



**SCHOOL OF ENGLISH AND DRAMA**  
**UNDERGRADUATE ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET**

**Your name must not appear anywhere on your work or on this form**

<b>Your College ID number:</b> (the 9 digit number on your student ID card) e.g. 101234567	210696336				
<b>Your College username:</b> e.g. le01234	CB21106				
<b>Your current year of study:</b> (please indicate)	Year 1	Year 2	Year F	Associate	Other
<b>Do you have a Specific Learning Difference (SpLD),</b> e.g. dyslexia	YES/NO (please delete) If YES, please include your SpLD Cover Note				
<b>Do you have a registered visual impairment?</b> (e.g. blind, partially sighted)	YES/NO (please delete)				
<b>Module Code:</b> e.g. ESH123/DRA456	ESH319				
<b>Module Title:</b>	Michel Foucault				
<b>Assignment number and element:</b> e.g. Assignment 1, Essay 1500 words, 30%	Assignment 1, Writing Exercise 2000 words, 30%				
<b>Question number (if applicable):</b> e.g. Question 3					
<b>Title:</b> i.e. a short description of your assignment	Literary Review of Michel Foucault's <i>Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir</i>				
<b>Word count:</b>	1815/2000				
<b>The date this assignment is due:</b>	2022-03-09				
<b>Your Seminar/Workshop Leader:</b>	Howard Finn				
<b>Your Personal Advisor:</b>					

**Sample Assignments:** a sample of anonymised assignments may sometimes be used in teaching (e.g. in class, on module areas). If you want to OPT OUT please tick this box.

**I understand that plagiarism is the use or presentation of the work of another person, including another student, without acknowledging the source. I declare that the writing-up of this assignment is my own unaided work and that where I have quoted from, closely paraphrased, used, or referred to the opinions or writings of others, these have been fully and clearly acknowledged and referenced. I further declare that I have not submitted any part of this assignment elsewhere, in another module or for another assessment at this or another university, and that no part of this assignment is self-plagiarised. I give permission for the School to run the e-copy of my assignment through plagiarism detection software. By the submission of this cover sheet, I acknowledge the above.**

**Notes:**

- For advice on referencing and writing, please consult the SED Writing and Reference Guide, which is accessible from the School of English and Drama QMPlus undergraduate home page and every module area.
- In your second and final years, you can access copies of assignments you completed in previous years, along with your grades and feedback, via the QMPlus Archive, which is accessible from every QMPlus page.

**► IMPORTANT: it is strongly recommended that you save this document as a '.doc' or '.docx' before commencing your assignment, so that all formatting options (e.g. those relating to footnotes and the embedding of images) are retained.**

*Begin your assignment beneath this line*

---

Notions of surveillance and control are never far from Foucault's mind. Published in 1976, *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* explores the history and emergence of modern-day conceptions of sexuality and refutes the so-called "repressive hypothesis" that dominates these conceptions<sup>1</sup>. While many refer to the Victorian era as the "Age of Repression" (thus acknowledging that there exists something different about this period than those which came before) and would assert that modern-day society has moved away from, or

---

<sup>1</sup> The translation of the title from French into English can be somewhat misleading, and perhaps somewhat detracts from the polemical nature of Foucault's writing. Whereas *savoir* is translated as *knowledge*, of which connotations range from wisdom, to an intimate comprehension, *savoir* retains the mostly technical, and detail-hungry aspects of knowledge, and somewhat more divorced from feeling or intimacy. For someone possessing such specific ideas as well as an ostensive deep-seated distrust for institutions, that we must read an inevitably imprecise translation is imbued with an amusing degree of situational irony.

entirely upended the supposed attitudes of the "Victorian regime", Foucault seeks to oppose this narrative by firmly positioning sexuality within the structures of knowledge, power, and industrialisation that had evolved by the late nineteenth century. To Foucault, the Victorian regime did not suppress sexuality— conversely, it contributed to a "proliferation of discourses concerned with sex"<sup>2</sup>— instead of censorship, there in fact "was installed rather an apparatus for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex".<sup>3</sup> Thus for Foucault, the present was not marked by a paradigm shift or departure from Victorian attitudes on sex, but rather Victorianism had created the conditions for what ideations on sexuality would become by the time he had written this first volume. For a variety of factors on which he further elucidates, and not owing itself to any isolated individuals or events, the Victorian era was far more similar to the present than previous eras were to this so-called "Age of Repression" (which as he argues, was not at all 'repressive').

A salient and compelling aspect of Foucault's argument is his elaboration on the relations of knowledge and power relative to sex. In contrast to the Eastern cultures' development of an *ars erotica*, in which the truth (and knowledge) of sex is inherent to the act of and pleasure in sex itself, the Western discourse on sex as well as the knowledge and truth to be gained exists within the structure of a *scientia sexualis*, in which truths are produced by confession.<sup>4</sup> The act of confession, originally in the context of medieval Western society and the Catholic Church slowly gave way to the confession of sexuality in the context of medical and scientific circles, where it then became medicalised and further catalogued. Far from repressing sexuality, nineteenth-century society "produced and determined the sexual mosaic".<sup>5</sup> These sexual tendencies or preferences gained new and lengthened identities— as Foucault famously states, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."<sup>6</sup>

