Public Beds in George Thompson’s *Venus in Boston*: Private spaces and Intimacy in the City

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Despite his relative contemporary anonymity, nineteenth-century American author George Thompson is regarded by scholars as a prolific antebellum author, a significant contributor to city-mysteries fiction genre and is often compared with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar A. Poe and Herman Melville. In his introduction to Thompson’s *Venus in Boston*, David S. Reynolds goes so far as claiming these authors “have been influenced by (his) novels” (Reynolds 2002, ix). However, unlike his peers, when describing the tension between public streets and domestic space, Thompson redefines and subverts concepts of performativity, sexuality and spectacle in the city.

His novella *Venus in Boston*, while sensational in nature, is considered pornographic and remains to this day his most studied work. Controversial and rather explicit, Thompson not only touches upon taboo subjects such as expressions of female sexuality, he is also, according to Reynolds, the first American novelist to openly address homosexuality, lesbianism and transvestism. In *Venus in Boston*, matters commonly preserved in the nineteenth century for the most intimate boudoirs (such as sexual tendencies) are brought forward to the public city space. Thompson’s city and its milieu are a display of theatricality, sexual perversions and extravaganza. However, once the theatricality of the exterior city invades the interior space, the boudoirs are no longer private but rather an extension of the streets, thus blatantly blurring society’s perceptions of space and social propriety.

Due to their controversial elements, his works have been overlooked by mainstream critics. This paper intends to outline and emphasize Thompson’s contribution to urban literature as well as provide a close analysis of his most infamous work. Drawing from scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, Gaston Bachelard and Richard Sennet, the paper will also examine the role of the urban spectator, the urban gaze and the tension between personal and private spaces while addressing one’s sexual facade.

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Introduction

In his novel, *Venus in Boston*, published in 1849, George Thompson addresses concepts of performativity, sexuality and spectacle in the open urban space, only to repurpose them; relocating them from the public streets to domestic spaces. Events take place, as the title of the novel indicates, in the massive metropoli of Boston. The novel tells the story of poor young Fanny, who sells fruits in the streets to support her family. In a city of sexual corruption, where women are either seductresses or prostitutes and men are predatory fiends, Fanny stands as a symbol of virtue and therefore, is in constant danger. Fanny is then kidnapped by the wealthy and perverted Mr. Tickles who repeatedly tries to rape her. Some secondary plotlines include a couple of twisted siblings, who refer to themselves as Duchess and Chevalier and pose as lovers to trick and blackmail wealthy men, as well as an impoverished con artist who tries to marry a gentle young lady. The narrator’s tone exudes dark humor and blatant sarcasm as Thompson addresses both economic and gender gaps, which become even more evident within the crowded urban space.

Be that as it may, representations and depictions of the city streets or public spaces are scant. Climactic or significant scenes occur within confined and private spaces, specifically boudoirs. These intimate spaces are often portrayed by Thompson with vivid, extravagant and dramatic language, using terminology borrowed from theater. In his own introduction to the novel, he concludes “I proceed at once to draw the curtain, and unfold the opening scene of my drama” (Thompson 2009, 1). Adopting a theatrical jargon encourages the reader to consider events occurring in bedrooms as acts within a play; a type of performance. In fact, “curtains” and “drapes” are a recurring motif in the novel and the narrator constantly makes use of methods of ‘unveiling’ as he conceals and reveals the most gruesomely erotic scenes. Furthermore, drawing once again from theater, the author challenges distinctions between readers and spectators by ‘breaking the fourth wall’ and addressing the reader only to “draw a curtain over what followed” (Thompson 2009, 86). Thus, Thompson’s city and its milieu are a display of theatricality, sexual perversions and spectacle.

