Race, Power, and White Womanhood: The Obsessions of Tom Watson and Thomas Dixon Jr.

Tara Nicole Kowasic
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd
Part of the History Commons

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/3028

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
Race, Power, and White Womanhood: The Obsessions of Tom Watson and Thomas Dixon Jr.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Tara Nicole Kowasic
Bachelor of Arts, University of Virginia, 2009

Director: Dr. John T. Kneebone
Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University Department of History

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2013
Table of Contents:

List of Figures............................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements....................................................................................................iii
Abstract......................................................................................................................iv
Introduction.............................................................................................................1
Chapter One: The Clansman: Background and Historical Contextualization.............19
Chapter Two: The Birth of Reopening Old Wounds?...............................................44
Chapter Three: Watson, Lichtenstein, and Frank.......................................................57
Conclusion.............................................................................................................77
Appendix I...............................................................................................................82
Bibliography...........................................................................................................85
Vita..........................................................................................................................91
List of Figures

2. Drawing depicting Ku Klux Klan, the Richmond Times Dispatch, 1905………………29
3. Photo of Thomas Dixon Jr.…………………………………………………………35
4. Advertisement from the Richmond Times Dispatch, October 29, 1915………………36
5. Advertisement from the Richmond Times Dispatch, October 16, 1915………………37
6. Photo of Jim Conley………………………………………………………………38
7. Photo of Mary Phagan………………………………………………………………39
8. Photo of Leo M. Frank………………………………………………………………40
9. Photo of the Lynching of Leo M. Frank……………………………………………41
10. Article announcing the lynching of Leo M. Frank, The Atlanta Journal, 1915………42
11. Photo of Thomas E. Watson…………………………………………………………43
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. John Kneebone, for his expertise, assistance and dedication to this project. A huge thank you must go to my graduate committee, Dr. Emilie Raymond and Professor Elizabeth Canfield, for their time and amazing feedback. I would also like to thank my fellow graduate student, Ben Plache, for his last minute edits to this thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank and acknowledge the history department’s Administrative Coordinator Kathleen Murphy, my friends, family, and fellow graduate students who helped make the, somewhat tiresome and lonely, journey of graduate school enjoyable.
Abstract

RACE, POWER, AND WHITE WOMANHOOD: THE OBSESSIONS OF TOM WATSON AND THOMAS DIXON JR.

By Tara Nicole Kowasic, Master of Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Director: Dr. John T. Kneebone
Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University Department of History

Thomas Dixon Jr. (1864 -1946) and Thomas E. Watson (1856-1922), two controversial and radical figures, are often credited with the second coming of the Ku Klux Klan. Dixon, writer of novels and plays such as *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), and Watson, politician, prolific writer, and publisher of *Watson’s Magazine* and *The Jeffersonian*, reached the masses and saturated popular culture with their racial agenda. As each of these men had especially long careers, this thesis focuses on particular times and specific issues. With Dixon, the writing of *The Clansman* (1905) and production of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) are key points in his career and exemplary of his feelings about race, gender and power. For
Watson, the Leo Frank controversy (1913-1915) demonstrates the same. Moreover, each man’s career was associated by others with the second coming of the Klan in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Thus, this era is significant for analysis of both men’s work.

Through their writings, plays, and political stances, Dixon and Watson ensured widespread reception of a racial message aimed at maintaining the Southern social order at the turn of the twentieth century. While desired social order placed white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men at the top of the social pyramid, a viewing of their work through a gendered lens adds complexity to these motivations. This thesis applies a gendered analysis in a comparative study of these two racist publicists in order to identify and analyze what for them, is the fundamental foundation of that social order. In doing so, not only is an obsession with racial control demonstrated, but also a deep-seated desire to protect and control white womanhood—the most important component of the white, Anglo, Protestant majority. In this analysis, gender emerges as a means to augment race and power while maintaining and bolstering the traditional social order.
Introduction

One of the highest grossing films in American history, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), by director D.W. Griffith, is saturated with racism and idealization of the Ku Klux Klan. Few know that Griffith based the movie on the play by Thomas Dixon Jr. entitled *The Clansman* (1905). Dixon, an idolizer of the Lost Cause, conjoined his two novels, *The Leopard’s Spots* and *The Clansman*, into a play that demonstrated the danger of racial integration. At a time when racial tensions were at their zenith, Dixon managed to present a play that reflected white Southern and Northern perceptions of race relations. The play was enormously successful as it traveled the nation, revitalizing the Lost Cause and proclaiming the Klan to be the savior of the white race—and more specifically of white women. Regrettably, few historians consider the play in its own right due to the success and controversy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation*. This is unfortunate as the play reflects social and cultural instabilities present in the early twentieth century. Years before the film, the play ensured widespread dissemination of Dixon’s racist message throughout American society.

The play opens at the end of the Civil War with Confederate whites disfranchised instead of the freedmen. Silas Lynch, the mulatto villain, is elected lieutenant governor. He seeks to

---

1 The Lost Cause is a Southern mode of thinking that portrays the the South as victims in Reconstruction. Moreover, it argues that the evil North upset the old status quo—the faithful slave and loving master. An example of Lost Cause rhetoric would be Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1964; orig. 1936).
legalize inter-racial relationships and marry a white woman, Elsie Stoneman, whose father, Austin Stoneman, was an abolitionist and Lynch’s mentor. Ben Cameron is a young white man who fought on the side of the Confederacy. He also seeks to marry Elsie. Outraged with the white disfranchisement in the South, Ben opts to lead South Carolina’s Ku Klux Klan. Meanwhile, Cameron’s former slave, Gus, is accused of the rape and murder of Ben’s younger sister, Flora. Gus is lynched and left on the doorstep of Silas Lynch. In a rage, Lynch attempts to force marriage on Elsie Stoneman at gunpoint. Ben and his Clansmen storm in and save Elsie and the white race. Austin Stoneman comes to his senses and promises Ben the South will return to a nation under white supremacy.

Looking at *The Clansman* reveals anxieties hidden under the rubric of race and power for the white, Anglo, Protestant male. I argue that the controversial nature of the play aided in its acceptance and rejection as it facilitated negative stereotypes, bolstered the elevation of white manhood over so-called lesser peoples, and yet promoted Southern white paranoia over race relations. Moreover, this play exemplifies issues rooted in Victorian sexuality. While Dixon and Watson were not Victorians, their views on sexuality and gender rules are exemplary of the ideas expressed within the discourse of the subject’s popular theorists. The discourse on Victorian sexuality represents a move to the acknowledgment that innate sexual desire existed but needed to be under control within the confines of marriage—within the South this meant non-interracial marriage. This view explicates traditional gender roles as a way of controlling the innate, and socially disruptive, desire for sex. Furthermore, these traditional roles placed women in the private sphere of the family and home while men acted in the public sphere, augmenting the practice and notion of patriarchy. Historian Jane Dailey argued that prior to the Civil War there were no solidified gender roles within the African American community. But following the Civil
War, black men began to adopt the logic of these gender roles and asserted that they entered the public sphere to ensure protection of their families in the private realm. The white reaction to this was to deny black rights because the end result, they feared, would be miscegenation. Therefore, in order to preserve accepted gender roles of whites, the only viable option was for whites to deny civil rights to black men.\(^2\) Dixon responded to this by warning his audience, white Protestants, to save the white race from the “black beast” entering the public sphere, and thereby threatening the chastity of pure white women in the private sphere.

Thomas Edward Watson was an American politician (U. S. Congressman and Senator), newspaper editor, and writer during the turn of the twentieth century. He was well known for articulating an agrarian viewpoint while attacking big business, bankers, railroads, and the Southern Democrats who protected them. After 1908 he became infamous for his anti-Semitic, racist, and anti-Catholic writings. Through his publications, *The Jeffersonian* and *Watson’s Magazine*, Watson influenced public opinion, especially during the 1913-1915 case of Leo M. Frank.

Leo Frank was a Jewish American factory manager from New York accused of the rape of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan in Atlanta, Georgia. Phagan, a white worker at Frank’s factory, was found sexually assaulted and strangled in the factory’s basement on April 26, 1913. Frank was arrested because accounts of previous advances he made on Phagan showed possible motivation. Moreover, he did not have an alibi and had access to the crime scene. After a month-long trial Frank was sentenced to death. Two years later, after all Frank’s appeals failed, Governor John M. Slaton commuted the sentence to life in prison on June 21, 1915. This outraged many, including Watson, who, convinced of Frank’s guilt, wrote Frank’s attorney

repeatedly as well as discussed the trial at length in The Jeffersonian. A mob took Frank from his cell on August 16, 1915 and lynched him. Watson celebrated the lynching in The Jeffersonian: “Womanhood is made safer everywhere;” “another Ku Klux Klan may be organized to restore HOME RULE;” “the next Leo Frank case in Georgia will NEVER reach the courthouse;” “the voice of the people is the voice of GOD.”³

While it is now widely accepted that Leo Frank was innocent, and black janitor Jim Conley was guilty, the incident and Watson’s obsession with it raises many questions. For example, why was there such a great outcry at the rape of a working class female? Why was Jewish, Yankee, Capitalist Frank, rather than African American Jim Conley, made the chief suspect when evidence suggested otherwise? These questions can be answered by looking at Watson’s coverage of the trial through a gendered lens. Such a perspective reveals anxieties rooted in a Protestant gender system that must be maintained to promote white male dominance.

Men like Thomas Dixon Jr. and Thomas Watson attempted to prohibit extramarital and inter-racial sex, but merely for black men and white women. The double standard called for white women, but not necessarily men, to remain pure in order to maintain the ideal family structure rooted in the values of the Victorian era. Watson and Dixon were not fully formed Victorians, rather the type of description of discourse on Victorian sexuality resembles the way they organized their thinking about gender roles and sexuality. This ethos advocated repression, or self control, for the good of all. Sex, for women, was to be confined within marriage to produce and raise children who would eventually uphold those same values. Consequently, I

argue that Watson and Dixon’s racist writings had the deeper purpose of upholding the patriarchal structure of whites.
Victorian Sex and Context

Some scholars of gender and history argue that Victorian sexuality promoted the suppression of sexual desires. Oddly, during the Victorian era there was a rise in pornography and prostitution. In this way the notion of Victorian sexuality appears to be an oxymoron—supporting repression of premarital sex while secretly promoting interest in pornographic and extramarital sex. At this level it is of import to define sexuality, which does not refer to the intimate act itself, but rather all things representative i.e., clothing and body language. To simplify Victorian sexuality under the umbrella term “repressive” would thus be an error.

Scholars have battled over what the discourse of Victorian sexuality truly means. Unfortunately, one cannot cover the entire historiography in this short essay. But, in order to do the historiography justice three scholars will be introduced. Each fits either into the model of “expression” or “repression.” Through these scholars one will recognize the beginnings and solidification of what can be called “traditional family values” which became widespread attitudes demonstrated by Dixon and Watson.

During the early twentieth century historians neglected the study of sexuality. The first studies emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as historians noticed a discursive shift in dealing with the topic of sexuality. Commonly, these historians argued that the change was not in sexual instinct itself but rather social responses to the act. Many of them focused on Victorian era writers, medical texts, and advice manuals. They typically argued the repression model and then shortly afterwards the expression model appeared on the scene.

Ronald Pearsall examined a large portion of Victorian life. He looked into prostitution circles, perversion, pornography, or anything outside the desired norm. He argued that Victorian sex was class-based as each class had a certain set of mores that were mutually exclusive. In this
paradigm the middle class, or majority, exerted power over the upper and lower classes by pushing this ideal of repression. So, while each class understood sexuality in a very different way, each was forced to express it within middle class values.\(^4\) For Pearsall, the middle class norm and white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant norms were interchangeable. Men and women were to refrain from sexual activities outside the confines of marriage. However this norm applied more to the women than to men, as women were to remain “pure” or “virginal.” Women remained moral epicenters of the home and hearth while men moved about freely in the public sphere.

The middle class worked to keep the lower classes moral, but indulged in questionable practices themselves. This understanding is most apparent in the double standards for men and women. Women were to be at the helm of the home, paradigms of virtue and supposedly devoid of sexual desire, while it was silently tolerated for men to have extramarital affairs, usually with prostitutes or African American women.\(^5\) Thomas Dixon grew up in a Southern middle class family during the Reconstruction era. His values seem to mimic those discussed here.

Post-modern theorist Michel Foucault analyzed the power-knowledge dynamic of repression. The model of “repression” suggested sex was suppressed—something to be tamped down and removed in order to avoid sin. Foucault addressed this directly by asking if “repression” was really “repression.” He questioned and proposed that this mode of repression was historically constructed through scholars’ subjective readings of sources.\(^6\)


Foucault argued that sexual discourse had increased since the seventeenth century and fostered a new language to delineate evil. The Counter-Reformation was the driving force for this change. Catholics were encouraged to confess their sins to ensure proper penance. Therefore, suitable language was utilized to differentiate the severity of sins. Only through this method could one guarantee appropriate penance and salvation. One had to understand evil in order to avoid it, thereby making it controllable. In short, the discourse of sexuality entered the vernacular via religion.\(^7\)

However, Foucault did not credit religion itself for the growing discourse on sexuality. By the eighteenth century political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex emerged. This discourse was more of an analysis of sex rather than general theory. In this regard, heterosexual monogamy emerged as the norm but obsession arose to locate the individuals who diverged from this new norm. These non-normative individuals drew attention not because they were accepted, but rather to enforce the traditional, and newly hetero-normative, familial unit. Sexuality became binary—perversion (unsanctioned sex outside of marriage) and normal (sex controlled within marriage between the same classes).\(^8\) In short, this would be the same view held by Dixon and other men of his era. For example, the greatest fear and central theme throughout Dixon’s work revolved around miscegenation. By addressing this issue repeatedly and by depicting the near-rape of a white female, Dixon was bolstering the notions of the traditional white familial unit. In doing this Dixon demonstrated how race and power are revealed via gender anxieties.

