered herself part of the feminist movement. As an upper class woman, she would have been well read and familiar with the ideas of eugenics and the belief that the lower classes and those who lived “evil lives” were feeble-minded. Seeing Toronto disintegrating into poverty in the 1930s would have reinforced her belief that the world would soon be overpopulated with feeble-minded individuals who could not support themselves.

When Mrs. Robison meets Ronnie and Midge, she immediately gives them a cool look of appraisal and judges them to be common streetwalkers. Ronnie and Midge, who are conscious that they are in the wrong place and in hostile company, immediately understand what Mrs. Robison’s look means and interact rudely with her. In the glance that Mrs. Robison gives the girls, we know that she is not familiar with their way of life and cannot, from her upper class viewpoint, understand why they would prostitute themselves unless they were either feeble-minded or morally degenerate. Although Mrs. Robison only looks at the girls with contempt when they are in her house, she unleashes her opinions of disgust and anger after they leave. She says to Father Dowling: “You probably haven’t much experience in these matters. That’s the trouble, Father.” “You meant well enough, I know, but if you would realize that all prostitutes are feeble-minded...”¹⁷

Father Dowling immediately recognizes this view as “sociological”, one that most other feminists of the time had, and is shocked that he would hear it from a good Catholic like Mrs. Robison. However, her disgust for prostitutes is echoed by other influential women of the day, especially suffragettes like Emily Murphy and doctors like Dr. Margaret Patterson. Emily Murphy approached prostitution from a view that all prostitutes were either feeble-minded or morally degenerate, and must be sterilized so that these traits were not passed on to further generations.¹⁸ Dr. Margaret Patterson, who advocated for the reform of prostitutes, believed they were morally sick and should be placed in a moral hospital where they would serve a long sentence until they were reformed.¹⁹ These women did not understand the lower class, and would not have had daily interactions with prostitutes. Mrs. Robison, too, does not interact with prostitutes. Today, it seems remarkable that these women who have not consulted prostitutes about their ways of life would decide that they are feeble-minded and morally degenerate, and should be segregated from society and sterilized. Their positions were based on the ideology of the time, not on solid research or first-hand information. As Father Dowling muses later that night, he thinks about what Mrs. Robison has voiced to him about prostitutes and how they relate to eugenics:

The social service point of view, the unfit produce the feeble-minded, let’s sterilize the feeble-minded, Mary Magdalen was feeble-minded and Mary of Egypt, too, and Joan of Arc heard voices; it becomes simply a problem of breeding, once you can sterilize the unfit it’s easy to breed the whores out of existence, and the mentally fit are always moral, and immorality is simple feeble-mindedness.²⁰

Although Ronnie and Midge are judged by people like Mrs. Robison, they continue on in their lives of prostitution with a solidarity that both empowers and strengthens them. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir explains how crucial it is for prostitutes to have these bonds with each other. She says that

Because their relations with one half of humanity are of a commercial kind and because society as a whole treats them as pariahs, prostitutes have a close solidarity among themselves; they may happen to be rivals, to feel jealous, to hurl insults at one another, to fight; but they profoundly need one another in order to form a counter-universe in which they regain their human dignity.²¹

Ronnie and Midge do not know any men who do not exploit them until they meet Father Dowling. The extent to which Ronnie and Midge need each other is profound; they rely entirely on each other. They understand each other fully. After Midge realizes she has a venereal disease and there is nothing they can do about it because they do not have enough money, Midge is sure she sees a tombstone in her teacup. She is comforted by Ronnie, who understands her need: "Sit down, Ronnie, and don't keep listening. Talk and talk and talk to me."²²

Their tight bonds are also necessary for protection. Midge angers Lou, their pimp, when she says: "I'm sick listening to you. You come hanging around here cutting in on every penny Ronnie makes and god knows what for. I could never see you for trees. Now get out of here quick."²³ However, Lou seriously considers beating Midge, and Ronnie has to convince him to leave by excusing Midge's behaviour and saying: "Please, Lou, go on out. Do it for me."²⁴

