

BOOBIES, BOOTY SHORTS, AND BAR TRASH:  
HOW TO SPOT A FEMINIST

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the love of my life, Kelly Williams, whose constant love and support has carried me through the last two years of graduate school. Thank you for listening as I talked through my ideas, believing in me even when I doubted myself, and reminding me daily that I could do it and do it well. 91's baby!

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction:

#### **Bikinis and Broken Hearts: Early Indoctrination into the Cult of True Womanhood**

When I was seven years old, my mother took me shopping for summer clothes at the local JC Penney, including a new swimsuit. I cannot recall any of the other clothes I looked at that day, but I have always remembered how much I loved a pink and white striped two-piece with a ruffle around the bottom. I had to beg my mother to let me get it. She was always a “tomboy” who dressed very modestly, and she insisted on a one-piece every year. Any girl who grew up tall knows the pains of wearing a one-piece; they never seem to be long enough, so wearing one involves a lot of pulling up on the top and pulling down on the rear. My parents never noticed my discomfort, and insisted I wear the more modest style. But on this one magical shopping trip, my mother gave in and let me get the coveted pink and white bikini. I don’t know what persuaded her to change her mind, whether it was too much whining and arguing or if, for a moment, she doubted her typical reasons for saying no. But I was thrilled. I imagined myself wearing it to the pool at the trailer park where my grandparents lived. Something about it made me feel pretty. Maybe it was the hue of the rosy stripes or the flutter of the ruffle. I’ve been drawn to “girlie” things since I can remember—dresses and make-up and jewelry and high-heel shoes and anything pink—and that bikini made me feel girlie.

My mom had warned me that my dad may not approve my new swimsuit, but somehow I felt confident that it was mine as we left the store that day. When I showed him my new clothes that evening, his disapproval was immediate and adamant. Dad said

it was too revealing and I was too young for a bikini. Back to the store it went the following day. I don't remember what the swimsuit we exchanged it for looked like. But I still remember the one I wanted so badly but couldn't have because it was "too immodest," although my seven-year-old mind had no idea what "immodest" meant exactly or why this swimsuit fit that category. Actually, for a two-piece, it was pretty modest.

Twenty-five years after the bikini incident, I was accepted into a graduate program at Texas State University. While discussing my acceptance, my mother dutifully warned me that I would need new clothes because the tube tops and daisy dukes I wore to work as a bartender weren't appropriate for the classroom. But she didn't need to tell me that—she had been telling me what clothing is inappropriate my entire life. Not that I've followed her guidelines for modesty. I went bra-less for years before the fear of gravity set in and wore short skirts with tall heels and shirts that were backless or strapless. And I still dress in a slightly more modest version of this self when I'm not at work, especially during those long, scorching Texas summers.

But I am conditioned to believe that in some situations more conservative attire is expected, so I spend a lot of time standing in my closet. I stand in my closet, thirty-six square feet crammed full of clothes, attempting to piece together a version of me that is acceptable to myself and others. I stand in my closet bending over in front of the mirror and asking how much is too much cleavage, if any at all. I stand in my closet pondering what, if any, effect it would have if I exposed more of my shoulders or back. I stand in my closet trying to figure out why anyone cares so goddamn much about what I wear.

But I know “they” do—I’ve been told so my entire life—so I navigate through my closet and attempt to portray myself as a woman deserving respect, whatever that woman looks like.

What my parents taught me through the swimsuit incident, a lesson that resonates through my mind each day as I look through my closet for something to wear, is that my body is public property, and when I leave the house it is on display for others to judge or ogle or ignore. Because my body is not my own, I have the obligation to dress in ways that others in society deem appropriate for each occasion. I am responsible for the ways my body makes other people feel by very my existence, and if some people view my body as too sexual, if it arouses “impure” thoughts, I am responsible for covering up. If I want to be a respected, then I must dress the part.

In this particular respect, there is nothing new under the sun. As Barbara Welter shows in her essay “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1866,” specific feminine ideals—piety, purity, domesticity, and submission—were so prevalent during the Victorian era in the United States as to create a “Cult of True Woman.” Specifically, the Victorians felt that a “true” woman’s only focus outside of the home should be religion because it would not distract them from their duties within the home while reinforcing the other three aspects of True womanhood: remaining sexually pure, submissive to her father or husband, and dedicated to her domestic duties (Welter 153). Women had to protect their greatest asset, their purity, against possible male assault because men were considered much more sexual in nature and less capable of controlling their urges (155). Welter argues that “the most feminine virtue expected of women” was submission:

although men were expected to be pious and pure and to play a strong role in raising families, men were also expected to be the authority figures that their wives and daughters would defer to (158). In sum, a pious, pure, and submissive woman was well-suited for the domestic life that awaited her, taking care of family and home, and if she could learn to cook, sew, bear children, and take care of a home, then she was a member of the cult of True Womanhood.

Although in 1966, budding second-wave feminists considered Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1866" groundbreaking in its analysis of Victorian era women's collective experience (Hewitt 156), recent feminists have criticized Welter's analysis as limited in scope to only middle class, northern, white women (157). Some have also declared the end of the Cult of True Womanhood in the U.S. In a 1983 speech, Patricia Albjerg Graham traced the history of women in universities in the United States as evidence of a shift from the ideals of womanhood from the Victorian era and argued that women of the 1980s were expected to be "attractive, active, ambitious, and ambivalent" (404). Mary Louise Roberts also discusses the ideologies behind True Womanhood as though they are relics of the past and encourages feminist scholars to closely examine the shift from the true woman to the "new woman" (151).

In this thesis I argue that despite the advancements in female equality that have taken place in the five decades since Welter's article was first published, and despite cultural changes that have altered the ways in which people view piety, purity, submission, and domesticity, women are still judged by these "ideals" today and face punishment from men and women alike if they are deemed too "slutty" or "bitchy." This

cultural imperative for women to live by the standards of the Cult of True Womanhood is reinforced, but also challenged by, pop culture.

In Chapter Two, I examine contemporary cultural movements that reify standards of True Womanhood. These movements reflect the strong influence of not only the U.S.'s puritanical past that still influences society's views of sexuality and the female body, but also the modern resurgence of conservatism.

I will focus on the recent phenomenon of purity balls, formal events in which fathers pledge to protect their daughters' purity and their daughters commit to remain virgins until marriage. Purity balls were created in 2000 by a family in Colorado and have become increasingly popular in the past fifteen years (*Generations*). By examining the rhetoric surrounding these balls, I will reveal the ways in which these events portray women's bodies as the property of men—first their fathers and later their husbands—and how these balls are an indoctrination into the cult of True Womanhood.

The “modest is hottest” movement is also a recent development created as a Christian response to the perception of increasing immodesty in popular culture. I will discuss the meaning of modesty and how the term “modest is hottest” reinforces the idea that the purpose of women's bodies is to be attractive, and “modesty” is the best way to accomplish this goal.

I will also examine the Supreme Court case *Sebelius V Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, in which Hobby Lobby is fighting an Affordable Care Act mandate that requires them to provide contraception to their employees under their healthcare plan. Hobby Lobby's refusal to provide their female employees with certain types of contraception represents a

modern push for women to remain domestic and submissive.

This chapter will also focus on my personal experiences as a heterosexual white female growing up in a conservative family and living with conflicting identities of my physical self. Collectively, purity balls, the “modest is hottest” movement, and the *Sebelius V Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* Supreme Court case represent different aspects of how women’s bodies are controlled through the ideologies of True Womanhood by repressing individual female ownership of sexuality, outward appearance, and reproductive system.

Chapter Three will include a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the 2013 song “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams featuring rapper TI. “Blurred Lines” is both popular and contentious: it was named both the Song of the Summer by Billboard and “the most controversial song of the decade” by *The Guardian*. “Blurred Lines” stirred so much controversy that approximately twenty student unions in the United Kingdom banned the song on their campuses (Lynskey). Described as “rapey,” the song’s title is can be interpreted as the blurred lines of consent. I will utilize Huckin’s method of CDA to expose how “Blurred Lines” is a response to women’s perceived sexual power as they attempt to break away from the confines of True Womanhood.

In Chapter Four, I will focus on the ways in which modern women attempt to break free of the cult of True Womanhood. However, as women continue to gain more power and sexual freedom, society has begun to punish victims of rape through victim-blaming and bullying. For example, pop culture icon Miley Cyrus has pushed the boundaries imposed by the cult of True Womanhood. With the October 2013 release of

her album *Bangerz* and the media campaign that followed, including a risqué performance on the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2013 that caused a social media frenzy, she reclaimed ownership of her body by rejecting the standards previously placed on her in her role as Hannah Montana in a Disney television show of the same name. However, she also faced a great deal of pushback in the form of slut-bashing, which parallels my own experiences and media reaction to a teenage girl's rape in Steubenville, Ohio in 2012. In the Steubenville, Ohio rape case, an intoxicated 16-year-old girl was taken to multiple locations and raped repeatedly by two teenage boys while other teens took photos and video of the sexual assaults and posted them to social media sites. The case was ignored by local law enforcement officials until hacktivist group Anonymous became involved and exposed the shameful behavior of the teens involved and the slut-bashing and victim-blaming that followed. The Steubenville case thus serves as an excellent text for this chapter's analysis of how the media blame and shame women, even rape victims, for their sexuality.

### **Research Questions**

How are the ideologies of cult of True Womanhood projected onto the female body in contemporary times? Specifically,

How does pop culture recreate and reinforce the ideologies of True Womanhood through their discussions and representations of the female body?

How are women rejecting and defying the constraints of True Womanhood?

What are the repercussions for women who choose to reject and defy True Womanhood?

## **Methodology**

I will borrow from Thomas Huckin's method of "Critical Discourse Analysis" as I examine recent pop culture texts for the ways in which they reinforce female embodiment of True Womanhood. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a context-sensitive method for analyzing texts for their cultural significance and relevance. Maintaining that no text exists in isolation, Huckin proposes analyzing texts in "real-world context" by integrating the text with the discursive practices and social context that surround the text. Huckin's method assumes a moral stance, uncovering and analyzing the ways that socially and culturally significant texts reinforce social inequalities (Huckin 96). Because CDA involves analyzing texts within the context in which they are created, it is an excellent method for uncovering social inequalities of specific time periods, including the constraints placed on modern women by the continued adherence to the ideologies of the cult of True Womanhood.

Huckin's method of CDA involves examining a text on three different levels, beginning with the entire text, then focusing on individual sentences, and narrowing in on key words and phrases. When examining the text as a whole, CDA practitioners consider the genre of the text and look closely at the way issues are framed, including what the author chooses to emphasize and de-emphasize, what has been omitted or manipulated within the text, and the use of visual aids, presuppositions, and discursive differences (Huckin 98-100). Sentence level analysis also focuses on what is foregrounded within the text and the use of presuppositions, as well as what is topicalized within individual sentences, the construction of agent-patient relationships, and insinuations (100-1). At the

most detailed level, CDA focuses on individual words and phrases within the text, analyzing the use of labels or metaphors that carry connotations, the level of formality in the register of the text, and the use of modal phrases that carry authority (101-2).

