Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860

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Chapter VII

JEALOUSY AND

THE IMMORAL WIFE

FROM the 1790's to the twentieth century, European travelers expressed astonishment at the scrupulous fidelity of American wives. They were often puzzled by a seeming paradox: whereas American daughters were permitted greater freedom than were European girls, wives accepted more restrictions. Public opinion, as well as the courts of law, regarded even a casual extramarital adventure as a serious and heinous offense. American society, exclaimed one bewildered Frenchman, "c'est le paradis des maris!" ¹

¹ Francis J. Grund, The Americans in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations (London, 1837), I, 35-45; Moreau de Saint-Méry, Voyage aux Etats-Unis de l'Amérique, 1793-1798, ed. by Steward L. Mims (New Haven, 1913), pp. 304-311. Since adultery was not punishable at common law, American statutes were ultimately based on ecclesiastical law, which, unlike Roman statutes, severely punished offenders regardless of sex (Francis Wharton, A Treatise on the Criminal Law of the United States [Philadelphia, 1874], II, 821-822). Such states as Missouri and Alabama punished adultery only by fines, reserving more brutal penalties for crimes against property. In New Hampshire, however, as late as 1805 an adulterer
According to Alexis de Tocqueville, democracy loosened traditional social ties, but at the same time strengthened the natural bond between man and woman. If the absence of a settled population and social hierarchy meant that various members of a community were farther apart, the same mobility and economic pressure brought the husband and wife closer together. In modern terms, the individual was unconditionally attached to the smallest in-group and was more concerned with the preservation of its moral values, while much of the neighboring community acquired the status of an out-group. The more meaningful human relations, such as sexual love, became intensified as they were restricted in area.

De Tocqueville argued that social democracy destroyed the conditions which might justify illegitimate love in an aristocracy, since a man was theoretically free to choose a girl from any class for his wife, and women enjoyed the liberty of entering a marriage which was a freely chosen civil covenant. Like a voluntary political covenant, a democratic marriage might be subject to theories of secession, but while the union endured there was a heightened sense of obligation.

Should an American wife desire an occasional diversion, the lack of an aristocracy meant a comparative lack of idle, roving men. During the working day, the two sexes were effectively separated by the universality of labor, after which time wives were expected to enjoy the com-

might be fined one thousand pounds, receive thirty-nine lashes on the bare back, be set upon a gallows with a rope around his or her neck for one hour, and be confined in prison for one year (The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri . . . [St. Louis, 1835], p. 306; A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama . . . comp. by John G. Aikin [Philadelphia, 1833], p. 108; Constitution and Laws of the State of New Hampshire . . . [Dover, N.H., 1805], p. 279).

pany of their own husbands. De Tocqueville found that public opinion successfully enforced strict values concerning marital obligation; hence the freest people in the world submitted willingly to the most rigorous and restrictive sexual code.3

If the heroine in American fiction proclaimed that she would accept death before dishonor, it was a natural corollary for the hero to justify murder as the punishment for dishonor. For most crimes it was sufficient to permit the execution of justice by civil authorities. The social compact meant that each individual surrendered his primitive right of retribution to the governmental power, thus acknowledging that he belonged to a state and that the entire nation constituted an in-group. But the American family, as De Tocqueville observed, transcended all other social relations and obligations. If the so-called unwritten law had an ancient history, stemming from prenational clans, tribes, and totem groups, it persisted in America as a concomitant to the democratic family.

The right to defend one's person, property, or habitation was, according to Locke, founded in the law of nature and could not be superseded by the law of society. Thus English jurists ruled that a woman may kill in the defense of her chastity, thereby preventing the felony of rape; yet adultery, which was only a trespass, could not justify homicide on the part of an injured husband, though it reduced the crime from murder to manslaughter.4 American courts in the first half of the nineteenth century generally ac-

3 Ibid., pp. 345–347. He also noted that the punishment of most sexual offenses was far stricter than in France. Rape, for instance, received only light and uncertain punishment in France, but Americans, who considered nothing “de plus précieux que l'honneur de la femme,” usually punished rapists with death.

4 Foster's C.L. 274, 299; 1 Hale's P.C. 445, 486, 489; 1 Hawkins ch. 28, s. 23. Quoted in Nathan Dane, A General Abridgment and Digest of American Law with Occasional Notes and Comments (Boston, 1834), VII, 224–228, VI, 649.
cepted the English precedent that when a husband kills an adulterer, a distinction between murder and manslaughter depends on "whether the killing was in the first transport of passion or not." When accompanied by sufficient provocation, such as adultery, "hot blood" was supposed to reduce the magnitude of guilt. A man who delayed his vengeance was deemed to have entered a "cooling period" enabling him to resist his murderous impulses; but if a husband witnessed his wife's dishonor and killed the seducer in a heat of passion, he was "entitled to the lowest degree of punishment, for the provocation is grievous," and in one case the court directed that the burning off of an avenging husband's hand (the traditional punishment for manslaughter before the 1820's) be "gently inflicted, because there could not be a greater provocation." Some states, such as Missouri, ruled that homicide was excusable when committed "in the heat of passion, upon any sudden and sufficient provocation, or upon sudden combat without any undue advantage being taken." And in practice, courts tended to expand the period when a "heat of passion" justified homicide, so that Edwin M. Stanton was able to tell the jury in the Sickles case (1859): "What, then, is the act of adultery? It cannot be limited to a fleeting moment of time. That would be a mockery; for then the adulterer would ever escape." Even when injured husbands were convicted of manslaughter, however, there were many governors like I. Basset of Mary-

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9 Ibid., p. 322; Wharton, *Criminal Law*, II, 45.
7 Revised Statutes, p. 168.
land, who was quoted as saying, "Matrimony, gentlemen, matrimony is everything. . . . So all important . . . is the purity of the marriage bed, that I shall, probably, never refuse a pardon to the man who kills the villain that violates it."  

