THE MYSTERIOUS POWER
OF SEX

THE strange relation between sexual reproduction and the desire to destroy is certainly one of the oldest subjects in the world's literature. When writers turn to the delicate and beautiful theme of human fertilization, they seem to be irresistibly drawn to the wild, unpredictable emotions of an animal mating season, to the bloody combat for the possession of a quivering female, or to the spiderlike tendency of a wife to eliminate her husband, once his primary function has been fulfilled. This association of sex and aggression is at least as ancient as the *Iliad*, but it received a new emphasis with the spread of the novel and with a widening of interest in romantic love in the second half of the eighteenth century. In America, from primitive tales of seduction and stirring adventure to the dime novel, the imaginative life has been increasingly dominated by the linked images of sex and violent death. For reasons which have never been satisfactorily explained,
however, literary descriptions devoted more care and realism to sudden death than to the sexual relation. This curious disproportion between fiction and reality has been so thoroughly accepted that it has seldom been questioned or analyzed.

As a necessary preface to this question of sex and violence, it should be observed that between the mid-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries there occurred a sexual revolution with implications as far reaching as any political or religious transformation. Social historians have expressed interest in the movement of female emancipation, but the actual changes in woman's social status and the consequent effects on child-rearing and national character have been only dimly suspected. In this study we can only suggest that the transformation of woman's economic and social position was accompanied by psychological tension, reflected in fiction by the heightened association between sex and death.

If the legal status of English and American women did not change significantly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is obvious that their actual role had become less certain by 1800. The increasing agitation for reform and liberation, especially after the French Revolution, is ample evidence of the fact. Social attitudes toward sex and marriage were necessarily influenced by an expanding population, the growth of cities, the use of women in primitive industry, the enlistment of men into large armies, and the emigration of many unattached males to distant colonies or frontiers. With the rapid emergence of the textile industry, it was evident that strong forces were pushing the sexes toward a common role as undifferentiated units of labor.

In America there were special circumstances which delayed the integration of women into the economy but did not thereby reduce the uncertainty associated with
social change. The ability of a young man to support a wife and children, together with a general shortage of women, gave the weaker sex a dignity and power they had not possessed in Western culture since the days of Rome. It is a commonplace of history that colonial America was distinguished by early marriages, large families, the absence of dowries, a high degree of feminine choice, a concept of marriage as a civil contract, and a stern attitude toward adultery and mistress-keeping.

Since the scarcity of women undoubtedly both increased their value and enhanced the institution of marriage, Americans were especially susceptible to the kind of romantic love celebrated in sentimental fiction. In America a woman's prestige and power were greatest in those brief, adolescent (or postadolescent) years when she exercised free choice and enjoyed the luxury of comparing and contrasting suitors. The emotional life of a girl's late adolescence was something to be cultivated, treasured, and relived, for it was often her most meaningful experience. Whatever status, whatever happiness she was ultimately to achieve would be determined, according to theory, by the quality of those early emotions.

American attitudes toward sex in the late eighteenth century were also strongly influenced by English moral philosophy with its emphasis on the balance, order, and unity of nature. Although some lawyers continued to talk as if the principal evil of seduction lay in its depreciation of a woman's market value, it was obvious to enlightened minds that women could no longer be regarded as mere livestock, to be fattened and preserved in chastity for a profitable sale in marriage. Francis Hutcheson, who advocated equal property rights for women, thought that sexual indulgence without regard for tender and generous

passions would bring about a weakening and disintegration of the mental powers as a result of violating natural law. Nature made mankind "capable of more frequent gratifications than most other animals, as a compensation for the superior toils of educating their offspring. But . . . nature has pointed out the method of gratification which is consistent with all the moral sentiments of the heart." Since adultery was a crime against the harmony of nature, it should therefore be punished with death. Although William Paley held that men "will not undertake the incumbrance, expence [sic.] and restraint of married life, if they can gratify their passions at a cheaper price," he stated that illicit sexual relations depraved the mind and moral character more than any other vice, a belief which also found expression in the more materialistic writings of David Hartley.

It is interesting that the philosophers who equated morality with an innate sense or with the rule of expediency, who stressed the dependence of mind on body, and who supported a more liberal view of women's rights, also identified corruption and sin with sexual transgression. Thus the very thinkers who tended to undermine traditional Christian morality also tried to preserve the ancient doctrine of sexual sin. When such an orthodox theologian as Timothy Dwight discussed the subject of lewdness and adultery, he found himself in the curious position of quoting from William Paley, whose beliefs on other matters he found quite unacceptable. Obviously embarrassed by analyzing a subject which, he said, had been

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3 Ibid., p. 176.


5 Timothy Dwight, *Theology; Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons* . . . (New Haven, 1836), III, 414–415.
practically banished from religion, Dwight echoed the writings of Benjamin Rush and other semimaterialistic students of human pathology: "To all these must be added the putrefactive influence of impurity itself; which, as the pestilence through the body, diffuses mortification and rottenness throughout the soul; and converts it into a mere mass of death and corruption."\(^6\) We may take Dwight's acceptance of Paley as an authority on sex as a symbol of the increasing tension over woman's changing status. Despite their many differences regarding the source of morality, most philosophers and theologians in the first decades of the new century were united in their effort to preserve traditional sexual standards in the face of a changing society.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Americans grew even more uncertain over the future of marriage, divorce, birth control, and female employment. Radical reformers offered shocking theories, frontier settlements were often distressingly far from minister or magistrate when time was of the essence, growing cities made it difficult to enforce traditional sexual restrictions, ugly rumors emerged from the South concerning the sexual side of slavery, and newly educated or newly prosperous classes attempted to achieve respectability by a purification of language and custom. The quaint New England practices of bundling and of mass confessions of fornication were distinctly out of fashion.\(^7\)

