



Truth

FEMALE SEXUALITY AND THE
SUBVERSION OF TRUTH

BY LILY MECHNER

"Slut."

Slut.

What does that mean?

How many times can you misuse a word before it doesn't mean anything at all? A word doesn't need a meaning when it only exists as a stick with which to beat women down.

I was eleven years old the first time I was called a slut. Was it true? Was it fair? What does an eleven-year-old girl possibly do to be called a slut?

Ignore those questions because they have no helpful answers. In fact, they distract from the questions we should be asking. Why did a 14-year-old boy call a girl a slut? Why does any man? Why do women?



To hurt her? It does hurt the first dozen times. To make her dirty, sinful, and tainted just by being associated with that word? People do look at you; differently, they wonder if it's true, even when you're eleven. To make her matter less? Because no one likes a slut. Because if you're a slut, whatever happens really is your own fault and no one has to care.

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When a friend of mine was six years old, she faced down in court, the grown man who molested her. She was braver in that moment than most of us will ever have to be. She spoke up, testified, and eventually won her case, and what did he call her to her face, a judge, and any gods who happened to be watching? Slut.

The use of this one word is not the issue. The problem is why it means so much while having very little meaning at all. It exemplifies both a symptom and a cause of a larger issue in our society: the ways women's sexuality is subjugated through

subversions of truth. Those in control use this strategy constantly through everyday life, which lends power to a broader culture of deeply internalized misogyny.



Michelangelo, "The Original Sin," Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel,

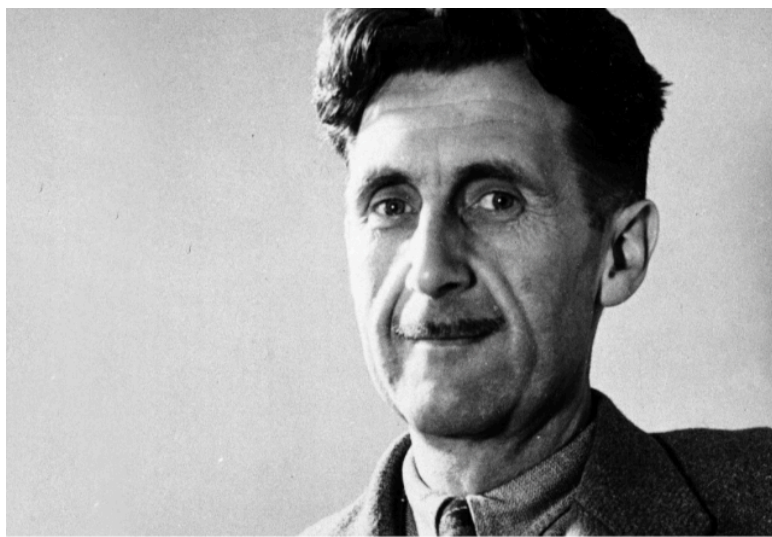
The issue of female sexuality has been one either vastly ignored or deeply stigmatized depending on how we look at it. Even from the mythology of the world's largest religion, Christianity, all sin originated from woman. Eve is enticed by a serpent and takes the fruit of knowledge against God's command, and by eating it, learns good from evil. To punish her, God says: "I shall surely increase your sorrow and your pregnancy; in pain you shall bear children. And to your husband will be your desire, and he will rule over you." According to the Old Testament, Eve's punishment is to "desire" her husband and to be subservient to him. For the two billion Christians worldwide, this is often used to justify institutional sexism. This cultural perspective is not unique to Christian mythology. The demonization of female sexuality is rampant in our media as well.

1984, the seminal speculative fiction novel written by George Orwell in 1949, tells the story of a man in a deeply dystopian imaging

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of what the year 1984 might look like. It shows a future England called "Oceania" ruled by an intensely authoritarian government which demands to control every aspect of its citizens' lives, including their thoughts. It is headed by a mysterious icon: "Big Brother." When I first began reading this text, I felt vaguely uncomfortable with Julia, the main female character. We are first introduced to her when Winston, 1984's protagonist, fantasizes about raping and murdering her:

"Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind... He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax... He hated her because she was young and pretty and sexless because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so."



George Orwell

In the world of 1984, sex outside of arranged marriages is both illegal and incomprehensible. The discouragement and criminalization of sex are calculated to encourage nationalistic fervor and worship of Big Brother.



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Winston is our audience surrogate, our "hero," so it feels strange to me that we are meant to identify with his urges towards sexual violence. I was unsure of what Orwell was attempting to show with these "beautiful hallucinations." Are we supposed to judge Winston for these violent urges, or sympathize with his resentment towards this young woman for being unattainably

"sexless"? Once again, a man's sexual desires morally trump women's autonomy.

