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## Clients Who Frequent Madam Barnett's<sup>1</sup> Emporium

*Scott Russell*

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### Prologue

I have tried to achieve a comfort zone with this project. It happened in 1997, on one of those days before a staff meeting when we were tired and cynical, feeling used by the society of writing that exists in the college. We began to kid around about the students who wanted us to punish them, the students who wanted a quick fix, those who wanted to punish us. That is when the idea of Madam Barnett's Writing Emporium was born. It started as a joke, the idea that we in the University of Michigan-Flint Writing Center were like hookers. Perhaps it should have ended there, but with my affection for odd comparisons, and Vince Locke's (Vince is another tutor) idea for a paper on writing center myths, the idea just wouldn't go away.

During the summer, I checked out books, social and psychological studies of prostitution, to see if the similarities were mere jokes, or if there was something important in the idea that tutoring and prostitution were partially alike. I thought the exploration would be amusing. I did not know that I would discover things that disturbed me about myself and how tutoring has affected me.

### The Clients

“Prostitution is about male sexuality”(Høigård and Finstad 93).

There are vast differences between what we writing tutors do and what workers in the sex trade do that give us, in the writing center, greater

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social acceptance, and give to sex workers far greater personal risks. But when one looks into studies such as *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money and Love*, by Cecelie Høigård and Liv Finstad, one sees important similarities. Both tutors and sex workers have to deal with multiple clients, often strangers, for purposes that are ostensibly for the client's gratification. Both workers deal with aspects of the client's performance that are intimate in nature and involve the client's ego. According to Høigård and Finstad, there is damage that can occur to prostitutes because of this kind of work. Ignoring for the moment the risks to life and limb, the sex worker can become incapable of having a satisfying intimate relationship. In their study, Høigård and Finstad argue that prostitution was damaging to the women they studied and, by extension, damaging to all women. Prostitution, they say, reinforces traditional perceptions of male and female sexuality (93). Prostitutes learn to advertise themselves in a way that buys into those cultural perceptions—a form of objectification. If comparative factors are valid, tutors run a parallel risk in terms of their writing; tutors develop a sense that they have to be correct and they themselves have difficulty being tutored.

One key to determining if the comparison is valid is a look at the kinds of clients which create the emotional environment of the work. In his book *The Elegant Prostitute*, Harold Greenwald examines the cases of individual prostitutes he has had as patients. He says, "In order to understand the call girl better, it is necessary to understand her clients and her relationships with them" (221). He says that these clients fall into three categories: the most frequent is the occasional client. Greenwald observes that "Perhaps 50 to 75% of the call girl's clientele consists of occasional Johns." They have dropped into town on business. They often lead "respectable" lives. Then, there is the habitual client who develops a relationship with one or more particular women. The third basic type that Greenwald identifies is the compulsive client "who cannot keep away . . .," who is driven to seek the company of call girls (222). As a writing tutor reads Greenwald's profiles, he or she cannot help seeing writing center clients emerge who fall into these three categories: the occasional client, the habitual appointment, and the compulsive writing center groupie.

### **The Occasional Client**

He comes in because he got a low grade on his last English assignment. He readily admits that writing is not his long suit and that he did not understand the assignment correctly. But he is an average, conscientious student. He says he has a start on the next assignment and gets it from his pack. He and the tutor proceed and things go fine. At one

point, the student says that he should have proofed better and the tutor says that he knows it's only a draft, that they should focus on how well the effort fulfills the assignment. This student may come back in a few weeks when he feels uncertain. Or he may not be back until the next course in the composition sequence.

### **The Habitual Appointment**

She asks for particular tutors. There are her favorites. That's good. Except that she often has a lengthy paper on social work which is due in a day. Because of nonstandard constructions, it is often hard to sort out what she is trying to say. It is writer-based prose, line-by-line work. That's fine, too, except that one tutor has worked with her in the past, over a series of appointments the previous term. He helped her develop some personal proofreading strategies. Later, when he is consulted, it becomes clear she has brought a paper in virtually the same condition, has made no attempt to proofread herself. She makes subsequent appointments when other papers are due and it is always the same; she wants an editing job done each time. She cajoles for extra time, comes at the last minute before closing. She dresses up when it's a male tutor. In fact, when we think about it, she never has worked with a female tutor.