This paper intends to outline and explore Thompson’s perception of sexuality in the city as he blurs distinctions between private and public spaces. Once the urban spectacle and the gaze of the urban city dweller invade private spaces, the boudoirs are no longer intimate but rather an extension of the streets, thus, purposely blurring society’s perceptions of space. Due to this controversial portrayal of urban spaces and sexuality, Thompson’s work has been overlooked by mainstream critics. However, this research will unravel crucial elements and provide a close analysis of Thompson’s most infamous work with the intention of emphasizing the author’s contribution to urban literature.

The city dweller

In his *Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard discusses the correlation of one’s exterior and interior space (both literal and metaphorical) as crucial to the existence of the individual self. According to Bachelard, the balance between the outside and the inside, or rather their asymmetry, is what distinguishes “being and non-being”, in other words; defining the manner in which one processes and observes their existence within their environment (Bachelard 1969, 212). However, one’s existence within a given
space is almost invariably distinct from another’s. Speaking in more concrete terms, issues such as gender, social status, financial state and other factors filter “the qualifying epithets attached to inside and outside” and thus, determine the perception of “being” within a certain space (Bachelard 1969, 215). Thus, one’s self or rather, their interiority, is shaped by the way they process their surroundings and in turn, affects the way in which that space is perceived.

Yet, for Walter Benjamin the nineteenth-century urban dweller’s perception of space is projected onto it not only by process and thought; it also takes a material form. Benjamin asserts that for the new city inhabitant of the nineteenth century the “place of dwelling for the first time opposed to the place of work” (Benjamin 1999, 8) resulting in the domestic space becoming “an expression of the individual’s personality” (Benjamin 1999, 9). He then argues that the refuge of the private man is, perhaps, also for the first time, designed to represent the dweller’s interiority – project his inner world onto his home and therefore, an “ornament is to this house what a signature is to a painting” (Benjamin 199, 9). Therefore, the internalization of space as Bachelard discusses it extends beyond the mind and eye and renders the outer material realm into a mirror of one’s inner world.

If the urban dweller’s “being” is defined by his surroundings, and as Benjamin suggests, his home, a secure haven in the bustling city, is in fact a tangible projection of the individual self, then the home may in fact reproduce certain elements of the city. That is to say, the urban dweller’s perception of the urban “outer” space seeps into his physical interior space; his dwelling. Thus, as Benjamin writes, rendering his home into nothing more but a miniature copy of his universe; the city. Benjamin, similarly to Thompson, borrows theatrical metaphors when concluding this dichotomy between inner and exterior worlds claiming a private man’s “living room is a box in the theater of the world” (Benjamin 1999, 9). The interior is formed in accordance with the individual’s inner self, which is inevitably influenced by the spectacle he absorbs from his surroundings.

For the urban dweller to internalize the city’s phantasmagoric impact, he engages, to some extent, with flanerie. The flaneur is a modern trope originating in nineteenth-century Paris. It is defined by Benjamin as a middle-class male urban pedestrian who wanders the streets in a “combination of distracted observation and dreamlike reverie” (Benjamin 1999, 36). Charles Baudelaire, who contributed greatly to the birth of the flaneur, states in his celebrated essay The Painter of Modern Life that “the perfect flaneur” sets up his home in the midst of the city’s movement “to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home” (Benjamin 1999, 9). The flaneur is above all an avid spectator who both defines and is defined by the city’s spectacle. He stands above the crowds which he gazes upon yet is inevitably a part of them, “he is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’” (Benjamin 1999, 10). Thus, the nineteenth-century flaneur allowed a new form of urban spectatorship which was essential to the portrayal of the city’s overwhelming imagery.

