

The Cult of Virginity

Jessica Valenti (2009)

In the moments after I first had sex, my then-boyfriend—lying down next to me over his lint-covered blanket—grabbed a pen from his nightstand and drew a heart on the wall molding above his bed with our initials and the date inside. The only way you could see it was by lying flat on the bed with your head smashed up against the wall. Crooked necks aside, it was a sweet gesture, one that I'd forgotten about until I started writing this book.

The date seemed so important to us at the time, even though the event itself was hardly awe-inspiring. There was the expected fumbling, a joke about his fish-printed boxers, and ensuing condom difficulties. At one point, his best friend even called to see how things were going. I suppose romance and discretion are lost on sixteen-year-olds from Brooklyn. Yet we celebrated our “anniversary” every year until we broke up, when Josh left for college two years before me and met a girl with a lip ring.

I've often wondered what that date marks—the day I became a woman? Considering I still bought underwear in cutesy three-packs, and that I certainly hadn't mastered the art of speaking my mind, I've gotta go with no. Societal standards would have me believe that it was the day I became morally sullied, but I fail to see how anything that lasts less than five minutes can have such an indelible ethical impact—so it's not that, either.

Really, the only meaning it had (besides a little bit of pain and a lot of postcoital embarrassment) was the meaning that Josh and I ascribed to it. Or so I thought. I hadn't counted on the meaning my peers, my parents, and society would imbue it with on my behalf.

From that date on—in the small, incestuous world of high school friendships, nothing is a secret for long—I was a “sexually active teen,” a term often used in tandem with phrases like “at risk,” or along-

side warnings about drug and alcohol use, regardless of how uncontroversial the sex itself may have been. Through the rest of high school, whenever I had a date, my peers assumed that I had had sex because my sexuality had been defined by that one moment when my virginity was lost. It meant that I was no longer discriminating, no longer “good.” The perceived change in my social value wasn't lost on my parents, either; before I graduated high school, my mother found an empty condom wrapper in my bag and remarked that if I kept having sex, no one would want to marry me.

I realize that my experience isn't necessarily representative of most women's—everyone has their own story—but there are common themes in so many young women's sexual journeys. Sometimes it's shame. Sometimes its violence. Sometimes it's pleasure. And sometimes it's simply nothing to write home about.

The idea that virginity (or loss thereof) can profoundly affect women's lives is certainly nothing new. But what virginity is, what it was, and how it's being used now to punish women and roll back their rights is at the core of the purity myth. Because today, in a world where porn culture and reenergized abstinence movements collide, the moral panic myth about young women's supposed promiscuity is diverting attention from the real problem—that women are still being judged (sometimes to death) on something that doesn't really exist: virginity.

THE VIRGINITY MYSTERY

Before Hanne Blank wrote her book *Virgin: The Untouched History*, she had a bit of a problem. Blank was answering teens' questions on Scarleteen¹—a sex education website she founded with writer Heather

Corinna so that young people could access information about sex online, other than porn and Net Nanny—when she discovered that she kept hitting a roadblock when it came to the topic of virginity.

“One of the questions that kept coming up was ‘I did such-and-such. Am I still a virgin?’” Blank told me in an interview. “They desperately wanted an authoritative answer.”

But she just didn’t have one. So Blank decided to spend some time in Harvard’s medical school library to find a definitive answer for her young web browsers.

“I spent about a week looking through everything I could—medical dictionaries, encyclopedias, anatomies—trying to find some sort of diagnostic standard for virginity,” Blank said.

The problem was, there was no standard. Either a book wouldn’t mention virginity at all or it would provide a definition that wasn’t medical, but subjective.

“Then it dawned on me—I’m in arguably one of the best medical libraries in the world, scouring their stacks, and I’m not finding anything close to a medical definition for virginity. And I thought, *That’s really weird. That’s just flat-out strange.*”

Blank said she found it odd mostly because everyone, including doctors, talks about virginity as if they know what it is—but no one ever bothers to mention the truth: “People have been talking authoritatively about virginity for thousands of years, yet we don’t even have a working medical definition for it!”