### **The Compulsive Writing Center Groupie**

He is one of those people who somehow manages to begin telling his life story within the first five minutes of a meeting. If one asks him how he is, he uses it as a means to talk about how he is really into computers but likes to write, only "words are not his friends." The tutor attempts to begin his session, and within eight minutes I can hear the student talking about his life, even attempting to make personal connection. It isn't romantic, more as though the tutor was a long lost relative who is being caught up on family news. She tries to get him back on track, and he, as adroitly, uses her questions as a vehicle for further conversation. He comes in at least twice a week, sometimes without any particular assignment. It becomes clear that he is more than just in need of friends. He talks with anyone who listens. As one person fades from his company, he redirects his conversation to anyone looking on. His writing is secondary to each visit, an excuse to come and chat, hang out, become part of the society of the Center.

Within these three original groups are subsets that show signs of a particular kind of struggle with academic writing: the brutal drop-in, the punctuation fetishist, the red pen request, and the moral imperative.

## **The Brutal Drop-in**

She enters in a hurry, glances around the Center, then asks the tutor at the desk, “Do you work here?” The tutor asks how he can help. She wants someone to help her with a business writing assignment and unfolds a piece of paper that turns out to be the assignment sheet. “How do I do that?” she demands. Her voice is excited, nearly angry. The tutor explains how the Writing Center can help and suggests she should have a chair and they can talk it over. He isn’t experienced with that kind of assignment and asks another tutor to come help. The student grows impatient as the tutors read the sheet again. The second tutor suggests how she might approach the writing. “Okay, so what do I write?” she asks. The tutors suggest she write a response to the prompt and gradually re-work it. The student demands to talk to the person in charge. The manager is called over and introduced. He suggests largely the same thing the tutors did and the student says, “So just tell me what I’m supposed to write!” He reviews the assignment with her, paraphrasing what needs to be done, offering her space in the Center where she can write. She snatches up the assignment angrily and asks who his boss is. He tells her and she storms out as if to see the director.

## **The Punctuation Fetishist**

He is shy and humble when he drops in. He is about thirty, a “returning student.” There is no paper due, so the tutor talks to him about what the student refers to as “writing at the college level.” The student is very aware of “the college level.” He says that phrase a lot. He finally asks if he could bring in a piece of his recent writing to see if it qualifies. “Certainly,” the tutor says and sets the student up with an appointment.

The student comes to the conference with a quarter-folded sheet of paper. On it is typing and the tutor reads. The tutor sees that the first paragraph, fifteen lines or so, is one sentence. It doesn’t really talk about anything. The clauses are connected by colons and semi-colons into a lengthy run-on. The second paragraph has two such constructions. Gently, the tutor begins to help the student sort out what he was trying to say. The student says he wasn’t trying to say anything. He just wanted to know if he was writing at the college level. After discussing writing and the kinds of assignments the student is apt to encounter in courses, the tutor offers the student an in-house assignment and sets up another appointment. After

a few visits, the student begins to trust the tutor and risk clarity in his writing. But he still sneaks in a colon whenever possible.

### **The Red Pen Request**

He says he likes criticism, that the harsher it is, the more it does him good. He says, "Use a red pen, if you like. Write all over it." The tutor says, "We don't even have red pens here." However, the student is adamant that he needs criticism, that he can take it, doesn't mind being told that what he writes is garbage if that's what it is. The tutor says, "We never tell a student his or her writing is garbage, but I can be very frank with you if that's what you want." Yes, that is what he wants, total frankness. In subsequent visits, this student tells every tutor that he likes totally frank criticism, and points out the original tutor as an example of someone who can be really tough, brutal when necessary. We shouldn't pull any punches with him.

### **The Moral Imperative**

He will not tell us his name or let us log his appointment in the book. Then, even though we are willing to proceed on that basis, he is so nervous sitting with the tutor that he says he has to leave and does. He comes back a few days later and tells us he is the son of a professor in the sciences, that if his father finds out he is coming to the Writing Center for help, he will be in trouble. He feels ashamed that he has to come but cannot afford to get a bad grade either. In his sessions, he is argumentative and high-handed with the tutor. There are only two tutors on the staff he will work with because he believes they are competent.

