

# 2 Fifty Shades of White: Purity Culture in Cinema

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## Abstract

'Nature adores virgins' is a TV trope that evokes a complex interplay between nature, purity and human perception. Emma Rush and Andre La Nauze in their paper Corporate Paedophilia (2006a) and Letting Children Be Children (2006b) an unintentional construction of girls and women that positions them, 'innocent' asexual beings, as sexually corruptible, and thus as the cause to men's uncontrollable sexuality (Faulker, 2010). This paper aims to explore various dimensions of this concept as represented in various films and shows for example, Fifty Shades of Grey, AFTER, Priscilla etc.

## Keywords

- innocence
- purity
- sexuality
- religion
- gender
- popular culture

## Introduction

*"Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." (Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians 6:18, English Standard Version).*

Prevalent Christian teachings view sex purely as a means for procreation. Pre-marital and extra-marital sex is considered a sin. Women's relationship with religion often shaped their understandings and perceptions of purity. Religious knowledge labels various behaviours as virtuous, and others as reputable. Many women have internalised this religious knowledge, and have accepted their bodies as unclean and impure. According to the popular website *TV Tropes*, "There's just something about virgins that seems to exude desirability, like a natural aphrodisiac..." "Sometimes this trope comes in a more disturbing form, where the thought of defiling a virgin is a turn-on in and of itself. However, it could also be thought of as a turn-on to be the first one to show someone how great sex can be. There is also the foolish idea held by some insecure people that a virgin won't know if the sex was bad, having no comparison." Emily-Kane and Mini Schippers discuss in their study of people's belief of gender and sexuality that assertive female sexuality

is viewed as a potential threat to a man's social dominance. This can be one of the reasons why some men are attracted to women who are perceived as 'pure' and 'innocent'. The theory suggests that men may fear that women will use their sexuality as a manipulative tactic and emasculate them. By reducing female sexual autonomy, it minimises the threat to their power. Research shows that controlling women's sexuality serves as a key mechanism for maintaining male dominance and gender inequality (Kane and Schippers 3). Nearly 50% of men view women's sexual power as greater than their own, most men often perceive women's sexual power as a threat (8). This perception leads men to support restrictions on female sexual autonomy to preserve their dominance. The belief that male sexual drives are inherently stronger than female drives serves to justify sexual aggression and portray women as passive recipients. This mindset contributes to the invisibility of gender inequalities and hinders the acknowledgement of women's sexual disadvantages (15). Women are significantly more likely to recognize these power differentials as socially constructed rather than natural and to identify how these arrangements harm them. However, men typically view the status quo as satisfactory, helping perpetuate the system of reduced female sexual autonomy (8). The movies discussed in the following paragraphs serve as excellent examples of this phenomenon.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), directed by Volker Schlöndorff is an adaptation of a novel by Margaret Atwood. The movie is set in a dystopian society where women are stripped of their rights and sexual autonomy. They are forced into strict gender roles with severe punishments if they don't follow. The movie deals with themes of sexual control, purity, repression and forced submission. Another example is Sofia Coppola's movie *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) based on Jeffrey Eugenides' novel which follows the story of five sisters raised by devoutly religious parents, who impose strict rules to maintain their "purity". This movie deals with the themes of repression and restriction.

In the movie *The Crucible* (1996) directed by Nicholas Hytner is an adaptation of Arthur Miller's play, set during the Salem witch trials. It demonstrates how young women are blamed for allegedly "corrupting" men's morality and causing a breakdown of communal morals. The young female characters are accused of witchcraft, illustrating society's fear of female sexuality and its perceived corruptive influence over men.

The movie *Mustang* (2015), directed by Deniz Gamze Ergüven, is set in the 2010s in a remote village in Turkey. The film tells the story of five orphaned sisters living in a conservative society. They are punished by their grandmother for playing a game of "chicken fight" with their male classmates. She punishes them for having bodily contact with boys, and thus "pleasuring themselves". They are not permitted to leave the house as they prepare for their marriages. Selma, one of the sisters, also had to undergo a "virginity test."

