

2-17-2019

Mysterious Moralism: Anthony Comstock's Crusade Against Female Sexuality and Society's Resistance Against Censorship and Enforced Christian Values

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Recommended Citation

Grilla, Gabriella (2019) "Mysterious Moralism: Anthony Comstock's Crusade Against Female Sexuality and Society's Resistance Against Censorship and Enforced Christian Values," *Of Life and History*: Vol. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory/vol2/iss1/8>

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Cover Page Footnote

Works Cited Books Comstock, Anthony. *Frauds exposed; or, How the people are deceived and robbed, and youth corrupted*. Multiple publishing cities: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 1880.

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Mysterious Moralism

Anthony Comstock's Crusade against Female Sexuality and Society's Resistance to Censorship and Enforced Christian Values

Gabriella M. Grilla '19

A Need for Morality

When asked to create parameters defining pornography during the *Jacobellis v. Ohio* case in 1964, Justice Stewart could not provide one, claiming only to “know it when I see it.”¹ This quote summarizes the struggles that the Crusader of Vice, Anthony Comstock, faced 50 years prior. As a devoutly religious man, Comstock dedicated his life to eradicating vice in American society and attempted to do so by targeting forms of sexual obscenity, such as pornography. The first major roadblock in Comstock's crusade came from his inability to depict or discuss vice, even when on the stand during trial, for fear of spreading obscenity through his descriptions. This inability to provide a clear definition of obscenity and pornography, the same issue that arose during the *Jacobellis v. Ohio* case, would prove damning in Comstock's quest for societal purity.

Comstock believed the end of vice started with women; women either perpetuated vice, knowingly or maliciously, and needed an education, or they fought its infection. The movement viewed women who spread vice unknowingly as victims of vice as well as perpetrators. They needed both protection from their infantile ways and education concerning the dangers of obscenity. The women who made a conscious choice to lure and corrupt young men and children with her sexuality, on the other hand, did not deserve saving or acceptance in society. It became the responsibility of the newly educated, no longer naïve women and the devout to put an end to the spread of vice. Comstock believed these women, and their traditional values, would prove essential in the struggle to put an end to the epidemic of lust. The framing of women in Comstock's personal world appeared to completely disregard the new found roles of women in society as the culture began to change.

Comstock noticed the female form becoming increasingly sexualized in the public sphere as society slid deeper into sin. Nude art offended him, classics such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* only had merit as long as they remained inaccessible to the wider public, and the gauche nature of birth control scandalized him.² Society appears to have grown more comfortable with women in the public sphere as well as more accepting of small shows of female sexuality. The rise of consumerism also began to turn the female body into a commodity, eliciting more widespread unabashed public desire than seen in society before. Comstock believed, as a self-appointed and government sanctioned Crusader of Vice, the responsibility for the defeat of obscenity fell upon him alone as much as upon women. He wished that women would not allow for such deviant portrayals of their bodies to exist in society and that they would leave the public sphere to return home to watch over and educate their children.³ Although depicted as an effort to protect American youth, Comstock's crusade to suppress and censor vice was born from his beliefs that public female sexuality would continue to degrade and erode society, and in order to maintain the class system a reconstitution of the elite identity needed to take place. Through publicly and aggressively shaming and harassing citizens, arresting vice dealers, and passing legislature, Anthony Comstock attempted to return women to a Puritanical way of life and stunt the upward mobility of the lower classes.

A Crusader Finds His Cause

Born in New Canaan, Connecticut to a fervently religious family, Comstock learned the perceived value of gender roles early on. His mother attended all-day sermons on Sundays and spent a large amount of time teaching her children the dangers of vice as well as the virtues of righteous living. In their home, Mrs. Comstock acting as a matriarchy, expressly in charge of rearing her children and making sure that they learned the word of the Lord and followed it to the letter. Comstock took this domestic and religious education very seriously. His mother's role in the

¹ 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964) (Stewart, J., concurring).

² Anthony Comstock, “Vampire Literature,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 153, No. 417. (Boston, 1891), 166.

³ Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

home, as well as her teachings of Christianity, would later shape his hatred of the changing society. By the time he turned seventeen he had shut down the local saloon and would pour out his ration of whiskey each dinner during the Civil War. When he pursued a career as a merchant and moved to New York he dealt with the death of a fellow clerk who “had been led astray and corrupted and diseased” after he encountered pornography.⁴ He could not stand to see the rampant vice polluting the streets; sex workers, penny and dime books, and birth control all encouraging hedonistic behavior. Comstock decided to take action. After making a few citizens arrests and confiscating a substantial amount of obscene material he started running out of money. Upon visiting the Young Men’s Christian Association, one of the founders, Mr. Morris Jesup, provided funding to cover his past expenses and continue his quest to eradicate vice. From there, Comstock convinced Associate Justice William Strong to help him write a bill that passed in 1873. He took up the mantle of Assistant Postmaster General, created the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and dug his heels in against the tide of lust.

