Antebellum Sensational Novels and Subversion of Domesticity

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Abstract
With the sensational novels of the 1840s, a new genre of popular fiction focused on life in cities appeared in America. Through grotesque humor, repulsive images and at times extreme perversity the authors of these novels intended to unmask the corruption and decadence of the ruling class. The first part of this article traces the development of sensational novels and the achievements George Thompson, the most prolific author in this genre. The second part of the article focuses on the subversion of domesticity in Thompson's novels. Domestic novels of 19th century usually trace the success of a virtuous heroine who overcomes all kinds of difficulties and personal misfortune and, often guided by a strong Christian faith, moves to middle-class marriage. The sensational novels of George Thompson move in a different direction and subvert social norms of the era. His narratives deconstruct marriage and family, with households frequently being split apart as a result of the perverse activities of one or both spouses. Thompson's novels do not end in domestic bliss, but with sensational and disturbing images. In this article I focus on the subversion of domesticity in two of Thompson's novels – Venus in Boston *and* City Crimes.

Keywords
sensational novels, subversion, antebellum era, family, deconstruction

In early nineteenth century America, the hunger of the public for sensationalism was fed on the mass scale for the first time. Freedom of the press, embedded in the First Amendment of the Constitution, enabled newspapers to report on shocking stories, which was not possible in more repressive societies. Improvements in printing technology facilitated the publication of various kinds of literature which reflected the taste of working-class readers. Popular newspapers made a dramatic shift toward the sensational, and crime literature enjoyed increasing popularity. As a result, the antebellum public was provided an increasingly repulsive diet of horror, gore and perversity in the penny papers and in the closely associated genres of crime pamphlets and later also in sensational novels.

Penny newspapers that pioneered the emergence of sensationalism appeared in the 1830s. The first were New York's *Morning Post* and *Sun*, but it did not take long before every major American city had one or more of these newspapers. Sold for a penny, they replaced the more respected sixpennies and were aimed at the pockets of America's growing working class. Many of the strategies that characterize present-day tabloid newspapers – human interest stories, a fascination with sex and crime, the use of vernacular language, and an indifference to respectable opinion – can be traced to the penny newspapers of 1830s.[1] The most notorious of them was James Gordon Bennet's *New York Herald* which appeared in 1835. Bennet was able to make, for example, a courtroom trial of people of no social standing (such as young clerk accused of murdering a prostitute) into an impressive national saga. He quickly earned a reputation for nastiness and coarseness. Foreign commentators noted that "the more respectable the city in America, the more infamous, the more degrading and disgusting, we have found to be its

1 Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 47.

Newspaper Press." [2] *The New York Herald* thrilled its readers with daily reports of tragedies and crimes in such an extent that Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his journal "What sickening details in the daily journals!" [3]

Soon in the wake of the penny press the sensational novels arrived. They were not an American invention (Eugene Sue's *Les Mystéres de Paris* appeared in 1842.), but these novels had a distinctive flavor in America. The publishers of the sensational genre competed fiercely for an audience and experimented with various types of fiction. The first genre that attracted a wide following was the *city mysteries*. Novels in this genre uncovered tales of criminal underworlds or the luxuries and decadence of the rich.[4] One of the first of these exposés, George Lippard's *The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1845), sold more than 60,000 copies in its first year, making it the most popular novel in the United States before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Between 1845 and 1860, more than fifty city mysteries appeared. The most popular settings were Boston, New York and Philadelphia, but authors exploited other American cities, among them St. Louis, San Francisco, New Orleans and Rochester. During this period, several other popular writers (such as George Thompson and Ned Buntline) forged a distinctly American unrestrained style characterized by grotesque humor, extreme perversity and nastiness, and thematic subversiveness.

