

Margins of Desire: Sex Work and the Space of the Novel

Sex work appears and disappears along shifting axes of visibility. Rarely fully legible, it is often stitched into the underside of society's visible seams, at once obscured and indispensable to the social worlds that require its disavowal. In literature, this partial visibility signals not absence but function: The labor sex work performs within narrative is frequently structural rather than overtly representational. This study, therefore, approaches the sex worker neither as a purely abstract narratological device nor as a transparent reflection of lived reality, but as a figure produced at the intersection of form and history – simultaneously a formal construction and a historically situated subject whose narrative marginality is inseparable from racialized, gendered, and nationally specific regimes of regulation and criminalization.

This project maintains a deliberately defined scope within a generic formation where this intersection of form and history becomes highly visible. It focuses on women sex worker characters operating within crime fiction's historically masculinized imaginative terrain – hyper-urban worlds shaped by policing, violence, and patriarchal economies of power. Although I engage with texts authored by both women and men, I understand crime fiction as a genre long organized around masculinist narrative authority, a structure that conditions how women sex worker characters appear. It is within – and sometimes against – this inherited formal architecture that gendered power is staged and contested.

To fully grasp how crime narratives mobilize sex work as both a literary device and a social critique, it is crucial to foreground the realities that structure sex work's ubiquity and simultaneous invisibility. Natalie West, editor of *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*, explains:

the umbrella term 'sex work' encompasses a variety of acts, gigs, and professions, with different levels of vulnerability to law enforcement and the criminal legal system: escorts, hoers, dominatrices and fetish professionals, people in the trade, massage parlor workers, porn performers, cam models, strippers, and others who trade in sex and sexuality for money. Many sex workers face the criminalization of their work, and because women of color face the criminalization of their bodies, sex workers of color live at a particularly violent intersection of these processes . . . [within] a culture that stigmatizes sex and criminalizes sex work . . . Without seeing sex work as work, sex workers cannot be seen as laboring subjects.¹

¹ *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*. eds. Natalie West and Tina Horn (The Feminist Press, 2021), 10.

Put simply, “sex workers [are people] whom society too often sees as deviant and whose voices are deemed invalid.”² Likewise, the sex worker character and the labor they perform in and for crime narratives are often downplayed in analyses of novelistic and fictional form. Sex workers are too easily read as dominated by the world, flattened by it, their inner lives evaporated by the social machine they serve. Lacking character, in other words, and having only objectivity. Still today, when we read or watch contemporary fictional stories, the impression can be similar: sex worker characters are often represented and read as typecasts – plucked straight from central casting, suspended like paper dolls, positioned rigidly in their conventional forms. As Adele Parks (whose *One Last Secret* I read in what follows) rightfully complains, “we appear comfortable forcing sex workers into uncomplicated, two-dimensional stereotypes.”³

Sex Work and Crime Fiction: Margins of Desire rejects the assumption that the sex worker character is mere background noise – a well-worn groove of a predictably churned-out refrain. Put another way, this Element seeks complexity and contradiction in the cliché demanded by conventional genre fiction. It does so by considering the *work* that sex work performs in crime narratives. Importantly, this study is geographically and historically specific. While I move between British and American literary traditions, I do not treat them as interchangeable. These are distinct national traditions whose crime narratives share formal affinities while emerging from divergent racial and legal histories. The histories of prostitution, policing, urbanization, and racial formation in Britain differ significantly from those in the United States, particularly in relation to slavery, segregation, and racial capitalism. These differences shape not only the lived realities of sex workers but also the narrative forms through which they appear.

These historically contingent differences do not simply alter representation; they inflect the very generic expectations through which sex work becomes legible within crime fiction. In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant complicates the conventions of genre fiction, writing, “a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective experience, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected.”⁴ At different historical moments, the pressures to conceal or code sex work lead sex

² Angela Jones, *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* (University Press, 2020), 12.

³ Adele Parks, “We Need More Nuanced Portrayals of Sex Workers,” in *Crime Reads*, January 5, 2023. <https://crimereads.com/we-need-more-nuanced-portrayals-of-sex-workers/>.

⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Literature* (Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

work to (often) appear in literature in partial perspective. Authors nudge sex work into plausibly-deniable boundary cases that still imply, or carry like concealed baggage, the specter of sexual labor. In literature, there are characters who are not explicitly sex workers but who nevertheless imply sex work. Throughout this Element, I examine how sexual work functions in and is mediated by crime fiction – not merely as representations of a social type (which, historically in this genre and elsewhere culturally is that of the victim, the prurient spectacle), but as acts of labor and social reproduction in and through the novel form. Throughout this Element’s three short sections (“Knowledge, Power, Secrets”; “Affect and Anxiety”; and “Sex Sleuths”), I read the sex work – the narratological labor – present in but obscured by many readings of crime fiction, where representations of sex workers live on in silhouette, hired to titillate and provide gritty, realistic local color.

