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# RELIGION AND ETHNICITY IN ANTEBELLUM SENSATIONAL NOVELS

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## Abstract

Before the Civil War, the United States was a rapidly changing country. American cities were growing thanks to a huge influx of European immigrants and at the same time, a distinctly national American literature emerged. Sensational novels were among the new genres that appeared in the antebellum period. They were popular texts read mostly by a growing and increasingly literate working class. George Thompson and George Lippard were among the authors of such novels, and this article focuses on the way these authors depicted various aspects of antebellum society including ethnic groups and attitude towards a religion.

*Keywords:* George Thompson, city mysteries, religion, ethnicity, immigrants

## 1. Introduction

The period that preceded the American Civil War has been known as the American Renaissance. In decades before the war, some of the most influential writers of American literary history, including Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Walt Whitman, wrote their seminal works which became an essential part of literary canon. However, during the same period, a great amount of lesser-known popular works were written by sometimes extremely prolific authors who, unlike their more famous contemporaries, never made it to American literary histories for one reason or another. Although the literary value of these works was usually more than doubtful, they were widely read and enjoyed a wide circulation among a diverse range of readers. In the antebellum period, advancements in printing technology and transportation caused that more people had access to books than at any other previous period of American history. The rise of literacy further expanded the market and introduction of the gas lighting in majority of the large cities enabled people to stay up late and read. Gradually, these popular works became an important part of antebellum culture. Despite their low literary quality, they tell much about gender, race or class in the antebellum America's society. This article focuses on some of these minor writers and their works. It particularly

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aims at authors' depiction of the phenomena such as ethnicity and religion in the antebellum society.

## 2. Sensational novels

I will focus on the sensational novels, one of the most popular antebellum genres. This genre was not a uniquely American phenomenon since it was imported from Britain, but it took a life of its own and caught a distinctly American flavour in the US. During the 1840s, a sub-genre of sensational literature appeared, referred to by various scholars as 'city mysteries' or 'urban exposé novels'. Again, these were inspired by the works from the Old World, more particularly by Eugene Sue's *Mystéres de Paris* (1842) and G.M.W. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1844). These novels were not called 'urban exposé' for nothing. Their authors claimed that they uncovered tales of criminal underworlds and depravity and decadence of the city elites [1]. In city mysteries, the authors sympathized with the working class and portrayed the poor as victims of brutality of corrupt bankers, judges or businessmen. One of the main purposes of city mysteries was a criticism of American society. The sub-genre was inspired by English gothic novels nonetheless haunted castles were replaced by dark and mean streets of various American cities.

Despite the significant influence of the genre on the popular culture of the antebellum era, these works have been long neglected by literary scholars. There are two reasons explaining why. First, several examples of the genre disappeared. Sensational novels were intended for quick reading and quick disposal and they were printed on a low-quality paper. In addition to that, several authors were charged for obscenity by prudish censors and their works were destroyed. Even today, only a few of the antebellum sensational novels have been reprinted. The second reason for neglect is that sensational novels violated traditional canons of literary taste, and literary scholars were more drawn to authors such as Melville, Hawthorne or Whitman. Only the rise of Cultural Studies in the 1980s brought the sensational novels attention which they have long deserved [2].They were an important part of working-class culture, and as I mentioned earlier, they are a great source of depiction of class, ethnic and racial identity of mid-nineteenth century America.

Two of the most famous authors of sensational novels were George Lippard and George Thompson. Lippard's *The Quaker City* or, *The Monks of the Monk Hall* (1845) actually became the best-selling novel of the antebellum period only to be outsold by Harriet Beecher Stowe's influential abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) in the 1850s. On the other hand, George Thompson wrote as many as a hundred novels (an exact number is very difficult to estimate since several of his works were lost due to the above-mentioned circumstances). He himself boasted that he wrote "a sufficient quality of tales, sketches, poetry, essays and other literary stock of every description to constitute half a dozen cartloads" [3]. There are two of his novels available today, *Venus in Boston* (1849) and *City Crimes* (1849).