In *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, Candace Spigelman advocates blending personal narrative with academic writing in order to create “useful contradictions” and “more complicated meanings” by “simultaneously viewing an issue from alternate perspectives” (3). Because of my familiarity with the subject matter of this thesis as a young, academic woman, and my personal experience navigating pop culture texts, I have experiential knowledge that will be useful in exploring and illuminating the ways modern women are expected to embody True Womanhood. I will incorporate my personal experience through the process of analytic autoethnography, which involves narrative writing but contains certain critical elements that make it distinctive from autobiography and other forms of narrative writing.

According to Leon Anderson, analytic autoethnography is a research methodology that involves a “complete member researcher” who is immersed in the particular social group being studied and who engages in constant analytic reflexivity throughout the research and writing process (378). The analytic autoethnographer must maintain visibility throughout the writing process, writing her own narrative experience into the discussion, which must also contain input from outside sources, whether persons, texts, or both (Anderson 378). Finally, analytic autoethnographers maintain a commitment to an analytic agenda throughout the research and writing process, which has “this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under

investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization” (388).

Situating my personal narrative as a form of analytic autoethnography within the context of contemporary pop culture and academia, two social spheres I straddle, will allow for a deeper analysis of the ways in which the ideologies of True Womanhood are reinforced in contemporary society.

### **Literature Review**

Co-authors Heather Gray and Samantha Phillips focus on society’s expectations of female beauty, tracing 20<sup>th</sup>-century beauty standards and the ways in which these standards have defined and oppressed women. They argue that placing too much importance on beauty stifles women’s intellectual growth and advocate for a rejection of beauty standards and acceptance of women’s bodies in their imperfect states. Co-authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards believe that women can choose to pursue beauty as part of their feminist right and refer to feminists who enjoy fashion and femininity as “Girlies.” According to Baumgardner and Richards, the rise of Girlie feminism resulted from the plethora of influences that inspired a generation of feminists who were raised by second-wave feminist mothers. They believe that rejecting femininity in place of masculinity does not translate into equality and that feminism and femininity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, true equality for women means the ability to choose how they represent themselves. Furthermore, they argue, women should be able to be sexual and sexy if they choose without being sexualized and objectified all of the time.

Summer Wood takes issue with feminist use of the word “choice” whether in reference to abortion or any other decision a woman might make for her own life. Wood

asserts that “choice” has become synonymous with “feminism,” but choice is really just an illusion because all of women’s decisions are based, at least to some extent, on extenuating circumstances. She argues that women feel they choose to be stay-at-home moms, for example, because feminism has allowed them that choice when in reality their decision is affected by a multitude of factors, including financial and familial factors. But the same could be said for all choices people make, since no decision is made in a vacuum, and we are all influenced and limited in every decision we make.

According to Merri Johnson, women are presented with a false dichotomy when it comes to sexuality: they must choose between being anti-sex prudes or pro-sex sluts. Johnson argues that a new female sexual ideology must be constructed, one in which women can be more open about their sexuality and sexual experiences without fear of retribution in the form of slut-bashing. Slut-bashing is a form of bullying focused on a woman’s sexuality, real or perceived. Leora Tanenbaum writes that slut-bashing “is one issue that affects every single female who grows up in this country because any preteen or teenage girl can become a target” (311). While males are not victims of slut-bashing—their sexual escapades are cheered as conquests—females of all ages can, and often have, been called names like “slut” and “whore” by males and females, regardless of whether or not they are sexually active. Slut-bashing reinforces the sexist belief that men are free to enjoy sex, but women are not.

bell hooks discusses women’s reproductive rights and condemns the 1960’s pro-choice movement for focusing only on legalizing abortion, noting that legalizing abortion was the primary objective of predominantly white and middle class second-wave

feminists because, for them, legalization was all that stood in the way of getting an abortion if need be. The focus on abortion neglected many other aspects of reproductive rights such as access to other types of birth control and proper sex education, especially for those in poor communities. hooks believes Christians object so strongly to abortion because it is a rejection of motherhood and domesticity.

### **Conclusion**

In order for women to regain ownership of their bodies, to reclaim what has been viewed as public property for so long, we must first uncover and discuss the ways in which popular culture teaches women to embody the sexist ideologies of True Womanhood or suffer penalties for rejecting these ideologies. Women cannot achieve equality if we are still being shamed for our bodies and our sexuality. We must embrace new feminist heroines without subscribing to the slut-bashing cattiness rampant in society and take a new stance on female sexuality. After all, sex doesn't objectify women. But treating women as passive recipients rather than willful enjoyers does, and the consequences of the former are far reaching and extremely damaging.

## CHAPTER II

### **Piety, Purity, and Pregnancy: Modern Indoctrination into True Womanhood**

*Oh so all my lovin' goes  
Under the fog, fog, fog  
And I believed them all  
Well I'm just a poor little baby  
'Cause well I believe them all*

*Oh so while you're growin' old  
Under the gun, gun, gun  
And I believed them all  
Well I'm just one poor baby  
'Cause well I believed them all*

*I wish I could buy back  
The woman you stole ~Yeah Yeah Yeahs*

I was raised with the puritanical values of Evangelical Christianity. My siblings and I were not allowed to watch certain movies and television shows, including anything on MTV; our musical libraries were limited almost entirely to Christian artists; and, as previously mentioned, when it came to picking out my clothes, modesty was stressed by both of my parents. These strict limitations, coupled with five years of home schooling that resulted in the formation of few friendships, left me feeling socially awkward and inadequate. I didn't kiss a boy until I was sixteen, and I clung tightly to my virginity until it was stripped away from me at the age of eighteen. I didn't learn anything about sex or how to be a sexual person.

It was during this time of teenage sexual exploration that I began to drift away from Christianity, but the tenets of purity and piety had already left an indelible, and I will argue unhealthy, mark on my developing identity.

In this chapter I analyze popular components of contemporary Christianity for the

ways they reify True Womanhood, to the detriment of women. According to *Pew Forum*'s 2007 "Religious Landscape Survey," 78% of American adults identify as members of a Judeo-Christian religion and 26% as Evangelicals specifically. Evangelical Christians comprise the largest religious population in the United States, with Catholics close behind at nearly 24% (Religious). With such a large portion of the population professing to be believers, the influence of Judeo-Christian values, particularly those of Evangelicals and Christians in general, on popular culture ideologies of True Womanhood cannot be denied. Because I was raised Evangelical and they are the largest, and arguably most influential, segment of the Judeo-Christian population, this discussion of True Womanhood will focus primarily on Evangelical movements.

### **"Modest is Hottest": The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the Cult of True Womanhood**

*It is illegal for women to go topless in most cities, yet you can buy a magazine of a woman without her top on at any 7-11 store. So, you can sell breasts, but you cannot wear breasts, in America. ~ Violet Rose<sup>1</sup>*

When I was 22 years old, I had a job in a coffee shop on the south side of my hometown, the "right" side of the tracks. The owners were a young, yuppie couple, thirty-ish with no children and a little BMW coupe. They also owned the pizzeria enclosed in the same small building. They were still trying to grow their businesses, so they both worked a lot, her at the coffee shop and him at the pizzeria. One afternoon she approached me in the back of the coffee shop, placed a hand on my shoulder, and told me that my shirt was inappropriate for work. It was a racerback tank top from the Gap with a

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<sup>1</sup> Violet Rose is a feminist activist and sex worker from the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> Critics have complained that Cyrus' performance was racist in nature. However, since race is not the

built in bra, similar to what my female coworker who was the same age as me wore. The only difference was that she was very thin and petite with small breasts, but I have been voluptuous since the first signs of puberty. When she said my shirt was inappropriate for work, what she meant was my breasts were inappropriate, and although they were completely covered by my shirt, the outline of my bust was offensive. Modesty and D cups are mutually exclusive.

The phrase “Modest is Hottest” has become a common meme among Evangelical Christian women, perpetuated by best-selling Christian artists such as Jaime Jamgochian and Rebecca St. James. The slogan is screen-printed onto t-shirts and featured on a Pinterest account filled with pictures of female celebrities in clothing that covers from shoulder to knee (Jamgochian; St. James). Jamgochian, the first to popularize “Modest is Hottest,” travels throughout the United States hosting events for teenage girls in which she performs songs, discusses her views on the importance of modesty, and offers fashion tips for how to “dress fun and cute and trendy, but still do it in a way that’s modest and reflects the values God has given each one of us.” She believes her “modest is hottest” mantra empowers young women by encouraging them to dress more conservatively. However, a closer examination of the term reveals exactly how disempowering the term “modest is hottest” truly is as it encourages the embodiment of the Cult of True Womanhood.

Jamgochian’s target audience for her Modest is Hottest events are young women ages twelve through eighteen and their mothers. She reaches these young women at an early age, indoctrinating them into believing that their bodies are made for people to look

at and therefore they should be dressed appropriately. On the surface, “modest is hottest” implies that modesty is a way to attract the opposite sex. A Google search of the word “hottest” brings up links to websites such as “Fifteen Hottest Freshman” by *The Harvard Crimson* and “Sexiest Women and Hottest Celebrities” by *Maxim*, along with images of scantily clad and provocatively posed women. Thus in modern society the word “hottest,” when referring to people, implies sex appeal, especially when those people are female. A few internet critics of “modest is hottest” have already pointed out that telling young women that modesty is what men find attractive only continues to objectify women, which is certainly a valid criticism (Miller; Beauty). Telling young women that modesty is the way to be more attractive to men simply reinforces the idea that a woman’s body is public property and that a woman’s duty is to figure out how to make her body the most attractive. “Modest is hottest” implies that men will be more sexually attracted to women who are dressed in an asexual (a.k.a. modest) fashion, which therefore makes modesty sexual. It’s a confused message, to say the least, one in which men’s desires trump women’s.

“Modest” is also a problematic word. Jamgochian bases her slogan and campaign on a definition of modesty as “observing the proprieties of dress and behavior” (Modest). She believes that wearing clothing that reveals little flesh is what God wants women to do, and that women will be happier and more comfortable when their bodies are covered up. Thus dressing modestly becomes an outward sign of purity and piety within Evangelical Christian communities. In conservative religious communities, such as Evangelical Christians who subscribe to Jamgochian’s ideas of “modest is hottest,”

members tend to assess each other's sexuality according to the "mental one-drop rule" in which even the slightest sign of deviant behavior marks the person as a full-fledged deviant (Brekhus 515). In these communities "even a woman who has never had sexual intercourse could conceivably qualify as a 'whore' provided her clothing, appearance, or demeanor suggested the tiniest drop of 'promiscuity'" (516). Dressing "modestly" is thus a social cue that others use to determine the sexuality of women. Males are not required to dress modestly.

