

# When and Why did Paris Come to be Called *The City of Love*?

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(the original posting has hyperlinks)

I've written recently about the way the adjective "French" had acquired over the last 500 years a sexual connotation in colloquial English, thanks to the early association of France with syphilis (the "French disease") in the late 15th century and later to the dissemination of French pornography starting in the 17th century. How were these mostly negative associations eventually turned into positive ones?

I will focus below on American perceptions since they seem to have been instrumental in the dissemination of the "City of Love" concept. Historian Harvey Levenstein has explored in two books (2000, 2010) the evolving and complicated relations American tourists had with France and in particular with Paris over the past two centuries. The French themselves were the ones to come up with the "City of Light" name (*Ville Lumière*) but never quite adopted the "City of Love", at least not in the metonymic way Americans did.

In the first half of the 19th century, American tourists were by far and large "well-off young white Protestant males" who crossed the Atlantic to visit the "Athens of modern Europe" to appreciate French culture—opera, music, paintings, sculptures, architecture. Far from the prying and suspicious eyes of their puritan families, they also got to enjoy more vivid and titillating experiences. Not only the high-brow fine arts were unexpectedly full of nudes, but even opera dancers and singers were scantily clad. Popular entertainment available in dancing halls and open-air cabarets in the outskirts of Paris could be naughty (even for the French actually: the early forms of can-can were banned repeatedly in the first half of the century). Unlike honorable American women who "stroved for an ethereal look, slim, pale, and otherworldly", the "Females of Paris" (Alabama planter William Raser, 1817, cited by Levenstein, 2000) exhibited a remarkable abundance of flesh, and wore make-up, powder, and perfume. And the French upper classes, including the women, seemed to have a shockingly relaxed view of marital bonds.

That said, mentions of the expression "City of Love" are still uncommon in English-language 19th century texts. Here is one from 1833, from an American traveler in France who tells how after leaving Beauvais he...

*...rapidly approached the city of love and intrigue, pomp and gaiety.*

Those young American visitors were confronted with an overwhelming availability of commercial sex. The Industrial Revolution was attracting thousands of men and women to the capital, and a number of those women (and a few men) turned to prostitution to make ends meet. There were prostitutes in the streets, in the restaurants, in the foyers of theatres and music halls, wherever there were customers. By the 1830s, the French government had taken a "regulationist" approach to prostitution in the hope of better controlling it (and venereal diseases), so a good part of the

(female) Parisian prostitutes were duly registered, as were the brothels. There were sex workers of all ranks, from lowly (and often unregistered) street-walkers to high-class, fabulously rich courtesans whose lovers were aristocrats, politicians, entrepreneurs, artists, and journalists. Sex was not an underground business: this was the Parisian world that young American tourists and students found themselves enmeshed in. Despite the culture shock, some Americans, and other foreigners of course, embraced willingly a new lifestyle that felt like freedom, even though they did not dare report their sexual adventures in the letters they wrote home. Some partook in the "Bohemian" lifestyle in the Latin Quarter or Montmartre, mingling with impoverished artists, poets and students, and their girlfriends, the young and pretty grisettes who were garment workers, shop attendants, and sometimes part-time sex workers. There would be several generations of "Bohemian" Americans in Paris.

The "romantic" Paris was born, mythologized by literature and music, and later by the cinema. This mythology did not separate romance from sex work, as shown by Alexandre Dumas Fils' novel *The Lady of the Camellias*, turned into the opera *La traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi. And indeed, Paris as a romantic place was fused with the "Modern Babylon", the "Brothel of Europe", the hotspot of sex tourism that by the mid-century was attracting provincial and foreign tourists eager to enjoy its decadent lifestyle and night amusements. Not less than twenty guidebooks published between 1867 and 1907 listed cafés-concerts, restaurants, dancing halls, circuses, theatres, and those "secret" establishments such as *brasseries de femmes* and brothels, where lonely travelers could enjoy the company of those notorious Parisian women. Women, women everywhere!

American women also flocked to Paris in the late 19th century, as tourism became feminized. Mrs John Sherwood wrote in the *North American Review* in 1890 that...