Comstock did not expressly provide clear distinctions of how to determine obscenity, thus Comstock’s Law strictly prohibits the mailing of “vile and immoral goods” and allows officials to apprehend anything “obscene or immoral.”⁵ These vague words put Comstock and the court judges in lofty positions of power. Only a select few men could decide what constitutes obscenity by law, and thus it made the hunt for vice arduous and uncertain. Comstock believed objects should adhere to the standard of the Hicklin test, a definition for obscenity created in the English courts. Comstock’s Law, while centered on censoring the mail, would extend the Hicklin test to any possible pornographic object, mailed or otherwise. Some mail-able items that he apprehended included medical textbooks, pamphlets on birth control, advertisements for raucous theater, and ads or information about sexuality. The standard for vice would slowly become understood as the decisions from different court cases became accessible to the public. Society eventually discerned which sins of lust would result in their arrests and jail time, and which would most likely only result in a fine. Besides not having clear criteria for determining lasciviousness or lewdness, Comstock would also not comment to newspapers about the nature of confiscated items.⁶ He would neither describe the offensive material nor print excerpts from it. His secrecy about what determined obscenity prompted two reactions from the public; committing small acts of protest by printing more subtle ads or immediately searching for the offending item to see for themselves what level of lust warranted removal from society. The latter had the unintended consequence of exposing women and children, the focus of Comstock’s campaign, to the very material Comstock hoped to hide from them.

The morality movement focused as much on suppressing class as it did on suppressing women. Comstock used women to manipulate the public, children to manipulate the women, and the elites to manipulate the middle and lower classes. Middle class parents treated virtues as something akin to currency, given that they believed that by being virtuous their children would naturally succeed in life. Parents wanted to advance their children’s social standing and they believed that through education, virtuousness, and an advantageous social network that their children could attain upward mobility.⁷ Comstock recognized that the elite did not like the nouveau riche and did not intend to mix with social climbing middle class families, so they supported Comstock when he came looking for benefactors. Given the elites concern with raising their own virtuous children, and their understanding of the middle class as riddled with sin, they threw their support behind Comstock’s campaign in an effort to maintain their social class and to limit the interactions their children had with the lower class.⁸ Comstock would target the middle and lower class distributors and consumers through arrests and ideological warfare, aggressively publishing and highlighting works and advertisements that aligned with his worldview. He shamed lower class women for having to work outside of the home to provide a comfortable life for their family. He blamed women leaving the home and the erosion of family on “the spread of immoral sexual practices and materials.”⁹

Comstock showed his elite favoritism when arresting Mme. Restelle, a known abortionist, for a second time. At the time of her arrest, Restelle’s home housed many elite women recovering from their recent procedures, all of whom

⁴ Charles Gallaudet Trumbull, *Anthony Comstock, Fighter: Some Impressions of a Lifetime of Adventure in Conflict with the Powers of Evil*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1913), 51.

⁵ Comstock Act from Andrea Tone, “Black Market Birth Control: Contraceptive Entrepreneurship and Criminality in the Gilded Age,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 439.

⁶ “Comstock Heckled At Labor Temple,” *New York Times* (New York, 1910), 8.

⁷ Beisel, 5.

⁸ Beisel, 10.

⁹ Beisel, 10.

Comstock did not arrest given their status, even though having an abortion was punishable by law. Similarly, Comstock opposed nude art and would have taken on the MET given the chance, but the elite loved art museums and the new exclusivity they provided. Instead, he attacked famous art in a more general sense and seized any copies made and distributed, further enforcing the exclusivity of art museums and the “otherness” of the lower classes. Comstock would eventually concede this fight and decide that the audience viewing the art would determine the nature of its morality. According to Comstock, middle and lower class citizens who viewed nude art or provocative works would not understand the overall moral implications of the work, and thus could and would be polluted by its vice.¹⁰

Charles Goodyear and the successive President of the NYSSV, Samuel Colgate, further exemplify Comstock turning a blind eye to the behavior of the elites. Colgate owned Vaseline and a year after becoming the president of the NYSSV he executed a campaign to increase sales centered on the spermicidal nature of Vaseline. Rather than attacking Colgate and Vaseline, Comstock ignored his patrons’ trespasses as Colgate gave money and time to the organization. Another example is the Stuart Rubber Company of Milwaukee. Comstock arrested Morris Glattsine, a poor immigrant, for selling condoms to individual buyers, which he purchased from the Stuart Rubber Company, but not the company itself for manufacturing condoms – even though they sold condoms in bulk through the mail.¹¹ These elite men and untouchable companies infuriated Comstock but since he could not prosecute them he took his energies out on the working classes, especially on working class women. Comstock did not fit with the middle or lower classes, but also did not fit in with the elite. He belonged to a class of his own. Eventually the elite class would turn on him, finding him tiresome as he continued to target the theater, art museums, and saloons.