As the fear of sexual corruption increased, certain offenses were omitted from a liberal criminal code for a curious and most interesting reason:

Because, as every crime must be defined, the details of such a definition would inflict a lasting wound on the morals of the


\(^7\) Calhoun, *Social History*, II, 151. Bundling lingered in a few remote areas and among the Dutch and Germans in rural Pennsylvania.
people. Your criminal code is no longer to be the study of a select few: it is not the design of the framers that it should be exclusively the study even of our own sex; and it is particularly desirable, that it should become a branch of early education for our youth. The shock which such a chapter must give to their pudicity, the familiarity their minds must acquire with the most disgusting images, would . . . be most injurious in its effects.8

If Edward Livingston had “not polluted the pages of the law” by mentioning abnormal sexual crimes, he had no fear that the omission would encourage such outrages in America:

Although it certainly prevailed among most of the ancient nations, and is said to be frequently committed in some of the modern, yet, I think, in all these cases it may be traced to causes and institutions peculiar to the people . . . which cannot operate here; and that the repugnance, disgust, and even horror, which the very idea inspires, will be a sufficient security that it can never become a prevalent one in our country.

Yet Livingston did not consider the details of murder injurious to the minds of youth, nor did he think that the horror and disgust inspired by the idea of murder would be “a sufficient security that it can never become . . . prevalent . . . in our country.” The conception of a crime too horrible to deserve either trial or punishment was something new in jurisprudence and was not unrelated to the tension over woman’s changing status.

While there is little evidence that the early colonists were especially troubled by questions of marriage and sex, these had become deadly serious issues by the 1840’s and 50’s. From a fairly uniform acceptance of early marriage and large families, American sexual experience had moved in a variety of conflicting directions. Tradi-

tionalists complained about the increasing number of working women, the celibacy of Shakers and Catholic clergy, the mounting number of prostitutes, the alleged immorality of convents, the mistresses of the rich, the spread of birth-control information, the high number of divorces in western states, the rumors of free-love communities, and the polygamy of the Mormons. Social and political issues were dramatized in sexual terms. According to *De Bow's Review* in the South and to Mormon critics in the West, each defending their own "peculiar institutions," moral decline in the North had reached a point unrivaled by Rome in its days of greatest debauchery. In 1859 a writer in *The New Englander* declared that Anglo-Saxon superiority rested in the race's "hiding power" of chastity and in that deeply felt "reverence for woman" which had enabled Saxons and barbarians to conquer England and Rome. America's position as a leader of the superior race was now seriously threatened by six thousand New York prostitutes, by Washington society where "the reputation of a harlot scarcely impairs the standing of a wife and a mother," and by the fact that adultery was not punished as a state offense. When the public morals were not protected by law, "we are not surprised when the popular sentiment sustains the wronged husband in taking summary vengeance on the guilty, who have embittered his home and disgraced his innocent babes. The wife, who violates her vow . . . merits severe punishment." 10

Literature reflected this tension and this self-consciousness, provided an outlet for both social and personal conflicts, and attempted to reassure the discontented. Order and balance could be maintained by a sentimental alle-

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giance to motherhood, by a deification of respectable woman, and by an unrestrained assault on seduction, lechery, prostitution, and adultery. No longer was sex to be a subject for literary humor or casual reference; there was nothing amusing about it.

Two tendencies, which were not entirely separate, may be discerned in the literary treatment of sex from the early 1820's. On the one hand, there was a persistence of such eighteenth-century ideals as chaste maidenhood and the romantic selection of husbands. In Daniel Jackson's popular version of *Alonzo and Melissa* (1811), terror and death were associated with an unfeeling father's thwarting the course of romantic love. After 1830 the feminine ideal included an increasingly sexless motherhood which curiously resembled Catholic doctrine. Thus George Lippard described the young wife of a wicked and licentious Protestant minister as the image of "holy chastity." With a babe at her breast, this blissful mother was the goddess of beauty and purity except to the kind of man who degraded the "holiest impulse of our nature, into a bestial appetite," the miserable wretch whose "heart is foul with pollution at the very mention of woman." 11

The other development was both stranger and more complex. A popular fascination for science, particularly medicine, coincided with the concern for purifying love. Newspapers in the 1830's and 40's were full of advertisements for remedies, "revealed truths," and pamphlets on personal medical problems. Common people were becoming conscious of some mysterious relationship among the animal passions, physical organs, and specifically human powers. The new physiology pointed to certain disturbing similarities between men and animals, yet civilization seemed to demand that these likenesses be minimized. It

was altogether possible, men reasoned, that the chief dis-
tinction between human intelligence and animal crudity
lay in man's control over his sexual impulse, just as the
Anglo-Saxon's superiority might be attributed to his
liberation from the tyranny of sex. Ancient religious con-
ceptions of chastity as a purification of a corrupt and evil
body acquired a new validity from science. Doctors proved
that sexual expression drained human energy from loftier
and nobler pursuits. Along with the increasing circula-
tion of pseudomedical literature, there were such innova-
tions as the "bachelors' guides," which urged self-discipline
and threatened young men with insanity and death if they
submitted to licentious habits. Even Benjamin Rush ad-
vised young men that they might remain chaste "by never
looking directly in the face of a woman," and recommended
cold baths, supplemented by vegetable and salt-free diets
to reduce the sexual impulse.12

It is doubtful, of course, that licentiousness constituted
a greater problem in America in 1830 than it had in 1730.
But there is reasonable evidence that in the early nine-
teenth century ministers, doctors, and writers of fiction
were increasingly troubled by sexual immorality. The
spread of political and social democracy reminded con-
servative gentlemen of the ominous predictions by
European aristocrats: popular government would lead
inevitably to anarchy and thus to unrestrained sexual in-
dulgence. In the eyes of most Americans who had heard of
the lascivious courts of Europe, this was obviously aristo-
cratic prejudice. On the other hand, a nation which lacked
rigid social controls and a central ecclesiastical authority
had to prove that liberty was not an excuse for profligacy.
The excessive prudishness of Americans was partly a
manifestation of this self-mistrust. In fiction, the identifi-

12 Benjamin Rush, Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases
cation of sex and death was the psychological result of the tension between fear and freedom.

