Nymphomaniac

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Introduction

In the 1960s there was a new wave of feminism rising in American culture; women were rallying against the homemaker image and pushing toward a more modern, independent, and influential image. During this time there was a ‘Sexual Revolution’ making an imprint on American culture; women were becoming more open and proud about their sexuality. They viewed themselves and their actions as liberated and powerful, but to outsiders they were viewed as the new-age deviant nymphomaniacs. Nymphomaniacs, women who express and pursue an excessive amount of sexual activity, have felt a strong backlash for centuries to the cultural norms and gendered expectations of women in Western cultures. But where did the rise of the nymphomaniacs begin, and how did they become such an iconic taboo in Western cultures and societies? As our society strives to make steps toward more progressive and accepting ideologies, will women have to continue to keep their sexual identities hidden?

History and Etymology

The origin of nymphomaniac can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece; the word nymphae means “bride” or “young wife” (www.etymonline.com). The word then goes on to give rise to the Greek mythological characters with the same name; The Nymphs. According to Classical mythology, the nymphs are minor female deities and protectors of springs, mountains, and rivers; they are represented as young, beautiful girls (Mythica). There are five different types, each named for the landmark or location they were entrusted to protect: celestial, water, land, plant, and the underworld. They never grew old or died from old age, and in some legends they gave birth to demi-gods. These free spirits were set apart from the common, mortal woman of Classical Greek life because they could not be tamed by men; they never married. The gods and goddesses most commonly associated with nymphs are Artemis, Apollo, and Dionysus. The following page includes a classical painting of nymphs.
This is an Italian artist’s representation of what mythological nymphs could have looked like. An important feature of these women is their comfortable appearance and body language; they are creatures of nature. Their nudity isn’t meant to create the poster image for sexual desire or promiscuity, but to display the most natural state for all humans and divine beings. This portrait captures the original meaning behind the word *nymph*. 

Figure 1: 'Bathing Nymphs' - Palma Vecchi, c. 1525-28.
In the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, \textit{nymph} went through a semantic shift. Doctors began to add the suffix \textit{mania} to form “\textit{nymphomania}”; a disease in which women suffer through an excessive sexual desire (Dictionary). Women accused of being nymphomaniacs were often sent to hospitals or asylums where doctors would treat these patients with series of traumatic and violent procedures; most commonly hysterectomies, lobotomies, and various other techniques that by today’s standards would be considered cruel and unusual. Unfortunately many of the accused women did not have any form of a mental disorder or cognitive impairment; they were usually sent away by fathers or husbands for not conforming to archaic cultural norms for women’s behavior.

\textbf{Nymphomaniacs and Satyriasis}

Figure 2 displays the Google Ngram comparison of the words \textit{nymphomania} and \textit{satyriasis}. Just as \textit{nymphomania} refers to the excessive sexual urges in women, \textit{satyriasis} is the excessive sexual urges in men. This word also takes its roots in Greek mythology as well as having a similar semantic shift involving psychiatry.; however, around 1880 \textit{nymphomania} appears to be used almost three times as much as \textit{satyriasis} in literary publications – but why? If both words are used to describe a person with excessive sexual compulsions and with identical symptoms, why is the female diagnosis much more commonly used and recognized?

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{nymphomania_satyriasis_ngram.png}
\caption{Nymphomania and satyriasis.}
\end{figure}
One hypothesis reflects the differences in the names themselves. When one hears a word that includes the suffix *mania*, it is automatically associated with a mental or cognitive impairment. This then leads one to start associating other characteristics of what one might know about other manias; mood swings, aggression, erratic behavior, etc. In general, abnormal behaviors. When a woman is diagnosed as being a nymphomaniac, she is immediately stigmatized as having a sort of immoral, uncontrollable and irrational behavior; she is a danger to society and possibly threatens the moral guidelines for other women she may come in contact with. On the other hand, if a man is diagnosed as having satyriasis, the name doesn’t do as much as to trigger a preconceived notion as to what that might entail. The suffix *sis* in medical terms is usually associated with a physical ailment, such as dialysis or neurofibromatosis, or even a biological event (*meiosis* or *biogenesis*). Its name doesn’t automatically trigger thoughts of abnormal or uncontrollable behavior, but more of an abnormal condition involving bodily function. This still leads to question why one gender is left with a much more burdening stereotype of the same state.