Contraceptives, Consumerism, and Conventions

Comstock’s very existence bred contempt. At a time with a booming economy and natural cultural shifts, many people did not appreciate his direct attempt to censor them and limit their right to free expression and free speech. Social markers of the Gilded Age include anarchy, Free Love advocates, and stretching artistic boundaries – all individuals and organizations who valued freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Comstock’s vigorous and tireless campaign against vice did not cause vice to dissipate but instead forced it underground and into common conversation; “When Mr. Comstock started out the main business this society opposes was carried on openly. Now it is stealthy and afraid.”¹² Sellers and distributors of vice would describe their products in secretive and humorous ways in pamphlets and circulars to show that they took the law seriously enough to try and avoid detection, but not seriously enough to stop selling contraceptives.

The black market contraceptive industry thrived.¹³ Many women turned to selling preventative measures and passing along the names of underground abortionists by word of mouth. This network of women emphasized their ability to make the male dominated system work for them; their gossip did not register to men as something worth their time, leaving them relatively undetected. When it came to light that women also dealt in selling preventative measures and spread information about abortionists, the Society for the Suppression of Vice adjusted their scope to include women as well.¹⁴ Women who sold birth control exclusively as a way to make money, such as the case of Sarah Chase, faced frequent arrests. Disinterested judges, however, turned these cases over quite frequently because selling birth control would only amount to a small infraction and given the gravity of many serious crimes brought before the court, did not seem like a valid way to spend the courts time, money, or energy. The turnover incensed Comstock and he attacked working class women with increasing fervor.

While Comstock prosecuted both men and women engaged in the sale and dissemination of vice, he focused most of his energies on women. Men bought photos of pornography because women posed for them, they had to purchase birth control because women slept with them, and so on. He placed the dissemination of lust squarely on the shoulders of women and did not call the character of men into question. Again, while he would pursue individual dealers of vice and criticize American society as a whole, he felt men underwent continuous barrages of vice temptation that threatened their morality within this dangerously obscene society. The dangers of vice permeated society so deeply that

¹⁰ Beisel, 13.

¹¹ Tone, 444.

¹² John S. Sumner, “Comstock and Sumner,” *Journal of Education Vol. 82, No. 17* (Boston: Boston University, 1915), 458.

¹³ Tone, 437.

¹⁴ Tone, 437-8.

women, on the other hand, need protection from the sinful public sphere. That, or they perpetuated vice and society should shun them as the true sorceresses of lust they are. In Comstock's moral society only men who exhibited excessively deviant behaviors, like La Grange Brown, experienced his legendary rage. A true Gilded Age sexual predator, Brown had over 300 pornographic photos of young, elite women posed on his lap locked away in a private room in his home, which he booby-trapped to explode should anyone unwanted attempt to enter.¹⁵ Comstock would scorn Brown along with the women who posed for the photos, but still he would not place any blame on the customers of the photos who kept Brown's services in need. This poses an interested dichotomy because if Anthony Comstock truly understood Gilded Age men as the victims and not equal perpetrators of vice, then that places a large amount of power firmly in the hands of women. By that token, given the apparent dangers of obscene things, women could single handedly funnel society into a completely salacious and immoral environment and all men would be under their control.

While Comstock held many women in contempt his cruelty knew no bounds when it came to Ida Craddock and Mme. Restelle. Their cases turned into spectacular shows of Comstock's cruelty, highlighting his ferocity and lack of remorse when up attempting to prosecute women, their sexuality, or their reproductive agency. Restelle's case also emphasizes the disparity between the upper and lower classes in the morality movement. Abortionists in the Gilded Age, both Restelle and Craddock ran secretive clinics to help women in unsightly situations. Craddock received medically training and Restelle learned the procedures through experience. Both women advocated for the education and open discussion of female sexuality but "even if Comstock could have tolerated Craddock's arguments for the propriety of sexual impulse, he could not permit her to argue it publically."¹⁶ Comstock impersonated someone in need of help and approached Restelle and Craddock. Both women offered him aid. After being tried in court, Restelle's verdict came back guilty, sentencing her to jail for the second time.

Craddock, also found guilty, did not entirely understand what led to her arrest, even after Comstock found abortion implements in her home. As a trained medical professional, Craddock wanted to help women in unfortunate situations. Craddock, like Restelle, received jail time. Both women would commit suicide after their trials, and Mme. Restelle left a letter painting Comstock as the reason behind her most egregious sin.

Comstock fluctuated wildly from holding women up on a platform of moral righteousness to portraying them as the center of vice and lust. Women could defeat immorality by shunning vice, resisting changes in society, and returning to the home.¹⁷ Perhaps Comstock did not find moral fault with men because they largely controlled the money in America and acted as his benefactors, even if elite women supported him. Simply put, he could not survive without their contributions. He also believed that men should act as the patriarch of the family and the sole source of economic income, meaning he would not have wanted to engage with his benefactors wives. In Comstock's ideal world, the family depends solely on the salary of the father and the mother cares for and nourishes the souls of the children. His aggressive push for a return to a more rigid, moral society did not receive much support. While the more prominent members of the anti-morality movement, such as Margaret Sanger, would agree that the protection of women and children deserved more attention and care, the majority of people did not agree that a return to a Puritan way of life would inherently create that protection. Sanger and others "believed that the answer lay in women's economic, political, sexual, and reproductive empowerment, which would only be possible with free speech rights."¹⁸ Like most political issues, passionate outliers such as Anthony Comstock and Victoria Woodhull and the Free Love Movement obtained the most visibility, but mainly the average American fell in the middle.¹⁹ They enjoyed slightly scandalous books or theater time and again, but also did not want to contribute to the disintegration of American society.

