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The Erotic Woman:
Sexual Advice Literature and Racy Novels in Victorian America

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Senior History Thesis

June 3, 1993

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Introduction

The term "Victorian" has long conjured images of a prudish society that viewed women as "passionless" and sought to restrict sexual expression to the act of procreation. Yet these once commonly accepted perceptions have been questioned and vigorously debated in the last few decades. The history of sexuality is an especially elusive field, for people rarely leave documents detailing the most intimate aspects of their lives. The records that are left are limited and often appear to be contradictory. The same decades that witnessed an outpouring of advice literature condemning sexual excess also experienced a huge upsurge in the publishing of erotic fiction. Although both were directed at and voraciously consumed by the American public, scholars have devoted much attention to the advice literature and have largely ignored the sensationalist pamphlet novels. Yet both bodies of literature are equally valuable to the historian who seeks to better understand Victorian sexual attitudes. Unlike the advice literature, written primarily by an elite coterie of physicians, teachers and clergymen who imposed their prescriptives upon the reader, the pamphlet novels were tailored to suit the public's taste in order to achieve commercial success. As relics of

popular culture, these novels can offer insights unattainable by studying advice literature alone.

The influx of prescriptive literature and erotic fiction was partially due to a revolution of the American printing industry during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Innovations in technology such as the steam-driven cylinder press made it more economical and quicker to print books. The development of extensive railroad and canal systems to transport reading material gave rise to a network in which, for the first time, large quantities of inexpensive books could be distributed to the public. As late as the end of the eighteenth century, a publisher's first printing of a novel ran somewhere between three hundred and fifteen hundred copies. By 1825, however, a press run of ten thousand copies for a novel was not uncommon.[1] Newspapers and magazines were full of enthusiastic commentary about the "age of novel writing." It seemed as if everyone was heeding the advice of a Putnam's magazine reviewer who wrote in October, 1854,

> Novels are one of the features of our age. We know not what we would do without them ... Do you wish to instruct, to convince, to please? Write a novel! Have you a system of religion or politics or manners or social life to inculcate? Write a novel! ... And lastly, not least, but loftiest ... would you make money? Then, in Pluto's and Mammon's name! Write a novel![2]

The emergence of a large-scale print industry coincided with rising literacy rates. Figures for the 1850 census indicate a highly literate white population: nearly identical rates of over

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[1]Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17.
[2]Nina Baym, Novels, Readers and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 32.

90% for both men and women.[3] Yet as Cathy Davidson has noted, such statistics are questionable as accurate reflections of literacy, and quantifying these rates poses a difficult problem.[4] Despite such difficulties a general consensus exists among historians that throughout the eighteenth century, and particularly after the Revolutionary War, literacy rates rose.

A significant proportion of this increasingly literate population spent its leisure hours reading erotic fiction. During the 1840s racy fiction comprised almost two-thirds of American novels published in that decade. This increase resulted from publishers' redoubled efforts to satisfy the demand for erotica after an 1842 federal statute prohibited the importation of "all indecent and obscene prints, paintings, lithographs, engravings, and transparencies."[5] Prior to 1842, the appetite for such literature had been fed primarily by French authors. Even after the import ban statute was passed, American publishers reprinted cheap translations of French novels due to the lack of international copyright laws. Yet the ban significantly opened up the market to American writers, and they responded with their own brand of erotic fiction. One author in particular, George Lippard, is credited with spawning the "city mystery" novels, a

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[3]Davidson, Revolution and the Word, 57.

[4]What has been often used as a standard for determining literacy are signatures on official documents, particularly land deeds. Inherent in such criteria are biases which ignore women, people of lower economic classes and people of color. Furthermore, discrepancies within that system have also been discovered. For example, often on one document a person will sign his/her name, and on another document they have signed an 'x.' Also it has been discovered in some cases that a third person transcribed names onto official documents.

[5]David Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), 214-215, and Section 28 of Chapter CCLXX, August 30, 1842 Statute in United States Statutes at Large, Vol. 5, Public Laws, 567.

genre of sensationalistic exposés of sin and sexual vice that lurked in America's big cities. Lippard is best known for The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall, which reportedly sold more copies than any other American novel before Uncle Tom's Cabin.[6] Partially to feed the public's constant demand for racy literature, and also due to the exigencies of making a living at an extremely low-profit profession, these authors often wrote new novels every year, some producing several annually.

Equally prolific were writers of prescriptive literature. Historian Ronald Walters notes a "flood of cautionary literature carried ... to the masses after 1830."[7] Undoubtedly, the astronomical increase of such writings can be partly explained by the printing revolution. Yet scholars who have studied the subject contend that the relative volume of sexual advice literature grew. Moreover, the tone of such material became markedly more ominous with added emphasis on the urgency to regulate sexuality.[8] This change in tone was due to the treatment of sexuality by physicians as a mental and physical problem. Up until this time, cautionary literature had addressed sexuality as a moral issue.

Beginning in the 1830s and 1840s, scores of doctors lectured widely and published works on the harmful consequences of excessive sexual indulgence. They claimed their writings were scientific and often used statistical "evidence" to substantiate

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[6]Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance, 207.
[7]Ronald Walters, Primers For Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974), 10.
[8]Walters, Primers For Prudery, 10 and Stephen Nissenbaum, Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 26.

their arguments. Despite a considerable range of opinions, advice writers operated within a certain cultural consensus about proper boundaries for sexual behavior. They all agreed that the sexual instinct needed strict guidance and proper channeling or a myriad of mental and physical ailments would result. There was a distinct difference in the way authors of prescriptive literature viewed this sexual instinct in men and women. In men, sexual passion was readily acknowledged: the female sexual instinct, on the other hand, was clouded in ambiguity, its very existence questioned.

A complex dynamic existed between writers of the two genres. Those who wrote prescriptive material condemned the eroticism of sensationalist novels. They vehemently exhorted their readers to avoid such literature, charging that erotic novels contained subversive ideas that would infiltrate pure minds and lead to depravity. Sensationalist authors, on the other hand, defended themselves against such accusations with equal fervor. Employing the very language of their critics, they claimed that they also sought to warn and instruct the virtuous against the evils of the world.

There are some obvious limitations to using prescriptive literature and erotic novels as historical documents. Advice manuals describe ideals rather than reality. The effect this literature had on its readers' behavior is difficult to ascertain. The same holds true for erotic novels. Although denounced for containing "subversive" messages, racy novels can not be measured for their pernicious influence. A further restriction lies in the

type of people who wrote these books. Advice writers and erotic novelists were almost exclusively white men. Thus, in advice manuals and racy novels, men were dictating or portraying a male conception of female sexuality.

This study will not attempt to gauge the effect advice manuals or racy fiction had on their audiences. It will, however, explore the images of female sexuality contained in both types of literature. Advice writers championed the ideal of a chaste and "passionless" Victorian lady. Sensationalist authors eroticized female sexuality in a way that directly challenged that ideal. These contradictory messages need to be examined within the context of one another in order to achieve a greater understanding of Victorian attitudes about female sexuality.

Background On Advice Literature

Before embarking on a comparative analysis of advice literature and erotic novels it is necessary to give a brief background of the two genres. Prescriptive literature consists of medical advice literature written by physicians and conduct manuals written by clergymen and moralists. The medical advice literature explicitly addresses sexuality. It is the emergence of these writings which historians refer to as evidence of a change in tone of cautionary literature. The conduct manuals, which describe general etiquette, are important because significant overlap in authors and subject matter exists.

Historian Stephen Nissenbaum details a short bibliography of pre-1830 cautionary literature about sex. Printed works regarding sexuality were rare in the colonial period, and only occasional sermons against sexual misconduct appeared. Benjamin Wadsworth, a Boston minister, published a sermon on adultery in 1716, and almost exactly a century later "Parson" Mason Locke Weems wrote a somewhat more lurid tract on the same subject. In 1723 Cotton Mather anonymously published a pamphlet on the evils of masturbation. The following year a Boston reprint of an anonymous, and more explicit, sixty-five page British work entitled Onania appeared. This is the extent of cautionary literature regarding sex until the 1830s.[9]

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[9]Nissenbaum, Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America, 26.