Furthermore, "modest" has definitions beyond dressing conservatively, including "placing a modest estimate on one's abilities or worth" and "neither bold nor self-assertive: tending toward diffidence" (Modest). With these definitions in mind, "modest is hottest" takes on another complex and equally damning meaning: women are most attractive when they are submissive and do not fully value themselves and their abilities. Teaching women that "modest is hottest" is teaching them that they should not take pride in their knowledge, talents, and abilities (as males are taught to do), but rather should recede into the background, or risk being immodest. In fact, St. James tells young girls that modesty "has to do with walking in humility, being meek and unassuming. Someone who is modest places a moderate estimate on her abilities, is not bold or in-your-face, is not vain or conceited." While humility might have its virtues, advising women to be meek and to underestimate their own abilities reinforces gender roles involving women's inferiority to men, especially when the opposite of modesty is represented as vanity and conceit, creating a dichotomy of conceit and humility with no healthy, self-confident in-between.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, piety was used to reinforce submissive behavior and to keep women in the domesticated sphere of the home and away from academic and professional pursuits. (Welter 153). Conflating modesty with piety encourages submission by reminding women that they are the weaker sex and man's role is to guide and protect them as dictated by God. A woman should not think too highly of herself or her talents and goals lest she stray away from the guidance of her husband. Although some argue that the Cult of True Womanhood is passé, "modest is hottest" indicates that the ideals of submission, piety, and purity are very much alive.

### **Whose Vagina is it Anyway?: The Modern Invention of Purity Balls**

*You don't own me, I'm not just one of your  
many toys  
You don't own me, don't say I can't go with  
other boys*

*And don't tell me what to do  
And don't tell me what to say  
And please, when I go out with you  
Don't put me on display, 'cause*

*You don't own me, don't try to change me in  
any way  
You don't own me, don't tie me down 'cause  
I'd never stay ~ Lesley Gore*

The conflation of purity with piety and submission also appears in the modern form of purity balls, events in which girls, typically aged twelve and older, make a silent commitment to remain "pure" until marriage and refrain from sex, dating and kissing. Their fathers also sign a commitment pledging to be men of integrity and to protect their daughters' purity. In some ceremonies, the father gives his daughter a purity ring that she wears on her left ring finger to remind her to remain pure.

Randy and Lisa Wilson founded purity balls in 2000, and according to their website, purity balls have been held in 48 states and 17 countries (*Generations*). “Inside a Sacred Purity Ceremony,” a feature on purity balls on *Nightline Prime*, follows the Wilsons and the Johnsons as they prepare for the 14<sup>th</sup> annual purity ball in Colorado Springs.

In a scene from “Inside a Sacred Purity Ceremony,” Ron Johnson gets down on one knee as he gives his twelve-year-old daughter Caroline a purity ring that he says represents her vow to remain pure until she marries a man approved for her by both God and her father (Thompson). Ron tells Caroline that the purity ring serves as “a daily reminder that at this point you’re married to the Lord and, ah, and your father is your boyfriend, and, ah, we’re going to have fun together” before placing the ring on her finger (Thompson). The scene is oddly similar to a marriage proposal, and Ron’s admonishment that a father knows best how to find a husband for his daughter sounds more like a claim of ownership than a vow of fatherly love.

Like other young women who have taken the purity pledge with their fathers, Caroline is vowing not to date anyone until she is ready to get married and not to have sex or even kiss anyone until her wedding day. In other words, she not only must remain “pure,” but also submissive to her father, allowing him to have a tremendous amount of authority in one of the most important decisions of her life: choosing a mate. This authoritative relationship is expressed in the purity pledge taken by fathers during the purity ball ceremonies:

I, (daughter’s name)'s father, choose before God to cover my daughter as

her authority and protection in the area of purity. I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband and father. I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and my family as the high priest in my home. This covering will be used by God to influence generations to come. (*Generations*)

With this pledge the father is assigning himself as both head of the family and guardian of his daughter's purity. Purity thus becomes her most valuable asset. As Welter explains, in the cult of True Womanhood, a woman's virginity maintains its place as "the greatest treasure" a woman can give her husband; in modern times, women can have plastic surgeries to reattach their hymens and replicate their lost virginity for the cherry popping pleasure of their husbands or lovers (154).

On the other side of the gender dichotomy established by those who subscribe to the philosophy that informs purity balls is a cult of True Manhood in which men are expected to be strong, masculine, protective providers for their families. The Wilsons support this dichotomy and openly promote a Christian lifestyle with strict gender roles in which fathers serve as "protectors" of the family and women are viewed as "nurturers" (Thompson). They openly endorse women playing a submissive role in life, first to their fathers and later to their husbands. To indoctrinate their sons into this patriarchal ideology, the Wilsons celebrated their sons' entries into manhood at the age of twelve through a ceremony they call "Brave Heart of a Warrior" (*Generations*). The Wilsons believe that "manhood is passed down from the masculine to the masculine" so their sons' rites of passage included the gifting of a purity ring and a manly, phallic sword so

large that “he would grow into the weight of the sword just as he would grow into the weight of manhood” (*Generations*).

Because men are the decision makers in the Wilson’s ideal marriage, Randy, the strong patriarch of the family, believes young men need more one-on-one attention from their fathers and other male role models, so he advises fathers to take their sons camping or to sporting events or other places “where men can be men” (*Generations*). Unlike their female counterparts, these young men are valued for more than their bodies, and the father/son relationship compared to the father/daughter relationship shows how little time is invested into the intellect and abilities of the young women who are pledged to their fathers.

The Wilsons, and those who follow similar beliefs, are training their sons to be dominant and authoritative in an androcentric world in which women are obedient and look to men for guidance as “the movers, the doers, the actors,” while women play the role of “passive, submissive responders” (Welter 159). Through purity balls, a young woman first promises her “purity” and virginity to her father who then gives her, purity and all, to a man he approves of, with the father’s ring being replaced by the husband as the new symbol of ownership. Fortunately, this puritanical view of purity and virginity is slowly shifting as more women are unsubscribing to the outdated ideologies of True Womanhood in the wake of second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution that accompanied that wave. But increased female sexual liberation comes with repercussions for not living up to the old standards of True Womanhood that include slut-bashing, victim-blaming, and male protest rhetoric, topics that will be explored in depth in

chapters three, four, and five, respectively.

### **Abortion, Contraception, and Enforced Domesticity**

*Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.*  
~*The Who*

I remember staying up late November 3, 1992, watching the results come in for the presidential election with my mom. The candidates that year were Democrat William Jefferson Clinton, Republican George H. W. Bush, and Ross Perot as the Independent monkey wrench, and my family, all staunch Republicans, had been rooting for another Bush term. Pat Robertson had been praying for and predicting a godly Republican victory for months, and through the countless marathons of *The 700 Club* I knew what the most important issue in the election was that year: abortion. Or so it seemed in my sheltered, little world. My mother has long considered herself “pro-life” in the most compassionately conservative “only-in-cases-of-rape-and-incest” kind of way. She had volunteered at the local Pregnancy Crisis Center for a time and often wore a Precious Feet Pin - a tiny gold pin in the shape of a baby’s feet ten weeks after conception. Although my mother truly believes that abortion is taking a human life, she is a kind woman who would never call a woman who got an abortion a murderer. She simply believes abortion should be illegal except in extreme circumstances. And in the early 1990s, abortion seemed on the brink of easy accessibility due to the creation of RU 486, commonly referred to as the abortion pill.

I doubt my mother really understood how RU 486 worked. She received most of her information on the pill from talking points from *The 700 Club* and other conservative programs who waged a pro-life campaign against FDA approval of RU 486 by repeatedly

calling it the “abortion pill,” as though that was the name the pharmaceutical companies had chosen to patent it by. Sometimes the arguments against FDA approval of RU 486 focused briefly on the newness of the drug and possible negative side effects for women who use it, but the main argument, the one I remember discussed passionately and often, was that RU 486 would make it easier for a woman to have an abortion. RU 486 removed the trauma and danger of a surgical procedure and made terminating a pregnancy almost as easy as taking a pill. With this battle in the war over abortion looming on the horizon, my mother followed the 1992 presidential election closely. Now I realize those on the other side of the issue were probably watching the election just as closely.

Like good Christians, we watched the election results come in on *The 700 Club*. We joined Pat Robertson in prayer that God’s will be done as polls began to close and Clinton’s lead continued to grow. When it was announced that Clinton was projected to win the election by a wide margin, my mother began to cry. She sat on the couch in our living room, weeping softly for a loss she felt would result in the approval of RU 486 and more abortions. All my mother ever really wanted to be was a mother, and she felt that if women could experience how amazing motherhood is, then surely they would be happy with their decision.

RU 486 was approved by the FDA in 1996. Nearly two decades later, in 2014, women do have more options for contraceptives than ever and, through the Affordable Care Act’s (ACA) mandate, health insurance companies cover the cost of contraceptives for women. The results of an increase in contraceptive use and thereby a reduction in the number of abortions should please those on both sides of the abortion debate. In fact,

a study conducted by researchers at Washington University found that access to free contraceptives dramatically reduced the rate of abortions by a range of 62% to 78% compared to national averages simply by preventing unwanted pregnancies (“Access”). However, at least one company refused to comply with the mandate based on religious beliefs, a corporation with 567 arts and craft stores that owners still refer to as a “family business”: Hobby Lobby (Totenberg).

### **Hobby Lobby and the Plight of the True Woman’s Uterus**

Hobby Lobby, currently boasting more than 13,000 employees, is owned by founder David Green and his family (Totenberg). Known for playing Christian music in all 567 of their stores and closing on Sundays, Hobby Lobby’s Christian ownership attempted to persuade lawmakers to remove the mandate from the Affordable Care Act. The corporation began a series of lawsuits that resulted in the current Supreme Court case *Sebelius V Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc* (Totenberg). The Greens base their case against providing emergency contraception on what they believe is their right as Christian owners of a “family business [to] maintain the right to live out their sincere and deeply held religious convictions as guaranteed by the law and the Constitution” (*Sebelius*).

Hobby Lobby’s argument against the mandate focuses on four of the twenty contraceptives they would be required to provide for their employees on the company insurance plan which they claim act as abortifacients and therefore violate their religious, anti-abortion beliefs. Much as occurred during the RU 486 controversy of my adolescence, conservatives are rallying around Hobby Lobby, this time expanding the campaign to new media forms with a website dedicated solely to the Supreme Court case

and meme sharing on social media sites that indicates the user agrees with Hobby Lobby (*Sebelius*).

The Green family's contention regarding certain types of contraception is problematic. They are focused on two types of birth control methods—the emergency contraceptive pill and intra-uterine devices (IUDs)—both of which they refer to as “potentially life-terminating drugs and devices” (*Sebelius*). However, the emergency contraception pill prevents pregnancy by delaying ovulation or making it harder for sperm to swim to the egg, neither of which constitutes termination of a life by any medical or legal definition (Redden). Similarly, an IUD is inserted into a woman's uterus where it works either by effecting sperm so they cannot implant in an egg or by preventing ovulation, and the IUD's contraceptive effects can last anywhere from five to twelve years depending on the device. While an IUD is a long-term method of birth control, some forms of the IUD can prevent pregnancy if used within five days of engaging in unprotected sex. None of these forms of contraception effect a fertilized, implanted egg.