The genre of domestic fiction had been around long before the sensational novel. One of the first domestic novels in America, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, was published in 1794 and it became a great bestseller. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854) were also quite successful. These novels, classified by David Reynolds as Conventional, praised the home, family, good works as well as Christian virtues such as submission and endurance.[5] The stories usually followed the fate of a pious and virtuous heroine striving to overcome personal misfortune, finally ending with a bourgeois marriage. In domestic novels, home was an ideal to be achieved and marriage was a kind of reward for virtuous behavior.[6]

Although today less studied than the domestic genre, sensational novels were at least as popular and as culturally significant. A number of them (e.g. Lippard's *The Quaker City* and George Thompson's *City Crimes*) sold as many copies as the most popular domestic novels, which usually sold for a dollar and was targeted toward the middle-class Victorian household. The sensational novel sold for twenty-five cents and was peddled everywhere – from stores to sidewalk stalls to railroad stations, so the cultural impact of these fictions may have been even greater. The target audience, of course, was the working class.

The sensational genre did not escape the attention of major writers of the period – Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, employed several themes typical for city mysteries in his short stories. But despite the significant impact on popular culture of the antebellum era, these works were ignored by literary critics for a long time. Several reasons explain this neglect. First of all, many examples of the genre disappeared, since sensational fiction was intended for rapid reading and rapid disposal. Furthermore, prudish censors, fighting against anything even remotely associated with pornography destroyed the plates used

2 David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Rennaissance. The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 172.

3 David S. Reynolds, "Introduction", in George Thompson, *Venus in Boston and other Tales of Nineteenth-Century Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), XXXII.

4 Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents* (London: Verso, 1987), 85.

5 Reynolds, *Beneath the American Rennaissance,* 182.

6 Reynolds, "Introduction", XXXIV.

to print quite a lot of sensational novels. Another reason is that popular fiction of the era violated traditional canons of literary taste, commentators through the years being drawn more to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Poe and the other authors of the period. Only the rise of the New Historicism and Cultural Studies in 1980s opened the way for a reconsideration of antebellum popular fiction. Sensational novels were an important part of antebellum working class culture, and these texts are a valuable source of depictions of class identity and class relations in the mid-nineteenth century.[7]

Authors of sensational novels deliberately tried to be inflammatory, openly spitting in the face of highbrow literature. They exposed what was seen as the hypocrisy and secret corruption among the higher classes, including statesmen, lawyers, publishers, clergymen and the wealthy. In sensational novels, rebels or outcasts become symbols of protest against tyranny. One of the main purposes of sensational fiction was criticism of American society. In some of the novels, low characters are invested with admirable qualities. The central conflict is usually between various oppressors and some version of a likeable criminal representing lower-class or other oppressed groups. These include the urban poor and working class suffering from the effects of rapid industrialization, working women cut off from meaningful employment as well as unfortunates forced to break the law due to unfavorable circumstances.

In the 1840s a number of sensational novels emerged as a literature of protest, authors taking the side of oppressed groups while exposing alleged corruption among respected pillars of society. Antebellum America was portrayed as a nightmarish society of class divisions and social injustices; to some writers and readers, the republican ideals fought for in the American Revolution seemed to have been betrayed. Authors developed a highly irrational style characterized by the intentional disruption of linear patterns as well as assaults on conventional literary rules and genres, among them highly popular genre of domestic novels.[8] The writers of sensational novels were disgusted with sentimental literature, which they insisted was published by "a cadre of bourgeois magazinists upholding the economic and political status quo." [9] The subversion of this genre was therefore only a natural response.

George Thompson is not very well known, but his literary achievements during the antebellum period are enormous, at least as far as the volume of his works is concerned. Over a period of fifteen years he wrote more than hundred sensational novels, among them *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure* (1849), *The Gay Girls of New York* (1853) and *Fanny Greeley; or, Confessions of a Free-love Sister* (1853). Few copies of his novels, however, have survived, mostly because they were printed on low-quality paper which did not stand up against the ravages of time. The only two of Thompson's works widely available to present-day reader are *Venus in Boston* (1849) and *City Crimes* (1849).

Two major influences on George Thompson's sensationalism may be traced. The first is the above-mentioned penny newspapers, from which he appropriated images of crime and violence. A second influence is America's leading antebellum showman, P. T. Barnum, known as the Prince of Humbug, who became famous as an exhibitor of freaks, human oddities, anomalies and other out of the ordinary wonders of nature. The novelist expressed a fascinated, although critical view of the showman and dedicated an entire book (a parody of Barnum's autobiography) to him. Thompson criticized Barnum's

7 Ibid., XXVII.

8 Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 198.

