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(Illicit) Sex and the City: Transgressive Female  
Sexuality and the “Porno-Gothic” Genre  
in George Thompson’s *City Crimes*

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George Thompson, an early practitioner of American pulp sensation fiction, made extensive use of erotic and gothic traditions in his 1849 novel *City Crimes*. His portrait of “life in New York and Boston” can be understood as an urban gothic, an appropriation of the gothic genre inspired by Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*. From this precursor developed the American city-mysteries genre, to which Thompson was a prolific and controversial contributor. This genre emphasized the sexual depravity of city dwellers, making the prostitute, and more generally the lascivious woman, a key figure both in Thompson’s work and in the urban gothic genre as a whole. Rampant female sexuality, constructed as inherently transgressive, is central to Thompson’s revelations of illicit eroticism. This strain of city-mysteries fiction can be called the “porno-gothic,” a term used by J. V. Ridgely in a study of George Lippard, Thompson’s

contemporary and a fellow writer of sensational urban novels. In *City Crimes*, Thompson tantalizes the reader with shocking, grotesque, and erotic images and scenes, fusing gothic fiction and pornography. While Thompson's depiction of the female pursuit of pleasure and free love is treated as feminist by Reynolds and Gladman in their introduction to *City Crimes*, it is my contention that rogue female sexuality is villainized, as seen in the tragic fates of lascivious women. Free lovers, in the period when Thompson wrote, may have advocated for female sexual autonomy and considered marriage to be *de facto* legalized prostitution, but Thompson's anti-heroines are neither valorized nor redeemed for their agency and sexual assertiveness. To read *City Crimes* as feminist, or even as generally sympathetic towards women, is to ignore the sexist and even misogynist implications of Thompson's characterizations. In this essay, I will relate the prostitutes and sexually voracious women in *City Crimes* to Thompson's "porno-gothic" construction of female sexuality as deviant and transgressive. My examination will reveal how this depiction of criminal women links female sexuality with deviance and reinforces a gendered double standard for nineteenth-century sexual expression.

The blended genre of "porno-gothic" derives from many literary and cultural sources. Karen J. Renner borrows Ridgely's term, characterizing "porno-gothic" as an apt description of Thompson's work. She writes, "Thompson was a prolific writer of sensational urban novels and a contributor to later manifestations of the flash press – small weekly papers, often of a decidedly sexual nature, that first appeared during the 1840s" (175). George Thompson's *City Crimes* nominally aims to unveil the depravity and horror of urban crime. This revelatory undertaking emphasizes deviant sexuality and eroticism and thereby caters to the reader's

appetite for titillating and taboo material. Thompson's narrator acts as a tour guide revealing the mysteries and crimes that bubble under the surface of the city. As one critic notes:

Behind or beneath the mundane appearances of the social world in Thompson's novels are countless forms of violence, suffering, sexual excess, intoxication, and so forth. His texts are full of examples of his most characteristic trope – the unveiling or revealing of an ugly truth hidden by sham surfaces . . . (Looby 653)

In the introduction to *Venus in Boston and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*, David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman describe Thompson's various works as "trying to tap into what [Thompson] called 'public curiosity' over 'the most repulsive-looking objects which afford no instruction, produce no agreeable sensations, but which merely gratify a morbid and depraved appetite'" (xxxiii). Thompson's specific blend of fiction combined sex, crime, and excessive violence with "ideas of the freakish and the bizarre from Phineas T. Barnum exhibitions" (Reynolds and Gladman xi). Barnum's influence is seen in Thompson's portrayal of deformed characters as well as shocking and disturbing scenes. His use of the grotesque and horrific, and specifically, of grotesque eroticism, has clear antecedents in gothic fiction.

Thompson was influenced by nineteenth-century pornography, loading *City Crimes* with scenes of rapturous lust and illicit sexual acts. Sexual content was a defining aspect of the sensational flash press of the 1840s. Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz discuss how the flash papers "shared a pattern and style" as they were "salacious and sex-oriented, humorous and ribald, in league with the brothel world and also in varying degrees attuned to the saloon culture" (19-20). Any examination of female sexuality in the flash press and urban gothic genre of the 1840s necessitates a discussion of pornography in relation to the pivotal fallen woman: the prostitute. According to Cohen, Gilfoyle, and