It is ironic, then, that Thompson’s novel, packed with sights of luxury and extravaganza, begins with a chapter named “The Blind Basket-maker and his Family” (Thompson 2009, 1). By choosing to begin the novel with a focus on an urban dweller who is visually unreceptive of the city, Thompson distinguishes those marginalized from the urban milieu. The blind man is unable to internalize the exterior as he lacks the fundamental requirement to merge with the urban spectacle; his sight. Thus, the physical embodiment of his interiority, his home, is referred to as “humble” and
nothing more (Thompson 2009, 3). However, the narrative goes into a lengthy description of the view from the blind man’s window: “a distant view of a shining river […] green, pleasant fields […] the cheerful sunshine looked in upon them…” (Thompson 2009, 3). Since the blind man’s home is indisputably located in the city, the portrayal of the rural landscape is either a metaphor or a figment of the blind man’s imagination. In any case, it indicates not only the character’s inability to perceive the city, but also implies that without the ability to actually see the urban spectacle, one cannot be a part of it. Thus, similarly to Benjamin, Thompson links the interiority of one’s home (which in the blind man’s case is lacking), to the shaping not only of their personal interiority and character but also a cosmos of urban spectacles within the domestic space. Therefore, in a space defined by spectacle, in which one’s physical and psychic interiority are defined by their environment, the blind man’s character cannot exist. He then fades away from the city landscape and dies in the early chapters of the novel.

Thus, the images an urban dweller internalizes shape his personality, which in turn is projected onto his domestic space. These sights have the potential of enriching one’s character or, such as in the blind man’s case, abstracting from it. Unlike the blind man, characters who thrive in the city are those who can both absorb the visual richness of the city as well as mirror it in their private dwelling. However, some of these characters, such as the libertine Mr. Tickles and the seductress Duchess, extravagantly embellish their homes to mask their true character, dazzling their guests in a similar manner the flaneur is overwhelmed by the city sights. For instance, the Duchess’ salon serves as the stage for her nuanced performance, both of her character and status as well as the schemes she concocts with her brother the Chevalier. Her room has “gorgeous drapery”, “voluptuous paintings, with frames superbly carved and gilded” and a “rich and yielding Turkish carpet” (Thompson 2009, 57). The narrator notes that “the splendid harp and piano” evinced the fine taste of the room’s tenant. The room and its contents, therefore, reflect their personality. This is also the setting in which the Duchess lures and entraps wealthy men for her and her brother to blackmail.

If, as Benjamin suggests, the urban dweller’s home is indeed a reproduction of their exterior universe as filtered through their own perspective, it is inevitable for the urbanite to extend not only the city’s splendor into their home, but also its potential dangers. For Fanny, for instance, a helpless fruit girl, loss of virtue lurks on every street corner. Constantly evading a girl of her age named Sow Nance, who has become a prostitute and solicitor of other girls and who functions as a cautionary tale for poor girls in the city, Fanny is eventually captured by the “Honorable Mr. Tickles” (Thompson 2009, 17). She is then locked in a luxurious bedroom. Although trapped and her fate uncertain, Fanny calmly observes her cage, which is “large” and “very elegantly furnished”, she then picks out “a piano”, “a profusion of paintings” and “a luxurious sofa” (Thompson 2009, 10). Unaware of Mr. Tickles’ perverse intentions to rape her, Fanny lingers to observe and realize her surroundings. The astounding splendor of the room she is locked in supposedly represents Mr. Tickles’ fine character and intends to convince her of his alleged feelings. Simply put, Fanny is a version of the innocent flaneur bombarded by overabundant sights and therefore, perhaps, unaware of potential dangers.

After being forced into her room, Fanny endures a horrific ceremony in which she is brutally dressed in lavish clothing to please Mr. Tickles’ aesthetic delights. This act
serves two purposes; first, she is forced to take a part in the theatrical scene Mr. Tickles wishes to display. Secondly, and most important, she is no longer a spectator gazing upon the spectacle around her, she becomes the spectacle and is gazed upon by others. Once individuals become a part of the spectacle and are in themselves a spectacle, the relationship between the gazer and their subject carries a haunting nature. The spectator satisfies their curiosity by prying, intruding and infiltrating the privacy of the subject. By doing so, Thompson explores the bounds of “personal space” on both levels; literal space (one’s home) and allegorical (one’s privacy). To what extent can one remain a private individual in a space where gazing and observing is a crucial element to being? And consequently, to what extent does one’s home serve as an extension of either their personality or their urban environment?

