

What Natalie Dylan Means for “Virginity”

By Noel Ullery

“When I put my virginity up for auction in September, it was in part a sociological experiment – I wanted to study the public’s response. Now it seems that the tables have turned, and the public is studying me.” (Dylan, *Why I’m Selling My Virginity*)

Natalie Dylan (pseudonym), a 22-year-old undergrad student has sent a dividing shock through the mainstream media and the feminist community. On September 9, 2008, Natalie placed her virginity up for auction through the Moonlite Bunny Ranch (in Las Vegas, Nevada) in an effort to fund her graduate school education. Natalie wants to become a marriage counselor. Bidding has reached an unbelievable 3.8 million dollars. It is widely believed that virginity has lost its meaning and importance, especially compared to past traditions, but Natalie Dylan’s auction has revived traditionalist views and is causing people to rethink the current state of body politics and feminist issues.

PART 1—What Is Virginity?

“I’ve had quite a few woman bidders, but that kind of defeats the purpose. For me, personally, virginity loss means intercourse.” (Dylan, interview)

With this statement, and the premise of her auction, Natalie presents the question of what really defines virginity? Is penis-vagina (PV) intercourse really the defining factor of virginity loss? According to Laura Carpenter, in her book *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, Medieval Europeans (early Christians) separated physical virginity from spiritual virginity. PV intercourse caused the physical loss of virginity, while foreplay was merely “corrupting.”

Our current popular view of virginity loss as PV intercourse also can be associated with biological reasons as well. PV intercourse is the only type of sex that impregnates women, and it is the only strictly heterosexual act (Blank 10). In a culture that pushes heteronormativity, any type of sex that is not traditional PV intercourse challenges accepted norms, and is therefore considered deviant or “not real sex.”

The “losing of innocence” also merits mention with its association with virginity loss. In David Friedman’s book *A Mind of Its Own*, he nicknames the penis as a “demonrod.” The penis, he argues, is proof of man’s alienation from God, and passes original sin through each generation through semen. In this manner, a woman who has not experienced PV intercourse maintains her sanctity—her innocence—and is therefore considered a virgin: “Virgin symbolized all that was pure, the penis stood for all that was evil” (Friedman 5). This idea also explains why the term “virgin” has customarily been attributed to women. Women are born “pure,” and only lose their purity through intercourse with a man wielding his “demonrod.”

Natalie has openly stated in interviews that she has participated in oral sex, yet the bids continue to roll in. These ideas that our society embodies also work to objectify sexuality. Even if a person is deeply in love with someone and decides to “have sex” with that person, be it someone of the same sex or the opposite, it is only seen as virginity loss if it is traditional PV intercourse and the importance of love in sex is easily defeated.

PART 2—For What It’s Worth

“If virginity is considered valuable, what’s to stop me from benefiting from that? It is mine after all. And the value of my chastity is one level on which men cannot compete with me. I decided to flip the equation, and turn my virginity into something that allows me to gain power and opportunity”. (Dylan, *Why I’m Selling My Virginity*)

Although this statement by Natalie sounds sexually empowering, is it really? In 1958, the anthropologist Otto Nemecke stated his belief that concern over virginity loss is peculiar only to patriarchal and patrilineal societies (Holtzman, 45). Value placed on virginity reflects societal attitudes about the roles of men and women, and reinforces men’s ownership over women and their bodies; she may be claiming control over her body, but by doing this, she is also buying into the view of virginity as a commodity—a view that has served to disempower women and empower men.

“The Ideology of Virginity” by David Berger and Morton Wenger

was published in 1973, but remains a groundbreaking, and timeless, study. The study looks at self-defined definition of virginity loss by both men and women. Virginity norms are supported by both sexes, but for different reasons; these reasons are related to the economic role of women in society. Berger and Wenger found that female chastity (virginity) is a male interest, and a female bargaining power: “If the sole interest of females and/or their function in society is an exclusively sexual one (as a “sex object”), then women’s control over their sexual behavior provides the only possible control over their destinies, and their only source of power (666).