### **Victimless Crimes**

It is arguable that writing clients are a study in the mores of the society that creates them. And while a sampling does not qualify as proof, it can help us conceptualize the range and nature of special needs a society creates in its members, whether these are special sexual needs or special writing needs. A sampling also serves as a demonstration of what a worker in either field can encounter. In the above group, for example, it looks as though the writing tutor most often encounters people who to some degree are intimidated and temporarily on unfamiliar ground. Many of these people feel as though they are on the outside, looking in. Often they feel

they are the only ones in this fix. The fix usually has something to do with writing (there being only one case where writing was completely secondary to the student's visit). But it is not simply writing. For a number of these people, writing in general or writing of a particular kind had become a kind of monster for them that ruined the experience of education temporarily or forever.

In the case of the occasional client (the most common), it is not all writing which is the problem, but the academic writing of a particular assignment with all its bells and whistles (MLA style, double spacing, 12 point font, one inch margins, numbered pages with headers, rhetorical devices, etc.). One could posit metaphorically that this student leads a respectable academic life, and has found himself in a strange town for the night. He avails himself of the writing tutor only when these rare circumstances conspire to make him feel lonely.

For the occasional client, the society of writing that exists in the college does not present a monolithic barrier to the student's viability. What have become the occasional clientele are the students who used to get through college all the time before writing centers or tutors officially existed. Grade point averages suffered only a momentary "C" before the student moved on to graduation. Some availed themselves of illicit help from fellow students.

The tutor's habitual client is quite different. In the case of the habitual client described above, the client had an ongoing problem. Her writing required thorough restructuring of sentences, so that meaning could be conveyed to the paper's intended audience. It was, for her, an overwhelming task. So she developed a relationship with a small number of tutors who could be both effective and sensitive to her needs. Once her routine was established, it afforded her an opportunity to flirt casually as she liked to do. There were, thus, both positive and negative reasons for her habitual use of the Center.

It should be recognized that the habitual client has been marginalized by the society of writing and the larger culture of academia. If this client were to enter into these arenas, it would be academic suicide. The demands of the audience for the client's writing would be ultimately too different from the methods the habitual client uses to make meaning (conversational constructions, non-standard dialect, ESL, etc.). In short, this client is mismatched to academic society, such that the society does not approve of the client and the client does not feel able to change enough, or fast enough, to warrant approval. The habitual client might always be at least a bit depressed about writing, and may judge herself harshly for not learning grammar and correct punctuation earlier in school. The habitual client likes the help of tutors because tutors will assist without being judgmental.

The extreme cases presented illustrate the boundaries of the

possible. These truly parallel the sexual extremes we have heard or read about. Could it be that human extremes always become ritualistic and involve symbolic self-injury? The “red pen request,” one variation of the habitual client, has learned through some experience to desire criticism. Since the client would want it even if the client’s writing were excellent, the criticism serves a purpose other than the improvement of the writing. Obviously, if an extreme case wanted just to be verbally abused, it is possible that the writing would always be flawed. What “red pen” wanted was a particular verbal relationship with a person who was capable of finding fault and expressing it. And it is possible that the client also wants a means of making contact with a reader that has too often been absent in some crucial way.

Standard, formal dialects and the “higher” forms of education that support them have been identified as means used to maintain a society’s strata. These are the things that confront a client with special needs. But some of what this client brings to the writing center demands a more personal response from us than simply blaming social mechanics. One gets the sense that these clients have tried to have a relationship with society and been rejected. From the rejection, they came away with an interpretation of the relationship the society was demanding. When they come to the writing center, they attempt to reconstruct, in the tutor, the society that rejected them, so that they might succeed in the relationship at last. They find that, within important limits, tutors can better act out the part of this society because they are physically present, give feedback, and seem to enjoy it.

The punctuation fetishist, for example, wanted to know if he could attain the *level* of the desired academic relationship. “I am a frog. Can I make prince?” His interpretation of the relationship was based on the idea that there was a high and low, that the messages of the lowly were simple, clear, and punctuated with commas and periods. The messages of the high ones, on the other hand, seemed complicated to the point of nonsense. Even the punctuation was inscrutable. One might guess that here is a client who felt excluded upon reading something written by an academic to an audience of peers. After coming to the Writing Center a few times, he began to feel comfortable with the tutors, but he never quite believed what he was told by them. He may even have had an infatuation with his original interpretation of academic society and its writing. Certainly, there are those who love it.