There were certain psychological factors in the American attitude toward adultery which De Tocqueville failed to analyze. Although he noted that economic vicissitudes threw a husband and wife closer together, he ignored the connections between economic opportunity, a heightened conception of the self, and a fear of sexual dispossession. It is proverbial that American men were ambitious, especially in the decades of expansion after the War of 1812. It is also a commonplace that Americans were extremely individualistic and self-conscious. As William James later said, the self may include a man's possessions, talents, social prestige, ideals, and ambitions. American social and economic conditions increased this widened sense of the self, a sense of private expansion and of escape from the early limitations of childhood. Obviously, a wife was an essential part of a man's self, especially when few opportunities existed for other intimate social relationships. Nothing could be so shattering to an expansive ego as the discovery of an intruding rival self in the unsuspected and sheltered heart of a man's proudest possession. Though American courts were haunted by the authority of English precedent, they were forced by public opinion to consider adultery as something more than a simple trespass.

Even in popular literature, there was scarcely a trace of the European tradition of humorous cuckoldry. The pompous, ridiculous husband, whose buxom wife made him a village joke, was not considered to be funny by American writers. If a husband set out to kill his wife's

*Quoted in Mason L. Weems, God's Revenge against Adultery, Awfully Exemplified in the Following Cases . . . 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1816), p. 20.
lover, it was not a humorous affair of clumsy chases and hidings under the bed. Readers grimly expected that infidelity would lead inevitably to the death of one or both offenders.10

II

Mason Locke Weems, who considered the passion of sex as a God-given instinct, "so fascinating as to require all the aids of religion to preserve it within its proper limits," traced the inflexible dialectic of sin, adultery, and murder. He concluded that when the wife of a tavern keeper had been "shamefully neglected as to her mind," when a spirited and handsome gentleman "was infected with that most shameful and uneasy of all diseases, an incurable lust or itching after strange women," and when religious and moral scruples disintegrated before the perverse logic of Thomas Paine, the combination could only lead to misery and to death.11 In Weem's interpretation, which was typical of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, corruption arose from the acceptance of false ideas; a rejection of revealed religion brought a "contempt of all sacred obligations," providing passion with an opportunity to unseat reason; sexual transgression provoked retaliation, but since the order of nature had been shattered, even an avenging husband was doomed to

10 It is interesting to note the persistence of social opinion and the change of individual values in twentieth-century literature. This conflict over the seriousness of adultery is perhaps best expressed in a story by Barry Benefield called "Blocker Locke" (1926), in which Blocker, an Arkansas tombstone cutter, is undisturbed when his wife runs off with a boarder. He enjoys his new freedom and the opportunity to play with the children. Public opinion, however, rises against him. When a Negro kills a wife and lover, Blocker is stung by the remark: "Even a damned nigger these days can show some white men how to protect their honor." He is finally forced to go to Little Rock, where his wife had moved, to avenge his unoffended honor. He kills the wrong couple, however, because his wife had moved again (Short Turns [New York, 1926]).

11 Weems, Adultery, pp. 4–8.
a brooding loneliness and death. Sin, in other words, ignited a chain reaction of violence and disintegration. God’s revenge against adultery was a built-in mechanism in the great design of nature.

A generation after Weems’s analysis, a novel was published which discussed adultery and jealousy in terms of a gradual, developmental process. Disturbed by many of the tendencies in American society which De Tocqueville had perceptively described, William Gilmore Simms reflected a different intellectual world from that of Parson Weems. Simms felt that a murder, instead of resulting from an acceptance of false ideas or a rejection of religion, might be precipitated by an individual’s isolation from the guidance of traditional institutions, by a weakness of paternal authority, and by an exaggerated emotional dependence on marriage.

Edward Clifford, in Simms’s *Confession* (1841), had been orphaned at an early age and could only barely remember “the caresses of a fond mother.” His uncle and aunt were called very good people because they attended the most popular church, paid their debts, and helped send missionaries to Calcutta and Bombay. But the uncle was the kind of man who demanded the latest news from the Liverpool cotton market when he returned from church. He sent his own son to the best academy, whereas Edward attended the charity school. The boy grew up, consequently, feeling unloved, insecure, and burdensome.

Simms always placed great emphasis on family environment and social education. Unlike Guy Rivers, who had been morally warped by an indulgent mother, Edward Clifford was an example of the boy who has been ignored and unindulged. He was brooding, lonesome, and uncertain: “I had no society—knew nothing of society—saw it at a distance, under suspicious circumstances, and was myself an object of suspicion.”
If Guy Rivers had been incapable of genuine love, Edward was inclined toward an excessive love and friendship for the few individuals who showed any interest in him. William Edgerton saved him from bullies in school; William’s father later helped him to become a lawyer; and Julia Clifford, the daughter of his unfeeling aunt and uncle, loved Edward as a boy and finally married him.

Even as a husband and lawyer, however, Edward Clifford was isolated and unhappy: “My feelings were too devoted, too concentrative, too all-absorbing, to leave me happy, even when they seemed gratified.” As a man who had never loved before, Edward’s attachment to his wife resembled De Tocqueville’s description of the American husband: “My love—linked with impatient mind, imperious blood, impetuous enthusiasm, and suspicious fear—was a devotion exacting as the grave, . . . as jealous of the thing whose worship it demands as God is said to be of ours.”