*...more than eleven thousand virgins [...] semi yearly migrate from America to the shores of England and France.*

Like their male counterparts, American women came for the art and culture and some were seeking more than this. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic claimed that those girls were going wild once they set foot in Paris: some tried to find a titled European husband while others were plunging headfirst into the Bohemian lifestyle. The word flirt entered the French language and was applied at first to American women. French salonnière Juliette Adam, responded to Mrs Sherwood in the same magazine:

*What the European women denounce in the young Americans is the abuse of flirtation in which some of them indulge. At this dangerous pastime they learn to overexcite the vanity of the men, and therefore disdain them.*

At the turn of the century, American men, unlike their predecessors, could acknowledge that they were going to Paris for the thrill of sexual adventures. Theodore Dreiser summed it up in *The Century Magazine* in October 1913:

*As in the Café de Paris, I noticed that it was not so much the quality of the furnishings as the spirit of the place which was important. This latter was compounded of various elements, success being the first one, perfection of service another, absolute individuality of cooking another, and lastly the subtlety and magnetism of sex, which is capitalized and*

*used in Paris as it is nowhere else in the world. Until I stepped into this restaurant I never actually realized what it is that draws a certain moneyed element to Paris. The tomb of Napoleon, the Panthéon, and the Louvre are not the significant attractions of that important city. Those things have their value and constitute an historical and artistic element that is imposing, romantic, and forceful; but over and above that there is something else, and that is sex. A little experience and inquiry in Paris quickly taught me that the owners and managers of the more successful restaurants encourage and help to sustain a certain type of woman whose presence is desirable. She must be young, beautiful, or attractive, and, above all things, possessed of temperament. [...] Paris — this aspect of it — is a perfect maelstrom of sex, and it is sustained by the wealth and the curiosity of the stranger, as well as of the Frenchman.*

In 1914, fashion writer Grace van Braam Gray waxed lyrical about Paris and its amorous women:

*That may sound odd to those who have not visited Paris, but it is, as everyone knows, a city where Love is the great game and the great pursuit of everyone. A woman in France does not, as does the American girl, go her way unconscious of men and indifferent as to what any but her especial friends think. To the French woman the adornment of her body is almost a religion. Frenchmen, too, look first at a woman's frocks, then at her face, and it is only at the last they ever stop to question if she is clever often more in fear than in hopes.*

Samuel P. Orth wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* in September 1913:

*When a new Dante arises out of the ashes of modern poetry, he will fill a vast corner of hell with tourists, and the majority of them will have the image of Paris, the 'modern Babylon,' imprinted on their memory. Everybody goes to Paris. That has been the fair capital's misfortune. Everybody has gone to Paris for three hundred years, to taste the forbidden fruit. And Paris, with dainty conceit, has prepared elaborately and artistically the suggestive degeneracy which most of these tourists go to Paris particularly to see. Paris gives any one a boost toward the abyss, if he seeks it — and if he can pay for it.*

So, in the early decades of the 20th century, Paris was definitively associated with sexuality, negatively—the modern Babylon, with its thousands of sex workers, its can-can dancers, its street sellers of naughty postcards (as [described here](#) by Grace Corneau, the *Chicago Tribune* correspondent in Paris who had herself married a French count)—and positively—the Paris of romance, where star-crossed lovers meet in quaint cafés, kiss in a mansarde under a roof, and dance in *ginguettes*, unless it's a comedy with love triangles of upper-class people chasing each other.

Once again, countless novels, plays, songs, and now movies were selling "Romantic Paris". Perez (2006) has shown how Hollywood participated in the construction of this mythology in the 1920-1930s, with comedies and drama set in Paris, where the City is shown as the place where people can escape to pursue, or succumb to, dreams of romance. The IMDb lists about 60 movies with "Paris" or "Parisian" in the title produced in the US between 1918 and 1939. Two were simply titled Paris, one in 1926 and one in 1929, both featuring the romance between a young and rich American and a low-born Parisian girl (a chorus girl in 1924 and an "apache" girl in 1926).

*All the mystery, the glamour, the romance that stalk on every side when the clocks strike midnight in gay Páree.*

In *Ninotchka* (1939), it's Paris who thaws out the icy Communist Party envoy played by Greta Garbo and makes her drink champagne, laugh (famously) and fall in love with a French aristocrat. Hollywood romance/comedies featured French actors (Maurice Chevalier), French-born American actors (Claudette Colbert), or American actors of French descent (Adolphe Menjou), all supposed to bring something typically French on screen.

The expression *City of Love* was still uncommon at that time. In 1923, heart-throb Rudolph Valentino aka "The Great Lover" wrote in his very public diary how he was going on honeymoon in Paris with his wife Natacha Rambova (that was in 1923).

*We're off for the Citadel of Laughter—the City of Love—Natacha and I—Paris bound!*

In 1927, Jamaican-American journalist J.A. Rogers visited Paris visited the lovely, beautiful Paris.

*Singular fact! Paris, City of Love and Beauty, is heart-shaped.*

He also found inspiration in some Parisian landmarks such as the Place de la Concorde, where the guillotine stood during the Revolution.

*I have an intuition that the oppressors of the Negro in America who have been getting away with murder, are going to have a change of luck some day, just like those old aristocrats.*

Paris was not just for love!