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We later find out that Julia is, like Winston, subtly rebelling against the authoritarian rule of the "Inner Party," the leaders and bureaucrats of their government, and their puritanical values. Julia secretly contacts Winston, and the two of them rendezvous in a forest, they make love as he desired and it turns out that she has done this same thing "hundreds of times--well, scores of times, anyway." By this, she means having illicit sex with men despite the party's anti-sex policies. Winston responds to this in a rather surprising way:

"The more men you've had, the more I love you. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"I hate purity, I hate goodness. I don't want any virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone corrupt to the bones."

"Well then, I ought to suit you, dear. I'm corrupt to the bones."

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SuffragetteS

In this positive portrayal, Orwell seems to be nearly enlightened when it comes to sexual liberation. Born in 1903, he lived through the beginning and end of first-wave feminism in the UK. When he was a young child and then an adolescent, the Suffragettes campaigned for the right to vote. As an adult man, Orwell would have seen the huge advances women made towards equality in the workforce due to the massive social disruption of the World Wars.

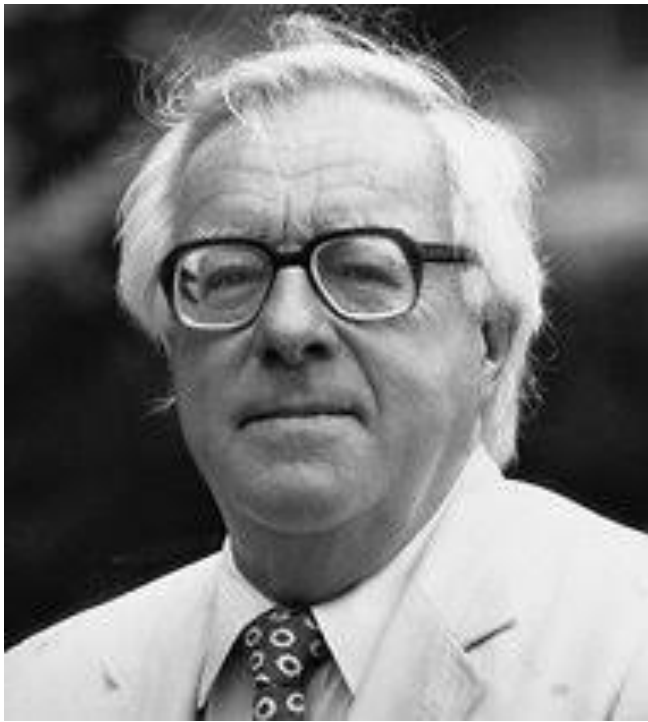
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According to Lucy Noakes in her book, *Women in the British Army: War and the Gentle Sex*, 460,000 women in Britain worked for the British Services during the two World Wars. Orwell's portrayal of Julia may come from this historical context and, ironically enough, was a reasonably accurate prediction of what second wave of feminism would deliver, wherein much focus was to be on the concept of liberation through sexual freedom. Just as Julia rebels against an authoritarian regime by expressing her sexual nature, the women's liberation movement emphasized sexual freedom for women.

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Orwell's portrayal of Julia continues to perplex me, and I find myself unable to understand how he can both embrace the revolutionary power of female sexuality while simultaneously portraying a protagonist motivated by rape fantasies, without proving any self-reflection or moral lesson to this. Regardless, Orwell clearly understands that a

priority of an authoritarian regime is to harness and restrict sexual expression, that being a deeply personal, and fundamental aspect of human nature. Julia and Winston discuss this at one point, concluding that "Sexual privation induced hysteria, which was desirable because it could be transformed into war fever and leader worship... There was a direct, intimate connection between chastity and political orthodoxy." (Orwell, 113) This analysis cuts to the heart of the issue involving the deliberate subversions of truth in order to gain and maintain power. While it is general sexual denial Orwell discusses here, it is in the specific way these ideologies are forced on women that relate to my argument.



Ray Bradbury

Four years after 1984 was written, and coincidentally, three years after Orwell passed away, Ray Bradbury published his dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* in 1953. It tells the story of fireman Guy Montag, whose

job is to burn books. He lives in a world torn apart by war under an authoritarian government and populated with repressed individuals lashing out in violence towards others and themselves. He is unhappily married to a woman named Mildred, an exemplary member of their broken society. She spends all her time watching substanceless television while refusing to acknowledge the shambles her relationship and world are in. The other woman in Montag's life is Clarisse, a girl whose family moves in next door to him and Mildred. She is "seventeen and insane," a complete reprobate in their society. Clarisse, instead of absorbing herself in mindless entertainment and destruction, instead enjoys interhuman connection and intellectual engagement. Montag's meeting with her leads him to question his world and to eventually rebel.