Edward was delighted when William Edgerton, who was a poor lawyer but an able artist and musician, discovered that Julia had talent at sketching and proposed to give her lessons. Although he encouraged the hobby by converting a room into a studio and by buying the necessary materials, Edward’s self-confidence had been fragile since boyhood, and he found, to his surprise, that Julia’s praise of her new instructor was disturbingly unpleasant.

Finding that he had become slightly isolated from his wife, Edward feared that she would think him jealous if he mentioned his discontent. At first he merely brooded over the affair, taking long walks into the country whenever the strain became unbearable. As Edgerton increased the number of his visits, however, Edward lost self-control and began to spy on the couple. This brought a deep sense of guilt, since he had always trusted his friend, to say
nothing of his beloved wife: "The shame I already felt; but, though sickening beneath it, the passion which drove me into the commission of so slavish an act, was still superior to all others."

When there seemed to be evidence that Edgerton was actually falling in love with Julia, Edward gave them every opportunity to be alone. Meanwhile, Julia was growing uncomfortable and vainly pleaded with her husband to spend more time at home. This stage of spying and miserable doubting ended when Edward read a letter from his aunt, Julia's mother, urging her to enjoy the privileges of a European wife. As soon as he surmised that his wife's infidelity was common gossip, reaching even the ears of her mother, Edward decided that his rival must die. But it was only when his sensitive ego had been wounded by the remarks of his hated aunt that he moved from obsessive thought to compulsive action.

One evening Edward found his former friend playing a flute outside Julia's window. Although he had a pistol and was about to shoot, the action was frozen by an image from the past. As a boy Edward had once seen his worst bully lying unprotected in the grass beneath a great oak. He found two bricks and slowly crept into position, until he was able to throw with deadly aim. He saw the brick flying in the air, the blood spurting from the boy's head, and the boy's bewildered rise and collapse. Though seriously injured, the bully did not die, yet the agony and horror of the scene, recurring in Edward's imagination, now kept him from killing Edgerton.

Somewhat later, after Edward had intercepted another letter from the aunt, informing Julia that "so far you've played your cards nicely," he felt compelled to leave the couple alone, so that he might spy on their activities. They were playing a quiet game of chess when Edgerton leaned across the board, grabbing Julia's hand; she blushed,
whereupon the villain pushed the table aside, grasped her waist, and dragged her to his knee. The scene was too much for Edward's excited emotions. He fainted and saw no more.

When Julia failed to report the insult, there seemed to be no question of her unfaithfulness. Edward now felt a calm tenderness toward her, because he knew that she was soon to die. First, however, he took a friend and the unsuspecting William Edgerton to the woods for a duel. But Edgerton, when suddenly presented with a pistol, refused to fight. Edward Clifford was furious:

You must not refuse me the only atonement you can make. . . . You have violated the rites of hospitality, the laws of honor and manhood. . . . These offences would amply justify me in taking your life without scruple, and without exposing my own. . . . But my soul revolts at this. I remember the past—our boyhood together—and the parental kindness of your venerated parent. . . . If life is nothing to you, it is as little to me now.

Edgerton admitted his guilt, proclaimed his readiness to die, but still refused to fight. Edward was about to shoot him unopposed when his friend knocked the pistol away, declining to witness a murder. Finally, Edgerton agreed to a duel on the condition that he be given time to write to his father.

At home, impatient at the delay in his vengeance, Edward waited anxiously for Julia to confess her sin; but when she did not, as the time for the duel approached, he poured poison in her cup of tea: "I never did anything more firmly. Yet I was not the less miserable, because I was firm. My nerve was that of the executioner who carries out a just judgment."

Arriving at Edgerton's lodging house, Edward discovered that his enemy had hanged himself to save his former friend from committing murder. In a long letter Edgerton
confessed that he had loved Julia but had struggled against unholy desires: "the indulgence of fond parents had gratified all my wishes, and taught me to expect their gratification. I could not subdue my passions even when they were unaccompanied by any hopes." He added that he had been encouraged by Edward's neglect of his wife but that all advances had been repulsed; thinking that he noticed signs of coldness between the married couple, he had tried to embrace Julia at a chess game, but she had been outraged by his conduct.

Since Edward had already killed his wife, he tried to convince himself that Edgerton's confession was merely an attempt to cover Julia's guilt. At his law office, however, he found a letter Julia had hoped he would read before any crisis arose. He was horrified to discover that his wife had actually hated Edgerton and had been insulted by her mother's letters: "for your sake I have borne much; for the sake of peace, and to avoid strife and crime, I have been silent—perhaps too long." After doctors attributed Julia's death to apoplexy, a friend convinced Edward that he should not surrender himself to justice. Only by living, Simms concluded, could he atone for his crime. If, according to the rule of the law, Edward lacked sufficient provocation for homicide, his motives, at least, were acceptable to a large segment of American society.

It is significant that Simms did not subject his hero to formal justice. Edward Clifford was legally guilty of murder, yet he had acted neither from maliciousness nor from hasty passion. Again and again Simms emphasized Clifford's severe conscience, his inner conflict, and his hesitation. But if Edward's motives were approved by many Americans, Simms indicated that his crime was more than one of simple error. Here we may note a resemblance between the case of Edward Clifford and that of a monomaniac like Wieland, who also killed for worthy motives.
In literature, motives were seldom isolated from the rest of a personality. Unfounded suspicions, like hallucinations, were not merely accidental.