Blank now refers to virginity as “the state of having not had partnered sex.” But if virginity is simply the first time someone has sex, then what is sex? If it’s just heterosexual intercourse, then we’d have to come to the fairly ridiculous conclusion that all lesbians and gay men are virgins, and that different kinds of intimacy, like oral sex, mean nothing. And even using the straight-intercourse model of sex as a gauge, we’d have to get into the down-and-dirty conversation of what constitutes penetration.

Since I’ve become convinced that virginity is a sham being perpetrated against women, I decided to turn to other people to see how they “count” sex. Most say it’s penetration. Some say it’s oral sex. My closest friend, Kate, a lesbian, has the best answer to

date (a rule I’ve followed since she shared it with me): It isn’t sex unless you’ve had an orgasm. That’s a pleasure-based, non-heteronormative way of marking intimacy if I’ve ever heard one. Of course, this way of defining sex isn’t likely to be very popular among the straight-male sect, given that some would probably end up not counting for many of their partners.

But any way you cut it, virginity is just too subjective to pretend we can define it.

Laura Carpenter, a professor at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, told me that she wrote her book, she was loath to even use the word “virginity,” lest she propagate the notion that there’s one concrete definition for it.²

“What is this thing, this social phenomenon? I think the emphasis put on virginity, particularly for women, causes a lot more harm than good,” said Carpenter.³

This has much to do with the fact that “virgin” is almost always synonymous with “woman.” Virgin sacrifices, popping cherries, white dresses, supposed vaginal tightness, you name it. Outside of the occasional reference to the male virgin in the form of a goofy movie about horny teenage boys, virginity is pretty much all about women. Even the dictionary definitions of “virgin” cite an “unmarried girl or woman” or a “religious woman, esp. a saint.”⁴ No such definition exists for men or boys.

It’s this inextricable relationship between sexual purity and women—how we’re either virgins or not virgins—that makes the very concept of virginity so dangerous and so necessary to do away with.

Admittedly, it would be hard to dismiss virginity as we know it altogether, considering the meaning it has in so many people’s—especially women’s—lives. When I suggest that virginity is a lie told to women, I don’t aim to discount or make light of how important the current social idea of virginity is for people. Culture, religion, and social beliefs influence the role that virginity and sexuality play in women’s lives—sometimes very positively. So, to be clear, when I argue for an end to the idea of virginity, it’s because I believe sexual intimacy should be honored and respected, but that it shouldn’t be revered at the expense of women’s well-being, or seen as such an

integral part of our self.

I also care about the meaning of virginity. We have social norms that get to decide what women

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integral part of female identity that we end up defining ourselves by our sexuality.

I also can't discount that no matter what personal meaning each woman gives virginity, it's people who have social and political influence who ultimately get to decide what virginity means—at least, as it affects women on a large scale.

VIRGINITY: COMMODITY, MORALITY, OR FARCE?

It's hard to know when people started caring about virginity, but we do know that men, or male-led institutions, have always been the ones that get to define and assign value to virginity.

Blank posits that a long-standing historical interest in virginity is about establishing paternity (if a man marries a virgin, he can be reasonably sure the child she bears is his) and about using women's sexuality as a commodity. Either way, the notion has always been deeply entrenched in patriarchy and male ownership.

Raising daughters of quality became another model of production, as valuable as breeding healthy sheep, weaving sturdy cloth, or bringing in a good harvest. . . . The gesture is now generally symbolic in the first world, but we nonetheless still observe the custom of the father "giving" his daughter in marriage. Up until the last century or so, however, when laws were liberalized to allow women to stand as full citizens in their own right, this represented a literal transfer of property from a father's household to a husband's.⁵

That's why women who had sex were (and still are, at times) referred to as "damaged goods"—because they were literally just that: something to be owned, traded, bought, and sold.