II

From the sentimental tale of the 1790's to the yellow-backed novel of the 1850's there was a constant and monotonous repetition of the theme that seduction meant homicide. In 1794 Mrs. Susanna Haswell Rowson presented America with a simple expression of this idea, and Americans thereafter showed their gratitude by reprinting the book at least seventy-seven times before 1848. Such success naturally encouraged other gentle souls to imagine the possibilities leading up to, and resulting from, seduction. In the category of consequences, in spite of Parson Weems's maxim that "the greater her depravity and misery, the greater be your pity and 'labour of love' for her recovery," there was only death, almost always in childbirth, and destitution, or the life of a street-walker, which was considered living death.

The "wages of sin" theory was not new, of course, but there was something new in the shrill insistence that sexual error, violence, and murder were parts of one inexorable process. A girl had the choice of blissful, sublimated love and holy motherhood or disgraceful and painful death. A man could be a vigorous, alert, altruistic gentleman or a depraved, disintegrating lecher. If one were to judge by fiction, an alarming proportion of both sexes made the wrong choice.

So obsessed were American writers with the importance of rape and seduction that by 1823 these were discovered to have been the real causes of the American Revolution. According to John Neal, who was of course eccentric about many things, it was only when rape became an issue that the Revolution really got under way: "Men of America! —will ye ever forget it? . . . These things, at last, drove
us mad. We arose, as one people—a nation, about to offer up its enemies in sacrifice.”

Twenty-four years earlier, Charles Brockden Brown's ideal heroine in *Ormond* was willing either to commit suicide or to sacrifice her persecutor for the preservation of female honor; but an uncertainty of sexual values was expressed in the rational arguments of the villain in the same book. Ormond did not appeal to animal magnetism, since he possessed the power of reason:

How shall I describe it? Is it loss of fame? No. The deed will be unwitnessed. . . . Thy reputation will be spotless. . . . All that know thee will be lavish of their eulogies as ever, their eulogies will be as justly merited. . . . It is neither drudgery, nor sickness, nor privation of friends.

Having already killed two men during his courtship, Ormond now proposed that Constantia surrender to him beside the corpse of his latest victim. Without an appeal to reason, she declined and threatened to stab herself. This was to insult Ormond's logic:

So! thou preferrest thy imaginary honor to life! To escape this injury without a name or substance, without connection with the past or future, without contamination of thy purity . . . thou wilt kill thyself. . . . Die with the guilt of suicide and the brand of cowardice upon thy memory. . . . Thy decision is of moment to thyself, but of none to me. Living or dead, the prize that I have in view shall be mine.

Constantia solved her problem by the simple expedient of killing Ormond and thus saved her feminine purity. In this incident, however, there are several suggestions which have great importance for a study of sex and homicide. The dominant theme is an association between death and sexual intercourse: the villain's sexual desire had been the direct motivation for murder; the heroine proposed to

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13 [John Neal], *Seventy-Six* [anon.] (Baltimore, 1823), I, 66–67.
kill herself to escape possession; the sexual act itself would have been a symbolic death, beside the body of a murdered man; and this implication was reinforced by Ormond’s rather surprising suggestion of necrophilia. (This same linking of death with illicit sex was very strong in Matthew Gregory Lewis’ *The Monk*, which was published four years before *Ormond*, but the combination was more common to the nineteenth than to the eighteenth century.) A clear reflection of the Enlightenment is perhaps to be seen in the villain’s logical reasoning. There were few nineteenth-century seducers who, like Brown’s villain in *Wieland*, would attempt to persuade a girl by saying, “Even if I execute my purpose, what injury is done? Your prejudices will call it by that name, but it merits it not.” Even for the purpose of dramatic effect, such talk was increasingly dangerous.

That any death was infinitely preferable to the loss of chastity was one of the most frequent literary clichés. When a family missed their beloved daughter, they might worry slightly about murder, but they could not even face the possibility of a lost virginity: “It was terror enough for them to know that their child was gone; but that she was dishonored! Better than to tell them this would it have been to pour molten lead on their quivering eyeballs!” Better that twenty bullets pierce a girl’s heart than for her to lose her chastity in an unholy union. Even when a friend’s life was at stake, virginity was triumphant: “Although the life of my friend is dearer to me than my own, I will never consent to save it by a dishonored allegiance with the son of a pirate!”

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By the 1840's the question of seduction had become infused with social consciousness. In the preface to the twenty-seventh American edition of The Quaker City (1844), George Lippard pompously defended the sexual rights of the lower classes:

The seduction of a poor and innocent girl, is a deed altogether as criminal as deliberate murder. It is worse than the murder of the body, for it is the assassination of the soul. If the murderer deserves death by the gallows, then the assassin of chastity and maidenhood is worthy of death by the hands of any man, and in any place.17

Unlike the Brown villain of the late 1790's, a rich young seducer of the 1840's did not rely upon rational argument. Since he wanted to arouse the primitive and savage nature of a woman, he talked excitedly of shimmering lakes, green valleys, and untouched forests. Even the most innocent maid was unable to depend on principle and enlightened education when the talk was charged with images of sublime nature: "Her bosom rose no longer quick and gaspingly, but in long pulsations, that urged the full globes in all their virgin beauty, softly and slowly into view. Like billows, they rose above the folds of the night robe, while the flush grew warmer on her cheek." Mary Arlington was not a Constantia Dudley who could coldly assert her feminine independence and kill the dastard threatening her honor, yet death was more closely associated with the delicate, submissive girl of the 1840's!