This Element is invested in the same problem as Jessica Tanner’s *Sex Work, Text Work: Mapping Prostitution in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel* (2023), which traces the ways that sex worker characters are not passive literary figures but, rather, active agents who confound literary expectations through acts of narrative slippage.⁵ Tanner (who focuses exclusively on French realism written by Zola, Huysmans, Goncourt, and Philippe) argues that sex worker characters defy and complicate all forms of containment – narratologically, socially, and spatially by “writing back” against convention and asserting textual agency, even if unacknowledged. Like Tanner, I am interested in how, by reconsidering sex workers’ agential narrative roles, we can reconceive sex work as reality-building rather than mere reality-effect.

The problem posed by this Element is revealed by two limiting binaries that contour much of crime fiction: (1) the archetype of the “minor” sex worker in crime narratives as either disposable victim or splash of low, local color, and (2) between the redeemed and the damned, in cases of major characters. This Element argues that the sex worker character in crime narratives, often dismissed as a flat stereotype or mere plot device, actively performs crucial narratological labor that shapes the novel’s realism and challenges conventional understandings of character, agency, and social reproduction. By applying literary critic Alex Woloch’s theory of character-space and drawing on contemporary Black feminist scholarship by Jennifer C. Nash, Mireille Miller-Young, Ariane Cruz, Siobhan Brooks, and Angela Jones, which privileges power, pleasure, and desire, this study reveals how sex worker characters, through their evolving representation from marginal figures to central agents, resist

⁵ Jessica Tanner, *Sex Work, Text Work: Mapping Prostitution in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel* (Northwestern University Press, 2023).

narrative containment and illuminate broader socio-cultural tensions surrounding gender, class, and authority within the genre. At one and the same time, they labor for the plot, but they also direct the plot in ways not quite circumscribed by the conventional role of the servant-laborer.

“The world’s oldest profession” has been representationally present in Western canonical literary history dating back to at least Middle English. Chaucer satirized prostitution in *The Canterbury Tales* as a necessary social ill ripe for ridiculing moral deficiencies. So, too, did Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies, such as Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. But the literary trope of the sex worker as “damned” or victimized emerged fully in the eighteenth century, most notably in Daniel Defoe’s early modern realist novel *Moll Flanders* (1772). I begin briefly with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British prose not to establish a linear genealogy for contemporary crime fiction, but to illustrate how early realist narrative experiments staged tensions between character interiority and structural containment – tensions that later reappear, under very different racial and national conditions, in American and African American crime narratives.

In the British context, prostitution was framed within anxieties about moral reform, urban disorder, and class mobility in a rapidly commercializing empire. While not a conventional crime narrative, Defoe nevertheless frames his protagonist within a society shaped by corruption and sexual commerce. Moll, a vulnerable person born into poverty without kinship connections in a culture with limited options for women, becomes a thief and a prostitute to survive. Defoe’s characterization of her as a woman whose criminalized sexuality is intertwined with her economic precarity lends her an air of moral ambiguity, prefiguring emergent literary realism’s complex ethical and psychological dynamics of formal structure and characterization. Importantly, Defoe, in *Moll Flanders*, was trying to bridge the established form of the picaresque novel (the adventures of the rogue underclass surviving by his wits) with a new kind of fictional protagonist: an individual, a person, rather than a type. The picaresque novel is a partial forerunner, or the closest we get to crime narratives in the eighteenth century.

Such formal literary experimentation helped establish what Woloch describes as “a tension between our sense of the character as an actual human placed within an imagined world and the space of the character within the narrative structure.”⁶ Yet Woloch’s structural account of character-space must itself be historicized. The distribution of narrative attention is never neutral; it reflects

⁶ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.

social hierarchies that determine whose interiority is legible, whose labor is narratable, and whose suffering is aestheticized. As Woloch elaborates, the character-space – the relative amount of narrative attention a figure receives – shapes how an “implied personality” functions within bounded form. “Each individual portrait has a radically contingent position within the story as a whole; our sense of the human figure (*as* implied person) is inseparable from the space that he or she occupies within the narrative totality.”⁷ Literary characters, then, are not autonomous persons but narrative effects circumscribed by their placement and function. At the same time, especially in literatures contending with the aftereffects of slavery and colonialism as well as the impact of segregation, the distinction between narrative effect and embodied subject cannot be cleanly maintained. The sex worker as minor character often condenses real histories of racialized sexual labor into formal compression. Character-space therefore does not merely measure aesthetic distribution; it encodes historical regimes of value. Characters matter not simply as psychological portraits, thick or thin, but as vectors of structural position within the novel’s social and narrative economy.

What appears as “depth” (attributed to most protagonists or major characters) and “flatness” (attributed to minor, secondary characters) actually reveals how a narrative allots story space and plot function. Sex worker characters often have greater structural integrity and influence in a text as a whole than the space they have been allotted. Minor characters can lie at the junction of other characters, meaning, minor characters can have outsized influence on the narrative because they connect major characters together. They often do so while remaining relatively invisible, in a direct sense, to the reader.