The importance of Simms's tale lies in its portrait of an American marriage and of a jealousy which originated in essentially American conditions. The actions of both Clifford and Edgerton were determined by an interplay of chance and childhood training. The precise nature and time of a murder might be subject to accident, as were the specific impressions which seemed to confirm Edward's suspicion of his wife's infidelity. But the basic motivation, the inclination toward jealousy and self-torture, was a part of Edward's total personality. His development as a child had turned his emotions inward so that, incapable of genuine love and friendship, he remained an outcast from family and society. Yet he was not a moral alien, for he accepted the standards of marriage, virtue, and friendship, and it was this conflict that led to the self-punishment of suspicion. Simms made it clear that this inclination toward jealousy was further stimulated by the isolated nature of American marriage and by social values which stressed the danger of adultery and condoned the avenging husband. In one sense, Confession is a moralistic tale exhorting husbands to have more faith in their wives, but it is also an attack on a society which throws men into emotional isolation.

III

Our interpretation of Simms's Confession was presented within a sociological framework, in the sense that attitudes toward jealousy and violence in fiction were related to the nature of American marriage and to American values concerning adultery. But the fictional treatment of jealousy and the immoral wife cannot be explained by sociology alone. If novelists sometimes expressed interest in such
problems as the changing status of women, they discussed these problems at the imaginative level, combining in a language of symbols both conscious and unconscious attitudes. In Chapter Six we considered the symbolic association between sex and death, a half-conscious relationship which appealed to imaginative poets and writers in many ages. To understand the full implications of murder inspired by jealousy, we must return to this symbolic connection between dying and sexual fulfillment. Consequently, we may move from a sociological to a psychological mode of analysis.

The plot of Richard Henry Dana's "Paul Felton" bears a striking resemblance to Simms's Confession, but it also contains overtones requiring a different critical approach for clear understanding. At present, the status of Freudian theory in literary criticism is by no means clear, since the dubious products of reckless Freudian enthusiasts have quite naturally raised serious questions concerning the validity of any psychological study of art. On the other hand, some literary works are better suited for psychological analysis than others. In "Paul Felton," Dana assumed or implied a psychology similar to Freudianism in several important respects. It must be stressed, however, that we are not trying to prove that writers in the early nineteenth century anticipated modern theories. Rather, we wish to use modern concepts as tools for the clarification and interpretation of symbolic language.

Specifically, the romantic psychology, as expressed in most of Dana's tales, had six basic assumptions which parallel some of the principles of Freudian theory: first, the passion of love, including the sexual desire and a need

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for affection and approval, was man's supreme motivation; second, a mother's love was an essential factor in shaping and determining a personality; third, although a man's ideas could be changed in later life, his emotions and actual psychic behavior were determined in childhood; fourth, an individual's perceptions and impressions of reality were subjective and, in effect, only a reflection of his particular psyche; fifth, both the moral sense and imagination were related to the basic passion of love; sixth, repression or perversion of the love impulse could obliterate the effects of moral training and result in open aggression and death.

It is obvious that the conservative elder Dana did not think of love in Freud's sexual terms, yet for him romantic love was never entirely disassociated from sex. If the game of symbol-hunting can lead to futile extremes, there are also occasions when sexual symbols clarify important beliefs concerning human nature and violence, beliefs which are implicit in the six assumptions just enumerated. In this discussion we shall therefore confine our purpose to the discovery of imaginative associations between sex and aggression, avoiding any impulse to dwell on symbols for their own sake.

Unlike Simms's Edward Clifford, Paul Felton was not an orphan. His mother had died, however, leaving Paul and his sister with an isolated and grief-stricken father. In a household darkened by persistent silence and the melancholy of death, Paul became reserved and pensive: "His character was of a strong cast; and not being left to its free play among equals, it worked with a force increased by its pent-up and secret action."

Less quick tempered than Edward Clifford, Paul was also more philosophical, brooding, and romantic. His father, who had no use for the "modern system" of educating an encyclopedic mind, encouraged Paul to read
slowly and deeply in the great books. An antirationalist who scorned the pretensions of science, Paul considered the universe as an immense and exciting mystery: “Material became intellectual beauty with him; he was as a part of the great universe, and all he looked upon, or thought on, was in some way connected with his own mind and heart.” In other words, Paul’s perceptions were partly a reflection of his own psyche, which endowed impressions from the material world with beauty and mystery.

Paul Felton was isolated from society like Simms’s character, but for different reasons. The Federalist Dana could sympathize with Paul’s distaste for the crude and uncouth townsfolk, “who had, for the most part, that rough and bold bearing which comes from a union of ignorance and independence.” Yet isolation brought self-doubt and self-torture. Overly conscious of his awkward appearance and morbid character, Paul longed for love and understanding, for someone’s recognition of his depth of soul, and for moral reassurance. Like his father, he yearned in silence for the lost mother.

In such circumstances, it was only natural that Paul should fall in love with Esther Waring, the daughter of his father’s friend, who had come to visit his own sister. During a highly emotional courtship, Paul experienced undulating states of mania and despair; and his brooding unhappiness did not disappear with marriage. In an extreme depression, he even doubted if his bride genuinely loved him: “She found that her kindness touched me and made me happy, and this stirred an innocent pride within her, and she mistook it all for love. And, fool! fool! so did I.”

Esther had once had a suitor named Frank Ridgley, who now returned from abroad. She had grown up with Frank and had always liked him, but she had never felt a trace of deeper affection. Frank, who had easily recov-
erred from Esther's rejection, was a gay, cheerful young man, whose handsomeness and amiability made Paul Felton feel insecure and inferior. With no knowledge of his wife's past, Paul began to suspect that she had once loved another man, perhaps more deeply than himself.

As Frank Ridgley's visits became more frequent and as Paul's suspicions of his wife's past increased, a new character appeared who clarified the origins of his jealousy. Abel, a wild boy who lived in the woods, was persecuted by the superstitious villages. They accused him of selling his soul to the devil. On one of his brooding walks Paul discovered the half-crazed Abel, pitied him, and fed him; and thereafter the boy became the constant companion of the jealous husband. Since Dana had already indicated that Paul's perceptions were often projected images of his own heart, there can be little doubt that Abel was intended as a symbol. Like Paul, Abel was isolated from society, yet the mature husband, if vaguely envying the villagers' happiness, took refuge in his conviction of superiority. Abel, on the other hand, had not voluntarily rejected his neighbors.