This new litany of highly specific terms coined for the various categories of sexual proclivities, and broader stereotypes derived from the investigations of the medical and scientific establishments and then assembled into a hierarchy can seem rather amusing although to Foucault it is a serious matter that he subjects to his relentlessly thorough analysis and ties directly to his understanding of power within this discourse of sexuality. The idea of power is so integral to his theorisations on sexuality that he often concatenates it with knowledge in the creation of a new term: power-knowledge, or even power-knowledge-pleasure. However, "power" still remains a complex idea to Foucault, such that tacking to "knowledge" with a hyphen does not at all suffice. Power involves itself in several ways in relation to knowledge and pleasure. Within the context of the confession and discovery of knowledge, power and pleasure mix together in what Foucault refers to as *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*. As Foucault sees it, power is exercised by the observer to obtain the pleasure of truth, yet also enforces the pleasures disclosed; power is exercised by the subject in their choice to disclose their sexual pleasures who obtains a type of pleasure for the attention given to their confession of

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 57-58.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 43

pleasures.<sup>7</sup> Thus the listener and confessor both experience power and pleasure in a fashion that is mutually self-reinforcing through the act of confession and discovery (which begets knowledge) in a ritualised and structured informational game of hide-and-seek. However, this is not the end of Foucault's complicated treatise on power, which at times can seem more boolean or mathematical than literary. Notably, he professes that power originates from numerous loci and that "one is always 'inside' power, there is no escaping it".<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there exists desire's ability to constitute a power relation, as desire is predicated on a lack of the object of one's desire and therefore will always implicate a power dynamic.<sup>9</sup>

It is also worth noting the structure of the text. While brief anecdotes and narratives are included, this text seems to meander far less than Foucault's previous works; his arguments are specific and complex, but as a whole remain quite concise and accessible to a broader audience. Although it is a lengthy introduction to his subsequent volumes which further expand on the history of sexuality, in comparison to Foucault's earlier work, *Madness and Civilization*, volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality* when read in isolation can at times appear to behave a bit like a carefully outlined pamphlet or guide in terms of its structure. It is well-organised and quite logical in progression, although the topic of the final chapter at first appears to have little to do with the history of sexuality—entitled, "Right of Death and Power over Life" this chapter begins with a discussion of conceptual shift regarding power that the West has undergone. At first, power of the heads of society—the sovereign—was based in a "right of seizure"<sup>10</sup>; however it is now based in a right to "foster," thus power shifted from imposing limitations to prescribing, i.e. telling people how they *ought to* live. Yet how does this relate to sexuality? Foucault provides this background to reveal sex as the intersection of the individual body and its disciplines and the regulation of society and acts as "a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, to Foucault it makes sense that sexuality became a vital part of discourse within a Western culture of which the political and economic structures sought to instruct the individual and regulate the masses: to and in society, sexuality, the notion of sex, and the notion of the act of sex all exist separately from the act of sex itself.

Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* offers us many things, including the "repressive hypothesis", though it remains somewhat unclear why we "other Victorians" so adamantly view the Victorian era as the "Age of Repression" and why this term has stuck, if it is so obviously the case that the inverse is true. Perhaps what we mean by "sexual repression" is in fact more closely related to the effects of "sexual enforcement"—that in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, sexuality became medicalised, categorised in a fashion that required the abnormal to define the normal. This hierarchy built from the varying acceptability of sexualities would therefore prompt individuals possessing perceived deviant sexual interests or whose sex lives would have ranked low on this hierarchy to engage in some forms of self

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 44-45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 93-95.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 145-146.

censorship so as to avoid the social ramifications. Depending upon the extremity of the perceived sexual deviance, these repercussions might range from shaming or ostracism to more extreme punishments such as fines, imprisonment, or institutionalisation. Hence in many ways, it makes some sense that it is commonly thought that the Victorian era was marked by a fairly high degree of sexual "repression". Although sexuality entered academic circles and became the topic of great discussion during this time period and thus brought about "the production of sexuality rather than the repression of sex"<sup>12</sup>, sexuality was also increasingly and more dutifully policed, and with potentially more extreme consequences than there had existed before.

It is nonetheless intriguing to consider the relevance of this text today, given that it was written over forty years ago. Does the text still hold up? Are we indeed simply "other Victorians"? Yes. In many ways we still are, and the systems of mapping and ranking our sexual propensities are still of great social relevance; although, while new classifications continue to proliferate, it seems that Western society is attempting to slowly move away from hierarchies (or so our present, contemporary discourse claims). However, with increased discourse, and increased importance, there have also come into existence far more administrative bodies and media of surveillance and regulation, which Foucault would no doubt likely find disquieting. Although the consequences of confession are arguably less life-threatening, Today's discourse on sexuality is equipped with its own, modern means of interrogation, and inquisition. One cannot help but wonder what Foucault would make of the modern town-square that is social media, or how he would position the advent of new forms of technology and communication within the discourse on sex, and the complex of power-knowledge-pleasure that it inevitably implicates.

Foucault ends the text by looking towards the future and reflecting that perhaps one day people— our distant offspring— will laugh and be amused by our society's preoccupation and obsession with sex, and that perhaps their society will be utterly alien to ours and will thus be dominated by a completely different set of anxieties and concerns and panics. Or rather, is there perhaps some basic truth as to why sex is so inescapable for us, and why it is perceived as so relevant to our understandings of identity? To Foucault, the discourse on sexuality is not entirely unhealthy, and he does not appear to be nostalgic for a world completely absent of this discourse— the existence of groups can be important for connection and resistance of the bodies of surveillance and regulation for which Foucault harbours such a lasting distaste. But rather, Foucault seems to imagine a world in which sex has less importance and we are more free of our multiplicity of neuroses on sexuality. These conjectures at the end of his work echo and expand on a witty remark from his first chapter— society's enduring hope, woefully self-inflicted, and always tantalisingly out of reach— "tomorrow, sex will be good again."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 7.

### Bibliography

Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998)