**Nymphomaniacs and Literature**

A part from the tragic, medicinal history behind the term *nymphomaniac*, there is another event that launches the use of the word; the 1955 novel *Lolita*. Written by Vladimir Nabokov, it is the controversial story of a middle-aged man who becomes infatuated with a twelve-year old girl. He eventually seduces her and begins a sexual relationship with the girl, despite her fragile, young age. The protagonist, Humbert Humbert, has had a longstanding interest in pubescent-aged girls; he refers to them as *nymphet*. Throughout the novel Humbert frequently uses this term, as well as a few others, to justify his sexual advances of a young girl. By giving his love interest a title that suggests that she is sexually promiscuous or has insatiable sexual appetite, he is drawing attention away from his own perversions. Lolita is then portrayed in a completely different way; no longer is she an innocent adolescent, but now is a vixen and antagonist using adult behavior. While it is clear that in the novel the young Lolita is objectified and sexually exploited by a much older man, the words associated with her character have an oppositional view. Around the time of *Lolita’s* publication in 1955, a dramatic increase occurred in the usage of the words *nympho* and *nymphet*, as shown in Figure 3. Although the context of the two words is not specified in the NGRAM search, it is rather coincidental that their sudden gain in popularity runs along the same time as the release of what is considered to be one of the greatest novels of the 20th century.
Notice that until approximately 1950 *nymphet* was virtually nonexistent; *nympho* also takes a dramatic increase in use around the same time. Could this be a direct influence from *Lolita*?

Figure 4 compares the same three terms, but also introduces the term *hebephile*, a type of chronophilia in which one is primarily or exclusively sexually interested in pubescent individuals approximately eleven to fourteen years of age (Wikipedia). Humbert is
described in character analysis as being a hebephile, as throughout the story he is fulfilling his sexual fantasies with Lolita; yet it is the words associated with her character analysis that transpire into culture and common vocabulary use. Could this be due to gender gaps in society at the time of its release? Even though adult-child relationships were considered morally unethical and taboo, did society still dissect Lolita’s character as being an explicit character, despite her age, simply because she is a young, unorthodox female?

**Transition/Conclusion:**
As we progress further into the 21st century, the gender isolating terms of the past are taking on new names, as well as new identities. Women are breaking away from the Victorian Era stereotypes of being the silent, restrained housewife and bridging the gender inequality gap. Nymphomania is being replaced with more neutral terms such as hypersexuality and sex addiction. This neutralization of nymphomania reduces the shame and attention that was once predominately geared toward women. Hypersexuality, defined as a dysfunctional preoccupation with sexual fantasy for a period of at least six months (Weiss), is a part of sex addiction. Figure 5 shows the increase in these new expressions as they begin to replace the older in cultural aspects of the English language.

![Figure 5: Nymphomania, satyriasis, sex addiction, and hypersexuality.](image)
The term sex addiction does not appear until the early 1980s, peaks in the 1990s, and then drops back down around the turn of the century; within the past five years it has regained some of its popularity within its use in pop culture. The recent trend has been for celebrities (mostly male; Tiger Woods, David Duchovny, etc.) to come out as having sex addiction issues after a scandalous event or failure in personal relationships are covered by the media. Since American culture is greatly intertwined with media and pop culture, this could be a huge contributing factor in the eradication of the use of nymphomaniac and satyriasis. Media is one of the biggest contenders in the ways that language shapes culture (whether it’s subliminal or not); the words that are chosen for today’s news reports and magazine articles are the words that will be repeated in tomorrow’s conversation.

References


