

Mysterious Places in Antebellum Sensational and Porn Novels

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Abstract

The dime novels of ante-bellum America are full of various mysterious places, houses with secret chambers and trapdoors or vast underground tunnels inhabited by the most hideous creatures. The article deals with such places in two of the most popular sensational novels – George Lippard’s Quaker City and George Thompson’s City Crimes.

Sensational novels, fiction for audience of artisans and laborers, came into existence in the late 1830s and early 1840s in the wake of the sensational press. The publishers of such stories competed fiercely for the audience and experimented with various types of fiction. The first genre that attracted wide following and mass success was the *city mysteries*. These novels, mostly serialized, revealed the mysteries of the city by telling the tales of criminal underworlds and decadence of elites and other dark, unsettling aspects of urban life (Denning, 1987: 85) They were inspired by Eugene Sue’s *Les Mysteres de Paris*, published in 1845, which became pirated and imitated in Germany, Great Britain and the United States. In the States, the city mysteries gained extreme popularity and a whole school of popular fiction concerning the mysteries evolved. Between 1844 and 1860, more than fifty novels concerning the city life appeared. The most popular settings were Boston, New York and Philadelphia, but the sensational novelists exploited wide array of other American cities – New Orleans, St. Louis, San Francisco, Lowell or Rochester (Reynolds, 1995: XIV).

The extreme popularity of sensational novels in antebellum America can be illustrated by the success of George Lippard’s *The Quaker City or, the Monks of the Monk Hall*. When it was published in 1845, it sold 60,000 copies in its first year and at least 10,000 copies annually for the next decade. Its alleged twenty-seven printings make *The Quaker City* the most popular American novel before the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Sensational novels or city mysteries did not escape the attention of the major writers of the period, but despite its enormous impact on popular culture, they were ignored by literary critics and historians for a long time. Several reasons explain this neglect. First of all, many examples of the genre disappeared since the sensational fiction was designed for rapid reading and disposal. Moreover, prudish censors, fighting against everything even remotely linked to pornography, destroyed the plates of many sensational novels. Another reason is that the sensational fiction violated traditional canons of critical taste, and literary critics were drawn to authors such as Melville or Hawthorne. Only the rise of new historicism and cultural studies opened the way for reconsideration of a non-canonical literature. City mysteries novels were an important part of antebellum working-class culture and the texts are valuable source of conceptions of class identity and class relations in the period (Reynolds, 2002: XXVII).

A more appropriate term for sensational genre would probably be urban porno-gothic. Several novels can be placed in the genre of popular pornography. The stereotypical image of an antebellum American is that of an uptight prude who cannot tolerate even a hint of sexuality. The fact is that pornographic fiction was widely consumed by sensational novel readers. The authors such as George Lippard or George Thompson vividly evoked homosexuality, miscegenation, group sex, child pornography or sadomasochism. They were reacting against middle-class culture that was, in some ways, absurdly prudish. Because of the censorship, their pornography was of the “soft” variety, according to today’s standards. The male characters of Thompson’s works voyeuristically gloat over “snowy globes” or

“voluptuous busts” of women disrobing, coming out of the bath or standing naked in front of the mirror. The sex scenes are rather suggestive than explicit and they are usually finished with sentences such as “we will not inflict upon the reader the disgusting details of that evening’s licentious extravagances” (*Venus in Boston*: 214) or “that night was one of guilty rapture to all the parties; but the particulars must be supplied by reader’s own imagination” (*Venus in Boston*: 248).

As far as the gothic aspect is concerned, the authors of city mysteries replaced haunted countryside and supernatural terrors with bleak cityscape and the horrors of urban poverty and crime. American cities lacked mysterious places and American authors were at disadvantage to their European counterparts. Philadelphia or New York could not compare to Paris or London with having several places associated with history and mystery. Therefore, the authors of sensational novels had to create imaginative places of mystery and set them in real urban landscape.

According to Michal Peprník, the place of mystery “is like an energy field whose charge organizes, to a large extent, the development of the plot – it generates curiosity or anxiety and fear since it threatens to destabilize the existing order, it calls for its own investigation, it makes some characters its victims, and turns others into investigators. It contains and hides a story, creates suspense, invites the reader to participate in its decoding, activates his experimental potential, and opens paths of associations normally closed or unused.” (2005: 313).

In my article, I will examine mysterious places in two of the antebellum sensational novels – the above-mentioned *The Quaker City* and George Thompson’s *City Crimes. The Quaker City or, the Monks of the Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery and Crime* was the first work of the new genre in America and almost immediately became the most popular. The plot is based on a real-life story, a famous case in which a Philadelphian Simon Mercer was acquitted after killing a man who had allegedly seduced his sister on a promise of marriage. Onto this real life scandal, Lippard added social satire, antielitism and Gothic grotesquerie. Much of the action in the novel takes place in the Monk Hall, the heart of *Quaker City*, and its place of mystery, where members of Philadelphia elite gather to carry on all kinds of perversions.