## 3. Immoral reformers

David Reynolds calls Thompson and Lippard the immoral reformers. Their novels fit into the category of antebellum reform literature. Large number of texts written in the period sought to promote reforms in areas such as temperance, prostitution, slavery, labour, or Catholicism. The difference between the conventional (Harriet Beecher Stowe and her above-mentioned *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be considered one) and immoral reformers was that the works of latter were immoral and ambiguous. Reynolds assumes that in the 1840s and 1850s "there arose a strong subversive element, seen in a succession of vociferous reformers whose loudly announced goal was to stamp out various behavioral sins or social iniquities – intemperance, licentiousness, urban poverty, chattel and wage slavery, poor prison conditions, and so forth – but who described vice in such lurid detail that they themselves were branded as dangerously immoral and sacrilegious" [4]. In the conventional reform writings, the usual strategy was to present often grotesque effects of vice and follow with a long essay on remedies of it. Later immoral reformers tried to outdo one another in presenting graphic accounts of the horrors of vice, but they omitted altogether the didactic moral commentary. Both Thompson and Lippard claimed that their intentions were purely moral and righteous, but instead of seeking cures for vice they emphasized its grisly results such as shattered homes, violence or nightmare visions.

The settings of their novels were Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and other large American cities. Thompson's and Lippard's city mysteries portrayed the city as modern Sodom where hypocritical aristocrats were engaged in a wide range of illicit activities while the lower classes lived their miserable lives in wretched conditions. As the sensational writers sympathized with the working class and the poor, various rebels or outcasts became symbols of protest against tyranny, and low characters were invested with admirable qualities. The character of 'likeable criminal' became central in several novels of the genre and the conflict is usually between wealthy oppressors and a variation of such likeable criminal representing urban poor. Therefore, the sensational literature can be seen as a literature of protest.

## 4. Anti-Catholicism and clerical vice in the antebellum society

However, urban working classes in antebellum cities were not an orderly lot and thus the antebellum period saw several disturbing riots, public lynchings or mob savagery. One of the most infamous examples was the Astor Place riot of 1849 in New York, where accumulating social tensions resulted in a riot which eventually saw 22 people dead and 150 wounded. The cause of the riot was a dispute about an appropriate way how to perform the leading role in Shakespeare's Macbeth [5]. Other riots were incited by anti-Catholic moods among the country's Protestants. In 1834, a Catholic convent in Charleston,

Massachusetts was torched to the ground by an angry mob, and the riot included razing of the convent cemetery [6].

Anti-Catholicism in antebellum America was by no means limited to riots. A series of anti-Catholic exposé texts depicting alcoholism and prostitution within walls of various convents were published in the same decade. The authors of such texts invented stereotypes such as depraved priest that quickly found their way into the mainstream popular literature including sensational novels. Another very common textual strategy was what Reynolds calls "an impulse to 'tear away veils' or 'lift up masks' in an effort to reveal hidden corruption" [4, p. 86]. Authority figures such as bankers, judges or Catholic priests were portrayed as corrupt and their rottenness could be revealed only through sensational images.

Antebellum public was fascinated with sensational scandals involving clergymen. Crime pamphlets and urban penny press (ancestor of today's tabloids) often enjoyed enormous sales thanks to stories which involved depraved reverends. There seemed to be an epidemic of clerical vice in the US throughout the 1830s and 1840s. A number of articles revealed scandals with headlines such as 'Reverend Seducer' or 'Another Reverend Rascal'. One of the more notorious scandals involved the popular preacher John Newland Maffitt, who arranged a marriage with a young woman, enjoyed her for ten days and then cast her off [2, p. XLVII]. The most shocking was probably the case which involved Benjamin T. Onderdonk, the Episcopalian bishop of New York who was brought to trial on nine counts of "'immoralities and impurities' committed against Episcopal women" [7]. However, it is important to emphasize that these accusations were by no means limited to Catholic clergy and included ministers of Baptist, Congregational, Episcopalian, or Methodist denominations. The fascination with clerical sins soon found its reflection in the sensational literature. The stereotype of reverend rake was not ignored even by respected authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, who (1850) created Arthur Dimmesdale, the most famous adulterous minister of American literature, in his *The Scarlet Letter*.

There are several reasons that help explain the increased interest of antebellum public in cases of clerical vice and the growing number of 'reverend rascals' in the decades before the Civil War. First, the new print culture heralded by penny papers that came to existence in the 1830s promoted sensational stories. Not only murders but also stories of seduction were what sold these papers. Second, there was a notable distrust of the public towards some of the clergy. The Second Great Awakening, an evangelical movement within the Christian Church in the US between the 1790s and 1840s, brought not just religious revitalization but also a rapid growth of new denominations. According to Cohen, this rapid growth provided a space for irregularly trained ministers, and lax education and licensing requirements enabled occasional charlatans to enter a position of trust. The denominations competed among one another and questionable behaviour of a minister of one denomination was seen by others as a welcome opportunity to discredit an adversary. Therefore, denominational

press eagerly publicized any examples of questionable ministerial vice. Third, the evangelical movement introduced a new emotional religious style that brought sensuality and passion to the fore. Camp meetings and all-night revivals provided a mixed-sex social space that helped encourage atmosphere leading to sexual disorder [7, p. 83]. The fact was that sexual temptation was an occupational hazard for members of the clergy in the antebellum period. Cohen claims that no other male occupation offered such easy access to women: "Protected by a traditional assumption of unimpeachable morality, ministers could approach strange women in public and open conversations without benefit of introduction; for other men, this was rude or risky forwardness" [7, p. 84]. It is not surprising that an occasional irregularly trained 'rascal' tried to take an advantage of this position.