Comstock's attempt to not only target women's control of their bodies but also the woman's role in the family disregarded the fact that some families might need two incomes, or as in the case of Sarah Chase, that the woman provided the only source of income. His refusal to accept the overwhelming shifts in society towards a more materialistic

¹⁵ Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2-3.

¹⁶ Shirley J. Burton, "Obscene, Lewd, and Lascivious: Ida Craddock and the Criminally Obscene Women of Chicago, 1873-1913" *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Mount Pleasant; Central Michigan University Press, 1993), 5

¹⁷ Beisel, 8.

¹⁸ Werbel, 303.

¹⁹ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Victoria Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and Conflict over Sex in the United States in the 1870s," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Oxford; Oxford University 2000), 428.

realm rendered him unable to understand the benefits of working women and how they provided for their families in this time of tremendous change.²⁰

A concurrent relationship formed between women entering the workforce because of the inflated cost of living and the growth of industry with the cost of living becoming inflated and industry growing because women entered the workforce. Rent, education and general goods rose in cost and the popularity of department stores increased, putting pressure on lower class women to adapt to the new consumerism and changing expectations of homemaking.²¹ At this time, expectations of women centered on pursuing motherhood, first and foremost, and guiding their children through life. That being said, a new set of expectations surrounding homemaking and working outside the home began to appear, demanding even more of woman and their time than before. Women needed to showcase their perfect, respectable home and family while also working a fulltime job. Men, on the other hand, did not experience familial pressures the same way and did not face new expectations when it came to rearing children, even as an opening developed for equal sharing of household work given the fact both the men and women worked full time.

The existence of department stores developed an additional layer of expectation and material excess advertised as luxury. It became the matriarch's job to shop and decorate the home beyond practical items. "Social identity was established through new possibilities of consumption," so a correlation formed between women who presented a clean, decorated home and the moral worth and values of the family that lived within. Through Comstock's general shaming of consumerism and the disapproval of male society when it came to decorative home items "women were condemned for a role they were increasingly required to play."²² This would spark the stereotype that shopping is a vapid and wasteful women's hobby, marking them also as vapid and wasteful.

Comstock did not recognize or care for this new societal expectation. In his mind women should stop all activities outside of the home and resist the pressures of a corrupt and immoral society. He condemned women for having jobs and for shopping in excess. This issue complicated the elite support of Comstock. While elite women agreed with him that excess and mixing with lower class women would introduce their children to vice and potentially harm them, they also believed that by buying new and expensive things that they contributed to homemaking. If they had steady and remarkable homes then their children would be virtuous by default. Shopping would never become completely exclusive, no matter how much the elites wished it would, thus their children who attended the department stores with them would mix with the lower classes. This mixing had potential to bind women more closely together as they spent more time in the presence of each other but Comstock used the intermingling as another way to split women apart. In the eyes of Comstock and the elite, if lower class women had time and money to shop then they did not need to hold jobs or work outside the home. Women should dedicate their time more usefully to the home, such as by teaching their children Christian values.

While Comstock found fault with excess shopping and department stores, the Ladies' Mile, a stretch of New York from W. 15th to W. 23rd street filled with shops, theaters, salons, and debauchery, scandalized him to an even greater degree. This area became a new stomping ground for elite and lower class women alike to enjoy public society and show off whatever new fashion they had come into. The area gained popularity among single and married women, ignoring the blatantly uncensored vice and foul society. The saloons sold pornography to drunken men, brothels and prostitutes dotted the streets at night, and the theater buzzed with crude shows, including burlesque. Again, the elite wanted to create a socially privatized commodity, so they removed the brothels and raised prices for the theater.

Comstock fought hard to remove racy shows from the theaters, believing that they made vice even more accessible to the masses and due to their consumable and digestible nature. He went so far as to pursue Jake Berry, or Jacob Schonberger, the author behind a racy burlesque variety show.²³ When he went to make his arrest, Comstock could not find Jake and instead arrested all of the female dancers in retaliation, only letting them leave once Jake had shown up – martyring himself for his show. While the courts deemed the show filthy and unwatchable they did not take any direct action. A year later the courts convicted Berry of obscenity when another organization complained. Comstock believed the women who participated in these shows exhibited questionable moral characters and spread the infection of vice to the masses. At the same time, he believed the women attending the theater did not understand that they fell

²⁰ Beisel, 8.

²¹ Beisel, 14.

²² Beisel, 14-15.