Despite her passion and her throbbing bosom, Mary resisted the evil and aristocratic Gus Lorrimer not for herself but for the purity of their love. The incident was symbolic of the diverging conceptions of romantic and sexual love. Sex was described as murder, as a brutal struggle, as rape in the dark. It was something that even a licentious brother must avenge with a triumphant and

17Lippard, Quaker City; this preface is between pp. 206–207.
joyous killing. But though Mary had been dishonored against her will, she was irretrievably ruined:

The crime had not only stained her person with dishonor, but, like the sickening warmth of the hot-house, it had forced the flower of her soul, into sudden and unnatural maturity. It was the maturity of precocious experience. In her inmost soul, she felt that she was a dishonored thing, whose very touch was pollution.18

Outside the mysterious and ambiguous relation in marriage, sex brought a rotting, a decomposition of human virtue and dignity. If a girl had natural warmth and passion, even a single sexual experience made her capable of any crime.19 A combination of “fat, greasy churchmen” and an unjust wage system might be responsible for prostitution, but once a girl’s soul had been “murdered,” she had no chance for recovery. Regardless of her age or experience, a lost woman was marked with a “bold, brazen expression” which could never be assumed by the virtuous nor lost by the damned.20 If man’s nonintellectual nature was the source of his semidivinity, the feelings and passions had to be preserved from contamination by animal sexuality. There was no room for a partial or temporary corruption; only death could atone for a ruin so total and absolute.21

The frontier presented special opportunities for seduction, since there an isolated population was often careless in the confidence they granted to strange men, and frontier girls might be dangerously discontent or unenlight-

18 Ibid., p. 124.
ened. But according to William Gilmore Simms, the men were “exquisitely alive to the nicest consciousness of woman” and were quick to avenge seduction with extreme fury.\textsuperscript{22}

It was in New York City, however, that the theme of seduction and homicide received its fullest elaboration, especially after 1840. In the great metropolis the Madam Sitstills and Madam Resimers engaged in a lucrative “trade of murder,” in the “vilest crime known in the annals of Hell,” where science and vice combined in “a traffic which, in its incredible infamy, has no name in language.”\textsuperscript{23}

Nothing excited the indignation of popular novelists so much as the “dens of abortion,” of which there were countless tales describing the “three-fold murder” of a deluded girl’s chastity, her body, and her unborn child. The villain was usually a wealthy, aristocratic youth whose success was insured by the moral blindness of indifferent and impersonal neighbors.

III

On Saturday night, April 9, 1836, a young prostitute named Dorcas Doyen, known in New York as Helen Jewett, was murdered with an axe at Rosina Townsend’s “Palace of the Passions.” The criminal had attempted to prevent detection by setting fire to the luxurious bed, but the body of Miss Jewett, in her dishabille, was but slightly burned. On Monday, James Gordon Bennett reported the case in his New York Herald as “one of the most foul and premeditated murders, that ever fell to our lot to

\textsuperscript{22} William Gilmore Simms, Charlemont; or, The Pride of the Village: A Tale of Kentucky (New York, 1856), pp. 9–10.

\textsuperscript{23} [Edward Zane Carroll Judson], The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life, by Ned Buntline [pseud.] (New York, 1848), p. 100; Lippard, New York, pp. 123–124. The abortion theme also received a sensational treatment in such pamphlets as Wonderful Trial of Caroline Lohman, Alias Restell, with Speeches of Counsel, Charge of Court, and Verdict of Jury (New York, 1847).
record.” During the next few weeks Helen Jewett and her alleged nineteen-year-old slayer, Richard P. Robinson, were principal subjects of conversation on the sidewalks and wharves, in family circles, taverns, and barbershops. The recently established Herald launched a new era in journalism by increasing its circulation threefold in little more than a week. Like Edgar Poe, Mr. Bennett had a curious attachment to dead, beautiful women:

The body looked as white, as full, as polished as the purest Parian marble. The perfect figure, the exquisite limbs, the fine face, the full arms, the beautiful bust, all surpassed, in every respect, the Venus de Medici, according to the cast generally given her. . . . For a few moments I was lost in admiration of the extraordinary sight, a beautiful female corpse, that surpassed the finest statue of antiquity. I was recalled to her horrid destiny by seeing the dreadful bloody gashes on the right temple.

The editor examined Miss Jewett’s “elegant” room and discovered there a small library of poetry, novels, and monthly periodicals: “There hung on the wall a beautiful print of Lord Byron as the presiding genius of the place. The books were Byron, Scott, Bulwer’s works and the Knickerbocker.” What could be more exhilarating for the romantic imagination than a literate prostitute whose figure surpassed the Venus de Medici! Mr. Bennett continued knowingly: “She has seduced by her beauty and blandishments more young men than any known in the police records.” The demand for “human interest” increased as the editor studied Miss Jewett’s personal correspondence: “Not a fulsome expression nor an unchaste

26 Howard, Helen Jewett, p. 122.
word is from her in any of these letters. They contain apt quotations from the Italian, French and English poets. . . . Her hand writing is uncommonly beautiful.”