The Monk Hall, a huge edifice built by unknown wealthy foreigner some time before the Revolution, stood in the outskirts of southern part of the city. The proprietor, not satisfied with three stories above ground, built also three subterranean levels. Soon, rumors started to spread about the orgies “held by godless proprietor in his subterranean apartments, where wine was drunken without stint, and beauty ruined without remorse” (*The Quaker City*: 46). As the time passed on, the rumors began to grow and the mystery deepened. A stable, some hundred yards distant, was said to be connected by a tunnel with the mansion. The gossips called the lantern-like structure of the west wing the tower and suggested witchcraft and devildom. The proprietor was called “a libertine, a gourmand, an astrologer and a wizard. He feasted in the day and he consulted his friend, the devil in the night. He drank wine at all times, and betrayed innocence on every occasion” (*The Quaker City*: 47).

What had been a place of wealth and magnificence in the centre of a huge garden now stands in industrial neighborhood, “with a printing office on one side and the stereotype foundry on the other, while on the opposite side of the way, a mass of miserable frame houses seemed about to commit suicide and fling themselves madly into the gutter, and in the distance a long line of dwellings, offices, and factories, looming in broken perspective looked as if they wanted to shake hands across the narrow stree.” (*The Quaker City*: 48). The permanent inhabitants of the mansion satisfy the Barnumesque taste of antebellum readers for everything bizarre. The housekeeper of the Monk Hall, named Abijah K. Jones but known to everyone as the Devil-Bug, is one of the most sadistic, evil characters of American literature.

“It was a strange thickset specimen of flesh and blood, with a short body, marked by immensely broad shoulders, long arms and thin distorted legs. The head of the creature was ludicrously large in proportion to the body...A flat nose with wide nostrils shooting out into each cheeks like the smaller wings of an insect, an immense mouth whose heavy lips disclosed two long rows of bristling brows, a pointed chin, blackened by heavy beard, and massive eye-brows meeting over the nose, all furnished the details of a countenance, not exactly calculated to inspire the most pleasant feelings in the world. One eye, small black and shaped like a bead, stared steadily in Byrnewood’s face, while the socket was empty, shrivelled and orbless. The eyelids of the vacant socket were joined together like the opposing edges of the curtain, while the other eye gained additional brilliancy and effect from the loss of its fellow member (The Quaker City: 51).

The mansion is a setting for private life of the private citizens of the city. The members of the secret fraternity gather in its rooms and halls at night. The Monks are Philadelphia’s bankers, merchants, editors and clergy: “Here were lawyers from the court, doctors from the school, and judges from the bench. Here too, ruddy and round faced, sate a demure parson, whose white hands and soft words, had made him the idol of his wealthy congregation. Here was a puffy-face Editor, side by side with a Magazine Proprietor; here were sleek-visaged tradesmen, with round faces and gouty hands, whose voices now shouting the drinking song had re-echoed the prayer and the psalm in the aristocratic church, not longer than the Sunday ago” (The Quaker City: 55). Their activities range from drunkenness and gambling to incest, rape and murder. In Leslie Fiedler’s words, the Monk Hall is a gothic whorehouse.(Fiedler, 1967: 228). Lippard's notion of a huge mansion where the wealthy gather to revel was not a complete fabrication. During the antebellum period, several clubs were formed for wealthy men, who arrogantly displayed the status on the part of the urban elite. (Reynolds, 1995: XXXIII).

However, the mansion is not limited only to the upper elite. Subterranean floors, known as the Dead Vaults, are home for Philadelphia’s lowest – the beggars, thieves and murderers: “In the day-time, vagabond man and woman and child, lay quiet and snug, in the underground recesses of Monk Hall; in the night they stole forth from the secret passage thro’ the pawnbroker’s shop in the adjoining street, and prowled over the city to beg, to rob, or perchance to murder” (The Quaker City: 477).

The gloomiest place of the Monk Hall is a huge cavern located under the foundations at its very bottom, and the inhabitants call it the Pit of the Monk Hall, with the extent “as uncertain and vague as the ghostly shadows which flitted from the hard floor to the distant ceiling far above”, and the floor “crowded with rubbish and lumber of all kinds”(The Quaker City: 307). The only permanent inhabitants of the Pit are “vermine and reptiles of all kind and of every loathsome shape...crowd of rats, whose immense numbers blackened the cellar for yards around and glittering house-snakes” (The Quaker City: 307). All of the trapdoors, which are inseparable parts of this Gothic mansion, lead to the Pit.