²³ Werbel, 115.

victim to commercialized lust by watching the improper shows. The women would most certainly not comprehend what sorts of soul damaging things the society of the Ladies' Mile exposed them to, and instead aided the withering of their good moral fibers. The Ladies' Mile and all of its indecencies would continue to agitate thorn Comstock's until his death.

Birth control, women's sexual pleasure, and dissemination of sexual information also continued to pose a deep problem for Comstock. Many jurors felt sympathetic to those selling birth control and preventative literature, as they themselves came from the middle and lower classes. In a particular instance, Comstock posed as someone in need of birth control and bought a syringe from Ezra Heywood, which he advertised as the "Comstock syringe for Preventing Contraception."²⁴ Heywood, known for his cunning, advocated his own case upon his arrest for selling the syringe. He convinced the jury that since he did not know the exact reason someone would buy a syringe, and could only speculate, then he could not possibly be in business of vice. The jurors could not prove that Heywood knew Comstock would need a syringe for preventative measures given their commonality and innumerable uses.

Above all else, Anthony Comstock believed in the values of evangelical Christianity, sex for reproductions sake, and gender roles. He did not understand why women would take preventative measures because to him, sex should only occur when trying to conceive a child, and should not happen otherwise. Specifically though, he found fault with women having sexual desires that had nothing to do with children, which lead him to focus on criminalizing women when prosecuting vice. While Comstock found fault in men who bought pornography or sold birth control he did not actually blame them, and instead tracked that fault back to women and believed if they had not posed for the photographs or if they practiced good Christian values then family planning would not be a concern of theirs. Confronted with changes in society that made him uncomfortable, such as the production of sex toys, nude art, and burlesque theater, Comstock found it hard to understand why society prioritized vice and sexual pleasure. For example, when dealing with objects of female lust, specifically dildos, he did not understand, beyond the tantalizing allure of lust, consumerism, and loose morals, why such objects needed to exist. He came to the conclusion that women who sought out pleasure from objects besides their husbands, or sought sexual pleasure at all, posed an unfathomable threat to society.²⁵ Their bodies, their sexuality, and the new liberties they took in society lead to the shift in American culture from piousness to lascivious.

Sexuality in Art Challenging Comstock's Morality Movement

As the theater became more risqué and a place to celebrate women and their bodies and sexuality, the world of art also began to evolve. In one of the biggest blunders of Anthony Comstock's career he confiscated all of the printed journals from the Art Students League of New York, receiving an incredible amount of push back and negative media coverage. The students held protests, drew cartoons of him onto public walls, and comic artists started submitting pieces of Comstock in sexually compromising positions. Comstock had noticed that the *American Student of Art* circulated ads and solicitations through the mail and went to investigate its contents for obscene things. He found two photos he did not like and arrested the clerk selling the journals. After being released the clerk remained in a state of shock for quite some time, which meant nothing to Comstock given she disseminated vice. He would not relent, and neither would his critics.

After Comstock's attempted raid, where he did actually procure almost all copies of the journal, he could never again obtain the same level of substantial footing for his crusade. Public opinion had turned firmly against Comstock. The director of the MET, Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke said:

Really, I can't understand it. Is this man serious or is he indulging in a joke? I trust that it does not mean all of the art schools will be taken away. All the art schools employ models in the nude. A nude figure is not indecent unless it was made to offend morals.²⁶

In response to Sir. Clarke, Comstock claimed that "nobody but me knows what he is talking about on this subject. What if he knew that one those libidinous and lascivious books had fallen into the hands of an innocent

²⁴ Ezra Heywood, *Free Speech: Report of Ezra H. Heywood's Defense* (Princeton, Mass., c. 1883), 6, 14-18; Martin Henry Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism: the Biography of Ezra Heywood* (Urbana, 1989), 144-45; Andrea Tone, "Black Market Birth Control: Contraceptive Entrepreneurship and Criminality in the Gilded Age," in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44.

²⁵ Werbel, 79.

²⁶ "Art Students Jeer at Comstock's Raid," *New York Times* (New York, 1906), 7.

child?”²⁷ By calling the moral authority of successful artists into question while affirming his own authority Comstock attempts to assert himself as the only moral authority on obscenity. In this regard he predates Justice Potter Stewart’s comments on pornography by about 5 decades. Comstock demonstrated time and again that his crusade had nothing to do with American children and everything to do with the control of women. By centering his crusade on the rhetoric of protecting children from vice it provided him with enough support that should someone like Margaret Sanger or Emma Goldman point out his oppression of women he could then pivot and retaliate by claiming to only be taking the necessary measures to protect the children. He tried to stamp out depictions of female nudity and sexuality in the arts believing they influenced society and culture. He used publicity and children to manipulate the elite into funding his crusade when, at its core, Comstock’s morality movement wanted to control and censor women.

