

COMSTOCKERY AND CENSORSHIP IN EARLY AMERICAN MODERNISM

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To my grandmother, Eva Osyany, who always knew I had potential and recognized the importance of letting me discover it for myself.

Nagyon szeretlek. Nagyon hiányzol.

~ A Kicsi

Abstract

Anthony Comstock was a moral crusader who abhorred all things lewd and obscene, and who was successful in introducing the Comstock Law to help his fight against it. His life-long battle against vice at the end of the nineteenth-century had an impact on literature and the literary world as it transitioned from Victorian prudery to modernist realism. Comstock's influence negatively affected publishers, distributors, and writers, in particular, canonical Americans Walt Whitman and Theodore Dreiser. His methods were unconventional, and in the name of morality, Comstock often behaved immorally to achieve his goals of protecting youth from being corrupted by obscenity. The question of the value of censorship was present then, as it still endures today, and centered on the potential harm of viewing or reading obscene materials. Although Comstock presented an impressive record of confiscations and arrests, his crusade did not have a lasting effect beyond the *fin de siècle*.

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Introduction

“Don’t You Know Who I Am? I’m Anthony Comstock!”

Early modernism in America and Britain evolved from the need of artists, writers, and thinkers to redefine what life and people should be all about. What developed was a movement that encouraged individual thought, a questioning of tradition, and a need to experience the realities of life in order to understand it, no matter how painful that could be. What ignited modernism was the longing to break free from the confinement of Victorian thought and what it represented: it was a direct rebellion (Singal 9). While there were those who fully embraced modernist ideas, there were those who were not willing to relinquish Victorianism for modernist practices and ideals they thought were wrong and most importantly, immoral. “Victorian” is a term that represents the era in England in which Queen Victoria reigned and, therefore, seems to be misapplied to a period of life in America. Victorianism has been identified as having a “highly conservative and rural set of cultural traditions [. . .] characterized by its bourgeois, progressive, urban, industrial, and nationalistic orientation.” The British bourgeois who were connected to industrialism and evangelical Protestantism tended to live on the outskirts of polite society and political power. In America, however, they “largely dominated economic, social, and political institutions.” Because of this, Victorian thought in America was mainstream and the dominant culture in the late nineteenth century and resulted in a “more conservative, less reformist, and less progressive society” than in Britain (Ingham 5). For the most part, Victorian nineteenth-century Americans were seen in the following way:

[. . .] a male or female person of character was dependably self-controlled, punctual, orderly, hard-working, conscientious, sober, respectful of other

Victorians' property rights, ready to postpone immediate gratification for long-term goals, pious toward a usually friendly God, a believer in the truth of the Bible, oriented strongly toward home and family, honorable in relations with other Victorians, anxious for self-improvement in a fashion which might appear compulsive to modern observers, and patriotic. (Coben 4)

Basically, they were value-driven, and their goal was to be hard-working, moral citizens dedicated to both family and God. The motivation was a search for national identity, in addition to establishing and maintaining their position in a rapidly expanding era of economic, political, and social growth, courtesy of the Industrial Revolution and the modernization it brought with it. In their efforts to achieve this, order was essential in the home and in society, and adhering to clear-cut values helped them achieve and retain the order they sought. The result was that they often projected to others a sense of being prudish, uptight, serious, and unbending.

Daniel Walker Howe stresses the importance of recognizing that American Victorianism was comprised of a culture as well as a society. According to Howe, culture was made up of the “systems of beliefs, attitudes, and techniques,” such as those found within education, religion, politics, and customs. Society, on the other hand, represented the “structures of relationships among people” (509). He recognized that both aspects were often at odds with each other, as Victorian Americans could accept and practice the cultural elements, while disagreeing with, and turning their backs on, the societal aspects. Free-love advocates would fall into this categorization. American Victorians were not the only culture at that time; however, they were the largest one and it was understood that to be a part of it not only garnered respect, but placed one within upwardly mobile social realms. As well, people who adopted American Victorianism did not do so passively, but with deliberation and enthusiasm because they saw it as

beneficial (515). There were also those, however, who lived within this time period who were identified as rebels of Victorianism because they did not believe in or embody the culture and society the era represented. For instance, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe were known for their dissent of Victorian norms (512).

Regarding sex, Victorians were conventionally believed to be uptight and repressed. In the last few decades, revisionist historians have challenged the notion that Victorian women only had sex for reasons of procreation and to please their husbands. Some literature from the time period, along with the more recent studies by the revisionists, show that this was not exactly the case. An article by Sarah Stage refers to Carl Degler's ground-breaking work from 1974, *What Ought to Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century*, that states, among other things, that Victorian advice literature not only acknowledged female sexuality but also encouraged it (481). Degler also invokes the Mosher Survey, which was conducted from 1892 to 1920, as evidence that sex and discussions of sex did take place. Stage succinctly points out that although some women may have been having and enjoying sex, for the most part, the idea of sexuality for women and by women was still bound tightly in the moral sensibilities of that time. Stage calls to attention the important fact that half of the forty-five women surveyed for Mosher's study were interviewed pre-1900 and the other half after 1900 and as late as 1917 (482). The difference in the results from before the turn of the century compared with those from after, is very telling of the mind-set that existed. The majority of the women interviewed before 1900 believed sex was for the purpose of procreation and was integral to men and not to women. After 1900, the majority of the women believed sex was not just for procreation, but was also an expression of love, for

mental union, and for enjoyment. Those women also believed it to be integral for women as for men. The results from after 1900 occurred when modernism was being established and reflect the transition of ideas from one social era to the other. Even though there may be substantiation that Victorian American women were willingly sexually active, which contradicts the stereotype, there is still clear evidence that a mentality of repression did exist, thereby confirming the understanding that Victorians were constrained by their system of values. Stage states that the “Victorians were not the wretched victims of sexual repression we may imagine. Rather they were women and men who found in restrictive sexual codes something of value appropriate to their lives. Why else would the repressive codes have endured so long?” (484). Her point is well-taken.

Most people do not know who Anthony Comstock is, or was, but in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New York, his name was well-known and synonymous with censorship and prosecution. He garnered strong support by some, and evoked anger in many. Comstock was an American Victorian crusader who battled immorality with the support of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and United States Postal Service, to destroy a “hydra-headed monster”: obscenity (Marcuse 132). He was responsible for burning many tons of printed material, the destruction of countless contraceptive and sexual devices, the prosecution and imprisonment of hundreds of “law breakers,” and the suicides of several people whom he pursued with his law on his side.

After forming and becoming an agent for the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Comstock was successful in having the United States Congress pass a law, aptly named the “Comstock Law,” which provided him with the legal backing to

arrest those whom he deemed to be participating in and contributing to the moral decay of society by publishing and distributing literary works and advertisements that he considered obscene, lewd, and lascivious, and by distributing them through the mail. Because obscenity is a subjective matter, it has always been challenging to define (along with identifying things lewd and lascivious). Comstock's assessment and judgment as to what fell into this category were often questioned. Additionally, his ability to censor written materials that were published, including those sent through the mail, was considered to be a violation of the United States Constitution and its legislated right to free speech. Undeterred by those legalities that did not support his cause, Comstock persevered for over forty years in his quest to rid America of the multi-headed beast.

This thesis will examine Anthony Comstock's beliefs, and how they clashed with those of a burgeoning modernism, and the impact those beliefs had on early American modernist literature through his crusade against obscenity. Chapter one considers the man and his ideals, including how his career began and what motivated him. Chapter two is an analysis of some of Walt Whitman's poetry from his controversial *Leaves of Grass* collection, seeking to determine why the publication would have been targeted for suppression. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is examined in chapter three, where discussion surrounds the morality of the book, and whether or not the work could be considered to be didactic, even though it does not adhere to Comstock's principles. The final chapter of this thesis provides a close look at the legacy of Comstock and his work: was his crusade warranted, and was censorship a successful way of protecting society, particularly its children, from the potential harm of obscene literature?

Daniel Singal identifies Victorianism as having an “ideal vision of a stable, peaceful society free from sin and discord [. . .] in a predictable universe presided over by a benevolent God and immutable natural laws [. . .],” and he recognizes the moral dichotomy between “human” and “animal.” For Victorians, God laid out the path of life, and it represented goodness and morality. From that path, no one was to diverge or even question. Humans were defined by those characteristics that civilized them and held them above “animals.” Religion, education, manners, art, and devotion to family distinguished them from the animal or savage realm, which Singal states “contained those instincts and passions that constantly threatened self-control, and which therefore had to be repressed at all costs” (9). Anthony Comstock thought that he epitomized these Victorian traits and, given his strong adherence to Victorian values and practices, it is not surprising that he took up his cause with such fervor when he believed everything he stood for was being eroded by those whom he saw as promoting moral decay and evil.

Comstock was deeply religious and believed it was his calling to take up the cause against obscenity, and he therefore stopped at nothing to accomplish his goals of arrest, prosecution, and persecution. Some of his tactics were questionable, and the results of the methods he employed were often destructive on the human level, yet Comstock was neither deterred nor remorseful because his purpose in life was very clear to him, regardless of cost to himself or those he pursued. He would stop at nothing to ensure the line between human and animal would not be blurred. Beyond his assiduous battle against obscenity, it should be noted that his efforts included a fight against gambling and visual art. While relevant to the broad reach of Comstock’s moral zealotry, these

additional aspects will not be included in this work as they raise many of their own questions and require specific examination in a direction beyond the scope of this thesis.

In 1844, Anthony Comstock was born in New Canaan, Connecticut. His mother, Polly, was devoutly religious and was the most important influence in his life (Broun 37). She died when Comstock was ten years old, but his recollection of her reading from the bible and telling wholesome stories on a daily basis was something that remained with him for his entire life, and it laid the foundation for the life-long war on which he was set to embark. The stories she told instilled in her children's "minds and hearts and breath and blood" the notion of "moral heroism" (Trumbull 26). Her watchwords were "purity, principle, duty" and never "expediency" and "policy" (27). In his adulthood, Comstock stated: "Such stories today fascinate me. I don't care that" (he would snap his fingers) "for your blood and thunder stories. But I do enjoy the story of any man or woman, boy or girl, who sacrifices self for principle" (27). Comstock himself was therefore a character in the stories he favored, as he sacrificed himself for what he believed in. Regardless of opinions of Comstock, the path he strode, or the methods he employed, from beginning to end, he was a man of his principles and never wavered from them, except once.

Trumbull, Comstock's biographer, light-heartedly tells his reader of the first and only encounter Comstock had with liquor, which he believes led to Comstock's life-long decision to abstain from alcohol. Apparently, while in his boyhood, Comstock was driving the cattle home from pasture when he stopped in at the home of a boy he was forbidden to visit. The boy had some homemade wine and encouraged Comstock to take a drink with him. Trumbull states, "Anthony felt somewhat hilarious that evening at

home, and was glad to get to bed. The next morning he had quite a ‘head’ when he woke up” (28). This incident not only represents Comstock’s own personal experience with vice and how it influenced him for the rest of his life, but also, equally as important, how he behaved contrarily to what his mother instilled in him, by disobeying her in going to the home of a boy of whom she disapproved. It should be noted that Comstock’s biographer lists no other indiscretion in the life of his subject, beyond schoolroom hijinks as a young boy. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that Trumbull was the son of Comstock’s “old time friend” H. Clay Trumbull (20). Those who suffered at the hands of Comstock during his crusade, however, could readily compile a long list of indiscretions they believed occurred during his vice-hunting days in New York.

At the age of eighteen, Comstock engaged for the first time in actions in the name of morality. While working as a clerk in Winnipauk, Connecticut, he learned of a saloonkeeper who sold liquor to women and children in exchange for groceries. Comstock was appalled by this immoral act and informed the local sheriff of what was going on. The sheriff did nothing about it. Comstock entered the establishment in a quest for apples, which he knew they did not have, to afford him a look around. Taking note of what he saw, he returned to the gin-mill that night and “raged against the kegs” (Broun 41). He opened faucets, letting all of the contents drain onto the floor and “fastened up a conspicuous notice stating that unless the place was now closed and kept closed the building would come down, and [Comstock] retired with [the] consciousness of having done a good job completely [. . .]” (Trumbull 13). The statement that Comstock “retired,” pleased with his actions, has been questioned. O’Higgins and Reede believe that Comstock actually felt guilty for imbibing the home brew and getting drunk

as a young boy. Despite Trumbull's passing off that moment merely as a lesson learned by Comstock, O'Higgins and Reede believe that he "suffered remorse and self-hatred" from it, which he transferred to the saloonkeeper, as if he were the young boy who had tempted him years earlier (qtd. in Broun 42). Broun and Leech see some merit in the perspective of O'Higgins and Reede, but they accept this view in general terms only. They "doubt Comstock's 'head' ever pressed heavily against his conscience," for if it had, it is unlikely he would have shared the incident with Trumbull. Comstock kept a diary all of his life, and many things included within were not shared with Trumbull, so if indeed he had experienced the remorse and self-hatred suggested by O'Higgins and Reede, one would have expected Comstock to have censored himself on this event as well. Broun and Leech doubt that Comstock's momentary foray into drinking impacted him that heavily, beyond deciding he did not like it and would not do it again (42).

In 1863 Comstock enlisted in the Union Army, to replace his fallen brother, and fought in the American Civil War. While there, he continued to keep his diary. Throughout his life, Comstock sought refuge and guidance from his faith and regularly noted those challenges in his diary, often referring to the strength he gained from God and his willingness to leave things in God's hands. Two diary entries indicate the difficulties he endured while in the army and show the importance of his faith and his reliance on it to stay true to himself:

Jan 20 – Have been twitted several times today about being a Christian.
"Would that I were a better one."

This is a typically Christian perspective in that serving God is always a work in progress therefore, for Comstock to want to be a "better one" (Christian) is his acknowledgement and acceptance of that process. As well, with being a good Christian comes martyrdom

and being “twitted” was merely Comstock’s cross to bear for the greater good of his faith in the name of God. The statement also supports the idea that Victorians were “pious.” Essentially, they were devout and well-intended where God was concerned, even if the divinity striven for could never be achieved.

March 9 – Heard some persons speaking against me. Do not know the reason. Tried hard to do my duty. Will not join with them in sin and wickedness; though loose (sic) all of their friendship. For Jesus is more precious than all the world. This I fear is the reason of their hatred or jealousy. (Broun 45)

For Comstock, adhering to his love of God and living within His design always took priority over his need for friendship and companionship from those who crossed the line into Singal’s “animal” world.