Abel's story is especially significant in Freudian terms. Once he and a group of other boys were walking through the fields in search of crows' eggs. None of the boys had ever dared to enter the dark woods beyond the fields, but Abel saw the crows flying toward a particular tree. When he went in pursuit, his superstitious companions, horrified by his boldness, did not follow. After climbing to the crows' nest, where he gathered some eggs, Abel was discovered by the devil, who was referred to as "He." Attempting to flee with the eggs, Abel finally collapsed to the ground, where the other boys found him later with broken eggs in his hand: "See his hands; they are stained all over!" Abel accepted the boys' belief that the crow was an agent of Satan. By entering the forbidden woods,
by stealing the eggs, and by polluting his hands, Abel felt he had enslaved himself to the devil, and despite his remorse, he was forever isolated from human society.

Now the search for crows' eggs was clearly a symbol for a boy's seeking the mystery of reproduction. All of the other boys were interested, even fascinated, but only Abel dared to violate the taboo of the forest. The outraged father in the form of a devil, the stained hands, the physical collapse, and the overpowering guilt, suggest that Abel had discovered the secret of both sexual orgasm and of parental intercourse. He was mysteriously enslaved by a power (sex) which he identified with the devil, yet he was so terrified and guilt-ridden that he could not think of entering the devil's forbidden hut. It is significant that when Paul listened to the pathetic story of Abel's submission to the devil's power and subsequent isolation from society he felt both sympathy and personal guilt. Paul's strange feelings tended to identify Abel with his own boyhood.

Although his wife was reluctant, Paul persuaded her to attend a gay ball in the village without him. Later, feeling lonely and distraught, he arrived at the hall, blinded and confused by the flare of lamps, the whirl of skirts, and the babel of sounds. Weak and sick at the sight of Esther springing and laughing in a dance with Frank, Paul overheard a group of men raving about his wife's beauty. They described her marriage as "a sort of Vulcan and Venus match," observing that she probably regretted not marrying her former suitor. One man, adding that Frank had been stupid to believe her refusal, since everyone had known her to be a coquette, concluded that she had married "Vulcan" only to annoy the amorous Frank Ridgley.

As Paul moved toward the dancing couple, he heard people around his wife joking about himself. Then Esther
saw him and shrieked. When the crowd rushed up to her, she said, “I know not. . . . ’T’was a—a spider!—some horrid creature on me!”

“How things!” Paul whispered to her, as he half supported her body, “that lie hid in corners, with meshes spread for silly flies. Beware, for they draw the blood, and leave their prey hanging for the common eye.”

According to Abel, the devil lived in a little hut by the woods. Though he was haunted and persecuted by the devil, Abel had never dared enter the cabin. Half-crazed by the affair in the ballroom, Paul Felton next wandered across the fields and, scorning Abel’s dire warnings, entered the hut. Once inside, he noticed that the ceiling was broken, so that when the rain began, it fell in a regular rhythm on the tattered roof and on the floor. As Paul suffered a mounting agony in the cabin, reliving the ballroom scene, he felt the ground rock and pitch, while the small room darkened, the floor shook intensely, and the walls began to enlarge. He was seized by a fainting convolution, and his hand “swept down the side of the hut where it struck against the handle of a rusty knife that had been left sticking loosely between the logs.” “When he began to come to himself a little,” Dana wrote, “he was still sitting on the ground, his back against the wall. His senses were confused. He thought he saw his wife near him and a bloody knife by his side.” As Paul’s mind cleared, the image of his wife disappeared, but the real knife remained.

Like Edward Clifford, Paul spied on his wife during Frank’s visits, with the hope of catching her in a compromising position. Increasingly, however, he spent his time in the hut, scraping rust from the knife and sending Abel to the house as a spy: “Paul sat, as he had done each day before, in the same spot, passing the knife slowly over the stone, then stopping and feeling it, and looking it
When Abel came up, he did not, as usual, conceal the knife. Abel knew it instantly, though now bright and sharpened. All his horrors rushed upon him; his knees knocked against each other, his hands struck against his thighs. . . . ‘The knife! the knife! hide it! hide it!’

Abel erroneously reported that Esther’s father, who had come to soothe and comfort his abandoned daughter, had left the Felton home. Consequently, when Paul looked through the window and saw his wife embracing another man, he supposed it to be Frank Ridgely. Later, after creeping into Esther’s bedroom, he stood for a long time, watching her sleep. He finally placed the knife’s point on her heart, and with one hand against his eyes, he sank the blade between her ribs. In the morning, they found him senseless at her side. When awakened, he looked upon his wife’s murdered body and died himself. Abel was found dead on Paul’s grave.

As we have noted, the plot of this melodramatic story resembles Simms’s *Confession*. A lonely, brooding husband, inclined toward jealousy by his childhood environment, tries to end his previous isolation by an unconditional devotion to a woman. A chain of accidental circumstances push him through the fires of jealousy and suspicion, until he murders his once-beloved wife. Simms’s story, more detailed and plausible, relied on social factors and accident. Hence Simms’s protagonist was less involved in guilt and did not have to die.

If Abel’s original experience symbolized a boy’s discovery of his parents’ sexual relation and of his own sexual nature, then Paul Felton’s aggression was primarily a revolt against this knowledge. Yet he could not escape: “Perhaps there are no minds, of the highest intellectual order, that have not known moments when they would have fled from thoughts and sensations which
they felt to be like visitants from hell." Because Paul could not flee, his "natural superstition" persuaded him that his passions "were good or evil spirits which had power to bless or curse him."