The problem with virginity as a commodity parallels the problems with more tangible commodities, even though virginity is an abstract concept. Once a commodity has been used, it is no longer as valuable as it was when it was new. The commodity has been devalued. When Natalie sells her virginity, and has sex for the first time, she will be devalued as well – much like a new car that is newly bought, driven around the block, and then resold. Natalie will still be the same person after she has intercourse. Nothing will be visibly different about her. But she will never be able to sell her virginity again. Her virginity has become objectified, and Natalie becomes used goods. Virginity loss is sexually and socially gratifying for a man if he takes it from a woman because the woman’s virginity is not only acquired by the man, it is destroyed. It can only “belong” to one man. Virginity is a nonrenewable resource (Blank, 107).

In “*Why I’m Selling My Virginity*,” Natalie says “For me, my virginity as something sacred is simply not a concept I could embrace. But valuing virginity monetarily—now that’s a concept I could definitely get behind.” Although Natalie does not personally see her virginity as something special, if the ideal of virginity as a commodity was not in place, there would be no monetary value associated with it. She may deny it personally, but the bids she has received, and media attention, say otherwise.

PART 3—Only Hymens Tell the Truth

“Deflowering is historically oppressive—early European marriages began with a Dowry, in which a father would sell his virginal daughter to the man whose family could offer the most agricultural wealth. Dads were basically their daughter’s pimps.” (Dylan, *Why I’m Selling My Virginity*)

Just as one would not haphazardly throw around a diamond ring, or a priceless antique, the valuable commodity that virginity is has traditionally been fiercely guarded—protected from potential damage or corruption that could lessen its value. As Natalie says, fathers did function as their daughter’s pimps in European dowry systems, but we can also bring this idea a bit closer to home. In the Victorian era, girls’ hymens were protected by parents and doctors to ensure that their daughters would be able to marry.

According to Blank, the hymen was discovered because we needed something physical to label virginity with (24). In the Victorian era, only a woman’s husband had the right to rupture it. Under the constant vigilance of parents and doctors, and having ownership of it revoked, girls were in possession of their hymens, but did not actually own them. “A treasure to be sacrificed appropriately and legally at marriage” (Brumberg, 145), if a girl did not have one, she was not considered virginal, and therefore was not valuable enough to marry.

Even as late as 1939, gynecologists needed the permission of a woman’s groom to perform a hymenotomy because he still had a custodial right to his fiancée’s hymen (Brumberg, 160). Forty years later, fear of virginity loss through hymen rupture persisted with the introduction of the tampon. A Catholic guide in sex education at the time stated, “Tampons are completely unsuitable as a form of sanitary protection for young girls” (Brumberg, 163).

Nowadays, the hymen’s fragility is supposedly common knowledge. It can be said that the hymen has acquired more of a metaphorical meaning, rather than a literal one pertaining to virginity loss, since the majority of women tear their hymens before having sexual intercourse for the first time. Many doctors would not even know a hymen if they saw one anyway, since hymens rarely cause medical problems, and only a small subset of doctors will ever actually encounter them

(Blank, 192). Yet Natalie is bringing back the importance of the hymen. She has agreed to undergo a physical examination if the winning bidder requests it. If her hymen is not intact, the bidder can freely renege their bid.

All virginity tests have three things in common—(1) looking for physical signs of virginity; (2) testing conforms to cultural standards; and (3) women have no say, because they are not to be trusted (Blank, 77). Natalie's words are not enough proof of her virginity, nor is a lie detector test. According to Anke Bernau in "Still Intact: The Lure and Lore of the Virgin," in the past, and notably in the Middle Ages, "women were often suspected of pretending to be virgins, and of performing traits associated with virginity. Such suspicions—expressed by medical, legal, religious, and literary writers—were based on the belief that women all potentially possessed a dangerous knowledge that allowed them to exploit the elusive nature of virginity and to deceive those around them." It is difficult to say whether Natalie possesses "dangerous knowledge" or not, but what is clear is that her choice to have a physical examination to prove her virginity represents a culture that still does not value a woman's words to be truthful.

PART 4—It's a Women's Problem

"The vagina becomes the sole measurement of a woman's worth, often obscuring the ways she provides value to her community and family. It is to patriarchy's benefit to reduce women to fuckable parts because of the way that we conceptualize sex." (Dylan, *Why I'm Selling My Virginity*)

The way that we conceptualize sex is immensely different for men and women. Virginity at marriage could be the difference between life and death for a woman, but for men, virginity has never mattered in regard to whether they are fit to marry or not (Blank, 10). According to Berger and Wenger, "the problem of sexual inequality is not one confined to any given strata in society. It is not a class-based phenomenon, nor is it a distinctively racial problem, nor is it related to the values of certain religious groups" (674). Sexual inequality is a women's problem.