The two paintings in the *American Student of Art* that Comstock had a problem with showed a nude women in the woods and a group of nude men “at play,” thus exhibiting homosexual behaviors.²⁸ The court did not support his objections. Many students and artists argued that the human form did not have inherent obscenity but when people project their own judgments and desires on the human form then it becomes obscene.²⁹ Comstock’s elite benefactors became increasingly uncomfortable with his encroachment into the arts, and given their necessity in his crusade, forced him to change his argument about suggestive art. He instead argued that “the female form is beautiful, a young girl may be nude in her room and there is no wrong attached to it; but if a lascivious eye looks through the keyhole, then it is wrong for her to be stripped of her clothing.”³⁰ This quote illustrates Comstock’s hypocrisy regarding responsibility for immorality and vice. He does not hold men responsible for the degradation of society, just as he does not blame a man for peering predatorily into the private room of a nude young woman. Comstock and the artists now agree that obscenity in nude art comes from the judgments of the viewers, but he still believes that any art that could encourage obscenity should be destroyed. If the art contains markers of obscenity to any one viewer then it should not be allowed to exist as it will spread and corrupt the population.

The elite liked the exclusivity of art museums, theater, and saucy reading materials, so they did not appreciate Comstock’s threat to put an end to institutions like museums or theaters. “Tensions over what it meant to be upper class ultimately impeded censorship efforts, particularly efforts to censor art” because the elite intended to distinguish themselves from the lower classes and they attended art museums as a way to assure that separation.³¹ Comstock would only take issue with nude artworks if created and disseminated prints reached the general public, similar to the works of the old literary masters. If their works did not reach the public through reprinting in English, and instead stayed in their own language, he would consider it art and not obscene.

This idea developed into the concept of determining the obscenity of art through the social status of the people who viewed the work.³² If an upper class woman looked at a nude piece of art in a museum, with all the gilding and expense that came with it, then the painting is considered art. If a middle or lower class woman looked at the same work as a re-print, given that she most likely does not have the time or the money to get to a museum, then it is obscene. Comstock believed that the lower classes would not comprehend the overall moral in the work and would only take it at face value and understand it for a base, pornographic feature. He makes the same argument about a lot of great literature, claiming that its sexual scenes would overshadow the overall moral of the work, and that the hedonistic quality would consume young men and women, rendering them unable to search for the moral meaning.³³

Edward Stokes, owner of the Hoffman House hotel, hung a painting in his bar by William Bouguereau, (figure 1). *Nymphs and Satyr* not only contained sexually charged nudity, but it’s undertones of female sexual domination and retribution sparked much interest among the elite and the lowly.³⁴ Men would visit the bar just to look at the painting and soon elite women also made the trip to see the work with their own eyes. Comstock wanted terribly to remove the art but could not, given the vast attachment many people had to the piece. He once again bowed to pressure from the

²⁷ “Art Students Jeer at Comstock’s Raid,” 7.

²⁸ “Art Students’ League Raided by Comstock and it’s Magazine seized by the Purifier as “Indecent.”” *New York Times* Vol. LV, No.17,732 (New York, 1906), 1.

²⁹ White, Elliot, “The Nude in Art – Is It Immodest?” *Boston Daily Globe* (Boston, 1911), 44.

³⁰ Alyssa Picard, ““To Popularize the Nude in Art”: Comstockery Reconsidered,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 205.

³¹ Beisel, 17.

³² Beisel, 13.

³³ Comstock, 161.

³⁴ Scobey, 51.

elite and allowed the painting to remain, even though it became a public mixing place of the classes and genders. Comstock and David Scobey, the author of the article “Nymphs and Satyr: Sex and the Bourgeois Public Sphere in Victorian New York” speculated as to how women could find the painting interesting but it seems rather apparent; women enjoyed the reversal of roles.³⁵ The painting supposedly tells the story of a satyr caught spying on nymphs as they bathed. As retaliation for his indecency the nymphs knowingly dragged him into the water, aware that he could not swim, as punishment for his act of lust. The painting relates almost painfully to Comstock’s theories on men and sexuality. Given how he, and society in general, forced women to bear the burden of men’s sexual desires it makes clear sense that women would relate to this painting. They would want to emulate it, imagining themselves in a position of power and dominance in society. The painting also contains a rape narrative, should one read it that way, where after being subjected to male desires against their will the nymphs exacted their retribution on the spot.

Nymphs and Satyrs acts as an obvious example of a subtler problem Comstock faced, the changing nature of what people find sexually attractive. At this point in time a few popular actresses and models, such as Annie Sutherland, used their sexuality during shows and advertising. Growing consumerism and commercialization lead increasingly to the use of the female form as commodity. Women would pose for ads in suggestive ways, but also, more alarmingly, in men’s clothing. They wore pants in cigarette ads, which appears to be a unique satire given how the men of the Gilded Age did not feel threatened by this reversal of roles. The affixed social hierarchy reassured men that their authority would never be overturned, allowing them to feel aroused by a woman in pants or a suit, instead of threatened; “the torrent of provocative pictures of women with tights, loops, and shadows now barreling across the country at unprecedented speed also brought copious images of gender-bending women to the attention of male consumers.”³⁶ In a particular ad, (figure 2), a young woman stands on a man’s back, a ribbon in his mouth, appearing to dominate him. This as sparks interest because;