In his marriage with Esther, Paul had hoped to recover the original, sexless love of a mother's adoration. He could not, however, forget his discovery that his mother had been contaminated and that he himself had the masculine power to contaminate. The recurring image of Abel was a reminder of both the first horrifying knowledge of sex (the symbol of eggs and the stain on the hands) and of the guilt which this knowledge brought to the memory of his own tender love for his mother. The sexual aspect of marriage meant that he could never again experience the pure and unquestioned love from a mother, especially when his wife was attractive to other men. Frank Ridgely's harmless and innocent friendship raised the haunting thought of the possession of his mother by his father. Perhaps, he thought, Esther, too, had once been possessed. In the emotional crisis at the ball, he reexperienced the crushing discovery that a mother might divide her affection in different ways, that a woman's love is not, as a child assumes, unconditional.

Unlike Abel, the image of his frightened and guilt-ridden boyhood, Paul was not afraid of the father-devil. As a man, he was capable of facing directly the facts of sex, of entering the forbidden hut, where the symbols clearly expressed the sexual relation. Abel, who could not enter the hut because he was a boy, was terrified and shocked by Paul's open display of the knife, which has traditionally signified male potency. Abel had not yet recovered from the stigma of stained hands.

But if Paul was able to enter the cabin and discover the knife, he could not thereby remove the guilt and sense of fatality which accompanied his decision. Once he had
found the knife, an act which represented his surrendering all hope of recovering a stainless and idyllic love, Paul felt that his wife's death was inevitable. Like the devil-father, he could enter the broken, rain-defiled hut, he could pull the knife from the wall and scrape it clean, he could even imagine the figure of his wife beside him after the convulsive agony, but his wife, in the image, must be dead.

As in so much of the popular literature, sex might be supremely realized only in the moment of death. In murdering his wife, Paul Felton expressed the conviction that a total possession, such as a child's illusory possession of his mother's affections, could, in reality, be achieved only in death. He was killing not only his wife and himself, but his mother, woman, and sex, in a frantic attempt to prevent the alienation of the most intimate and total love.

Dana probably intended his symbolism to have religious significance, which would provide a different, but by no means unrelated interpretation. Like many of Dana's contemporaries, Paul Felton was a religious enthusiast, who attacked the "idols" of reason and "Idea." God, he argued, was an infusing, passionate spirit, not an abstract principle or a universal intelligence. Thus the story might be explained as a dramatization of religious enthusiasm, of the problem of how enthusiasm might be controlled, without sacrificing vital religion. The strictly religious discussions, however, seem to have been added as an afterthought. Related to the question of enthusiasm, and more integral to the story, is the problem of how to control sexual desire without sacrificing love.

If Paul Felton was more like a creation of Emily Brontë than like a typical American husband, this should not conceal the fact that Dana's theme developed the implications of what De Tocqueville observed concerning the
American family. Paul Felton was doomed by the very factors which De Tocqueville described: social isolation and emotional dependence on a wife. In a fluid society, lacking the security of fixed status and reciprocal obligations, a husband and wife were thrown closer together, and love became the most private and exclusive part of life. Sex therefore acquired a heightened seriousness, which was reflected in the American attitude toward adultery.

According to the principles of rationalistic law, "hot blood" weakened the power of calm reason and thus mitigated the guilt of homicide. In the eyes of many Americans, it was only natural that an injured husband's blood should remain hot until revenge was complete. But here we meet with a contradiction which is related to our previous discussions of alienation and responsibility. The legal theory of hot blood followed by a cooling period was based on an assumption that the moral faculty was rational and that hot blood was a kind of partial physical alienation, stimulated by external causes. When a man discovered that his wife had been dishonored, his calm reason was temporarily overpowered by animal passions. Since he was then unable to suspend desire, he was not a responsible agent. If, however, the moral faculty was identified with a man's fundamental inclination, expressed by senses and passions, it was irrelevant to talk of hot blood as preventing calm judgment. When morality was the product of purified emotion, when virtue was independent of intellect, it was clear that an act committed in passion must reflect either a good or an evil heart.

The moral-sense philosophy thus raised a question which traditional jurisprudence had successfully ignored. It was not sufficient to dismiss the case of a husband who killed his wife's lover on the ground that passion had overpowered reason. Legally, this might be the only defense,
but there was a strong tendency in America to excuse the vengeful husband as an agent of triumphant virtue. If matrimony was indeed “everything,” as Governor Basset said, then Americans were justified in pardoning a husband whose outraged moral sense drove him to homicide. The highest values were not to be maintained by reason, but rather by righteous emotion. Yet, as Dana sensed, there was a disturbing ambiguity concerning “moral passion.” When an aggressive impulse was so closely linked to sexual passion, it was difficult to distinguish virtue from evil. Hot blood was related, after all, to sexual jealousy, which might itself be the hidden result of excessive isolation and of a yearning for unconditional love.

IV

De Tocqueville shared the view of many foreign travelers that Americans were unique in their respect and admiration for women. It was also true, however, that many American men were unhappy over the extreme idealization of the fair sex, which inevitably brought restrictions for men. Sentimental writers might glorify motherhood, but mothers also exercised more power in America than in most other countries; society might extol the virtuous, independent maiden, but the independent maiden could turn a man down, regardless of his qualifications. Observers from abroad reported that American wives had special talents for spending and planning to spend money. We have noticed the frequent blame attached to coddling mothers, and to wives who usurped their husband’s authority, in fictional explanations of crime.