Horowitz, “The initial application of the term [pornography] applied to works which described the lives, customs, and habits of prostitutes and their patrons. . . . Relying upon this definition, the flash press was pornographic” (72). Based on this historical definition, so is *City Crimes*, in its portrayal of a female prostitute, Maria Archer, in addition to the novel’s ample erotic content and implied sexual acts. Most significantly, the novel can be deemed pornographic for its use of “visual and verbal images of sexuality employed for purposes of shock or male titillation” (72). Male visual pleasure and the act of unveiling the shocking truth of the city are paramount to Thompson’s novel. In this way, women are itemized and consumed, their deviant sexuality fetishized. As Kate Millet wrote 121 years after *City Crimes* in her book *Sexual Politics*:

While patriarchy tends to convert woman to a sexual object, she has not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is agreed to be her fate. Instead, *she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality*, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence. (116; emphasis mine)

This apt observation encompasses the dilemma of the sexualized female subject who, while forced to be a sexual object by men and for men, is punished for any sexual autonomy or enjoyment of this sexuality.

The depictions of women in Thompson’s fiction must be read in relation to the emerging feminist discourse and criticism of the mid 1800s in order to understand the most prevalent conceptions of women’s rights and experience and how these tensions were beginning to be approached. According to Jamie Crouse, “The dominant understanding of gender roles in the nineteenth century found its clearest expression in the cult of true

womanhood but had its roots in a much longer tradition, one based on essential gender differences” (259). Margaret Fuller repudiated this notion in her landmark text *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Published in 1845, this work is contemporaneous with *City Crimes* and considered the first American feminist treatise, following in the same vein as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). As Susan Crucea remarks, “Feminism, as we know the term today, was non-existent in nineteenth-century America. The phrase did not become popular until the 1910s as efforts began to focus around woman’s suffrage, yet pre-feminist activity began long before 1910” (187). *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is the crucial example of this “pre-feminist activity,” constituting the work we now retroactively designate as “feminism.” Fuller’s text tackles the relationship between the sexes in mid-nineteenth century America and advocates self-reliance, as well as intellectual and spiritual cultivation, for women. Fuller writes, “Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (1710). Here, Fuller rejects the male-female binary and champions an erasure of starkly defined concepts of masculinity and femininity: “The radical nature of Fuller’s argument comes out of seeing the natures of men and women as inextricably related rather than seeking to divide them and treat each as separate and distinct” (Crouse 280). In a sense, Thompson’s depiction of lascivious women motivated by carnal desires is in tune with Fuller’s gender continuum – he portrays women that, while womanly, do not conform to nineteenth-century ideals of femininity in terms of their attitudes, values, and sexual cravings. Nevertheless, Thompson’s sexual heroines are presented as aberrations to the feminine ideal, rather than celebrated for their freedom and independence. By linking feminine sexuality with deviance and crime,

Thompson ensures that other characters and the reader – as a consequence of the moralizing narrator’s instruction – understand the female characters as villains. If a woman is characterized as evil because she murders an infant or her husband, and she is also very sexual, her sexuality becomes intertwined with her (actual) villainous attributes.

Marriage – the social institution so central to issues of gender equality and the subjugation of women in the nineteenth century – factors prominently in *City Crimes*. Of marriage Fuller writes:

A profound thinker has said, “no married woman can represent the female world, for she belongs to her husband. The idea of Woman must be represented by a virgin.” But that is the very fault of marriage, and of the present relation between the sexes; that the woman does belong to the man, instead of forming a whole with him. Were it otherwise, there would be no such limitation to the thought. (1717)

Fuller goes on to imagine “Woman, self-centered” as a being and how, as an independent, self-reliant entity, she would not become consumed by any relationship, including marriage (1717). To be married would be simply another experience for women, as it is for men.

Not surprisingly, marriage was a central area of controversy for the emergent feminist discourse of the nineteenth century. Of the marriage critiques that arose in the antebellum period, the free-love movement’s critique was one of the most radical. Thompson’s depiction of marriage, a central facet (by its presence or absence) in the lives of the main female characters of *City Crimes*, warrants a discussion of the free-love movement. Reynolds and Gladman discuss the intersection of marriage and free love in their introduction by referencing “‘legalized prostitution,’ the term free lovers used to describe the conventional marriage” (x1).