There was, however, an undercurrent of popular noncautionary literature written about sexuality. The most notable of these works was the "Aristotle" series, which was first published anonymously in England in the mid-seventeenth century. This series, written under the pseudonym of Aristotle, combined writings of the Greek philosopher with legends, folklore, ancient medical practices, and mysticism of the sexual act into a digest of information. The first American edition was published in 1766, and in the next eighty years more than one hundred editions were printed under varying titles and with changing texts. The most popular title of the series, Aristotle's Master Piece, appeared in at least twenty-seven American editions between 1766 and 1831. Historians John and Robin Haller write, "the pamphlets were a valuable source of erotic and medical lore ... The name Aristotle lent respectability, and the erotic nature of the poetic passages made the pamphlets appealing."[10]

The Aristotle volumes were essentially descriptive and portrayed sex as a beneficial and mutually pleasurable experience. Sex "eases and lightens the body, clears the mind, comforts the head and senses, and expels melancholy." "Aristotle" believed that sexual intercourse should be passionate and recognized its animalistic qualities. During sex people should be "furious when they couple ... The act of coition should be performed with the greatest ardor and intenseness of desire possible, or else they

[10]John and Robin Haller, The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 94.

may as well let it alone."[11] The anonymous author did not limit such sensual feelings to men alone, as later advice writers did, but recognized that women were sexual beings as well.

The use of the "Aristotle series" as evidence of a change in the tone of prescriptive literature requires qualification. Strictly speaking, these volumes were not the eighteenth-century equivalent of Victorian sexual advice manuals. They did not provide "advice" so much as present "facts of life." Unlike the nineteenth-century prescriptives, the Aristotle series was not written by elite or "respectable" members of society. By modern standards, the self-proclaimed medical experts of the 1830s and beyond often held dubious credentials. Yet, in their time these writers were generally accepted as leading authorities. The Aristotle tracts, on the other hand, were anonymously penned and widely considered as obscene. A seduction trial of the 1840s illustrates this last point. In the trial of Reverend Issachar Grosscup for the seduction of Roxana Wheeler, the defense attempted to portray the young woman as promiscuous. To bolster their case, the lawyers argued that her character had been corrupted and defiled long before she met Reverend Grosscup, for someone had testified to seeing Roxana reading Aristotle's Master Piece.[12]

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[11]As quoted in Stephen Nissenbaum, Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America, 27.

[12]Trial of Rev. Issachar Grosscup, (n. p., n. d.), 67. The defense told the jury, "Was she first degraded and seduced in that privy on the evening of the 5th day of June, 1846? No! No!! Gentlemen, she was found perusing books, so filthy, so obscene, as to be unfit for the perusal of even men, much less of women and young girls ... Do you believe it has taken three years to complete the work begun by Midnight Scenes and Aristotle's Masterpiece?"

The nature of public discourse on sexuality changed in the 1830s. The sparse cautionary literature prior to the 1830s had been written by ministers who wrote about sexuality in moral terms. They limited their remarks to sexual 'transgressions,' namely adultery and masturbation, and did not address sexuality in general. The Aristotle tracts, as evidenced by their multitude of editions, seem to have filled the void. The last known edition of Aristotle's Master Piece was printed in 1831, a symbolic date in that it signaled the turning of the tide. The decade of the 1830s witnessed a plethora of medical writers who conceived of sexuality as a medical and physiological phenomenon. Unlike the Aristotle series, the medical tracts contained excessive moralizing on the destructive consequences of unbridled sexuality. American medical treatises on sexuality appeared as early as Benjamin Rush's Medical Inquiries and Observations, upon the Diseases of the Mind (1812), illustrating that changes in sexual attitudes cannot be dated with precision. However, it is safe to say that the decades after the 1830s experienced a significant shift in both the types of people writing about sexuality and the messages they advocated.

Sylvester Graham is cited by many as the person instrumental in provoking this change. Stephen Nissenbaum points to Graham as the first writer to "formulate a coherent physiological analysis of the various new anxieties about the human body that had emerged by the 1830s, and to propose a systematic regimen he believed would assuage them."[13] Graham believed that the various diseases affecting American men were caused by too frequent sexual

[13]Nissenbaum, preface, Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America, ix.

intercourse. Drawing upon the theory that the body represented a "closed system" and the belief that one ounce of semen was equal to forty ounces of blood, Graham argued that sexual excess increased a man's susceptibility to disease. He developed a strict dietary regimen consisting of unbolted wheat, rye meal, hominy, and "Graham" flour to combat the debilitating effects of loss of sperm. Yet diet alone was not enough to maintain a male's health, and Graham further promoted limiting sexual intercourse to twelve times per year.

Sylvester Graham's sexual and dietary theories tended to be more extreme than those held by the other major sexual advice writers. They did, however, incorporate many of his ideas and presented them in a more moderate fashion. Graham and his contemporaries took full advantage of printing innovations to propagate their messages to the American public. They faced immense competition not only from each other, but from those who held radically different ideas about sexuality: the racy novelists.

Background on Racy Novels

Racy literature of the 1840s grew out of a rich background of sensationalism beginning in the early nineteenth century. Literary scholar David Reynolds has noted a shift toward sensational journalism beginning in the first decade of the nineteenth century. As evidence, Reynolds cites the 1809 founding of The American Magazine of Wonders, which promised to feature only what was "Miraculous! Queer! Marvelous! Whimsical! Absurd! Out of the Way! Unaccountable!"[14] During the next few decades, the number of such journals grew and Americans were fed an increasingly spicy and gory popular literature.

In 1833 the first penny newspaper, the New York Sun, was founded, soon followed by the New York Transcript (1834) and James Gordon Bennett's infamous New York Herald (1835). These newspapers, like their British equivalent, the "penny dreadful," were marked by a new brand of journalism that was brash, daring, and above all, sensational. In the past, journalistic etiquette had omitted tales of sex and scandal from the daily press. Newspapers had usually placed advertisements and related commercial information on their front pages. The new penny papers, however, capitalized on stories of violence and sex.

The rise of sensationalism was also closely intertwined with crime literature. Pamphlets detailing particularly shocking trials appeared early in the nineteenth century, and by the 1830s

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[14]Ibid., 173.

and 1840s had swelled into a virtual flood. In these decades the public read about a succession of widely publicized cases: that of Ephraim K. Avery, a Methodist preacher who was tried in 1833 for seducing and then murdering a girl after a religious camp meeting; the scandal involving Richard P. Robinson, a New York clerk who was acquitted after being tried for the murder of prostitute Helen Jewett; and the case of Peter Robinson, a poor carpenter who had dragged his victim to the cellar, dug a grave before his eyes, and then buried the corpse beneath the floor planks.[15]

The penny papers and crime writings not only generated images that would figure in sensationalist novels, but there was considerable overlap among the publications. The Robinson-Jewett episode of 1836 is a prime example. Within weeks of the crime, a biography on Richard Robinson was published including "extracts" from his diary. The New York Herald covered the Robinson trial daily, increasing its circulation in one week to 15,000 per day.[16] Author Joseph Holt Ingraham, among others, fictionalized the murder of Helen Jewett and offered his own "solution" to the unsolved crime in his novel, Frank Rivers. Sometimes the penny press served as a testing ground for novelists. George Lippard frequently first serialized his novels in a newspaper he edited, The Quaker City Weekly, which had a circulation of over fifteen thousand. Lippard wrote five novels for the newspaper, including

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[15]Ibid., 176.

[16]Timothy J. Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 133.

The Quaker City, which was originally issued in ten paper-covered parts from 1844-1855 before it was bound as a book in 1845.[17]

Erotic novels shared many characteristics. Often they merged fiction with non-fiction to create a sense of authenticity. The "city mysteries" alleged to expose the seamy underworld of the cities, and in doing so the novelists incorporated real-life figures into their novels. Harrison Gray Buchanan's Asmodeus described the many "bawdy houses" of New York, and in particular featured madams Fanny Okille, Julia Brown and Annie Clark. George Thompson portrayed an international ring of women labeled the "Daughters of Venus" in his novel The Countess: or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure (1849). These women, who belonged to the "Ladies Free and Easy Club," devised plots "to catch the thoughtless with the tempting bait" of commercial sex. Members of the club included actual women such as the famous abortionist Madame Restelle, mistress Amelia Norman, and prostitutes Kate Winslow and Caroline Hastings. The women who figured as characters in Thompson's and Buchanan's books were prominent mid-century celebrities who were widely recognizable to the reading public.

As in the example of the Helen Jewett case, authors frequently fictionalized real-life seductions and murders. George Lippard's The Quaker City was based on the famous 1843 Philadelphia case of Mahlon Heberton.[18] After boasting to his oyster-cellar companions that he could seduce any woman in the city, Heberton lured teenager Sarah Mercer into a brothel. Once

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[17]Jacob Blanck, comp., Bibliography of American Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), Vol. 5, 406.
[18]Reynolds, George Lippard, An Anthology, 18.

inside he tried to seduce her through promises of marriage. When that failed, he raped her at gunpoint. After the girl's brother, Singleton Mercer, learned of the crime, he tracked down Heberton and murdered him. Mercer's murder trial garnered national attention, even more so when he was acquitted on the grounds that killing a seducer was a justifiable crime. Lippard's novel was a highly sensationalized embellishment of the case, but the central plot remained essentially the same.

