



OP-ED COLUMNIST

What's Up, Slut?

By MAUREEN DOWD
Published: July 15, 2006

Washington



When he was dating in the 70's, my brother used to refer to "Wednesday night girls" and "Saturday night girls."

I mentioned this to my 23-year-old assistant, Ashley, and she looked intrigued. "So, which is the one you *don't* want to be?" she asked.

My brother may have thought of Wednesday night girls as easy prey, and Saturday night girls as potential wives, but Ashley thought of Wednesday as the night she nestled in to watch DVD's with her boyfriend, and Saturday as the night she and her girlfriends went to bars to flirt with guys.

For centuries, men divided women into good girls and bad girls. The madonna-whore bifurcation is imbedded in American culture, from Betty/Veronica to Mary Ann/Ginger to Charlotte/Samantha.

In the 1960 movie of John O'Hara's "Butterfield 8," Elizabeth Taylor plays Gloria Wandrous, a bad girl about town. When her married lover gets mad at her for purloining his patrician wife's mink coat, he immediately downgrades her to a "tramp" who has been working her way through New York's Ivy League men.

"You're a joke, a dirty joke from one end of this town to the other," he sneers at her.

Later, she admits to her mother: "Face it. I was the slut of all time."

After eons of being a summary judgment that a woman is damaged goods, the word slut has shifted into more ambiguous territory. It can still be an insult, especially since there is no pejorative equivalent to suggest that a man has sullied himself with too many sexual partners. Men are players, women are sluts, just the way men are tough and women are bitchy.

Republicans denigrated the prim law professor Anita Hill by painting her, in David Brock's memorable phrase, as "a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty." Clinton defenders demonized Monica Lewinsky the same way.

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But as women express themselves more, sexually and professionally, and no longer need to “use their virginity as a meal ticket,” as the anthropologist Helen Fisher puts it, the slur may have lost some sting. The Times’s Stephanie Rosenbloom writes that the word has morphed into a term of endearment and teasing, with teenage girls greeting each other with “Hi, slut!” — the way “queer” and “pimp” took on different coloration, and the way “girl” went from an insult in early feminist days to a word embraced by young women. The gangsta rap characterizations of women that some found offensive are now being embraced by many young women.

“Slut” is a faddish appellation for everything from lip balm to cocktails, and applies to voracious behavior of all kinds; Cosmopolitan recently ran a quiz on how to tell if you’re an “attention slut.”

“It’s just a really fun word to say,” explains my classy 26-year-old girlfriend. “Usually women only call someone a slut if she’s not slutty, but if you do call a slutty friend a slut, you can get away with it because, oh, it was just a *joke*, even when it’s not. So, yet another way for mean girls to flourish.”

It was probably inevitable, once women began discovering their inner slut with microminis and other provocative outfits, and with high school and college girls reporting a much more blasé attitude about performing oral sex, that they’d turn the word itself inside-out. But, semantics aside, have attitudes really changed much?

Studies show that superiors, men and women, may penalize female executives who dress in too sexy a manner — proving that it’s not always safe to strut as a slut. And Don Reisinger, a student in Albany, told Ms. Rosenbloom: “When I think of the word slut, I think of a woman who has been around the block more times than my dad’s Chevy. I might date a slut, but I certainly wouldn’t marry one.”

That men are counting those spins around the block is a fact that’s not lost on women. The late-night comic Craig Ferguson dryly observed that women often get back with their exes because they don’t want their total number to go up.

One 24-year-old Washington reporter agreed that “redos” of previous partners can keep your number below the slut threshold, defined by two of her male friends as “less than 20.” She thinks she is “chaste” with a number of six, but admits she sometimes subtracts one or two when telling a guy her romantic history. She said she kept dating Mr. Six after she’d lost interest simply because she didn’t want to up the number to Mr. Seven.

One 25-year-old writer in D.C. said his ideal girl’s number is one or two fewer than his. When he had “the numbers talk” with one date, she gave him an answer that he found both satisfactory and sexy: “Enough to know what I’m doing.”

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