\(^7\) Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 19.

Foucault and Pearsall both argued that sexuality became an avenue to acquire and maintain power. Foucault proposed repression as a means for control, in that sex became part of the discourse and a concern for society. Pearsall argued that attitudes towards sex changed but the obsession with sex did not increase or decrease. Sex existed in lexicon and word play but was still constrained within certain aspects of society i.e., marriage.

The conspiracy to keep sex where it belonged—in silence and between sheets—was difficult to break. There was hardly room at all for prosaic sex; where sex was mentioned it was in nutty, esoteric, exotic, ego-vaulting, pseudoscientific, ultra romantic contexts. For Pearsall sex did not exist in a solid form within society. Thus, it was changeable as each class expressed it differently. What one must take from Pearsall is that the middle class pushed this traditional model of repression to uphold societal values, which is still being practiced today. Meanwhile, Foucault demonstrated the solidification and promotion of a white, Christian, heteronormative family unit in which sex is controlled within marriage.

Steven Marcus examined what he called “the other Victorians,” or those who would not subscribe to the moral code of the middle class. He looked at pornographic literature and the lives of prostitutes to better understand the lives of those situated on the periphery of society. Marcus used psychoanalysis to understand whipping as a form of pornography. He argued that whipping displayed sadistic and masochistic tendencies. Through this, he suggested, sexual desire was the result of repression of sex and sexual culture. In this model sexuality was isolated, but still existed and was able to develop and change. The growth of pornography, especially with the invention of the camera, was one of the results of sexual repression. Thus, repression

9 Pearsall, The Worm and the Bud, 415.
encouraged a form of sexual growth in the Victorian era, which in turn created more sexual expression to repress.\textsuperscript{10}

Juxtaposing the conclusions of Foucault and Marcus, certain points become clear. For each, society acknowledged sexuality in the midst of suppressing sexual desire. With Marcus, repression led to a need for an outlet that led to more pornographic content and an increase in extramarital affairs and prostitution. Because of this, sexuality became more repressed as it violated so-called traditional Victorian values. This does not denote a denial of sex, but rather a desire for control of the anarchic desire, whereas with Foucault sexuality became more fluid and visible and gave individuals a means to sexual expression. In this sense Victorian sexuality was not a vehicle for repressing sexual desire but for expressing and controlling it in the correct manner i.e., marriage between middle class whites.

Examining these writers together, one can easily see how Victorian sexuality could be labeled an oxymoron that could create anxiety. The notion of expression versus repression can be confusing as points seemingly interconnect and diverge on various levels. Yet, what I argue is that the hydraulic notion of sex, and white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant family values were elaborated and widely expressed during Dixon and Watson’s era. Further, the notion of the woman belonging in the domestic or private domain can be drawn from this era as well. Barbara Weltner’s (1966) article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” explains American gender roles in that era.\textsuperscript{11} She examined the shift from household production on farms to men working outside the home with industrial positions. When men worked on the farms the women


maintained the home doing daily chores and raising children—but they enjoyed an economic function in this form. When men left the home and entered the public domain women remained in the private sphere and lost their economic functions to the factories. During this time, marriage acted as a lasso for men holding them in the public sphere as the major breadwinners, while women prepared the next generation of men.

These traditional values transcended the times. Women remained in the private sector while men moved about freely in the public sphere. Also, the idea of the double standard for men remained intact. Women were to maintain their chastity, and virtue, acting as moral guardians of the home and hearth, while at the time silently tolerating men to do as they pleased—but not with other women of virtue (white middle-class women). In this regard, even the double standard promoted a sort of mode of control. Virtuous women could not engage in such acts; so men would engage prostitutes or force attentions on black women. Sexuality, nonetheless, was to be controlled within marriage. As demonstrated, Victorians did not disregard sex, or deny the flesh in a Puritanical form. Rather, they noted the innate need and function of sex within a controlled environment. This middle class ideal bolstered the familial unit and solidified the traditional values of the majority; family was the key, and consequently procreation was a necessary function for a successful family unit.

Thomas Dixon Jr. rallied for the prohibition of inter-racial sex for white women. Women were to remain pure in order to eventually acquire and maintain the ideal traditional family structure rooted in the middle class values of the era. Dixon felt urgency in defending the chastity of white women as the protectors of future generations. The middle class advocated repression (or control) in order to indoctrinate the other classes into their ideal. Sex, for women, was to be confined within marriage to produce and raise children who would eventually uphold
those same values. Consequently, this functioned as a method to uphold the patriarchal structure.
Historiography

While there are numerous articles and books dedicated to Watson and Dixon, none have applied a gendered perspective to both of them. Much of the work on Dixon looks at him in reference to *The Birth of a Nation* and the Ku Klux Klan, with some also attempting to psychoanalyze him. Watson, on the other hand, is examined for his role in the Populist movement, racism and the Ku Klux Klan, and the anti-Catholic movement. By examining the Watson papers specifically the weekly *Jeffersonian*, an uncanny resemblance between Watson and Dixon appears, as they both display a value system that was popular for much of the twentieth-century South. Hence, this thesis contributes to the scholarship on both figures, as it will cover a new area of study.

Dixon and Watson were the products of the old Southern order. This system produced ideals that valued the white, Anglo, Protestant male model. While this mindset was popular within their generation, the early 1900s generated a period of change. Historian Rebecca Edwards, in *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era*, expanded on this notion of change stating that the latter half of the nineteenth century was immersed in discourse about the relationship between women and men, and the family and state.

A shift in norms is exemplified within the early twentieth century factory system. Women working outside the home created tension within the traditional social system. Edwards stated “Democrats linked white male political rights to the household authority.”

12 Women’s virtues were associated with concerns for morality and Christianity. These concerns were to remain in the private sphere—between husband and wife with men acting as the “masters of their home.”

Women entering the workforce under the direction of a male supervisor endangered the traditional social structure. The threat to these values and norms generated political fear and awareness. The consciousness of this threat allowed Watson to get on his public soapbox and appeal to, and engage the masses. Watson and Dixon valued the hierarchical gendered relations because it ensured protection of time honored traditions and survival of the value system.

“Outside this order lay the allied evils of sexual and political illegitimacy.”13 The Leo Frank case exemplified the concern for sexual illegitimacy.

Historians interested in the Leo Frank case have asked: how did the testimony of a black man convict an affluent white factory manager of murder? For example, when Joel Williamson briefly discussed Leo Frank in A Rage for Order: Black White Relations in the South Since Emancipation, he proposed that the whites refused to acknowledge flaws within their own traditional social system. Rather, the problem was always caused by some outside force, i.e. usually blacks, but also Reconstructionists, Yankee Carpetbaggers, Capitalist factory workers and later Communists.14

Williamson argued that the Frank case was indicative of a new menace within the Southern order. The press, politicians, and above all, Watson, painted Phagan as an innocent virginal girl who had been defiled by an alien Jew. Moreover, that alien was convicted and later lynched (the way a black man would be for committing the crime) on the testimony of a “drunken” African American man. According to Williamson, Frank was killed as a substitute scapegoat for the old favorite, the “black beast.” In essence Frank stood for everything alien,

13 Edwards, Angels in the Machinery, 23.
14 Joel Williamson, A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation, 240.
unknown and unwanted within the Southern social scene. He was the new menace exemplary of Yankee, industrialist, Jewish penetration in the upper class of Atlanta. While Phagan was the opposite: Southern, white, Protestant, an “innocent virgin.”¹⁵ In this way Phagan represented the white, Protestant majority obsessed with maintaining and protecting white womanhood. Contrarily, Frank represented a new threat.

Jeffrey Melnick, in Black- Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South, suggested that the trial at its core was a question of who was capable of committing such a crime.¹⁶ According to Melnick, the prominence of outsiders in Atlanta posed a major threat to New South Atlanta. Frank’s wealth, affluence, education and religious beliefs made him a viable enemy—an elite outsider with the potential for power and control. Jim Conley, the black witness, was uneducated, a drunk, a janitor, and thought to be illiterate. Conley, as such, was not a perceived threat to the New South as whites had learned to maintain order with African American relations through disenfranchisement and segregation. Frank was the new ideal menace that made Jews the common enemy as opposed to African Americans.

Melnick suggested that the actors in this endeavor cannot be overlooked. The suspects were black or Jewish, and both were male. The victim was young, white, Christian, and female. The white, Southern male was absent.¹⁷ Furthermore, this is demonstrative of who was in control in factories and consequently the New South. Thus, this called into question the proper place of the white male. The white males absence and inability to protect the virtue of the white female


¹⁶ Jeffrey Melnick, Black- Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South, 106.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Melnick, “‘The Night Witch Did It’: Villainy and Narrative in the Leo Frank Case,” American Literary History 12, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 2000): 113-29. 115
meant society needed to assign a capable culprit as villain. How could such an atrocity occur if race relations were in a “harmonious state?” The whites saw blacks as ignorant, and thus “Conley’s ignorance proved his innocence.” Logically, Frank’s intelligence proved his guilt.  

The goal of the white Protestant majority was to find a satisfactory villain. The whites worked tirelessly to marginalize blacks; a black janitor was not a suitable demon for the crime of murder of a young white girl. Jim Conley, Melnick argued, possessed limited social power while Frank, young, affluent, Yankee, and Jewish, served as the new ideal monster. Frank, a powerful man, overseeing the work of young white women, threatened the fabric of the social order. As an alien to the South possessing control and therefore a threat to white womanhood, Frank was the antithesis of the value system that Watson held so dearly.

Nancy MacLean’s article, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” applied a gendered analysis in order to decipher the public’s mob-like reaction to the Frank case—what she refers to as reactionary populism. Much like Williamson and Melnick, she is primarily concerned with the “curious reversal” of Southern practice: the condemnation of an affluent factory manager on the testimony of a black man. MacLean noted that the public rallied around Phagan, insisting she died to preserve her chastity.

MacLean argued Phagan may not have been a virgin. In this sense Phagan “evinced profound concern about changing relations between the sexes and generations and about the

18 Melnick, Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South, 106-108. Interestingly, the white male was absent or incapable of saving the white female in The Birth of a Nation as well. Unlike in the stage play of The Clansman, the white male did not arrive in time to save the virtuous woman. As Phagan’s death was prior to the premiere of The Birth of a Nation, one could argue this movie is symbolic of fear of the white male losing control to new enemies, capable enemies like Frank, not Conley.

19 Melnick, Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South, 61-64.
shifting mores among the wage earning women.” Speculation surrounding Phagan’s virtue only added to public outburst at the changing social order. Surely, such a thing would not occur under the older, treasured social order in which the white, Anglo, Protestant male was able to protect white womanhood. This concern managed to unite working class radicals with the middle and upper classes. Populism by nature is a grassroots movement, yet this unlikely alliance between the classes is what MacLean found so intriguing. Each group rallied around a working class female. MacLean argues this hostility toward Frank created a militant sexual conservatism in which the common denominator was fear of dissolution of the traditional social order.

The economic development acted a solvent on older relations of power and authority. The dissolution of the older social order made class hostilities more volatile and agreeable to reactionary populism. Thus, consequent change in female behavior with familial relations at the center was the catalyst for concern, obsession, and mob response in the Frank case. Women entering the work force threatened men with losing agency and authority in the home. The mentality of Dixon and Watson, raised in a time when male agency was unquestionable and white womanhood acted to guarantee future generations upholding traditional norms, would see the issues surrounding the Leo Frank case as threatening to society.

Jacqueline Dowd Hall examined Jesse Daniel Ames’s role in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). She argued that lynching was used as a justification to “protect,” or more accurately “control,” white womanhood. She argued that “any transgression of the caste system was a step toward ‘social equality,’ and social equality, with its


21 MacLean, Reactionary Populism, 920.
connotation of personal intimacy, could end only in interracial sex.”22 Thus, lynching was a mode of social control, attempting to maintain the color line in the South. Rape became an obsession of the Southern mind that was rooted in “conflict between ‘civilization and savagery’.” According to Hall, rape and rumors of such, became acceptable forms of folklore in the Bible belt.23 Thus, entertainment such as The Clansman, The Birth of a Nation, and the controversy surrounding the Leo Frank case, aroused Southern male white paranoia and warned of the evils that could ensue if they lost control, or failed to “protect white womanhood,” all the while providing justification for and glorifying mob violence.

By looking at The Clansman and the Leo Frank trial in terms of gender, the parallels between Dixon and Watson, two men who spewed radical rhetoric, can be seen together. Dixon, worried about miscegenation and the destruction of society at the hands of the mythic “black beast,” and Watson, concerned with a Yankee, Jewish, Capitalist stealing a young girl’s virtue while already threatening the Protestant male’s social legitimacy are through different modes of operation, proposing the same thing. Protecting white womanhood to uphold the patriarchal structure for future generations is the common denominator. In speaking out during tumultuous times these men’s radical message resonated within society.