## 5. Religion in sensational novels

What was then the attitude of sensational authors towards this phenomenon? Reynolds cannot be more right when he claims that "in antebellum popular fiction, a good minister is hard to find" [4, p. 261]. Sensational novelists virtually gave up trying to portray virtuous ministers because they knew that such pastors would bore the public that was fed by penny papers, bringing scores of cases of actual ministers, and by the end of the 1840s, reverend rake became one of the most popular characters in the sensational fiction. Almost every sensational novel published in the decade contains a scene in which a seducer uses religion as an instrument for seduction. It was George Thompson himself who coined the phrase 'reverend rake' to describe a hypocritical preacher [4, p. 262].

The plot of his *City Crimes* is typical of the sensational genre. It follows the fates of Frank Sydney, a wealthy young man who decides to devote his time and wealth to the welfare of those who need it. During nights, he roams the darkest alleys of New York City and meets all kinds of its wretched inhabitants while trying to help the poor. Thompson uses a plethora of sensational images to create an atmosphere of a corrupt metropolis.

One of the first desperate people he encounters is a young prostitute who, after seducing him, tells Sydney the story of her life. Her parents were people of respectable standing, "members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and remarkably rigid in their observance of the external forms and ceremonies of religion" [8]. It was a weekly custom of the pastor of the church to visit the members of his congregation. At the age of twelve, the young girl observed that the visits of the parson at the house of her parents took place only when the father of the family was absent. She gradually got suspicious, so during one of the visits she used a keyhole to observe what was happening in the room. What she observed only confirmed her suspicion. She saw the honourable Reverend Flanders to bestow "the most fervent embraces upon my mother, which she returned with compound interest" [8, p. 113]. This experience causes loss of love and respect for her mother. However, outwardly nothing suggests the pastor's

depraved character since "he used to preach excellent sermons, so far as composition and style of delivery were concerned; his words were smooth as oil; his manner full of the order of sanctity; his prayers were fervid eloquence" [8. p. 114]. She still considered her father to be an exemplary good and sincere Christian, but the relationship with him suffered a blow as well when she incidentally found out that he was engaged in carnal activities with their housemaid.

Instead of following this story with a commentary about hypocrisy and false morality, which was a typical feature of conventional reform literature, Thompson goes on with a story of the young girl that includes descriptions of Reverend Flanders's advances towards her. Eventually, the father learns about the reverend's affair with his wife, but the reverend gets away with merely paying him a considerable sum of money, and the entire affair is swept under the carpet. The young girl leaves her home, gets married to a man who forces her to sell her body and ends up as a courtesan.

Besides reverend Flanders, George Thompson fictionalizes the above-mentioned popular preacher John Newland Maffitt as the "Reverend John Marrowfat, that noted hero of pulpit oratory, amours and matrimony" [8, p. 245]. An interesting discussion takes place on a boat during a voyage to Boston between the reverend and Samuel Cough, an advocate of temperance, over a bottle of liquor which ends up with Marrowfat singing obscene songs and falling over a chair.

However, the most developed character of 'reverend rake' in City Crimes is Dr. Sinclair, an eloquent pastor at the Saint Paul's church. At a masquerade ball (which he denounced in one of his sermons as a Satan's device for destruction of souls), he falls victim to the charms of one of the masked participants, who eventually turns out to be Josephine Franklin, his beautiful parishioner and one of the most evil female characters to be found in the sensational novels. George Thompson offers the following authorial commentary after Dr. Sinclair removes the mask and reveals his true identity to Josephine: "Yes, that learned and talented divine, who had so often denounced the sins and follies of fashionable world, and declaimed particularly against the demoralizing influences of masquerade balls – that young and handsome preacher, whose exalted reputation for sanctity and holiness had induced the amorous Josephine and her licentious mother to suppose him inaccessible to their lustful glances, and far removed from the power of temptation – that model of purity and virtue was now present at this scene of profligate dissipation, gazing into the wanton eyes of a beautiful siren, his face flushed with excitement, and his heart palpitating with eager desire!" [8, p. 171] David Reynolds compares Dr. Sinclair with Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne's reverend from *The Scarlett Letter*. Both are learned and eloquent preachers who publicly preach against sin but such public denouncement only serves as a cloak for their own failings. Both are just pawns in the hands of strong women, Dimmesdale of Hester Prynne and Sinclair of wicked Josephine Franklin [2, p. XLVIII].