As Wendy Hayden explains the term “free love” in “(R)Evolutionary Rhetorics: Science and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Free-Love Discourse”:

While diverse definitions of the term – and therefore goals of the movement – existed, they coalesce from one central principle: the right of men and women to engage in sexual and emotional relationships without the interference of sexist social mores, religion, or law. The advocates for free love rejected the inequalities between wives and husbands under the law, and maintained that women could not achieve equality as long as the laws defined marriage and kept them controlled by husbands. They portrayed marriage as a form of “sexual slavery” and advocated its destruction. (112)

The free-love movement had clear feminist leanings in its advocacy of the equality of men and women and the right to both seek, as well as refuse, sexual pleasure. In free-love discourse, it was not promiscuous or transgressive for women to be free beings with autonomy in their personal and sexual lives. Free lovers rejected the conception of women as “passionless” and insisted that “women, like men, were equally entitled to gratify their sexual desires in the most beneficial and pleasurable way possible” (Battan 3). According to Jesse Battan, for women to defy the limitations enforced upon them by virtue of their gender “was clearly at odds with Victorian sexual and marital ideology, which celebrated the doctrine of separate spheres, the sentimental image of motherhood, and the cult of domesticity that envisioned the home as a ‘haven in a heartless world’” (2). The values of the free-love movement are useful for interpreting the treatment of female sexuality in *City Crimes*. While free-love rhetoric is integral to the characterizations of Julia, Josephine, and Lucretia, who seek sexual stimulation above all else, this pursuit of pleasure is depicted as intertwined with crime and vice, as all

three women commit murder to advance their autonomy and satisfy their desires. These women may be “free lovers,” but they are not successful or positive champions for feminine sexual freedom. The feminist underpinnings of the free lovers, intersecting with the sexist and unfavorable portrayal of women in the text, are at odds with the portrayal of women in Thompson’s novel. As a “porno-gothic” text, *City Crimes* continually mingles pain and pleasure, violence and sex, and posits female sexuality as inextricable from vice and fallenness.

The combination of shocking horror and exciting thrills, part of the gothic tradition, is central to the urban gothic landscape of *City Crimes*. One of Thompson’s inspirations, *Les Mystères de Paris*, is considered to be the first text of the city-mysteries genre, an urban form of/variation on gothic fiction, in which “Sue substituted a malignant cityscape for the haunted countryside of gothic fiction, and replaced the latter’s supernatural terrors with the horrors of urban poverty and crime” (Reynolds and Gladman x). Thompson adopts various gothic codes and conventions, from underground “dark vaults” and cellars, to horrifying scenes of violence and disfigurement, to seeming ghosts (who prove to be criminal men). The evil, disfigured, and almost supernatural Dead Man is an extreme example of gothic villainy. Exploiting the potential for voyeuristic thrills, the narrator takes the reader on a virtual tour of the sewers and thieves’ “cribs” of New York City and Boston. The text is laden with descriptions that are perversely exciting in their morbidity and shock value, such as the scene in which Sydney descends into the sewers and the dark vaults for the first time:

Before him lay the carcase of some animal which had died from disease – it was swollen and green with putrefaction; and oh, horrible! we sicken as we record the loathsome fact – the starved wretch was ravenously devouring the carrion!

Yes, with his finger nails, long as vultures' claws, he tore out the reeking entrails, and ate them with the ferocity of the grave-robbing hyena! (132)

The narrator relishes the description of the sickening realities of the urban underworld, relaying disturbingly graphic scenes of gore and horror that are intended to shock and intrigue the reader.

Thompson's descriptions oscillate between violence and carnage and lust and debauchery. While the gothic genre typically includes some facet of sexuality and desire – often mingled with fear – works like *City Crimes* take the genre's implicit eroticism to a new, overt level with an infusion of what is, in effect, pornography. In *A History of Pornography*, H. Montgomery Hyde explains that the category of pornography has always designated material – whether writing or pictures (or, in the twentieth century, films) that “must have the power to be or be intended to act as an aphrodisiac – that is, to excite sexual passions or desires” (1). Even though the pornographic content of *City Crimes* would (now) be considered softcore – that is, depictions that lack the description of penetration and other overt sex acts – Thompson's descriptions of “the delights of voluptuousness,” however improper his narrator deems them, were intended to titillate the reader (112). *City Crimes* does not represent merely conventional sexual experiences, but those specifically perceived as deviant or abhorrent:

To say that Thompson's pornography is suggestive rather than explicit . . . is not to diminish its adventurousness and transgressiveness, given the era in which it appeared. . . . Among the kinds of sexual activity Thompson depicts are adultery, miscegenation, group sex, incest, child sex, rape, and gay sex. (Reynolds and Gladman xxxvii)