Comstock was not well received by the men in his company, and there is little doubt as to why: his high moral standard, and what could be considered by them as an attitude of supremacy, created a divide between them, a divide he tried to bridge by encouraging good behavior and devoutness, which only served to create a vicious circle. Believing the men were jealous of him may have been Comstock’s way of ascribing reason to why they did not like him without having to accept any responsibility for possibly just not being likable. Comstock abhorred drinking, gambling, smoking, and profanity, although one writer states “he swore like a trooper” (Marcuse 141) and was quite open in showing his disdain for this sort of inappropriate behavior. When he willingly accepted his ration of rum, he made a point of pouring it on the ground in front of the others, much to their dismay and chiding, for why would he not pass it to them if he did not want it? Of course this was his point: it was evil, and no one should have it (45). Comstock’s moral lessons most likely showed him to be judgmental with a

superiority complex, which would understandably result in the soldiers' dislike and loathing for him. Sitting around the campfire, typically a time of comradeship, the soldiers tended to smoke, partially for the enjoyment and leisure of it, but also to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Comstock would not smoke, even to protect himself from the insects, and instead opted to build smudges. He felt that, if smoking was truly a necessity, "he preferred to have the smoke chiefly outside of his system" (Trumbull 39). Comstock had strength of character and was not going to succumb to any vice, for any reason. In a way, this resolve further set him apart from the men in his company, because it made him seem less human, ironically, when considering the nineteenth-century convention of human and animal, and, given his religious convictions, Comstock would likely argue that it made him more divine. For Comstock, his period of enlistment actually allowed him to be more religiously devout than prior to his service. His diary includes numerous references to prayer meetings, the attendance of services and prayer meetings he attended at least four times a week, and as many as eight or nine times a week (Broun 47). Comstock took it upon himself to find ministers to preach to his men. When none could be found, he would read aloud to the troops a sermon from a religious paper. He worked tirelessly for his religious duty and equally as tirelessly for his patriotic duty. He never complained about either.

Comstock's time in the army was really the first time he experienced and lived with people whom he considered immoral. His religious and moral fervor, which strengthened greatly while in the service, prepared him well for his role of reformer, in God's name, although he was unaware at this time that this was to be his calling. After completing his service in 1865, Comstock was given an honorable discharge. He worked

for a brief period in a New Haven grocery store and then returned to New Canaan where he met up with a banker he knew. The banker asked him: “Comstock, why don’t you go to New York and make your mark?” Comstock responded, “I haven’t any money.” The banker handed Comstock a five-dollar bill, which he accepted, bought a ticket for New York, and set out towards his goal as a self-made merchant (Trumbull 45). Despite his moral-mindedness and need to correct the behaviors of others for the good of society, at this point he had no plans of making a career of it.

Within a few days of arriving in New York City, Comstock secured a job at a dry goods company where he started as a porter and quickly moved up to shipping clerk. He felt he had great potential in the dry goods business and when the change in position did not include a raise in pay, he resigned. He immediately found a job with another dry goods company and also rose through the ranks to “city salesman” (Trumbull 46, 47). His salary was not significant but, being adept at saving, he managed to put enough money aside to purchase a small house in Brooklyn. In 1871, he married Margaret Hamilton, daughter of a Presbyterian elder. His wife was ten years older than him and, according to Broun and Leech, “dim she must have been, for one friend who knew her well could remember no more than that she was inveterate in her silence and always dressed in black.” She was a slight woman, apparently only weighing about eighty-two pounds (12). Her physical description is sharply contrasted to that of Comstock, who was described by his biographer to be “five foot ten in his shoes, carr[ying] two hundred and ten pounds of muscle and bone” (Trumbull 19). He had “Atlas shoulders,” a “chest of prodigious girth,” a “bull-like neck,” bi-ceps and calves of “exceptional size,” and “short legs that remind one somewhat of tree-trunks.” Trumbull continues to say: “His calling

is that of a fighter, he has a fighter's build" (19). Trumbull's "fighter" description represents how Comstock's life played out, and, by informing the reader that he had the physical stature to support his life-long fights, emphasizes that Comstock dedicated his life to doing what he was built to do, although it was the streets and courtrooms of New York that were his ring. According to Marcuse, Comstock was a heavy eater as "eating was the one sensual pleasure which he considered allowed, and which had to take the place of every other" (146). If Marcuse is correct, then Comstock's vast size would have been attributable to over-eating rather than "muscle and bone." According to Paul Boyer, Comstock had an "outlandish appearance – potbelly, thick neck, jutting jaw, [and] mutton-chop whiskers" (2). Whether Comstock's size was due to athleticism or over-eating, he was a large man, which worked to his benefit in the many physical scuffles he had as a vice hunter.

In 1871, the Comstock's one and only child, a daughter, was born. Comstock loved children, and it was in the name of protecting all children that he stood his ground in his fight for morality. His daughter was sickly and died when she was close to a year old. The night she died, Margaret was home and had a nurse help her tend to the child because Comstock was in court. He was not present at the time of his daughter's death. The diary entry referring to the passing of his child was: "The Lord's work will be done. Oh, for grace to say it and live it!" (qtd. in Trumbull 151). Two days later, Comstock had to return to court and, while he was there, Margaret buried their daughter. There is much irony with this situation. Comstock's life-long work was to protect children, about whom he genuinely cared, yet it was this work that took him away from his own child at the time of her death and away from her funeral as well. His public crusade took him away

from something private and personal, which should have surpassed all else. His faith offered him the idea that everything in life was in the hands of the Lord and, his faith being so strong, he was comfortable leaving his daughter in the Lord's hands. Perhaps this event echoes the Puritanical statements of O'Higgins and Reede referred to earlier, however, in a reversed fashion. Rather than seeking revenge on others for a situation that occurred on the self, Comstock was "saving" children in the only way he could, when he was unable to save his own daughter. He knew she was not going to survive and therefore he had to persevere where his efforts could save children. Additionally, he forever carried his mother's stories and teachings about self-sacrifice in the name of principle, and this was a clear example of one of the sacrifices he had to make in the name of principle and duty.

For Victorians, and therefore Comstock, sex was an "animal" instinct that had to be repressed. They "conceived it as a hidden geyser of animality existing within everyone and capable of erupting with little or no warning at the slightest stimulus." They believed that all erotic temptation must be "rooted out," and Comstock was doing his part to see that it was (Singal 9). Through his sales work in the dry goods business, Comstock saw, again and again, young businessmen "whose lives were plainly being ruined by their interest in the obscene pictures and literature and other devilish things they had easy access to" (Trumbull 51). Men would spend (and lose) their hard-earned money on obscene materials, be filled with thoughts of lust, seek relief, and be apt to engage in other vices such as drinking and gambling. One of his friends had been "corrupted and diseased," and Comstock was determined to hold accountable the person who had ruined his friend. Charles Conroy was the man who sold the obscene material to

Comstock's acquaintance. Comstock located Conroy, purchased a book from him, discovered where his stock was secretly stored, and then made his way to the police station with purchase in hand. A police officer accompanied Comstock to find Conroy, who was arrested and his stock of books and pictures seized. At the age of 24, in 1868, this was Comstock's first contribution to the arrest of someone for the sale of obscene books (52). This event was the catalyst for what would become his full-time job and new life-long goal. Unknown to him at the time, Conroy and Comstock would meet again. During a later altercation between the two of them, Conroy slashed Comstock's cheek with a knife and resulted in the scar Comstock was forced to wear for the remainder of his life.

Following the Conroy arrest, Comstock found other young associates who were being "demoralized by vicious books and pictures" and set out to find the supplier. When he did, he informed the police once again. This time, one of the officers tipped off one of the store clerks in advance, and Comstock was unable to find or purchase any questionable material at the store. "Outraged by the treachery of the patrolman," Comstock went straight to the precinct and had the officer fired (53). This incident was the beginning of the view that Comstock was a man who would stand his ground and needed to be heeded. Because of the dismissal of the police officer, the newspaper ran a story on the event, which attacked Comstock. He was "ridiculed" as an "officious meddler in affairs that did not concern him," and the paper stated: "if this young Comstock is the Christian he professes to be, he can find plenty of these places in Ann and Nassau Streets" (54). This information was of great benefit to Comstock, as it led him to the area of the city that was rife with obscene publications and materials, and thus

the floodgates opened for his new career to begin, although initially he acted completely alone (55).

Comstock became a marked man from early on and had to endure physical attacks and threats on his life. Knowing this, in 1871, one of Comstock's friends, Professor Sprague, who had a familial connection with the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, presented Comstock with a revolver. One day while walking down the street, a man approached Comstock and said: "Is your name Comstock?" Comstock replied that it was, and the man stated "I am going to break your ----- neck for you," to which Comstock said, "I have consulted with the Chief of Police and the District Attorney and they have advised me to defend myself against you." Undeterred, the man continued to threaten Comstock at which point Comstock drew his revolver and said: "if you make any attempt to interfere with me I'll put daylight through you" (59). Again, Comstock was a man of conviction and principle and would not allow anyone to bully him or get in the way of the work he felt needed to be done, even if it meant his life was at risk. By his second year in New York City, he had made seven arrests.

It became clear to Comstock that he had important work to do, but he did not have the means or backing to do it. True to form, he prayed. He prayed for friends and money and then opened himself to receive an answer to his prayer. The YMCA was the answer he needed. He wrote a letter to the secretary, R. R. McBurney, and Morris K. Jesup, a wealthy New York banker, happened to see the letter on McBurney's desk (64). The result was monetary assistance for Comstock in his pursuits of vice, as well as the backing of an organization. In 1872, the YMCA created a committee to support Comstock in his work against vice. The problem was that there was no law to legislate

what Comstock was trying to do, especially when he realized he would need to monitor the postal system as well, as much of the obscene material was being sent through the mail (83, 84). His only hope was to petition the United States Congress to pass a law. After much work, many days, and long nights in Washington, the Comstock Law was passed, although Comstock was not present for the final moment as it was the Sabbath, a day of rest (93). The law prohibited any obscene, lewd, or lascivious material (including contraceptive information and products) to be sent through the mail. The penalty was a fine and could also include imprisonment. With the passing of the law, the YMCA created the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV) to which Comstock was appointed Secretary and Chief Special Agent (103, 104). True to Comstock's drive and unwillingness to back down, the office of the NYSSV was conveniently located at 150 Nassau Street, right in the "thick of the city's pornography trade" (Dennis 301). Comstock also recommended that he be appointed Special Agent of the Post-Office Department. His recommendation was accepted (Trumbull 101).

Comstock's vice-hunting career spanned over forty years and, within those years, he made no apology for his tactics or approaches, as he felt it was his job to ferret out the roots of all evil: obscenity, lewdness, and lasciviousness. He gained his strength from God, his support from the NYSSV and the law, and he established his own methods for saving society from moral decay. At the very basis of this decay, he saw the innocence of children being taken away by what he considered detrimental and damaging influences. One of the books written by Comstock addresses his grave concern for the well-being of youth. Written in 1883, well into his career, *Traps for the Young* explains how Comstock feels the innocence and purity of children is sapped away from them by

satanic forces that parade as literature of an obscene and lewd nature. He states: “Satan lays the snare, and children are his victims. His traps, like all others, are baited to allure the human soul” (9). For Comstock, Satan is trying to foul the minds of children in order to win them over. It is quite likely that, given his strong religious convictions and his Victorian sensibilities, Comstock views anything “wrong” as being at the hands of Satan. In this book, he projects a clear understanding of how Satan goes about his work. The paragraph that closes the book’s preface reads as follows:

Our youth are in danger; mentally and morally they are cursed by a literature that is a disgrace to the nineteenth century. The spirit of evil environs them. Let no man be henceforth indifferent. Read, reflect, act.
(6)

Comstock wholeheartedly believed that if youth read or experienced this kind of literature, they would be doomed; once they had a taste of it, even the purest of minds would succumb to it, and the child would be headed down a dark path. His book pleads with parents to protect their children from seeing this type of literature because children’s minds are open to influences that they cannot counter with an undeveloped intellect. He outlines how the evil takes a hold:

Evil thoughts, like bees, go in swarms. A single one may present itself before the mind. If entertainment be extended, or place given it, at once this vile fellow is found to have an immense train in following. I repeat: their approach may be so secret and insidious, that but one may be discerned at first, and yet from all sides they will flock, darkening the eyes of the understanding, filling the ears of reason, until the poor danger signals can no longer be seen nor heard, and the poor victim swiftly becomes insensible to purity and virtue. (7)

His vision of the evil of obscene literature is that of an all-encompassing darkness that will enshroud children and never release them from its clutches. It is interesting to note that Comstock places children in the roles of “victim,” presumably because of their

innocence and lack of judgment; however, in all of his pursuits of the vices of adults, he only targeted the producer and supplier and not the consumer of the material. This is evident when Comstock began his acts of vigilantism against vice because it diseased and ruined his friends. Rather than hold his friends accountable for reading the literature, he only pursued its source.

Each chapter of *Traps for the Young* discusses a “trap” Comstock has identified that he believes can and will entangle children, including newspapers, half-dime novels and story papers, advertisements, and death traps by mail. Regarding newspapers, Comstock explains how easy it is for children to pick up a newspaper that was cast aside in the parlor by their father. He differentiates between the “fact of a crime committed” and the newspaper “making a sensational article or short story, containing all the foul doings of corrupt men and women” (13). Such details would only serve to corrupt children and give them a taste for the sensational that they may begin to seek in their own lives. Comstock urges parents to heed his warnings and to train their children to “habitually call upon God in prayer” in order to burn away the evil and save them from folly (18). He offers the parents the following advice:

Parents have a right, and *it is their duty*, (emphasis Comstock), to close the door of their home against these evils. It is not infringing the liberty of the press to say “These influences shall not enter my home, where my beloved children dwell.” (18)

What Comstock is suggesting is that parents monitor what comes into their house as reading material, and that they have an obligation to protect their children this way. It is interesting to realize that Comstock is fully cognizant of freedom of speech and that preventing certain material from entering the home does not impinge on that freedom, in his opinion. The irony of Comstock making this statement is that he had repeatedly been

criticized because of his censorship law, as his actions removed that freedom from his fellow Americans. It is perhaps acceptable for parents to screen what their children read, while they are children, but is it acceptable for an agent of vice to make the same decisions for the people of America? Comstock places the responsibility on parents, as adults, to make the best decisions for their children. If he believes adults are capable of exercising such judgment, why then does he need to pursue the censorship and banning of literary material? It seems contradictory because, if adults do possess the judgment, it would be assumed that it would extend to decisions about their own reading material and, coupled with their grown-up intellect, they would be able to decide whether to read it and how much of it to read. Early modernists believed it was necessary “to expand one’s consciousness, open oneself to the world, and perfect one’s ability to experience experience – exactly what the Victorians had most feared” (Singal 11). Clearly Comstock embodies this fear as he does not want anyone, children especially, to be open to, and as he sees it, vulnerable to some of the realities of life.

