UNRULY WOMEN

Jill Lorraine Gibbons
BSW (Hons Class 1), UNSW,
Ph.D, University of Newcastle

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Abstract

My memoir of the friendship between a young social worker and an elderly prostitute spans the period from 1920 to 2000 telling the stories of two women from very different backgrounds who attempted to elude their conditioning to be perfect wives and mothers. Both social work and prostitution are women’s professions, subject to many stereotypes, and found on the margins of society. As a social worker, my relationship with Pat demanded that I let go of judgements and conventional morality, my need to fix. In telling Pat’s story, I could have followed a problem trajectory—how she suffered physical and sexual abuse and neglect as a child which led to a lifetime of prostitution and alcoholism, inability to parent her own children, and a propensity to being in relationships with violent men. However, in the face of social disapprobation Pat was a woman who refused to be shamed or silenced—she was proud of her life. My story sets out to create a voice for both of us, unruly women in our own ways, in defiance of being cast as nobodies.

The exegesis examines the genre of women’s life writing through the critical dimensions of voice, agency, identity, and relationality. The historical context of my story is explored through fiction and non-fiction set in Sydney during the years leading up to and during WW2; and literature on social policy and attitudes regarding children in care, prostitution and alcoholism over the last 80 years. Finally, literary representations of prostitutes in fiction, memoirs and autobiographies are reviewed with reference to feminist analyses and debates about prostitution.

Critical analysis of the concept of the angel in the house, the Victorian ideal of womanhood, has drawn attention to the stereotyping of women into Madonnas or whores. As early as 1975, Anne Summers posited that Australian women have been colonised through our history to be damned whores or God’s police. This duality of thinking that classifies women as good or bad must be laid to rest. Yet feminists continue to debate whether there are circumstances in which women can freely choose to work as prostitutes, and conferences on prostitution continue to be picketed by sex workers’ collectives arguing that their choices should be respected. In 1931 Virginia Woolf famously said that the angel must be killed if women are to achieve their creative and social potentials, if they are to be accepted as individual and unique with all their light and shade.

‘Unruly Women’ sets out to tell the story of two individual women, and both informed and was informed by my examination of women’s memoir, the historical context of the story, and the critical review of literary representations and feminist debates about prostitution.

Key words: women’s memoir, social work, prostitution, feminist sex wars, institutional care