Ultimately, as Woloch shows us, the space a character holds in a narrative is contingent, not fixed or guaranteed. Meaning, a character’s ontological status is grounded less by their story-being and more by narrative discourse. Moll, in *Moll Flanders*, is not only the novel’s protagonist, but also its only fully developed character, occupying the central character-space where narrative energy and moral and psychological depth and detail converge. Her character’s narration therefore reads as an autobiographical account of a fully-fledged person who recollects – in addition to thievery and prostitution – regrets, religious repentance, reinventions, marriage, and integration into a different socio-economic class. She narrates her own life, including her motivations, rationalizations, and strategic scheming for her crimes. She therefore occupies an expansive and privileged character-space, not only making her vivid and dynamic but establishing her as a highly agential character motivated by

⁷ *Ibid.*

calculated self-preservation. Her portrayal as a sex worker is central to the story and (crucial to agential characterization) self-articulated, as well as complex and functional, not only impacting other characters but shaping the entire narrative.⁸

How we think about agency and character – their desires, choices, and actions – is akin to how Gérard Genette thinks about characterization via idiolects and sociolects. Comparing Balzac to Proust, he notes how the difference between a narrator's and a character's speech styles individuates and "objectivizes" them, and thereby achieves their mimetic autonomy, with the possibility of going so far with that individuation (as Proust does) that stylistic repetition can tip even further into caricature.⁹ That's the thing about conceiving of character agency too: having someone seem to be able to think, believe, and act in a way unplanned by the implied author and unpredicted by the narratorial voice (i.e., in a way that surprises the reader) generates a reality- and individuation-effect. But too much wildness *or* stubbornness in their behavior – too much careless freedom or too much sticking to one's guns against social pressures – can appear less like the possession of agency and more like the enslavement to the passions. What I mean by "reality-building" via character is the calibration or right tuning of these spectrums.

In tracing the fictional representation of sex workers from *Moll Flanders* to the nineteenth century, we see how character-space, moral framing, and narrative function change across different literary cultural moments. Whereas Moll's penitentiary narrative arc was mediated by her own wit, cleverness, and survival, some nineteenth-century novels drove their sex worker characters to damnation. As the trope of the tragic or fallen woman gained traction (both socially and fictionally), many Victorian narratives punished their sex worker characters by sentencing them to death. This was in keeping with the tendency of Victorian novels to allot one of two endings to female characters, the other being marriage. And this limitation, of course, only applies to characters that *do* have an ending. Many sex worker characters are not significant enough. If, as Woloch argues, attending to character-space reveals ideological and formal tensions within the novel as a literary form, then the sex worker's (often terminal) fate was accepted in part not only as an inevitable result of her trade but so too as befitting her role in the narrative as minor. This is how such

⁸ Although, Defoe's preface challenges the extent or completion of this self-articulation as he makes it clear that he is a kind of "editor" of Moll's narrative, cleaning up her language and expression. This speaks to the complexities of sex work representation in fiction.

⁹ Refer to Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 182–184.

characters fit into a narrative's economy of representation, as befits the economic contingency of the characters.

Charles Dickens artfully crafted heavily populated fictional worlds where memorable minor characters circulate around protagonists, often contributing more to atmosphere than to plot. These minor figures are frequently rendered as indelibly grotesque – repetitions of familiar types or trollish singularities brought to life through distinctive speech patterns, eccentric gestures or habits, or notable physical features. Woloch draws upon E. M. Forster's notion of a character's "flatness" as a convergence of minorness and caricature, a quality that proliferates in nineteenth-century realist novels.¹⁰ Nancy in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837) is a quintessential example of this: a secondary sex worker figure shaped by the "fallen woman" trope and ultimately punished by death, even after enduring suffering and offering self-sacrifice. Nancy's character-space is radically limited, her backstory vague. Like Moll, she is a "good woman" confined to a corrupt world, who devolves to thievery and is assumed to be a prostitute – a fact Dickens only affirms in his 1841 preface. However, unlike Moll whose, confessional narration facilitates her redemption and the structure of the novel itself, Nancy is denied interiority. We don't hear her voice directly; her emotions are mediated through others' perceptions of her.

Nancy's characterization – like that of so many of Dickens' minor figures – contributes to the texture of realism not by offering psychological depth but by reinforcing the illusion of a densely inhabited, socially stratified world. This limited narrative access to her inner life, incessantly pressuring her character objectivity into a surface of the story world, positions her as, at least from one angle, an example of Roland Barthes' "reality effect."¹¹ Barthes argues that certain details, seemingly gratuitous or lacking direct plot function, serve primarily to signify "the real," thereby naturalizing the fictional world. In this light, Nancy's flatness is not a failure of representation but a formal technique: her sentimental presence and stylized suffering function as narrative details that simulate (and *stimulate*) the real rather than open consciousness to further examination. But often with sex work in fiction, its "reality effect" does not easily recede (as in the purest cases) into the meaningless arbitrariness of the real. Stripped of complex interiority while also presented as a type, Nancy functions as a detail more than as a fully realized individual, but one whose purpose is to evoke and reinforce specific socio-cultural anxieties about sex work and crime prevalent in Victorian society. A character type, in other words, defined by a lack of character; a Möbius strip where sheer reality effect turns

¹⁰ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 129.

¹¹ Refer to Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, edited by François Wahl (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 141–148.