From Julia Fairchild's scandalous affair with Nero the African-American servant, whose child she bears in secret and then murders, to Lucretia and Josephine Franklin, the bizarre mother-daughter duo who engage in a threesome with a ship captain, Thompson focuses on unusual, criminal, or perverse liaisons for the purposes of arousing that "depraved appetite" of the readership. Some forms of illicit sexual activity are mentioned only in passing, but Thompson ensures they are included, if only to stir the reader's imagination. Many forms of sexuality featured are overtly grotesque, causing the line between horrific and pornographic to become difficult to distinguish and essentially intertwined. In the *Dark Vaults*, Frank Sydney sees

[a] cave . . . literally crammed with human beings. Men and women, boys and girls, young children, negroes, and *hogs* were laying indiscriminately upon the ground, in a compact mass. These beings were vile and loathsome in appearance beyond all human conception; every one of them was a mass of rags, filth, disease, and corruption. (133, Thompson's emphasis)

Incest, miscegenation, and even bestiality are all suggested here. In *City Crimes*, Thompson is pulling the veil away from the dark and despicable world supposedly unknown to readers and allowing them a glimpse into depravity. The details of the sordid and debased world of crime and poverty evoke feelings of disgust and horror that are still thrilling and exciting. As Richard S. Randall notes in *Freedom and Taboo: Pornography and the Politics of a Self Divided*, "Here we have the paradox of all taboos: neither murder nor various other 'unacceptable' acts – adultery, sodomy, incest, for example – would be the object of prohibition were they not, from time to time, very much desired" (Randall 3). The forbidden nature of these sexual deviances – and sexual expression and indulgence in general – creates a tantalizing and somehow pleasurable reading experience. The desire to gratify these impulses, mingled with the fact that

they must be regulated and controlled, creates the tension between what is enjoyed and what is feared. This mingling of fear with curiosity and pleasure accounts for the appetite that readily consumes this type of literature.

The pornographic elements of the text provide the omniscient, first-person plural narrator an opportunity to feign propriety concerning the salacious subject matter and to affect concern for the delicate and gentle reader. The narrator negotiates which incidents to relay to the reader and how much detail to provide. By skipping over explicitly obscene details, Thompson allows the narrator to preserve a sense of decorum and regard for the readers' gentle sensibilities. In one instance, the narrator boasts:

We have undertaken a difficult and painful task, and we shall accomplish it; *unrestrained by a false delicacy*, we shall drag forth from the dark and mysterious labyrinths of great cities, the hidden iniquities which taint the moral atmosphere. . . . (126; emphasis mine)

Despite such boasts, the narrator is palpably “restrained by a “false delicacy” in certain descriptions or omissions. Describing a *ménage à trois* with the Franklins and a ship captain, Thompson writes, “And clasping both ladies around the waists, [the captain] kissed them alternately, again and again. That night was one of guilty rapture to all the parties; but the particulars must be supplied by the reader’s own imagination” (248). The narrator’s restraint is selective: he spares no detail in describing putrefied corpses and torture, but ensures that all sex is only suggested, that all breasts are euphemized as globes, hillocks, or twin sisters.

Thompson’s subject matter ranges from scenes of brutal torture and maiming to sewers of excrement to a disfigured, dwarf-like child hidden in a dark cellar, and yet there is a hierarchy of appropriateness that deems it better to relate detailed scenes of filth and barbarism than to

relate the particulars of sexual intercourse. This attitude towards eroticism pervades all the novel's descriptions of sex, which largely focus on the misadventures of wanton women. As a result, female sexuality is more criminal and debased than many of the other strange and perverse incidents, places, and figures.

The first of many sexually awakened and heavily eroticized female characters encountered in the novel is the "Courtezan," or prostitute, Maria Archer (112). The fallen woman is a stock figure in narratives of urban crime and deviance. As Renner explains, the prostitute, "a woman who manufactured and marketed desire, coincided with an increasingly prevalent conception of women as, in Nancy Cott's words, essentially 'passionless' unless aroused by sincere romantic love" (167). Furthermore, the prostitute "became an object of antebellum fascination and concern less because of her defiance of the ideology of passionlessness and more because of the extent to which she could be made to reinforce this ideology" (168). Not surprisingly, Maria's sexiness is immediately assessed and presented for voyeuristic consumption by Sydney and the reader:

Throwing off her shawl, she displayed a fine form and a voluptuous bust – the latter, very liberally displayed, as she was arrayed in nothing but a loose dressing gown, which concealed neither her plump shoulders, nor the two fair and ample globes, whiter than alabaster, that gave her form a luxurious fullness. (111)

While Maria makes her living through sex, she is not depicted as having a pronounced sex drive – her prostitution is coerced, her downfall a result of disgust at her parents' adulterous and inappropriate affairs, and her desire appears latent until aroused by the encounter with Frank.