A Spectating Audience/Crowd

In “Voyeurs or Walkers,” Michel de Certeau asks in his “Walking in the City” and discusses the masses as a constantly evolving self-telling text (de Certeau 1993, 152). Viewing the city from the top of a skyscraper, he is able to look down and observe the lines of pedestrians roaming the streets like an intertwined text which these walkers “write without being able to read it” (de Certeau 1993, 153). De Certeau observes that the crowd both forms and in fact merges with the spectacle, thus, becoming both a voyeur as well as part of the spectacle himself. It is then when one’s material and metaphorical intimate space, as Bachelard puts it, “loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void” (Bachelard 1969, 218). The city dweller cannot exist without the city sights as well as the gaze which defines his movement in the city. His role, then, is both the spectator and the subject.

According to David S. Reynolds’ introduction of the novel, Thompson’s interest in the elusive relationship between spectator and subject was a recurring theme throughout the author’s body of work. It appears the author was specifically concerned with sensationalism and the deformed body with relation to “the nature of the urban experience”, that is, the way in which the crippled or disfigured individual is sensationalized and moves in the public space (Reynolds 2002, IX). Reynolds also touches upon the author’s curiosity about popular freak-shows and human circuses, or in essence publicly gazing upon others as a form of entertainment. As such, the urban pedestrian masses both perform and engage with a certain invasion of the individual’s body and space.

Thompson, of course, was not the only author to be inspired by and comment on the boundless relationship between the urban spectator and the spectacle. Reynolds compares Thompson’s approach and contribution to urban literature to that of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar A. Poe, going as far as claiming these authors can be “shown to have been influenced by [Thomson’s] novels” (Reynolds 2002, IX). Perhaps, the best example of such a literary work concerned with similar themes is Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd”. In the story the narrator is a faceless and nameless spectator who while sitting in a coffee-shop inspects the crowds through the window, which serves as a panoramic view of the city. The narrator refers to the crowds as “varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expressions and countenance” (Poe 1978, 508). He then singles out a random individual and follows him through the city. At the end of the narrative, the implied reader is left with the query of who is “the man of the crowd”, whether it is the
narrator who can navigate through the crowds and easily pursue another, or the pursued, who moves both independently as well as part of the crowds.

However, more pertinent to the discussion of the function of city spaces with regard to the interest of the spectator in the spectated, is the location from which Poe’s narrative begins. It is crucial that the narrator observes the crowds while sitting in a café. In her essay “The Spectator and the Rise of the Modern Metropole”, Alison O’Byrne links the emergence of the spectator to the rising of coffee-houses in the metropolis. It is the coffee house in which “men from all backgrounds could come together…” (O’Byrne 2014, 59). She discusses the role of the spectator in the city as an anonymous entity able “to slip in and out of various conversations and social spaces in the city” (O’Byrne 2014, 60). The narrator’s anonymity in Poe’s story, renders him approachable to any gender and class. For the urban individual to become a spectator means to immerse one’s self in the public realm and the diverse crowd. Furthermore, according to Richard Sennet’s article, “Reflections on the Public Realm”, for individuals of different classes to be exposed to one another, they would have to share public spaces (Sennet, 2000, 381). The coffee-house on the one hand, negates this definition since only certain classes can spare the time or afford to sit at a café. On the other hand, the window offers a glimpse for individuals on both its sides into the other’s perspective. In other words, the café is one of the elusive city spaces allowing an interaction between different social classes and in which the private and the public bleed into one another.