Days after the Supreme Court heard the oral arguments in the *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby, Inc.* case, *Mother Jones* reported that until three months after the Greens filed their lawsuit, the Hobby Lobby retirement plan held \$73 million dollars in mutual funds invested in companies that produce the same contraceptives the company did not want to provide for its employees due to religious reasons, along with other drugs that are actually used to induce abortions (Redden). Furthermore, Hobby Lobby's insurance covered Plan B and Ella, the so-called morning-after pills used to prevent fertilization of

an egg after unprotected sex, until 2012 when they decided to fight the ACA mandate. When these facts came to light, Hobby Lobby's argument began to look less like strict adherence to religious convictions and more like not wanting to provide women with access to emergency contraception just 'cause the government said they have to. After all, investing millions in companies that produce true abortifacients is a big oversight for a company who bases its entire case on the argument that it has always found ways to uphold their beliefs through their business (Redden). I'm not sure how much hypocrisy counts against someone in a court case, but if Hobby Lobby's case may not really be about adherence religious beliefs, then what is it about exactly?

The forms of birth control that Hobby Lobby targets in their lawsuit significantly reduce the burden of domesticity for women, removing an onus of True Womanhood. Giving women the ability to pick up an emergency contraceptive pill at the pharmacy free of charge through their insurance policies allows women more reproductive freedom than ever by giving them the ability to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy up to five days after a sexual encounter in which other birth control methods might have failed. The morning-after pill gives women the ability to prevent pregnancy *after* a sex act, whether performed in a committed relationship or "promiscuously," and this latter form of sex is particularly troubling to those who still subscribe to the ideologies of True Womanhood. Removing the burden of unplanned and unwanted pregnancy frees women to let go of their "purity" and have sex for enjoyment with fewer negative consequences. IUDs, in particular, allow women even more sexual freedom by providing long-lasting protection from unwanted pregnancies for several years without the worry of missed pills or broken

condoms. Women do not have to let God decide how many children they should have and when, nor do they have to remain pure until marriage lest they end up pregnant outside of wedlock. Women no longer have to submit to the will of men who may refuse to wear condoms or, worse, remove them during intercourse. And women can abstain from domesticity until they choose otherwise, or forever if they so desire. Thus, emergency contraception and IUDs help women regain ownership of their own bodies by helping to free them from the burden of childbearing. And without the tell-tale signs of pregnancy revealing an unmarried woman's promiscuous behavior, women do not have to worry about being shamed by unplanned pregnancies. What was once a scarlet letter for an unmarried woman can now be avoided altogether.

The battle over contraceptives is perhaps more important to women's rights than the battle over abortion fought by second-wave feminists. As bell hooks points out, legalization was the only thing that once stood in the way for middle class women who needed to terminate a pregnancy because they have the financial means to travel to a clinic if necessary (183-4). Despite the legalization of abortion with *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, access to abortion is limited in every state, with only 87% of counties in the United States having an abortion provider ("Access"). Because of the limited access to abortion, emergency and long-term contraceptives are crucial for women who do not want to be held prisoner in the cult of True Womanhood.

### **The Modern Cult of True Womanhood**

*No I don't believe in luck  
No I don't believe in circumstance no more  
Accidents never happen in a perfect world  
So I won't believe in luck*

*I saw you walking in the dark  
So I slipped behind your footsteps for a  
while  
Caught you turning round the block  
Fancy meeting in a smaller world, after all*

*Accidents never happen, could have planned  
it all  
Precognition in my ears  
Accidents never happen in a perfect world  
Complications disappear ~Blondie*

Through the “Modest is Hottest” campaign and purity balls, women are told that their bodies are public property, while Hobby Lobby’s fight to deny access to contraceptives through their company insurance policy limits the choices their female employees have through their policies while setting a dangerous precedent by conflating contraceptives with abortion. These three examples show how True Womanhood is still forced upon women, often young, impressionable women, by teaching them that the purpose of their bodies is to attract and pleasure men and grow babies. Telling women that their bodies must be covered and remain pure until they can gift their virginity to their husbands takes away much of their autonomy to make decisions about what they do with and how they present their own bodies, while removing access to certain types of contraceptives often forces them into a domestic role they may not want or be ready for.

Following the standards of piety, purity, domesticity, and submission defines a True Woman. A True Woman knows that her place is in the home and her role is subjugated to the men in her life. A True Woman is not sexual; rather she maintains the standards of modesty that society places upon her. A True Woman does not question or defy these standards, and to do so relegates a woman to Untrue Woman status. Untrue

Women are punished for their lack adherence to the standards placed upon them by society. Modern women who have rejected the standards of True Womanhood and reclaimed ownership of their bodies and been relegated to Untrue Woman status will be explored in the following chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### **Miley and Me: The Slut-Bashing Repercussions for Rejecting True Womanhood**

*From the sky, we look so organized and brave  
Walls that make up barricades and graves  
Daddy's little empire, built by hands and built by  
slaves  
From the sky we look so organized and brave  
In the heat, I saw you rising from the dirt  
Drunken tears and tugging at your skirt  
If only you could tell me then, what part of you got  
hurt  
In the heat, I saw you rising from the dirt ~Jason  
Isbell*

Back in 2012, my only biological sister was set to get married. For the bachelorette party, I rented a hotel room in downtown Tulsa and made reservations for a nice restaurant. The evening was interrupted when my sister's fiancé who was babysitting my nephew had to leave for an emergency. Before he left, he explained that his brother was inside, drunk. But weren't we all? Under the false assumption that he was as excited to join our families together as I was, I plopped down on the couch next to him and started making conversation. We were both equally drunk, and I don't remember our conversation exactly, but as we talked about the marriage between his brother and my sister we laughed and joked, until I said some cliché comment along the lines of "if your brother hurts my sister, then I will have to hurt him." Looking back, it seems like a stupid thing to say, but people say stupid things all the time, and I am no exception. But I guess he didn't take it as a joke.

I don't remember much of what happened next except fragments of images and feelings. I remember suddenly being on my back on the couch, with no idea how I got

that way, the weight of his body on top of me, his arm across my chest pushing me down, my neck bent at a sharp, painful angle against the arm of the couch. He was screaming in my face, what exactly I don't recall, but I do remember that at first I was laughing, and then I went from amused to terrified in a split second. Somehow my sister and my cousin managed to get him off of me and we ended up in the hallway where I remember being pushed through a closet door, and when I landed flat on my back on the hardwood floor, I came to the sober realization that I was very much in danger. I ran out onto the front porch where I could hear yelling inside as my sister and cousin tried to keep him in the house and away from me. I kept dialing the numbers 911 on my cell phone and then deleting them. I couldn't believe what was happening and couldn't convince myself that calling the police was the right thing to do. But when he rushed out of the front door, I hit the call button on my phone. He stood there screaming at me as my sister and cousin tried to push him back through the front door, and I explained to the 911 operator through hysterical tears what was going on.

The police arrived quickly and escorted him inside so they could ask me what happened. I explained the situation, and they asked me what I wanted to do about it. And then, not wanting to cause more trouble, I made a decision I will regret for the rest of my life: I told them I didn't want him arrested. I just wanted him away from me. They called his wife who came with their two young children to pick him up. I should have sent his sorry ass to jail. Shortly after the cops left, my sister's fiancé arrived. As I sat on the porch crying, he walked past and spat at me "What the fuck, Faith? Why did you attack my brother?" I was too shocked and upset to defend myself. I apologized to my sister

because I felt like I had caused so much trouble, and she told me not to be sorry, that I had done nothing wrong, and it was not my fault that he attacked me out of nowhere.

When I woke up the next morning nothing that happened the night before seemed real, until I realized how sore I was. My sister and cousin confessed how frightened they had been the night before, and my sister said my nephew heard the entire attack. I was devastated. And slowly the realization set in of how perilous the night before had been as a man so much larger and more powerful than me had violently tossed me around like a rag doll. I was supposed to visit my dad that day before returning home to Fort Smith, but I didn't know what to say after what had happened the previous night. I could not hide my emotions. I called my boyfriend on the way to my dad's house, and as I sat in a parking lot I wept and told him what happened. He was upset, understandably so, and did his best to comfort me. When I arrived at my dad's house, he could tell immediately that something was wrong. He had no idea how bad it was, but as I told him and my step-mother the story, I watched the anger growing in his face. They both told me that it wasn't my fault, and he said he needed to have a conversation with my sister's fiancé and his father and brother because I deserved an apology, and they needed to understand that attacking a woman is never acceptable in our family.

I went back to Fort Smith that night, and my father went to try to talk to his future son-in-law, who apparently didn't want to talk about it. The more my father was ignored, the more upset he became, and tensions escalated until a rift developed between my father and my sister that has not mended to this day. It was clear that the fiancé's family blamed me for what happened. They believed I got what I deserved. Being blamed for

being attacked hurt more than the attack itself. Members of my own family told me that I shouldn't have been so drunk, and I should learn how to keep my mouth shut. I didn't want to go to my sister's wedding, but she begged me. Her fiancé sent me an apology that felt more than just a little manipulative, but I caved. I didn't want to lose my relationship with my sister. And I felt so guilty because everyone kept telling me in their own subtle ways how it was my fault.

I had to be in the wedding party with an entire family of people who hated me, and I didn't really understand why. His siblings did not show up for the wedding rehearsal, and the rehearsal dinner was canceled. They never spoke to me and refused to take pictures together, so all of my sister's wedding photos taken after the ceremony are either his family or hers. I wondered how they could be so dismissive of another person's feelings, and then I realized it was because they thought of me as bar trash. They knew so little about me other than what I looked like and that I worked in a bar, lived with my boyfriend, and was still childless at 32. They dismissed my feelings, my very humanity, based on those few things. I didn't deserve compassion or respect. I did not subscribe to the ideologies of True Womanhood.

On August 10, 2012, a few months after the horrific post-bachelorette party incident, I worked my last shift as a bartender. After being immersed in a culture of debauchery and sexuality for three years, I hung up my bar key, packed all my belongings, and moved 500 miles away from my hometown to go to graduate school. I nervously prepared for my first day, worried that I would not fit in. Should I cover up my tattoos? Is my hair too blond? Will I be able to keep my conversation appropriate for the

classroom, or will my years of working in an “anything goes” environment render me incapable of blending in to what I would soon learn was called an academic discourse community? Could I rid myself of the distinguishing markers that labeled me as “bar trash” and made me so easily dismissed by my sister’s in-laws?

From the first day, I felt as though the distance between “Faith the bartender” and “Faith the graduate student” far exceeded the 500-mile physical distance between my former life and my current one. When my colleagues inquired about my experiences as a bartender, my stories felt more like novelty than useful academic knowledge, rendering me an oddity and an outsider. As I was confronted with my own markedness, I became more aware of the ways that all women are marked in our culture by their appearance and perceived sexuality.

I brought up slut-bashing one evening in one of my grad school classes, and to my surprise no one was familiar with the term I had seen thrown around in multiple forums online. Apparently academic feminism and popular feminism were not yet on the same page.

The distance between the two became even more obvious in my final semester in a discussion that took place in a film studies course. The film under discussion was *Halloween* (1978), and we were focused on the first scene in the movie in which the young Michael Myers stabs his topless teenage sister to death after he sees her have sexual intercourse with a teen boy. In the scene Michael appears to be punishing his sister for having sex.