The masquerade ball is just a beginning because it marks the start of reverend's downfall. He becomes a frequent visitor to the Franklin house and soon his conduct influences his performance at the pulpit. He loses his eloquence, appears in public in disordered appearance, but his congregation does not suspect anything and considers Sinclair to be ill. However, he completely falls from high estate and becomes "a wine bibber and a lover of flesh" [8, p. 213]. At this point Thompson asks a question why the ministers of the Gospel are so prone to licentiousness. His answer is not very different from the above-mentioned explanation of Cohen: "The female members of a church are apt to regard their minister with the highest degree of affectionate admiration – as an idol to be worshipped. They load him with presents – they spoil him with flattery – they dazzle him with their glances, and encourage him by their smiles. Living a life of luxurious ease, and enjoying a fat salary, he cannot avoid experiencing those feelings which are natural to all mankind. He is very often thrown into the society of pretty women of his flock, under circumstances which are dangerously fascinating. The 'sister,' instead of maintaining a proper reserve, grows too communicative and too familiar, and the minister, who is but a man, subject to all the weaknesses and frailties of humanity, often in an unguarded moment forgets his sacred calling…" [8, p. 213]. Thompson follows this explanation with a graphic description of 'obscene revels' between depraved Josephine and fallen reverend. Later, he is robbed and arrested by the police when he returns home drunk and disordered and spends a night in a city jail. Only after a city magistrate recognizes him as an esteemed pastor, he is released.

Josephine Franklin eventually grows tired with the reverend. He loses sympathies of his congregation and the position of the rector at Saint Paul's, and instead of trying to regain his reputation he falls even deeper and abandons himself entirely. He occasionally visits some of the members of his former congregation and begs for food or money but he spends most of his time in a wretched watering hole, where he delivers mock sermons. On one stormy night, as Sinclair ventures out on the streets of New York, he falls into an unfenced pit in the street, breaks his neck and is buried among "city paupers, felons and nameless vagrants" [8, p. 286] in the morning. Thompson, similar to Hawthorne, shows understanding for his reverend's fall from grace. Though Sinclair never publicly confesses his sin (like Dimmesdale does), it is clear that he is a victim to desires of wicked Josephine. The difference between the two is that Thompson as a representative of immoral reformers in much detail describes Sinclair's demise including obscenities with Josephine Franklin or the effects of his love for alcohol.

George Lippard's bestselling novel *The Quaker City* or, the *Monks of the Monk Hall* also exploits the misdeeds of urban clergy. It is necessary to mention in the context of the article that the 'Monks' are Philadelphia's bankers, merchants, judges, and editors, members of a secret fraternity who meet in rooms and halls of the 'Monk Hall' for their revelries. Lippard's reverend is Dr. F.A.T. Pyne, a pastor of a fictional Church of Free Believers and True Repenters. He is one of the men who "saving souls on their own particular hook,

acquire their degrees from some unknown college, and hold forth in some dark alley, two stories upstairs where they preach brimstone, turpentine and Millerism, in large installments, according the taste of their hearers" [9]. Lippard dedicates an entire chapter to a sermon that takes place in a Pyne's church. Preaching from his pulpit ("something like a cross between a watch-box and a bath-tub" [9, p. 262]), his speech is a fire and brimstone against "Vatican Paganism". "Down with the Pope, UP with the Bible" is his mantra. At one point, "Brother Syllaybub Scissors" tells an absurd story of the crew of an American ship that went to an audience with the Pope and after they all refused to kiss his toe they disappeared and never came out from Vatican, only to end up minced in Bolognese sausages. His story receives a huge applause from the audience, though "what the Free Believers applauded was difficult to tell. Whether it was the Pope of Rome, or the crew, or the sausage manufactory…to this day remains a mystery." [9, p. 265] Pyne is a typical example of the nativist Catholic hater and it is clear that Lippard mocks the evangelical preaching of the period and the anti-Catholic reformers that enjoyed popularity in antebellum American cities in the entire chapter.