Though Ronnie and Midge have to work together to protect themselves from men, they also know how to handle men and Midge gains pleasure from some sexual acts. In *Sex, Love, and Morality*, William J. Robinson acknowledges the enjoyment of sexual activity with multiple, constantly changing partners. Although this book was published in 1928, it has progressive views for the time; Robinson says that there is a class of women who favour variety to having one sexual partner. He says that although economics is the primary reason that women choose prostitution, there is a small class who "...will always engage in prostitution, no matter how favourable the economic condition and how liberal the sexual code may become."²⁵ He also says that "It seems strange that some men (and women too) should enjoy the act more when it is purely physical and even venal in its nature without any admixture of sentiment or love, but this is a fact, a well established fact."²⁶ Even if prostitution were eradicated, these women with their need for sexual diversity would still remain. In *Such is My Beloved*, Midge, more than Ronnie, seems to enjoy sex. One of the men she services is a young labourer who "handled her with tremendous satisfaction till she was forced to make him think she was exhausted."²⁷

Although prostitution sometimes might have been enjoyable for Ronnie or Midge, it was almost definitely not a positive experience most of the time. It was especially bad when whores in the early 1900s were caught in prostitution and taken to court. Ronnie, Midge, and a prostitute named Lizzie Cyr who worked in Calgary in 1917 all exemplify what would happen when a prostitute was caught in her work. "The Person Behind the Person's Case" recounts an incident in which Lizzie Cyr was brought to court by a man named John James Ryan. Ryan testified that Cyr was a prostitute, was guilty of living an immoral life, and also had gonorrhoea. Nothing that Ryan said was proven, but Ryan knew that Cyr would be found guilty because she had committed a "crime of status" – her crime was that she "led a certain type of life."²⁸ Just having Ryan testify that Cyr had gonorrhoea, was living a loose and immoral life, and that she had left

her husband showed Alice Jamieson, the police magistrate, that Cyr was leading an immoral life. She did not even bother to listen to the defence's argument. Since Cyr was a repeat offender and had previously been in trouble because of drunkenness and vagrancy, she was considered morally inferior and dealt with harshly. She was sentenced to six month's hard labour and kept in a dismal prison cell, even though none of the evidence that Ryan had brought against her was proven.²⁹

Ronnie and Midge meet a depressingly similar end. When Mr. Robison realizes that Father Dowling is interacting with prostitutes and understands what a scandal could arise from such interactions, he immediately finds a way to stop Father Dowling. He tells the Bishop about the prostitutes, and the Bishop then arranges for Ronnie and Midge to be dealt with. Police break into the room that Ronnie and Midge are in while they are doing a business interaction with a man, and they are arrested. In court, they face a woman magistrate who seems similar to the way Lizzie Cyr might have described Alice Jamieson. This Helen Hendricks whom they face is someone "Women dreaded to come before ... There seemed to be some deep restless cruelty within her that often made her savage, particularly when there was a charge of immorality being considered."³⁰ Like Cyr, Ronnie and Midge are repeat offenders. They did not reform the first time they were punished, and so were to be dealt with severely, since they had proven themselves to be morally degenerate. It is also interesting to note that the man testifying against Ronnie and Midge is a similar character to the one testifying against Lizzie Cyr. When he testifies against Ronnie and Midge, "an extraordinary viciousness crept into his voice; he wanted to hurt the girls so deeply they would never forget him."³¹ Ronnie and Midge's case is just one more case in the day; it is not remarkable, and the magistrate wonders why these two girls have been singled out, since they look so much like the rest of the girls who come before her every day.

It is notable that the women's movement was the reason that female police magistrates existed, and it seems ironic that women who were working so hard for the freedom of other women would so harshly penalize women who were simply trying to keep themselves alive by living a life of prostitution. However, middle-class feminists did not understand what lower-class women had to go through in order to survive. For the prostitutes in this time period, living chaste, "moral" lives simply would not work; they would starve. Although the women's courts aimed at reforming prostitutes, it was impossible for these women to reform without being able to work jobs that paid them enough, and some of them would not have wanted to do that. Although Ronnie and Midge say they would be willing to work as housekeepers, they also would have had a clear understanding that they could be expected to sexually satisfy their employers. Robinson explains that if women are expected to sexually satisfy their bosses, they may as well be in the sex trade where they are in control of their hours and who they will service.³²

Since the 1950s, feminists have found it easier to appreciate that women are not bound to conventional morality and are free to become prostitutes if they desire. Feminists like de Beauvoir realized that a woman's style of life does not make her morally degenerate or feeble-minded. They moved away from judging prostitutes based on religion-based moral values, which left more room for the understanding of different lifestyles. By 1993, feminists thought it understandable that women would become prostitutes to supplement their work income. While whores might be socially stigmatized, feminists like Germaine Greer and de Beauvoir understand that when there is a need for a specific type of sex work, women will fill it.