The theme of virginity is a common feature in various TV shows and movies such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *AFTER*, *Priscilla*, and *Cruel Intentions*. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the male protagonist Christian Grey is portrayed as attracted to Anastasia Steele's "innocence". A reviewer from BuzzFeed described Anastasia as a "blank-space heroine" and noted that she is portrayed as "practically a child".

The movie *After*, based on Wattpad fanfiction by the same name, revolves around a couple, Hardin and Tessa. The story begins with a bet that Hardin makes with his friends, claiming he can get Tessa to sleep with him. Tessa is portrayed as the "good girl" in contrast to her roommate, who wears revealing clothes and has black hair with bold-coloured outfits. Tessa, on the other hand, is depicted as a blonde who wears pastel-coloured clothes. The entire love story between Tessa and Hardin starts with this bet, and Tessa is shown to be a typical good girl who doesn't engage in partying or drinking alcohol.

The fetishisation of innocence is a common theme in the movies mentioned above. According to TV Tropes, the promise of sex is often seen as women's strongest card in their quest to find a provider/protector. Women who lower the cost of sex by giving it away easily are strongly disliked by other women. Virginity is often viewed as a prized possession, with almost all religions placing particular importance on a woman's virginity. This fetishisation of innocence may be the result of a power play.

In Japan, Kawaii culture celebrates characteristics like sweet, vulnerable, innocent, childlike, pure, adorable, gentle, weak, and inexperienced. This culture is both infantile and delicate, while also being pretty. The fetishisation of innocence extends from the hypersexualization of young girls to the infantilization of adult women.

In their papers "Corporate Paedophilia" (2006a) and "Letting Children Be Children" (2006b), Emma Rush and Andre La Nauze discuss the unintentional construction of girls and women as 'innocent' and asexual beings who are seen as sexually corruptible, and thus blamed for men's uncontrollable sexuality (Faulkner 108). This research reveals a complex dynamic where young girls lack true agency in their sexual development, despite being heavily sexualized by media and marketing (Rush and Nauze 50). The media and advertising industry plays a significant role in constructing problematic narratives around female sexuality and innocence (56). The portrayal of children, especially girls, as miniature adults playing sexual roles sends concerning messages about their availability and corruptibility (10). Marketing creates a contradictory message by simultaneously portraying girls as innocent yet sexually available, contributing to their vulnerability (16). This paradoxical representation serves to normalize inappropriate desires while placing blame on the victims (50).

The idea that "nature adores a virgin" can take a more disturbing form where the thought of defiling a virgin is a turn-on in itself. However, it may also be seen as a turn-on to be the first one to show someone how great sex can be. There is also the misguided idea held by some insecure individuals that a virgin won't know if the sex was bad, having no comparison (TV Tropes).

For example, in *Lolita*, written by Vladimir Nabokov, and its adaptations in popular culture explore the story of a middle-aged man who is obsessed with a young girl. The narrative highlights how society often depicts young girls as "temptresses," despite their youth. This portrayal reflects the troubling notion that girls can somehow be held responsible for inciting male desire.

All of this can be understood in terms of the relationship between Elvis Presley and Priscilla Presley. According to Priscilla Presley, Elvis Presley had made a commitment to himself that the woman he chose to marry would remain a virgin until their marriage. In an article by *Men's Health*, it was mentioned that Elvis seemed to be drawn to Priscilla's impressionability. He reportedly told someone that she was "young enough that I can train her any way I want." In the movie, Elvis referred to Priscilla as "little one." Setting aside the problematic age difference between the two, the relationship depicted in Sofia Coppola's portrayal of Priscilla displays a clear power imbalance. Elvis Presley met Priscilla Beaulieu when she was 14 and he was 24, stationed in West Germany. During a 2016 appearance on *Loose Women*, Priscilla stated, "You obviously didn't have your own life. You lived his life."