She was, in short, a creature of refined sensibilities, an ideal of feminine attraction, who mysteriously combined the attributes of a genteel woman with the undisguised sexuality of a prostitute. She was fascinating and, at the same time, upsetting. Harlots were supposed to be depraved, diseased streetwalkers, not accomplished goddesses of Parian marble who read the Knickerbocker, lived in luxurious suites, and wrote with elegance and learning. But if Helen Jewett challenged certain American assumptions about refinement, she also reinforced the association between sex and death. On the surface, here was simply a demonstration that sexual sin resulted in horrible murder. Psychologically, however, the case furnished a symbolism clearly expressed in the morbid writing of James Gordon Bennett. Like many other Americans of his time, Mr. Bennett used the image of statuesque nudity to evoke erotic interest. From Vanderlyn’s “Ariadne” to Hiram Powers’ “Greek Slave,” classical nudity was curiously identified with daring sexuality. But, as Mr. Bennett observed, there was a disturbing similarity between a cold, sculptured ideal of Venus and a cold, naked corpse, helpless and frozen before the gaze of men.

The symbolism of sex and death was enhanced by the burning bed in which Helen was discovered. She represented, for the more sensational-minded, a sleeping princess of sin, rescued at the last moment from the retribution of a ravaging, masculine fire. Even when the poor girl’s body had been buried there was an inevitable and final association between death and illicit sexuality. Americans of the mid-twentieth century pride themselves on their worldly attitude toward sexual perversion, but it is doubtful if even the earthiest of moderns could help
wincing at the strange nineteenth-century obsession with corpses. After Helen Jewett had been buried, there was great excitement over the rumor that resurrectionists had found her grave and had taken the body to doctors for dissection: “The sensitive shuddered, and the hardened laughed at the relation, and in mixed circles, the shudder mingled with the obscene jest.” Thus the tension over death and forbidden sexuality was resolved into the typically adolescent rebellion of obscene humor. The psychological formula for such an attitude might read as follows: Helen Jewett’s sexuality is attractive but taboo, therefore she must die; but in death she is even more appealing and even more forbidden, therefore she must be subjected to the supreme indignity.

It was not enough, however, to dismiss the sensational case with an obscene jest. For men who believed in inevitable moral progress, it was necessary to explain why a pretty, cultivated girl of twenty-two should have chosen the path of sin; why a hard-working, nineteen-year-old clerk with a good family and a promising job should have frequented houses of ill fame. The Jewett case was an American tragedy of the younger generation which demanded interpretation.

H. R. Howard, the editor of the New York National Police Gazette, wrote in 1848 what was probably the most careful study of Helen Jewett. According to Howard’s account, Helen had been a spirited and intelligent girl whose passions were precociously aroused by romantic literature. Had she benefited from gentle paternal guidance, she might have married happily, but tyranny and social

27 See especially, Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain’s America (Boston, 1932), pp. 152-153. DeVoto referred to American humor, especially in the West, as “a violent humor, appropriate to violent life. . . . Death in picturesque, horrible, or exaggerated forms was a source of laughter, Bodies of the lynched, the murdered, and the grotesquely killed are stock devices.”

28 Howard, Helen Jewett, p. 124.
injustice forced her into sin and prostitution. Her young lover and murderer, who had been reared in the “quiet routine of country life,” was a victim of “the intoxicating pleasures and dazzling temptations of this great Babel of enjoyment.” The problem, then, bore a striking resemblance to the issues involved in moral insanity, although Howard emphasized social and institutional evil more than faulty childhood training. Intelligence and education could not protect the moral sense from corruption, nor could good intentions bring redemption when society condemned an erring girl to hopeless slavery. After studying the facts of the Jewett case, a reformer might conclude that prostitutes and teen-age murderers were helpless victims of injustice, but American writers of fiction were not yet prepared to accept the values of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*.

Seven years after the murder, the indefatigable Joseph Holt Ingraham, who wrote seventy “novels” between 1840 and 1849, unlimbered his machinelike pen for the inevitable subject of Helen Jewett. *Frank Rivers; or, The Dangers of the Town* (1843) is not a good novel, but it is interesting as a fictional “explication” of a well-known murder. In the Ingraham version, everything was simplified by the devices of contrast and accident. The principal contrast was between masculine nature, always capable of both sexual error and repentance, and feminine nature, which was either pure or totally depraved. Related to this traditional division was the strong contrast of the virtues of the country with the “dangers of the town.” The other primary difference from Howard’s version was that the seduction, the murder, and the trial, all involved accident.

Hart Granger, a senior at a “time-honored University” on a beautiful New England river, was an ideal American boy. He was rich, popular with his fellow students, respected by the faculty, and had never been in love. Ellen,
an orphan girl with a tyrant aunt, informed him that no good could result from their friendship, since her station was below his; but such frankness and self-distrust only aroused Hart's passion. Ellen might be a sweet, innocent girl, but "Professor" Ingraham argued that only careful education and the correct example of a mother could protect society. It was Ellen's sin to be unloved and unguided.

Against her protests, Hart succeeded in persuading Ellen to climb into his boat for a ride on the river. When the boat tipped over, he valiantly rescued the girl, taking her half-unconscious body to his college rooms. The weaknesses of these innocent teen-agers had brought them to the brink of sex and death, but the accident of the boat pushed them to their fall.

After losing her virginity, Ellen became an entirely different person. In New York City, where Hart for a time provided elegant rooms, expensive clothes, and jewelry, she resolved to achieve power and rank at any cost: "How seldom is the first error in woman followed by penitence and cessation from guilt. . . . With reckless facility she plunges deeper and deeper into error, till vice is personified in her."