In addition to Comstock worrying that young minds would be corrupted by what they read, he was terribly concerned the literature would lead children to masturbation, which would result in the physical changes he lists here:

Fathers and mothers, look into your child’s face, and when you see the vigor of youth failing, the cheek growing pale, the eye lusterless and sunken, the step listless and faltering, the body enervated, and the desire to be much alone coming over your offspring [. . .], then look seriously for a cause. [. . .] It will be found to come from secret practices, which have early in life sapped the health of mind and body. (154)

He believed that viewing obscene pictures and writings would lead to unhealthy practices in children, and that even educational texts about human anatomy would teach children about their sex organs, which would raise a curiosity and result in self-gratification. He

believed that if children did not have access to this information, they would not be tempted toward this vice (Bates 15).

Comstock believed that Satan created “half-dime novels and story papers,” as he was not satisfied that he had captured enough youthful, innocent minds and souls through the newspapers because parents were in fact catching on and banning them from the home. Comstock said, “[The newspapers] were found to be so gross, so libidinous, so monstrous, that every decent person spurned them. They were excluded from the home on sight” (20). Again, this raises the same question: if people were capable of making the right decisions, as far as Comstock was concerned, and recognized what they should not be allowing their children to read, why did he continually feel the need to step in and rid society of these works all together? Comstock believed the half-dime novels and story papers were traps set by Satan because they were marketed to children. They were inexpensive so children could afford to buy them and they were pocket-sized so children could carry (or conceal!) them in their pockets. Comstock believed all books produced lust, “the boon companion of all other crimes” (qtd. in Boyer 21) such as:

vulgarity, profanity, loose ideas of life, impurity of thought and deed. They render[ed] the imagination unclean, destroy[ed] domestic peace, desolate[d] homes, cheapen[ed] woman’s virtue, and ma[d]e foul-mouthed bullies, cheats, vagabonds, thieves, desperados, and libertines. (25)

Unlike the stories his mother told him, the publications were not tales of “moral heroes” but were rather about robbery, murder, conspiracy, the ruining of a young girl, and other similar themes, including acts that “favor violation of marriage laws and cheapen female virtue” (22). Comstock firmly believed that youth reading books of this nature and subject matter would be led into a life of the same kind of behavior as the characters in the book. His own book lists, anecdotally, the young people he came in contact with who

were in trouble with the law. According to Comstock, they all confessed to having read the half-dime-novels, which led them astray. Because Comstock does not include the first and last name or address of the youthful culprits, it is difficult to determine if he has omitted that information to protect them or because his accounts are fabricated.

Regardless, the recounting supports his point in a very compelling manner. Part of Comstock's meticulous recordkeeping during his vice days includes a chart that lists published arrests (gathered from his casual reading of the newspaper) of youth along with their ages and the crimes committed. The crimes range from pickpocketing to murder and the ages of the criminals are from six to twenty-one. Comstock attributes the committing of these crimes wholly to the reading of the half-dime novels and story papers.

Without a doubt, Comstock's crusade against vice needed to include the protection of children, for if their generation remained pure, chaste, and uncorrupted, it would bode well for a future society of the same, causing the current population of those "diseased" by the obscene, lewd, and lascivious publications to dwindle until they were gone and society was rid of them. Comstock stated: "By cursing the youth of to-day, we heavily discount the prosperity of the future of this nation, and endanger the permanency of our national institutions" ("Vampire Literature" 163). He believed the "writers and publishers [were] conspirators against the nations highest hopes for the future" (163). Unable to wait for the new generation he was hoping to foster, Comstock wore the armor of a crusader. In addition to toting a gun, he had no qualms about employing questionable methods to reach his goal. (It is ironic Comstock titled one of his books *Traps for the Young*, as he was considered notorious for setting traps of his own.) With

very few exceptions, Comstock always got his man, or woman, and he kept a log of all of his vice-hunting accomplishments. They read as follows:

- Over fifty tons of vile books
- 28,425 pounds of stereo types for printing such books
- 3,984,063 obscene pictures
- 16,900 negatives for printing such pictures
- 3,646 persons have been arrested
- Out of those arrested, 2,682 have been convicted or pleaded guilty, and 2,180 have been sentenced

All of the materials would fill almost sixteen freight cars, and sixty-one passenger cars would be needed to transport the people (Trumbull 239). What is not included in Trumbull's biography of Comstock is the number of people who committed suicide at his hand or those whose families and lives that were ruined by the unscrupulous manner in which Comstock sought and secured his prosecutions.

Comstock, however, was by no means immune to finding himself in the role of victim, as he was often the subject of physical attacks as well as mockery and ridicule. The most famous incident of ridicule was offered courtesy of playwright George Bernard Shaw in 1905. Shaw's play, *Man and Superman*, had been removed from the open shelves in the library, with no explanation given. Learning of this, Shaw, who had heard of Comstock and believed him to be responsible, wrote a strong letter to the *New York Times* and stated, among other things, "Comstockery is the world's standing joke at the expense of the United States" (qtd. in "Comstock" 88). In fact, Comstock had nothing to do with the removal of Shaw's play from the shelves (Broun 229). To the reporter who informed Comstock of Shaw's letter, Comstock said "George Bernard Shaw? Let's see – Shaw; who is he? I have never heard of him in my life. Never saw one of his books, so he can't be much" (qtd. in "Comstock" 89). Unfortunately, through Comstock's attempts

to discredit Shaw, he actually admitted his own ignorance because at this time, everyone would have heard of George Bernard Shaw. Comstock's written response to the *Times* included: "Did you ever see such egotism? I had nothing to do with removing this Irish smut dealer's books from the public library shelves, but I will take a hand in the matter now..." (qtd. in "Comstock" 89). That he did by informing the police of the intention of Arnold Daly to mount the production of Shaw's play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, a play about a prostitute, in New York City (Broun 229). Of course, the irony is that Comstock was known for having an ego of his own and perhaps disliked being caught off guard and being spoken of in an effectively negative and public way. The end result is that "Comstockery" has become a well-known and well-used noun by essayists and editorial writers to refer to literature that has suffered at the heavy-handedness of censorship (Broun 18). Comstock was not a reader of literature, nor did he attend the theatre, so it is unsurprising he had not heard of Shaw.

As mentioned earlier, Comstock kept a diary for most of his life. The entries range from seeking help from God, to explanation of his various pursuits and arrests. The perspective Comstock inadvertently offers through his diaries frequently differs from the account of those who were on the opposing side. Which version is correct? It is hard to know. Being the devoutly religious man Comstock was, he would presumably be honest, but given the way he admitted to have conducted himself on several occasions, along with the collective telling of a very different version by those who he had in his sights, their versions may be correct. Regardless, and without a shadow of a doubt, Comstock was fierce and unforgiving for his cause. Prior to his death in 1915, Comstock ordered that his diaries be destroyed following his death. This request was carried out,

but only after Broun and Leech had gained access to them for their 1927 book *Roundsman of the Lord* (Dennis 269).

Comstock was a proud man who was devoted to his life as crusader and vice hunter, and a man who wanted everyone to know him (except when in disguise for his cause). His reputation preceded and followed him, he never vacillated, and he stood his ground, dedicated on every level. He has also been described to be “devoid of humour, lustful after publicity, and vastly ignorant” (Boyer 2). On a rainy day in New York City, Comstock was nearly run over by a wagon as he tried to cross Broadway. Enraged, he approached the wagon, waved his badge under the horse’s nose, and said, “Don’t you know who I am? I’m Anthony Comstock” (Broun 145).

Chapter One

“To Make Words Sing, Dance, Kiss, and Copulate”

While Anthony Comstock addressed obscenity on the streets, established literature was not immune to his crusade. Comstock took great exception to European and British works arriving on American soil that he believed would corrupt the people of the United States. Fourteenth-century Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as well de Balzac's nineteenth-century *Droll Stories*, were among the books suppressed by Comstock's New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Comstock's view of these books was that they were fine in their native languages and homelands because they were only accessible to scholars who had the intellect to discern “smut” from important literature. Comstock recognized that the works may have held value as literature, but, with the increase in literacy in United States, books that once could only be read by the educated were now in the hands of those whom Comstock did not believe were capable of reading books for intellectual purposes. Again, the Victorian divide between human and animal resonates again. Because the uneducated were not “civilized” humans, they should not have access to the things they could not process appropriately. Comstock felt the lower, uneducated classes were reading the books because they incited erotic and licentious feelings by the obscenity he believed was found within. In *Traps for the Young*, Comstock states:

The wit and genius of past writers is of value to the student. The collection of rare books would not be complete without many books that contain offensive matter. The sale and exhibition of these rare and classical books should not be restricted, perhaps, for the student or literary man, but clearly should not be prostituted to indiscriminate circulation or substituted for suppressed obscene publications. (172)

Regarding *Decameron* by Boccaccio, Comstock “recognize[s] [. . .] the book (which he will not name because he does not want to advertise it) has become part of [the] literary inheritance from the fourteenth century.” He accepts the importance of it, even though it was deemed obscene at the time it was written, but, for Comstock, the problem lies in the fact that books like this one of Boccaccio’s were falling into the hands of the uneducated and that the publishers who were reproducing them were promoting the books as “published entire, *all suppressed portions complete.*” Comstock asks: “why stress the last clause?” (173). Because of the nature of the marketing of these works by American publishers, Comstock believed that they were being sold as and because they were considered obscene. To him, they were not being sold for their merit as literature but for their appeal as smut. Comstock felt “[. . .] the suppression of non-genuine and cheap editions of Boccaccio’s book is important, and should be sanctioned by every decent citizen” (176). Basically, Comstock did not want books, especially serious literature, to be bastardized to emphasize their obscenity for the purpose of appealing to the consumer who was seeking smut over literature. Had *Decameron* been translated strictly, and without alteration, from its original language without the American emphasis and billing of the “dirty” parts, it would be interesting to determine if sales would have been equivalent to those of the “non-genuine” and “cheap” versions.

John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Fanny Hill)* was banned in England for “corrupting the King’s subjects” when it was published in 1748. High-ranking church officials protested the book and wanted Cleland, his publisher, and his printer arrested. The bishop of London ordered an end to “the progress of this vile Book, which is an open insult upon Religion and good manners” (qtd. in Karolides 284).

Cleland agreed to expurgate the book, but that was not sufficient for the censors. The result of the ban was the publication of pirated copies, which now included a scene of sodomy that, not surprisingly, was also censored. *Fanny Hill* arrived in America in 1821, and it was immediately banned. Not unlike the situation in Britain, underground copies of the novel began cropping up all over the United States because it was far easier (and less expensive) for publishers and booksellers to meet the American demand by printing their own books, rather than by trying to import versions from Britain. Comstock was constantly seizing the many pirated versions of the book. *Fanny Hill* has the distinction of being the book that was banned the longest in the United States (Karolides 285-86). It was not until 1966 that it was legally ruled to be acceptable when the United States Supreme Court determined it was not considered obscene according to the *Roth* standard of assessing obscenity, which was that material that had a dominant theme designed to incite lust in the average reader, to be classified as such. No doubt the high demand for this book was perpetuated by its “forbidden” status.

In the preface to his book *Traps for the Young*, Comstock states:

We assimilate what we read. The pages of printed matter become our companions. Memory unites them indissolubly, so that, unlike an enemy, we cannot get away from them. They are constant attendants to quicken thought and influence action. (ix)

Comstock indicates that the influence of the written word was very powerful and that the words would essentially embed themselves within the minds of the reader to a point where objectivity and disassociation with the events on a page would not be possible. It is because of this belief that Comstock felt he needed to protect the minds that had yet to be corrupted (children’s and youth’s), and why he was a zealot when it came to any books, including revered literature.

In addition to censoring and banning imported works of literature, Comstock also had contemporary, American works in his sights. One of the most notable authors who fell victim to the scrutiny of Comstock and his vice hunters was Walt Whitman. In 1855, Whitman published his book *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poetry that was influenced by transcendentalism and celebrated the natural world and the human role within it. Whitman's work was believed to be filthy and obscene by some, including poet John Greenleaf Whittier who threw his copy into the fire (Bain 86). Critic Rufus Wilmot Griswold published a review of the publication in *The Criterion* in 1855 and stated, "It is impossible to imagine how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth" (Katz 105). The publication of *Leaves of Grass* cost Whitman his job with the Department of the Interior because the Secretary of the Department believed the book to be indecent and Whitman to be a free-lover (Kemeny 835). Ralph Waldo Emerson, Whitman's acquaintance, approved of the collection of poetry, because it stimulated transcendental ideals, although in 1860 Emerson did suggest to Whitman that he tone down the sexuality. Whitman believed that the evolution towards higher perfection was due in part to the divine presence in all of creation. As Whitman scholar David Kuebrich observed, "this divine force manifested itself in the instinctive desires of the soul – desires for sex, love, freedom, immortality – which could only be satisfied through the soul's participation in divinity" (qtd. in Kemeny 837). Sex was therefore a natural and instinctive part of the process of life and of progress. How could Whitman "tone down" something that was as valid as love, freedom, and immortality? Sex was part of that whole. In his notebook, Whitman referred to how he learned to "make words sing, dance, kiss, and copulate," which Rosemary Graham believes he did from reading

Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, a novel that influenced Whitman strongly (573). If his words did those things, and so did the subjects of his poetry, then they must have been part of who Whitman was and reflected what he believed to be important. In a very real sense, Whitman was his poetry, and he endeavored to stay true to it.