Certain occasional clients also show evidence of trauma at the hands of academic society. The “brutal drop-in” is a kind of occasional client. Unless tutors are fortunate enough to help them make a real breakthrough, they rarely see them more than a few times. In the case presented, the client was in a panic; her aggressive demands were a reaction caused by the writing assignment. Writing is a cognitive activity,

and she was not in a frame of mind to write. All she could think was, “Someone please tell me what to write!” She was drowning and the tutors were offering to teach her to swim in six easy lessons.

This kind of client more than likely hates to write, feels it shows how “dumb” she is. One can only imagine the kind of experience she had when learning to write as a child. A client like this might avoid writing and the classes that require it. Paradoxically, the client’s relationship is with *writing* itself. This client is hyper-aware of audience, since all audiences are a terror. For her, writing is reduced to an act that creates a permanent record of the client’s inadequacy.

Superficially, the “Moral Imperative” harkens to the archetypal young man who, because of his family’s social standing, must be discrete in his adventures. But there are some disturbing features to his case that raise serious questions. His parent(s) did not approve of him frequenting writing centers for the purposes of associating with tutors. One can hear the sonorous injunction, “The Bigginbrains never stoop so low.” The result of this is that the parent figures directly into the relationship the son has with writing and academia. This intrusion thwarts what might ultimately prove beneficial. So it is hard to figure out what sort of client “imperative” is because he is coming in under cover. A better question is, what sort of client might he become? He isn’t allowed to establish a relationship of his own. His initial visit may be due to occasional circumstances, but the secrecy, tension, and lack of rapport with the tutors leave him as mismatched with the tutors as with the assignment.

Even when secretly in the Center, fear of what the parent would think made it impossible for “Imperative” to get help with his writing. When he did keep an appointment, he played the part of the parent with the tutor, demanding demonstrations of excellence. The sad part was that he must have wanted very much to get help, to write his paper well (even if only to please the parent). But, as with other clients in exceptional situations, the ritual nature of his approach to the session destroyed its usefulness.

When one looks at “Imperative’s” situation globally, one has to see the parallels with how all children are expected to join and perform in society. Here sexual and academic performance dovetail: children in this country who are allowed to participate in sex education classes are generally handed personal health and hygiene information only. The general culture and the families of the children then present them with images that suggest possible relationships. Thus equipped, the kids are expected to invent the bridge between a prophylactic and a marriage. Is it any wonder this society creates tutors in both sex and academics?

## The Dry Hustle

After a term or two of working with clients similar to those described above, tutors develop a self-protective stance that studies say prostitutes adopt. Tutors learn to distance themselves from emotional elements of the work, even creating adversarial stances toward typical kinds of clients who always seem to behave and demand in the same ways. In our Center, in recent times, younger men with baseball caps worn at various angles have become stereotyped (as unfair as that may be).

The studies suggest that prostitutes require elaborate defenses just to stay alive, but also to cut down on the emotional wear and tear of intimacy with the public. Defenses tutors develop may be homologous to those of prostitutes: blanking out, retaining physical boundaries, keeping the time down, hiding the self, avoiding customers they could care about (Høigård and Finstad 74). There are even similarities in terms of the “legality” of going to a prostitute or, in our case, a tutor.

One obvious difference between tutors and prostitutes would seem to be how each is treated by the law. Within their society, prostitutes are often illegal, while within the university, tutors are technically not illegal. But Høigård and Finstad summarize the argument for legalized prostitution in Norway:

In defense of prostitution it has been argued in the Norwegian debate that prostitutes provide an opportunity for sex for men who otherwise are without a chance in the “normal” sex market. The needs of distinctively ugly or disabled men have been particularly emphasized. (36)

Høigård and Finstad readily demonstrate that most of the clients of prostitutes in their area of research (Oslo) do not fit this description, the implication being that there are some literal sexual politics being played out.

To us in the writing center trade, however, there is an obvious correlation to the way writing centers have been legalized. We may claim that writing centers are not remedial, or not exclusively in existence for the clients who are academically “disabled,” but we all know that this argument was originally one of the most compelling ones used to establish centers’ necessity to university administrations. There is, then, some reason to see our legalization as comparable to legalized prostitution in those societies which have it. And where tutors are recognized as a legitimate academic resource, does not one find a faculty which insists upon a more traditional pedagogy, a faculty that assumes it is the only fit mate for the student body, the only one with which legitimate documents may be conceived?