The "City Mystery"

The theme of seduction in popular literature was not unique to the mid-nineteenth century. It did, however, gain particular prominence in these decades with the appearance of the "city mystery." This genre had its origins in France and England with Eugène Sue's The Mysteries of Paris (1842) and G. M. W. Reynolds's The Mysteries of London (1844).[19] American writers were influenced by these novels and wrote a string of books depicting wanton and depraved characters indulging in crimes of sexual or social vice. New York, Philadelphia, and Boston were by far the most common settings for these novels, yet authors did not limit their exposés to major cities. Osgood Bradbury's The Mysteries of Lowell, Chandler Eastman Potter's The Mysteries of Manchester, and Philip Pendant's The Mysteries of Fitchburg are a few examples of novels set in smaller cities or towns. Any urban setting, regardless of its size, contained mysteries to be unraveled. As

[19]Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance, 82.

Pendant wrote in his preface, "There are Mysteries of Paris, New York, Boston, Lowell -- why not Fitchburg!? ... Dear reader, there are more things done here in Fitchburg, than is dreamt of in your philosophy."[20]

Foremost among American "city mystery" novelists was George Lippard. The Quaker City was not only one of the earliest in the genre, but it ranks as the most controversial and sensational. Branded by critics as "the most immoral work of the age," The Quaker City was the quintessential city mystery. Readers were shocked by the novel's lurid descriptions of seduction, sexual blackmail, incest, and murder. Although Lippard initially drew his inspiration from foreign works, he was instrumental in spurring a distinctly American version of city mysteries. David Reynolds attributes this difference to the social and political climate of the mid-nineteenth century,

> The typical American city-mysteries novel was more nightmarish and stylistically wild than its foreign counterpart, principally because, in America, socialist fervor had by the 1840s become fused with a fierce evangelical emotionalism and a republican rowdiness unknown in Europe.[21]

The American "city mystery" did not emerge out of a vacuum. These novels reflected the anxieties and fantasies of many Americans at a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Traditional controls on behavior faded into obsolescence during the transition to an industrialized, urban society. Parental authority over children lessened as leverages of property

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[20]Philip Penchant (pseudonym), Mysteries of Fitchburg (Fitchburg: Charles Shepley, 1844), 5.
[21]Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance, 82.

inheritances failed to compete with the plethora of career opportunities made possible by industrialization. The disciplinary power of the church waned, and the state no longer reinforced religious doctrine with law. New laws adopted a popular laissez-faire attitude toward the regulation of the family, and sexuality in particular.

These changes became imbued with sexual overtones. Young men and women left the countryside in droves in search of brighter economic prospects. Many, including moral reformers, feared that young men, no longer restrained by traditional controls, would wreak havoc in the city. Gambling houses, brothels, and bars offered recreational opportunities to men that were either nonexistent or difficult to find outside the city. Furthermore, the "bawdy houses" that were increasingly dotting the city landscape were of immense concern to moralists and reformers. As historian Timothy Gilfoyle has noted, prostitution in the colonies and the early republic was very limited. Societal controls kept a strict check on illicit sex, forcing it to operate on the fringes of society.[22] After 1820, however, the growth of large cities brought prostitution into the mainstream.

New York City provides a case in point to illustrate these sweeping demographic changes.[23] Between 1820 and 1860, the population of New York quadrupled to over 800,000. A slight surplus of women in the population at large was magnified as a dramatic imbalance among people twenty to thirty years old. Until

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[22]Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 26.
[23]Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1986), 43.

1830, the sex ratio was even, but by 1840 there were over 25% more young women than men in the city. This imbalanced sex ratio was due to the urban labor market. Young men traveled outside the city in search of work, and thus their demographic presence in New York was diminished. Young women, however, were confined to local employment opportunities. Although more men emigrated to New York, many also moved around in or out of the city; in contrast, the prospects for single women beyond the city remained slight. In her study of women in New York City, Christine Stansell notes the new opportunities available to city women in the 1830s and 1840s.

> The expansion of female wage work into other employments besides domestic service (ie manufacturing employment) meant that, for the first time, daughters could earn their livings outside household settings. Patriarchal controls over young women's leisure, time, earnings and sexuality weakened accordingly.[24]

Despite increased job opportunities for women, wages were extremely low. According to the New York Tribune in 1845, non-domestic female labor earned only $2.00 per week. Cost of living expenses averaged $1.50 to $1.75 per week, leaving little extra money after subtracted from weekly earnings.[25] Still, thousands of teenage women moved to New York City with hopes of finding wage work. This influx created a large pool of cheap female labor. The seasonal nature of industries employing women, such as the textile industry, forced most female workers to constantly move from one shop to another. Underemployed and underpaid, many women turned to prostitution out of economic necessity.

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[24]The following statistics are from Stansell, City of Women, 83.
[25]Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 59.

Statistics pertaining to prostitution are inexact and conflicting.[26] Due to their own motives, moral reformers, journalists, and some proponents of prostitution tended to inflate the numbers. In 1833 the Journal of Public Morals estimated there were 10,000 prostitutes in New York City. During the 1840s various newspapers and ministers estimated the range was anywhere between 10,000 and 50,000. A guidebook published under the pseudonym of Charles Paul De Kock[27] claimed they numbered 25,000.

Police reports also tended to be inconsistent. It is likely that the police consciously deflated their statistics to counter the charges of moral reformers. In 1866 New York Police Superintendent John Kennedy claimed there were just 2500 prostitutes in 560 brothels. Yet only eight years earlier Dr. William Sanger in his study on prostitution had personally interviewed 2000 women committed to the Charity Hospital alone. Regardless of the exact statistics of New York City prostitutes, their numbers were large and constituted an extremely visible feature of urban life.

Sanger's study revealed alarming facts about urban prostitution. Of the prostitutes he interviewed, 258 women cited seduction and abandonment as the reason for their "fall." One fifth (440) of the women were originally from the countryside.[28] Sanger's study only seemed to confirm the tale of seduction, desertion, and harlotry that had become deeply embedded within

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[26]The following statistics are from Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 57.
[27]Charles Paul De Kock seems to have been a popular pseudonym. It is not known whether this was the same De Kock who wrote Mary Ann Temple.
[28]Stansell, City of Women, 189.

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American popular culture through moral reform journals, sensationalist penny papers, and the city mystery novels.

The "city mystery" genre appeared in America at a time of monumental demographic changes. These novels not only reflected societal fear of the possibilities for corruption and prurience brought by urbanization, but they also drew upon actual experiences of city women. Novelists blended fact with fiction and presented highly sensationalized portrayals of stories that were often familiar to mid-nineteenth century readers. This quasi-realism aided authors in their attempts to deflect criticism, for they claimed they were addressing an urgent problem in Victorian society.

The Apology and the Audience

Anyone who wrote on sexuality broached the subject with fear of public censure. Sexual advice writers and erotic novelists prefaced their works with elaborate disclaimers. With regard to erotic novelists, these disclaimers are not surprising, for authors were sure to be assailed by reviewers and moralists. An 1846 editorial in the Saturday Evening Post lambasted George Lippard for The Quaker City, calling him the leader of "the raw head and bloody bones school" of literature. After quoting a racy excerpt from the novel, the editorial accused Lippard with arousing "the wanton devil that lies sleeping in every human heart" and gilding "robust licentiousness" with namby-pamby sentimentalities about the beauty of virtue, and heaven and hell."[29] Erotic authors were frequently the target of such opprobrium. They attempted to deflect these attacks through professions of the morality and social worth of their novels. Alice Barber by Osgood Bradbury begins with a typical disclaimer,

> But say some, by pointing out such spots in the paths of human life, you will throw a charm about them which may allure others to them who would never have seen nor visited them but for your descriptions -- There may be some so bold and venturesome as to approach and be destroyed. But while they are few, I trust there are thousands who would be warned and flee from danger.[30]

The fusion of fiction and non-fiction common to racy novels created an illusion of authenticity that was essential to authors'

[29]David S. Reynolds, George Lippard (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 14.