But long gone are the days when women were property . . . or so we'd like to think. It's not just wedding traditions or outdated laws that name women's virginity as a commodity; women's virginity, our sexuality, is still assigned a value by a movement with more power and influence in American society than we'd probably like to admit.

I like to call this movement the virginity movement. And it is a movement, indeed—with conser-

vatives and evangelical Christians at the helm, and our government, school systems, and social institutions taking orders. Composed of antifeminist think tanks like the Independent Women's Forum and Concerned Women for America; abstinence-only "educators" and organizations; religious leaders; and legislators with regressive social values, the virginity movement is much more than just the same old sexism; it's a targeted and well-funded backlash that is rolling back women's rights using revamped and modernized definitions of purity, morality, and sexuality. Its goals are mired in old-school gender roles, and the tool it's using is young women's sexuality. (What better way to get people to pay attention to your cause than to frame it in terms of teenage girls' having, or not having, sex? It's salacious!)

And, like it or not, the members of the virginity movement are the people who are defining virginity—and, to a large extent, sexuality—in America. Now, instead of women's virginity being explicitly bought and sold with dowries and business deals, it's being defined as little more than a stand-in for actual morality.

It's genius, really. Shame women into being chaste and tell them that all they have to do to be "good" is not have sex. (Of course, chastity and purity, as defined by the virginity movement, are not just about abstaining sexually so much as they're about upholding a specific, passive model of womanhood.)

For women especially, virginity has become the easy answer—the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a "good" (i.e., "moral") girl and therefore worthy of praise.

Present-day American society—whether through pop culture, religion, or institutions—conflates sexuality and morality constantly. Idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters—not what we accomplish, not what we think, not what we care about and work for. Just if/how/whom we have sex with. That's all.

Just look at the women we venerate for not having sex: pageant queens who run on abstinence platforms, pop singers who share their virginal status, and religious women who "save themselves" for marriage. It's an interesting state of affairs when women have to simply do, well, *nothing* in order to

be considered ethical role models. As Feministing.com commenter electron-Blue noted in response to the 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article “Students of Virginity,” on abstinence clubs at Ivy League colleges, “There were a WHOLE LOTTA us not having sex at Harvard . . . but none of us thought that that was special enough to start a club about it, for pete’s sake.”⁶

But for plenty of women across the country, it is special. Staying “pure” and “innocent” is touted as the greatest thing we can do. However, equating this inaction with morality not only is problematic because it continues to tie women’s ethics to our bodies, but also is downright insulting because it suggests that women can’t be moral actors. Instead, we’re defined by what we don’t do—our ethics are the ethics of passivity. (This model of ethics fits in perfectly with how the virginity movement defines the ideal woman.)

But it’s not only abstinence education or conservative propaganda that are perpetuating this message; you need look no further than pop culture for stark examples of how young people—especially young women—are taught to use virginity as an easy ethical road map.

A 2007 episode of the MTV documentary series *True Life* featured celibate youth.⁷ Among the teens choosing to abstain because of disease concerns and religious commitments was nineteen-year-old Kristin from Nashville, Tennessee. Kristin had cheated on her past boyfriends, and told the camera she’d decided to remain celibate until she feels she can be faithful to her current boyfriend. Clearly, Kristin’s problem isn’t sex—it’s trust. But instead of dealing with the actual issues behind her relationship woes, this young woman was able to circumvent any real self-analysis by simply claiming to be abstinent. So long as she’s chaste, she’s good.

Or consider singer and reality television celebrity Jessica Simpson, who has made her career largely by playing on the sexy-virgin stereotype. Simpson, the daughter of a Baptist youth minister, started her singing career by touring Christian youth festivals and True Love Waits events. Even when she went mainstream, she publicly declared her virginity—stating that her father had given her a promise ring

when she was twelve years old—and spoke of her intention to wait to have sex until marriage. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, Simpson was being marketed as a major sex symbol—all blond hair, breasts, and giggles. Especially giggles. Simpson’s character (and I use the word “character” because it’s hard to know what was actually her and not a finely honed image) was sold as the archetypal dumb blond. Thoughtless moments on *Newlyweds*, the MTV show that followed her short-lived marriage to singer Nick Lachey, became nationally known sound bites, such as Simpson’s wondering aloud whether tuna was chicken or fish, since she can read “Chicken of the Sea.”

