

The Murder of Helen Jewett

1. Snow in April

- a. What was the nature and extent of prostitution in New York City in the 1830s and 1840s?
- b. How many prostitutes work in Townsend's house?
- c. What kind of customer came to the Townsend house?
- d. What kind of policing did New York have at this time?
- e. How did the economic nature of things create a youth culture?
- f. Why were so many people allowed to see the body of Helen?
- g. What was the coroner system like? Where was the autopsy carried out?
- h. Who was James Gordon Bennett?

2. Sensational News

- a. What was crime like in New York at this time?
- b. What was the penny press?
- c. What was journalism like in this period?
- d. What is investigating reporting? Who invented it?

3. Self made woman

- a. Who was Judge Nathan Weston?
- b. Who was Dorcas Dorrance?
- c. How did Helen "reinvent" herself?
- d. what was the Cony Academy?
- e. Besides sexual skills what talents did the young Helen demonstrate?
- f. Who was H-----Sp-----y?
- g. Who was Harlow Spaulding?
- h. What is "Aspasia?"
- i. In Maine what was the law on unwanted pregnancy ?
- j. What is infanticide?
- k. Why was Helen's character as a youth in Maine so important?
- l. who seduced [ruined] Helen in Maine?

4. New York's Sex Trade

- a. New York was number 2 when it came to sexual vice. What was number 1?
- b. What caused New York to take off and become the nation's largest and most prosperous city?
- c. How many prostitutes were there in New York City?
- d. What did New Yorkers call prostitutes?
- e. Was prostitution illegal in New York in the 1830s?
- f. What was the geography of prostitution in New York?
- g. How did "drumming" contribute to prostitution?
- h. Who was the common target for prostitutes?
- i. What was the connection between prostitution and the theater industry?

- j. What was unusual about the location of many New York brothels?
- k. Why and how did “brothel bully gangs” pose a threat to the brothel?

5. Acclaim for a Woman of Spunk

- a. What was the main theme of the series of pamphlets that came out shortly after Helen’s death?
- b. What kind of person emerges in the Helen pamphlets?
- c. How did Helen deal with ungentlemanly behavior in the parlor of the brothel?
- d. How are our views of Jewett as victim shaped by these pamphlets?
- e. How did Helen use the police and the courts to her advantage?

6. The Brothel Business

- a. How was Helen’s life different as a mistress rather than as a prostitute?
- b. What was unusual about Helen dressed?
- c. About how many men patronized Townsend’s brothel in a week?
- d. On average how many clients a day did Helen service?
- e. Typically what Townsend’s prostitutes charge a customer?
- f. How much did the prostitutes pay a week to Townsend for room and board?
- g. How did Townsend’s prostitutes weekly income compare to other New Yorkers?
- h. How important was the parlor in the nineteenth century brothel?
- i. How did Rosina Townsend become a madam?
- j. How does John Livingston’s career illustrate America’s feelings about prostitution?
- k. Why does Vanderlyn’s painting *The Death of Jane McCrea* in Townsends brothel seem sadly ironic?
- l. How does the story of the real McCrea fit into attitudes toward Jewett and her housemates?

7. Epistolary Enticement

- a. What was the history of Mary Berry, the Duchess?”
- b. What was Helen’s personal life [relations to men] like?
- c. If Helen’s career is to be believed what makes a good prostitute?
- d. What does Edward’s letter suggest about client/prostitute relations?

8. A Servant Girl in Maine

- a. What was “warning out?”
- b. Why did the author spend so much time on the genealogy of the Westens and the Doyens?
- c. What does Dorcas’ family history tell us about the character of Helen?
- d. What was Jacob Doyen’s, the grandfather of Helen, life like? What was his character?
- d. What was John Doyen’s, the father of Helen, life like? What was his character?
- e. Why does the writings of Anne Royall become important?

9. Reading and Imagination

- a. How important was reading to Dorcas?
- b. For the more “straightlaced” what was the problem of reading novels?

- c. How might have Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fanshawe affected Dorcas?
- d. Of all of the writers who was the favorite to Dorcas and the according to many the most corrupting?
- e. What was a "virago queen"?
- f. Who was Black Sal or Dusky Sally?

10. Tracing Seduction

- a. In what way is the author a real detective in this chapter?
- b. Which famous future author of American fiction figures in this story?
- c. What is "cross-class" flirtation and how might figure into this story?
- d. Who are the prime suspects in the seduction of Helen?
- e. Of these suspects which one do you think is the seducer?
- f. What was the National Police Gazette?
- g. What was Mount Joy Hill in Portland?
- h. Who were the corner boys?
- i. In the previous generation what was the degree of children out of wedlock?
- j. Why did things change by the time of Helen?
- k. How important was female virginity?