In 1882, twenty-six years after its first publication, the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice (a sister chapter to the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, started by Comstock) informed the District Attorney in Boston that, under the law, *Leaves of Grass* was obscene and needed to be suppressed. The District Attorney contacted James Osgood, Whitman's publisher, and recommended that publication of the book immediately cease and that several lines in several poems be expurgated. Whitman was wholeheartedly against expurgation and stated: "Damn the expurgated books! I say damn 'em! The dirtiest book in all the world is the expurgated book" (qtd. in Reynolds 461). He also believed: "Expurgation is apology, yes, surrender, yes, an admission that something or other was wrong" (qtd. in Kemeny 833). He did not believe his poetry was wrong. Surprisingly, despite his incredibly strong opinion on the matter, Whitman agreed to make some changes because he had already altered the volume to suit middle-class and upper-class readers, whom he believed to be his primary audience (Reynolds 540). The changes Whitman agreed to make turned out to be insufficient, and the Boston District Attorney demanded the removal of specific poems in their entirety from *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman flatly refused to remove any poems and now also refused to change any poems. As a result, Osgood refused to print any more copies of Whitman's books and returned his plates to him. A publisher in Philadelphia agreed to publish *Leaves of Grass* in 1882, and the publicity gained from the controversy in Boston resulted in all

copies of the book selling out in one day. Comstock did not directly and openly target Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* because he was well aware that the middle and upper classes were the primary readers of his work. Comstock respected the privileged classes as they represented the intellectual part of society, and their offspring were among the youth he was trying to protect. By identifying Whitman as a source of obscenity, he would have irked those whom he held in esteem. It was the upper classes who primarily supported and funded Comstock, and therefore to criticize the literature they enjoyed would put the societal aid and financial backing he received at risk. Comstock blamed foreigners and the lower class for the creation and perpetuation of literary smut, and therefore if he placed Whitman in this category, in any way, he would have contradicted himself. As well, there is no evidence that youth (from any class) was reading Whitman's work, so the argument of corruption of children by it would have been unfounded. In order to achieve what he felt was necessary, without compromising his relationship with the wealthy and intellectual, or opposing his own beliefs, Comstock turned to his allies in Boston to suppress Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Beisel, "Constructing" 122).

It is ironic and should be noted that, in many ways, Whitman and Comstock were quite similar. Both men disliked drinking, swearing, and obscenity. Both men held their mothers in high regard and, as a result, both men had the highest respect for women. Whitman and Comstock believed women needed to be protected, and both felt that pornographic and sexual objectification of women contributed to their degradation. If they were so similar in these views, then why would they be diametrically opposed with

regard to Whitman's writing? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to delve into Whitman's controversial poetry.

His poem "Spontaneous Me," from *Children of Adam* within the *Leaves of Grass* collection, is one he initially consented to alter to appease the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice. Whitman's poem celebrates the natural world and an individual's connection to that world as an extension of nature. The poem opens in a non-controversial way with the following lines:

Spontaneous me, Nature
The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with,
The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder,
The hillside whiten'd with blossoms of the mountain ash,
The same late in autumn, the hues of red, yellow, drab, purple,
and light and dark green [. . .]

The first line, "Spontaneous me, Nature," expresses Whitman's belief that people and nature are inextricably tied, and that it is natural for humans to be spontaneous. His capitalization of "Nature" exhibits his respect for it. Neither Comstock nor his vice societies would be able to take issue with the first line, and, in fact, Comstock would likely applaud Whitman for using an upper-case "N" for nature, as it was God who created nature, and it is God for whom Comstock has ultimately undertaken his crusade. Although Whitman's poem may reflect more pagan ideas, his section heading of *Children of Adam* is acknowledgement of his belief in a higher power and therefore ultimately connects the idea of Nature to God.

The lines that follow in the stanza above shift from the "me" to introduce another person to the scene. For Whitman, natural things are so important they must be shared. Even though there is physical contact between the speaker and "the friend," because his friend's arm is "hanging idly over [his] shoulder," the touching is platonic, completely

non-sexual, in fact, so casual, it is impossible to determine the sex of his friend. Because Whitman hovers only briefly over the physical touching and moves into admiring nature, the sense that he conveys is that the person he is with is there to enjoy the beauty of their surroundings and thus reinforces the significance and importance of nature by needing to share it with someone else. Once again, this is a very pastoral and morally sound collection of lines.

Whitman uses stream-of-consciousness approach to his work, and it is necessary to flow with him from one idea to the next, despite the lack of conventional punctuation. The next lines exhibit this subtle shift in direction from the first lines:

The rich coverlet of the grass, animals and birds, the private
Untrimmed bank, the primitive apples, the pebble-stones,
Beautiful dripping fragments, the negligent list of one after an-
other as I happen to call them to me or think of them [. . .]

In the first stanza, the idea of the need to share the beauty of nature with others is clear, as is the description of the larger landscape “hillside” and the general colours and hues of autumn. Whitman is now honing in on something. He describes very specific things rather than the vistas of the beginning. He points out animals and birds, apples, and stones and refers to “fragments.” With the use of the word “private,” the reader, including morally aware ones, would suddenly be cognizant of a change of direction. Now, instead of an overall, shared experience, Whitman is whittling things down to a more detailed and personal acknowledgement of what surrounds him. Despite this change, beyond capturing the attention of his naysayers, his lines can still be construed to be innocent. Although it is known that Comstock was not much of a reader, one has to question whether or not he had an intellect sensitive to subtleties, or if he was simply determined to find obscenity where it either did not exist or where the meaning of

something could be seen to be obscene. Given the reputation Whitman had for his sexually-themed writing, Comstock and his peers could have read much more into the second stanza of “Spontaneous Me” so that it did read sexually and, therefore, in their eyes, obscenely.

“The rich coverlet of grass” could be seen as a blanket for the “animals” (which to Whitman was humans, thereby inadvertently playing with the Victorian dichotomy), and the “private untrimmed bank” might be the pubic hair of a woman, with the “primitive apples” (evoking thoughts of Eve in the Garden of Eden), her breasts. The “pebble-stones” and “dripping fragments” could represent male genitalia. The question is, did Comstock possess awareness at this level or not? Given his lack of education, which would ironically render him a Victorian “animal,” and lack of interest in reading things other than the Bible, for the sake of argument, it will be assumed that he would be unable to make the associations suggested for the second stanza and, therefore, to this point, the poem would still be morally acceptable to Comstock.

The third stanza makes the direction Whitman is taking us more obvious:

The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures,)
The poems of the privacy of night, and of men like me,
This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that
all men carry,
(Know once for all, avow’d on purpose, wherever are men like
me, are our lusty lurking masculine poems,) [. . .]

Whitman is now differentiating between the conventions of a poem (“what we call poems”) being the visual he provided for us in the first stanza, and what “real” poems are, which is what occurs in the “privacy of the night,” namely: sex. Without a doubt, the phrase “privacy of the night, and of men like me” would raise Comstock’s eyebrows because it is fairly blatant that Whitman is referring to sex. If Comstock were the least

bit unsure and needed confirmation, the lines that follow that phrase would clarify: “This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry” (including Comstock) is referring to a flaccid penis. It is most interesting to note that in *Walt Whitman’s Blue Book*, which contains his *Leaves of Grass* poems in their 1860 version, are copies of Whitman’s editing in his own hand. In pencil, Whitman had struck out this typed line. It is unclear why, but perhaps he felt it to be too explicit. Regardless, five years later, he reinstated the line and at the top of the page within the *Blue Book* he wrote by hand “satisfactory” – Jan 1865” (306). Whatever his apprehensions were with this line, he came to terms with it for the publication of the poem.

Whitman also makes the definitive statement “wherever are men like me,” so any man with a penis, therefore all men, are lusting and lurking. Comstock believed that “lust [was] the boon companion of all other crimes” and that it “breeds unhallowed living, and sinks man, made in the image of God, below the level of beasts” (*Traps* 132). Whitman expresses what could be considered honesty about the sexual drive of men. He presents men having desires as being part of who they are, and he is quite frank about it. Comstock, on the other hand, who must also possess those innate desires because he has a penis, forces them down and identifies them as being wrong, so wrong that they are essentially at the root of all evil. Because of his disdain for anything that can be interpreted as expressions of lust, or a promotion of lust, as Whitman’s poem could be considered to be, it is clear Comstock would have been greatly offended and angered by these lines of Whitman’s poetry because of the evil he believes lust incites.

The next lines would represent one key area where Whitman and Comstock would differ. Despite both of them respecting and wanting to protect women, Comstock

believes sex belongs in private, at home, with one's spouse, for the purpose of procreation. Whitman, on the other hand, celebrates sex and does so in a way that he believes is respectful and does not objectify women. Comstock's version of "private" refers to no discussions of sex, with the bedroom door tightly closed, while Whitman's refers openly to the beauty and naturalness of the act:

Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers,
And the climbing sap,
Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love, breasts
of love, bellies press'd and glued together with love
Earth of chaste love, life that is only life after love [. . .]

Stating the obvious, this stanza is filled with "love." Whitman is not describing a scene of mere lust or violent or forced sex. He is describing intercourse as a mutual act of love and, because of that, the love is "chaste." The effect of the moment is so profound that life only truly becomes life "after love." Life only really begins to be fulfilling after experiencing this kind of love.

Although it is impossible to know of the nature of Comstock's physical relationship with his wife, can it be assumed that he would have been unable to fathom the level of joy of sexual intercourse that Whitman expresses in his poetry, because it was not for the purpose of procreation? Is it because Comstock, who dearly loved his wife, was sexually repressed that he found this kind of literature so repulsive and offensive? Did he perhaps share the desires to which Whitman refers but had to repress them in the name of serving God and his crusade by believing he was protecting women and children from such obscenity even when it was poetically celebrated? If Comstock was against random acts of sex and sex for the sake of lust, then should he have a problem with "Spontaneous Me," which presents sex as rather virtuous and in a way that draws on the

beauty of nature? Whitman is not crude in his language, and he is describing a very natural act in a very tasteful and artistic way. The line that follows is, “The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the body of the earth.” One can almost envision Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as Adam is conventionally understood to represent “man” and Eve, “woman,” which is perhaps what Whitman was striving for as this poem is found in the *Children of Adam* series within *Leaves of Grass*. Perhaps part of the reason Comstock could have a problem with it is that the scene could be construed as a re-enactment of the Original Sin which, in his eyes, should not be glorified and extolled.

As mentioned earlier, Rosemary Graham believes Whitman was strongly influenced by *Fanny Hill*. If this was indeed the case, then Comstock would have opposed the works in question in *Leaves of Grass*. *Fanny Hill* was the proverbial thorn in Comstock’s side that continually had to be removed. One of the most referenced sections of Whitman’s poetry is the “twenty ninth bather” section of “Song of Myself”:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly the drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah, the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, it ran from their
long hair,

Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also passed over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float o their backs-their white bellies bulge to
the sun-they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and
bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray [. . .]

The scene and lines from *Fanny Hill* that Graham believes influenced Whitman, and subsequently found their way into his poem, were regarding the scene in the novel where Harriet is telling stories and recounts her own tale where she wandered to a house that was situated on the riverbank. She fell asleep and awoke to sounds of splashing and discovered a young, naked man in the water. Harriet, like the woman in Whitman's poem, hides so as not to be seen. Eventually she is impelled to come out and to see the naked man. She sees the "lustre of the whitest skin imaginable" with the "sun playing on it" and a "glossy white belly" (576). Whitman's line "The young men float on their backs-their white bellies bulge to the sun" is almost identical to those in *Fanny Hill*, and the words used are extremely close, too close to be coincidental. For Whitman to value the novel enough to draw from it emphasizes the fact that he must have recognized the work as a legitimate piece of literature and was not put off by the sexuality of that particular scene or the fact that the protagonist of the book was a prostitute. One could very easily consider Whitman's "twenty-ninth bather" to be a strumpet, as she is not intimidated to approach and initiate relations with twenty-eight nude men. By entering the water with them, she is doing so with sexual purpose. As they are all being "seized," rather than one man being chosen by her, she must be a woman of experience, as she is not frightened or threatened by them. In addition to the scenario being provocative,

clearly the last lines refer to the unnamed woman (for a prostitute does not need to have a name) providing them with sexual gratification. Her hand descends along their bodies until it “seizes fast to them.” The “puffs” refer to the heaving breathing of climax, and the bending arch would be the men’s penises in her grip. The spray with which they are sousing her would be their ejaculate.

The Victorian polarities of human and animal, right and wrong, moral and immoral also extend to a “sexual polarity” between men and women. Rooted in biology and nature, men are “rational and assertive,” while women are “emotional and passive,” and, in order to maintain morality, it was necessary to keep the two segregated (qtd. in Singal 10). Victorians “aspired to [. . .] a radical standard of innocence,” and Whitman’s poem did not rise to that standard; clearly, he believes men and women to be sexual beings who should not be segregated. As well, in a very modernist move, he reversed men from their assertive and women from their passive roles in this particular poem, because he saw nothing wrong with women being forward, including in sexual situations.

In addition, being wholly against a woman behaving in what he would perceive to be a very inappropriate way, Comstock would also be dismayed by the suggested detail with which the act is being described. It is not referred to in obscure terms, that a woman was frolicking with twenty-eight naked men with the result left to the imagination of the reader. Whitman explains, very creatively, what is actually transpiring, in detail. The connection to *Fanny Hill* is also an important one when considering Comstock’s point of view because of the connection to prostitutes. While Comstock does not specifically discuss prostitution, he does express concern about young girls needing to remain pure. He refers to the “restraints which keep boys and girls, young men and maidens pure and

chaste, which prevent [the] homes from being turned into voluntary brothels” (*Traps*159). Even loose behavior that would result in makeshift, informal brothels is not acceptable to Comstock, not only from the perspective of protecting women but also so that men would not be tempted.

In the time of Whitman and Comstock, masturbation was referred to euphemistically as the “solitary vice” (Reynolds 199). Comstock believed engaging in masturbation would lead to physical as well as moral harm.