Maria is a complicated figure in relation to the other sexually awakened women in the novel as she emphasizes the novel's double standards concerning masculine and feminine desire. Frank Sydney's encounter with the voluptuous and alluring young woman demonstrates his own susceptibility to lust, for which the narrator offers justifications. Elsewhere construed as a morally upstanding and courageous philanthropist, Sydney is here excused for succumbing to temptation. Considering that Sydney is engaged to Julia Fairchild, and is furious when he discovers her adultery with Nero, his own indiscretions with Maria reflect the novel's double standard. The narrator is distinctly hypocritical, even though hypocrisy is one of the evils criticized throughout the text. Sydney later exclaims to his new wife, "I mean that your abominable conduct is known to me – your true character is discovered. Before our marriage you were defiled by that negro footman, Nero" (147). Sydney's infidelity is unknown to Julia and she never becomes aware of his hypocrisy. The narrator oscillates in his chastisement of Sydney: first he is pardoned for his sexual attraction to Maria Archer because, after all, he is a "young man of an ardent and impulsive temperament" and he cannot help his feelings (111). Then, the narrator reneges and criticizes Sydney for his actions in "reveling in the delights of voluptuousness" (112). Finally, the narrator seizes this instance to extol the honesty and fairness of the narration itself:

We might have portrayed thee as a paragon of virtue and chastity...we might have made a saint of thee, Frank. But we prefer to depict human nature *as it is* and not *as it should be*; – therefore we represent thee to be no better than thou art in reality. Many will pardon thee for thy folly, Frank, and admit that it was natural – very natural. (112; Thompson's emphasis)

Here, male sexual impulse is privileged as “natural – very natural,” as though Sydney could not have been expected to resist the voluptuous and delicious Maria. Elsewhere, by contrast, female sexual impulse is castigated as unnatural. Sydney’s behaviour is excusable because he is otherwise good and noble: as the central protagonist, he is easily the most valorized, morally strong character in the novel. If Sydney were an evil, criminal man, then his amorous exploits would be represented as base and disgusting – as the advances of the Dead Man to Julia are. If a person is vile and corrupt in *City Crimes*, then any expression of sexual desire must also be base and revolting.

The explicit eroticism between Sydney and Maria is not condemned, as the eroticism of other encounters is, even though she is a prostitute and thus connected to the criminal characters in this urban underbelly. The novel emphasizes the consensual and uncommodified nature of their union (even though Sydney becomes a charitable benefactor to Maria, and so her presumed sexual favours during their first meeting can be interpreted as bought and paid for). Moreover, Maria is not a prostitute by choice, because Fred Archer, her criminal husband, forces her into prostitution for his own financial gain. Thus she is a helpless and oppressed victim; she laments:

He resolved that I should support him in idleness, by becoming a common prostitute. When he made this debasing and inhuman proposition to me, I rejected it with the indignation it merited; whereupon he very coolly informed me, that unless I complied, he should abandon me to my fate, and proclaim to the world that I was a harlot before he married me. (122)

Maria’s personal narrative to Sydney, “The Courtesan’s Story,” reveals her essential piety and purity, which were scandalized in her youth by the revelation of her parents’ adulterous affairs

– her mother with the Rev. Mr. Flanders, and her father with the family servant Jane (112). Her disgust and outrage at her parents lead them to chastise and punish her. Although Maria is an urban prostitute, the narrator redeems her by revealing the tale of familial corruption and oppression from which she was forced to flee. Maria is, accordingly a sympathetic figure suffering from gender and sexual oppression, and is less transgressive than other women in the novel. Jennifer Rae Greeson asserts that by the mid-nineteenth century, “It was clear that illicit female sexuality had begun to be perceived as a virulent modern social disease, too widespread and too complex to be explained in terms of the sins or failures of individual women” (280).

Maria stresses to Sydney that

I have been reduced to my present unfortunate position, more through the influence of circumstances, than on account of any natural depravity. – True, I am now what is termed a woman of the town – but still I am not entirely destitute of delicacy or refinement of feeling. (Thompson 123)

Maria’s situation is the result not of any inherent flaw or lasciviousness but rather of her corrupted childhood and her banishment, which led to her poverty and her subservience to a criminal man.