There is a certain connection between the subterranean vaults of the Monk Hall and *The Cask of Amontillado*, which Edgar Allan Poe, a close friend of Lippard, wrote shortly after *The Quaker City* was published. The Pit and the Dead Vault filled with skeletons and wine casks closely resemble the wine cellar into which Montreso lures Fortunato.

The Monk Hall is characteristic of the fascination with the life of the elite in sensational novels. In addition, Lippard appropriated the conventions of the Gothic for the city, the Monk Hall appears as a transformed Gothic castle. It is not merely a mansion within a city, it is the city itself, condensing the social and sexual relations between the wealthy and the poor into a single house (Denning, 1987: 92).

George Thompson was probably the most prolific author of antebellum sensational fiction and he wrote the first available pornographic texts in America. Although Thompson

wrote more than hundred (depending on a source) sensational and pornographic novels, his career was, until recently, almost completely ignored by the scholars. Thompson, who was the same age as Lippard, worked the city mysteries genre to perfection, incorporating elements of other popular culture phenomena. From penny newspapers he derived the images of crime and violence. From exhibitions of P.T. Barnum he acquired the interest in the freakish and bizarre and from French pornography the themes such as sexually voracious woman or reverend rake. His works are thus filled with such gore, sex and perversity that Thompson can be considered the most shockingly sensational and openly erotic American writer of his day (Reynolds, 2002: XI).

City Crimes is one of the two novels available to the readers today. The other surviving novels are available only in rare book rooms of selected American libraries. *City Crimes* is a typical example of Thompson's city mysteries. Set in New York and Boston, it concentrates not on virtuous activity but on the vicious, violent and disgusting.

The novel's place of mystery is one of the most disgusting places of antebellum sensational novels. Vast subterranean networks, in their layout similar to Monk Hall, located under Manhattan's Five Points and known as "Dark Vaults", are home to New York's underworld. Their origin is unknown, some people say that the tunnels were built as an ammunition storage during the war, others that they served as a sewer of the city. Into these labyrinths, "daylight never shone; an eternal night prevailed...it swarmed with human beings, who passed their lives amid its unwholesome damp and gloomy horrors...The Police rarely ventured to explore its secret mysteries – for Death lurked in its dark passages and hidden recesses" (Venus in Boston: 131).

In the tunnels, there exists a whole subterranean village inhabited by "myriads of men and women". The Dark Vaults are simply a living Barnum museum. During his first visit to the caverns, Frank Sydney, the novel's main protagonist, encounters a man, nearly naked, "seated upon a heap of excrement and filthy straw, devouring a pig's carcass, swollen and green with putrefaction" (Venus in Boston: 131). Later, he witnesses an Irish wake which ends with fight of the mourners, who eventually crush the body of the deceased under their feet. He passes along the cave, in which "men and women, boys and girls, young children, negroes and hogs were laying indiscriminately upon the ground, in a compact mass. Some were cursing each other in fierce oaths; horrible to relate! Negroes were lying with young white girls, and several, unmindful of the presence of others, were perpetrating the most dreadful enormities" (Venus in Boston: 133).

At the very heart of the Dark Vaults, the most hideous of New York's villains gather and feast under the leadership of Dead Man. In his portrayal, Thompson again shows the influence of P.T. Barnum, who gained his fame as "Prince of Humbug" by displaying anomalies, both human and animal, to New York citizens. The chief villain of *City Crimes*, in his hideous deeds more than equal to Devil Bug of *The Quaker City*, is basically a walking freak show: "Seated upon the a stool in the centre of the table was a man of frightful appearance; his long, tangled hair hung over two eyes that gleamed with savage ferocity; his face was the most awful that can be imagined – long, lean, cadaverous and livid, it resembled that of a corpse. No stranger could view it without a shudder; it caused the spectator to recoil with horror. His form was tall and bony, and he was gifted with prodigious strength" (Venus in Boston: 135). Every night, Dead Man leaves the Dark Vaults via secret elevator leading to one of the Five Point's old houses to steal, kill, and rape.

In quoted examples, Thompson often crosses the border from the freakish to the merely abominable. But in his disgusting images, Thompson is just trying to satisfy the appetite of antebellum readers for everything freakish and bizarre. He was as intent as Barnum on displaying of the repulsive. In competition of antebellum authors to outstrip one another's abominable images, Thompson would be the clear winner, with Lippard a distant

second, and Edgar Alan Poe, with all his horror, would be almost out of the running. (Reynolds: 2002, XXXIII). The mysterious places in analyzed novels serve as grounds for the presentation of sensational images. But while Lippard's *Monk Hall* is also a metaphor of Philadelphia's life, Thompson's *Dark Vaults* are just intended to shock the antebellum reader to the greatest possible extent.

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