This is not to say that women have created this problem—our culture has. This sexual inequality lies in how women are to be submissive, men dominant; women sluts, men studs; in other words, women are often demeaned by sex and virginity loss, while men gain a sense of authority and entitlement. This is why Natalie's virginity has fetched such a high price—men learn to desire virgins over non-virgins when they live in a culture where virginity is constructed as something valuable (Blank, 106). And though the United States does not have systems in place like bridewealth and dowries, the value of virginity is apparent in these sexual double standards.

According to Anke Bernau, virginity is a symbol of resistance against our culture—a culture that is "dangerously hollow, focused solely on instant gratification, and devoid of emotional and spiritual values" (3). In this sense, the "purity" of virginity has evolved from the traditional religious view to a symbol of a "pure" society—a symbol that, in this manner, serves as a challenge against patriarchy, and must be vanquished.

The "erotics of virginity," voices Blank, further explains this view. The erotics of virginity are the priorities of a patriarchal society—youth, physical nobility, ignorance, inexperience, fragility, and vulnerability (196). A woman's virginity is thus objectified, and taken away by a man who has none of these characteristics. By taking a woman's virginity, not only does a man break this symbol of resistance, he stakes claim over the woman. He has taken her nonrenewable "gift," and made it his own. The virgin woman has lost a part of herself, while the man has gained something for himself.

Does this sense of vanquish apply to Natalie, since she is losing her virginity on her own terms, and being paid for it? I argue that it does. Virginity is objectified, and objects can be bought. Therefore, Natalie's auction emphasizes the objectification of virginity, and the erotics of virginity as well. As discussed earlier, when Natalie does have sex for the first time, she becomes used goods. A man will have a story about how he vanquished a virgin—how he "popped her cherry," how he "turned a girl into a woman." And Natalie will have millions of

dollars in place of her virginity—an object for an object.

PART 5—Now and the Future

"We're in a society based on Puritanical views, and we hold onto that overtly. I brought it to the mainstream, but it's never going to be accepted. As a society, we are prudent, but in our day to day lives, sex and prostitution have become normalized." (Dylan, interview)

Is what Natalie is doing a feminist or antifeminist act? With statements like the ones I have spread throughout this paper, it is clear that Natalie sees (or wants to see) her auction as something sexually liberating. And surely there are some feminists who see it as such. But the problem that Natalie's auction poses is not whether she is taking control of her body and virginity or not. She is, and that is sexually liberating. The problem is that people are willing to pay millions of dollars for it. Natalie did not define what virginity is, our culture did. Natalie did not put a price tag of \$3.8 million on her virginity, the bidders have. And, Natalie is not the only woman to undergo virginity testing. What Natalie is doing, though, is making people ask questions. She is sparking thought and discussion in people who would normally not think twice about the ideology of virginity. Natalie Dylan is using her body as an agent for change. Natalie is reinforcing patriarchal values, but these values would be in place whether she illustrated them or not. I see Natalie as a martyr. She is using her body and mind to demonstrate values that are too often silenced or ignored. She is demonstrating values that we, as a culture, must work to change.

PART 6—Conclusion

"I definitely don't see this as the most valuable thing to give to my husband. My heart, mind, and love are much more valuable. That's the message we should be sending to young girls. We shouldn't teach prostitution or that virginity is the only thing to give." (Dylan, interview)

Until our society catches up with this view, women's and girl's sexuality will continue to be under a patriarchal control and value system—a system that has been in place since the Victorian era and earlier; a system that is still in use all around the world, and often in ways much more overt than we see in America. According to Gigi Durham in *The Lolita Effect*, "In real life, sex is at its core a relationship, and a very complex one. It involves not just our bodies, but emotions, ethics, power, legal issues, and many other dimensions" (40). In her book, she explains how the *Lolita Effect* ignores this—and the selling of Natalie's virginity does as well. How are girls to find sexual empowerment if "empowerment" involves bending to fit standards that, in a hypersexualized, yet straitlaced, society—where sexual ideals are created by patriarchy—are impossible to achieve? Patriarchy (and the problems it causes for women) is still alive because women support it, whether they realize it or not. It will take more women like Natalie Dylan to change that...women who do realize what our women and girls are up against, and who are not afraid to fight for a revolution.

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