22 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry, Revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 145

23 Hall, Revolt against Chivalry, 147.
Chapter One
The Clansman: Background and Historical Contextualization

The Clansmen showed through most of the South: Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Louisiana, Florida, and both Carolinas. It made its debut in Norfolk, Virginia, in late September, 1905. The storyline began at the end of the Civil War with the white population disfranchised instead of the African Americans. Each role in the play conveyed a message to society. For example, Silas Lynch, a mulatto villain with an uncontrollable lust for white women, refused to accept his fated station at the bottom of the social pyramid by attempting to obtain white property.24 The new world depicted by Dixon was far from historically accurate. However, the play embodied the fears of upheaval and displacement felt by white men among the top rungs of society. Those fears were widespread throughout the South in the early twentieth century. When all seemed lost, the Clansmen saved society from the black man; the play was created to broadcast the dire warnings that Dixon felt relevant to American society.

In order to understand the context surrounding Dixon’s work, it is important to recognize the era in which he was writing, the audience he was addressing, and how he came to hold

certain ideals. Dixon strongly believed in pseudo-scientific racism, a popular way of thinking about race that insisted non-whites were biologically inferior to whites. A core tenet of pseudo-scientific racism, and a common belief among the American population, was that African American men were inherently incapable of controlling their sexual desires. The character Silas Lynch, with his diabolical desire for white women and all things belonging to the white man, is just one of many examples of this belief in the play.

This hostility toward the dark-skinned members of American society was validated by the stereotypical depictions of the black man involved in relations with white women. The sexual fears and fantasies of the white population increasingly focused on the savagery of the diabolic black animal. The portrayal of black man as a “beast” merely augmented the need of white males to assert manhood in order to maintain control. Thus, “Southern white men equated manliness with whiteness, redefining manhood in racial rather than occupational terms.” As Social Darwinism gained prominence, eugenics, racist rhetoric and exertion for manliness sought a foundation in what was regarded as scientific legitimacy. These trends are evident in the works of Dixon. The assertion of manhood is depicted by Dixon as a former slave, Gus, is lynched and left on the mulatto Silas Lynch’s doorstep as a warning to stay away from white women. The Clansmen storming in to save the white race serves to relieve lasting anxieties caused by Reconstruction.

---------------------

25 Lears, Rebirth, 106.

26 Lears, Rebirth, 107. Lears exemplifies the reassertion of manhood with discussions of imperialism, militarism and also lynching of dark skinned individuals.

27 Lears, Rebirth, 107.
Dixon chose *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as his prequel because it had established a master narrative that, he believed, succeeded in demonizing whites and aggrandizing the suffering of black slaves.\(^{28}\) Thus, Dixon’s novels, which depicted the whites as the race suffering at the end of Reconstruction, sought to tell the “Southern truth.” Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel appeared on the best selling list for years, and its audience had expanded exponentially through its various adaptations as a play. It is estimated that for every person who read Stowe’s novel, fifty saw the play.\(^{29}\) With high illiteracy rates and the heavy price of books, Dixon knew the stage was his route to disseminating the “Southern truth.” Hence his motivation for writing the novels and reason for staging a play are exemplified. He sought to make money, and warn the middle class of the evils of breaking with tradition, more specifically, the tainting of the blood of the whites, the dismantling of their values, and the eventual destruction of the society, which he held so dear.

Each of the advertisements and articles dealing exclusively with the novel are taken from *The New York Times (NYT)*. The many pages in the *New York Times* publicizing the novel demonstrate the extent of Dixon’s popularity. The novel, and later play, were not meant to speak directly to the Southern states but were to present the ‘negro problem’ to America, with the end

\(^{28}\) Stokes, *The Birth of a Nation*, 37.

\(^{29}\) Stokes, *The Birth of a Nation*, 29-32, 36. Dixon was a youth of the post-Civil War era; he was exposed to Southern anger over the humiliating Reconstruction (especially against the North), the glorification of the Lost Cause, and social instability in the South. He came from a very religious family. His father and brother were ministers and that was expected of Dixon. However, before becoming the Reverend Thomas Dixon Jr., he abandoned the Church to study the writings of evolutionary theorists Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer. Dixon’s motivation for writing such novels as *The Leopard’s Spots* and *The Clansman* was to offer a counter-narrative to the view of the South depicted in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Dixon had experience as an actor so possibly this could have been his ambition all along but with the popularity of Stowe’s novel that resulted from its adaptation into a stage play, and the fact the he claimed he was responding directly to Stowe, this seems the more logical motivation.
result being the reconciliation of the white race. Furthermore, his work appealed to the need for a social hierarchy consisting of white, Protestant males perched securely on top as well as the promotion of the traditional family.

On April 16, 1904, the first article in the New York Times’ authors’ section read:

NEW Novel is announced by Thomas Dixon Jr., author of The One Woman and The Leopards Spots [sic]. It is said to be, in a way, a companion to his first book and is entitled, The Clansman [sic]. Mr. Dixon’s purpose here is to show that the original formers of the Ku Klux Klan were modern knights errant, taking the only means at hand to right wrongs.

The article continued with a discussion of each of Dixon’s previous novels, The One Woman and The Leopard’s Spots. To date they had sold over 100,000 copies, with The Leopard’s Spots outselling The One Woman. Interestingly, this article was printed in April, 1904, but The Clansman was not set for release until January 14, 1905. This eight-month advance notice helped create immediate demand for the book. Also, the article makes a blatant call to manhood as the KKK are “modern knights errant;” they are the savior of the white race. Similar advertisements continued throughout the rest of the year. There were at least six more articles in the remainder of 1904, with consistent updates on the progress of Dixon’s work. One such article named the illustrator, while another gave a brief five-line discussion on the opening chapter of the book. A subsequent article told the reader that the intended number for the first edition was set at 40,000. This number is revealing in that it shows Doubleday and Page, the publishers, expected to sell many copies. But, the truly revealing clue is an article mentioning that Dixon’s book

31 Referring to The Leopards Spots.


33 In chronological sequence: The Leopards Spots and The Leopards Spots. The Leopards Spots outsold The Leopards Spots.

exhausted its first printing within the first ten days. A second printing began immediately.\textsuperscript{35} The goal of this endeavor was to speak to American concerns dealing with white supremacy and more importantly, miscegenation.

Figure 1: Advertisement for book in \textit{New York Times}, 1905. \textsuperscript{36}


Beginning in 1905, advertising of the novel escalated. There were at least eight ads in the New York Times prior to the book’s premiere in January. Following the premiere, the book continued gaining publicity as it reached the best sellers list and exhausted its first edition. On premiere day, January 14, 1905, Dixon’s introduction was published in the New York Times. His introduction highlighted the controversial nature of his novel, as well as the influence of scientific racism in his works. “Aryan race” explicitly identifies his audience, political leanings, and the social ideals of the times.  

Also apparent from his introduction is Dixon’s claim that his story is historical fact. Furthermore, it is likely that most would take extreme interest in this novel, since it embodied and presented, or alluded, to historical characters. Such a stunt aroused curiosity. Whether or not one is interested in the glorification of the South and its “demise” caused by the Reconstruction period, such assertions commanded the interest of readers.

Seven days after the initial publication of Dixon’s novel, a review appeared in the New York Times “Noteworthy New Books of the Week” section. The author of the review described the book as “vivid and thrilling; some Northerners may have a few of their cherished ideas of history rather badly shaken when they read this book.” This one quote heading the introduction pictured earlier, (Figure 1), truly captured Dixon’s agenda: to speak to the North, correct the historical narrative, and create reconciliation for the white Aryan race. It also addresses the need to protect the moral epicenters of the Caucasian race: the mothers and future mothers of the next generations. A more detailed review appeared in the same issue of the New York Times. The

37 Refer to Fig 1 placed above this paragraph.

38 Austin Stoneman is said to represent Thaddeus Stevens.

review was mixed, stating, “one should question the wisdom or taste in creating books like this” and “gives fresh life to the bitterness past [sic] between North and South” and lastly, “most know too much about history to be led astray by the author’s own cause.”\(^\text{40}\) What proves interesting is that this review began in a very blunt, negative manner, but switched midway through the article to the condemnation of the “negro” in politics.

Only too true is the picture, which the author [Dixon] draws of the horrors, which followed the bestowal of arms and civil rights upon Negroes of the South. It is to wonder that to-day [sic] the white people of those same states passionately resent the least hint of a return to those days when Negro Legislatures and Negro officials cast their terrible shadow over the land. Bad as such a state of things would be to theorize over, the actual occurrence of it must have been so horrible that one marvels how the men who suffered it ever made peace with those who imposed it upon them.\(^\text{41}\)

The article ends with a mention that the “admirable” KKK protected white men when the “negroes” held all the offices. This quote also articulates resentment over the “negro” in the public sphere. While the gendered undertones are not overtly displayed in this quote, historian Jane Dailey argued that white men rationalized keeping black men out of the public sphere because, upon entrance, black men would desire access to the white private sphere and thus to white women. This point is clearly exemplified in the book via Silas Lynch attempting to force marriage on Elsie Stoneman. The only prevention therefore, was the denial of rights to blacks. Also, blatantly visible in this article is the yearning of white Southern males to return to an old way of life that kept blacks at the bottom of the social hierarchy under the control of whites. More importantly, one should not be concerned with the negative depiction of the black population, or their rights and lack thereof. The point of importance here is the verbalization of


fear of returning to the Reconstruction South in which Southern whites honestly believed they
were wronged by the Yankees. Reconstruction represented a time when Southern whites
believed they were disenfranchised and black men were hoping to take over their white women.
Dixon on Stage, “We’ve got supernumeraries and horses!”

On the heels of the novel’s success, Dixon decided to create a stage production of *The Clansman*, by combining *The Leopards Spots* with *The Clansman*. Dixon was able to retain his agenda to include the most important points: beware the black beast, safeguard your white women, Aryans are the one true superior race, and Clansmen are the race’s guardians. While the novel was a success, the most widespread public dissemination of Dixon’s message followed conversion of the novel to a stage play. As advertised, the play was his answer to Stowe’s novel. Obviously, if Dixon’s novels were the “South’s answer to Uncle Tom” then the logical destination was the stage. While at least one newspaper ran *The Clansman* serially, it cannot be assumed that everyone bought a copy of the book or had access to the novel via the newspapers. By placing his Clansmen on stage Dixon ensured that his counter narrative would be absorbed further into society.\(^\text{42}\)

\(^{42}\) At this point, the illiteracy rates of American society were still rather high, and those who could read cannot be assumed to read whatever novels go to print.
Figure 2: Drawing depicting Ku Klux Klan, *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, 1905.43

The article accompanying this picture gave publicity to Dixon’s Clansmen depictions. The artwork—spanning a whole column and stretching the entire length of the page—is more intriguing. Immediately commanding attention is the burning cross raised to the sky or heavens, representing God’s will and atonement. The crosses embroidered on the white men’s robes also command providence but more importantly reflect the Aryan right as the one true race. Notice also the two men front and center are not wearing masks, suggesting confidence in their beliefs and a lack of shame and the grey-haired man with hands in what looks like a prayerful position.

43 “Scene from The Ku Klux Klan,” *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, Sept 17th, 1905. The same picture was found reprinted in a paper in Florida and Kentucky.
The hooded figures in the background signify the Klan’s large membership and willingness to defend their cause. The background calls attention to the night, which could have two meanings: an appeal to the secrecy of the Clansmen, or perhaps signifying their time of congregation. Lastly, there is a dark figure at the foot of the cloaked figures in the forefront. More than likely it depicts a black man fallen victim to the Clansmen. As to how he came to be at their feet one can only speculate, but this portrays him in his rightful place, below his white superiors. More importantly though, while modern readers may view this as vile and grotesque, the drawing suggests that if a murder might have occurred, it was God’s will. Lastly, this propaganda personifies the social hierarchy, with the white Protestant male at the top of the social pyramid defending his pre-ordained station in life. This depiction appeared not only in a Richmond newspaper, but was found reprinted in Florida and Kentucky.44

The play debuted at the Liberty Theater in New York City in January of 1906 and met with a huge success in spite of apprehension by some.45 Later that year, however, the play sparked significant controversy in several cities. Four weeks after opening in Philadelphia, the play was banned due to a riot between white and black patrons.46 During a showing in Atlanta another riot broke out and police were forced to make several arrests.47 Pete Daniel credited the publicity surrounding the stage play with the Atlanta Race Riot of September 1906, when up to forty blacks were killed. Daniel believed that the play agitated race relations and the riots grew

44 At this point, it is unclear the total number of states to reprint this picture.


46 Stokes, The Birth of a Nation, 52. See also The Alexandria Gazette, October 26, 1906.

out of those tenuous race relations.⁴⁸ Although the play met with immense success in Kentucky, The Virginia Citizen of Irvington, Virginia, reported Governor Beckham of Kentucky “signed a bill making it unlawful to present anywhere in the state plays calculated to inspire race prejudice.”⁴⁹ The article then specified Stowe’s and Dixon’s plays as causes of the bill. According to Melvyn Stokes, the first year of Dixon’s stage play was the most enthusiastic—many people, white and black alike, paid to see the play. The enthusiasm for the play can be related to the message it presents. The play bolstered notions of white superiority. The near-rape of a white woman depicted on stage, sparked outrage and incited fear within the white audience, which was relieved by the lynching of Gus. Historian John Inscoe argued the play was widely accepted in North Carolina. While there was acceptance the opposition is revealing.

The most controversial responses to the play came from South Carolina, where Dixon received so many boos and hisses that he was unable to make his typical post-production speech. This debacle caught the attention of several newspapers, which reported on the incident. Allegedly, Dixon’s response to hissing was “God ordained the white man to teach the lessons of white supremacy.”⁵⁰ The Sun of New York reported Dixon as saying “I will give anyone 1,000 [dollars] to point out [an] inaccuracy.”⁵¹ The Daily Press of Norfolk, Virginia, exclaimed that the playgoers asserted Dixon was “making blood money.”⁵² Most noteworthy among the articles reporting on the incident in Columbia, South Carolina, was The De Soto County News, which

---

⁴⁸ Daniel, Crossroads, 59

⁴⁹ “Items of Interest,” The Virginia Citizen, April 13, 1906.