[30]Osgood Bradbury, Alice Barber: or, The Adventures of a Young Woman (New York: Samuel French, 1853), 8.

claims that their writings possessed social value. Repeatedly they stressed the accuracy and realism of their sensationalistic novels. George Thompson proclaimed that his novels The Countess and City Crimes; or, Life in New York and Boston were "not fiction ... but fact." Ned Buntline similarly asserted that although the stories in The Mysteries and Miseries of New York might seem unlikely, they were "drawn from *life*."[31]

Authors of advice literature also feared criticism for their discussion of sexual matters. Their apprehension was well-justified, given the experience of a Presbyterian minister John McDowall, one of the earliest "purity reformers." In 1833, McDowall conducted an extensive survey on New York prostitution and printed his findings in McDowall's Journal. Even McDowall's religious background was not enough to protect him from charges of depravity. A grand jury ruled in 1835 that his journal was "calculated to promote lewdness" and publication ceased.[32]

Advice writers, fearful of McDowall's fate, attempted to establish their respectability so as not to be questioned about their motives in discussing sexual matters. Robert Dale Owen, in his book Moral Physiology wrote,

> All those who have intimately known the life and private habits of the writer of this little treatise, will bear him witness, that what he now states is true, to the letter. He was indebted to his parents for habits of the strictest temperance -- some would call it abstemiousness -- in *all* things. He never, at any time, habitually, used ardent spirits ... never entered a brothel in his life....[33]

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[31]Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 144.
[32]Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 145.
[33]Robert Dale Owen, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 23.

Elaborate justifications such as Owen's indicate much about Victorian norms of propriety. Prior to 1830 very little was written by members of the middle class regarding sexuality. Sexual advice writers were the first to enter into large-scale public discourse on sexual issues. They sought to convince their readers and reviewers that these topics needed to be addressed and that they were the ones most suited to the job. They argued that if their young readers did not receive instruction from advice manuals, young people would obtain "the most corrupt and depraving knowledge from mercenary and polluted hands."[34]

To whom were such elaborate apologies addressed? The primary classifications to be made are the class level and sex of the reader. These distinctions lay the groundwork for analyzing the messages contained in both forms of literature. If erotic novels contained alternative portrayals of female sexuality, it is crucial to evaluate those images in the context of the probable audience.

Considerable debate exists among cultural historians and literary scholars regarding the audience of sensationalist fiction. The absence of purchase records makes identifying the readers difficult. Many pamphlet novels were sold at book shops or dry goods stores and no mail-order subscriptions have survived. Historians have had to look elsewhere for clues regarding the readers of these novels.

Michael Denning in his book Mechanic Accents argues for a class-based interpretation of the audience. He contends that "the

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[34]Sylvester Graham, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 20.

bulk of the audience of dime novels were workers -- craftworkers, factory operatives, domestic servants, and domestic workers -- and that the bulk of workers' reading was sensational fiction."[35] To substantiate his position, Denning argues that the success of the dime novel industry was largely due to the high levels of literacy among American workers. He also relies on autobiographies and outside observations of reading for connections between working-class reading and sensationalist literature. Denning qualifies his general statements about working-class culture with the acknowledgment that "dime novels were not limited to working-class readers; they were read by clerks, shopkeepers, local professionals, small farmers and their families."[36] Although he recognizes cross-class reading of the novels, Denning maintains that the magazine, not the dime novel, was integral to middle-class culture.

Denning's conclusions rest on a shaky foundation. The high levels of working-class literacy were surely surpassed by even higher levels of middle-class literacy. On that basis, one could argue that the success of the dime novel industry was due to high middle-class literacy, or a combination of both. Denning's contention that dime novels played a part, albeit minor, in middle-class culture warrants further consideration.

Nina Baym's study of literary reviewers reveals similar ambiguities in reading audiences. Although she focuses on novels in general, and not specifically pamphlet fiction, there is

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[35]Michael Denning, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (New York: New Left Books, 1987), 27

[36]Ibid., 45.

considerable overlap between Baym's and Denning's research. Baym writes that literary reviewers believed people of all classes read novels. In the New York Review of October 1837, a reviewer assessed Catherine Sedgwick's Live and Let Live, a didactic story arguing for more egalitarian treatment of servants. He wrote,

> We should not quarrel if the book were to be confined to the party whose failures are described. But it will be extensively read on the other side; and in its present form it is precisely the book we should wish to keep out of the hands of a numerous class of servants.[37]

Sedgwick's novel was clearly written from a middle-class perspective to a middle-class audience. Nevertheless, the reviewer believed working-class people were reading Sedgwick's book.

Further proof exists to support the argument that erotic literature was not strictly a working-class phenomenon. In the previously mentioned trial of Reverend Issachar Grosscup for the seduction of Roxana Wheeler, one of the lawyers for the defense made reference to the cross-class appeal of this literature. As was common with such trials, the seduction of Roxana Wheeler was to be fictionalized into a sensationalist novel. The lawyer told the jury, in speaking of the trial, "as I understand it is to be put in the form of a book to be sold, and circulated amongst all classes of this community ..."[38] Such a statement must be accepted and analyzed within the context in which it was spoken, that is, a lawyer trying to persuade the jury to sympathize with his client. By saying that people of all classes would be reading

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[37]Baym, Novels, Readers and Reviewers, 47.
[38]Trial of Rev. Issachar Gross, 64.

about the case, the reverend's reputation would be defamed with the "respectable" classes as well as the lower classes. Furthermore, perhaps the lawyer could speak with conviction that "all classes" would be reading the sensationalist novel because it was of particular interest to that community. Still, the lawyer's comment is suggestive that, at least in some cases, people believed that the sensationalist novels were read by members of the middle class.

Another body of evidence is supplied by advice writers themselves. Writers of medical and conduct advice literature vehemently condemned the reading of novels for various reasons. In some cases a general bias existed against novel-reading, and there is no mention of any particular type of novel. Often, however, advice writers referred specifically to the "corrupting" and "impure" influences of novel-reading, implying a more specific underlying fear that their audience was reading books of a "licentious" nature. As the author of a conduct manual entitled The Young Lady's Counselor wrote, the consequences of reading for "pleasure" and "excited sensibilities" were "Obscured, feeble intellect, a weakened memory, an extravagant and fanciful imagination, benumbed sensibilities, a demoralized conscience, and a corrupted heart!"[39] He continued with the further warning,

> If you are an indiscriminating novel reader, you admit both thieves and profligates, not merely to your society, but to your most intimate companionship, yea, into the palace of your soul ... Novels are also injurious to your religious interests. They create a loathing at the bare idea of a spiritual life, and bind you in chains to a life of sin.[40]

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[39]Wise, The Young Lady's Counselor, 189.
[40]Ibid., 191.

Lorenzo Fowler concurred in this denunciation of reading the "wrong" types of novels. In his list of "causes of the perversion of amativeness" he included,

> ... reading works of romance written by persons of morbid feelings, sickly sentiments, and extravagant hopes -- all containing highly wrought scenes of amatory happiness and earthly felicity -- thus exciting the animal feelings and weakening the judgment, creating a distaste for commonplace transactions, and giving false and imperfect ideas of human nature ....[41]

If only members of the working class were reading sensationalist novels, it seems that there would be no reason to warn middle-class readers about these books. On the other hand, if it was believed that middle-class men and women were also reading "impure" books, then it follows that advice writers would feel an imperative need to caution against such material.

The sex of the reader is another crucial element. Denning believes that the readership of dime novels was "internally divided by gender," meaning that novelists aimed particular types of books at men and others at women. He cites the "working girl" stories as examples of pamphlet novels geared to women. Many of these working girl stories were sensationalist novels. Common themes featured the working girl who struggled, often unsuccessfully, against seduction plots by "rakes" and "libertines." Osgood Bradbury's The Banker's Victim; or The Betrayed Seamstress tells the story of a young, beautiful seamstress named Jane Clark who, while riding home from work on a New York omnibus, attracts the libidinous attentions of a rich, married man named Colonel Mellen.

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[41]Lorenzo N. Fowler, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 55.

Leslie Fiedler, a literary scholar, believes that sensationalist fiction was not read by women. Fiedler's introduction to the 1970 reprinted version of Lippard's The Monks of Monk Hall; or The Quaker City states,

> It should be clear that the literature of the 1840's is a specific subgenre of popular literature -- not merely produced by men only but intended for an exclusively male audience ... it is the dissolution of a politically minded male audience with a taste for sub-pornography, in favor of the domestically oriented female audience with a taste for pure sentimentality which explains the loss of approval suffered by Lippard's kind of fiction.[42]

Fiedler argues that women, based on their "domestic orientation," would not be attracted to the sensationalist literature of Lippard and his contemporaries. Such an interpretation is founded upon stereotyped ideals of female 'gentility' and 'refinement.'