Renner casts seduction as the foundation of fallen-women narratives, explaining that “Because fallen women typically ended up dead or at least miserable, the seduction narrative could be read as a cautionary tale for women who might consider using their sexuality for the purpose of social mobility” (174). When Maria Archer declares that she is leaving her husband and hence the trade of prostitution, he murders her brutally: not only does her murder remind readers of the violence facing prostitutes – helplessly bound in the trade by force, necessity, or desperation – it speaks to the anxieties surrounding the burgeoning trade. As Greeson notes:

The urban prostitute, whose presence was increasingly obvious on the streets of new industrial cities, was a focal point for these anxieties because her figure combined worries about women living outside established forms of patriarchal control with fears about the way the industrial capitalist market was encroaching upon even the most intimate of human spaces. (Greeson 280)

As a prostitute and hence an emblematic figure of the city mystery, Maria is a complex character whose betrayal by her family and seduction and enslavement by her husband account for her coming to “belong to that unfortunate class” (Thompson 111). Writing about the intersection of urban gothic fiction and abolitionist narratives, Greeson explains, “the story of ‘the fallen woman’ came for the first time to signify not her sexual deviance – her personal sin caused by loose morals or misguided choices – but her sexual exploitation – her victimization by a corrupt social order beyond her personal control” (278). In casting prostitution as a specifically *social* evil and urging readers to feel sympathy for the fallen woman, the city-mysteries genre reveals its interest in “class differences and with the nature of the urban experience” (Reynolds and Gladman ix). Thompson’s sympathetic portrayal of Maria demonstrates that she is not deviant on account of being a sex worker, because she thinks of prostitution as a social evil and she wishes to escape her situation. As a prostitute, her low station in life is in stark contrast to other (more socially esteemed) women who desire lovers, casual sex, and freedom from marriage. As a result, Thompson suggests that it is not sexual experience that makes a woman corrupt, so much as sexual appetite and desire. Yet in spite of the sympathy that the novel extends to Maria, she nonetheless dies, implying that the urban prostitute’s fate is necessarily a tragic one.

In *City Crimes*, Thompson portrays a broad range of licentious or criminal personas but the female villains (and other female characters, such as Maria Archer) are all characterized by their sexuality. Male villains, by contrast, are not imbued with this sexual dimension. They may demonstrate vile desires, as the Dead Man does to Julia, but their criminality is not intertwined with their sexuality. By contrast, the women's transgressions are always linked to sexuality and crimes and misdeeds result from illicit sexual relationships or devious ploys to obtain or maintain access to these relationships, as seen in the figures of Julia Fairchild and Lucretia and Josephine Franklin. While the murders they commit are their crowning transgressions, their crimes are a direct result of their sexual appetites and unbridled desire. Reynolds and Gladman note that there are characters, plotlines and images that appear quasi-feminist, and indeed, some instances reveal the hypocrisy and double standards of middle-class gender ideology, especially in terms of female sex drive and a woman's right to sexual pleasure:

Thompson's women are figures of both fantasy and nightmare. They enact the rejection, and even inversion, of the maternal and nurturing female roles produced by the cult of true womanhood, a middle-class ideology which held that women were naturally chaste and good beings with a weak sex drive.

(xxxviii-xxxix)

Julia Fairchild is the antithesis of the true woman, completely rejecting domestic values. Her sex drive and her apparent sexual experience are so shocking to Sydney on their wedding night that he subsequently consults a doctor. Not only does she commit adultery with Nero the servant, with whom she becomes pregnant, but she also murders their newborn child. The infanticidal mother is a nightmarish subversion of the true woman.

Not only does Julia commit sexual transgressions, she does so proudly. Thompson's female villains are aware of their rejections of chastity and monogamy and determined to gratify their superhuman sex drives. Julia exclaims to Sydney, "You cannot understand the fiery and insatiate cravings of my passions.... I shall become an abandoned and licentious woman, yielding myself up unreservedly to the voluptuous promptings of my ardent soul" (152). Other women, like Lucretia and Josephine Franklin, adamantly protect their sexual freedom and independence and have many lovers but are condemned in the process. Lucretia and Josephine protest that, to escape the restricted lifestyle mandated by their husband and father, they *had* to kill him. Julia Fairchild turns to crime in her attempts to fulfill her needs. As such, female sex drive becomes intertwined with vileness and murder and "Although their sexual frustration sometimes seems to be offered as a mitigating factor in their crimes, these characters are still clearly villains and deserve punishment for their misdeeds" (Reynolds and Gladman xxxviii).