So the "City of Love" monicker already existed but it had not yet solidified. Before the 1940s, examples remain scattered, and other cities could claim the crown, like, say, Budapest, "City of love and romance" (1921), or Rome, *La Citta d'Amore*.

One article that may have tipped the balance towards Paris was the editorial *The Paris that did not fall* published by the New York Times on 15 June 1940, as France was ready to surrender. Here is the relevant part of this magnificent (unfortunately unsigned) piece, which was reprinted at the time in many other American newspapers:

*The city will stand. The material thing that men have found to love in it will still be there: the tree-lined avenues, the river of beautiful bridges, the old palace, Notre Dame, the Louvre, the parks, the Opera, the cafes in which multitudes of men from many lands have sat over little glasses and long, exquisite meals, saying what they pleased and thinking their own thoughts. This is the shell of Paris. The shell witnesses the obscene triumph of a man and an idea that have invaded not only a city but a century, out of the murk of past time.*

*But it is only the lovely shell that Hitler has captured. He has not captured the true Paris. Never can he, his tanks, his robot battalions penetrate within the walls of that magic city. For all their violence it remains inviolate, forever.*

*Paris of Voltaire, Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Anatole France, Montaigne; Paris of Madame Roland, Lafayette, Danton, Zola, Chateaubriand; Paris of Racine, Molière, Corneille; Paris of Gautier, Daudet and Rabelais; Paris where democracy had its modern*

*rebirth; Paris that taught the world to paint and build; Paris that laughed, Paris that used words for rapiers, Paris that turned the troops out to march with muffled drums in the funeral trains of poets; Paris where the creative imagination of modern man burned at its freest and brightest; Paris of museums, libraries, universities in which the mind could range at will; Paris the spiritual, Paris the city of love, Paris the city of light, Paris that quickened the pulse of youth and ministered to the serenity of age; Paris the volatile and profound: this is not Hitler's Paris, not today, not ever.*

This sentiment of an eternal, mythical, romantic Paris, impervious to Nazi brutality, was expressed two years later in the classic line from the movie *Casablanca* (1942), when Rick makes his former lover Ilsa board a plane and leave him:

*We'll always have Paris.*

The Americans rediscovered Paris after the war. This experience was sometimes a little bit rocky, but it sparked a newfound appreciation for the romance and sex to be found in Paris. This LIFE magazine article from October 1944 dedicates a whole page to the main attraction of the liberated capital: the bare legs of French girls.

*The bicycle is now Paris' means of transport and serves to show off the best-looking girls and neatest legs that Paris has ever produced in its modern history*

*Paris' greatest revelation was that, in privation, it had produced one of the prettiest crops of girls in the memory of living men. For four years they had not eaten too much or loafed. And, above all, they had all been obliged for four years to travel by bicycle. Bicycling Paris in fact was the greatest leg show in the world. The women wore wooden shoes and no stockings, but they were lean and fit. They compensated for plain attire with elaborate hair arrangements and hats.*

As tourists started to return, the name *City of Love* was soon given prominence in newspaper articles, such as this one from 1950, *Tourists tell of Paris Life*.

*Paris, the city of light, the city of love, is itself again. Couples embrace in the parks, walk arms entwined through the streets.*

William G. Andrews, a Colorado A&M graduate studying in Paris in 1954, reported on the Parisian nightlife for a Colorado newspaper.

*Gay Par-ee "the City of Love" "the City of Light" all this they call Paris.*

Andrews drank champagne and went to "almost" nude shows in Pigalle with his wife. He'd been in Oslo previously, which was less fun. He would become a specialist in French politics.

By the 1950s, "The City of Love" had become a common metonym for Paris, used notably in the advertising of American movies, such as the thriller *So Long at the Fair* (1950), the Parisian romances *The last time I saw Paris* (1954), *A certain smile* (1958), and *Paris Blues* (1961). "City of Love" and its variants were now a cliché part of English-language newspaper titles about Paris: *Paris, the City of Light, love and laughter proves hypnotic when seen by a Boroite* (1960), *In Paris, the City of Love, life is more than breathing in and out* (also 1960), and so on. In any case there was

no shortage of postwar American movies using romantic Paris as its main setting, such as an *American in Paris* (1951), *So This Is Paris* (1955), *Funny Face* (1957), *Gigi* (1958), *Charade* (1963), *Irma La Douce* (1963), or *Paris When It Sizzles* (1964). The current Netflix show *Emily in Paris* is just a late iteration of this!

As for other "cities of love", that would deserve some extra research. Verona (thanks to *Romeo and Juliet*) and Rome could certainly claim that title. In 2007, people started putting "love locks" on the Ponte Milvio in Rome... but this annoying practice later spread to the Pont de Arts in Paris, threatening the safety of the bridge.