Thompson’s depictions of living rooms and boudoirs, to some extent, mimics the function of such neutral city spaces. It should be mentioned, however, that the only reservation to this comparison has to do with the way in which individuals meet in these spaces. Sennet stresses that these inter-class encounters occur sporadically in the public space, while in Thompson’s novel these moments are carefully planned by the predatory characters (Sennet, 2000, 381). Be that as it may, private chambers in the novel offer both their lower-class characters as well as the readers a window into intimate forms of exploitation. Moreover, the author insists on engaging the readers as an audience, spectating on these perverse events. For instance, in one of three scenes taking place in the street, the implied narrator leads the readers/audience from the public space and into the private. He pauses the reader to “read and admire” a sign on the streets, indulge in “boisterous laughter”, regard “the odor of the place” and taste the food, which “unlike wine” did not “improve in flavor by age” (Thompson 2009, 21). The narrator awakens his listeners’ curiosity by overwhelming them with adjectives, illustrations and sights, stimulating a sensation similar to strolling down a bustling street, only to lead them into a private space, and thus, mediate between the two.

Domestic Subversion

According to Reynolds, yet another significant theme in Thompson’s works is the “subversion of domesticity” (Reynolds 2002, XXXIII). It should be noted that in nineteenth-century literature, interior spaces, homes in particular, were almost exclusively referred to as representations of domesticity and femininity. However, in many instances throughout Thompson’s different novels, the author was “thumbing his nose at the decorous tone that characterized the period’s domestic novels” (Reynolds 2002, XXXIII). The controversial author, regarded at the time as a soft pornographer, brought the atrocities of explicit sexual actions into the domestic space resulting in some of the most violent and sexualized relationships. Reynolds asserts
that instead of Christian nurture, which was the heart of domestic morality, “Thompson presents pornographic and criminal nurture” (Reynolds 2002, XXXIV). Thus, the subversion is double; the urban exterior invades the domestic, and sexuality and violence, more often than not, replace domesticity.

The latter form of subverted domesticity, in which sexual perversions are masked as expressions of nurturing, is addressed by Thompson’s twisted representations of parental relationships. When attempting to seduce Fanny, for example, Mr. Tickles, other than offering her a lavish lifestyle, also reminds the girl she has “neither father nor mother” (Thompson 2009, 10). He then promises to “supply their place” adding himself as a “lover to the bargain” (Thompson 2009, 10). While it is tempting to interpret this merely as Thompson’s voicing of sexual taboos, such as incest and pedophilia, one must consider the manner in which they are presented. Rather than simply pursuing the grotesque or presenting “bizarre family situations”, he seems to take pleasure in domestic ruin, parodying domesticity and challenging different types of intimacy (Reynolds 2002, XXXV). If, in the conventional sense, “father” and “mother” are metonymic to “home” and “nurture”, for Mr. Tickles they are nothing more than tools of entrapment; mocking cherished familial nineteenth-century values.

Furthermore, nineteenth-century decorum prevented women (not prostitutes) from roaming the streets unescorted. Yet, the streets were also, as Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson phrase in their “City Publics”, “the space of freedom for women, away from the suffocation of the gendered space of the home and the private realm” (Bridge and Watson 2000, 370). However, in the public city space women, as perceived by nineteenth-century gender conventions, are inferior and are subject to unpredictable encounters which may result in “attacks, rapes, and mugging in certain spaces that are public in the sense that they are accessible to all, but are not safe to all” (Bridge and Watson 2000, 370). Yet, in the novel, for Fanny the domestic space in not safe nor do the streets liberate her. On the one hand, her home, which is unable to provide for her, may eventually lead her into prostitution and sexual corruption due to her grandfather’s destitution, but on the other, the home she is taken to and the libertine Mr. Tickles’ attempts at “playing home” place her in immediate physical danger.

Such dangers, in Thompson’s attempts at “subversive domesticity”, are also expressed in his choice of locations within the domestic space, that is, the rooms in which different events take place. In his essay “The Sexual Geography of the City”, Frank Mort discusses how individuals of different gender and class “live together in the city” (Mort 2000, 312). Mort claims that it is through expressions of sexuality and sexual encounters that we connect in the metropolis, to him “the sexual body” is represented through “dress and personal adornment, stylized forms of movement, display, and visual spectacle” all these and more “lie at the heart of urban self-representation” (Mort 2000, 313). The streets, metaphorically speaking, function as stages on which different individuals are encouraged to shape and perform their sexuality through sight alone. Thus, in the public space where one aspires to see and be seen, sexuality is perceived as yet another layer of the urban spectacle.