Frank Rivers was another ideal American youth from New England, working as a confidential clerk in a New York mercantile house. Just before he sailed for Madeira, and after she had been abandoned by Hart Granger, Ellen skilfully seduced the young clerk. Thinking her a pure and virtuous girl, Rivers was overwhelmed by his guilt, offering marriage to retrieve her from ruin. Even the lost Ellen could not think of so deliberate a falsehood, however, and she confessed in a letter that she had been a sinful woman. "Thank—thank God!" Rivers breathed, "I am at least free from the guilt of the seducer. . . . I have now only to bleed for my own fall." He resolved not to see her again and wrote a letter urging her to be pure.
But Ellen was now free for a life of unrestrained indulgence: “She looked to the sacrifice of her person, with a sort of proud satisfaction, as if thereby she should avenge herself upon Granger. . . . She felt a kind of joyous despair, at the contemplation of the scenes of guilt into which she was about to plunge.” After an affair with a naval captain, Ellen took the plunge by visiting the third tier of the theater on the night of Fanny Kemble’s benefit, the third tier being informally reserved for the purchase of feminine charms: “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 seduce and ruin young men. . . . To tempt and to ruin became with her a system, and hundreds were slain by her.”

Meanwhile, Hart Granger, a candidate for orders at Trinity Church, was about to marry beautiful Adaline Langdon, daughter of the governor. Upon discovering such news, Ellen wrote to Hart, threatening to reveal his past as well as his paternity of a child unless he broke off the engagement. Hart, now thoroughly reformed, was shattered by this information: “Adaline’s happiness must not be wrecked. . . . She must not know my shame and guilt. It would kill her; and better this base woman perish.”

But banishing the thought of murder, Hart proceeded to Madam Berryton’s, in the hope of persuading Ellen to remain silent. In the meantime, Frank Rivers had returned from Madeira and, unable to resist the charms of his seducer, had been living with Ellen at Madam Berryton’s. He had just departed for the theater, leaving behind his cloak and a hatchet, which he carried to ward off the watchman’s dog. When Hart Granger was unsuccessful in persuading Ellen to suppress the disturbing past, he grabbed up the hatchet in a fury and struck her. He was horrified, yet relieved, when he found he had killed her: “Be it hers to answer for it, not mine! She brought it upon herself by
her obstinacy. Now for escape, and afterwards a life of remorse and horror for this dark deed of a moment!" Frank Rivers was then unjustly arrested and tried for the murder; though acquitted, his existence had been ruined by Ellen. Hart Granger fled to Europe, where he presumably led a life of remorse.

Compared with the facts of the Jewett case, the Ingraham story becomes a jumble of confused values. The central contradiction, implicit in any defense of the double standard, arises from the belief that men are both freer and less guilty than women. Men conform to a traditional morality which holds that faculties are separate and distinct and that the capacity for virtue is unaffected by accidents of experience. If Hart Granger and Frank Rivers were susceptible to seduction and to outbursts of passion, they also underwent the strain of inner conflict which finally resulted in remorse and repentance. A man may sin, so the theory goes, but he never loses his basic moral nature. Precisely the same assumption may be found in the jurisprudence based on Locke and Blackstone, and, as we have seen, it was this conception of a universal moral capacity which was challenged by the theory of moral insanity.

The fictional study of Helen Jewett thus brings us back to the distinction between two systems of ethics, but in this case the division is made along sexual lines. A woman, Ingraham argued, was like a machine, which could either be steered and directed by parents in the direction of holy virtue or be allowed to run free and unattended in the broken fields of chance. The delicate moral machinery of woman was easily warped and sprung beyond repair, so that total destruction was the only possibility. But this was to say that moral capacity was determined by external circumstances which were, in themselves, amoral. We have previously seen that Simms's villain, Guy Rivers, once he was corrupted by his mother, waged ruthless war
on society. In a similar fashion, Ingraham’s Ellen, once seduced, became a Sensual Woman who lived only to ruin virtuous men and subvert the social order. Like the victim of moral insanity, the dishonored woman experienced no inner conflict and therefore lacked the capacity for remorse and redemption.

In tracing changing conceptions of human nature, we saw that Locke’s “capacity for suspending desire” became a “moral sense” for the Scottish philosophers and that this “sense” was increasingly identified with physical passion and emotion, which might be nurtured or corrupted by social forces. We have suggested that there was a close association between this romantic moral sense and libidinal energy, whose discipline depended upon parental guidance. Because popular novels tend to simplify moral issues and to provide arbitrary conclusions, this association became complete with the stereotype fallen woman. By assigning different moral natures to men and women, popular novelists were able to accept the traditional belief in freedom and responsibility, while, at the same time, they recognized a woman’s moral dependence on her environment. But if external forces shaped woman’s moral capacity, this was because she possessed an undivided nature, no part of which lay beyond the influence of early experience. The essence of this nature was, of course, sexuality; and since all evil was ultimately the result of sexual corruption, which was synonymous with corruption of the moral sense, it was inevitable that Sensual Woman should die. Whereas rational man was guilty because he failed to suspend desire according to his inner law, a fallen woman, like the morally insane, embodied positive evil and was thus condemned as one alienated by metaphysical necessity. In other words, men were under a rational covenant with society, their guilt and punishment being determined by the degree of their willful moral alienation. Men might choose but could not actively
generate evil: Hart Granger was dangerous only as a bad example to other men. But woman, being inherently more subversive, was either within or totally outside society. She had no other choice: the feminine alien was a breeder of contagious evil.

The fictional version of Helen Jewett's history ignored both the gradations in her fall and the social responsibility for prostitution. By having the original seducer commit the murder and by stressing the fortuitous nature of both the seduction and killing, Ingraham absolved the males from genuine guilt, identifying aggression and death with feminine sexuality only. Nothing could so clearly reflect an anxiety concerning the changing and ambiguous position of woman in the early nineteenth century.

IV

Motives for actual homicide are numerous and complex, but prior to the occasional flashes of realism in Mark Twain, it was a rare fictional killing that did not involve sexual conflict. Some of the exceptions to this rule will be discussed in later chapters, but it is interesting to note that two of the most vivid nonsexual murders in American literature—the killing of old Boggs in Huckleberry Finn and of Claggart in Billy Budd—did not appear until well after the Civil War.