In *Such is My Beloved*, Father Dowling also comes to a similar conclusion. Although Ronnie and Midge are looked down upon by those in the upper classes, especially Mrs. Robison,

the reader is able to understand that the men of Toronto want and need prostitutes. De Beauvoir says that "...in a world where misery and unemployment prevail, there will be people to enter any profession that is open."³³ Father Dowling comes to understand this through the course of the novel, and understands their place in Toronto after speaking with the university student in the confessional. He says, "Maybe there is some purpose in their life after all."³⁴ He knows that by being prostitutes, Ronnie and Midge have a purpose in Toronto and are able to provide a valuable service to men: they satisfy men's sexual needs so that men do not have to seduce pure young virgins. In this way, Ronnie and Midge have justified their existence. Even though the feminists of the time objected to Ronnie and Midge's profession and labelled them morally degenerate, there was a place for them in society. They were able to support themselves while living as prostitutes, fulfilling a need for the men of Toronto, and empowering themselves despite the concerns of doctors, feminists, and those involved in the social purity movement.

Notes

1. In this essay, the word "feminist" is defined as someone who advocates the rights of women, regardless of the timeframe.
2. In *What a Young Wife Ought to Know*, Emma F. Angell Drake says "It occasionally happens that the wife during pregnancy is troubled with a passion far beyond what she has ever experienced at any other time. This in every instance is due to some unnatural condition, and should be considered a disease, and for it the physician should be consulted" (Drake, 93).
3. *What a Young Wife Ought to Know* maintains that "...God ordained the marriage relation primarily, for the purpose of the perpetuity of the human race, as his first command to the pair in Eden would indicate..." (Drake, 87).
4. J. G. Shearer, "Canada's War on the White Slave Trade." *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls*. Ed. Ernest A. Bell. 1910, 334.
5. Shearer, "Canada's War on the White Slave Trade," 333-381.
6. Mariana. Valverde. *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991, 47-49.
7. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 47.
8. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 47.
9. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 71.
10. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 77.
11. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 77.
12. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 82.
13. "Average Annual, Weekly and Hourly Earnings, Male and Female Wage-earners, Manufacturing Industries, Canada, 1934 to 1969." Statistics Canada. Government of Canada, 11 Dec. 2011. 11 Dec. 2011.
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14. De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989, 556.
15. Levine, Allan. "Perfect People, Perfect Country." *The Beaver: Exploring Canada's History* 85.2 (2005).
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16. Engs, Ruth Clifford. *The Eugenics Movement*. Greenwood Press, 2001, 69.
17. Callaghan, Morley. *Such is My Beloved*. McClelland and Stewart, 1989, 113.
18. Murphy, Emily. "Sterilization of the Insane." Heritage Community Foundation: The Famous Five, n.d. URL unavailable.
19. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 48.
20. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 114-115.
21. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 562.
22. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 83.
23. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 81.
24. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 82.

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25. Robinson, William J. *Sex, Love, and Morality*. Eugenics Publishing Co., New York, NY, 1928.
<http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/adli/adli.image.gallery.aspx?view=galleryplusimage&dorpid=1001276709>, 100.
26. Robinson, *Sex, Love, and Morality*, 101.
27. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 36.
28. Burton, Sarah. "The person behind the persons case; seventy-five years ago this month, the British Privy Council ruled that Canadian women were persons under the law. What sparked this victory for women's rights was the trial of a forgotten Calgary prostitute twelve years earlier." *The Beaver: Exploring Canada's History* 84.5 (2004).
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29. Burton, "The person behind the persons case."
30. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 136.
31. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 138.
32. Robinson, *Sex, Love, and Morality*, 93-94.
33. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 556.
34. Callaghan, *Such is My Beloved*, 94.

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