Although some elements of these women's stories depict how women were limited in their pursuit of sexual pleasures, and thus reveal gender inequality and double standards, Julia and the Franklin women are decidedly unsympathetic characters. It takes more than a depiction of natural female sex drive, and their *right* to promiscuity, to make the novel feminist. While Thompson's female characters reject the double standard where promiscuity is acceptable for men but not women, the extreme punishments and downfalls they suffer hardly amount to a celebration of female sexual freedom and autonomy. Julia drowns herself to evade the law following her murder of Mr. Hedge, while Josephine Franklin poisons herself after the Dead Man blinds her and burns her face with sulfuric acid. These criminal women suffer tragic

deaths as punishment for their crimes. And while the central crime committed by each woman is murder, these murders directly result from their sexual deviance:

Julia's . . . deviant sexuality becomes the means of her own undoing: although initially she feels no shame for seeking to satisfy her impulsive sexual urges, eventually her desires compel her to commit uncontrollable acts that her conscience cannot forgive. (Renner 183)

Even though Maria Archer is the only prostitute in the novel, the shadow of prostitution lingers around Julia's narrative as well. In order to keep the life of luxury she desires, she readily invites the affection of her aged and benevolent new landlord, Mr. Hedge. However disagreeable it may be, Julia is prepared to exchange marriage and sexual favors for Hedge's wealth and protection. Luckily for her, his impotence on their wedding night saves her from his undesired sexual advances. Reynolds and Gladman state that women such as Julia engage in "legalized prostitution" to advance themselves financially through marriage (xl). As Hayden explains, "free-love feminists asserted the claim that women's status in marriage as the sexual slaves of men restrained progress. Thus a marriage system that subjugated the wife to the husband proved unnatural and culturally imposed" (117). Thompson's anti-heroines defy subjugation to men by being autonomous subjects with unbridled passions. However, in order to evade the oppression of marriage, two women, Lucretia and Julia, kill their husbands. In *City Crimes*, it is impossible for women to reject marriage without fatal consequences.

In "The Free Love Network in America, 1850-1860," John Spurlock asserts that "By the 1840s an ideal of true marriage had been formed that viewed the voluntary decision to enter marriage as the most basic of all social relations" (765). Free lovers believed that being bound by the marriage contract was debilitating to individual freedom and that "Happiness for men

and women could only be certain if both were free to alter their relationships when loved changed” (768). From a free-love perspective, many marriages were considered a form of legalized prostitution. This characterization aptly describes Julia’s marriage; she has no interest in Mr. Hedge except for his money and naiveté. The old man gives her everything she wants and leaves her with full autonomy, happy just to have a beautiful young creature in his life. In a strange turn that seems to express sympathy for Julia, or perhaps for other, less licentious women who turn to false marriages for financial security, Thompson’s narrator comments, “How often do we see old, decrepit men wooing and wedding young girls. . . . Well have such sacrifices to Lust and Mammon, been termed *legalized prostitution*. And does not such a system excuse, if not justify, infidelity on the part of the wife?” (264; Thompson’s emphasis). The novel’s position on Julia’s morality is ambiguous: the novel appears to excuse her infidelity, as though she could not have been expected to be faithful to a decrepit, impotent old man. Reynolds and Gladman suggest, “In his colorful depiction of Julia and other women who escape marriage, Thompson not only flouted the cult of domesticity but also created for women readers a tantalizing space of sexual imagination” (xl). Women may evade or escape marriage, but their autonomy revolves around a craving for many (male) lovers, rather than a desire to be free and self-sufficient women. Thompson may have created a space of sexual imagination, but it is certainly not an appealing or inviting one, especially in light of the marginalization and destruction of these women.

Nonetheless, *City Crimes* recalls the anxiety over marriage and how women are to cope with restrictive or abusive husbands. As Dawn Keetley discusses in “Victim and Victimizer: Female Fiends and Unease over Marriage in Antebellum Sensational Fiction”:

in the same two decades that other popular cultural forms – like ladies’ magazines, sentimental fiction, and advice manuals – were thoroughly engaged in solidifying the ideology of domesticity, a strand of sensational fiction was imaginatively playing out what would only later (in the 1870s and 1880s) emerge as a vehement cultural conflict over the drawbacks of indissoluble marriage and its potential for breeding violence. (3)