Fathers and mothers, look into your child’s face, and when you see the vigor of youth failing, the cheek growing pale, the eye lustreless and sunken, the step listless and faltering, the body enervated, and the desire to be much alone coming over your offspring; when close application to work or study becomes irksome, and the buoyancy of youth gives place to peevishness and irritability, then seriously look for a cause. [...] In many instances it will be found to come from secret practices, which have early in life sapped the health of mind and body. (*Traps* 154)

Comstock was not the only one of his era to believe this. Sylvester Graham, who campaigned against masturbation at that time, said it resulted in a “blighted body – and a ruined soul,” and those who practice the solitary vice become “filled with self-contempt, and disgust, and reproach [and] is sick of himself and everything around him.” He also stated that the masturbator’s face takes on a “sickly, pale, shriveled, turbid and cadaverous aspect” (qtd. in Reynolds 199, 200).

The final lines from “Spontaneous Me” describe a masturbatory moment:

The greed that eats me day and night with hungry gnaw, till I
saturate what shall produce boys to fill my place when I
am through,
The wholesome relief, repose, content,
And this bunch pluck’d at random for myself,
It had done its work – I toss it carelessly to fall where it may.

Whitman seems to be expressing a desire for sex (“hungry gnaw”), but in this instance it appears that the speaker is engaging in masturbation. “Bunch,” which was the original title of this poem, refers to semen, and so the “bunch [he] pluck’d at random for [him]self” represents self-gratification. Because he has already procreated in the poem, like Onan, he now lets his seed spill “where it may.” He is letting the reader know that sex occurs for reasons of love and reproduction, but desire is present beyond that. His willingness to masturbate in his poem, in a sense, shows that he believes masturbation is permissible and natural. In this regard, Whitman and Comstock do not agree.

If, as referenced earlier, Whitman believed sex was part of the desire of the soul that leads to evolutionary progress toward the divine, then masturbation must have been included in that category for him. Several of his poems include lines and passages that strongly suggest or imply masturbation, a topic which seems to be familiar to him and one which he has well in hand. One of Whitman’s favorite physiological books was *Lectures to Women on Anatomy and Physiology* by Mary S. Grove. The book stated that masturbation was “fearfully common,” including among respectable women (qtd. in Reynolds 202). Whitman had no issue with it, but Comstock and his peers clearly did. Whitman’s poem seemed to try to strike a balance between being true to himself and his beliefs and trying to appease the puritanical censors (201).

In “Spontaneous Me,” the speaker attempts to maintain balance:

The young man that wakes deep at night, the hot hand seeking to
repress what would master him,
The mystic amorous night, the strange half-welcome pangs, visions,
sweats,
The pulse pounding through the palms and trembling encircling
fingers, the young man all color’d, red, ashamed, angry [. . .]

Whitman is expressing a moment that is not uncommon for men, particularly a “young man.” The “hot hand” is clearly very sexual, as sex is often connoted to be hot, plus actual heat could be radiating from the young man’s hand as a sign that his heart rate is elevated and blood is pumping vigorously through his system because of his active libido. This would not be to the liking of Comstock or his fellow censors; however, Whitman states the young man (a term which suggests young “gentleman”) is trying to “repress” his urges. Given Comstock’s hatred for masturbation and the evils it brings about, Whitman’s effort to show that the young man is making an effort to restrain himself should please Comstock, although, with this assertion, the poet’s tongue is embedded in his cheek.

The use of the word “mystic” indicates that the urges the young man is experiencing are from beyond his world or, in other words, out of his control. Whitman does not go so far as to suggest they are from the divine, but, once again, given his view of the connection between sex and the divine, it is quite acceptable to surmise the same in these lines. The fact that the young man “wakes” from “deep” sleep to this mystic desire relinquishes him of the responsibility of having brought these feelings on himself in the way Comstock suggests is possible by reading “evil” books. So while Whitman is showing that these desires are naturally occurring, thus protecting his creative right to refer to them without being considered obscene and gratuitous (thereby keeping the censors at bay), he is also showing Comstock that those desires were not born from reading obscene literature, but they came to the young man while he was, for all intents and purposes, unconscious. For Whitman, masturbation is innate and acceptable. Given Comstock’s position, he would insist that because the young man in the poem was

sexually active in earlier stanzas, he has ingrained lust and desire into his psyche that has become part of his persona, and, therefore, it would surface unconsciously.

The term “half-welcome” continues the idea that while the young man may be appreciative of the relief he gained from masturbating, it seems as if it was the only option to resolve his problem. He undertook it out of that need rather than the need to experience the pleasure that accompanied it, in a sense taking the good with the bad. Whitman and Comstock would most certainly be on opposing sides as to which part was the good and which the bad. The last phrase in the stanza leads the reader to think that the idea is headed in one direction, when in fact it goes quite another: “the young man all color’d, red, ashamed, angry.” After climaxing, it would be expected that the young man would be “color’d” and “red” and the reader anticipates a great sigh of relief from him, but Whitman determines that he is in fact “ashamed” and “angry.” Given Whitman’s belief that the act is natural and innate, shame and anger should not enter into it. Perhaps this is Whitman’s last-ditch effort to redeem himself with the puritanical watch-dogs. If he suggests repentance, then he can re-emphasize the lack of choice in the matter and convince the prudes that the young man did not commit this act under his own volition, and should therefore not be castigated for it but should be forgiven.

Other passages in other *Leaves of Grass* poems suggest masturbation as well, and Whitman seems to approach them in a similar way. If he was against it, he would not include it, but to reproach it back-handedly among the same lines shows that he was perhaps using it as a strategy. In “The Sleepers,” one of Whitman’s lines is “the sick-gray faces of the onanists” which directly correlates to Sylvester Graham’s statement that the face of a masturbator is “sickly” and “pale.” Whether Whitman was referring to

Graham's view or not, he shows masturbation in a negative light, once again, and as having detrimental physical affects as well (Reynolds 200). Did he believe masturbation could be harmful? Most likely not, but, by playing to those who stood for and promoted good morals, he could have been trying to lessen the blow.

In "Song of Myself," Reynolds notes that Whitman's "bold frankness contrasted with the prudery of his time and culture" (200). The lines he is referring to are:

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
Tracherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them, [...]

The sentries desert every part of me,
They have left me helpless to a red marauder,
They alone come to the headland to witness against and assist against
me.

I am given up by traitors,
I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest
traitor,
I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there.

Reynolds identifies these lines as a "Grahamite masturbatory nightmare" (200). This could extend to include a "Comstockian" nightmare as well. Everything Graham and Comstock feared about masturbation, Whitman brings to literary fruition. The word "flames" could invoke hell, which directly aligns with the evil of the solitary vice. By referring to the tip of the penis as "treacherous," the masturbator is literally playing with danger, something with which Comstock would agree. The following lines express that when one is left alone, without "sentries," it is very difficult to stay in control, and ultimately one becomes a traitor to oneself. For Comstock, this is exactly his point about lust. Once you start, you cannot stop, and ultimately you end up falling into worse things, including losing yourself to your vices. Again, one has to wonder why Whitman is confirming what Comstock (and Graham) believed to be true about the evils of

masturbation? Is he doing it to show them he is on their side and wants to warn his reader, or is he once again using this tact as a way to include scenes of masturbation in his poetry and get away with it?

Whitman's canon of work is far too extensive to consider every poem. But the examples given here provide the type of language and theme typical to Whitman. That is not to say all of his poems concern sex and masturbation, but with regard to the poems that do, of which there are many, his openness, frankness, and acceptance of sexuality is critical to who he was and to the poetry he wrote. Being true to himself was essential, which is why he ultimately opted not to expurgate his work and ultimately had to go searching for a new publisher when Osgood let him go.

Some wholeheartedly supported Whitman and his work, while others shared the opinion of Comstock and his fellow censors. Whitman was a modernist ahead of his time. His writing reflects his desire to loosen the constraints of what Victorians perceived as right versus wrong, moral versus immoral. His work tested the waters of the modernist ideas of the need to question the traditions, to which Victorians held so tightly, and to explore the world on all levels, in order to "experience experience." (Because Whitman was twenty-five years older than Comstock, it is notable that Whitman would be more open to the changes being introduced by the future than Comstock.) As mentioned earlier, Whitman and Emerson were acquaintances. Emerson was most impressed with Whitman's poetry, except for the sexually-charged pieces. However, when Whitman sent his 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* to Emerson, which still contained all of the poems intact, Emerson stated: "tell Walt I am not satisfied," and their relationship dwindled (Kemeny 815). So despite the similarities in their transcendental

beliefs in the value of the connection between human and nature, Emerson was not ready to initiate the move to the open, questioning, and experiential ideas that would become synonymous with the modernist period. Free-love advocate Ezra Heywood was very much ready for that move. Heywood fully supported Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*, so much so that Comstock arrested him for knowingly and willingly publishing a supplement of some of the poems from *Leaves of Grass* including “To a Common Prostitute” and “A Woman Waits for Me” (842). The grand jury declared the poems “too grossly obscene and lewd to be placed on the records of the court,” and the case had to be heard without the jury being able to read even a line of the poetry (qtd. in Karolides 388). The judge threw the case out on a technicality, and Whitman “privately rejoiced over Comstock’s defeat.” He gloated, “Comstock retires with his tail intensely curved inward” (qtd. in Kemeny 842). Despite Heywood’s public and enthusiastic support of Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman kept his distance from Heywood because, while they shared similar views on sexuality and free love, Whitman was not a supporter of the abolishment of marriage, and Heywood was.

One of the most fascinating and significant voices of support for Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* came from Mark Twain. Both Twain and Whitman were published by Osgood, so it is not surprising that they were familiar with each other. Neither of them was terribly keen on the other’s work, but, despite that, Twain wrote an article as a gesture of support for Whitman, which was never published (Folsom 2). Because Twain skirted the line of obscenity himself, and also took great amusement in the hypocrisy of the censors in allowing such literature as that written by Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and so forth, it sparked his interest to see what Whitman had written that

was being suppressed. Twain's article was called "The Walt Whitman Controversy" and was written in 1882. It was made public for the first time in 2007 in an article written by Ed Folsom and Jerome Loving, entitled "The Walt Whitman Controversy: A Lost Document." In his article, Twain says:

I have seen, thus far, only one remotely reasonable argument in justification of the law's letting old obscene books alone and tomahawking new ones. It is this: the old ones merely (and innocently) mirrored the life of their times, and the indecencies in them were not written with the intent to defile the reader's mind. Hence they were harmless. That is the one apparently reasonable argument which I have thus far encountered. But when you come to examine it carefully, it seems to be quite insufficient. For this reason: we surely do not make laws against the *intent* of obscene writings, but against their probable *effect*. If this is true, it seems to follow that we ought to condemn all indecent literature, regardless of its date. Because a book was harmless a hundred years ago, it does not follow that it is harmless to-day. A century or so ago, the foulest writings could not soil the English mind, because it was already defiled past defilement; but those same writings find a very different clientage to work upon now. Those books are not dead; among us they are bought and sold and read, every day. (n.p.)

Twain's perspective on this aligns with the concern of the censors with regard to established literary works. The difference, however, is that Twain does not identify the changes to the original versions of these texts; however, for Comstock, this is key to the issue. Twain's point is that if it was valuable literature then, it should still be valuable literature today. Throughout his article, he compares "good old books" with "bad new books" and, in a sense, discredits the older literature to make his point with the contemporary works, that they are one and the same. He states that Whitman's book is "refined and colorless and impotent, contrasted with that other and more widely read batch of literature." To Twain, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* does not compare in terms of obscenity level to the older literature. For the rest of the article, Twain extracts lines from other literature as well as lines from *Leaves of Grass* in order to compare and

contrast them to make his point. Ironically, the potential publisher of Twain's article has edited it, and several references and comments provided by Twain have been removed for being obscene or too coarse. Twain ends his piece with the following paragraph:

There – I have finished my quotations. And now I suspect that you will not dare to print them in full. As likely as not, you will cut them down to next to nothing, or even leave them out altogether. But if you do, I shall not complain; for such a course will formidably fortify my position, since it will show that you know, quite well, that antiquity & absence of evil intent can't take the harmfulness out of indelicate literature. Yes, you know that indecent literature is indecent literature; & that the effects produced by it are exactly the same, whether the writing was done yesterday or a thousand centuries ago; & that these effects are the same, whether the writer's intent was evil or innocent. Whitman's noble work. (n.p.)

Although Twain is seeking to assimilate old and new literature, he is doing so to prove the point. Obscenity is obscenity, and, if it is acceptable in older literature, then it should also be acceptable in contemporary literature, as well. He especially believed this about milder, newer works, such as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

The banning of *Leaves of Grass* was not seen as a decisive victory for the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, for even though they did stop the Osgood edition, they did not stop the definitive edition. The public controversy generated by the suppression of *Leaves of Grass* was a learning experience for the New England Society in that they learned to not openly and publicly threaten to suppress publishers and authors, unlike Comstock who made a point of informing everyone he could who was being prosecuted and why. As well, the New England Society made a point of not advertising the books they had banned because they knew the result would be increased sales for that book, and numerous efforts to publish even more copies. Comstock was very vocal about which books he banned. In 1891, the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice

realized they needed to disassociate themselves from Comstock, who had become a controversial figure, and they did so by changing their name to the New England Watch and Ward Society (Kemeny 845). It appears as though the notorious censor was now being censured himself.

Chapter Three

“Above All They Must Not Attempt To Shield Themselves Behind Illusions or Gentility”

Anthony Comstock contended that literature had to be morally uplifting. He advocated that “stories where the hero is not a thief, murderer, or desperado, but a *moral hero*, whose chief trait of character is standing for the right” (*Traps* 12). He maintained that “the community [was] cursed by pernicious literature [and that] ignorance as to its debasing character in numerous instances, and indifference that is disgraceful in others, tolerate and sanction [that] evil” (5). This notion was typical of the Victorian need to preserve the tradition of morality and maintain the pronounced divide between right and wrong, in an effort to uphold and promote the standard of innocence. Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel, *Sister Carrie*, was very much a departure from nineteenth-century literature and contained characteristics and traits of early modernist literature. According to Wayne Morgan, Dreiser “understood that popular fiction [at that time] bore little relation to the world he knew, and that masses of people were absorbing a false view of life” (155). This was his impetus to write *Sister Carrie*. He wanted people to experience real life and knew that “America was poised for a change in institutions and values that might make his new viewpoint acceptable or even fashionable.” Dreiser expected he would face opposition because he knew “how shallow and wrong public tastes and standards could be” (156). He said:

We were taught persistently to shun most human experience as either dangerous or degrading or destructive. The less you knew about life the better; the more you knew about the fictional heaven and hell ditto. People walked by in a kind of sanctified daze or dream, hypnotized or self-hypnotized by an erratic and impossible theory of human conduct which had grown up heaven knows where or how, and had finally cast its amethystine spell over all America, if not over all of the world. (qtd. in Morgan 156)

Sister Carrie would not be morally acceptable according to Comstock's standards, and it also did not meet with publisher Frank Doubleday's approval because of the lack of morality. He wanted to renege on his contract with Dreiser for *Sister Carrie* because Mrs. Doubleday found the novel offensive. Although Comstock was not directly involved in the controversy surrounding the publication of this novel, the Doubledays' response was based on Comstock's influence on society and, ultimately, his legacy. Because Dreiser had a contract, Doubleday had no choice but to publish the novel. Out of the one thousand copies that were printed, however, only 456 were sold because Doubleday did not advertise or promote the novel in any way (Pizer 10). The Doubledays' reaction to *Sister Carrie* aligned with Comstock's view of what literature should not represent. Comstock's theory of literature was that it should be clean and chaste, and literature that was not was as toxic as poison and fatal to anyone who read it (Haldeman-Julius 47).