I went to class that day prepared to discuss the common theme in 80’s slasher

films of punishing promiscuous women through long, often torturous, violent deaths. Instead, the discussion that followed was full of smirks and comments about how Michael's sister "should have had more respect for herself" and "gave 'it' up too easily" and "obviously that guy didn't care about her, he left as soon as he was finished." I was taken aback by the pervasive attitude in the room that she got what was coming to her, the little slut. So I spoke up: "maybe she just wanted get laid, too. Or maybe he had someplace to be. Or he left because her parents were about to come home." A classmate chimed in, echoing my sentiments, and the two of us tried to defend a fictional teenage girl from the onslaught of slut-bashing and victim-blaming in our graduate course. But our rebuttals were rebuffed as reading too much into the story. Apparently, the only appropriate assumption about a young, sexually active woman is that she devalues herself and makes poor decisions, and because of this, what happened to her, much like what happened to me on that terrible night, was exactly what she deserved.

Young women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century face the same slut-bashing and victim-blaming criticisms that Michael Myers' sister received from my colleagues that day. Second-wave feminists and the counter-culture of the sixties brought about a sexual revolution for women, complete with birth control to allow them to have sex with fewer consequences, but this newfound sexual freedom came with a price. According to feminist media analyst Andrea Press, women and teenage girls have been given "a cultural freedom" to engage in sexual activity, but that does not "translate into the social freedom to be a girl who had sex" (108). Instead, women are often punished for promiscuous behavior, real or perceived, through different methods of bullying and harassment such as being called

names like “slut,” “skank,” and “whore,” or being objectified and stereotyped for the clothing they wear, all of which falls under the category of slut-bashing. Slut-bashing is how society punishes women for rejecting True Womanhood, particularly the elements of piety and purity. In this chapter, I will discuss slut-bashing through the example of Miley Cyrus, a pop singer who has rejected True Womanhood and faced criticism for her choices.

### **Hannah Montana is Dead**

*I'm not going to do Hannah Montana, but I can give you an update. She was murdered.  
~Miley Cyrus*

The television program *Hannah Montana* debuted on the Disney Channel in 2006 when Miley Cyrus was only thirteen-years-old. In the show, Cyrus’ character Miley Stewart leads a double life: typical, although obviously privileged, teen girl by day and pop superstar Hannah Montana by night. In the show, Miley does not want anyone to know that she is Hannah Montana for fear that her friends will treat her differently, so she disguises herself onstage by wearing a blonde wig over her brunette hair and wearing ultra-feminine clothes in girly colors—pink, purple, turquoise, and red—with lots of sequins, shiny fabrics, and big accessories, whereas Miley dresses much more subdued in neutral colors and jeans. The show became a major hit for the Disney channel with ninety-nine episodes in four seasons and was cross-promoted with movies, albums, and other merchandise surrounding the franchise (Blue). The show also propelled Miley Cyrus into fame, a lifestyle some might argue she was bred for with her father being Billy Ray Cyrus—who also plays her father on *Hannah Montana*—and her godmother the

legendary Dolly Parton (Wootton). In 2010 alone, Cyrus earned \$48 million primarily from her role as Hannah Montana (Greenburg). *Hannah Montana* made Cyrus “the most popular sitcom star ever” (Weinman 73).

Cyrus’ character Miley and her alter ego Hannah are palatable for young girls and their parents because of the ways in which they demonstrate three of the ideologies of True Womanhood: purity, domesticity, and submission. (The omission of overt piety might be due to the secular Disney Channel not wanting to alienate viewers of different faiths.) For example, although Miley is interested in boys, her discussions and experiences on the show are limited to kissing and school girl crushes, never sex, so her purity is never questioned. Likewise, although Hannah maintains her pop superstar status, Miley is often shown in her home with her brother and widower father performing menial tasks like any other teenager, showing her domesticity through her typical family life. Finally, Miley’s father is also her manager, so despite her extraordinary success as Hannah she allows him to make many of the decisions in her career and life, embracing the submissive role of True Womanhood. Miley and Hannah are also both submissive to acceptable female stereotypes. Miley is more casual in her dress than Hannah, but her appearance is clearly feminine with long, flowing hair, while Hannah is the epitome of girlie, with her blonde wig and massive closet filled with sequined clothes and fancy shoes. Both Hannah’s and Miley’s wardrobes would fit in with the “Modest is Hottest” group, so there is a nod to piety.

Viewers watched Miley Cyrus and her character grow up for five years. But in 2011, Cyrus hung up her blonde wig and retired the Hannah Montana character with

hopes of becoming a superstar in her own right, and her transformation has shocked everyone.

The change in Cyrus could be seen as early as August 2012, when she had her long hair chopped off into a short, edgy pixy cut. She posted a picture of the haircut on Twitter with the caption “[n]ever felt more me in my whole life” (“Miley Cyrus Haircut”). Many of the responses she received on Twitter were negative, but Cyrus seemed unfazed. The haircut was only the beginning. Her performance at the August 2013 MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) one year later was a revolt against True Womanhood, and the repercussions she faced in the media are nothing short of slut-bashing.

Cyrus began the performance wearing a revealing teddy bear leotard and white platform tennis shoes, and when Cyrus was joined onstage with singer Robin Thicke, she stripped down to an itchy-bitsy nude bikini. With her tongue sticking out in a suggestive manner, Cyrus danced around Thicke with a foam finger, touching herself while grinding on Thicke and “twerking,” a sexually provocative dance that is popular within hip hop culture.<sup>2</sup> Thicke was on the VMAs performing his song “Blurred Lines.” The video for this song features young women wearing only nude thong panties and white tennis shoes frolicking around in a sexually suggestive manner, a fact that the media either ignored or were ignorant of. Immediately after the performance, social media users on sites such as Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook were calling Cyrus a slut, a skank, and white trash, and the news media were questioning what kind of example Miley Cyrus was setting for young

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<sup>2</sup> Critics have complained that Cyrus’ performance was racist in nature. However, since race is not the topic of this thesis it is not addressed within this text.

fans of her former alter ego Hannah Montana. Thicke's role in the performance was rarely mentioned, nor was the provocative video for his song. Men can be sexual without their manhood being challenged; in fact it is expected of them. However, women are not afforded this luxury.

Cyrus' performance and the response that followed are indicative of the current precarious nature of female sexuality as second wave feminism gave women increased freedom to explore their sexuality due to advancements in contraceptive science and the legalization of abortion, but not "the social freedom to be the girl who had sex" due to cultural pressures to adhere to True Womanhood (Press 108). Women are the objects of heterosexual male desire, but once a woman has sex her purity is no longer intact and her value in the cult of True Womanhood is greatly depleted. Cyrus' transformation from Hannah Montana to her current public persona represents her shift away from the cult of True Womanhood that Hannah embodied. The response to the performance on social media was overwhelming, sparking a record breaking 300,000 tweets per minute, some positive but most critical of Cyrus and her performance (Monde). Celebrities were even taking shots at her online. Comedian Bill Maher compared her performance to going to a strip club, while Brooke Shields, who played Miley Stewart's mother on *Hannah Montana*, tweeted her disapproval of her television daughter (Monde). The performance also received 161 complaints to the Federal Communications Commission, such as that she "groped a woman's posterior" and she "[m]ade multiple very indecent sexual poses and gestures, from grabbing her crotch, using a foam finger like a dildo and licking the butt of a stuffed bear" (Wenner). The Parent's Television Council called the performance

“unacceptable” and wondered “[h]ow is this image of former child star Miley Cyrus appropriate for 14-year-olds” (Monde). But Cyrus’ target audience for her performance wasn’t 14-year-olds. In fact, the purpose of her performance that evening was to distance herself as much as possible from her image as a preteen and teen idol. And her performance wasn’t meant to be sexy, as she confessed in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine days later that she knew she looked ridiculous, and that was the point (Wenner 43).

But most people appeared to miss the point in their eagerness to engage in slut-bashing. Colorful, hateful adjectives like “slutty” and “trashy” are littered throughout the comment sections on articles about the performance. One commenter wrote, “Her parents must be so embarrassed [and] if not they should be ashamed of themselves. There are hookers with more class than their Miley” (Monde). Another response stated “[a]nyone who's seen a female celebrity knows that the body is part of a woman's repertoire, but Miley is taking that way too far! She has crossed the line into sluttiness” (ABC News). Another commenter admonished Cyrus’s performance as “a vulgar and desperate attempt to change [her] persona from Hannah to something else” (ABC News), and another went so far as to challenge Cyrus’s right to womanhood: “Miley needs to learn that being a real woman, doesn't mean being slutty, but should mean having some class” (ABC News). One commenter even used Cyrus’s performance as an opportunity to remind his daughters of their responsibilities to True Womanhood and their perceived value as women, stating “[i]t was an opportunity for me to talk to my teenage girls. We talked about how important it is to protect your name and reputation. Once you've lost

that, then you don't have anything” (ABC News). Clearly many viewers were taken off guard by her performance and resorted to bullying as a way to rationalize what they saw as simply the actions of a slut rather than a well-executed performance meant to parody Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” video, which will be discussed in chapter 5. Women are often bullied and harassed if they are perceived as too sexually aggressive, having too many sexual partners, or dressing immodestly (Tanenbaum 311). Those women who do not adhere to the standards of piety, purity, domesticity, and submission set by the cult of True Womanhood are called “sluts.” In Cyrus’s performance, she was dressed provocatively and acting sexually aggressive, which led to slut-bashing.

Cyrus’s actions, despite the perception of many, are not that unusual for MTV. The channel often shows videos with women wearing little to nothing dancing and acting sexual. Meredith Levande documented what she sees as an increasing infusion of pornography within the music industry as a result of media conglomeration. Levande references music videos that contain a variety of sexualized images, including dancers grinding on one another, female pop artists touching themselves, and young women kissing. Sex is pervasive and accepted in music videos, but not, apparently, by a young woman who was once such a shining example of True Womanhood. Cyrus’s fans and foes alike expected her to remain pure and submissive, acting and dressing in a manner at least reminiscent of her Hannah Montana persona as a representative of the Disney franchise (Weinman 74). But Cyrus no longer wanted to submit to Disney, so she rejected the Hannah Montana persona in favor of a more liberated, sexual identity that at different times may be sexy, androgynous, or a parody of what men find sexy.

In fact, Cyrus proudly admits to rebelling against, or at least complicating, accepted definitions of sexiness in her VMA performance: “If I was trying to be sexy, I could have been sexy” (Eells 43). Instead, Cyrus chose to parody female sexuality in the most over-the-top way. Her costumes at the VMA performance, although revealing, were not sexy. The teddy bear leotard looked silly and childish, like a Halloween costume, and the nude bikini was ill fitting and cut into her buttocks giving her body a misshapen appearance. Through exposing her body she shirked the constraints of piety and purity in True Womanhood, but because her costumes were not sexy and she showed her body in a way that is not attractive than men, she also was not submitting to the desires of men to see the female body in a sexual way.

According to the Cult of True Womanhood, men are more sexually aggressive, and women are expected to guard their purity as their most valuable asset (Welter 154). Cyrus’s sexually aggressive actions on stage further violated the True Womanhood standards of purity and piety while also reflecting her lack of submission because she was the one touching, groping, and grinding on her fellow performers.