Nevertheless, in *City Crimes* only one female character is in a desperate and cruel marriage – Maria Archer. The other married women – Julia and Lucretia – both murder their husbands, not because they are victims of oppression or abuse, but because they want the freedom to indulge their insatiable sexual appetites with whomever they please. Lucretia warns her daughter against premature marriage: “But you must profit by *my* experience: do not be in haste to unite yourself in marriage to a man who, when he becomes your husband, will restrict you in the enjoyment of these voluptuous pleasures in which you now take such delight” (158; emphasis Thompson’s). Running parallel to the cautionary tale of allowing oneself to end up a prostitute is the cautionary tale of marriage. According to Hayden, marriage was problematic to free lovers because of the way in which it restricted female sexuality and made it deviant:

To free-love feminists, legal marriage stood in the way of proper evolution of the “unnatural” sanctions placed upon women’s sexuality. They envisioned evolving beyond marriage, where both partners would be free to exercise choice and where women’s sexuality would not be denied or painted as “unnatural.” (119)

Marriage as a restrictive institution to control female sexual desire is certainly seen in *City Crimes*, which casts women as abnormal for having a sexual appetite and desire for casual sex,

proclivities considered natural in men. The experiences of the novel's transgressive women seem to suggest that marriage can only end badly, as women need sexual freedom and the cage of marriage will inevitably drive them to criminal measures. By the late nineteenth century, the New Woman movement emerged, in which the women involved "believed that sexual identity and behavior should not be linked with public respectability. Sexual activity should not destroy a woman's reputation" (Cruea 204). In *City Crimes* women strive for this freedom but are unable to attain it, as these would-be New Women are also deviant murderesses. Any pseudo-feminism suggested by Thompson's depiction of sexually liberated women is violently undercut by the association of female sexuality with criminality. The potential feminist impact of the novel is thus destroyed.

Hidden amongst many licentious and sexually aggressive women, the Angel in the House is still present in *City Crimes*. Sophia Franklin, who is largely absent, is the only completely virtuous woman in the narrative. Sophia conforms to the cult of true womanhood perfectly, standing in as a paragon of feminine purity. Not surprisingly, she evinces no sex drive. She spurns one lascivious suitor and tries to escape from him; and she demonstrates no passion or sexual interest until she develops a romantic relationship with Sydney at the end. Her sexual identity conforms to Renner's assertion that "The seduction narrative was an appealing explanation for prostitution because it supported a predominant conception of female sexual desire as dormant unless kindled into activity by men" (170). Sophia perfectly maintains the ideology of the cult of true womanhood and separate spheres, and thus her sexuality is deemed normal and appropriate; other incarnations of female desire are, in turn, deviant. Unlike Josephine and Lucretia, whose bodies and sexual acts are casually on display, Sophia is never represented in a sexual way, nor are the details of her relationship with Sydney revealed. The

narrator is clearly restrained when it comes to defiling the image of a chaste, asexual persona like Sophia. She does not fit the profile of female sexual deviance that is showcased – for its titillating effects – as an urban horror.

In *City Crimes*, George Thompson has many aims: to write “a mirror of fashion, a picture of poverty, and a startling revelation of the secret crimes of great cities” (105).

In order to make such a venture thrilling for the reading public, Thompson infuses his narrative with sex and violence, crime and horror, emblematic of the burgeoning city-mysteries or urban gothic genre. The novel arouses reader interest and curiosity through its sensationalism.

Greeson asserts that gothic discursive conventions “promote the thrilling immorality of the subject matter while simultaneously averring the moral purpose behind that sensationalism” (289). The novel is not merely a revelation of horrifying domiciles and shocking intrigues: it is a constant moral judgment, a dissection of the many facets of urban deviance filled with narrative biases and prescriptions. As human sexuality and deviance is intrinsic to Thompson’s “porno-gothic” urban portrait, his construction of illicit female sexual desire is significant and central to the work. While male deviance manifests itself in crimes such as theft, violence, torture, and murder, feminine deviance manifests itself as sexual appetite, an interesting development when considered alongside the equally dominant nineteenth-century figures of the sexually fallen woman and, conversely, the pure, passionless virgin. Thompson makes some sympathetic gestures towards women seduced into prostitution or trapped in marriage, restricted from freely enjoying their passions. Nonetheless, the ideologies present throughout *City Crimes* are not feminist. Women’s inherent sexuality is characterized as abnormal and debauched. The intrigues of the female characters provide most of the fodder for the pornographic sequences, and feminine eroticism is depicted as inherently deviant, leading to

corruption, crime, misery, and death. In *City Crimes*, the sexual appetites of urban women are a social evil. The virtuous and sexless Sophia Franklin retreats to the country.

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