Presumably, in the privacy of his own home, the purchaser could enjoy the amusing sight of a grown women, dressed as a girl, riding her male companion like a horse and guiding him with gauzy reins held in his mouth like a bit... All of this made more dramatic through the technology of the stereoscope, which of course could be passed along to share intimate and piquant view with a partner, as proposal to play along... is a good reminder that then, as now, men’s sexual inclinations were enormously varied.³⁷

The point is not to assume to understand the sexual desires of the people of the Gilded Age but to acknowledge that they had started to evolve and allow more diverse interests to come through. Comstock believed in dispassionate sexual relationships that only practiced sex for reproduction alone. Changing and varied sexual interests and their individualized nature being used as marketing tools should have caused him to attack and slander every ad agency in town. Just like with Goodyear and Vaseline however, Comstock tended to leave the advertising agencies alone.

Walt Whitman and Mark Twain also posed an issue for Comstock. Both authors quietly but publicly opposed Comstock’s Law and his crusade to quell sexual expression. When Whitman’s collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, came under fire by the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, his publisher cancelled the contract and would not publish it. Twain wrote a scathing satirical essay in support of the NESSV in which he claims:

We surely do not make laws against intent of obscene writings, but against probable effect. If this is true, it seems to follow that we ought to condemn all indecent literature, regardless of its date. Because a book was harmless a hundred years ago, it does not follow that it is harmless to-day. A century or so ago, the foulest writings could not soil the English mind, because it was already defiled past defilement.³⁸

The works published in the Gilded Age appeared harmlessly sexual; they are celebrating sexuality and literature, not advocating vice. They did not intend to harm or defile society, and it appears unlikely that anything written in the Gilded Age could defile a mind already so corrupted. The act of censoring effect and not intent offended many artists. If any artist made a piece intended to offend and defile the morals of the audience then the piece would need to have censorship. If they did not intend to offend, but society itself took offense, then fault lies not with the art but with

³⁵ Scobey, 52.

³⁶ Werbel, 159.

³⁷ Werbel, 160.

³⁸ Werbel, 131.

society. Comstock's crusade put limits on the creativity of artists so, in essence, he censored their very thoughts and the thoughts of the people who would otherwise read or view their works. In retaliation for these acts of censorship, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Ezra Heywood, and many other artists began their exploration into writing, painting, or publishing sexually explicit art.

Comstock and the NESSV found the poems "A Woman Waits for Me," "To a Common Prostitute," and "Dalliance of the Eagles," so offensive because of their foray into beautifying sex, especially female pleasure. Comstock took fault with these poems for the same reason he found Boccaccio's *Decameron* offensive, because the narrative depicted "male and female (and even avian) lust celebrated and satisfied, rather than penalized."³⁹ While "To a Common Prostitute" counted as offensive because one should not admit to hiring a prostitute or express gratitude because they exist, "A Woman Waits for Me" depicts a willing female sexual partner and places emphasis on passion and pleasure for both people. The poems controversial natures came from the appreciative tone when discussing sex, and also the depiction of pleasurable sexual relationships. While society churned forward to allow women more agency and provide more room for them to demand fairer treatment sexually, the idea that a man openly and expressly wants a woman who ensures and expects her own pleasure shocked many citizens. The public still clung to many deep Puritan values, as evident in Comstock's ideology and "his assumption of respectful female "passionlessness";" which "was a normal element of evangelical discourse."⁴⁰ Comstock feared the authors making deliberate attempts to pollute the minds of Americans and encourage them into lascivious behavior, which Whitman did not intend to do. Whitman wanted to celebrate the pleasures and beauty of sex as an act of love and life, despite the moral values society assigned to it. He did not believe in suppressing or being ashamed of natural sexual urges or sexuality. Whitman "trusted that honest discussion of sexuality would liberate Americans; Comstock believed it would condemn them to hell."⁴¹

In his efforts to condemn certain pieces of art and literature, he ended up sensationalizing them and also opened conversations about the definition of art within the art communities. When he raided the Art Students League of New York people flocked to the streets to try and get their hands on a copy of the *American Student of Art*. Similarly, *Nymphs and Satyr* grabbed the attention of many citizens, but after Comstock unsuccessfully attempted to have it removed he only succeeded in turning it into a tourist attraction as well as a selling point of the Hoffman House hotel. Comstock would also gain many enemies within the art sphere. They did not appreciate having their work censored, especially when they did not even have parameters in which to work. They played a large part in the unsuccessful end of Comstock's career and life. His portrayal in the media as a villainous, senile old man who could not keep up with modernity undermined his crusade. Artists caricatured Comstock in many sexual ways and turned him into the butt of many jokes. Simply put, Gilded Age Americans did not appreciate any sort of censorship when it came to their actions, thoughts, or words - so do not touch their First Amendment or cartoonists will draw you taking a public bath in hell.