⁵¹ “Clansman Hissed in the South,” The Sun, Oct 16, 1905

⁵² “Audience Hisses Dixon and Play,” The Daily Press, Oct 17, 1905
claimed the hissing and booing responses were from white Democrats as “there were scarcely twelve negroes in the gallery.” Lastly, some men went to Dixon’s hotel after the play to express their opinions. Dixon politely declined, so the men left him a note that was delivered to his room.\textsuperscript{53} Prior to the play’s presentation, Governor Heyward refused Dixon’s offer of free box seats, asserting “what good can come of it?”\textsuperscript{54} Possibly the South Carolinian’s dismay was motivated by the portrayal of their state as the main setting for the play; or it was a likely response of fear for the return of tenuous social issues and negative race relations from the presentation of the play.

Unfortunately, the extent of South Carolina’s anger or resentment towards the play can only be speculated as only one more newspaper article addresses South Carolina’s disdain. An editorial was sent from W. E. Gonzales, editor and founder of Columbia’s \textit{The State}, which criticized the play’s historical inaccuracy.\textsuperscript{55} Gonzales argued the play was all fiction; even the glorification of the Klan was misrepresented, as the old Klan was not organized in the way Dixon presented. He explained the reason for the play’s success was simply that it had been advertised “like no other!” Further, he insinuated those in support of Dixon’s play were likely candidates to lead and join a lynching mob. He continued by elaborating that no South Carolina paper would endorse it and both Savannah and Macon, Georgia, condemned the play. Gonzales was aware that the play justified lynching, and thus public disorder and lawlessness.

The historical context surrounding the play’s production reflect the social instabilities of the early twentieth century. Several aspects of the play depict the tumultuous times. Dixon’s

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{De Soto County News}, Oct 20, 1905
\textsuperscript{54} “Governor Heyward Snubs Tom Dixon,” \textit{The Daily Press}, Oct 11, 1905
\textsuperscript{55} Gonzales was the son of a wealthy Southern planter and a Cuban revolutionary. For more information on W.E. Gonzales, founder of \textit{The State} visit \url{http://www.thestate.com/about/}
\end{quote}
childhood explains his glorification of the South and his need to vindicate the South through his writing. Dixon, who grew up during Reconstruction as a child of the Lost Cause, regarded the Southern white population as the victims of unfair Northern prejudices. The mere idea that an “inferior negro” could enter the public sphere to become involved in white politics, led directly to his suspicion that miscegenation would shortly follow. Thus, his writing, stage-play, and other forms of propaganda were used to speak out against such possibilities, solidifying the notions of white-male superiority. Under this model the white male would remain in the public realm making the decisions while his white wife remained protected within the home. Her chastity would not be threatened under this model, and thus the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant race would remain free to procreate babies who would someday continue the norms their parents tried so earnestly to protect. As Jane Dailey argued, the issue was maintaining the distinction between public and private for black men. When black men moved into the public sphere they could then move into the white private sphere. Whites could not permit equality because it would logically lead to miscegenation. This move to the public realm had to be prevented, and Dixon, through the character of Silas Lynch was attempting to articulate this message to the masses.

Through his writing Dixon addressed what he believed to be “historical inaccuracies.” Dixon’s audience was influenced by societal happenings as well. Dixon was able to articulate racist ideas and to validate them through historical fallacy. In turn, his audience was willing to hear his message. Reconstruction created a desire for regeneration and manliness. According to historian Jackson Lears, this was an underlying yearning for most white males and was a bi-product of the Protestant ethos. Dixon’s stories and play exemplified the assertion of white masculine supremacy as a former slave, Gus, was lynched. Ben Cameron and the Clansmen saved Elsie from Silas Lynch, thus restoring the pre-ordained position of white superiority.
When Dixon’s play debuted, it was popular because it reflected relevant social issues and demonstrated the success of the white male. It was equally unpopular as it brought old scars to the surface and heightened tensions at tumultuous times. The play fed and soothed the white paranoia. When whites did oppose the play, it was more out of concern for their own safety and the safety of their women as well as sanity in keeping the blacks under control.

*The Clansman*, with the references to the rape of white women and miscegenation displays common middle class values of the era. African Americans were not considered middle class; they were ranked lower than poor whites. The middle class, therefore, wanted to embrace its exclusivity and display its dominance in numbers by ensuring the continuity of these same values for future generations. If black Americans were ever to gain a foothold in politics and change their social status, miscegenation would surely ensue and the future generations would be threatened, thus tearing the fabric of American middle class ideals. These ideals, rooted in Victorian sexuality, demonstrate that sex was not to be ignored but had to be controlled and channeled properly. Dixon, and other middle class men of his era, held and promoted these views within the public sphere. Their greatest fear was that the “negro” would grow to be just as or more powerful than the white man. Henceforth, public white figures, much like Dixon, had to ensure the perpetuation of this racist mantra. This, like anything involving patriarchy, boiled down to acquiring and solidly maintaining power.
Figure 3: Thomas Dixon Jr.  

---

56 Cook, *Fire From the Flint*. 
Figure 4: Advertisement from the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, October 29, 1915.
Figure 5: Advertisement from the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, October 16, 1915.
Figure 6: Photo of Jim Conley, key witness in case against Leo M. Frank.  

---

Figure 7: Photo of Mary Phagan, victim in the case of Georgia v. Leo M. Frank.  

---

58 Frey, The Silent and the Damned.
Figure 8: Photo of Leo M. Frank, accused of the murder of Mary Phagan. 59

59 Frey, *The Silent and the Damned*. 
Figure 9: Infamous photo of the lynching of Frank near the birthplace of Mary Phagan in Marietta, Georgia.  

60 Frey, *The Silent and the Damned.*
Figure 10: Article announcing the lynching of Leo M. Frank in *The Atlanta Journal*, 1915.\(^{61}\)

---

\(^{61}\) Frey, *The Silent and the Damned*. 
Figure 11: Thomas E. Watson. 62

---

62 Woodward, Agrarian Rebel.
Chapter Two
The Birth of Reopening Old Wounds?

Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation opened in Clunes Auditorium in Los Angeles, California, on February 8, 1915, under its original name The Clansman. Much like the play, The Clansman, it was an instant hit. The first motion picture that was twelve reels in length, it lasted three hours in two parts separated by an intermission. Previously, few movies were more than one reel and most lasted a scant fifteen minutes. At the time it cost around $100,000 to make the film—also a first for the period. It was the first movie to be shown at the White House, and there were screenings for Supreme Court Justices and members of Congress. In short, it can be called the first American “blockbuster” with currently over 200,000,000 viewers worldwide.

When scholars have examined Dixon’s Clansman, most did so in terms of The Birth of a Nation. Scholars used Dixon’s novels and play to backdrop Dixon’s rise to the top of popular culture in the early twentieth century and to contextualize Birth. One rarely unearths a comparative study of the play and movie, such as John Inscoe’s 1987 article, “The Clansman on

---

63 Not until the premiere on the East Coast did Dixon change the name to The Birth of a Nation. Williamson, A Rage for Order, 115

64 Melvyn Stokes, D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008); Introduction.

65 The Birth of a Nation herein referred to as Birth.
Stage and Screen,” which juxtaposed the general acceptance of Birth with the controversy that surrounded The Clansman in North Carolina. Inscoe confined his review to public reactions in North Carolina, perhaps because Dixon grew up in North Carolina during the Reconstruction era and was a child of the Lost Cause. Additionally, Inscoe argued that the animosity surrounding the play’s performances resulted from tensions between the races, implying that Dixon’s Southern upbringing was partly responsible for his racist rhetoric. By the time Birth premiered, the white population had attained complete supremacy with Jim Crow and there was little fear from adverse race relations. Furthermore, Inscoe insisted that The Clansman indeed provoked “racial hostility and considerable controversy,” but by the time the film premiered it seemed irrational to fear a racial uprising.66

According to historian Joel Williamson, after the success of the New York premiere later in 1915, Thomas Dixon decided that the motion picture must be called The Birth of a Nation. “In Dixon’s mind, birth, sex, and blood, life and soul, and nation were all intimately and intricately linked, and that rather sanguinary net held the core of being.”67 Beyond entertainment, to Dixon and Griffith, this film represented a way of life and critical historical fact to be passed onto the masses. Like its predecessor, The Clansman, The Birth of a Nation was meant to break through to the minds of society and warn against evils. Unlike the former, this time the message was

66 Inscoe, The Clansman, 160-161. This difference is one reason why there seems to be scholarly obsession with Birth. If not a fear of racial hostilities with the showing of the film why did the Klan regain momentum? Inscoe, Melvyn Stokes and Wynn Wade discuss this in more detail. See Melvyn Stokes, D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008); Jackson Lears, Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920 (American History) (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010); Wynn Craig Wade, The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1998). Inscoe suggests, for example, that the inflammatory response to Birth should be examined under a different lens from that of the Clansman; the film’s response stemmed from enthusiasm over its Lost Cause glorification and defense against Northern response rather than the “negrophobia” which accompanied the play’s response.

67 Williamson, A Rage for Order, 115
more explicit and more easily accepted. Much like its counterpart, *The Clansman*, the controversy surrounding *Birth* made it immediately desirable. Lastly, it took the previous warnings presented in the play and gave them more agency, making them more visible, dramatic, and consequently, believable.

While the basic premise of both the play and motion picture are the same, their differences proved more dramatic in *The Birth of a Nation*. The film follows two families, the Northern abolitionist Stonemans, and the Southern Camerons. Like in the play, Part I of the movie covers the Old South, pre Civil War, whereas Part II covers Reconstruction. Gus, the Cameron servant attempts to force himself on his white mistress, Flora Cameron. In the play, Flora is found dead, drowned in the river, and Gus is accused of rape then lynched and left on the doorstep of mulatto Lieutenant Governor Silas Lynch. In the movie, however, Flora heads to the spring alone for some water. Gus tracks her down and proposes marriage to her. Flora, filled with panic and disgust, flees him and climbs a rocky slope to evade him, while he is still in pursuit. Gus corners her, but rather than submit to rape from a black man Flora flings herself onto the rocks causing fatal injuries. Ben Cameron, “the Little Colonel,” finds Flora, his sister. The Cameron family, including faithful servants Mammy and Jake, mourn the death of Flora while Gus hides out in a black saloon. Gus is later found and killed by the Klan, and as in the play left on Lynch’s doorstep. Lynch retaliates by ordering black militiamen into the streets to hold off the KKK.\(^{68}\)

Black militiamen capture Dr. Cameron. Jake, Mammy and Phil Stoneman rescue him. Phil Stoneman, Mr. and Mrs. Cameron, Margaret Cameron, Jake and Mammy flee the area and find refuge in a log cabin. At this time, Elsie Stoneman, as in the play, is refusing the advances

---

\(^{68}\) *Birth of a Nation*, DVD, directed by D. W. Griffith (1915; Chatsworth, Calif., 1998).
of Silas Lynch and is saved by Ben Cameron and the Klan when Lynch attempts to force marriage on her. But back at the cabin the militia is advancing and attempting to break in, seizing Dr. Cameron. When it becomes clear to Dr. Cameron that they may not survive this attack he plans to murder his daughter, Margaret, to keep her from falling into the hands of the black militia. Just as they are losing hope the Klan arrives and beats back the black attackers. The whites then parade through the streets in victory and the blacks are prevented from voting in further elections.  

The message for both movie and play remained the same: hail to the white race, protect white womanhood and drive the “brutal savages” down. Oddly, in 1915, when race relations were supposed to be settled through Jim Crow, two major scenes became more dramatic and insulting. Instead of allowing his daughter to be captured by black militia men Dr. Cameron actually contemplated murdering his daughter to save her from a “fate worse than death.” The scene with Flora, while the pursuit by Gus is the same, in the movie she chooses to throw herself to a painful death off a cliff onto rocks rather than drowning. Perhaps, these scenes are emblematic of the time. Although race relations were allegedly “better than before” for some reason Griffith and Dixon felt it necessary to relay the message in a blatant manner. The message, it seems, revolves around women and the “protection” or “control” of them. This concern might have been the result of the long held beliefs of Dixon and Griffith, but social events surrounding the nineteen teens might have also factored into this call for “protection” of white women as well.

69 Birth of a Nation
Melvin Stokes suggested that the scene with Flora and Gus stemmed from societal concerns with race, sexuality, and alcohol.\textsuperscript{70} Obviously, there is an ever-present distress over miscegenation as exemplified in this scene. A white female, rather than dishonor her own by submitting to Gus’s advances, kills herself. She needed the protection of a man to fight off Gus successfully, but her brother, Ben Cameron, could not get to her in time. The only way to protect her virtue was to ensure Gus could not have his way with her. After Flora’s body is discovered, Gus seeks refuge at the local black saloon insinuating that all immoralities are linked: savagery, alcoholism and attempted rape of women were the norm. Moreover, these scenes linked immoralities to innate traits of black men. The lynching of Gus and violence displayed in the film used the proclaimed “protection” of white womanhood to justify violence.