For Comstock, literature should be positive and always impart a moral lesson; it had to be didactic. Daniel Singal's view of Victorians concurs with this idea, an idea that differs from the modernist vision of art. He states, "Where Victorians saw art as didactic in purpose – as a vehicle for communicating and illustrating preordained moral truths – to Modernists it has become the principle means of creating whatever provisional order human beings can attain" (15). In short, the Victorian view of how people learn to behave is based on contrived and prescribed ideas, whereas modernists rely on actual life as the basis for both representation and authenticity. Modernists believe to "create values and garner whatever knowledge is available, individuals must repeatedly subject themselves – both directly, and vicariously through art – to the trials of experience.

Above all they must not attempt to shield themselves behind illusions or gentility” (15). It is important to recognize life with all of its scars in order to live it realistically, rather than to aspire to live a life that is based in unrealistic and contrived ideas, which can never be attained. David Carr and Robert Davis, in their article for the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, look closely at the “moral potential” of works of art, including literature. They assert that art and aesthetic in literature are compromised for the sake of an ethical or moral lesson and believe that it is possible for a work to be morally educational without needing to be outwardly didactic:

[The] benefit of artworks [literature] is that they open particular modes of (vicarious) experiential or affective access to the ideas, themes or narratives that they are otherwise concerned to explore. Baldly stated, one key difference between a newspaper report of a World War I battle and a Wilfred Owen poem is that whereas the news article merely seeks to inform us about what happened, the poem attempts [...] to communicate some feeling of what it may have been like to be there. (105)

Although Comstock supports the black-and-white didactic message, he is not an advocate of newspapers for teaching those lessons and states, “Another fruitful source of danger to the youth is the sickening details of loathsome crimes as they appear in many of our newspapers” (*Traps* 13). Because he believed newspaper stories sensationalized events and contained “all the foul doings of corrupt men and women,” it is easy to understand why he did not support or promote realistic and lifelike novels, because they, too, in his opinion, did not represent the facts.

The theories of Carr and Davis offer an effective way to examine *Sister Carrie*, in terms of whether or not it can be categorized as an immoral novel. If it is, in fact, immoral, then consideration must be given to whether morality can be understood through the realism that exists in the novel, rather than, and in the absence of, the heavy-

handed approach of lesson-teaching Comstock believes is imperative. At the heart of the debate is the most common complaint made by moral critics of *Sister Carrie*, which is the lack of consequence and punishment for the “sins” the characters commit:

Neither Carrie nor Hurstwood are subject to the “laws” of morality. While they both “sin,” one profits and the other suffers from the course of events. There is absolutely no relationship in this novel between what one does against society and what happens to him. [...] The laws at work in *Sister Carrie* are those of mechanistic and not conventional morality. (Lehan 76)

F. O. Matthiessen attributes this to being a product of the time, believing that “Carrie not only escaped punishment – Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful; and this was at the crux of his defiance of late nineteenth-century conventionality” (170).

These viewpoints are tied closely to Comstock’s preference for the type of didacticism that imparts a cause-and-effect approach, and which does exist explicitly in *Sister Carrie*, but only implicitly. The novel does not present a lesson as directly and as immediately as, for example, touching a stove teaches it is hot; it is necessary to experience the various decisions and milestones of the characters before drawing conclusions. In the novel this is achieved through the associative art and aesthetic created through Dreiser’s realism. Although Richard Lehan, F.O. Matthiessen, and others believe the consequences to be mechanistic, Carrie and Hurstwood have indeed suffered from their choices.

In brief, *Sister Carrie* is a story about a young girl, coming of age, who leaves her home to live with her sister and brother-in-law in Chicago. Essentially, protagonist Carrie struggles to settle in and settle for the confining life of domesticity her sister has established. Ultimately, Carrie leaves her sister’s home and tries to find her own way in the city. She reconnects with a kind, male stranger she met on the train, Drouet, who

offers to pay for an apartment for her and support her. He eventually moves in with her, and, although it is never outwardly stated, there is vague implication that they do have an intimate relationship. Carrie meets Drouet's friend, Hurstwood, and she falls in love with him. They do not embark on physical relations in the beginning, but Hurstwood would very much like to consummate his relationship with Carrie, and he sets out to achieve his goal, at the expense of his own marriage. Carrie ends her relationship with Drouet and is tricked by Hurstwood into leaving the city with him. Before fleeing with Carrie to Canada, and then New York City, Hurstwood steals money from his employer. Once a successful businessman, Hurstwood becomes unable to support Carrie in their new environs because of his inability to find satisfactory work, and his resulting depression has a negative impact on their relationship. Carrie leaves Hurstwood when she discovers she can support herself as an actress and dancer, and she eventually loses track of Hurstwood who is now penniless, homeless, and ill. Hurstwood dies, and Carrie becomes successful in her career. She remains alone, however, with no one to love and no one to love her, which is what the reader believes is all she ever really wanted.

Based on the standard established by Carr and Davis, it is possible to determine if in fact *Sister Carrie* is a novel that can be "officially" categorized as one lacking morals and ethics. Carr and Davis discuss modes they believe exist in literature and that identify novels as such. The first mode they offer is "Bad Characters":

Generally the realism of much modern fiction has reveled in forms of psychological veracity in which morally suspect figures are seen to thrive. . . . Many of these seem particularly adept at navigating the ethical uncertainties of modern life, its rejection of hierarchy and tradition, and its constant refrain that values are everywhere negotiable rather than absolute. (101)

Can any of the three principle characters, Carrie, Drouet, or Hurstwood, be considered “bad characters” based on the criteria above? Perhaps Carrie can because she establishes relationships with two men to whom she is not married. If she is morally suspect because of her living arrangements, it is essential to recognize that they were out of her need to survive and not because she was using the men to gain riches and wealth and to satisfy her own needs. Her intent was innocent and therefore only skirts the line of being morally questionable. Dreiser touches on this within his novel in reference to Carrie’s new living arrangement with Drouet:

In the light of the world’s attitude toward woman and her duties, the nature of Carrie’s mental state deserves consideration. Actions such as hers are measured by an arbitrary scale. Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good. All women virtuous. (68)

Essentially, Dreiser points out that because of societal conventions, Carrie must be guilty of her actions (living with, and engaging in a relationship with, Drouet), but that society does not take into account Carrie’s circumstances or her “mental state,” meaning her poverty and miserable existence without Drouet. This emphasizes the notion that Carrie was walking a fine moral line, but, because she crossed it, even if justified, her morality must be called into question. This particular passage is not only relevant to the story but also echoes Dreiser’s personal desire to break free from the confines and judgments of nineteenth-century society.

Carrie, according to Sheldon Grebstein, “thrives. She fills out in form. She becomes more aware. She learns delicacy and grace” (546). The question is, does this make her “morally suspect”? Grebstein’s suggestion that Carrie thrives because she fills out, becomes more aware and graceful, is unfounded. Carrie was a young girl who is

physically growing and maturing. The traits to which Grebstein attributes to her thriving are naturally occurring in any female in the transition from adolescence to maturity. She would have met those milestones regardless of her living arrangements. They are therefore not accurate in questioning her morals. As far as “navigating the ethical uncertainties,” Carrie could be considered guilty when she enters a secret relationship with Hurstwood, albeit a platonic one, while she is living with and being supported by Drouet. If her living arrangements with Drouet and Hurstwood are to be considered, perhaps Carrie does consider values to be negotiable.

Drouet could probably be considered the least “bad” of these three characters, as he has given Carrie a place to live and is supporting her. His immorality is based on a cynical assumption that he was helping Carrie for his own benefit, rather than just to be a kind soul. The fact that he participated in a sexual relationship with her is enough to support this assertion. Chapter eight of *Sister Carrie* illustrates his justification for having a physical relationship with her, based on inherent need and nature, rather than by choice, which makes his level of immorality flexible.

He could not help what he was going to do. He could not see clearly enough to wish to do differently. He was drawn by his innate desire to act on the old pursuing part. He would need to delight himself with Carrie as surely as he would need to eat a heavy breakfast. He might suffer the least rudimentary twinge of conscience in whatever he did, and in just so far he was evil and sinning. But whatever twinges of conscience he might have would be rudimentary, you may be sure. (58)

As well, by comparing his need for intercourse with Carrie to a need for a heavy breakfast, Drouet seems unable to discern the difference of the level and impact of both acts, and thereby eases his conscience by equating them. Because he does not take Carrie’s feeling into consideration in performing this innate act, he is selfish and self-

centred. However, because twinges of conscience do exist, even though they would be “rudimentary,” it shows he is simply answering nature’s imperative and nothing more. Therefore, as sexual relations with Carrie are not intended to take advantage of her, Drouet’s level of “bad” is present but not excessive.

Hurstwood is by far the worst character of the three when considering Carr and Davis’s categorization of “bad characters.” Not only did he enter into a relationship with Carrie (initially platonic, but with the intent and desire for more) while he was married, but, also, he did not inform Carrie of his marital status. When Carrie discovers Hurstwood is married, however, he shows a complete lack of guilt in his pursuit of Carrie while still legally committed to another woman, and he also shows that her rebuffing him makes him more attracted to her.

To add to his misery there was no word from Carrie. He was quite certain now that she knew he was married and was angered by his perfidy. His loss seemed all the more bitter now that he needed her most. He thought he would go out and insist on seeing her if she did not send him word of some sort soon. He was really affected most miserably of all by this desertion. He had loved her earnestly enough, but now that the possibility of losing her stared him in the face, she seemed much more attractive. (176)

The use of the word “deserted” emphasizes Hurstwood’s complete self-centredness. He has committed the wrong and yet believes he is the victim because Carrie has stopped contact with him. This is an example of his needing Carrie to bolster his ego and suggests that this relationship is not one of equals. To Hurstwood, Carrie is a possession, as confirmed by the fact that he is more attracted to her at the thought of losing her. If he genuinely cared about her, not only would he have treated her with more respect, overall, he would not have been more aroused just by the prospect of her ending the relationship with him.

Hurstwood is also a thief, which was made even worse by the fact that he did not steal the money out of necessity for food and survival, he steals it to get himself out of the unethical situation he creates for himself through his selfishness and self-centeredness. Towards the latter part of the novel, he does not actively and honestly look for work in order to support Carrie and himself, and while this may be attributable to his depression, which is therefore beyond his control, he does not uphold his obligation to support her and therefore leaves them destitute. This situation aligns with ideas of the mode of “negotiable values.” Although Carrie and Drouet are only somewhat “bad characters,” they do possess these characteristics, which are enough to accept this mode as valid for *Sister Carrie*. Hurstwood fully epitomizes what Carr and Davis have identified; so, regardless, the novel contains a “bad character.”

“Wicked Attractions” is the second mode which Carr and Davis describe as “[. . .] The glamour of a life of unbridled desire is favorably contrasted with the oppressive and arbitrary nature of authority and convention” (101). Carrie does not fit into this category. At no point in the novel, even with sexuality only assumed, does she appear to feel unbridled desire for either of the men with whom she lives. She feels a fondness for them, but there is never a sense of passion.

Hurstwood, being an older man, could scarcely be said to retain the fire of youth, though he did possess a passion warm and unreasoning. It was strong enough to induce the leaning toward him which, on Carrie’s part, we have seen. She might have been said to be imagining herself in love, when she was not. (Dreiser 161)

At first read, this quotation could suggest that Carrie does in fact feel passionately for Hurstwood because she is attracted to him, and he possesses a “passion warm and unreasoning.” However, upon closer consideration, it is suggested that Carrie, as a

typical woman, according to Dreiser, mistakes passion for love. Because Carrie is so desperate to be loved, she may have given in to physical pleasures with Hurstwood in an attempt to feel she was in love, or, more sadly, to try to coax herself to love him. Because this passion was not driven by physical, unbridled desire, Carrie cannot be categorized as having a “wicked attraction.” Hurstwood, on the other hand, fits very much into this mode, as shown in the previous passage. Hurstwood’s unbridled desire for Carrie contrasts with the “oppressive and arbitrary nature of the authority and convention” of his marriage, which he willingly tosses aside to pursue his passion for Carrie.

“Blasphemy,” the third mode, also identifies whether a literary work to is unethical or immoral. Carr and Davis describe this mode as “a form of subversion of dominant orders experienced as morally or spiritually flawed or oppressive. As such, it may be deployed to cast doubt on the authority or sanctity of a ruling group or worldview” (101). The key feature of this mode is that it suggests a deliberate intent to discredit the “authority or sanctity of the ruling group or world view.” Although Hurstwood steals and is unfaithful to his wife, there really is no sense that he has made the decisions to do either of these things in order to make a statement about people’s right to take what they want or to flout the sanctity and convention of marriage. There are no instances in the novel involving Carrie and Drouet where this sort of goal or result exists and, therefore, “Blasphemy,” as defined by Carr and Davis, can be eliminated as an immoral mode within *Sister Carrie*.