What Fiedler ignores are the constant references made by authors to their female readership. Lippard himself, in his preface to a later edition of The Quaker City addressed "the young man and young woman who may read this book when I am dead ...."[43] Osgood Bradbury often wrote his novels from a female, first-person perspective. Alice Barber; or, The Adventures of a Young Woman and Ellen, The Pride of Broadway are two examples of novels supposedly written by women to warn other women about the dangers of seduction. In Alice Barber, Bradbury constantly mentioned his "fair readers" and cautioned "any young female whose eyes perchance may glance over these pages of my history. Don't be in a hurry to be married, and curb your fancy while you are yet

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[42]George Lippard, Introduction, The Monks of Monk Hall 1845 Introduction by Leslie A Fielder. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1970), xiii-xiv. (Known more commonly as The Quaker City, and heretofore referred to as such)
[43]Ibid., 2.

young."[44] In Antonita, The Female Contrabandista, the author wrote, "And now, dear reader, -- (that term *dear* only applies to the *lady* readers, remember)" and later wrote, "Are you a *lover*, sweet *lady-reader* -- or rather have you got one?"[45] Such references are highly suggestive that these authors believed women were reading their novels.

If, however, Fiedler's argument is valid, allusions to female readers must somehow be explained. A possibility is that male authors were sharing a joke with their male readers. Erotic descriptions of women would seem to appeal to a heterosexual male audience. Mentioning female readers, if it was assumed that no women were reading these novels, could act as bond between author and reader. If people assumed in the 1840s, as Leslie Fiedler did in 1970, that women -- or at least respectable women -- would not read sensationalist novels because of their "sensibilities," then references to women readers could be laughed at by male readers. Such an argument involves substantial conjecture about authors' motives and must explain all sensationalist authors' allusions to female readers.

The readership of prescriptive literature is less ambiguous. Topics discussed in conduct manuals, such as dinner parties and relations with servants, reflect middle and upper-middle class culture. For example, Mrs. L.G. Abell wrote in Woman in Her Various Relations,

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[44]Bradbury, Alice Barber, 32.

[45]Lorry Luff (pseudonym), Antonita, The Female Contrabandista (New York: Williams Brothers, 1848), 18, 27.

> Be kind to domestics. Make their situation as pleasant and agreeable as possible. If you need their help ask it as a favor, but never ask them to do what you can do for yourself, it will make you helpless. Be careful not to tell them your secrets, if ever so much inclined to do so, or any thing else you should not tell.[46]

Such advice was clearly written to women who could afford to have servants in their households. It is unlikely that Mrs. Abell thought female domestics would be reading her book.

Despite indications that prescriptive literature was aimed toward a middle-class audience, the possibilities of working-class readership is not precluded. Often manuals were marketed as "self-help" books, a genre that would seem to appeal to people who wanted to make a better life for themselves. Furthermore, interest in and demand for information regarding sexuality was undoubtedly shared by members of the working class.

The sex of the reader is obvious with regard to advice literature. Titles of manuals often mentioned the readers' sex. A rather extreme example is Dr. Frederick Hollick's The Marriage Guide, or Natural History of Generation: A Private Instructor for Married Persons and Those About to Marry, Both Male and Female. Other manuals were not quite as detailed, but still referred specifically to the sex of the reader, such as William Alcott's The Young Wife, Gift Book For Young Ladies, and The Young Husband.

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[46]Mrs. L. G. Abell, Woman in Her Various Relations: Containing Practical Rules For American Females (New York: J. M. Fairchild & Co., 1855), 154-155.

Advice manuals were addressed to a primarily middle-class audience; however, members of the lower classes could have easily read them. There is enough evidence to suggest that although erotic novels may have been geared largely to working-class people, the appeal of these books crossed class and sex boundaries. These erotic writings posed a threat to advice writers because they contained "subversive" portrayals of female sexuality that were available to, and being read by, members of the middle class.

Female Sexuality: The Angel of Light or the Painted Lady

Advice authors overwhelmingly devoted their writings to the dangers of unbridled male sexuality and ways to restrict male erotic impulses. Historians have argued that this greater attention resulted from a lack of understanding of female sexuality. Charles Rosenberg notes, "Female sexuality was surrounded by an ambivalence so massive as to constitute one of the central analytical dilemmas in the understanding of 19th century social history."[47] As one would expect, descriptions of female sexuality were marked by ambiguity. Although advice writers portrayed an ideal image of a pure and virtuous woman who was inherently "passionless," they grudgingly acknowledged the existence of women who did not fit that mold. Sylvester Graham explained, "Woman is, by nature, far more chaste than man, in the present state of the world ... but it is *possible* to deprave even woman."[48] According to advice writers, sensuous women were rare and unnatural and their depravity could almost always be attributed to corruption by a man. Occasionally advice writers elaborated on the evils associated with such women, yet references to "lost women" were either so vague or filled with hyperbole that they obscured the subject of female sexuality.

On the other hand, erotic authors focused much more on female sexuality. Their novels explicitly described the paths of

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[47]Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role," American Quarterly, 25 (1973), 138.
[48]Sylvester Graham, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 68.

degradation that "fallen" women had taken and explored the various consequences for women whose sexuality had been "awakened." Authors commonly portrayed powerful women who sought to inflict sexual revenge on their seducers, or failing that, on the male sex in general. These women were not only sexually "awakened," but their sexuality consumed them and became the driving force in their lives.

The racy novelists glamorized and eroticized what the advice authors only hinted at -- the "fallen" woman. Although they portrayed two contrasting visions of female sexuality, it must be recognized that advice writers and erotic authors were influenced by the same cultural stereotypes of woman as "angel of light" or "painted lady."

The Angel of Light

Advice writers posited a unique female sexuality that was highly spiritualized and maternally inspired. It was believed that sex differences were not merely biological but shaped personalities and moral sensibilities as well. Women were not subject to the destructive carnal desires of men and therefore were morally superior to their male counterparts. Writers varied to the degree they accorded sexual feelings to women, but a general consensus existed that women's passion paled in comparison to that of men.

A prevalent assumption was that female sexual urges never originated within women themselves, but required provocation by an external force. William Acton proposed that women's sexual

desires were "very moderate compared to those of the male" and motivated by the need "to please him" [her husband] and "the desire for maternity." The reformer Dio Lewis observed that "women are .. to a certain degree passionless. [Their] pivotal passion ... is the maternal."[49] In another of his manuals, Acton observed, after numerous hours of private consultation with female patients, that women possessed little or no sexual feeling. It was only out of "fear that they would be deserted for courtesans if they did not waive their own inclinations" that married women submitted to their husband's physical desires.[50]

The spiritualization of women's sexuality and love was an essential component to the ideal of feminine purity. Nelson Sizer, a phrenologist who studied sexual differences, quoted a contemporary's view in his 1850 manual,

> Woman is more pure, tender, affectionate, and patient than man. She is the counterpart of man -- taken out of man, to comfort him like angels and to lighten his cares. She thinks less profoundly than man; sensibility is her power.[51]

To speak of women as "angels" implied a removal from human sexual urges. Spiritualizing women's sexuality not only distinguished it from sensuality, but it rendered female sexuality an abstraction.

Very similar descriptions of pure women are found in erotic novels. Virtuous women were the target of seducers, thus painting a stark contrast between the "before" and "after" of seduction.

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[49]William Acton and Dio Lewis, as quoted in Steven Seidman, Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980 (New York: Routledge, 1991), 24.
[50]William Acton, as quoted in Haller and Haller, The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America, 97.
[51]Nelson Sizer, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 66.

George Lippard infused his descriptions of women with references to their innate purity and religious nature,

> There are two expressions, the most inexpressibly beautiful, which by turns pass over the face of a pure and lovely woman. One is when religion fills her being, and sends its calm, holy light to the upraised eyes, shedding over every feature the baptism of a deathless emotion; the other, when pure love (in itself a part -- yes the essence of religion,) first courses in heaven-born sunshine over her face ....[52]

Prior to her seduction, The Quaker City's young victim Mary Arlington represented the quintessence of female spiritual love. Even her name held religious connotations. "Oh sweetest name of woman! name by which some of us may hail a wife, or a sister in heaven; name so soft, and rippling, and musical; name of mother of Jesus -- made holy by poetry and religion!" In Lippard's most blatant statement about the spiritualization of Mary's love, he wrote, "Women's religion is her love."[53]

Images of the pure woman do not differ much between prescriptive literature or racy novels. The virtuous woman was portrayed as chaste and "passionless." Her sexuality was spiritualized, and therefore was non-threatening. Descriptions of pure women, however, were not what earned erotic novelists the animus of moralists.

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[52]George Lippard, "The Life of a Man of the World," from The Midnight Queen; or, Leaves From New York Life (New York: Garrett & Co., 1853), 70.

[53]Lippard, The Quaker City, 83, 90.

The Painted Lady

Advice writers were all too aware of women who defied the pure and virtuous model. It was here that their definition of female sexuality became tenuous. To explain such women, advice writers pointed to a plethora of external causes, chief among them, men.