11. Adolescent Clerks

- a. What made a moral man?
- b. Why were a flurry of moral advice books in the period?
- c. How was Robinson treated in the papers?
- d. What was Robinson's family history like? Why might that be important?
- e. Who was George Marston?
- f. Who was William Attree?

12. Love Letters and Lies

- a. What part do Helen's letters play in her business?
- b. In reading her letters what kind of woman was Helen?
- c. Why was Helen's possession of Frank's miniature significant?
- d. What is Frank's name of affection for Helen?
- e. Who was Cashier?
- f. What was unique [or was it?] about Helen's relations with her clients?
- g. What does Helen's education tell about the place and purpose of women in this period?
- h. These letters reveal a growing tension between Frank and Helen. What was the cause?
- i. How often did Frank "visit" Helen?
- j. Besides his looks and sexual skills what makes Frank attractive to Helen?
- k. How did their use of names reflect their particular feelings at the moment?
- l. What was "brothel etiquette"?
- m. How old were Frank and Helen at this time?
- n. How does Helen's career belie the proposition that prostitution is sex without commitment [besides \$] ?

13. Blowing Up

- a. Why is Frank concerned over info Helen has that might jeopardize him?
- b. What does the letter on page 282 suggest about Frank's character?
- c. What was the play Norman Leslie about?
- d. What was the evidence pointing to Frank as the killer?
- e. How was Helen's body treated immediately after her murder's discovery?
- f. What eventually happened to Helen's body?

14. Overconfident Youth

- a. What was the Robinsonian Juntos?
- b. What did this murder do to Townsend's business?
- c. What kind of sightings were there on Thomas Street shortly after the murder?
- d. How did various "fashion statements" indicate public feeling after the murder?
- e. What was the "worthy victim" theme that some tried to develop after the murder?
- f. What was a "dandy"?
- g. What was the Magdalen Society? The Seventh Commandment Society?
- h. Which position did the Men's Moral Reform group take?
- i. What kind of person was revealed in Robinson's diary?
- j. How did Robinson feel about his father and mother?
- k. Who was most likely to be a member of the jury at this time?
- l. How does the fictional characters of Jekyll-Hyde fit Robinson?
- m. What was Robinson's father's insight into the character of his son?
- n. What segment of New York society supported Robinson most?
- o. Who was Robert Furlong?

15. Trial in June

- a. How long did the trial take? Was that unusual or typical?
- b. Were official transcripts taken?
- c. What was the unusual name of the trial courts of New York?
- d. Who was the sitting judge of this trial?
- e. Who was defense council? What was his unique gift?
- f. What is a pettifog?
- g. Who was the prosecution?
- h. According to the author which side—defense or prosecution—was the better?
- i. What was public attendance like?
- j. How were jury selected? How much did they receive in compensation?
- k. What was the fine for not doing your jury duty?
- l. What is a "talesman"?
- m. Largely who made up the jury? Who made up those spectators?
- n. How did one jury publically demean Townsend in court?
- o. Who was "Fire King"?
- p. Was there evidence that Robinson might have been involved in employee dishonesty?
- q. What is a house of assignation? How does that fit into Robinson's history?
- r. How does handwriting analysis fit into this trial?
- s. How critical was Furlong's testimony?

- t. What was Hoffman's use of defense witnesses calculated?
- u. What do we discover about common sleeping habits in the nineteenth century?
- v. Were jurors allowed to ask questions of witnesses?
- w. When did the real drama of the trial begin?
- x. Who, does it seem, eventually becomes on trial instead of Robinson?
- y. How long did the trial take from start to finish? How long did the jury deliberate?
- z. Was the judge biased?

16. The Great Unhung

- a. To what extent was the trial sexist?
- b. Why did not the other males in the Townsend house at the time of the murder testify?
- c. What happened in Salem Mass. [home of the famous witch trials] indicating public feelings about the verdict?
- d. Using D.O.P.E. analysis do you think Robinson guilty?
- e. Who was Emma Chancellor and how did she figure into this trial aftermath?
- f. How does embezzlement fit into this story?
- g. What does Robinson's letter to Gray [pg.376] show his character?
- h. Just how does sex figure into this young urban clerk culture?
- i. What was a "fip"?
- j. What eventually happened to Gray?
- k. Was Robinson a sexual predator?
- l. What is a psychopath? Was Robinson one?
- m. Robinson eventually goes to Texas. What was his military career like?

17. Texas

- a. What kind of place did Robinson settle in Texas?
- b. What did he do there?
- c. In what way did he act as a conduit for his siblings?
- d. Who did he marry in Texas?
- e. What was the Armstrong pamphlet?
- f. How did he fare in fortune in Texas?
- g. Did he ever visit his old haunts in New York?
- h. How did he finally die?

18. Epilogue

- a. In what way was this event a morality play?
- b. How similar were Jewett and Robinson?
- c. How did Jewett's and Robinson's life reflect parental angst?
- d. Was "justice" done in this incident?