According to Jacqueline Dowd Hall, rape as a means to justify lynching was normal practice in early twentieth century South. “No more were the ethics of Jim Crow more subtle and treacherous than when they touched on the proper conduct between black men toward white women.”\textsuperscript{71} Griffith and Dixon linked the desire for alcohol and white women as exemplary of “immoral savagery,” which merely made more necessary Southern attempts to control the black man. Jacqueline Dowd Hall examined this matter further in her book on Jesse Daniel Ames’s role in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). Hall argued that lynching was not a means to protect white women, but that lynching in the name of protection was a mode to control women and black men. “Lynching reinforced social boundaries that became quite literally, a matter of life and death…a story white Southerners told themselves about social arrangements and psychological strivings that lay beneath the surface of everyday

\textsuperscript{70} Stokes, \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, 218

\textsuperscript{71} Hall, \textit{Revolt Against Chivalry}, 145
Thus, the Gus and Flora scene calls for the chivalrous nature of the white male. When Gus is hiding in the saloon, one single white male walks in and takes on eight black men, only to lose when he is gunned down. When Gus is finally captured, he is lynched. Mob rule is glorified as a defensible means for the strong, Anglo Saxon male to protect his powerless woman. In return, women proffer their unconditional subordination. Thus, lynching emerges as a proper response to Gus’s actions. Lynching upholds the patriarchal structure.

While lynching and immorality are readily apparent in The Birth of a Nation, one cannot shy away from the loud cries and warnings of miscegenation and potential defilement of the white race. While miscegenation was consistently a concern during this era, it is likely that recent events influenced and reassured these fears in a Progressive and paternalistic Jim Crow era. Black prizefighter Jack Johnson and the Mann Act, raised public concern, and made interracial relationships a reality. The Mann Act, named for Illinois Congressman James Robert Mann, was a piece of Progressive era legislation that prohibited the transportation of women over state lines for “the purpose of prostitution and debauchery.” While it was meant to regulate prostitution, it was so broadly worded that it was often used to criminalize consensual sexual relations that the courts deemed immoral.73

Jack Johnson defeated several white opponents from 1909 to 1912. His fights were filmed and exhibited across the nation. Not only did this call into question the mental and physical prowess of the white male, but also it put a half naked athletic black man on the screen. Inevitably Anglo white males feared this would incite lust and diminish their own portrayals for the wives to see. Consequently, Congress passed the Sims Act in 1912, prohibiting the transport

72 Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry, 149

73 Stokes, Birth of a Nation, 219-221
of fight films across state lines. More importantly, Johnson became infamous for travelling with a white woman named Lucille Cameron, which made miscegenation a reality for the Anglo men in America.

In October of 1912, Johnson was arrested for the abduction of Cameron, a former prostitute of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who was intimately involved with Johnson when she moved to Chicago, Illinois, violating the Mann Act. The charges were placed by Cameron’s mother, but Lucille refused to implicate Johnson in the matter and Johnson was acquitted. Two weeks later Johnson and Cameron were married. A white woman willingly chose to marry a man of an “inferior” race. Moreover, she chose a man who defeated all white opponents for three years. Thus, miscegenation became a very real fear shortly before the release of Birth of a Nation, and this film is speaking directly to instances such as this. While the scenes are very similar to the play, why open old wounds in a supposed calm and Progressive Jim Crow era of peaceful race relations? The Birth of a Nation was meant to warn the white males not to become complacent and comfortable. The black male was still a threat to helpless, white females. More importantly, America now had the anti-Flora Cameron in Lucille Cameron, and a symbol of the threat to white patriarchy.

Overall, Jim Crow may have aided in creating a racial status quo but the general acceptance of Birth requires more discussion. Borrowing from Jane Dailey, there is an underlying cause to the film’s general acceptance. The film caused people to fear miscegenation—which by 1915 became a very real fear because of the Jack Johnson

74 Stokes, Birth of a Nation, 219-221

75 For more information on Jack Johnson: Geoffrey C. Ward, Unforgivable Blackness: the Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson (United Kingdom, Vintage, 2006).

76 Stokes, Birth of a Nation, 220-221
controversy. The film addressed specific issues through the actions of Silas Lynch, and the play displayed what seemed to be a logical route for a black man that acquired power originally denoted to Southern white men: he wanted white women. Moreover, the issue with Gus exemplified lynching as the necessary response to protect white womanhood.
Birth and Response

The discourse surrounding the premiere of Birth was seemingly undisputed among the whites. It was a blockbuster hit based on “historical truth” as many historians at that time validated Griffith’s depictions of Reconstruction. Reformer Jane Addams, in an interview with the New York Evening Post, while calling the film “grotesque” and meant to “appeal to race prejudice,” acknowledged a half-truth within the film.

Nobody denies that in the haste and confusion of the period after the Civil War the men in control of politics did very tyrannical and shortsighted things; and made a great many mistakes. The carpet-baggers of the North, who went in and influenced the negroes against the interests of the whites unquestionably did a great deal of harm; but to present the tendency they represented as the only one is as unfair to the North as to claim that all Southerners wanted to oppress negroes would be to the South.  

If Addams, an educated woman, would acknowledge Griffith’s view of Reconstruction as an exaggerated truth, surely Southerners and the masses would willingly embrace the film as historical fact. The film being shown to Woodrow Wilson, the Supreme Court, and Congress would only serve to augment that perception. While the whites were praising Dixon and Griffith for their masterpiece, the black population and NAACP set their eyes on protesting the film.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP), The Crisis, vehemently followed any and all developments surrounding Birth. At first, protesters hoped to completely ban the film, although this proved mainly unsuccessful. For example, in Chicago and Pittsburgh, city officials attempted to ban the play but managers of the theaters managed to obtain temporary injunctions. In Tacoma, Washington, the protesting proved successful, and a law was passed banning any film, play, drama etc, meant to inspire race hate. Ohio and Kansas were the only areas to completely ban the film for any length of time. The NAACP then hoped to “wound” the film by removing “the most racist portions of the play.” These scenes included Silas

---

Lynch attempting to force marriage on Elsie Stoneman, and Gus pursuing Flora. Melvyn Stokes noted that while some cuts were made they did not detract from the “trajectory of the film” and only Boston was successful in completely removing the Gus chase scene. Stokes quoted W.E.B. Dubois saying that all the protesting created a greater demand for the movie as people enjoy drama and controversy. The Crisis also backed this statement, “By protesting the film negroes only incite interest—It is a false history ignored by historians—this is not a time when we can acknowledge the truth.”

While successful in some states, this form of damage control was immensely unsuccessful in the South. This is partly attributed to the lack of NAACP offices in the Southern states, so any successful movements were small grass roots movements. Also, city officials in the Southern states fully supported the film making it difficult to pass any type of legislation banning or removing questionable portions of the film.

The Richmond News Leader reported that many prominent colored citizens of the Richmond area joined together to ask Mayor George Ainslie to ban the film. The fear was that the film would create negative race relations in the Richmond area and reopen old wounds.

Attorney J. R. Pollard spoke to The Richmond News Leader:

I do not think the community will be greatly disturbed by the presentation of the pictures...For I think too much of the good sense of RICHMOND [sic]. It repudiated “The Clansman” [sic] and I think it will repudiate “The Birth of a Nation” [sic] as not representing the relations of the races in the South.  

78 “The Birth of a Nation,” The Crisis, (Vol 10, No 6) October, 1915

79 Stokes, The Birth of a Nation, 168-170

80 “Fighting Race Calumny,” The Crisis, (Vol 10, No 2) June, 1915—In this quote the author is referring to the discovery of iron and how it is commonly credited to the white population even though historians knew it was a discovered and put to use by African Americans first.

81 “Colored Delegation Calls on Mayor to Protest Against Dixon’s ‘Birth of a Nation.’” The Richmond News Leader, October 23, 1915.
Ainslie responded in the same article, stating he spoke to several mayors in cities around the South, including Norfolk and Knoxville. Each mayor was reported as saying race relations were fine and the film was worth seeing. After watching the movie some days later Ainslie had this to say,

I have not heard the slightest unfavorable comment on “The Birth of a Nation,” [sic] the photoplay now showing in RICHMOND [sic], but on the contrary, those who have been fortune[sic] enough to have seen it, and who have related their impressions to me, have given it unstinted praise…Of course there are scenes, particularly in Part II, the one might well wish had never been acted in real life, but the indisputable record proves their truth, and thousands of persons now living in this country can testify that they knew and saw them.82

In Jane Addams response she called the questionable scenes of the second half grotesque and meant to incite race prejudice but acknowledged the half-truth of Reconstruction. Ainslie upheld the film was full of fact including the chase and forced marriage scene. Likely, Ainslie’s response would be more representative of the white Anglo male population at that time. Even in cities that once denounced the play, the film was revered as historical fact.

Interestingly, no one seems to comment on the nature of the most controversial scenes of the film. Jane Addams briefly mentioned them, the NAACP sought to have them removed, but did not specifically address them in detail in The Crisis, and Mayor Ainslie referred to each as historical fact. Each response, however insignificant they may seem, says more about the nature and meaning behind the Gus and Flora, Elsie and Silas, and log cabin scenes.

The NAACP’s silence hints that these were contemptible notions. The almost rape of Flora, Silas’s attempt to force marriage on Elsie, were detestable and preposterous. Moreover, drawing attention to the scenes would only create more drama, controversy and possible desire to

82 “Ainslie Praises Griffith’s Big Photo Play,” The Richmond New Leader, October 29, 1915.
see the play. Likely, the scenes would incite mob rule to justify lynching for the crime of rape. Lynching was used to protect the “virtue” of the woman because testifying to rape in court would cause public disgrace. The NAACP knew this, silence and hoping to cut the scenes was the safest route to avoid negative outcomes.

Thus, the silence seems to uphold what Jacqueline Dowd Hall referred to in her book—the folklore of rape…it was “not an objective reality.” Actually, of all the lynching committed between 1882-1946 only twenty three percent involved accusations of rape. Rape was a white form of fear and lore that was personified for the world to see. It was an irrational fear that the NAACP, rather than entertain these suggestions, ignored in any discourse surrounding the topic. While on the other hand, Ainslie upheld it as truth but did not discuss details within the newspapers.

Moreover, this white folklore was sustained by the anti-Flora, Lucille Cameron, when she willingly chose to marry Jack Johnson. The movie took rape, primarily a means to justify lynching after-the-fact- and gave it visible potency. An irrational fear of miscegenation was given agency just three years earlier and Birth directly addressed this fear. A consequence of the Jack Johnson controversy was Birth warning the public to fear men like Jack, Gus, and Silas Lynch. The movie sought to take the Lucille Cameron situation and correct it. Rather than a woman running off with a colored man—she killed herself. For this, Flora was the ideal women, soft, gentile, helpless. She also did what the ideal woman should do—protect her virtue when her brother could not protect her—the complete opposite of Lucille. Moreover, the lynching of Gus and the defeat of Lynch were used to alleviate anxieties derived from the fear of miscegenation. Thus, Birth justified violence as means to protect womanhood.

83 Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry, 149
Jesse Daniel Ames spoke out against the notions of the helpless female partly because she knew where this argument would lead. The log cabin scene when Dr. Cameron considered killing his daughter, Margaret, to protect her from a “fate worse than death.” Ames saw this as a possible ending for the “protection” of white womanhood. The white man saw this act as chivalrous, and chivalry was the repayment a virtuous white woman could expect. Ames sought, according to Hall, to blow up this notion of a chivalrous patriarchy by arguing that violence was not a means of protection. Virtuous women had no need for protection from a mythic villain. Nor should a woman condone any means of violence in exchange for “protection.” This was merely a mode for social control of women, and a means to justify lynching. *The Birth of a Nation* harnessed myth to racist stereotypes all the while maintaining the Victorian attitudes of the helpless woman whose role in life was to uphold her role in the household.
Our grand old Empire State HAS BEEN RAPED! We have been violated, AND WE ARE ASHAMED!...The great Seal of State has gone, LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT, to do for an unscrupulous law firm, a deed of darkness which dared not bask in the light of the sun… We have been betrayed! The breath of some leprous monster has passed over us and we feel like crying out, in horror and despair, “Unclean! UNCLEAN![sic]”

Thomas Edward Watson (1856-1922) is best known for his anti-Catholic and Anti-Semitic sentiments, role in the Populist movement, and as a prolific writer. Much like his counterpart, Thomas Dixon Jr., he was a Southern product of Reconstruction and Old South values including chivalry, and protecting white womanhood and Protestantism. As such, much of his writings demonstrate a parallel to the warnings of Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith, although slightly modified. For the purpose of this thesis, Watson’s role in the Leo Frank case (1913-1915) will be examined. While the target of the message changed from a “black beast” to a “Jew pervert,” the subtext of the message remained the same: to warn the Protestant male to protect Protestant white womanhood from an enemy, or more appropriately, the alien within.

Leo Frank was a successful young Jewish entrepreneur from Brooklyn, New York. He graduated from Cornell University and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1907 to manage his uncle’s pencil factory. In 1911 he married a local Jewish girl, Lucille Selig, whose affluent family made and distributed chemical products. Frank himself was well respected within the Atlanta Jewish

---

84 Thomas Watson, Jeffersonian, June 24, 1915.
community, and was the president of the local chapter of B’nai B’rith. Nonetheless, Frank was the embodiment of what Watson and others referred to as “alien to the South.” Yankee, young and Jewish, Frank acquired wealth, power and prestige in Atlanta. Moreover, he was in charge of many Protestant women and children, who made their way from the privacy of the home into the public realm of the factory, away from the protection of the “man of the house.”