The fourth mode, “Moral Horror,” is described the following way:

Depiction of “morally unresolved” horror is likely to undermine faith in and commitment to moral order [. . .] and by virtue [seems] to be reveling

only in the extremities of human depravity – to lack moral closure: in so doing, they raise the alarming prospect of a universe not only morally diminished, but morally meaningless. (102)

This mode is much more challenging to tackle, mainly because intent must be considered. By using the term “horror,” it must be assumed that Carr and Davis are referring to the extreme, as they confirm with their term “extremities of human depravity.” It is very difficult to determine if Hurstwood experienced or participated in any such behaviors to the level required to validate this category within *Sister Carrie*. Yes, he stole from his employer; yes, he was unfaithful to his wife; and yes, he was dishonest with Carrie and failed to honour his promise to support and provide for her. But he did this as an individual. His plight was completely self-imposed and affected himself, Carrie, and his family. His situation was created out of selfishness, but moral order was not altered. The only hint that this mode might be relevant is by Hurstwood perhaps lacking moral closure. He never restores his morality and, in fact, seeks closure through the means deemed immoral, the act of suicide:

Now he began leisurely to take off his clothes, but stopped first with his coat, and tucked it along the crack under the door. His vest he arranged in the same place. His old wet, cracked hat he laid softly upon the table. Then he pulled off his shoes and lay down. It seemed as if he thought for a while, for now he rose and turned the gas out, standing calmly in the blackness, hidden from view. After a few moments, in which he reviewed nothing, but merely hesitated, he turned the gas on again, but applied no match. Even then he stood there, hidden wholly in that kindness which is night, while the uprising fumes filled the room. When the odor reached his nostrils, he quit his attitude and fumbled for the bed. “What’s the use?” he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest. (Dreiser 366).

His lack of morality is personal and immediate and does not impinge on anyone at a broader level. As well, in reviewing his final moments, just recounted above, there is no sense of “horror.” The terms “leisurely,” “softly,” “kindness” all evoke calmness and

serenity, which completely contradicts the notion of horror. Additionally, Hurstwood is acting by choice. By using the phrase “what’s the use?” Hurstwood is willingly surrendering to his chosen fate, and, although may be representing “human depravity,” he is certainly not “reveling” in it. There is not enough that aligns with Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* to be able to justify “moral horror” as a possible mode. Likewise, Carrie and Drouet, although engaging in questionable choices and behaviors, may cross the line of morality but not to the extreme of altering moral order and reveling in human depravity in the way Carr and Davis require for this mode to be applicable.

“Moral Ambiguity,” the next category, refers to “characters whose choices and actions are prime sites of mixed motives and ethical uncertainty [. . .] which can present serious grounds for or temptations to moral skepticism and nihilism” (103). Carrie would most certainly fit into this classification. She is willing to live with Drouet in order to be supported by him. In a sense, she could be considered to be prostituting herself, which is conventionally immoral. Where the ambiguity enters is with the knowledge that she is doing it as a means of survival. As stated earlier, if her intent was to take Drouet for what he was worth, and allow herself to be lavished with the riches and privileges of the world, then her motivation would be clear and most definitely immoral. Because she is willing only to take whatever he offers as a means of survival, her choices become ambiguous. The next step for her, which does come to fruition, is with her willingness to engage in a secret relationship with Hurstwood. After Carrie’s first moment of closeness in a cab with Hurstwood, she thinks of her developing feelings for him and at the same time tries to assess any obligation of loyalty to Drouet.

She owed something to Drouet, she thought. It did not seem more than yesterday that he had aided her when she was worried and distressed. She

had the kindest feelings for him in every way. She gave him credit for his good looks, his generous feelings, and even, in fact, failed to recollect his egotism when he was absent; but she could not feel any binding influence keeping her for him as against all others. In fact, such a thought had never had any grounding, even in Drouet's desires. (Dreiser 92)

Although Carrie acknowledges to herself that Drouet has been good to her, she in fact convinces herself that she owes him nothing, in order to justify commencing a relationship with Hurstwood. This represents Carr and Davis's "temptation to moral skepticism." Although she did not technically have sexual relations with Hurstwood until after their rapid departure from Chicago, the situation is obfuscated by the fact that she was aware she had to be secretive in her meetings with him because they were inappropriate. Further to that, when asked about her meetings with Hurstwood by Drouet, she fibbed about the frequency of them, thereby demonstrating that she knew in her heart what she was doing was wrong but was still willing to participate. Again, this points to her awareness of her misdeeds but indicates feeling torn between them and her need to love and be loved. Drouet could also be said to be a relevant player in this classification, as his ambiguity could be identified as the division between wanting to help Carrie and wanting to establish a relationship with her. A further example would include his willingness to identify her to others as his wife, countered with his continued reluctance to actually marry her.

"That's all right. You're Mrs. Drouet now."

There was something about this which struck Carrie as slightly inconsiderate. She could see that Drouet did not have the keenest sensibilities.

"Why don't we get married?" she inquired, thinking of the voluble promises he had made.

"Well, we will," he said, "just as soon as I get this little deal of mine closed up."

He was referring to some property which he had said he had, and which required so much attention, adjustment, and what not, that somehow or other it interfered with his free moral, personal actions. (Dreiser 71-72)

He is experiencing the best of both worlds at a moral cost. Hurstwood, too, is morally ambiguous in his behavior. The scene where he dithers about whether or not to steal the money epitomizes this by asking “‘Why don’t I shut the safe?’ His mind said to itself, lingering. ‘What makes me pause here?’” (Dreiser 191). The scene continues for a few paragraphs and has Hurstwood going back and forth between holding and replacing the money, until the safe latches shut. It is at this point that Hurstwood decides to steal what is in his hand, rather than leave it on top of the safe with a note of explanation. He justified in his own mind that his only choice was to take the money, lest his employer consider him negatively for handling it in the first place. Moral ambiguity is apparent here because he is trying to right a wrong by committing another wrong.

The final mode offered by Carr and Davis is “The Alien Vision”:

Attempts to depict the inhuman and alien through the transfiguration of humanity in abject and repellent rather than exalted or ennobling ways. The main locus of such alienation is frequently the human body at its most refractory and corporeal. (103)

Carr and Davis may be referring to an actual physical transformation of human to inhuman or the change of certain physical characteristics to physically repellent ones. *Sister Carrie* does not contain any explicitly surreal transformations; however, it could be argued that, on an implicit level, Hurstwood undertakes this metamorphosis. As he spirals further and further downward when he becomes unemployed and homeless, his appearance is vastly altered. He is thin, disheveled, and his ratty clothes hang off of him. He becomes unrecognizable to Carrie when she sees him “waiting, more gaunt than ever [. . .] At first she did not recognize the shabby, baggy figure” (352). In a very real and

plausible sense, he has become something alien to himself and to others. Within Hurstwood's context, it does present as valid and therefore is an applicable mode.

For critics like Comstock, *Sister Carrie* must be categorized as an immoral novel because it represents four of the six modes established by Carr and Davis for identifying unethical and immoral literature. Although they do not state how many classifications must be present in order to categorize the work, the assumption is only one need exist, as the characteristics of each and every mode are significant in and of themselves. Because *Sister Carrie* actually contains most of them, it is not possible to consider this novel moral. The fact that *Sister Carrie* was written at the turn of the century helps to contextualize and reaffirm the immoral nature of this novel, thereby supporting Carr and Davis's theories. Reiterating the Victorian mindset, present at the time of original publication, society was not used to frank and unabashed fictional portrayals of people down on their luck, and the behaviors and decisions that led them there. The story not finishing with a happy ending also emphasizes that this was not the sort of book nineteenth-century readers could hold onto as morally uplifting.

Comstock believes literary works should teach a moral lesson through their purity and upstanding and heroic characters, and, while this may be a valid way to approach art, it does not accurately depict life. The literature to which Comstock refers is all fiction but, more importantly, also not representative of real life because the reading he promotes does not deal with the darker sides of life. Because of this, he is setting lofty and unattainable goals for the reader, which could actually have a negative effect in leading them to think: why bother? Perhaps greater lessons can be learned from the artistic and aesthetic realism in a literary work such as *Sister Carrie*. Although readers may not have

experienced some of the events or types of characters in the novel, because it is presented with ideas and situations that are relevant to one and to all, the association makes it possible to take away something valuable and legitimate. According to Carr and Davis, “Insofar as any and all imitation of the corrupt, the degraded, or the wicked attracts generally painful consequences, such works serve to deter us from vice and to encourage moral virtue” (100). By no means is *Sister Carrie* an uplifting or positive book. It deals with the gritty reality of poverty and survival at any cost. While, outwardly, it does not end in an Aesopian moral, within the text are numerous examples of poor decisions made which could be considered valid lessons in “what not to do.” Does a text need to be expressly didactic with a positive ending to teach a lesson in morals? If one considers the Bible, the answer is “no,” as it has many negative parabolic accounts.

One of the challenges with *Sister Carrie*, and why it received such sharp criticism, is Dreiser was writing in the *fin-de-siècle*. In other words, Dreiser wanted to take advantage of what modernism was beginning to offer (the freedom to express himself in a manner reflecting real life, and the freedom for his readers to experience that expression), but did so cautiously keeping in mind the prudery of Victorianism which was waning. It was the pushing of the boundaries that caused Dreiser the problem. A close look at the text will make it possible to see if the moral issues that are addressed, not in didactic form, as Comstock would have liked, but in artistic, aesthetic, and realistic terms that are a source for learning.

Regarding sex, there was deep concern that a heroine, Carrie, who did not possess vulnerability, would offend feminine readers, who are considered naturally vulnerable simply by virtue of being female. According to Florence Dore, she believed

“Carrie seem[ed] to be unaffected by the idea of feminine sexual innocence” and that Carrie “portray[ed] the sexualization of women at the turn of the century” (20). Carrie is unaffected by sexual innocence or not. Because Dreiser attempts to balance both the Victorian and modern, it is not possible to know if Carrie was prudishly unwilling to discuss it, or if she was actually unaffected by it. It cannot be overstated that her assumed relations with Drouet and Hurstwood were necessitated by survival. One thing that is certain is that Carrie was most definitely impacted by the lack of love in her relationships, which hints at the fact that she was bothered by the status quo of her living arrangements. Carrie wanted to love and wanted to be loved, and this is what was at the heart of her character’s sexualization. She was presumably having all the sex she could want, yet, clearly, that is not what she wanted, at least not with a person whom she did not love and who did not love her:

She might have been said to be imagining herself in love, when she was not. Women frequently do this. It flows from the fact that in each exists a bias toward affection, a craving for the pleasure of being loved. The longing to be shielded, bettered, sympathized with, is one of the attributes of the sex. This, coupled with sentiment and a natural tendency to emotion, often makes refusing difficult. It persuades them that they are in love. (161)

Although this passage refers to Hurstwood and not Drouet, Carrie was not in love with either of them. Had she loved Drouet, she would not have started a relationship with Hurstwood, and we know she does not love Hurstwood, because the excerpt above tells us so. Dreiser is presenting the sexualization of women at the turn of the century as Dore describes and bears the responsibility of his voice. His use of the words “flows,” “craving for the pleasure,” and “coupled” is sexually-charged and could easily capture the attention of censors, mindful of vulnerable female readers, but because Dreiser uses

them to describe love, he is well within the boundaries of morality. Perhaps Dore is correct that Carrie is unaffected by sexual innocence but only because sex is not an important component of this novel, and it was not something she was actively seeking in the way she seeks love. To Carrie's credit, she presses both Drouet and Hurstwood for marriage, even though she does not love them, presumably because she feels it was the right thing to do if they were going to live together ostensibly as man and wife, engaging in physical relations. The question is: can a moral lesson be learned from Carrie's decisions regarding her living arrangements and does she suffer the consequences of her "sins"? According to Joseph Coates:

The conditions under which she comes to live are not justified, nor excused, by any acceptable code. But they are not uncommon, and Mr. Dreiser handles them with such delicacy of treatment and in such a clean largeness of mental attitude, that they simply enforce an impressive moral lesson. The inevitable growth of her initial yielding softness into a hard cold selfishness at the last, but which yet fails to escape from the power of unsatisfied longing, is traced with much skill and with a logic which seems unanswerable. (167)

Coates is a little harsher in not accepting her dire circumstances of survival as justification for Carrie living with Drouet or Hurstwood, but he is generous in recognizing that she was not unique in her situation. That by no means makes her decision right, but she was clearly faced with having to make the best of a situation as other women had. Coates' insight seems far greater than the critics who believe Carrie was not held accountable for her mistakes. Not only is he capable of seeing that moral lesson in a non-didactic setting is possible, he also sees that she must pay for her choices, which she does by never finding what she desperately longs for: love.

Hurstwood's infidelity is a flaw that also needs to be considered. This term is used cautiously as he and Carrie never consummate their relationship prior to his

separation from his wife. Because it was his intent to enter into a relationship with Carrie, and because their meetings are secretive and clandestine, for all intents and purposes, Hurstwood is unfaithful.

His spirits fell, however, when upon reaching the park, he waited and waited and Carrie did not come. He held his favorite post for an hour or more, then arose and began to walk about restlessly. Could something have happened out there to keep her away? Could she have been reached by his wife? Surely not. He grew restless as he ruminated, and then decided that perhaps it was nothing. (Dreiser 171)

The reason this location is Hurstwood's "favorite post" is because it is the location where he meets Carrie, his mistress, for their rendezvous. The location has a positive association for him. His primary concern for her not showing up is that something may have happened to her. It is only his secondary concern that his wife may have found her and informed her that he was married. What this illustrates is that Hurstwood is not thinking logically about his situation and, despite his marriage-ending fight with his wife, she is not at the forefront of his thoughts. It is still all about Carrie and his relationship with her. Either not believing Mrs. Hurstwood might be the reason why Carrie does not meet him, or not wanting to believe it, Hurstwood seems to be incapable of accepting that it might be his actions that result in Carrie not being there. This implies that he believes he has done nothing wrong and therefore shows no remorse. The moral defect with Hurstwood is his infidelity, in this instance, and his lack of caring or compassion for the fact that he has orchestrated the destruction of his own marriage. Other references to his wife are fraught with disdain, anger, and blame, when in reality he is the one at fault. In terms of moral lesson and consequences, it is fairly broadly accepted that infidelity is immoral. The punishment Hurstwood experiences, as a result of his behavior, becomes

crystal clear as he has created a situation from which he cannot extricate himself, and his infidelity is the catalyst for the misery that is to follow.