The term “sexual encounters”, however, would carry a different meaning for individuals of varied classes. For certain members of the lower classes, “sexual encounters” in the public space could be apprehended as sexual intercourse. However, for middle and upper classes “sexual encounters” were limited to courtships under the public gaze. As Thompson challenges the norms of the traditional nineteenth-century domestic novel, in which gender roles are well-established and sexuality is repressed
into private chambers, sexual encounters, of all sorts, are in fact removed from the streets and planted in domestic spaces. These encounters, in which one must perform their sexuality (whether it is Fanny who projects virtue or the Duchess who exudes eroticism) are set in confined chambers. Yet, successful in his attempts to undermine the distinctions between the public and the private, these ‘confined chambers’ are no longer intimate and exclusive, but rather openly displayed to the readers/audience. In Thompson’s city, sacred nineteenth-century domestic values are cast aside as the home is rendered into yet another street alley. Consequently, intimacy (familial and sexual) is non-existent both in the bedroom and the streets.

Where the Public and Private Meet

According to Reynolds, the final chapter of the novel, named “The Chambers of Love”, is Thompson’s ultimate attempt to undermine domestic novels as the section concludes with “highly disturbing” and “sensational images” (Reynolds 2002, xxxiv). While, perhaps, in this chapter Thompson incorporated the wildest improprieties and challenges to the division of public and private/domestic spaces, sensationalism or horrific images are presented with a sense of indifferent simplicity. In fact, I would argue, considering the chapter is set in a brothel the events in it are rather anti-climactic and stripped down of all performative elements.

Unlike contemporary social perceptions of brothels, in her introduction to Archeology in Sin City, Donna J. Seifert depicts nineteenth-century American brothels as prominent social and economic institutions, some of which owned by respectable and well-known proprietors, and which have become famous “urban landmarks” (Seifert 2005, 1). The brothels were divided into social classes by their prostitutes’ talents, youth or beauty, the services they offered and their ambiance. Those of a higher class were not only beneficial to their patrons but also provided their employed women protection from “unruly customers”, while prostitutes of lower standings faced “the greatest personal risk” (Seifert 2005, 1). It appears the urban brothel, unlike the café or even a street corner, offered a setting for moderated urban encounters. Furthermore, it enabled the most public figures to associate in a rather public space while engaging in private affairs; the brothel is where one’s most private fancies and fantasies are met within a rather public space.

However, Thompson’s depiction of an urban brothel’s structure as well as the social dynamics in it, does not correlate with Seifert’s findings. The brothel in the final chapter is divided into two separate spaces, both offering different services. The upper brothel, from which customers would enter, had prostitutes from “the ordinary class” (Thompson 2009, 98). Lacking any unique merits would mean, as deducible from Seifert’s study, these women also lacked protection or choice of customer. Yet, in Thompson’s novel they sit “indolently” with their “private lovers”; a certain privilege that would have been allowed only to prostitutes of the highest class. On the other hand, the most exclusive part of the brothel, preserved for the wealthiest of clients, is located below the ground. Its entrance opens through a door “which has previously been invisible” in the Madam’s bedroom floor and the area is referred to as the “Chambers of Love” (Thompson 2009, 99). The location of its passage foreshadows the perversions that lie within the chambers; they exist as a separate dimension within the Madam’s bedroom.

These underground chambers house young women who have been abducted by wealthy men, raped and forced into prostitution. The rooms contain “a superb
chandelier” and “voluptuous paintings”, their tenants are “all very beautiful” (Thompson 2009, 99). The splendor of the space as well as its occupants are hidden from all types of public spaces, streets and brothel alike. The question should be asked then: what is the purpose of it? Firstly, the rooms’ luxury is not meant to sell or mask, the space is a pathetic farce promoting a lie to wealthy men who are fully aware of the charade. Second, according to Karen J. Renner’s article, Thompson diverts from the common treatment of the prostitute trope in Antebellum literature by presenting fallen women not as unfortunate creatures who were lured by financial stability and then cast aside, but rather by relying “on more overtly sadistic control” in which the victim is brutally forced into prostitution (Reiner 2010, 174). Thus, these young women were abducted rather than lured and placed in The Chambers of Love, which are to Thompson the epitome of an extravagantly performative and sexually twisted urban domestic space.