William Alcott devoted an entire chapter of his 1838 manual The Young Husband to "Delicacy and Purity." In it he warned his readers that men were at the root of all licentiousness. "Wherever impurity can be found, man is, directly or indirectly, the cause. He is ever, at least since the days of the first pair, the grand seducer."[54] Alcott was vehement that corruption never originated from women.

> If woman is vile -- and vile indeed she sometimes is -- she is so because she has been corrupted by others; and that corruption may always be traced, by a longer or shorter course, to the other sex ... Though the companion of the licentious man may be as pure as the celestial fire, yet is she speedily contaminated ... The most virtuous companion in the world will be unable to resist the torrent of a perpetual evil example.[55]

Sensuous women were the unfortunates whose sexuality had been "awakened" by men. William Acton, in his manual The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, alluded to this slumbering sexuality, although he doubted the ease with which it could be aroused.

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[54]William A. Alcott, The Young Husband or, Duties of Man in the Marriage Relation (Boston: Charles D. Strong, 1851), 249.
[55]Ibid., 249-250.

> There can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance, and that it requires positive and considerable excitement to be roused at all: and even if roused (which in many cases it never can be) it is very moderate compared with that of the male.[56]

During the 1850s, prominent physician Dr. William Sanger conducted a study on prostitutes in America's largest cities to ascertain what factors had led them to their path of sin. To his distress he found that over one-fourth of the prostitutes he interviewed said they entered their profession voluntarily, out of "inclination." Sanger refused to allow the evidence to speak for itself. Instead, he contrived it to reconcile with his image of woman's inherent virtuousness and relied on the theory of latent female sensuality.

> In itself such an answer would imply an innate depravity, a want of true womanly feeling, which is actually incredible. The force of desire can neither be denied nor disputed, but still in the bosoms of most females that force exists in a slumbering state until aroused by some outside influences ... the full force of sexual desire is seldom known to a virtuous woman.[57]

Another way in which female sexuality was recognized was through descriptions of masturbation. Manuals geared toward men and young boys focused much more on the "secret vice" than did those written for female readers, a natural trend given that male sexuality was recognized more than female sexuality. Dr. Augustus Gardner, Professor of Clinical Midwifery at the New York Medical College, wrote "Far less common, indeed, is [masturbation] among females than among the male youth."[58] Advice writers exhorted

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[56]William A. Alcott, as quoted in Haller and Haller, The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America, 98.
[57]Dr. William Sanger, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 67.
[58]Dr. Augustus K. Gardner, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 71.

young girls never to touch their sexual organs. Although it would give them temporary pleasure, the habit left "its mark upon the face so that those who are wise may know what the girl is doing."[59] Writers commonly invoked the theme that masturbation resulted in physical or mental consequences. Thus, any girl who indulged in the "secret vice" would have her transgressions made public.

Interestingly, masturbation was largely written about in connection with young girls, not women. The descriptions given by advice writers and doctors are of very young girls who experimented with masturbation, often without knowing what they were doing. Dr. Charles Meigs wrote of a case involving a nine-year old girl that he found particularly disturbing.

> I have met with a few samples of this terrible malady in the course of my long experience, and I am thankful to be able to say, but few; and those, not of the greatest intensity. In one of the cases, which occurred in a thin brunette, aged only nine years, I learned to my astonishment, that for months she had been in the almost constant habit of irritating the erotomaniac sense by various methods of provoking its exaltation, while at school on the form, or standing up in class, at church, at table, in the dining parlor, and more than all upon retiring to bed.[60]

Several points can be noted from Meig's description. Firstly, he emphasized that masturbation occurred rarely with females. The "few samples" he had met with were "not of the greatest intensity," implying that male masturbation was more frequent and occurred with greater vigor. Furthermore, the ways the nine-year old girl aroused herself were so general and varied that virtually anything she did could be described as masturbatory. Meigs

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[59]As quoted in Haller and Haller, The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America, 105.
[60]Dr. Charles Meigs, as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 72.

recognized female capacity for masturbation, and through implication, female sexuality. Yet he qualified his acknowledgment of female sexuality by downplaying the incidence and intensity of female masturbation, and by obscuring and generalizing methods of female masturbation.

Advice authors conceded that not all women were chaste and lacked sexual urges. Writers explained these women and girls by pointing to external forces. Descriptions of seemingly self-motivated expressions of sexuality, such as masturbation, were often clouded in generalizations. Young girls who masturbated were portrayed as innocent victims of something they knew little about. Thus, virtually any recognition of female sexuality that deviated from the "pure" model painted the woman as a "victim." She was not an autonomous sexual being who possessed sexual urges that were natural and healthy. Girls might masturbate to gratify themselves and obtain sexual pleasure, but their desires were labeled deviant and unnatural by the physicians who "treated" these girls.

On one level, advice manuals and erotic novels portrayed similar visions of female sexuality. Erotic authors incorporated the notion of a latent female sensuality that could only be stirred by an external force. In The Quaker City George Lippard devoted an entire section to a description of the duality of women's sexuality. He wrote of Mary Arlington, a young girl who becomes the victim of seduction,

> She knew not that in her own organization, were hidden sympathies of an animal as well as of an intellectual nature, that the blood in her veins only waited an opportunity to betray her, that in the very atmosphere of

> the holiest love of woman, lay a sleeping fiend, who at the first whisperings of her Wronger, would arise with hot breath and blood-shot eyes, to wreak eternal ruin on her, woman's honor.[61]

Mary's "Wronger" was her seducer, and his touch could stimulate dormant "sympathies of an animal." Joseph Holt Ingraham wrote similarly of the heroine of Alice May that her eyes were "large, languid, gentle, and, but for the purity of the soul within, voluptuous. Passion was there, but in the shape of love yet vestal and unawakened."[62]

Advice writers warned about the "evils" associated with novel-reading, charging that it would excite immoral sensations. Erotic authors also wrote about these dangers, showing books and novel-reading as sources of a woman's demise. In The Quaker City, Gus Lorrimer planned his seduction of Mary Arlington with the use of romance novels,

> The book which he had left open on the table, the story which he was about to tell were the first intimations of his atrocious design. While enchanting the mind of the Maiden, with a story full of Romance, it was intended to wake her animal nature into full action. And when her veins were all alive with fiery pulsations, when her heart grew animate with sensual life, when her eyes swam in the humid moisture of passion, then she would sink helplessly into his arms, and -- like the bird to the snake -- flutter to her ruin."[63]

Written as an "autobiography," Mary Ann Temple by Charles Paul De Kock tells the story of a young girl's descent into ruin and licentiousness. Her first step on this path occurs when a friend lends her a book. While on her way home, one of the pages falls out and a "young scapegoat" who often ogles her picks up the

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[61]Lippard, The Quaker City, 85.

[62]Joseph Holt Ingraham, Alice May, and Bruising Bill (Boston: Gleason's Publishing Hall, 1845), 7.

[63]Lippard, The Quaker City, 128.

stray leaf. "I saw that it represented a scene which often takes place in married life; but which young ladies are supposed to be wholly ignorant of." Although mortified to be caught with such a book, Mary hurries home and confesses, "what many young ladies in my place would also confess, if obliged to tell the truth, that my eyes were riveted to its pages till the clock struck twelve, midnight." Just as the romance novel sexually excited Lippard's Mary Arlington, Mary Ann Temple falls asleep after reading the book, her dreams full of "transport and joys that [she] had so far only tasted in [her] imagination."[64]

Mary Ann not only admits to the reader that she enjoys looking at the scenes in the book, but she says that other "young ladies" share her interest. Mary Ann's background is middle-class; her father is a prominent shopkeeper and well respected in the community. Thus, for her to say that she and other girls like her possess sexual thoughts and curiosity places these desires into the realm of the middle class. Furthermore, the title, Mary Ann Temple. Being an Authentic and Romantic History of an Amorous and Lively Girl: of Rare Beauty and Strong Natural Love of Pleasure!, states that Mary Ann's sexual desires are both "strong" and "natural," a direct contradiction of advice writers' portrayals of female sexuality.

Often wealth was the external force that provoked a woman's sexuality. George Lippard's The Midnight Queen depicts the evils of a consumer society rife with possibilities for degradation.

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[64]Charles Paul De Kock, Mary Ann Temple. Being an Authentic and Romantic History of an Amorous and Lively Girl: of Rare Beauty and Strong Natural Love of Pleasure! (New York: Henry S. G. Smith & Co., c. 1849), 8,9.