Mary Phagan was a “child of the New South.” Her family, tenant farmers from Marietta, Georgia, eighteen miles northwest of Atlanta, was pushed off the land when the price of cotton dropped. The family relocated to Bellwood, a mill village just outside of Atlanta. The entire family worked the mills for five cents an hour. By 1913, Mary Phagan worked at Frank’s pencil factory for twelve cents an hour. For ten hours a day, the thirteen-year-old Phagan operated a machine that pushed erasers into the brass tops of pencils. On Saturday, April 26, 1913, knowing Frank did his books every week on that day, Phagan left home on the trolley to gather her pay from the factory and to watch the Confederate Memorial Day parade on Peachtree Street, where the widow of Stonewall Jackson was set to give a speech. Mary was petite and attractive, four feet ten inches tall and one hundred and five pounds; she had filled the role of “Sleeping Beauty” in a church play two weeks earlier. She was a small, “helpless,” working girl attempting to enjoy her day off.

Mary arrived at the factory and headed to Frank’s office on the second floor. She asked him for her pay; she had missed Tuesday but “[had] Monday coming.” He handed her the pay envelope with her $1.20 in it. Mary left his office, and Frank later said he heard a thud, but when he looked around he saw nothing. The approximate time was twelve noon. Medical examiners

85 Williamson, A Rage for Order, 240
86 Williamson, A Rage for Order, 241
later said that Mary died at 12:30pm. Frank returned to his books until 1:20pm when he left for lunch at home. He returned to the office at 3pm and stayed until 6pm, leaving the night watchmen on duty. Frank spent the remainder of the evening with his wife and family.\textsuperscript{87}

The night watchman, Newt Lee, an African American, discovered Mary’s body at about 3am. She was face down on a pile of trash in the basement. Lee immediately notified the authorities. While Mary had been bitten and beaten, the cause of death was strangulation. A cord had been tied around her neck so tightly that she bled profusely. A piece of her underclothes was used to cover her face; apparently there had been an unsuccessful attempt at rape.\textsuperscript{88} Bloody handprints were found on the basement door along with notes supposedly written by Phagan, saying, “the night witch did it.”\textsuperscript{89} Lee was immediately arrested for Phagan’s murder. At 7am Sunday morning, the police showed up at Frank’s house. The police treated Frank in a hostile manner during questioning; two days later Frank was arrested for Phagan’s murder. Frank’s case would become the “most celebrated in Georgia,” as prosecutor, Hugh M. Dorsey, sought the governor’s mansion—and this case would guarantee his election.\textsuperscript{90}

The trial began in late July. The lead witness was Jim Conley, the pencil factory’s daytime janitor. Conley, under original police questioning, stated he was not at the pencil factory on that Saturday. When questioned again, and beaten, he admitted to the “true” story: that he

\textsuperscript{87} Williamson, \textit{A Rage for Order}, 241

\textsuperscript{88} Williamson, \textit{A Rage for Order}, 241

\textsuperscript{89} Melnick, \textit{Black Jewish Relations on Trial}, 88-108. See also: Jeffrey Melnick, “‘The Night Witch Did It’: Villainy and Narrative in the Leo Frank Case,” \textit{American Literary History} 12, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 2000): 113-29. These notes led to the immediate arrest of Newt Lee, two days later Frank was arrested for murder. The prosecution used these notes to clear Jim Conley, saying a “negro can’t read and write,” and thus point the finger at Frank as the author and murderer of Phagan.

\textsuperscript{90} Williamson, \textit{A Rage for Order}, 242
acted as Frank’s watchman when Frank committed acts of perversion and “crimes against nature” in Frank’s second story office. Conley declared that he had walked in on Frank in suggestive positions with other women and that Mary Phagan had rejected Frank’s advances on several occasions. Conley claimed that Frank asked him to help dispose of Mary’s body and pencil two notes framing the night watchman, Newt Lee. Conley refused to assist in burning Mary’s body without Frank’s help, which was why she was found atop the pile of trash with two notes nearby.91

Prosecutor Dorsey led Conley through this chain of events including his various different stories told to the police. According to historian Joel Williamson, the contradiction in his stories made Conley a believable star witness as black people were not known for telling the truth until they were coerced into doing so. Thus, Dorsey’s leading of the witness made Frank a culpable pervert and gave Conley, with a record for assault and history of alcohol abuse, the appearance of honesty and abiding by the general rules of the Southern order. By illuminating the several holes in Conley’s testimony, Dorsey made it appear iron clad and believable to an all white Protestant male jury. Conley, he contended, acted in the way any black man accused of killing a white woman would: he lied until he was forced to tell the truth. Moreover, Phagan was portrayed as a virginal young woman, a product of the South, and a victim of corruption.92 The prosecutor presented Phagan as a helpless, young, gentile, female, while portraying Frank as a Yankee, Jewish, pervert. These personifications only outraged the jury and assured Frank’s fate. Frank was found guilty and sentenced to death.

91 Williamson, A Rage for Order, 242

92 Williamson, A Rage for Order, 243-244
Frank’s lawyer appealed the conviction many times over the next two years. In the meantime, Frank stayed in the state penitentiary where he was attacked on numerous occasions; the last time an inmate slit his throat, but Frank was saved by a fellow inmate, a former practicing physician. Governor John M. Slaton, disgusted by the inequity of the trial, and in a move that threatened his political career, commuted Frank’s sentence to life in prison on June 21, 1915. Thomas Watson, who discussed the Frank trial at length in his weekly *Jeffersonian* and monthly *Watson’s Magazine* found Slaton’s action appalling. On August 16, 1915, Leo Frank was forcibly taken from his cell, driven one hundred miles from the prison in Milledgeville to Marietta, Georgia, near Phagan’s birthplace and hanged, which caused the stitches on his throat to reopen. He received the same fate a black man would for assaulting a white woman. Watson celebrated the lynching in his press. “Womanhood is made safer everywhere,” “the voice of the people is the voice of GOD,” “another Ku Klux Klan may be organized to restore HOME RULE,” and lastly “the next Leo Frank case in Georgia will NEVER reach the courthouse.” Watson played a large role in the conviction and lynching of Leo Frank.

---

93 Williamson, *A Rage for Order*, 243

Thomas Watson and Sigmund Lichtenstein—“No Jew can murder.”

Most consider the Frank case as a display of Watson’s loathing for the Jewish community. This assumption is not far fetched as he often referred to Frank as a “Jew pervert.” But roughly fifteen years prior to the infamous Frank case, Watson himself argued the other side of the proverbial coin; “No Jew can murder,” were the last words echoing in a silent courtroom. The question remains: What changed from 1901 to 1915? Honestly, nothing changed except the victim of the crime, the status of the supposed perpetrators, and the shifting of society’s worries. Watson remained the same.

Louis Schmier, historian, chronicled the Lichtenstein case through the oral history of one of the accused’s family members, Carrie Dawson Oppenheimer. Mrs. Oppenheimer gave four oral interviews on the events in Adrian, Georgia, from Saturday, November 10th, 1900 through the start of the trial on Wednesday, July 10th, 1901. According to Oppenheimer, the local drunk and gambling addict John Welch walked into Sigmund Lichtenstein’s store that Saturday asking for a refund on some fabric for his wife that he purchased with a previous night’s winnings. Lichtenstein examined the fabric, seeing that it was already cut and wrinkled, stated he could not offer a refund for fabric in such poor condition. Welch, filled with disdain, said “no Jew would keep [his] winnings while his family went hungry.” As Lichtenstein was walking to his home that evening, carving an apple with his pocket knife, he was accosted by Welch in front of his home.

Oppenheimer and Lichtenstein’s wife, Dora, could hear the conversation from inside the house. Welch demanded that he receive the money that Lichtenstein refused him. When

Sigmund would not change his mind, Welch pulled a gun on him and shot Sigmund in the thigh. Welch fell into Lichtenstein and they both collapsed to the ground. Dora and Oppenheimer called the doctor and went outside where a barely conscious Sigmund told the ladies to see to Welch. When the doctor arrived Welch was dead— Lichtenstein’s pocket knife had pierced him through the heart. Welch was a cousin of the town’s mayor, Wilbur Curry. Oppenheimer stated that one would have never known they were related until that incident. It did not take long for Curry to rally the town to the Lichtenstein residence. A torch carrying crowd, including the Mayor, stood outside Sigmund’s home shouting “Jew Killer” as Sigmund lay in his bed unconscious from loss of blood.

Curry painted his cousin, John Welch, as the innocent victim of a Jewish thug. “From Curry’s words Welch became the peace loving innocent and injured Christian hero. Sigmund became the violence prone, lying, cheating, Jewish villain.” Moreover, the events became completely reversed. Supposedly Lichtenstein cheated Welch when Welch politely asked for a refund of his untarnished goods to feed his family. When Welch threatened to expose Lichtenstein’s cheating ways, Lichtenstein instigated the fight to protect his reputation. The bashing of Lichtenstein’s character continued up until the trial nine months later. Dora Lichtenstein, fearing the fate that awaited her husband, employed the help of a family friend, Judge Roger Gamble of Louisville, Georgia.

96 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 438-39. Oppenheimer stated that Welch’s drinking and gambling made him the “black sheep” of the Curry family.

97 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 440. The doctor tied Sigmund down to his bed because the bullet was 1/16 an inch from his femoral artery meaning he could bleed out at the slightest movement. He remained unconscious with the bullet still in his leg for several weeks.

98 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 442

99 Schmier and Oppenheimer equated this to the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews.
In a meeting with Judge Gamble, Dora was urged to contact Thomas Watson, the most well-known lawyer in Georgia. Gamble, aware of the power of character slander, believed only the best legal talent would help Lichtenstein get out of this mess. After convincing Dora that it was the best and only option, she gave her consent to contact Watson. Watson responded back in a timely manner telling Dora that it was her husband’s right to a fair trial no matter who he was. Moreover, no one should be tried by a “lawless mob,” but that he regretfully could not assist in the matter as he was busy. At this time Watson was trying to leave the business of law and was working more as a writer. He was on a deadline to finish a book, a two volume history of France, and felt taking on a case would not be productive to his own goals.100

Both Dora and Judge Gamble were disappointed by Watson’s denial but Gamble continued his correspondence with Watson hoping to change his mind. Gamble proposed to Watson that Gamble would stay on the case as the trial lawyer and Watson need only prepare and present the defense.101 Watson responded affirmatively but said he would need five hundred dollars for this—two hundred and fifty must be given upfront.102 Dora, reluctant to spend such a large sum of money on a man she never met, agreed at the urging of Gamble.

The trial commenced on Wednesday, July 10, 1901. This was the first day that Oppenheimer and Dora met Watson. Oppenheimer recalled that at first she was not impressed with the man. Watson appeared average unlike this mythic hero that she was expecting. This

100 Schmier, “’No Jew Can Murder,’” 447

101 Schmier noted that “the correspondence between Judge Gamble and Tom Watson either has not survived or is inaccesible. The content of such correspondence rests on the memory of Mrs. Oppenheimer, all of whose recollections are supported by the scant existing evidence found in local newspapers and in Watson’s papers.” Schmier, “’No Jew Can Murder,’” 446 and see footnote on 446.

102 Schmier, “’No Jew Can Murder,’” 446-448. Schmier said this is one of the highest amounts Watson ever received for his legal expertise.
changed when she spoke to Watson. She said “he talked with us like we were his lifelong friends.” Watson took his seat behind the defense and sat through the trial. Mayor Curry testified that Welch was an honest, churchgoing man and that Lichtenstein was a dishonest Jew. This sort of testimony was the majority of the prosecution’s case. According to Oppenheimer, Watson sat in his seat with his eyes closed, periodically shaking his head or chuckling to himself, but the jury watched his every move. Judge Gamble cross examined the witnesses and got them to admit to Welch’s habitual drinking, and gambling. Watson just continued sitting with his eyes closed occasionally shrugging his shoulders, nodding, or chuckling.

When it came to closing arguments, Watson “came to life.” He said to the jury when he walked up: “You know me, I am just like you and I would not lie to you.” He presented himself like an average Joe, just like the members of the jury. Unlike the prosecution he did not speak in a condescending tone. He appeared humble and well-mannered, a “true Southern gentleman,” recounted Oppenheimer. The jury responded accordingly and hung on his every word as he spoke of Lichtenstein who cried on the stand and apologized profusely to Welch’s widow. He referred to Welch’s tears as “…the Godly tears flowing from a morally incorruptible Jew possessed by his peoples’ love of life.” His closing oration lasted thirty minutes and the jury was conscious of every second. Watson ended famously with “No Jew can murder. And you know I’m not telling you anything that isn’t true.”

103 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 450
104 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 450
105 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 451
106 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 453
This case raises several interesting points that this thesis hopes to answer. Why did white Southerners use a black man’s testimony to convict a white male for the murder of a young Protestant working girl? Why was Watson so concerned with the Frank case? Fifteen years previously he had defended a Jew on a murder charge, claiming “No Jew can murder.” But, he referred to Frank as a “Jew pervert” in 1915. Much like Thomas Dixon, Watson’s feeling on the Frank case revolved around the protection of the virtues of white womanhood, or to borrow from Jacqueline Dowd Hall, the means of controlling the purity of white womanhood. Furthermore, the intricate details intermingled within Watson’s own words reveal the rhetoric of protection and control that he used to incite fear in his readers. It resulted in the death of Leo Frank.

Watson’s Mentality—A change?

107 Schmier, “‘No Jew Can Murder,’” 453
Watson spent much of his later years writing in his various publications. He warned society about Catholics, Jews, Big Money Capitalists, and Blacks. In fact, those were the four groups that bore the brunt of his hate. He often commented on the immorality of nunnerys, the corruption of Capitalism, Jewish corruption and perversion, and the tainting of gentile blood by Blacks and Jews. This is well known, but the difference between his treatment of Lichtenstein compared to Frank deserves explanation. Some might argue that in the fifteen years between trials Watson’s mentality underwent a drastic alteration. I argue otherwise.