Especially during the 1840’s, American literature seemed to express an increasing consciousness of the evil in woman. Convention demanded that the heroine be pure and altruistic, yet the erring wife was no longer
pictured as a frail, deluded soul whose heart had been turned by the deceptive tongue of a skillful rake. After 1840, readers of popular literature encountered an increasing number of women who were coldhearted, dishonest, and mortally seductive. Perhaps this new interest in the wicked woman reflected a deeper sexual hostility, engendered by the feminine restriction upon, and frustration of, boys and men; perhaps it was hostility that lay behind the obsession with the female corpse. At any rate, the concern with adultery and feminine evil was clearly a result of the progressive uncertainty over woman's status and of the ever-widening gap between the ideal and reality.

In both Confession and "Paul Felton" jealous husbands murder virtuous wives. This would seem to imply that even a wife's virtue was not sufficient to remove lingering doubts concerning feminine evil. Although the murders were precipitated by simple mistakes in factual information, inference, and deduction, feminine evil was in one sense responsible for even these circumstantial errors and for the resulting jealousy. If certain murdered wives proved to have been faithful, universal woman still bore the subtle stain of Eve's first sin. A husband's suspicions might be irrational, groundless, and even tragic, but if wives were universally virtuous, there would be no jealous husbands. Dana and Simms may have been conscious of this ancient concept of a universal nature, at once ideal and sexually corrupt, but they placed the actual burden of guilt on the deluded husbands. During the 1840's, as the problem of feminine status became more acute, writers increasingly portrayed the woman with the poisonous heart.

There has long been a curious paradox in the male attitude toward woman's nature. Popular literature in Western nations has traditionally separated the virtuous
and innocent damsel from the willful hussy. On the other hand, there has been a persistence of what might be termed "the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady theory." Doubtless this latter view has roots in medieval scholasticism and in philosophical realism. If the universal of man was inextricably involved in Adam's fall, the universal of woman was just as inescapably associated with sexual passion. Since woman was sex, society might be justified in rigorously determining a single status and position for all women. Well before the nineteenth century, of course, men had shown an increasing discrimination among various feminine stereotypes. The ideal heroine, by her refinement and delicacy, transcended the limitations of a universal sex. Even in popular literature, however, the relation between the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady was never totally obscured. Sometimes, indeed, the contrast between the two feminine characters only served to accentuate the dual potentialities of single, universal woman.

Moralists who condemned novels as the "nerve and arm of the Duelist and the Murderer" issued a stern warning to girls who thought of themselves as refined heroines: "In your opinion, the delicacy of your feelings, the high estimate which you have formed of the female character, the restraints which are imposed on you by custom; will effectually guard you against the force of temptations which have called forth the depraved dispositions of the opposite sex." Yet human history proved that female nature, despite its capacity for refinements, was easily as wicked as was the male: "Ambition, pride, revenge, cruelty, envy, and contempt for God, are the dispositions which human nature uniformly displays." 13

Ned Buntline, whose autobiography reads like the memoirs of a Victorian Casanova, created several hundred of the purest, most conventional heroines. But his experience also contributed to a general skepticism regarding Woman:

A dog will lick away the sores and wounds of another of its own kind; man, tried himself in the crucibles of . . . suffering and temptation, has still some sympathy for a fallen brother; but woman, ever liable herself to error, and yielding to a mean spirit of selfishness . . . can find in her heart . . . no feeling for the fallen or erring of her own frail sisterhood.¹⁴

In the cheapest novels of the 1840's and 1850's, there was little restraint in the treatment of wicked women. One refined English woman, who made a hobby of collecting the reports of celebrated murder trials, loved to ask her friends in a soothing and delicate voice, "Did you never feel that it would be a joy to die?" When her husband contemplated the lynching of some robbers, she suggested, "If we could only bring them all together at one grand barbecue, and poison them!"¹⁵ A beautiful damsel named Emily Walraven, who must have been inspired by Poe, caressed and kissed her would-be lover as she pushed him slowly backward toward a pit of death.¹⁶ Even some wealthy New York sisters, "dressed in all the flaming gorgeousness of fashion," could express surprising sensibilities for the weaker sex. When the servant brought a handsome young man into the house after he had collapsed on their steps, they fought over the honor of seducing him: "I'll teach

¹⁵ [Alfred W. Arrington], The Rangers and Regulators of the Tanaha; or, Life among the Lawless. A Tale of the Republic of Texas, by Charles Summerfield [pseud.] (New York, 1856), pp. 65, 70.
you, Miss Impudence, that I'm not only mistress of the house, in father's and brother's absence, but of you, also!"

The other sister ripped a poniard from a morocco case, and said, "I'll rip your black heart out." 17 When the young man recovered, they made a compromise and both "showed him the elephant," as it was euphemistically termed in 1850.

On a more serious level, Hawthorne repeatedly suggested the feminine potentiality for evil, especially in such tales as "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1846) and "Young Goodman Brown" (1837). Nor should it be forgotten that in The Marble Faun (1860) Miriam's sexual power, combined with her subtle and mysterious propensity for evil, drove Donatello to murder. After Donatello committed the act, Miriam embraced him in a way that made the crime resemble seduction:

It was closer than a marriage-bond. So intimate, in those first moments, was the union, that it seemed as if their new sympathy annihilated all other ties, and that they were released from the chain of humanity; a new sphere, a special law, had been created for them alone.

But if Miriam and Donatello were temporarily saved from the "icy loneliness of virtue," Miriam came to realize that "an individual wrong-doing melts into the great mass of human crime, and makes us,—who dreamed only of our own little separate sin,—makes us guilty of the whole." Like Eve, who also unwittingly corrupted a natural man, Miriam knew that she must bear the guilt of all women.