Despite Simpson’s public persona as an airhead (as recently as 2008, she was featured in a Macy’s commercial as not understanding how to flick on a light switch), women are supposed to want to be her, not only because she’s beautiful by conventional standards, but also because she adheres to the social structures that tell women that they exist purely for men: as a virgin, as a sex symbol, or, in Simpson’s case, as both. It doesn’t matter that Simpson reveals few of her actual thoughts or moral beliefs; it’s enough that she’s “pure,” even if that purity means she’s a bit of a dolt.

For those women who can’t keep up the front as well as someone like Simpson, they suffer heaps of judgment—especially when they fall off the pedestal they’re posed upon so perfectly. American pop culture, especially, has an interesting new trend of venerating and fetishizing “pure” young women—whether they’re celebrities, beauty queens, or just everyday young woman—simply to bask in their eventual fall.

And no one embodies the “perfect” young American like beauty queens. They’re pretty, overwhelmingly white, thin, and eager to please. And, of course, pageant queens are supposed to be pure as pure can be. In fact, until 1999, the Miss America pageant had a “purity rule” that barred divorced women and those who had obtained abortions from entering the contest—lest they sully the competition, I suppose.⁸

So in 2006, when two of those “perfect” girls made the news for being in scandalous photos on the Internet, supposed promiscuity, or a combination thereof, Americans were transfixed.

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First, twenty-year-old Miss USA Tara Conner was nearly stripped of her title after reports surfaced that she frequented nightclubs, drank, and dated. Hardly unusual behavior for a young woman, regardless of how many tiaras she may have.

The *New York Daily News* could barely contain its slut-shaming glee when it reported on the story: “She really is a small-town girl. She just went wild when she came to the city,” one nightlife veteran said. “Tara just couldn’t handle herself. They were sneaking those [nightclub] guys in and out of the apartment . . . Conner still brought boyfriends home. . . . Soon she broke up with her hometown fiancé and started dating around in the Manhattan nightclub world. . . .”⁹

Instead of having her crown taken away, however, Conner was publicly “forgiven” by Miss USA co-owner Donald Trump, who appeared at a press conference to publicly declare he was giving the young woman a second chance.¹⁰ In case you had any doubts about whether this controversy was all tied up with male ownership and approval, consider the fact that Trump later reportedly considered giving his permission for Conner to pose for *Playboy* magazine. He played the role of dad, pimp, and owner, all rolled into one.¹¹

Mere days later, Miss Nevada USA, twenty-two-year-old Katie Rees, was dethroned after pictures of her exposing one of her breasts and mooning the camera were uncovered.¹² When you’re on a pedestal, you have a long way to fall.

Shaming young women for being sexual is nothing new, but it’s curious to observe how the expectation of purity gets played out through the women who are supposed to epitomize the feminine ideal: the “desirable” virgin. After all, we rarely see women who aren’t conventionally beautiful idolized for their abstinence. And no matter how “good” you are otherwise—even if you’re an all-American beauty queen—if you’re not virginal, you’re shamed.

The desirable virgin is sexy but not sexual. She’s young, white, and skinny. She’s a cheerleader, a baby sitter; she’s accessible and eager to please (remember those ethics of passivity!). She’s never a woman of color. She’s never a low-income girl or a fat girl. She’s never disabled. “Virgin” is a designation for those who meet a certain standard of what women, especially younger women, are supposed to look like. As for how these young women are supposed to act? A blank slate is best.

NOTES

1. www.scarleteen.com
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3. Laura M. Carpenter. Interview with the author, March 2008.
4. Dictionary.com definition of “virgin,” <http://dictionary.reference.com>.
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