The newspapers presented much more moderate and objective opinions about morality than Comstock or his opponents, emphasizing the opinions of the general public. Newspapers such as the New York Times and the Boston Globe printed stories about Comstock and the morality movement with titles such as "Nation's Most Crying Needs," "Mr. Comstock's Censorship," and "Licentious French Art." They covered both perspectives of Comstock, as someone doing whatever necessary to protect American citizens from the dangers of vice and also as someone unconstitutionally imposing their individual views and restrictions onto the general population. "Most middle-class adults agreed with Comstock that the literature of sporting men posed a threat to morality, but far fewer believed as he did that all element participating in the discussion of sexuality were morally dangerous."⁴² The general populous wanted to find a happy medium. They wanted to protect their children from the dangers of obscenity, but also did not believe in the corrupting nature of things like nudity in art and slightly "spicy" theatrical shows and literature.⁴³ Individuals enjoyed more freedoms and wealth as women left the home to get jobs, and the average working class family did not feel as though their children experienced neglect with two working parents but instead lived happier, more comfortable lives given their ability to better provide for the children.

³⁹ Werbel, 132.

⁴⁰ Werbel, 78.

⁴¹ Werbel, 11.

⁴² Horowitz, 420

⁴³ Comstock, 161

CES Wood wrote an article in *Liberty (Not the Daughter but the Mother of Order)* where he describes what Comstock has done and what the danger of his concepts could mean. Wood claims:

But the evil seed he is sowing may continue. Self-consciousness is bad – be it self-conceit or self-shame. There is one thing all great men envy in the animals – the utter lack of self-consciousness, that calm accord with nature which is the highest manhood or womanhood. IT can be reached not only by the ignorance of brutes, but also by the gracious intellect of man. Anthony Comstock destroys this. He makes nature a blunderer because we are born naked... He suggests evil where there is none. He makes noble vulgar and the pure impure... The person who sees impurity in nakedness dishonors himself with an impure suggestion.⁴⁴

He establishes similar ideas to those like Whitman and Twain. Nudity is only obscene if the person looking upon the art brings a salacious view with them. By condemning women and men for their natural urges and their naked bodies, Comstock himself created an impure society and attributed to the continuation of vice.

Conclusion: Comstock's Social Degradation Present in Modern Society

As much as Comstock mentioned protecting the children in the media, his actions revealed his true intentions. Throughout his tirade as the Crusader of Vice, Comstock targeted women and the lower classes in a blatant attempt to stem what he believed to be common, disgusting society, and limit women's agency in the public and private spheres. Despite all of his attempts to damn up the flow of vice Comstock's relevance in society had the opposite effect. His erratic ways, refusal to discuss materials he deemed obscene, and the negative press surrounding the deaths of Mme. Restelle and Ida Craddock instead propelled the dirty issues into the open. In the end, all of his efforts had the inverse effect. Society now, according to Comstock's definition, would be the foulest one in existence. Women having sexual partners outside of wedlock, the accessibility of birth control and abortions, and LGBTQ visibility are among a few examples of what Comstock would consider degradations of society. So while Comstock, theoretically, was right in his assumption that women in the public sphere would lead to a breakdown of conventional society, given his standards for conventional society, it does not mean that a loosening of specific morals endangers a whole society. Expecting homogeneity of values across an entire nation leads to dangerous consequences, Nazis Germany and North Korea for example. So where, then, is there a happy medium? Is it possible to have morally loose values but still an upstanding, non-eroding society? What would that look like?

The current society embodies everything Comstock aggressively tried to prevent, and his fears and beliefs have some validity. Women are the infectious spreaders of vice, but acting as if that is due to agency and not projection is shortsighted. Women spread vice because society assigns vice to them. Women's bodies are commoditized and consumed at an alarming rate, their images plastered on every form of media in every form of underdress. Constant images of naked women in sexual and revealing positions inspire a lustful response from the audience, but this is orchestrated by societal institutions, not individual women. The female body becomes a sex symbol from the moment she enters puberty, and this endangers her immediately. Comstock foresaw this corruption, although he would not agree that men had any influence in the creation of vice. He believed women would corrupt society with their bodies and sexuality, when in actuality society corrupted women. Comstock understood people as creatures of base instincts who, when their urges are validated by those in power, would denigrate women and society. A hero to some or a hero to none, Anthony Comstock failed in his crusade to prevent society from being publicly exposed to sexual urges and desires.

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⁴⁴ CES Wood, "Comstock, St. Paul, Et. Al," *Liberty (Not the Daughter by the Mother of Order, American Periodicals, (Boston, 1907)* 35

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude for Professor Edward O'Donnell and his seemingly never ending patience throughout the process of writing my senior capstone in his "Gilded Age America" seminar. I would also like to thank all of the consultants at the Writer's Workshop, as well as Kristina Reardon and Laurie Ann Britt-Smith for all their hard work. And finally, my parents for all the editing help, patience, and encouragement they gave me while pursuing my degree in history.