In her book *Elvis and Me*, Priscilla wrote, "He taught me everything: how to dress, how to walk, how to apply makeup and wear my hair, how to behave, how to return love — his way. Over the years he became my father, husband, and very nearly God." (Crosbie, *Business Insider*). According to a *Business Insider* article, during a trip to Las Vegas early on in their relationship, Elvis told Priscilla that he wanted her to dye her brunette hair a darker shade to match his dyed black quiff, which hid his natural blonde, and wear heavier eye makeup to make her blue eyes "stand out more". Priscilla also wrote elsewhere that Elvis made it clear what colours she should and shouldn't wear.

In a related article, author Eve Crosbie wrote about how Priscilla's book revealed that when Elvis returned to the US after serving in the army, Priscilla said that he asked her to promise to stay "untouched, as I left you." The movie portrayed the complex dynamic between American singer Elvis Presley and his wife Priscilla Beaulieu, emphasizing her "innocence" and his control over her.

Similarly, the main plot of the movie *Cruel Intentions* revolves around sex and a bet between Kathryn Merteuil and her step-brother Sebastian Valmont. This bet involves Annette Hargrove, the headmaster's daughter who strongly opposes sex before falling in love. The theme of a bet to deflower a virgin is a common plot in many movies, including *Cruel Intentions*. Typically, it results in the "bad boy" or "player" developing genuine feelings for the "good girl".

Influence from religious beliefs significantly impacts the prevalence of these tropes. The concept of purity culture is particularly powerful, imposing strict rules against premarital sex while paradoxically veering into fetishism. For example, in *A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime* by Monica Murphy, the story centers on the romance between a "virtuous" Catholic girl who adheres to purity culture and her male counterpart, who is initially attracted to her because of her untarnished purity.

Religion and purity culture emphasize the importance of virginity, often linking purity with honour. Unfortunately, this belief can lead to the use of rape as a means of control and humiliation within communities to which women belong. Specially during times like the India- Pakistan partition, women were often targetted as symbols of community honor, with upto 100,000 raped and abducted. The partition witnessed massive violence against women, they were molested, brutally raped, sexually abused and forced into prostitution.

They were dishonoured and forced into marriages. The estimation says that around 75,000 women were victimized during the partition. Often times families killed women of their own family to “save” them from rape and sexual assault. Nisid Hajari, in “Midnight’s Furies” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), presents a fast-paced narrative history of Partition and its aftermath, noting that “gangs of killers set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children while carrying off young women to be raped.

During the Rwanda Genocide in 1994 Hutu militias committed mass rapes of Tutsi women to shame and destabilize the Tutsi community. Women were assaulted in front of their families and communities, with perpetrators aware that, in the traditional Rwandan context, this would bring lasting shame to the women and their families, resulting in further societal fractures.

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book *Half the Sky: Transforming Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. This nonfiction book explores the many types of oppression that women experience around the world, such as the use of rape as a tool to degrade women and, consequently, their communities. The book emphasizes how sexual assaulters frequently use the alleged shame of women who have "lost their purity" as an excuse for their crimes.

## Conclusion

Purity culture has always existed. "Pure" and "innocent" women are always shown as the "better" options. In Camerino’s painting "The Madonna of Humility with Temptation of Eve," a large portrait of Madonna is beautifully clothed in blue tapestries surrounded by gold as she uses her body to breastfeed her child - seen as an act of love and virtue. Underneath the Madonna is Eve, who is mostly nude and surrounded by darkness. She is using her body to symbolize temptation and sexuality, representing sin. According to Orly Barket, PhD, it is the most visual depiction of the Madonna- whore complex. The MWC is a psychological complex experienced by CIS-gender men who place women into 2 categories - Madonna is pure, virtuous and nurturing and the whore, a women who is deemed overly sexual, manipulating and promiscuous. Religion and purity culture emphasize the importance of virginity, often linking purity with honour. Unfortunately, this belief can lead to the use of rape as a means of control and humiliation within communities to which women belong. This trope has become popular in TV shows, movies, and books, often featuring innocence and purity being fetishized and corrupted.

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Aaditi Paandey is currently a third-year psychology and history double major student at Sophia College for Women, where she also serves as the Student Body President. As a dedicated and passionate psychology student, Aaditi is deeply interested in exploring the complexities of human behaviour and mental processes. Her academic pursuits focus on understanding cognitive development and the psychological factors influencing mental health.

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