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes western society as being oriented to the production of legitimate offspring. To that end, all non-productive sexualities had to be “driven out, denied, reduced to silence”(4). But, of course, concessions have been made of necessity:

If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric—those “other Victorians,” as Steven Marcus would say—seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted. (Foucault 4)

It might be observed that the “truly necessary” room has been made for writing tutors as a result of higher educational urges toward profit (solvency). So many community colleges exist by having an open door policy; so many universities actively recruit students who are unprepared for their curriculum. Indeed, the societal message to children in this country is that college is as necessary to their success as high school once was. In order to retain even a fraction of these students through to degree completion, it has been necessary to legalize such fringe elements as writing tutors.

Along with this sanction has come an institutionalization (which must resemble that of the famous ranches of Nevada). In *The University of Michigan-Flint Writing Center: A Case Study and a History*, Ann Russell explains that that Center began (as do many) with a marginalized sense of outlaw mission, an us-against-them mentality vis-à-vis the traditional courses and lecturers. But Russell observes,

Had the tutors continued to see themselves as isolated and marginalized champions of an undervalued cause, the Center could not have met the changing needs of the larger institution. It was necessary for the tutors to give up their fierce sense of ownership, to recognize their connections to the campus, and to project a more businesslike image. (323)

Tutors in today’s Writing Center quite often find themselves in a much more notorious position among faculty and students. They are more visibly a part of the school’s writing program. It is not uncommon for tutors in our Writing Center to keep the fact that they are tutors a secret when they are attending classes. They do not want their fellow students to

resent them or to deluge them with requests to read papers in hallways. They do not want professors to expect that they will write papers in a way that justifies their job. They only want to be tutors in the Center.

In our Center, in the past decade, common law is fast approaching constitution. More and more practices have been written down as rules both because the program, department, and college wish to define “tutor” as a T-06 position and because tutors want safeguards and acknowledgement of their professionalism. Tutors want to help students do better and feel better, but they cannot be held accountable for the choices students make when they leave the Writing Center.

In prostitution things have been changing too. Our society is concerned about certain intimate behaviors to such a degree that it first legislates against them, then—when legislation fails to create the desired result—begins to invent forms for these intimate behaviors that minimize human contact. There is a proliferation of types of hustling in which the client and the sex worker never even meet face to face, but via telephone or the Internet. It is interesting that these types of encounters remove the sex worker from the reality of the client’s sexual success in much the same way that a student writer’s success is being moved outside the tutor’s sphere of concerns. I note this as writing centers are even now designing viable means to tutor on-line. Thus, the shift for both tutors and sex workers is toward less and less contact with those whom they serve, but more and more important in terms of numbers served and money generated.

In the end, we are faced with either changing an ancient arrangement of provider and client or simply re-inventing it in new venues. It may be that any intimate arrangement of people that places one in the position of professional and the other in the position of client works against what we call collaboration. I say this because I have noticed something about myself as a result of tutoring, something personal: like the prostitute who, after a few years of hustling, can no longer bond with another person intimately, I have discovered that, as a writer, I do not know when I need help with something I am writing. I assume that because of my experience, I do not need a tutor. I feel uncomfortable receiving criticism, give all sorts of signals that I can fix it myself, even when I can’t. It looks as though, when it comes to intimate writing relationships, I trust people less than many of my clients do. Having been the one in the objectified position so many times, it is difficult to switch positions, to become an honest writer who collaborates with other writers. I am much better at objectifying my clients.

After years of helping student writers, I am proficient at pigeon-holing them by type and motivation. I think I recognize them in their different guises after the first few words are exchanged. As tutors, we learn to do this to survive, to make sense of the cacophony of students’

personalities and their needs. And now that we are going to e-mail and chat room (maybe even live-cams) where we are spared the human presence, it will be so much easier for student and tutor to objectify each other and dehumanize themselves. The very nature of the computer screen—so like a television—calls attention to our move away from the direct human interaction that has defined our success as writing center tutors. It is important that we reconsider, in light of this trend, the human mechanics that allow for real connections in a tutorial, that we break a pattern that may have already formed instead of continuing to expanding it within the new mediums that confront us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Our Writing Center's director, Dr. Robert Barnett, graciously agreed to play the role of madam for this paper. My thanks to Vince Locke, Bob Barnett, Jake Blumner, Philip Greenfield, and especially Reema Kadri. Their help was essential.

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