Throughout the novel, Mildred and Clarisse are constantly narratively paralleled through Montag's narration. In his sexless, loveless marriage with Mildred, she constantly encourages him to conform, to be like her, even as she self-destructs. In contrast, Montag feels genuinely close to Clarisse, when he questions why, she speculates: "Because I like you... and I don't want anything from you. And because we know each other." In their world of isolation and anti-intellectualism this kind of connection and genuine communication, to "know" someone, as they do, is extraordinary. The two women of this book represent the conflict facing Montag. Should he conform to these societal norms, which lead to nothing but destruction, or should he rebel, breaking taboos and often laws? This same type of conflict, existing somewhere between Man v.s. Society and Man v.s. Self, is seen in an



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equally lauded piece of literature from only one year after *Fahrenheit 451*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

In *The Crucible*, protagonist John Proctor is forced to make a similar choice. The Puritan society of the late 1600s oddly mirrors Guy Montag's dystopian future. Both worlds force isolation by stigmatizing communication. In *Fahrenheit 451*, books are heavily censored in the name of social peace, whereas the Puritan's hyper-religiosity prevents the majority of meaningful communication as not to break any religious or social taboos and be labeled a deviant. In both these societies to be considered a deviant is a perilous thing. Both Proctor and Montag are good and moral men (by the standards of the authors) who makes a decision that causes them to

deviate from what is acceptable in their society. More specifically both men are led either astray or towards enlightenment, by young girls. We have discussed how Montag's acquaintance with Clarisse causes him to question his role in their world, but Proctor's passionate affair with Abigail Williams, who also happens to be a 16-year-old, both liberates and condemns him in that narrative.

Sex was highly stigmatized by the Puritans of that time. His extramarital relationship thus makes Proctor "a sinner, a sinner not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct." Montag's sins are not seemingly of the same nature as Proctor's. His sins are of an intellectual nature, "Thought Crimes," rather than carnal ones, and his relationship with

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Clarisse seems platonic rather than sexual. These differences show us the clear distinction between the themes of *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Crucible*. But despite these differences, the weight of these men's sins always fall on the shoulders of women. In fact, all the books I have been addressing were written by male authors in the mid 20th century, featuring male protagonists, so the lack of depth given to female characters is unsurprising. Each of these women I have discussed is a deviant, Julia and Abigail in sexual ways and Clarisse as an intellectual. Yet it is the failing of these male authors that these women's characters are underdeveloped, reduced to nothing more than either a rejection or an embrace of stereotypes.

Beyond these literary parallels, while Puritan Massachusetts is not generally remembered as an authoritarian regime, the levels of minute control over every aspect of the lives

of those who lived there, and the extreme punishment they endured for perceived deviance, rivals those of 1984. History is full of examples of times like the witch trials when oppressive governments used disinformation tactics to control sexual behavior, specifically women's, to further their political agenda. Such examples include Nazi Germany, post-Islamic Revolution Iran, and others. When I was beginning to plan this essay, I asked aloud at the dinner table, "when in history has women's sexuality been systematically suppressed?" and I was answered with an overwhelming and unhelpful chorus of "always?"

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Historically, women's status has varied widely culture to culture, although as my literature teacher, Jackson Shafer, noted, "misogyny is tragically nearly a social constant." In Wilhelmine Germany (pre-WWII), women's rights were on the rise. Progress in terms of, economic equality, education opportunity, and political participation was happening at a rapid rate during the early 20th century.

That endured a quick reversal at the start of Hitler's rule. Similar things occurred in Iran during the mid-1900s; women organized, demanding their rights, and huge strides were made for abortion access, education, and equal pay. Yet, just as in Germany, political unrest struck in the form of the so-called Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the progress of the past century was rapidly undone. And of course, the first target of oppression for these women is their sexual freedom, and thus their autonomy and self-determination.

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All of this is important to keep in mind as we face the modern political climate of the United States. The often misunderstood quote of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr comes to my mind: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." While many take the sophomoric view that Dr. King was attempting to tell us that some superhuman force guides our path towards righteousness, and we need merely wait it out, I find this to be deeply counter to his message. In America, many feel safe to believe that we have reached the point where women have more or less the same rights as men, that misogyny is essentially

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– Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

over, and we no longer have to worry about such things. While clearly false, this line of thinking is appealing and goes hand in hand with the underdeveloped analysis of Dr. King's quote. How nice it would be if women and men were finally truly equal in all areas of life. Sadly I need look no further than my own short 16 year existence to see how untrue this is. In just my lifetime, I have witnessed many successes for women's rights, and also so many disappointments. Among these is the continued lack of representation for women in American



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr

politics, and a modern peak of a toxic sexual culture which catapulted us into the “#Metoo” movement, this is not to pretend sexual harassment and violence towards women is a new thing, but our collective social consciousness is hyperaware due to the wave of accusations against powerful men.

That is not to say we have not made progress since the times of our witch burning ancestors, but we must be aware of how fast and easy this progress can be undone. We must be alert and wary of those put in power over us, the men elected to office and appointed to courts who would see all the progress of the last hundred years undone if they could. Men who treat women as incubators and flashlights are in charge of our collective future; so it is indeed the time to take both Bradbury and Orwell’s warnings



Anita Hill and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford

to heart, but more importantly to correctly understand Dr. King’s quote.

Because he was right, the universe does curve towards justice, but only because we make it.