Cyrus’s sexualized VMA performance defied the standards of purity, piety, and submission that her Hannah Montana character had adhered to on the Disney Channel, which made it more shocking than if she had not been Hannah for so long. The performance represented the antithesis of Hannah Montana: sexual, aggressive, and geared toward grown-ups rather than the young girls who followed the television show and frequented her concerts before. But the decidedly unsexy nature of her performance also defied MTV’s standards of female sexuality because her purpose, as she stated in the

*Rolling Stone* interview, was to be silly and not sexy (Eells 43). Her rejection of both the cult of True Womanhood and acceptable ways that women can express their sexuality outside of the cult represents a positive view of sexuality in which Cyrus is in charge of her own body and only she decides how much of it to expose and when she wants to make it sexy and attractive or silly and ridiculous. Cyrus's new persona represents an important and necessary step in desexualizing women's bodies because both telling women to cover up and only allowing women to expose parts of their body in a manner that is attractive to men removes female agency by taking away their right to own, display, and use their bodies any way they choose.

Cyrus has rejected the constraints placed on her by True Womanhood and become her own person, a young woman who is comfortable in her own body and who does not feel the need to be attractive or sexy, characteristics not commonly found among female pop stars. But she does not revert to modesty as a rejection of sex appeal, instead opting to portray herself as an unsexy parody of sexy. Her message is important yet missed by many: the female body is not inherently sexual. The female body can be sexy in certain situations, as Cyrus is in her 2013 video for "Wrecking Ball" in which she is nude throughout, riding on a wrecking ball and licking a hammer, and that sexuality can be empowering: Cyrus earned and estimated \$76.5 million in 2013. But women should be allowed to enjoy their bodies without feeling like sexual objects—"object" being the optimal word here, not the "subject" of her own sexual life. Miley Cyrus has remade herself into an active subject of her own sexual life. Until our society desexualizes the female body in a legitimate way rather than simply covering it up, women's bodies will

remain public property, and those who do not meet certain standards of modesty and appropriate behavior will be slut-bashed into submission.

### **Measuring Skirts and Morality: Policing Young Women's Bodies**

The slut-bashing that happened to Cyrus is indicative of a systemic problem young women face daily, and they are fighting back in a similar but subdued fashion. On May 10, 2014, a seventeen-year-old woman named Clare was kicked out of her home school prom by organizers because they said her dress was too short, and she was dressing “provocatively” (WGN Web Desk). A few days later, she wrote about her experience in a blog post titled “Fuck the Patriarchy.” According to Clare, the only dress code stipulation was that her dress be longer than the reach of her finger tips when standing up, and she documented in a photograph that her dress met that guideline. But at a height of 5’9,” her legs are longer than the average woman’s. Prom organizers pulled Clare aside and told her that her dress was too short and that male chaperones had complained that she might “cause the young men at the prom to think impure thoughts” (Haettinger). Because Clare did not meet the True Womanhood standards of purity and piety enforced by organizers of the prom, she was forced to leave. What should have been a night for making good memories turned into a case of slut-bashing.

Clare’s situation is not an anomaly. In 2014, school authorities sent eighteen-year-old Violet home on the final day of her senior year for wearing a dress they said was half an inch too short, a dress Violet says she had worn to school at least five times previously with no problems (Gates). Violet’s mother wore the offending dress to her daughter’s graduation a few days later to protest the school’s slut-bashing. Violet was

shamed and humiliated for not being pure, pious, and submissive—a True Woman.

High school students are not the only ones who are affected by slut-bashing dress codes. Signs posted of an “In-Building Dress Code” at the University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing were removed in less than twenty-four hours after students complained that they were discriminatory. The signs advised students: “Revealing clothing MUST NOT be worn while in the School of Nursing Building. It distracts from the learning environment” (Kingkade). Examples of “revealing” clothing were listed: “midriff-baring shirts, short-shorts, short skirts, low-rise pants, low-cut shirts that reveal cleavage” (Kingkade). All of these are descriptions of women’s clothing, while not a single one references male fashion. The message is clear: the bodies of female nursing students of UT Austin are distractions to male students if they do not adhere to the standards of purity and piety established by True Womanhood.

### **Dress Codes, Body Shaming, and Slut-Bashing: Breaking Free from the Cult**

*I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation  
You're living in the past, it's a new  
generation  
A girl can do what she wants to do and  
that's what I'm gonna do*

*An' I don't give a damn 'bout my bad  
reputation  
Oh no, not me*

*An' I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation  
Never said I wanted to improve my station  
An' I'm only doin' good when I'm havin' fun  
An' I don't have to please no one*

*An' I don't give a damn 'bout my bad  
reputation  
Oh no, not me, oh no, not me ~Joan Jett*

The stories of Cyrus, Clare, Violet, and the female nursing students at UT Austin are familiar to mine and those of many other women. We are held up to arbitrary standards of modesty, our body parts sexualized to the point where they are considered “distractions” for men. Our legs and torsos and shoulders and chests are reduced to sexual objects that must be covered lest we lead men to think impure thoughts. We are fragmented, broken down into mere parts, and our coverings for those parts are measured for their modesty. Our minds, our intelligence, and our creativity take a secondary role, to be respected only once we embody the standards of True Womanhood. But women can never be equal to men as long as they are forced to take a submissive role, covering their bodies in shame and embarrassment or dressing them only for male enjoyment and arousal. Women must reject the standards imposed upon them by True Womanhood and dress their bodies any damn way they choose. We have to stop policing women’s bodies and conflating their bodies with their morality and value. And we have to stop slut-bashing women if women want to break free of the cult.

## CHAPTER IV

### The “Impropriety” of the Untrue Woman: Victim-Blaming

*I slipped my hand under her skirt  
I said don't worry, it's not gonna hurt  
Oh, my reputation's kinda clouded with dirt  
That's why you sleep with one eye open  
But that's the price you pay ~ Florence and  
the Machine*

About a month before I quit my job at Roosters, a popular bar in Fort Smith, Arkansas, I heard on the news that a woman had been raped in the downtown area where I worked, a few blocks that was filled with white-collar workers by day and bar-hoppers after dark. Her name is Nicole. The bar’s security camera shows Nicole leaving at closing time, and a strange man following a few feet behind her. Several minutes later a bouncer from another local bar, Carlos found the man raping Nicole, and when the rapist took off running, Carlos chased after him. The local police caught up with the rapist, and Carlos was recognized for his bravery the following month by the local police department.

While the capture of the rapist might give this story the appearance of a happy ending in which justice was served and normalcy restored, this was not the case for the victim. Because the bar community in Fort Smith was so small, most everyone who knew Nicole was well aware that she was the rape victim. I approached my coworker Sally, wanting to vent my frustration and sadness about the situation. When I asked her if she had heard about what happened to Nicole, Sally glibly responded “oh yeah, I heard about it. But I’m not surprised. She’s always out getting drunk and talking to men and getting them to buy her drinks and dancing with them. What did she think was going to happen?” Shocked by Sally’s lack of empathy and compassion, and not willing to argue with her at

the beginning of a Friday night shift, I turned and walked away. But her statement stuck with me, as did Nicole's absence from the bar every shift I worked after her attack. I've heard that her rapist cut her on the face, and I wonder how much of her external and internal scars are still visible. Is she forever marked in our small, self-righteous city?

### **Rape Myths in the Media: The Guilt of the Untrue Woman**

*Now this this is one of them occasions  
Where the homies not doin' it right  
I mean he found him a ho he like  
But you can't make a ho a housewife  
And when it all boils down you gonna find in  
the end  
A bitch is a bitch, but a dog is a man's best  
friend  
So what you found you a ho you like  
But you can't make a ho a housewife ~Dr.  
Dre*

As exemplified by Nicole's situation, slut-bashing is not the only repercussion for women who choose to reject the standards of True Womanhood. The unconscious belief that a woman's value is based on her adherence to True Womanhood leads to victim-blaming and a culture of rape within the United States. Brian Ott and Robert Mack define culture as "the collection of artifacts, practices, and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular historical moment, supported by symbolic systems and directed by ideology" (126). Myths create and reinforce the dominant ideology of a culture (Ott and Mack 130). The rape culture in the United States is socially constructed through victim-blaming and slut-bashing practices perpetuated by rape myths that stem from perceived violations of True Womanhood.

Martha Burt defines rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about

rape, rape victims, and rapists...creating a hostile environment for rape victims,” with common rape myths being “‘only bad girls get raped’; ‘women ask for it’; ‘women ‘cry rape’ when they’ve been jilted or have something to cover up’” (217). Each of these myths stem from the belief that a True Woman would not put herself into the position to be raped.

The first myth, “only bad girls get raped,” derives from the belief that a True Woman upholds the highest standards of piety and purity and therefore would not put herself in the position to be raped. A “good girl” would never wear a short skirt, get drunk with her friends, or be alone with a man who is not her husband, father, or brother. Therefore, women who are raped were not good guardians of their virtue. Women who “ask for it” are denied True Womanhood through their impiety, impurity, and lack of submission by dressing immodestly, dancing provocatively, or otherwise “leading a man on” by kissing him or making other physical contact and then denying him sex. These women are often slut-bashed as “cock-teases,” implying they intentionally excite men and then deny them sex in a display of power and control. Women who “cry rape” are perceived as jilted or regretful lovers who are upset because they gave up their purity and piety for the wrong person rather than holding out for domesticity and marriage, and therefore they are no longer allowed in the cult of True Womanhood.

When a woman is sexually assaulted, she is often questioned about what she was wearing or how much she had to drink or how friendly she was to her attacker. Male victims of violence or sexual assault are not routinely questioned about what they did to provoke their attacker or whether or not they fought back sufficiently, yet “getting raped

always elicits an investigation into the ways in which a victim might ultimately have been responsible for what happened” (Mardorossian 756). Stabbing victims are never asked if the stabbing was consensual; a gunshot victim is never accused of not doing enough to prevent getting shot. A rape victim is an accuser until she can prove otherwise, because a rape accuser is no longer considered a True Woman.

The ways the news media frames stories about rape perpetuates rape myths, victim blaming, and slut-bashing, as can be seen in a rape case involving teenagers from Steubenville, Ohio that received national attention in 2013.

In August 2012, a sixteen-year-old girl in Steubenville, Ohio was raped by Trent Mays (17) and Ma’Lik Richmond (16) multiple times at different locations over the course of one night. Mays also took a nude photo of her with his cell phone and sent it via text messaging to some friends. Friends of the teens saw the ongoing sexual assault happen throughout the night, but no one tried to stop the assault or contact police. Instead, several of them took pictures of the young woman in a variety of compromising positions and proceeded to send them to each other through text messages and post them on social networking sites (Carter and Harlow). By attacking her character and perpetuating rape myths, coverage of the news story portrayed the victim as a violator of True Womanhood.

The Fox News Insider blog posted an opinion piece titled “Steubenville, Ohio Rape Case: Did Alleged Victim Give Consent?” citing testimony from the victim’s friend stating that she had drank “a half a bottle of vodka” the night of the rape, was “seen sick and stumbling around,” and appeared to be more intoxicated than they had ever seen her

before. By emphasizing details that place the victim in a negative light, the article enlists the rape myth that “good girls don’t get raped” because good girls don’t get drunk at parties. This myth is reinforced in the title of the article—“Did Alleged Victim Give Consent”—which calls the victim’s piety and purity into question by implying that she might have had consensual sex with her rapists, something a True Woman would never do (Fox News Insider). Questioning whether the sex was consensual also implies the victim is merely “cry[ing] rape” because she regrets giving up her purity and piety by having promiscuous sex.