Watson’s beliefs likely remained the same. But the difference was the victims and the accused, which were diametrically opposite in both regards. Lichtenstein was born in Texas. He spent time in Savannah before relocating to Adrian, Georgia, a few years before the trial. As such, he was well aware of Southern norms and practices. He was an outsider only in the sense that he was not Protestant. He had maintained a successful business and was relatively popular in the community as he had no known documented issues prior to the incident with Welch. He owned a small store and employed his family members, not a large quantity of Protestant females like Frank. In short, he possessed only a miniscule, if any, amount of power within the community and posed no threat.

Leo Frank was from the upper class. He had been educated at the prestigious Cornell University in New York, and relocated to Atlanta to manage a large pencil company, which employed mostly gentile women. He was in every sense of the word an outsider—an outsider as Watson saw it, with control over Protestant, “helpless” women forced into the workplace under the control of another man. He represented the anti-Watson. In Lichtenstein’s case Watson opened with “you know me I am just like you.” He often tried to portray himself as the every man. Moreover, Oppenheimer recalled that Watson did not condescend and act like he had a
prestigious education. Frank embodied everything that Watson opposed from his education, background, religion, to the way he spoke. He was a Yankee industrialist—an alien to the Southern way of life. Lastly, he possessed more control over public, economic affairs than most Southern-born gentile men could hope for, and he controlled their wives and daughters.

John Welch was one of the worst representations of gentility imaginable. He squandered away his money through drinking and gambling. Oppenheimer recalled the smell of liquor on his breath the Saturday he walked into the store. The town, for lack of a better term, would refer to him as the town drunk. He was first cousin to Mayor Wilbur Curry; yet prior to his death, Curry would rarely admit to the relation. Lastly, he was a man—a man who could have controlled his drinking and gambling and played the role required of a white Protestant male. He did not choose to uphold the value system. Consequently, he made for a poor victim; it was difficult to raise sympathy for someone like him.

Phagan, on the other hand, was the ideal victim. She was a young, innocent female. Forced into the workforce due to the sudden price drop of cotton, she took any job, which happened to be under the control of another man—not her father or husband. Men like Watson viewed Phagan as a victim of happenstance and industry. She was forced to leave the safety net of the home to work under another man. She was depicted as virginal, deflowered by a “Jewish pervert.” Surely such an atrocity could not go unpunished. This being the case, the perpetrator needed to fit the crime. Watson, along with many others, in spite of evidence, felt Leo Frank was the ideal culprit, a monster that had torn the social fabric. The death of Welch was a tragedy but Phagan’s murder represented much more to Georgians. She represented all the Protestant females forced into the workforce—females threatened by an alien to the South. She represented a change in society—the unwanted change from old safe and socially acceptable norms. With
this in mind, Watson did not so much change his views of the Jewish population, but rather he responded in defense posture. His response was also a mode of control.

While it may appear, in Watson’s support of janitor Jim Conley, that he moved into some sort of egalitarian stance involving race, that would be a fallacy. In *Watson’s Magazine*, August, 1910, Watson spoke against Americanization of the Chinese, teaching them about Christ, and drawing parallels between them and the African American population.

They may wash every black savage in Africa, put European clothes on him, pile school books in his wooly head, and persuade him that he is a ‘convert’ to Christ—and the negro will still be a negro as God made him. The effort to give him the racial traits of the white man is mere madness.\(^\text{108}\)

He continued the article arguing that conversion to Christ and Americanization leads to the demand for social equality, equating equality to “socialism.” The issue for him, like many, was that “mongrels” could not become anything more than savages. To attempt to civilize them caused them to desire things for which they were not fit: equality, education, and eventually the intermarriage with whites. Watson saw Conley as a means to an end. Through Conley, Watson was able to exploit and vilify the current enemy: an alien representative of “big money” industrialism that threatened to tear the social fabric.

As a politician and lawyer Watson often portrayed himself as the common man’s friend. This portrayal of himself won him much support as he appeared trustworthy and honest. He used his popularity to argue against the upper echelons of society—especially the Yankee Capitalist involvement in the South. Watson saw the Frank case saturated in what he called “big money corruption.”

Gigantic conspiracy of Big money organized to corrupt the state’s courts, its governor, its paper in order to save the life of a wealthy murderer.\(^\text{109 How much}\)

longer is the innocent blood of little Mary Phagan to cry in vain to Heaven from vengeance? Now is the time to have a Vigilance Committee APPOINT ITS OWN SENTRIES TO WATCH THAT DESPARATE CRIMINAL—whose money and whose resources seem so insolently determined that his crime shall go unpunished. If Franks rich connections keep on lying about this case, SOMETHING BAD WILL HAPPEN…RISE! PEOPLE OF GEORGIA[sic].

Watson’s concern was that Frank would be able to buy his way out of this mess and that young Mary Phagan’s murder would go unpunished. A lot of this “big money” was coming from Jewish supporters of the North, which only strengthened his belief and resentment of outside involvement in Southern affairs.

Watson, like many, expressed distaste for all non Southerners that controlled gentile women. As such, the focus was on intermarriage and corruption of Protestant blood.

Leo Frank came down from New York, to take charge of a factory where young Gentile girls worked for Hebrews…Leo Frank was a typical young Jewish man of business who loved pleasure and runs after Gentile girls. Every student of sociology knows that the black man’s lust after white women, is not much fiercer than the lust of the licentious Jew for the Gentile…The fact that the pleasure-loving Jewish business men spare Jewesses, but PURSUE GENTILE GIRLS excites bitter comment[sic].

Protestant men felt they were losing control of white women to the managers and owners of the factories. These women worked long hours away from the “safety” of their husbands and fathers. Watson presented this as an immediate threat, in that it was a corruption of the Protestant way of life. For a Protestant woman to procreate outside the desired norms meant the traditional way of life would no longer be upheld causing Protestant men to gradually lose control. If all gentile women married rich Yankee Jews, eventually the Jews would outnumber the Protestants. And since men like Watson believed Jews maintained a different set of morals, the old way of life

---


110 As quoted Woodward, Agrarian Rebel, 439. Some of Watson’s primary sources, while accessible via the web, are either lost or were not viewable due to technological difficulties. As such, Woodward’s use of primary sources has been utilized to supplement the sources I have.

would be abandoned—the way of life that had placed the white, Anglo, Protestant male atop the social pyramid.

The fear of the alien with unlimited resources and power to control and corrupt gentile girls was the reason why Watson and others were comfortable convicting Frank on the testimony of a black man. A man that disgusted Watson and that Watson would have arguably have never given agency to his testimony had a young, helpless, gentile girl not been the victim.

He [Conley] would have left at that point to care of itself, and he would have struck a bee line for the distant horizon. Negros committing rapes on white women do not tarry. Never! NEVER!!...It seems that negroes are good enough to kill our ballots, make our laws, hold office, sleep in our beds, cat [sic] at our tables, marry our daughters, and mongrelize the Anglo Saxon race, but are not good enough to bear testimony against a rich Jew ...all wrong for the president to allow any difference between black and whites, but no negro must be taken as a witness against a Jew who can command unlimited money[sic].112

While in this quote Watson is attempting to justify the court conviction of Frank on behalf of Conley’s testimony, one must ignore his justification of Conley and understand what he is really saying in this passage. For Watson, the enemy within was no longer the black man trying to attain a white woman, but a Jewish industrialist with unlimited means to control and corrupt young Protestant girls. The victim in this case, the monetary status of the accused (not his religion) and the circumstances surrounding her murder are keys to understanding why a white man was convicted on the testimony of a “drunken negro.” As Watson echoed through the pages of Watson’s Magazine and the Jeffersonian, Phagan was murdered to protect her “chastity.”

Phagan was idolized as a virgin who died to protect her virtue, much like Flora Cameron. She was portrayed as a young female, forced to work for a perverted man to help her family. Thus, in order for her death to not be in vain she was represented as a “virginal flower of the South” by Watson. Her gentile, virginal status only served to incite more hatred for Frank and

the greatest sympathy for women oppressed within the factory system. When reporting on her
death Watson described her “poor undergarments all dabbed in her virginal blood.” He continued
to stress the “virgin” issue every chance he got: “Mary’s bloody drawers and bloody garter-straaps
show that she bled from her virginal womb before she died;” “Poor little Mary Phagan!...who
would not survive her honor…the daughter of the state of Georgia, who lost her life in defense of
her chastity.” While stressing the issue of her virtue Watson always sought to personify
Phagan and make her relatable to readers. “The daughter of the state of Georgia,” would rouse
attention, anger the readers, and incite hatred for Frank throughout the trial. The people of
Georgia felt they had truly lost one of their own. Her death represented an attack on their way of
life, all things traditional, Protestant and Southern. Watson’s editorials meant to demonstrate
what happened when fathers and husbands could not protect women. Fear and hatred were the
expected reactions to Watson’s propaganda.

Moreover, when Governor Slaton commuted Frank’s sentence it allowed Watson to
openly rouse and justify lynching. As Frank was to be executed prior to the governor’s
commutation, his lynching demonstrated to Southern white males that the original sanction was
the only viable punitive measure. Watson pushed for this in his writings. Lastly, Thomas Dixon
showed this was the proper recourse to defend white womanhood with the lynching of Gus. It all
ends with justifiable violence as a means to repair a breach in the Southern order.

113 “The Leo Frank Case,” Watson’s Magazine, Vol. XX (Jan., 1915), 146, 150, 156.
Loose ends

Nancy MacLean, in her article, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” argued that anxieties over changing gender roles were at a high level around the time of the trial. “Staunch insistence that Phagan died to preserve her chastity evinced profound concern about changing relations between the sexes and generations about the shifting mores among the wage earning women.”\(^{114}\) Moreover, she argued that this obsession, furor, and confusion over gender relations fueled anti-Semitism in this era. The female workers moved out of the home and into the factories where they were controlled by a man outside of the family. Thus, the Jewish entrepreneur became another enemy within. For Dixon the internal enemy was still the African American man. Lastly, MacLean argued that this change in female behavior (leaving the home to work under another man) promoted promiscuity and female sexual agency. “With family relations as the context (changes in sexuality overall), power between the sexes and generations was the trigger that incited the passions in the Frank case.”\(^{115}\) MacLean is persuasive in this assertion. The issue at hand was the control of women. As women ventured out of the home they became sexually empowered—arguably the opposite of when they maintained the home.

Women working outside the home where they could acquire sexual empowerment posed a threat to Southern white men. Jewish industrialists, like Frank, already had economic means above most Protestant males. If Jewish men controlled white womanhood what would that mean for Southern, white Protestantism? The Frank case served as a warning of what could happen

\(^{114}\) MacLean, *Reactionary Populism*, 919.

\(^{115}\) MacLean, *Reactionary Populism*, 924.
when Protestant men could not protect or control their women. Watson merely exploited what many others were thinking.

In Watson’s Jeffersonian he published a letter from some of his admirers.

*If you don’t want to raise H--- in Georgia, you and your Slaton crowd had better keep quiet, for there is no limit fixed to which the sons of Georgia will not go to protect her fair women and Watson.*

The emphasis on “protect her fair women” denotes that Phagan was representative of a much larger issue: the issue of protecting and controlling womanhood throughout Georgia. Watson stressed the issue of “protecting womanhood” throughout his papers. “*Womanhood is made safer, everywhere;*” on the conviction of Frank, through prosecutor Dorsey’s success at trial “the fearless, incorruptible Solicitor General who won the great fight for LAW AND ORDER, and the PROTECTION OF WOMANHOOD…for LAW, for JUSTICE, for WOMANHOOD.”

With this in mind, Watson was merely articulating the issues of society at that time. He was exemplifying the issues surrounding changing gender roles and the anxieties caused from a move from the past. He was warning, however obnoxious, and inciting fear and anger to the masses in hopes to protect and restore the white, Anglo, Protestant patriarchal structure.

Since Watson was hoping to maintain old norms, one could not call him a harbinger of change. While it may appear from his performance in the Lichtenstein case, to his involvement in the Leo Frank case that he underwent a metamorphosis. This conclusion is not correct. Some could argue that Watson’s views of mob rule changed between Lichtenstein and Frank because he condemned the use of a “lawless mob” for one and practically glorified it for the other.

“When ‘Mobs’ Are No Longer Possible, Liberty Will Be Dead;” “*Lynch law is a good sign: it*

---


117 *Jeffersonian*, June 8, 15, 1916.
shows that a sense of justice yet lives among the people;” “THE NEXT JEW WHO DOES WHAT FRANK DID, IS GOING TO GET EXACTLY THE SAME THING THAT WE GIVE TO NEGRO RAPISTS.” What some might call a drastic change in this regard would be incorrect. His stance on mob rule was the result of the difference in circumstance. Again, one must look at the accused, the victim, and the situation as a whole. Moreover, his stance on males in power corrupting women was universal. In an article discussing what happens in nunneries (some of Watson’s anti-Catholic propaganda) he said “many of the nuns commit fornication with the very monks who are placed in authority over them.” Thus, Watson saw males with control over large number of females as leading to corruption. His view of male priests exploiting women was a constant theme in his anti-Catholic writings. The possibility of subjugation of women appeared to be a consistent concern for him. Thus, one must not just examine Watson’s role in the Frank case but rather what he hoped to gain from the propaganda.