In addition to anti-Catholicism, Reverend Pyne is a caricature of temperance reformers who publicly preach against liquor but in private enjoy a drink or two. He is a frequent visitor to the Monk Hall where he spends the money donated by his flock on alcohol, opium and women. There is a scene where in his 'study' he pours himself a full glass of Cognac and afterwards opens a packet of opium exclaiming "We temperance folks must have some little excitement after we have forsworn intemperance. When we leave off alcohol, we indulge our systems with a little Opium. That's what I call a capital compromise." [9, p. 291] One of the most disturbing moments in *The Quaker City* takes place in a room of this den of vice when Pyne drugs a poor girl who is actually his stepdaughter and attempts to rape her. Only a sudden appearance of one-eyed Devil-Bug, a murderous and deformed doorkeeper of the Monk Hall and the girl's true father, saves her from the vile hands of the reverend. In this scene Pyne is shown as a more hideous character than Devil-Bug since he betrays his position of a paternal protector. Because of this, F.A.T. Pyne is even more depraved than Thompson's reverend rakes in *City Crimes*.

## 6. Ethnicity

The nation's anti-Catholicism went hand in hand with a massive influx of immigrants to the United States. In the 1840s, immigrants from Ireland were the largest ethnic group coming from Europe and they were the main force in the transformation of American cities. Forced to leave Ireland by the Great Potato Famine, a vast majority of them were Roman Catholics. Increasingly, these new immigrants were perceived by the predominantly Protestant American public as savage and prone to alcohol, and their faith became often associated with their reluctance to assimilate and a lifestyle ruined by intemperance in press. In addition to that, supporters of nativism believed that the Irish Catholics were not

true Americans, because they relied on clergy, rituals and pomp to rule their lives [6]. All these aspects were seen in opposition to traditional Protestant values.

Thanks to the mass immigration, ethnic and religious diversity became a typical feature of American cities in the first half of the 19th century. More than 1.4 million immigrants arrived in America in the 1840s and the number almost doubled a decade later. By the beginning of the Civil War, immigrants made up more than 50% of populations of the cities such as Chicago or St. Louis and nearly 50% of population of New York [10]. Their influence was increasingly felt in culture, politics and workplace, and it is not surprising that the supporters of nativism expressed fears about the immigrant threat for the future of their country.

Both Lippard and Thompson addressed the increasing ethnic diversity of antebellum cities, but unfortunately the roles of their ethnic characters are only marginal. In *The Quaker City*, there is an Irish housemaid (housekeeping was the most common occupation for female immigrants from Ireland), Peggy Grud, "a tall, stout Irishwoman, coarsely clad, with large hands and a withered face" [9, p. 203] who speaks a strong Irish accent. In his fire and brimstone sermon against Papism, Reverend Pyne advices his flock to discharge "a seamstress, or a governess, or a hired girl, especially an Irish Pagan girl" from their employ [9, p. 267]. In Thompson' *Venus in Boston*, there briefly appears a large, big-fisted but goodhearted Irishman nicknamed 'Cod-mouth Pat', also speaking with a strong accent. And finally, there cannot be more stereotypical portrayals of Irish characters than those of two landlords of the 'cribs' in New York's Five Points in Thompson's City Crimes. Bloody Mike is "a great bull-necked Irishman, with red hair, and ferocious countenance" who addresses his customers with words such as "Spake, ye blasted scoundrel; or wid my first I'll let daylight thro'yer skull!" [8, p. 130]. His competition in the Five Points 'restaurant' business is Pat Mulligan, "a villainous looking Irishman whose countenance expressed as much intellect or humanity as that of a hog" [8, p. 194]. Although these Irish characters do not play any important role in the development of the plot or of the main protagonists, they confirm that ethnic diversity was a well-established phenomenon in antebellum cities. However, from these brief quotes it is clear what attitude did American public and the sensational authors (who claimed to defend the rights of the urban poor) have towards Irish immigrants.

## 7. Conclusion

George Thompson and George Lippard are two of the best-known representatives of the sensational novel genre. They claimed that in their city mysteries, they unmasked vices of America's elite by depicting seemingly respectable figures as being corrupt. There is almost no character in position of power that would have been virtuous in their works. Both of them portrayed the American city as a scene of crime and sin. The city mysteries also reflect several popular phenomena of the period such as scandals involving clergy. The novels

of both authors include several examples of the popular stereotype of reverend rake. That is virtually their only reference to a religion. Lippard's *The Quaker City* mocks the corrupt antebellum preachers and negative attitudes towards Catholicism in far greater extent than Thompson's works. On the other hand, Thompson has outdone Lippard in sensational depictions of the revelries of his reverend rakes. As far as ethnicity is concerned, their works include mostly marginal Irish characters and their portrayal does not go beyond contemporary stereotypical images.

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