In coverage of the victim’s testimony by ABC and CNN, rape myths are again perpetuated with the focus on the victim’s testimony that she was intoxicated that night and could not remember what happened (NG; Carter and Harlow). Both articles question whether or not she was sober enough to consent to sex and mention the testimony of the victim’s friends who claimed that she was known to drink heavily and tell lies (NG; Carter and Harlow). Like Fox News Insider, both ABC and CNN are questioning the victim’s purity and piety through the myth that “only bad girls get raped” by framing the victim as a liar and a drunk who might only be “crying rape” because she regrets giving up her purity and her status as a True Woman.

The media also framed the victim as the woman who was “ask[ing] for it.” One article mentions testimony that at one point she was seen “close to Richmond,” while another cites a witness who testified that the victim left a party holding hands with Mays (NG; Carter and Harlow). In cases of rape people tend to believe that “consent is either granted or withheld once and for all,” so any consensual physical contact between victim

and perpetrator is often seen as consent (Hengehold 193). This implication of consent is reinforced through the “mental one-drop rule” that because the victim exhibited a few signs of interest in the rapists, holding hands and standing close, she must have also consented to sex (Brekhus 516). By framing the victim in this way, her piety and purity are once again called into question as she is portrayed as wanting to have sex with her attackers.

The Steubenville rape victim knew her rapists, which is common in most cases. The USBJS states that 78% of sexual violence incidences were perpetrated by someone the victim knew, yet only 35% of all acts of sexual violence are reported to the police. The lack of rape reporting is systemic of a culture of rape that forces victims to thoroughly prove their victimhood beyond a shadow of a doubt in a society that questions their adherence to True Womanhood. Furthermore, the ways in which rape victims are treated with slut-bashing and victim-blaming prevents women from coming forward when they are assaulted for fear of ruining their reputations as True Women. The rise of social media has opened up a new platform for bullying and harassment that has resulted in an increase in slut-bashing, victim-blaming, and the perpetuation of rape myths.

An article in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, “Sexting, Shame and Suicide: A Shocking Tale of Sexual Assault in the Digital Age,” discusses the recent trend of teenagers photographing and videotaping themselves sexually assaulting girls and then distributing what amounts to child pornography (Burleigh). The teen girls involved are disgraced and bullied, kicked out of the cult of True Womanhood because their piety and purity are no longer intact. Unfortunately, rather than live with a reputation as an Untrue Woman,

some of these teenage victims turn to suicide. Fifteen-year-old Audrie Pott killed herself just days after she was sexually assaulted at a party while passed out from drinking too much. Three teenage boys she knew from school removed her clothing while she was passed out, wrote all over her body with permanent marker, and took pictures of her nude body while they digital penetrated her. The pictures were circulated among her classmates, and, rather than live with the shame of losing her status as a True Woman, she hanged herself from the showerhead in her bathroom.

In another case, Rehtaeh Parsons, a seventeen-year-old Nova Scotia girl, committed suicide after she was gang raped by four teenage boys at a party who posted a picture they took of the assault online (Burleigh). After two years of bullying, Rehtaeh's mother said her daughter could not take it anymore and hanged herself in the bathroom of their home. Rehtaeh, like Audrie, was disgraced by her lack of purity and piety and her exclusion from the cult of True Womanhood. Being labeled by their communities as "sluts" and "whores" was too much for these young women, and they felt like they would never be able to escape their bad reputations and be allowed to rejoin the Cult. Their exclusion from the Cult and the pain of being bullied for their lack of piety and purity drove these young women to make a terrible decision that they could not undo: suicide.

### **Soiled Reputations and Shattered Lives: Cast out of the Cult**

*Was she asking for it?  
Was she asking nice?  
Yeah, she was asking for it  
Did she ask you twice? ~Hole*

Audrie's and Rehtaeh's stories, as well as the notorious Steubenville case, represent the extreme consequences of the latest method for punishing women who lose

their True Womanhood. Cameras with built-in phones and access to social media platforms allow for the destruction of a woman's reputation simply by snapping a photo, clicking an icon, and uploading an image for all the world to see. Once an image of a sexual assault is uploaded, it can remain in the cyber-world forever, allowing a woman to be revictimized repeatedly and publicly, her purity and piety forever tainted, never again allowed membership into the cult of True Womanhood.

The revictimization of rape victims in the news media through the construction of rape myths based on a victim's lack of adherence to the ideologies of True Womanhood, coupled with the growing problem of victim-blaming and slut-bashing based on those same ideologies, has led to a rape culture in the United States in which victims are afraid to report assault and face the consequences for being publicly kicked out of The Cult.

The rapists who assaulted Audrie, Rehtaeh, and the Steubenville victim had already denied them True Womanhood status. In each case, the young women were assaulted because they were drunk at parties, Audrie was seen kissing boys at the party and the Steubenville victim was seen holding hands with one of her attackers, so they were not "good girls" who deserved respect. Because of the "mental one-drop rule" that is often used to establish a woman's purity, these victims were deemed Untrue Women, bad girls who were asking for it (Brekhus 516). Rape is used to punish women who do not adhere to the standards of True Womanhood.

Robin Thicke's song "Blurred Lines" is an example of a pop culture text emphasizing the punishment of Untrue Women who do not fit into the constraints placed upon them by The Cult by taking their purity and "good girl" status. As women

increasingly defy True Womanhood, some men are responding to this new female liberation in the form of protest rhetoric, a topic that will be discussed in the next chapter through a CDA of Robin Thicke's song "Blurred Lines."

## CHAPTER V

### **My Body, My Self: Rejecting the Constraints of True Womanhood**

*Take this pink ribbon off my eyes  
I'm exposed and it's no big surprise  
Don't you think I know exactly where I  
stand?  
This world is forcing me to hold your hand*

*'Cause I'm just a girl  
Little ol' me  
Well, don't let me out of your sight  
Oh, I'm just a girl.  
All pretty and petite  
So don't let me have any rights.  
Oh, I've had it up to here.*

*The moment that I step outside  
So many reasons for me to run and hide  
I can't do the little things I hold so dear  
It's all those little things that I fear*

*Cause I'm just a girl ~Gwen Stefani*

When I worked at Roosters, getting hit on was the norm. Sometimes guys would even ask me how often I got hit on as a way to hit on me. And there were women who hit on me, too, and married couples. At times, these flirtations were polite and respectful; after all, there is nothing wrong with finding a person attractive and wanting to get to know him or her better. But many of these flirtations were simply blatant solicitations for sex. Sometimes it wasn't so much what people said as what they did. While working in the bar, I've felt a stranger's hand on my ass many times and had my breasts groped by drunken women. I've even had my hand licked. My typical work outfit often consisted of short-shorts or a skirt with a low-cut shirt and maybe some knee socks or fishnets. When my boyfriend told people that I worked in a bar, many would ask why he would allow me

to work there.

One night as I was walking to my car after work, a guy approached me in the parking lot. I unlocked my car door and swung the door open right as he caught up with me.

“Hey, I remember you. Where you going?”

He had been in Roosters that night and ordered drinks from me.

“I’m going home to get in bed with my boyfriend” I replied and quickly plopped down in the car seat.

Before I could grab the car door and shut it, he stepped into the opening. “I don’t think a fine-ass girl like you should be going home. I’m from Dallas, we don’t have fine-ass girls like you there” he said as he pulled a roll of cash out of his pocket.

I couldn’t shut the door, he was standing in the way. I usually had a bouncer walk me to my car every night, but that night Bingo and I had parted ways when he headed for the dumpster. What the fuck was I thinking, I knew the rule was there for a reason. So I did the only thing I could think of, I looked the son-of-a-bitch in the face and I yelled as loud and angry as I could: “You better get the fuck away from my fucking car before I call my fucking bouncer over here and he fucks your ass up!”

Startled, he took a step back and said “Oh no, no, no, don’t do that” as I slammed the car door shut and locked it. I breathed a sigh of relief and looked up to see Bingo in the parking lot across the street. When our eyes met, he made a motion with his fingers, pointing from his eyes to me and back again, letting me know he was watching. I never walked to my car alone again.

What happened in the parking lot that night, and all of the other inappropriate touching, comments, and behaviors I described previously, are all indicative of the pervasive attitudes about women who work in bars that I faced on a daily basis during the three years I worked at Roosters. I was seen as immodest and not submissive, because I used my sexuality to earn money by dressing provocatively. I willingly refused the constraints of True Womanhood and ignored the pressure to remain pious, pure, and submissive, choosing instead to use, in part, my appearance to make money.

All of the inappropriate touches and the incident with the man in the parking lot are repercussions for my refusal to join the cult of True Womanhood. People viewed my body as public property for them to touch because it was “on display.” The man in the parking lot tried to reclaim dominance over me because I had used my sexuality to earn tips from him that night. People asked my boyfriend why he would “let me” work in a bar because they assumed he would feel threatened that I was empowered by my sexuality. My sexual power was perceived as a threat, and because of this I was punished for being an Untrue Woman through inappropriate touching and other behaviors as men tried to suppress my power and reclaim dominance over me.

### **Robin Thicke is a Dick: Punishing the Untrue Woman**

In March 2013, singer Robin Thicke released the song “Blurred Lines” which he co-wrote with producer Pharrell Williams and rapper TI along with two versions of the video: one in which the female dancers/models were barely clothed that was released for television play and one in which the same women were wearing significantly less clothing. The song became a summertime hit, spending a record breaking 16 weeks at the

Number One spot on Billboards Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart and selling 5.8 million downloads in the first 26 weeks after its release (Ramirez). As of June, 2014, the official unrated version of the video has been viewed over 34 million times on Youtube (Thicke). Thicke has performed the song live on multiple award shows, including the highly sexualized and controversial live performance with Miley Cyrus at the MTV Video Music Awards that was discussed in chapter three. The lyrics of “Blurred Lines” and the accompanying video encourage punishing women who reject the ideologies of True Womanhood by forcing their submission through sexual assault.

### **Blurring the Lines of Consent: Rape and the Reclamation of Male Dominance**

*You hit me once, I hit you back  
You gave a kick, I gave a slap  
You smashed a plate over my head  
Then I set fire to our bed ~Florence and the  
Machine*

In the pre-chorus to the song, Thicke describes a woman who does not meet the standards of True Womanhood:

Ok now he was close, tried to domesticate you

But you're an animal, baby it's in your nature

Just let me liberate you

Hey, hey, hey

You don't need no papers

Hey, hey, hey

That man is not your maker (“Robin” lines 12-18).

The woman denied a previous attempt by a man to enforce domesticity upon her, and

Thicke blames her rejection of domesticity on her animalistic nature, a reference to her sexuality and lack of purity (“Robin” line 14). The woman is told she does not need “papers” and “that man is not [her] maker,” a reference to marriage and God, implying premarital sex and a lack of purity and piety (“Robin” lines 16, 18). Thicke is describing an Untrue Woman—one who is not pure, pious, domestic, and submissive—and he expresses his intentions to punish her for not living up to the standards of True Womanhood in the chorus:

And that’s why I’m gon’ take a good girl

I know you want it (repeat 3x)

.....