9 Ibid., 207.

interest in human anomalies, although in his own novels the writer seems just as determined to exploit the sensational and bizarre, sometimes going even further.

Besides being the most prolific antebellum author, Thompson was also a pioneer in the development of the pornographic novel, as the titles of above-mentioned works suggest. Together with George Lippard, he published the most daringly erotic fiction of the nineteenth century. One prevailing narrative is of a powerful cult of moral domesticity that governed daily behavior in America, maintaining an uptight, prudish nation which could not tolerate even a hint of sexuality.[10] This myth was reinforced by popular ladies magazines, domestic novels and etiquette books. Undoubtedly in some ways the middle-class culture of antebellum America was absurdly prudish by today's standards. In polite circles, undergarments were called "inexpressibles," piano legs were covered with stockings and ladies garments attempted to hide as much flesh as possible. The Cult of True Womanhood prevailed when in 1831 nude statues in an art exhibition in Boston were decorously covered in "inappropriate" places by aprons.

Still, this cult of domesticity was an ideological response to reading habits that were far more inclined to illegal and obscene than is commonly supposed today.[11] The fact is that Lippard and Thompson's pornographic fiction was widely consumed by antebellum readers. Much of this writing was directed toward male fantasies, although both authors also depicted women with strong sexual drives. According to present-day standards, the pornography was of the "soft" variety, mostly because of censorship. The male characters voyeuristically gloat over "snowy globes" or "heaving bosoms" of partially undressed women standing in front of the mirror or coming out of the bath, and the sex scenes are rather suggestive than explicit. Usually, these descriptions are interrupted by a narrator's remark such as "we will not inflict upon the reader the disgusting details of that evening's licentious extravagances"[12] or "that night was one of guilty rapture to all the parties; but the particulars must be supplied by reader's own imagination." [13] The writers defended their work on the ground that they were reformers trying to root out moral corruption.

Several of the sensational novels openly deal with homosexuality, lesbianism, group sex, transvestism, incest and even child pornography. In *Venus in Boston*, an adulterous couple exchanges clothes during foreplay, the woman dressing in her lover's uniform and trying to rape him, the man wearing her garments playing the part of a shy girl. Later in the same novel, a girl being initiated into a brothel named "Chambers of Love" is kissed by a dozen of half-naked girls, some of them doing so "almost passionately, as if their libidinous natures derived a gratification even in kissing one of their own sex"[14] In *City Crimes*, Thompson describes poor people living in subterranean caves under New York's Five Points who "all herd together, without regard to nature or decency. Why the crime of incest is as common as dirt! I have known a mother and her son – a father and his daughter – a brother and sister – to be guilty of criminal intimacy!"[15] A very unusual scene takes place later in the novel, when a Spanish ambassador – "one of those beasts in human shape whose pervertal appetites prompts them to the commission

10 Cullen, *The Art of Democracy*, 82.

11 Reynolds, *Beneath the American Rennaissance,* 211.

12 George Thompson, *Venus in Boston and other Tales of Nineteenth-Century Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 214.

13 Ibid., 248.

14 Ibid., 100.

15 Ibid., 133.

of a crime against nature"[16] – approaches a boy for sexual gratification on a steamer to Boston. Thompson reminds the reader that the incident is not that out of the ordinary, because "in New York, there are boys who *prostitute* themselves from motives of gain; and they are liberally patronized by the tribe of genteel foreign vagabonds who infest the city"[17]

Sexuality in antebellum novels had little to do with natural passion or honest feeling. Erotic themes became a tool for exposing what the authors of sensational novels viewed as the corruption of America's ruling class, the portrayal of sexual aberration being an especially potent weapon. The upper classes' pretence to virtue could quickly be exposed by depicting their private sexual misdeeds.[18] The description of incest, sadomasochism, mass orgies and miscegenation was less explicit yet more perverse than most of today's pornography. Since sex was being used as a weapon, it was treated as aberrant and unconnected with love. In the antebellum sensational novels, it was governed by violence and manipulation.