That the great mass of human crime was generated by woman's sexual power was a theme which underlay the general treatment of adultery and homicide in fiction. It is important to remind ourselves that in 1850 Hawthorne chose adultery as the classic symbol for moral evil. The

17 [Judson], G'hals, p. 84.
date is significant because some of the most widely read novels in the late 1840's and early 1850's showed an increasing interest in adultery, as opposed to the more traditional theme of sentimental seduction. In the cheaper tales, however, there were few Hester Prynnes to arouse a reader's sympathy. In George Lippard's *The Empire City*, published the same year as *The Scarlet Letter*, Gulian Van Huyden discovered his wife in the bushes with his brother. She confessed that she had only married to suit her father. Gulian, who was not a dramatic character like Roger Chillingworth, did not plot subtle revenge. He simply let his wife die unattended in childbirth while he enjoyed a Christmas revel.

Lippard was perhaps more concerned with adultery than was any other popular writer before the Civil War. If part of his immense success resulted from his Gothic sensationalism, he must also have reflected certain popular interests and attitudes. He never tired, and his public apparently never tired, of the portrait of an incredibly evil wife whose original fall had been determined by circumstance.

In *The Quaker City* (1844), his adulteress had been forced to sacrifice a marriage of love for one of wealth. Her husband loved her tenderly and dearly, but she soon proved to be unfaithful. Once fallen, her pure evil became manifest in a plot to murder her husband and in her willingness to sleep with anyone who might help her in that cause. In the end, the righteous husband gloated as he refused to give an antidote to his poisoned, pleading wife.

There can be no doubt, however, that in 1853 Lippard created one of the most evil women and achieved one of the most grotesque combinations of sex and death in all literature. In *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*, he carried Poe's favorite theme to completion.
In the manner of the gift books and annals, the hideous chapter was entitled, "The Bridals of Joanna and Beverly." Beverly Barron had seduced Joanna Livingstone after giving her a fabricated account of her husband's amorous affairs. When Eugene Livingstone discovered the deception, Barron killed him in a duel. Essentially, then, Joanna was a loyal wife and mother, whose fall had been engineered only by false insinuations and by spurious letters.

Some time after the duel, when Barron called on his lovely mistress to persuade her to accompany him to Europe, she greeted him in a flowing, snowy robe, with every detail of her voluptuous bust and figure revealed. After discussing future plans, Barron asked for a glass of old Tokay; so, with a smile, the beautiful Joanna brought a decanter and goblet of scarlet Bohemian glass. As they walked side by side, hand in hand, she leaned her head on his shoulder, allowing her breast to throb against his chest. Reviewing the history of their romance, Joanna suddenly added that if Eugene's letters had been forged, then "you and I would be guilty, O, guilty beyond power of redemption, and Eugene would be an infamously murdered man." Barron assured her that the letters were authentic and that Eugene had been unfaithful.

In a passionate embrace, he whispered something in her ear. At first she refused, but in response to his kisses, she submitted: "Come then," she said at last, "come, husband—." Joanna led him to the bedroom, where a magnificent bed was draped by a white canopy: "Trembling, but beautiful beyond the power of words,—beautiful in the flush of her cheeks, the depth of her gaze, the passion of her parted lips,—beautiful in every motion of that bosom which heaved madly against the folds which only half-concealed it,—trembling, she led him toward the bed."
Remarking that her first marriage bed had been polluted by a false husband, Barron promised to love her faithfully until death and then he pulled back the folds of the curtain. "'Our marriage bed, love,'" Joanna said. "'Why are you so cold?' and again she laughed." As Barron stared in horror at Eugene's now rotting corpse, the voluptuous Joanna laughingly told him that the wine was poisoned. Thinking that she lacked the nerve to murder him, Beverly Barron escaped from the house and staggered along Broadway, where crowds hooted at him as a drunk. Between a pile of bricks and boards, in a dark corner behind the Tombs, Barron collapsed on his last, frozen, bridal bed.

Apart from the vulgar sensationalism of this tale, which is embarrassing to modern readers, there are two ideas which deserve consideration. First, there was a close association between death and expected sexual fulfillment. As we have seen, this relationship was common in the sentimental theme of seduction, but for Lippard, it was the sexual woman who brought death. Lippard's desire was obviously to shock his readers, to describe preparations and events leading to an expected realization of sexual passion, approaching the point of pornographic detail, only to resolve the growing tension by a sudden shift to murder and death.

Second, the immoral wife was pictured as a uniquely evil being who, though not responsible for her original fall, was capable of a cunning and subtle aggression exceeding the worst treachery that a man might devise. In most stories, except in the case of a monomaniac, the development of a male criminal was generally described as a slow process; but the descent of a woman into adultery and crime was a sudden event, determined by circumstance. Any wife, the reader might conclude, if she were unprotected and unsupervised, might fall into the clutches
of a Beverly Barron, in which case one's innocent and modest spouse would be instantly transformed into a cold-blooded, murderous demon.

This portrait of the wicked woman undoubtedly represented a growing fear of adultery, which, in turn, reflected a general anxiety over the changing status of women. In the 1830's De Tocqueville had provided an explanation for the seriousness with which Americans regarded marital fidelity. He optimistically observed that American wives cheerfully accepted a more restricted and servile role than that of their European sisters. But by 1850 there were discernible forces which seemed to threaten woman's traditional position of subservience. On the one hand, the literary ideal of feminine perfection had become inflated to a point beyond even the dreams of realization. At the same time, a changing economy undermined the sources of masculine authority in the home. It is significant that popular writers expressed their fear of change in specifically sexual terms. A husband's loss of prestige and power could best be symbolized in the outrage of sexual dishonor. Social disorganization could be represented in its ultimate form in the union of sex and death.