You’re a good girl (“Robin” lines 19-23)

In the online photo essay “From the Mouths of Rapists: The Lyrics of Robin Thicke’s ‘Blurred Lines,’” Sezin Koehler juxtaposes lyrics taken directly from “Blurred Lines” with photographs of rape victims holding up signs with quotes from their rapists. The results are striking and the correlation is impossible to miss. In the first photo the sign reads “I know you want it” and in the second is a similar “you know you want it” (Koehler). “I know you want it” is a variation of the rape myth that women who get raped somehow “ask for it” through their impious and impure behavior, their lack of adherence to True Womanhood, and the line is repeated eighteen times within the song (Burt 217). When women who are empowered by their sexuality and dress or behave provocatively but turn down male requests for sex, are slut-bashed for their sexuality and blamed for provoking any sexual assaults through this rape myth, because a True Woman knows that

you must dress with modesty if you want to be respected.

The third photo in Koehler's collage is a woman holding up a sign that says "good girl," while the fourth features a man whose sign reads "Be a good girl, don't say anything, okay?" Referring to a grown adult as a little girl diminishes his or her autonomy and agency and reinforces male dominance, themes that are found throughout both the lyrics of "Blurred Lines" and Koehler's compilation of photographs. "[O]nly bad girls get raped" because a "good girl," or True Woman, would not flaunt her sexual power by arousing a man and then denying him sex (Burt 217). A True Woman is submissive.

When Thicke sings "The way you grab me / Must wanna get nasty" ("Robin" lines 32-33) he employs the "mental one-drop rule" to determine that because she showed any interest in him at all, she must want to have sex with him, a justification used by many rapists (Brekhus 516). Thicke's implication that the way a woman behaves means that she must want sex is mirrored in images in Koehler's collection in phrases like "you said no, but your body told me yes," "you were being such a tease," and "you can't have a drink with someone and NOT expect this to happen." Both the song lyrics and the rapists' quotes reinforce the rape myth that women are often "asking for it" when they do not maintain the standards of purity and piety set by True Womanhood (Burt). A True Woman knows better than to lead a man on.

The third verse, sung by rapper T.I., is by far the most aggressive in its enforcement of male dominance with the line "I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two" (Robin line 78). This reference to violent sodomy is reflected in

Koehler's compilation in which a woman holds a sign over her face that reads "turn over...I hope you like anal." The references to sexual violence continue as TI proclaims that he is "nothing like your last guy, he too square for you / He don't smack your ass and pull your hair like that" ("Robin" lines 83-84). TI uses sexualized violence as a way to reclaim dominance over an Untrue Woman. In this way, his sexual offers for sodomy, spanking, and hair pulling serve as a punishment for the Untrue Woman's sexual empowerment by reducing her to a sex object who enjoys the pain men inflict on her more than the pleasure.

The conflation of a woman's sexual enjoyment and pain is furthered in the bridge, which is sung by Thicke right after TI's verse. Thicke encourages the woman to "do it like it hurt, like it hurt" (Robin line 90). Thicke wants the woman to have sex in a way that pains her to increase his sexual dominance and punish her for being an Untrue Woman. Thicke and TI want to fuck the woman into submission.

In the video for "Blurred Lines," the women are portrayed as having sexual power that the men want to take away from them. It begins with an overhead shot of singer Robin Thicke, fully dressed in slacks and a button-up shirt complete with shoes and sunglasses, lying in bed next to a woman who is nude except for thong panties in a color similar to her flesh, chunky white tennis shoes, and bright lipstick. #THICKE is written across the screen in bold red letters. The woman's nudity represents her sexual power as she lays next to him in bed, the object of his desire that he cannot have. By placing his name prominently over her image, Thicke is attempting to reclaim his dominance over her. Throughout the video, all three of the women are nearly nude and dance around

playfully while Thicke, TI, and Pharrell, fully clothed, ogle them. The women are flaunting their sexuality, and they embody the Untrue Woman, in no way pious, pure, domestic, or submissive, as the men in the video try to reestablish their dominance.

The bright color of the women's lipstick draws attention to their mouths, and this emphasis is strengthened by scenes of the women licking their lips in a sexual manner. While their mouths are sexualized, tempting the men in the video, they are also silenced. A woman's voice is only heard one time in the video: as Thicke sings the line "But you're an animal, baby, it's in your nature" he turns his head and points toward the woman dancing next to him who then meows like a cat (Robin line 13). The insinuation that a woman is an animal serves to dehumanize women, while the use of a cat sound carries implications of "pussy," a slang term for the vagina. In this way, the women are reduced to sexual orifices and silenced into submission.

The video also contains references to rape. In one scene, Thicke pretends to inject one of the women with a giant syringe. The implication of drugging a woman while singing a song about the blurred lines between rape and consent is problematic considering women are frequently drugged or given alcohol and then raped when they are too incapacitated to fight back or at times even know what is happening, such as the victims discussed in chapter four. In another scene, one of the women is laying on her stomach with a small stop sign sitting atop her nude buttocks. This image is accompanied by Thicke once again crooning about how much he hates "these blurred lines" (Robin line 107). The implication that a woman would be lying nude before a man in a sexualized pose, yet still give him a sign to stop when he approaches her for sex,

reinforces Thicke's complaints of how lines between consensual sex and rape appear blurred. Putting the lyrics and the image in context together, Thicke is complaining about what he perceives to be mixed messages coming from Untrue Women who arouse him with their sexual power yet refuse to have sex with him. He wants to reestablish his dominance and punish women for their lack of conformity to the cult of True Womanhood by forcing himself on them.

Thicke's masculine dominance is unequivocally displayed in the video in scenes during which the women dance in front of a wall with the words "Robin Thicke has a big dick" spelled out in large silver balloons. In case anyone wants to question his sexual dominance, Thicke asserts that his penis is large and important. Penis size and masculinity are often conflated in pop culture, and by telling the world that his penis is large Thicke is assuring viewers that he is very masculine and therefore capable of sexually dominating the women in the video. In the final scene of the video, all three men are shown with large wads of cash in their hands. By flashing money at the camera, the men are reinforcing their male dominance as successful breadwinners.

## CHAPTER VI

### Conclusion:

#### Pop Culture, the Female Body, and the Cult of True Womanhood

*Happiness hit her like a train on a track  
Coming towards her stuck still no turning  
back  
She hid around corners and she hid under  
beds  
She killed it with kisses and from it she fled  
With every bubble she sank with her drink  
And washed it away down the kitchen sink*

*The dog days are over  
The dog days are done  
The horses are coming  
So you better run*

*Run fast for your mother, run fast for your  
father  
Run for your children, for your sisters and  
brothers  
Leave all your love and your longing behind  
You can't carry it with you if you want to  
survive*

*The dog days are over  
The dog days are done  
Can you hear the horses?  
'Cause here they come ~Florence and the  
Machine*

My second semester of graduate school I had the pleasure of teaching English to freshman students. During one class period, I taught a lesson about how to write interesting titles for essays, and I used examples of my own titles, including the one for this thesis. I wrote “Boobies, Booty Shorts, and Bar Trash: How to Spot a Feminist” on the chalkboard and asked, as I did for each title, what do you think my thesis is about?

The students who responded thought the point of my thesis was that women shouldn't dress a certain way if they want to be respected or viewed as a feminist. Though initially surprised by their responses, I realized that they were not used to associating boobies, booty shorts, or bar trash with anything feminist. In their minds, sexy clothing and feminism could never overlap.

These students are not alone in their sentiments. Conversations with my colleagues about discussions of feminism with their students echo feminist scholar Terri Moi's experiences:

young women who would never put up with legal or institutional injustice believe that if they were to call themselves feminists, other people would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive, and intolerant and—worst of all—that they must hate men. (1736)

This negative view of feminists has made feminism the “F-word” among most people who fear that associations with feminism will label them as “feminazis” (Moi 1736). If we want to change people's perspective of feminism and break free from the Cult of True Womanhood, we must do a better job of defining and modeling what feminism is, and a good place to do that is in the classroom.

### **Feminism in the Classroom: Helping the Next Generation Break Free from the Cult**

I believe that the best way to reach students is to meet them where they are, tapping into their prior knowledge and experiences. Pop culture provides an excellent medium for doing so because the majority of students will be familiar with these songs, music videos, television shows, or films. For example, Miley Cyrus' VMA performance

and the video for “Blurred Lines” offer opportunities for classroom discussions about representations of women, including slut-bashing, victim-blaming, and rape culture. Advertisements and magazine covers are also excellent texts for feminist analysis, particularly for discussions about how society is conditioned to objectify, commodify, and devalue the female body. Students can also engage in free-writing exercises about experiences they have had with slut-bashing and victim-blaming. These types of lessons will help students to see the relevance of feminism in their everyday lives and give them a much fuller understanding of what it means to be a “feminist” and to engage in feminist analysis.

The examples in this thesis represent a fraction of the ways that the ideologies of True Womanhood are systematically enforced within society through indoctrination, regulation, and punishment. The cult of True Womanhood has long served as a way for men to maintain dominance over women, as each element—piety, purity, domesticity, and submission—operates to preserve the androcentric nature of society. As women achieve more power by breaking free from the constraints of True Womanhood, we will continue to face persecution from men and women who wish to enforce the standards set by the Cult. Slut-bashing, victim-blaming, and the culture of rape are three examples of ways that men are trying to regain their dominance and punish women who do not subscribe to the ideologies of True Womanhood. Women are also punished through domestic violence and body-shaming, and regulated by corporate practices that disadvantage women such as a lack of maternity leave or required working hours when childcare is not available, while pop culture and the media continue to perpetuate such

practices by normalizing them through cultural myths, all of which are areas for further research.

The issue of race is ignored in this thesis, and deliberately so. As a White woman, I do not know what it is like to be African American or Latina or Asian American or any other ethnicity, nor do I fully understand the experience of a minority woman, and I feel it would be insulting to pretend that I do. Nonetheless, I do believe the Cult of True Womanhood affects every woman in the United States to some degree or another, albeit in distinct ways for distinct minority groups. Feminism involves allowing individual women to use their own voices and tell their own stories about their experiences with the Cult of True Womanhood. Therefore, instead of attempting to speak for different groups of women, I believe they should speak for themselves because giving marginalized groups a voice is the first step toward ending oppression.

Oppression through the ideologies of True Womanhood continues today. In fact, despite my awareness of the ways in which True Womanhood has been forced upon me, I still struggle with feeling the need to live up to these standards. When I go to the university campus on my days off, I still look for something “modest” to wear. When I meet new people who adhere to the standards of True Womanhood in their appearance, I wonder if they are judging me for the lack of piety and purity in my appearance. When I visit my boyfriend’s family, I carefully choose an outfit that I feel they will find respectfully modest. But I cannot conceal everything about myself that makes me an Untrue Woman. My breasts, wide hips, and long legs will always be a part of me. My tattoos are permanent. And my desire to break free of the constraints of True

Womanhood will never fade away.

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