The central character is a young woman named Frank Frances who is raised by a reverend and his housekeeper in the country. When she turns sixteen, her mother introduces her to New York society. After arriving in the city, she discovers that her mother is not wealthy, as she had pretended to be, but is penniless and has pledged Frank to marry a rich Mr. Wareham. With money from Mr. Wareham, Frank's mother throws extravagant parties for her every night at a mansion. Frank, who becomes known as "the midnight queen," tells her ex-lover from the country,

> The atmosphere was new to me. At first I was amazed, then intoxicated, and then -- corrupted ... I became a participant in the revels ... In a word, all that came to the mansion and shared in its orgies were either the victims or the criminals of society -- of a bad social world, which on every hand contrasts immense wealth and voluptuous indulgence with fathomless poverty and withering want, and which too often makes of a marriage but the cloak for infamy and prostitution.[65]

The term "voluptuous indulgence" highlights the connection between excess and sensuality. Indulgence in luxury items implied vanity and a lack of control, which was tantamount to untamed sexuality.

Although most female characters owed their sexually awakening to an external force, they were commonly portrayed as partially responsible for their plight. The lines between sexual "awakening" and sexual "agency" become blurred. Osgood Bradbury's Alice Barber tells the story of a young country girl who is lured to the city and seduced by a man who purports to be a colonel, but in actuality is a married gambler. As a young girl, Alice often had "impure" thoughts. "Strange that such thoughts were so prone

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[65]Lippard, "The Midnight Queen," from The Midnight Queen; or, Leaves From New York Life, 24-25.

to enter my head. I believe I used to be a very singular young girl. No doubt I began to think too early about love affairs and marriage."[66] Even though Alice was tricked by the colonel's promises of love and marriage, she seems partially to blame for her seduction due to her "singular" nature.

Reading may have furnished the initial impetus for Mary Ann Temple's downward path, but she is depicted as enjoying every moment of her "fall." After she is forced out of her parents' house, she travels to New York and stays at a boarding house. The house is full of young girls who all happen to have lovers (she does not realize at first that the "boarding house" is a brothel). One young man who visits the boarding house takes a fancy to Mary and kisses her. Although she protests, it is more out of obligation to a sense of propriety than out of genuine inclination.

> "You are very rude, sir!" but my eyes neutralized the severity of my words. His embrace had thrilled every nerve; and I could have forgiven him a thousand kisses, if I could have reconciled it with the notions of propriety in which I had been educated. His every glance occasioned me a new and strange feeling at the heart ...[67]

Throughout the book, Mary Ann becomes increasingly aware of her sexuality. Initially, reading sparked this process. In the previous passage, the "new and strange feeling" was excited by a man in a brothel. By the end of the book, however, Mary Ann is not troubled by "notions of propriety," and her sexuality is fully roused.

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[66]Bradbury, Alice Barber, 30.
[67]De Kock, Mary Ann Temple, 33.

He tore open my bosom, and putting his lips to the 'White Mountains,' caused me the most thrilling pleasures. I sank prostate in his passionate kisses ... I pressed my lips to his, and then I fastened them to his beautiful rounded neck. That fired his blood again, and I underwent a repetition of my former experience; but this time I was not a passive instrument in his hands. I hugged and kissed him with a voluptuous eagerness, that, when once I began was carried to the extreme by my uncontrollable passions."[68]

Mary Ann is an active and eager sexual partner, as opposed to a "passive instrument." The man may have originally been the sexual aggressor, but once her "uncontrollable passions" were excited, she assumed a dominant role.

Authors often portrayed women who could only express their sexual passion in adulterous liaisons, thus linking sexual impropriety with awakened female sexuality. George Lippard's The Empire City features one such adulteress whose sinful actions betray her "spiritual voluptuousness." Caught in an adulterous embrace with her husband's brother, her "bosom was bared - it rose, it fell, it panted and heaved with passion."[69] The adulteress's husband tells a friend that he had never seen his wife as beautiful as she was while in that state, implying that her beauty derived from her sexual passion. Another Lippard character commits adultery without remorse, and reserves her "passions like a volcano" for her lover, not her husband.

Dora Livingstone, one of The Quaker City characters, epitomizes a woman in command of her sexuality. She is a young, beautiful woman who married out of ambition, only to commit adultery to further achieve her goals of wealth and high stature.

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[68]Ibid., 75.

[69]George Lippard, The Empire City: or, New York By Night and Day. (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1850), 25.

Lippard described her, "... she lay in that gorgeous couch, in an attitude of voluptuous ease; a perfect incarnation of the Sensual Woman, who combines the beauty of a mere animal, with the intellect strong and resolute in its every purpose." Dora is not only at ease with her sexuality, she revels in it. In one scene she lay on the couch in a "dreamy reverie" awaiting her lover's arrival. "As she lay reclining on the sofa, a low murmur of delight escaped from her lips, and a flush, like the sunnyside of a ripening peach, blightened (sic) over her face and neck. Her eyelids slowly unclosing revealed her large dark eyes, animate with an expression of sudden delight ..."[70] This passage was a description of Dora as she rested, yet it reads more like a description of sexual arousal. Dora's every action, indeed her whole being, exuded sexuality.

What was more frightening about Dora was that she was a sexual being without any external provocation. Unlike most female characters of racy novels, Dora was an autonomous sexual agent. Although Dora was not a "victim" of a seduction, she eventually became the victim of her own sexuality. Throughout the novel she uses her sexuality to get what she wants. In the end she tries to sell herself sexually to avoid being exposed to her husband and the community as an adulteress. When her blackmailer rejects the offer of her body, it marks the first time Dora's sexuality fails to secure her goals. Dora's husband eventually poisons her and she dies a fiery death, symbolic of hell's eternal flames for sinners.

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[70]Lippard, The Quaker City, 137, 181.

Consequences of Sexual Awakening

All seduced women became polluted "things" robbed of their humanity. The guilt may not have been the victim's, yet she bore the shame of the crime, for seduction altered the very essence of a woman's soul. After her seduction, Mary Arlington,

> had sprung from the maiden into the woman, but a blight was on her soul forever ... in her inmost soul, she felt that she was a dishonored thing, whose very touch was pollution, whose presence, among the pure and stainless, would be a bitter mockery and foul reproach. The guilt was not hers, but the Ruin blasted her purity forever.[71]

Male seducers were not held to the same standards. Authors often condemned the double standard which punished women much more harshly for sexual transgressions, even in cases in which women were the victims. Yet their portrayals of seduction reaffirmed that code. Erotic novels did not explore what happened to the men who were seducers. If, occasionally a seducer met with an ill fate, as did The Quaker City's Gus Lorrimer when he was shot by the victim's brother, his demise was not comparable to that of a woman. Authors may have been critical of the double standard, yet their writings did not fundamentally challenge it. George Thompson wrote in The Gay Girls of New-York: or, Life on Broadway, "[A] woman can never recover her position in society -- while the man who sins a thousand times, is a thousand times applauded."[72]

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[71]Ibid., 145.

[72]George Thompson, The Gay Girls of New-York, as quoted in Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 148.

A woman who had lost her virtue was immeasurably more reprehensible than a depraved man. In the words of advice writer William G. Eliot, Jr., "The best things perverted become the worst."[73] Advice writers often wrote of the "stain" of a polluted woman, a metaphor that erotic novelists portrayed literally. After Mary Arlington's seduction she acquired a physical blemish, "a large vein, black and distorted, shot upward, darkening the glossy skin, while it told the story of the maiden's dishonor and shame."[74] The marking "told the story" of her dishonor, rendering her shame permanent without hope of ablution.

Invariably, the fallen woman turned to the only life she was fit for -- prostitution. Sensationalist literature abounds with descriptions of such women and explanations of how they reached their lowly state. The story is repeatedly told of women who had once been virtuous, but were seduced and "fell" into a life of prostitution. Harrison Gray Buchanan wrote in Asmodeus: or Legends of New York, "[she] was now obliged to follow this avocation, disinherited by her parents for ever and for ever ... by a young collegiate, in Yale College, she had been seduced; and now, with blight and ruin upon her young and loving heart, see her in a den of crime!"[75]

A common theme that runs throughout many racy novels is the prostitute who seeks sexual revenge on her seducer. George Foster's Celio describes a young woman named Virginia and her

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[73]William G. Eliot, Jr., as quoted in Walters, Primers For Prudery, 69.
[74]Lippard, The Quaker City, 144.
[75]Harrison Gray Buchanan, Asmodeus: or Legends of New York. (New York: John D. Munson & Co., 1848), 28.

descent into prostitution. At the age of fifteen she was seduced by a visiting cousin and then by a local minister. Motivated by a desire "to seek and execute revenge upon mankind," she left the countryside for New York City to work as a prostitute. Within the character of Virginia, several ideas about female sexuality converge. Although seduced, she is implicated in her sexual awakening and prostitution because she admits to having "perverted and unnatural appetites." She prostitutes because there is no alternative for the creature that she has become. "I am a demon -- a she-devil, as are all women who have lost their virtue; and I mean to make the most of it."[76] She is not only dehumanized, but she represents evil.