Everything was different from Lichtenstein to Frank. Phagan represented a diametrical change to the Southern social order. Welch represented what was wrong with the Protestant male when he succumbed to his vices. Lichtenstein was the owner of a small store that employed his family members. Frank managed a factory that controlled young gentile females. The Frank case demonstrated the evils of female sexual agency: what happened when men lost control of their women. Female individual agency was to be avoided at all costs as it would lead to the breakdown of the Protestant way of life. Following the logic of Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Frank was lynched because that fate was considered the proper punishment for threatening white women.


womanhood, and lynching Frank was a way to control white womanhood with the end result upholding the patriarchal structure.
Conclusion

Human nature has never changed: unnatural restraint perpetually imposed upon red-blooded mortals merely drives them to unnatural relations with the other sex. Normal young women are just what they were in the days of the women caught in the act. Normal young men are just what they were when David reached out for another man’s wife. Insulted nature will not surrender her rights. Whenever she is suppressed in one direction she breaks out somewhere else.120

Sexuality is fluid. Moreover, early scholars of sexuality argued that in the nineteenth century that when sexuality was repressed it would burst out as if it was hydraulic. As demonstrated by this quote even Thomas Watson noted the hydraulic character of sexuality. His belief was that sexuality needed to be properly channeled—white, Anglo, Protestant male with white, Anglo, Protestant females; African American males with African American women, Jewish men with Jewish women. Crossing these implicit boundaries was very taboo and seen as detrimental to society. Thus, the whole notion of sexuality created anxieties in the early twentieth century as many Protestant males believed the social norms were changing around them.

Barbara Weltner argued that nineteenth century Americans saw men leave home for jobs in the public arena, relegating women to caring for the future generations in the home. Women in this era maintained the persona of the “virtuous woman, guardians of home and hearth.” They stayed home, remaining faithful to their husbands and raising future generations to uphold the same values. Jane Dailey argued that black men moved into the public sphere with the rise and

fall of Reconstruction in hopes of protecting their families. Consequently, the old status quo of Southern race relations began to fade. Most historians would agree that from the end of Reconstruction, 1876, through the turn of the new century race relations were tumultuous. Moreover, by the early 1900s women made their way into the factory system as workers outside the home. The Southern norms and practices were under drastic reconstruction.

The myth of the black rapist reached pathological proportions at the turn of the [twentieth] century, in part because of its congruence with the exaggerated sexual tension of a dying Victorianism.¹²¹

It is no coincidence that Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* began its run as a stage play. Dixon was told stories of the Old South as a child. He became a staunch racist who resented Reconstruction, Yankees, and blacks that sought to alter the traditional Southern order. He, like many, feared that legitimacy, agency, and power given to a black man would result in miscegenation: a pollution of the white, Anglo, Protestant majority’s blood line. Consequently, miscegenation would lead to the deterioration of the valued Protestant norms that placed white males at the top of the social pyramid. Black men were believed inferior and unable to function at the level of a white male. If whites and blacks were to have mulatto children, Dixon insisted that society would inevitably crumble. *The Clansman* was Dixon’s articulation of this message for the masses. The Clansmen, as depicted in the play and later film, *The Birth of a Nation*, alleviated these anxieties through violence.

Many scenes within *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation* addressed the issue of miscegenation. The Gus and Flora scene, in both film and play, demonstrated a black man attempting to attain a white male’s property: a white girl. Flora dies to protect her virtue. In the play she drowns in a stream, while in the movie she flings herself from a height onto some rocks,

¹²¹ Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 148
in both ways demonstrating what an ideal woman should do to protect Southern norms. Moreover, Gus is later captured and lynched—a common chivalric practice to “protect womanhood.” Conversely, Silas Lynch was meant to exemplify what might happen if blacks acquired legitimacy in the South. Power-hungry Silas disenfranchised the white population and attempted to force marriage on Elsie Stoneman, who was saved by Ben Cameron and the Klan. The log cabin scene shows Dr. Cameron contemplating killing his own daughter, Margaret Cameron, to keep her from falling into the hands of black militiamen. Dr. Cameron protected Margaret’s virtue from a “fate worse than death.” These scenes, which also portray Southern whites regaining control of the South, demonstrate the need to “protect” white womanhood through violence because the loss of control could lead to the destruction of the society they knew.

These were very relevant responses to the societal changes of the time. The controversy with Jack Johnson and Lucille Cameron, occurring before the premiere of The Birth of a Nation but after The Clansman, personified these fears in real life and made them legitimate concerns of the Protestant white males. “As Victorian sexual attitudes seemed to crumble, the primal image remained: The Birth of a Nation harnessed the enormous myth-making potential of the modern film to a pernicious set of racist stereotypes and sexual obsessions.” As such, it was a defense mechanism meant to rouse fear and provoke action, which usually resulted in lynching. According to Hall, lynching of a black rapist showed a “…trade-off implicit in the code of chivalry, for the right of the Southern lady to protection presupposed her obligation to obey.” Lynchers saw themselves as “protectors of women, dispersers of justice, and guardians of

122 Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry, 149
123 Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry, 151
communal values.”

Society could do nothing with the Jack Johnson controversy. Lucille and he ran away together, and their escape represented a gut punch to the status quo. Jack Johnson personified the fear that if black men did well they would attract white women. *The Birth of a Nation* meant to alleviate the anxieties caused from this failure and concern that it could occur again. The film bolstered the white male’s confidence that he could and would retain control of white women and consequently society.

Those messages are identical to the messages Thomas Watson articulated via his coverage of the Frank trial. Watson was concerned over women departing the home and going to work in factories run by non-blood male relatives. Moreover, many of the factories were under the control of non-Protestants, mainly Jewish men. These men were rich, educated, and usually Yankees. Leo Frank was all the above. When a young, gentile girl was killed in his factory he became the target. The movement of women out of the home and into the factory was feared to give women sexual agency. As a result, white womanhood was under threat again, but this time from a non-Protestant, white male with unlimited financial means to rise to the top. If white Protestant women were ever to prefer a Jewish male’s riches the social fabric would tear. When word spread about the possibility of Mary Phagan’s rape, Watson had the fuel he needed to warn the community of what was at stake with this case.

Watson incited hatred and paranoia by publically condemning Frank. As a result of Watson’s constant badgering, Frank was lynched shortly after his death sentence was commuted to life in prison. Watson exclaimed “Womanhood is made safer everywhere.”

The lynching of Frank was emblematic of the consequences for threatening the virtue of a young gentile female.

---

124 Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 151

125 Woodward, *Agrarian Rebel*, 445
“Together the practice of ladyhood and the etiquette of chivalry functioned as highly effective strategies of control over women’s behavior as well as powerful safeguards of caste restrictions.”

This mode of protection maintained and upheld the old value structure of white Protestant males. Thus, white supremacy was also a way to harness and control womanhood. By controlling Southern white womanhood, Southern white men controlled the future. Sexuality needed to be addressed and had to be channeled properly, in order to preserve a white, Protestant, patriarchal society. Thomas Dixon and Thomas Watson expressed the profound anxieties that this project generated in Southern and American culture before World War I. Their trajectory by happenstance makes 1915 a climatic year in that culture.

\[126\] Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 152
Appendix 1

*The Clansman* Abridged Plot and Characters

Austin Stoneman is a Yankee abolitionist and commander of the Black League. He is also the patriarch of the Stoneman family.

Ben Cameron is a Southerner who fought and was injured in the Civil War. He falls in love with Stoneman’s daughter, Elsie, and becomes the leader of the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina.

Flora Cameron is the younger sister of Ben. Her family’s former slave, Gus, is accused of and lynched for raping her.

Silas Lynch is the mulatto villain of the story and protégé of Austin Stoneman. He harbors feelings for Stoneman’s daughter Elsie.

Gus is a former slave of the Cameron family. He has affections for Flora and he is lynched for her accused rape and murder. Afterwards, his body is left on Silas’ doorstep as a warning to leave white women alone.

Elsie Stoneman is the daughter of Austin. She falls in love with Ben Cameron.

Dr Cameron is the Cameron family patriarch. He remains a proponent of anti-violence until the death of his daughter, Flora.

Act I begins and focuses on the end of the war during election day 1867 in Piedmont, South Carolina. Whites are disfranchised while blacks maintain full rights. Austin Stoneman heads the secret Black League in the South and hopes to recruit Ben Cameron. Ben Cameron fought and was injured during the War Between the States. Stoneman offers Ben a chance to head to Black League in South Carolina but Ben declines the offer and instead opts to create a secret white coalition, the Klan. He fears if the blacks carry the vote whites will have no legal
recourse. Constant talks ensue of legalizing inter racial relationships, so the honor of white women is at stake. Elsie Stoneman, daughter of an abolitionist Austin Stoneman, nursed Ben back to health and they fall in love. However, with Ben’s refusal to join the Black League, Austin Stoneman does not approve the relationship. The election results arrive and Silas Lynch wins the lieutenant governorship and the new legislature consists of mostly blacks.

Act II commences six months later. Silas Lynch who is upset with Ben’s refusal to work with him in the Black League sets the Cameron house for auction. Ben Cameron, in a conversation with his father, Dr. Cameron, mentions that Nathan Forrest asked him to head the South Carolina coalition of the KKK. Dr. Cameron urges against this, as he does not wish for possibilities of violence. Lynch arrives in Piedmont for the sale of the Cameron home and admits he desires to buy the house and take a white bride. The house goes to auction but Elsie shows up and outbids Lynch at the last minute. Elsie and Ben reconcile but he still must win her father’s affection. At this point, Nathan Forrest has appeared, and Ben and his father, Dr. Cameron are arrested for believed membership in white military companies.

Act III opens with Flora Cameron, aged 13, playing outside. Former slave, Gus, appears and gives her a box of candy. Ben sees this and warns his sister not to stray too far from home. Ben begins discussion with Dr. Cameron surrounding the ‘boldness’ of blacks and insists something might be done. Dr. Cameron, a pacifist throughout the story, insists that violence is not the answer. In the meantime Flora has left the house to play by the stream and was followed

127 This is part of Dixon’s humor, making the daughter of an abolitionist fall in love with the Southern leader of the Klan.


129 Stokes, *The Birth of a Nation*, 49. Ben is the head of the white military groups.
by Gus. Meanwhile, Austin Stoneman receives word that Ben is the Grand Dragon of the Klan and informs Elsie and asks her to leave him. She confronts Ben and he admits to heading the organization. Elsie offers him an ultimatum; it’s either her or the Klan. At this point Flora’s bonnet has been discovered and she has gone missing. A search party commences and locates her body. They find Gus responsible and try him for her murder. He is found guilty, lynched, and left on Silas’ doorstep as a message.\textsuperscript{130}

Act IV begins with Silas angry and ready for retaliation. He wants Ben Cameron hanged until dead. Austin Stoneman has Ben arrested and sent to trial for treason. At Ben’s trial Elsie, who was supposed to testify to his membership in the Klan, declares she knows nothing of the Klan and confesses her love for him. Stoneman, who has a proclamation declaring the use of martial law does so and leaves for Washington. Ben is arrested and sentenced death. Silas offers Elsie a deal stating he will save Ben is she agrees to marry him. Stoneman returns and while heretofore he had been encouraging interracial relationships; upon hearing of Silas’ affections for Elsie he is disgusted and recants his support. In the climatic scene, Elsie is held captive by one of Silas’ minions while Stoneman and Lynch have their revolvers pointed at one another. Stoneman ponders shooting Elsie to save her from Lynch, as he is about to end her life to save her, the Klan storms in and saves the day. Ben, who was saved earlier, unMASKS himself and Elsie falls into his arms. Stoneman and Ben reconcile and Stoneman assures Ben that a state of normalcy will return.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{130} Stokes, \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, 49-50.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{131} Stokes, \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, 50-51.
\end{flushright}
Bibliography

Primary Documents:

The Dixon Papers, Emory University, Georgia


The Watson Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Primary Newspaper and Article Sources:

The Alexandria Gazette, Alexandria, Virginia

The Bourbon News, Paris, Kentucky

The Breckenridge News, Cloverport, Kentucky

The Daily Press, Norfolk, Virginia

The De Sato County News, Arcadia, Florida

The Free Lance Star, Fredericksburg, Virginia

The Jeffersonian, Thomas E. Watson, Thomson, Georgia
The Crisis, NAACP, New York, New York

The News Leader, Richmond, Virginia


The New York Evening Post, New York, New York

The Ocala Evening Star, Ocala, Florida

The Ocala Banner, Ocala, Florida

The Peninsula Enterprise, Accomac, Virginia

The Pensacola Journal, Pensacola, Florida

The Paducah Sun, Paducah, Kentucky

The Sun, New York, New York

The Times Dispatch, Richmond, Virginia

The Washington Times, Washington, District of Columbia

The Watchmen and Southron, Sumter, South Carolina

The Watsonian Magazine, Thomas E. Watson, Thomson, Georgia

The Virginia Citizen, Irvington, Virginia

Primary Video Sources:

Birth of a Nation, DVD, directed by D. W. Griffith (1915; Chatsworth, Calif., 1998).

Secondary Sources:


Frey, Robert Sietz. “Christian Responses to the Trial and Lynching of Leo Frank: Ministers, Theologians, and Laymen.” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Fall, 1987): 461-76.


Melnick, Jeffrey “‘The Night Witch Did It': Villainy and Narrative in the Leo Frank Case.” *American Literary History* 12, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 2000): 113-29.


Vita

Tara Nicole Kowasic was born on December 29, 1982, on a Naval Base in Waukegan, Illinois, and raised in Locust Grove, Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Arts in History from The University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2009. She received a Master of Arts in History from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, in 2013. She currently resides in Richmond, Virginia.