Besides being pornographic, Thompson's novels seem to be intentionally repulsive. George Thompson stood out by his fascination with savage violence and also managed to be the most sexually explicit novelist of the antebellum era. In his works a chapter of orgiastic sex is usually followed by a chapter of savage violence, often involving torture or cannibalism.[19] Thompson's raunchy images serve two purposes. Firstly, he is trying to satisfy the craving of American public for everything freakish and bizarre; secondly, he is thumbing his nose at the decorous tone that characterized the period's domestic novels. In his works there are no odes to marital happiness; instead, marriages and families are torn apart by the perverse activities of one or both partners.

The literature produced by Thompson and other antebellum sensational authors was deliberately subversive in both a stylistic and political sense; it created a new, impulsive mode aimed at mimicking the rebellious forces of American culture. The unmasking of the social elite was also realized through new variations of stereotypes such as the reverend rake. Sensational novels subvert much of what is associated with bourgeois ideals – domesticity and the cult of the true womanhood, institutions such as church and big business, white supremacy as well as the belief that human mind is rational and guided by ethics.[20]

The subversion of social norms and domesticity is one of the main themes in Thompson's novels. Pious, chaste heroines, a mainstay of domestic novels, are nearly undetectable in both *Venus in Boston* and *City Crimes*. Sophia Franklin, the virtuous heroine of *City Crimes*, "a beautiful blonde with golden hair and angelic countenance,"[21] does not appear until the last two chapters of the novel, only to be a part of the diabolical plan of her mother and sister, who attempt to sell her virginity to a wealthy seducer. She is saved by Frank Sydney, the novel's main character, who kills the seducer in a duel. The fact that Sophia needs a rescuer distinguishes her from typical domestic heroines, whose virtue alone saves them. Fanny Aubrey, a poor apple seller in *Venus in Boston*, is another example of a passive female character. Like Sophia, Fanny reaches the edge

16 Ibid., 246.

17 Ibid.

18 Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 223.

19 Ibid., 222.

20 Reynolds, "Introduction", XXX.

21 Thompson, *Venus in Boston and other Tales of Nineteenth-Century Life*, 273.

of moral ruin (She is kidnapped and almost raped in a brothel owned by wealthy politician.) only to be saved by helpful male character.[22]

Ruined families seem to be Thompson's favorite theme. The majority of his characters come from a disturbed family environment. Sow Nance, a teenage prostitute in *Venus in Boston*, confesses, "I came from a first-rate family, I did; my father was hung for killing my mother – one of my brothers has also danced a horn pipe in the air, and another is under sentence of death, off South, for beating a women's brains out with a fire shovel and choking her five children with a dishcloth."[23] Another vicious character, The Duchess, describes herself as being born in an almshouse to a mother with a fondness for strong drink. In *City Crimes*, we can find even more disturbing images. Maria Archer, a courtesan, tells Franks Sydney about her parents, who were regarded as most exemplary and pious. However, both of them were having a secret affair – her father with the maid and her mother with Reverend Flanders, the family clergyman. She declares that "these interviews with that holy man did her more substantial good than all his preaching."[24] The perverse reverend even attempts to seduce Maria herself. Maria runs away from her home in disgust, but her life continues to parody the ideals of domesticity. She is seduced by a young rake who drugs her and "initiates her into the voluptuous mysteries of Venus."[25] Maria marries this gentleman, only to find out that he is a pimp and forces her to support him with prostitution.

The most extreme subversion of the domestic ideal can be found in the family of the Dead Man, the archvillain of *City Crimes*. His marriage is "a parody of the courtship and marriage of domestic novels."[26] Dead Man does not court; he takes possession of a woman after murdering her husband and blinding her children. The new children he fathers are called Image and Jack the Prigg. Image is more animal than human, "of pygmy size, its shrunk limbs distorted and fleshless, and its lank body covered with filthy rags; its head, of enormous size, was entirely devoid of hair; and the unnatural shape as well as the prodigious dimensions of that bald cranium, betokened beastly idiocy."[27] Image's contact with his parents is limited to blows and curses. On the other hand, Jack the Prigg is a boy of five, who on his little chest wears a tattoo of a man hanging from a gallows, is thoroughly trained in crime and atheism. His father teaches him that Bible is "all a cursed humbug" and is happy when Jack the Prigg addresses him as "the damnedest scoundrel that ever went unhung."[28] The boy receives a glass of brandy as a reward for his cleverness.