Countless authors incorporated this theme into their novels. Osgood Bradbury's Ellen Grant tells the story of the dangers of seduced innocence and purity. After her seduction by a Methodist preacher, Ellen moved to New York "where she became a wanton." The lecherous preacher also moves to the city, disguising himself as a doctor. Ellen plots her revenge and succeeds in killing him. Another novel, The Life and Sufferings of Cecilia Mayo, recounts the story of Cecilia. After her seduction and abandonment at an early age, she becomes a whore who specializes in ruining young men.[77]

Often, the prostitute sought not only revenge, but sexual power over men. Joseph Holt Ingraham, in his fictionalized account of the Helen Jewett murder, Frank Rivers, wrote of Jewett,

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[76]George Foster, Celio: or New York Above-Ground and Under-Ground (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 35-36.
[77]Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance, 218.

•she was the seducer, not he ... Her beauty was her power, and she triumphed in it. She felt a sort of revenge against the other sex, and used every art to tempt and seduce and ruin young men.*[78] In this portrayal, the blame of seduction is placed entirely on women, not men. Jewett was a well-known prostitute in New York city, and after her murder various fictionalized accounts of her life and death were published. Some contained a more sentimental version, depicting Jewett as the wronged woman who had been seduced and degraded into prostitution. Ingraham's version, in contrast, placed the sexual agency entirely with Jewett.

A slight twist on the revenge theme depicted women who sought to bring other women down to their degraded state. The narrator of Alice Barber regretfully tells the reader that

> the black hearted in this world are not confined to one sex ... Alas! that my own sex should cater for the bad passions of men, and practice all kinds of deception to lure young and beautiful girls into the vortex of death and distraction![79]

Either out of greed or misogyny, these "black hearted" women lure the innocent and unsuspecting into seduction traps. Most commonly, these women are the "madams" who run brothels. Harrison Gray Buchanan's Asmodeus featured prominent prostitutes-turned-madams who ran New York City's various "boarding houses." One of the most infamous was Julia Brown, described as a "queenly elm" who made "riches amassed by the ruin of hundreds of innocent females, and by untold and countless misery and wretchedness." More despicable than Julia Brown were those women who prostituted

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[78]Joseph Holt Ingraham, Frank Rivers, as quoted in Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 151.
[79]Bradbury, Alice Barber, 9.

their own daughters. Buchanan described one such woman, Cornelia Buckly, "What can we think of a woman who educates her own daughter to ways of prostitution; of a mother who will consent to proffer to the person of her own daughter to base lusts, even within her own rooms?"[80]

Some women are depicted as being so degraded and filled with resentment that they delight in seeing any woman seduced. Osgood Bradbury's The Mysteries of Boston portrays a sister, Louise, who lost her virtue and was determined to have the same fate befall her sister, Alice Jane. Louise conspires to have various men seduce her sister, yet all attempts fail because of Alice Jane's moral fortitude. In The Quaker City, Gus Lorrimer's seduction of Mary Arlington is aided through the efforts of a woman named Bessie, who wins Mary's confidence and lures her to Monk Hall. "Bessie" is the assumed name of a young woman named Emily who came from an upper-class background, was seduced, and then disappeared from her hometown. Emily was taken to Monk Hall, a mansion on the outskirts of the city where a secret club of "monks" met to indulge in sin and vice. When asked if she regretted luring Mary to her seduction, Bessie responded, "I feel happy -- aye happy -- when I can drag another woman, into the same foul pit, where I am doomed to lie and rot...."[81]

Frequently the fallen woman was driven to madness. Filled with self-loathing and unable to return to her previously pristine state, the spoiled woman withdrew into the recesses of insanity.

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[80]Buchanan, Asmodeus, 41-42, 84.
[81]Lippard, The Quaker City, 80.

Ned Buntline's The B'hoys of New York is one of the many novels employing this theme. Buntline described prostitute Agnes Morton as "lost -- and more, she is a *maniac*." A similar fate befalls Mary Arlington, "[her] quivering lips reddened to a deep purple hue, the brow animated by an expression as wild as it was startling, the hand clasped tremblingly over the bosom ... all betrayed the deep emotion, like to madness in its indications ..."[82] In other cases, death seemed to be the only viable option. In a Poe-like touch of the macabre, Lippard's "midnight queen" ends her life of infamy by poisoning herself and lying down in a shroud and coffin for a sleep of death. Her last words to her ex-lover from the country are, "do not attempt to touch my hand. I am but a poor, polluted thing...."[83] For these women, the reality of their lives was too much for them to bear.

To a certain degree, prescriptive manuals and erotic novels portrayed similar visions of female sexuality. Writers of both literatures envisioned a female sexuality marked by extremes, that of the "angel of light" or the "painted lady." Through the notion of latent sensuality, advice writers and novelists endowed women with schizophrenic sexual natures; any woman, regardless of her purity, could have her sensual nature aroused. Once awakened, a woman's sexuality inevitably proved destructive.

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[82]Ibid., 301.
[83]George Lippard, "The Midnight Queen," from The Midnight Queen; or, Leaves From New York Life, 29.

Erotic novelists went far beyond this level and challenged conventional notions of female sexuality. Rather than portraying women who were passive 'victims' of sexual awakening, erotic novelists depicted female characters who were active sexual participants. These sexually powerful women enjoyed their passion and often used it to secure their goals. This is not to infer, however, that novelists' conceived of a healthy and natural female sexuality. Whether provoked externally or self-realized, female sexual passion brought destruction and ruin.

Conclusion

During the same decades of the nineteenth century, advice writers and racy novelists wrote intensely about sexuality. These decades were a turbulent time in American history, a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Authors of both literatures responded to these changes in very different ways. Sexual advice writers wrote scores of manuals describing the deleterious consequences of unbridled sexuality. They viewed self-control, particularly concerning sexuality, as the last barrier against social disarray. Erotic novelists, initially inspired by foreign works, began a new genre of sensationalist literature called the "city mystery." Novels of this genre reflected increasing apprehension over urbanization and the possibilities for degradation that lurked within the city.

Sexual advice writers perceived male sexuality as a social problem. They were the first to bring discussion of sexual issues into "respectable" public discourse. In doing so, they challenged Victorian codes of propriety. Sexuality was made a topic acceptable for public discussion. Yet these advice writers did not advocate sexual education on the grounds that their manuals would promote healthier sexual awareness. Rather, advice writers viewed the sexual instinct, particularly in men, as a dangerous force requiring strict regulation.

Female sexuality was a topic that eluded advice authors' understanding. Their writings on the subject were marked by

extreme ambiguity and ambivalence. Advice writers championed an ideal of a chaste Victorian lady whose satisfaction in life derived from her roles as mother and wife. This model of womanhood had its flaws, however, for it failed to encompass women who betrayed signs of sexuality. In explaining such women, advice writers strove to keep their pure and virtuous model intact. Any "corruption" in a woman, (and sensuality was most certainly corrupt) could be attributed to a variety of external causes. Thus, the female sexual instinct remained dormant unless aroused by someone or something other than the woman herself.

Racy novelists' fantasized and eroticized this notion of a latent female sexuality. Erotic authors filled their books with portrayals of sensual women whose passions were very much "awakened." Once provoked, female sexuality could not be contained; it consumed women and directed their every action. A sexual woman was a degraded woman. Sexual passion was a polluting entity, forever tainting the hapless individual who had her sexual instinct aroused. Unbridled female sexuality spilled over into society as well. Once degraded, a sexual woman wanted to corrupt those around her, either through sexual revenge on men, or by aiding seducers in their nefarious plans to ruin other young women.

The city mysteries challenged conventional ideals of the passionless Victorian woman, yet not in truly radical ways. Racy novelists never portrayed women who were "good" and "virtuous" -- and also sexual. The few heroines in racy novels were those women like Osgood Bradbury's Alice Jane who managed to thwart seduction

plots due to their impenetrable purity. Even Charles Paul de Kock's Mary Ann Temple, which purported to tell the story of a girl's "strong and natural" love of pleasure, linked Mary Ann's sexual awakening with her "fall" from virtue.

Advice writers found racy novels "subversive" because they contained portrayals of sexual women that contradicted their model of female sexuality. Sufficient evidence exists to suggest that men and women of all classes read these novels. Writers of prescriptive literature had reason to believe that their advice manuals were competing with racy novels for readers. Furthermore, a danger posed by these tales of seduction was that they furnished a script of seduction for their readers. Mid-nineteenth century readers had available to them detailed scripts of "illicit" behavior that they could follow if they so chose. It was one thing to warn people about the evils in life to avoid -- it was quite another thing to conjoin these warnings with explicit descriptions of the proscribed acts.

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