Most American writers before 1860 (and, indeed, before the 1880's), were not primarily concerned with a spectator's factual report of an interesting event; rather, they attempted to condense reality by constructing artificial plots. Like dreams, nonrealistic fiction relied more on emotional association than on logical causality. To increase this emotional involvement, writers often exaggerated the familial relationship of characters, so that step-brothers fought for the hands of cousins, good brothers uncovered the villainy of the bad brothers' fathers, and
good sons rescued hidden mothers and cleared the reputation of murdered good fathers. Moral values were simplified and clarified in this literature by a disproportional emphasis on family ties and sexual attraction. Thus, in an 1840 version of Mark Twain’s Sherburn-Boggs murder, one might expect to find that Boggs was actually Colonel Sherburn’s half-brother and heir to the Sherburn estate, that the dastardly Colonel had seduced Boggs’s daughter, an act which led to Boggs’s drunkenness and insults. This gave Sherburn the opportunity to kill the rightful heir and to win the daughter as his mistress.29

It must be remembered that the line separating women from property was still not distinct in the first half of the nineteenth century. A woman might be a very special kind of property, but she was still essentially a possession. As a scarce and desirable commodity, the beautiful heroine was therefore often a symbol of wealth and status. Nothing was so common in popular fiction as the hero who struggled simultaneously for his father’s estate and for the heroine’s hand. Sexual conflict could symbolize all conflict between human egos, every contest between men for possession and power.

In this respect American literature of the early nineteenth century merely continued an ancient tradition of Western culture. But in the Victorian era a heightened sensitivity to sexual morality gave different connotations to actual possession, especially to illicit possession. Increasingly, the complete mastery of a woman was associated with guilt and death, an association not unrelated to a changing attitude toward the human body.

For such ancient ascetics as St. Bernard and St. Odo of Cluny, the love of a woman’s body was inconceivable, since it was composed of blood, mucus, and bile: “Man is

29 If this seems far-fetched, one has only to read Theodore S. Fay’s The Countess, 3 vols. (London, 1840).
nothing else than fetid sperm, a sack of dung, the food of worms." 30 By the nineteenth century such contempt for man's animality was no longer confined to the writings of philosophers and religious ascetics. A protest against the indecency of the human body became a major theme of popular literature in England and America.31

Science and the new power of industry seemed to give man, especially American man, an opportunity to rise above his former status, and to progress toward godhood. But if science provided the means for escaping the limitations of animal nature, it also furnished concepts and a vocabulary with which man might describe his degenerate and ephemeral body. Many writers expressed their disgust for the human body in an often-repeated image of a corpse in water. Only in the science-obsessed nineteenth century could a poet write:

The result of decomposition is the generation of gas, distending the cellular tissues and all the cavities, and giving the puffed appearance which is so horrible. . . . But, apart from decomposition, there may be, and very usually is, a generation of gas within the stomach, from the acetous fermentation of vegetable matter . . . sufficient to induce a distention which will bring the body to the surface. The effect produced by the firing of a cannon is that of simple vibration. This may either loosen the corpse from the soft mud or ooze . . . or it may overcome the tenacity of some putrescent portions of the cellular tissues; allowing the cavities to distend under the influence of the gas.32

30 Quoted in Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex (Philadelphia, 1924), VI, 119.
31 Ibid., p. 99. This aversion to the naked body apparently increased in the eighteenth century, reaching its height in the late nineteenth century, when Western peoples were outraged by the comparative nudity of savages. There is much evidence that sexual modesty was of considerably less concern in Europe before 1700. See ibid., I, 1-48.
32 Poe, Works, III, 125-126.
It should be added that this rather appalling comment from Edgar Allan Poe's detective, M. Dupin, pertained to a beautiful girl who had supposedly been seduced and killed.

In *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) Nathaniel Hawthorne was less physiological but no less vivid in his description of the once dazzling Zenobia, whose sin was mysterious but definitely sexual: "Her wet garments swathed limbs of terrific inflexibility. She was the marble image of a death-agony. Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her with clenched hands. . . . Ah, that rigidity! It is impossible to bear the terror of it." Originally Zenobia had been described as a symbol of warm-blooded, feminine sexuality, a frank and passionate woman whose form excited the mind of even a finicky and fastidious bachelor: "Something in her manner, irresistibly brought up a picture of that fine, perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment." But like Helen Jewett, Zenobia's naked sexuality had to be reduced to the rigidity of Parian marble, if not to the distension of "the cellular tissues and all the cavities." The tense fascination which usually accompanied such descriptions finally collapsed in grotesque humor; on the American frontier the image of a beautiful Zenobia was transformed into an ungainly Clementine, with "ruby lips above the water, blowing bubbles clear and fine."

In the earlier tales of seduction the equation between sexual transgression and death had been a simple causal relation. The association became more complex, however, when writers identified sex with the cold nakedness of marble, or with physical decomposition. Instead of a causal relationship, sexual sin meant death, and, to a certain extent, killing meant sexual possession.

There had been hints of this complete identification in some of the early gothic romances, as when Matthew
Gregory Lewis’ saintly abbott, Ambrosio, raped a girl in a tomb. We have also seen that Charles Brockden Brown suggested the combination of sex and death in Ormond (1799), but the transition is best seen, perhaps, in a surprising story by Washington Irving, which followed Ormond by twenty-five years.

“The Story of the Young Robber” in Tales of a Traveler comes as a decided shock after Irving’s sirupy and conventional tales of weeping maidens and marital bliss. In this narrative, after murdering the prospective groom of sixteen-year-old Rosetta, a jealous Italian boy escaped from justice by joining a gang of bandits. The bandit leader, however, captured Rosetta. Because of his former attachment, the young lover pleaded that the girl be spared, but the gang encircled him and cocked their carbines. Horrified, he watched the captain rape Rosetta and then abandon her to the repeated rapings of the troop.