The female heroines of *City Crimes* do not view marriage as a reward for pious and chaste behavior; instead they encourage promiscuity. Josephine Franklin warns her daughter not to "unite herself in marriage to a man who will restrict her in the enjoyment of those voluptuous pleasures in which she now takes such delight."[29] Josephine calls her own husband a "cold formalist and canting religionist," and both mother and daughter devise a plot in which the husband is killed (by means of lead poured into his ear) so they can both enjoy "flowery avenues of pleasure." Julia Fairfield has an affair

22 Reynolds, "Introduction", XXXI.

23 Thompson, *Venus in Boston and other Tales of Nineteenth-Century Life*, 47.

24 Ibid., 113.

25 Ibid., 122.

26 Reynolds, "Introduction", XXXV.

27 Thompson, *Venus in Boston and other Tales of Nineteenth-Century Life*, 203.

28 Ibid., 135.

29 Ibid., 158.

with her black servant before marrying Frank Sydney. When Frank finds out and casts her away, she plans to find a rich man, "infatuate him by her arts, make him her slave, and the deny him the pleasure for which he pants, until he gives her a large sum of money" and after that "either surrender herself to him, or still refuse to afford him the gratification he seeks."[30] The powerful sexual drive of women is another favorite theme of Thompson's and several of his novels are populated by nymphomaniacs who demand a constant variety of fulfillments.

Thompson's novels subvert domestic fiction in a variety of other ways. His heroines are in their perverse homes surrounded by pornographic literature and other sexually charged entertainments. In domestic novels, the heroine usually reads the Bible or other religious tracts. Thompson's characters never read the Bible; they feast instead on pornography. The title character in *Venus in Boston* proudly boasts that she is the author of "Confessions of a Voluptuous Young Lady of High Rank" and Josephine Franklin from *City Crimes* is seen reading through a portfolio of engravings "of rather an obscene character, consisting principally of nude male characters."[31] Together with her mother Josephine has a room in their house named the "Sanctuary of the Graces" outfitted with "a large number of figures, exquisitely made of wax, representing males and females, large as life, and completely nude, in every imaginable variety of posture, a few classical, others voluptuous, and many positively obscene" in which the women "loved to feed their impure tastes by contemplating every phase of licentious dalliance."[32]

Lastly, Thompson's novels end unconventionally, again with highly repugnant and sensational images. In *City Crimes*, Josephine has her face disfigured by acid. She marries a wealthy man, but when he sees her face unveiled after the marriage, he leaves with terror and Josephine kills herself by poison. Her mother becomes an owner of a fashionable brothel. The Dead Man is blown to bits by a bomb placed into his abdomen. Josephine's pious sister Sophia eventually marries Frank Sydney and their marriage may suggest a conventional ending, but the event is described in such a saccharine letter that it sounds more like a parody. No one gets married in *Venus in Boston*; the villainous couple in the novel, the Chevalier and the Duchess, continue their crime carrier in Boston, and the author "regrets that the limits of the present work have not permitted him to record more fully their extraordinary operations in voluptuous intrigue and stupendous fraud."[33] Jew Mike, thief and murderer, "has gone on a professional tour to the South and West" and Sow Nance, a prostitute from a disturbed family, becomes the most "abandoned" prostitute in Boston.

City Crimes and *Venus in Boston* are not the only sensational novels that depict families destroyed by evil forces. Thompson and other iconoclastic authors deliberately invert the pattern of the domestic fiction and repeatedly show the destruction rather than construction of conventional family life. Antebellum sensational authors believed that the most effective way of revealing the vices of America's elite was to depict seemingly respectable figures such as pious matrons or clergymen engaged in secret sexual orgies that exposed them as bestial and corrupt. In addition to selling books, the main purpose of this subversion seems to have been to undermine the status quo in antebellum American society by revealing its injustices.

30 Ibid., 190.

31 Ibid., 214.

32 Ibid., 271.

33 Ibid., 104.

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