

Abstract

Title – “Intrigue Like Those in Days of Nero”: Sensationalized Reportage of the Harry K. Thaw Trials in the Twilight of the Comstock Era

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Mentor(s) and Mentor Email – Dr. Benjamin Esswein (besswein@liberty.edu)

Student name(s) and email(s) – Emily Parrow (eeparow@liberty.edu)

Abstract: On June 25, 1906, millionaire Harry Kendall Thaw shot famed architect Stanford White on the rooftop of Madison Square Garden in New York, claiming to have acted to avenge the rape of his wife. Stunned by the publicity of the killing, Thaw’s legal team justified the murder in terms of the invented malady *Dementia Americana*, a righteous, temporary insanity vindicated by foundational principles of 19th century honor culture. Spanning 1907-1908, the ensuing two trials—*The People vs. Harry Thaw*—occurred at a crossroads in American history, when conservative, Victorian ideas about gender and sex were dying away in favor of a looser, more modern understanding exemplified by the flapper of the 1920s. Intersecting the moral climate of the Trials was the sensational or yellow press, which reflected these contemporary shifts when delivering the case’s lurid, salacious details of sex and murder into the hands of an ever-expanding readership. The press served as the prime vehicle by which Americans learned about the so-called “obscene” subject matter national anti-vice crusaders like the formidable Anthony Comstock had fought to eradicate since the 1870s.

Relying heavily on primary sources like newspapers, court documents, periodicals, letters, meeting minutes, and memoirs, this paper analyzes the lives and press coverage of the Trials’ three key participants—Stanford White, Evelyn Nesbit, and Harry Thaw— in relation to 20th century shifts in journalism, gender norms, and purity and honor culture. This paper seeks to fill a void in scholarship by uniquely examining the connection between the Thaw Trials and national anti-vice crusades while analyzing the widespread influence of the media, a topic ever

relevant to modern day politics. These intersecting factors render the Thaw Trials a fascinating case study through which to understand the greater political, social, cultural, and moral climate of Gilded Age and Progressive Era New York.

Christian worldview integration: This historical topic, permeated as it is with darkness and the unmistakable evidence of corrupt human nature, challenged me exponentially as an aspiring historian. It strengthened my research abilities, specifically through the somewhat tedious, methodical process of locating, comparing, and incorporating newspaper reports and articles pertaining to the topic at hand. I learned to be open-minded and receptive in my inquiry into conflicting accounts and interpretations, thereby striving to model prudence and academic honesty.

Further, the more I uncovered about the havoc within the public and private lives of White, Nesbit, and Thaw—true products of Gilded Age and Progressive Era America—the more I realized the staggering similarities to the modern day. At times stifling my discomfort with some of the extremes of the case, I began to see several timeless threads, specifically in terms of modern debates over the exploitative nature of the press; the Church's role in upholding moral purity in society; the acceptability of religious and secular conversations about sex, pornography, and contraceptives; and the way people, ever human, are disturbingly interested in scandal and true crime—the more grisly and salacious, the better.

This project brought me into close contact with the broken humanity of my historical subjects. My Christian faith encouraged me to interpret this sordid tale with integrity, compassion, and an unflinching dedication to uncovering the truth, no matter how staggering or uncomfortable. My research is intended not to glorify the debauchery associated with the Thaw Trials, thereby engaging in the same fixated sensationalism as the early 20th century media. Rather, I seek to analyze and reflect upon the events with a greater and more important context in mind—one that radically changed societal norms in the United States.