“I perceived,” said the young Italian, “that the captain was but following with strictness the terrible laws to which we had sworn fidelity.” When the bandit leader sent a note to Rosetta’s father, demanding ransom, that kindly gentleman answered that a dishonored girl was not worth a ransom. According to the laws of the troop, this meant inevitable death. “I felt,” the young lover said, “that, not having been able to have her to myself, I could become her executioner!” He explained to his comrades that he could do the act more “tenderly” than anyone else.

Rosetta, in a stupor from the numerous rapings, did not know who guided her to a thicket. She slept in her rejected lover’s arms. “There was a forlorn kind of triumph,” he thought, “at having at length become her exclusive possessor.” Significantly, he plunged a poniard into her bosom. In this startling tale, the only “good” character was thus raped by a gang and murdered, although nothing happened to the gang or to the murderer.
The young Italian bandit learned not only that sexual desire can motivate a murder, as in the case of the rival groom, but also discovered that sexual possession and murder could be identical. Desire could only be realized by tenderly inserting a poniard into the breast of an unconscious girl.

It has often been observed that the feminine ideal was curiously ethereal from the time of Scott and Irving to that of Hawthorne and Tennyson. The perfect woman was a wispy dove-girl, a formless, buoyant spirit, whose delicate life was sustained by a pure and sexless love, a being incapable of either the drudgery of household chores or of the degrading, unfeminine work of a factory girl. Such an ideal might soothe masculine anxiety over the status of woman in a changing economy, but it had the disadvantage of being far removed from the reality of sexual desire, marriage, and procreation. Since sexual possession stood for the dissipation of ethereal womanhood, the unhappy male was faced with a choice between ascetic love and a spiritless, dying body. In a curious paradox, then, the strictly sexual ideal was often transformed into an image of a dead naked woman.

Regardless of how far one wishes to analyze Poe's symbolism, his imagery of death often bears an obvious sexual connotation which does not require the extremes of Freudian theory for understanding. The tombs, chimneys, crypts, pits, and the damp "interior recess" between "two colossal supports" which envelop his hapless characters may or may not be definite sexual symbols, but that Poe identified sexual love with death and decomposition cannot be doubted. If sexual contamination did not result in total death, mesmerism provided a useful substitute in the concept of a hypnotic trance, which well symbolized a spiritual and moral death. In a state of hypnotism or catalepsy a woman was without will and might be more desir-
able, but the line between mere physical existence and decay was very fragile; without consciousness and moral power, a man's body could crumble and rot away to "a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity." 33

Poe's friend, George Lippard, was more direct in his combination of catalepsy, sin, and sexual desire. In one of his novels a character named Marion Merlin had been forced into an unholy marriage by her father. But the beautiful, sensitive, and well educated girl planned to commit suicide before submitting to her middle-aged and sensuous husband. He drugged her, however, and her sexual fall, like that of the fictional Helen Jewett, occurred when she was incapable of resistance. Once her moral sense had been destroyed, she pushed the villain husband into Niagara Falls. Thereafter she seduced many men, including a young minister, and when Marion encouraged a friend to rape the minister's fiancée, the now fallen divine cursed and struck his former mistress. Thinking she was dead, a "celebrated" doctor took her to his garret for an orgy of dissection, which gave Lippard his chance for the favorite, breath-taking description of a completely naked and beautiful woman, with ivory limbs and marble breasts. But since Marion was only in a state of catalepsy, she was finally able to seduce and ruin the "celebrated" doctor. 34 Only death itself could destroy the latent power of sex to corrupt man's passions.

33 Ibid., 334. Although it is dangerous to give a sexual interpretation to all of Poe's tales or to attempt to prove certain symbolic relationships by a reference to the sketchy facts of Poe's life, it seems fairly clear that the lovers' suicides in "The Assignation" and the death of Roderick and Madeline Usher are symbols of simultaneous sexual union and decomposition.

34 Lippard, New York, pp. 212-228.
We have seen that in American fiction, at least, the total moral alien was thought to deserve swift and certain death. Completely lacking in benevolent impulses, in an emotional sense of right and wrong, and thus in sympathetic identification with his fellow men, this victim of moral insanity was an embodiment of the evil principle. But such a concept of total depravity implied a conflict in American values, since, according to the liberal tradition, a man was guilty only when he consciously chose evil. By definition, the total moral alien was a man without the capacity for good actions and was hence incapable of moral choice.

It might be argued, of course, that a totally depraved heart was the result of willful disobedience to universal moral law. The total moral alien was the final product of a process of moral alienation which began with a conscious rejection of sympathy and responsibility. Yet such an explanation left unanswered the ancient question concerning the origin of corruption.

If morality depended on the control of passion by reason, physical and moral alienation were clearly distinguishable, since man was held responsible as long as his reason suffered no impairment. But when philosophers transferred the locus of responsibility from reason to the senses, they made possible a theory of moral alienation which in fiction was based on the fascinating yet corrupting power of sex. Right action was the result of emotions refined and purified by the various senses, which were themselves disciplined or distorted by experience. Sexual stimulation perverted the senses and aroused the passions so that the mind, in spite of its rational knowledge of consequences, could not prevent an undermining of the moral faculty. Hence in ultimate terms there was no dif-
ference between physical and moral alienation. Writers of fiction affirmed this point by the theme of the evil woman whose original fall had been involuntary. But because all men were subject to sexual contamination against which reason was no defense, evil had to be destroyed by the irrational and absolute rule of moral survival.