The Chambers of Love are comprised of a large grand hall to which are connected nothing but bedrooms. The “family” occupying this “home” are six prostitutes who refer to themselves as “the daughters of Venus” (Thompson 2009, 101). They refer to one another as “sister” and teach each other “the delights of love” (Thompson 2009, 100). These sisters are related only in the sense that they share similar misfortune. Fanny is brought into the underground brothel to please Mr. Tickles. She encounters “the daughters of Venus” while rested on a couch, the six nude young women pace around the hall surrounding her. They tell Fanny she is in a “place of safety”, as a home should be, and yet they kiss Fanny “passionately, as if their libidinous natures derived a gratification even in kissing one of their own sex” (Thompson 2009, 100). While two of them seem “sad” and “dispirited” the others are “vicious and reckless in the extreme” (Thompson 2009, 99). Not only is the domestic invaded by sexual perversions but so are the family and gender dynamics; young women, if not mothers, are sisters and lovers at once. The daughters of Venus have turned into “young creatures” and their use of any family relations is ironic and horrific (Thompson 2009, 99).

Fanny is assigned a mentor prostitute, Julia, who appears to have lived in the chambers for a long time and awaits her chance to become an actual courtesan. Although abducted herself, and probably forced into prostitution, Julia asks the Madam impatiently to feel “the embraces of fifty men” (Thompson 2009, 100). Julia, who was abused before becoming the passionate creature she is now, expresses one of Thompson’s major concerns: the intensity between the urban spectator and the spectacle. Confined within a space she has no control over, Julia has become a force-fed spectator who is constantly bombarded with overwhelming, and at times horrific, sights. Her enslaver is a man who is “almost entirely destitute of a nose” which made him appear “positively disgusting” and yet she asks for more (Thompson 2009, 101). Her insatiable lust can be compared to the gradually numbing sensation the urban dweller and spectator may experience in the city. This is also expressed by Thompson’s attempt to lead his readers/spectators through scenes, as he depicts sights that become increasingly more grotesque. The urban spectator, the reader and Julia, have become desensitized and developed a “blasé attitude to others […]” as a response to the overstimulation of the city (Bridge and Watson, 369). Julia’s “libidinous nature” is nothing but an ill outcome of her overwhelmed senses and her relationship with her “owner” “Mr. Lawyer” is Thompson’s take on married life in yet another satirical mockery of family life, monogamy and marriage.
Although concluding rather bleakly, the narrator offers his readers a glimpse of hope; a peek into Julia’s true feelings as “her beautiful countenance” wore an expression of “ill-concealed disgust” while she walked with the lawyer into her room (Thompson 2009, 101). The narrative, which has so far been committed to unraveling gruesomely sexual scenes, completes Julia’s and the lawyer’s account stating “the door was closed, and – we dare not describe what followed” (Thompson 2009, 101). The baffled reader is left to wonder as for the reason this scene is censured unlike others and concludes with a sealed entrance.

The door, in the elusive relationship between the overt and covert, “schematizes two strong possibilities’, that of the “temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings’ (Bachelard 1969, 222). It is the act of opening the door and, metaphorically speaking, which offers Julia a glimpse into other possibilities, a different space and reality, that reveals the essence of her being. Yet, the momentary exposure of emotions also allows for hope, for a chance that the distinction between the personal and public can be maintained. Furthermore, by finally closing the door on a sexual deed implies the performance is complete. Once the performative self is exposed, the private and public meet, rendering the spectacle obsolete.

Works Cited