As a result of his desperation from his broken marriage, and now tenuous relationship with Carrie, Hurstwood steals ten thousand dollars from his employer. Hurstwood struggles with whether or not to steal the money and, not surprisingly, as by now his true character has revealed itself, he makes the wrong decision.

Hurstwood could not bring himself to act definitely. He wanted to think about it – to ponder over it, to decide whether it were best. He was drawn by such a keen desire for Carrie, driven by such a state of turmoil in his own affairs that he thought constantly it would be best, and yet he wavered. He did not know what evil might result from it to him – how soon he might come to grief. The true ethics of the situation never once occurred to him, and never would have under any circumstances. (Dreiser 193)

This passage is rich with moral examination and conscience, and it foreshadows consequence. Something deep down in Hurstwood shows he has a conscience because he is hesitant about whether or not he should steal the money. He had no designs on stealing anything, of course, but the hand of providence opened the safe that provided him with the thought and the opportunity. The fact, however, that he has to deliberate to decide “whether it was best or not to steal the money” confirms that he is morally flawed. This message is blatant, and no didactic Comstockery is needed to determine it. The reason that he is even considering taking the money is to “fix” the bad situation he created: the financial ruin brought about the dissolution of his marriage due to his infidelity with Carrie. He knows that having the money would help him; but he also knows that no good will come of stealing it; yet, his own “turmoil” is far greater than his need to resolve the wrong he is committing. The result is inconsequential to him at that moment. He was fully aware that some “evil” would come of it, but he seems more concerned with when

that would be: basically, for how long can he get away without punishment. The fact that the “ethics of the situation” did not, nor ever would, occur to him, indicates a significant character flaw, as he is concerned with how he might be affected and not the moral harm. This is an ideal example of the “moral ambiguity,” to which Carr and Davis refer. The moral lesson through this scene is clear: stealing is wrong. Ironically, even though Hurstwood gives back the bulk of the money shortly after, the punishment for his thievery is iron-clad, for this is the point in his life where, upon choosing to throw away his career for his selfishness and greed, he has to start from the beginning to find a job and earn money to sustain himself and Carrie, which he is never able to do. In fact, it is this act that results in his life ending as it does. Given the explicitness of this situation, it is not defensible to say of Hurstwood that “there is absolutely no relationship in this novel between what one does against society and what happens to him” (Lehan 76). Cause and effect saturate this event, and it very clearly teaches a moral lesson.

Sister Carrie presents situations that require moral reflection under the artistic and aesthetic guise of a novel. Uplifting and didactic stories of moral heroics may be effective in their own right, but so are portrayals of characters who live in “real” situations and have to make “real decisions.” As suggested earlier, Comstock’s preferred method of moral teaching could leave readers demoralized because they would have no hope of attaining the greatness of his protagonists. The books he promotes would lack art and aesthetic because they would be consistently contrived and over-worked in order to lead to the clear-cut, moral end, Comstock felt essential in literature. The effects would be weakened moral messages in those works (Carr 106). With strong art and aesthetics, even in a book such as *Sister Carrie* that is filled with “bad morals,” the message is still

strong and a lesson can be learned. In order for readers to get the message being delivered, they have to be able to relate to the story and characters. Even though literature may include negative decisions and behaviors, and be morally questionable, they represent a reality everyone can understand, even those who have not necessarily experienced the exact events. Everyone has been faced with the decision of doing right versus doing wrong, and everyone, in some form or another, has had to deal with the consequences of those decisions whether socially or self-imposed.

Comstock preaches morals that should exist in ideal literature, but because to him they are black and white, right and wrong, the ability for moral judgment by the reader to weigh the options for his or her own situation is lost. There is no requirement for deliberation that builds good moral character. Robert Haney explains what morals might be understood to be:

[They] are judgments – good, bad, or a mixture of the two – by which society chooses to label specific human actions. Morals never exist in the absolute: they are intricately related to the particular social situations in which they develop. Morals thus change continuously – and often dramatically – from place to place and almost from day to day. (133)

Morals are not static, as Comstock believes they are. They are fluid and changing and the best way to learn what is morally right and morally wrong is through experience, even through reading novels that could contain ambiguous moral questions. The process of grappling with these questions is what strengthens moral character. If it were up to the censors, including Comstock, literature would:

[. . .] be moral and nice by avoiding all description of unpleasant characters and discussion of unpleasant problems and by letting slip no expression or reflection of actual life that might shock a very delicate constitution of mind; be good and cheerful and complacent, striking always an optimistic note, and showing life as bright as a new dishpan. (Haldeman-Julius 54)

In other words, it would be sterile and completely unrealistic. By all means, glistening, clean literature has its place, but it is important to remember that so does literature that presents societal situations of truth, which includes the bad and the dark.

At the time of the publication of *Sister Carrie*, people were surrounded with the literary censorship and suppression Comstock was promoting. In a sense, even choosing to read books like this became a moral decision. Those who chose to listen to Comstock and not read them were putting themselves in the position of not using their own resolve to make judgments about what was between the pages because they were not willing to venture in there. Many heeded Comstock's warnings and did not want to risk corruption. The question is: how can you express your moral conviction without being given a chance to prove it by internalizing difficult situations? Perhaps they were exercising their moral right by choosing not to experience it.

Despite the negative press Dreiser's novel received, not everyone had a problem with it:

Sister Carrie is, for today at least a book for the few; not for the many. [...] It has been adjudged "immoral" by some of our very best citizens. [...] There is nothing in the book to offend any serious-thinking person; it is not an esoteric, a lubricious, a salacious book in any way whatsoever. It is simply a calm, impassioned, impersonal statement that such-and-such forces worked thus-and-so about a woman and a man produced such-and-such results. I mention this point to warn those who might read the book and choose to be offended at it, at me, at this journal, and at Mr. Dreiser afterward. (Lyon 164)

Harris Lyon describes *Sister Carrie* as a slice-of-life novel that deals with people, their decisions, and the results of those decisions. Because he does not see it as "immoral," he argues that what occurs within the pages of this book is nothing out of the ordinary from everyday life experiences. He does not feel there is anything within the book that should

shock the reader. If it did shock, then that would suggest that the events that occur in *Sister Carrie* are anomalies of the real world, which is dishonest. No doubt this is why Lyon suggests that, if people are offended, it is because they are “choosing” to be so. It is their choice to accept the situations and scenarios as real or contrived. If they believe them to be contrived, then perhaps they may be offended. Of *Sister Carrie* and the controversy, Dreiser wrote:

Immoral! Immoral! Under this cloak hide the vices of wealth as well as the vast unspoken blackness of poverty and ignorance; and between them must walk the little novelist, choosing neither truth nor beauty, but some half-convinced phase of life that bears no honest relationship to either the whole of nature or to man. The impossibility of any such theory of literature having weight with the true artist must be apparent to every clear reasoning mind. Life is not made up of any one phase or condition of being, nor can man’s interest possibly be so confined. The extent of all reality is the realm of the author’s pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not. (Dreiser 474)

Dreiser is expressing his frustration that a writer must strike a balance between truth and moral convention in order to be artistic while not offending anyone. This reinforces the argument that he was trying to position himself between a Victorian world and a modern one. In the end, he realizes the expression of truth, even if the truth is negative. In writing of the truth and presenting life honestly, morality and artistry will both be realized, regardless of whether or not it offends anyone. Singal says:

Modernism – in stark contrast to Victorianism – eschews innocence and demands instead to know “reality” in all its depth and complexity, no matter how incomplete and paradoxical that knowledge might be, and no matter how painful. It offers a demanding, and at times even heroic, vision of life that most of its adherents may in fact have fallen short of, but which they have used to guide themselves by nonetheless. (16)

Dreiser is most certainly trying to offer his reader this sense of reality, complete with complexity and pain. It is interesting that Singal uses the word “heroic” in this context as

it completely contradicts Comstock's view of heroism. Although Carrie might not be seen as a heroine from the Victorian perspective, the modernist could see that despite her circumstances, she triumphs over hardship. However, true to modernist form, happy endings are not a given, and she still suffers from the absence of love in her life. This is what Dreiser wanted his reader to experience: life as it really happens; life where things do not always work out as one hopes; and life complete with tarnished characters in undesirable situations.

At the time of its publication, *Sister Carrie* was not well received because it exposed a seedier, lower-class life from which nineteenth-century idealists wanted to shield themselves. Regardless, Dreiser challenged them to take a look because he wanted them to stop “shun[ning] most human experience” and learn about the value of humanity, even when it was “dangerous or degrading or destructive” (Morgan 156). According to Morgan:

The modern [1965] reader often finds in *Sister Carrie* a certain antique quality, and it is difficult to understand the criticism it aroused. It offered none of the lurid physical descriptions no *de rigueur* in the novel. It dealt with no social or sexual perversions. It did not openly discuss any controversial themes. It was not shocking, but it was nonetheless a major milestone in American literary history, both for its techniques and its contents. (156-57)

Theodore Dreiser was at the head-waters of a new social movement, and was successful at getting people to discuss the real-life issues that many wanted to continue to ignore, even though it was through their criticism and censoring of his novel *Sister Carrie*.

Chapter Four

“To Reconnect All That the Victorian Moral Dichotomy Tore Asunder”

Our youth are in danger; mentally and morally they are cursed by a literature that is a disgrace to the nineteenth century. The spirit of evil environs them. Let no man be henceforth indifferent. Read. Reflect.
Act. (*Traps* 6)

This paragraph, which was referred to at the beginning of this thesis, ends the preface to Comstock’s book *Traps for the Young* and identifies the impetus for his moral crusade: arresting the moral corruption of children, and society, by reading material he deemed obscene. Bound by the strictures of Victorian thinking, Comstock was being loyal to the society’s beliefs as well as his own, but was Comstock correct in believing that obscene literature could cause moral harm to youth, or were those concerns unfounded?

Furthermore, if potential harm did in fact exist, was zealous censorship the answer to stopping it?

To gain a clear sense of Comstock’s life-long battle to protect children, it is important to understand how children were viewed in the nineteenth century. What were the societal expectations with regard to the young? In the sixteenth century, parents and adults did not have concern for the innocence of children and, in fact, did not really consider children to be innocent. Coarse language and indecent behaviors were common in the presence of youth (Heins 19). Into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, things began to change. Children were seen as individuals and, according to the Puritans, they were the carriers of Original Sin and therefore had to be “controlled and indoctrinated into right behavior” (20). What sparked this change? The 1710 tract entitled *Onania of the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, And all its frightful Consequences, in both Sexes, Considered* was published, and it explained the dangers and horrors of masturbation.

Society accepted this notion and took it seriously, and, as a result, the publication saw at least eighty editions and many translations (21). The idea of self-gratification being dangerous with “frightful consequences” was picked up by Swiss physician Samuel-Auguste Tissot, and in 1758 he published *L’Onanisme, Dissertation sur les Maladies produites par la Mastubation*. Because Tissot was a medical doctor, he was deemed credible, and people took what he had to say to heart. Tissot did not put a lot of stock into the “moral trivialities” of *Onania*, but he did express the very negative affects of youthful masturbation. He identifies “consumption, incontinence, jaundice, loose teeth, sallow complexion” as well as possible psychological effects as potential consequences of committing the act (21).

As the eighteenth century became the nineteenth, the view of children as innocent, uncorrupted beings became stronger when coupled with the growth of “antimasturbation” literature. This essentially ignited the purity movement of the new century, of which Comstock was a part (Hunt 576). The Victorian era taught and practiced moral behavior and a standard of innocence, which Comstock worked feverishly to retain.

The anxieties invoked persistently played on a mix of claims that masturbation threatened individual, social, and national well-being. Not only would the individual masturbator suffer, but the moral fabric of society is weakened, and the nation deprived of virile young men who are the primary agents of both economic and military strength [...] thus self-control had to be developed at puberty. (595)

In *Traps for the Young*, the idea of youth reading obscene literature was distasteful to Comstock because he believed it always led to masturbation, and he feared the horrendous effects that would have on them and on society as a whole. It is unclear whether Comstock believed physical and psychological ills could actually result from the solitary vice, but he was not a very educated man and, therefore, likely took the

authoritative antimasturbatory literature at face value, given that it was written by people considered to be reputable. Comstock believed the following about reading obscene literature and subsequent masturbation: “Its most deadly effects are felt by the victims in the habit of secret-vices, before their course is marked by external appearances” (136). Basically, those who masturbate as a result of reading questionable material are doomed to suffer. Comstock also believed that those with the intention of stopping masturbation when they got older were lost. He states, “Ah! Silly boy, the shackles of habit you will never be able to throw off by your own unaided strength. [. . .] *The time to stop is before you begin*” (136). According to Alan Hunt, “the purity campaigners promoted the idea of salvation through renunciation” (579). Comstock even goes so far as to recount the story of a girl under the age of fifteen who viewed “debasement and foul-worded matter,” and the last thing he heard from the child was that “she was in a dying condition, the result of habits induced by this foul reading” (*Traps* 139). His statement actually seems to hint that he believes she got her comeuppance. Because Comstock believed masturbation could cause illness and death, a belief supported by eighteenth century literature, it provided him a solid backing for his crusade. Morris Ernst and William Seagle’s in 1928 book, *To the Pure: A Study of Obscenity and the Censor*, written mere decades after the height of Comstock’s crusade, includes information from the Society for Social Hygiene that masturbation begins around age five and continues through life, and that the greatest danger to the practice is a feeling of guilt. The bottom line is that masturbation is normal, even at the turn of the century, and that the guilt associated with it can be attributed to those affiliated with the purity movement (276).

If the nineteenth century was preoccupied with protecting the sexual innocence of youth as it was being inundated with literature about the evils of masturbation, Comstock, as a typical Victorian, was well-placed to lead and perpetuate the trend of the purity movement. If Comstock was worried about moral harm coming to youth who read inappropriate materials, then he was also terribly worried about the physical harm that would come to them as well through masturbation that may have resulted from their reading. “Uncle Tony,” as youngsters often referred to him, loved children and wanted to keep them safe and uncorrupted. However, just because Comstock claimed that youth would be in danger from their reading does not mean they actually were. It should be noted that Comstock was not alone in his view, most likely because he was a very influential character at that time. In *Social Abominations or The Follies of Modern Society*, written in 1892, Comstock’s voice is heard loud and clear in the “Literature and Vice” chapter:

Hence the first duty of all concerned in the training of children in the matter of “literature and vice” is to see to it that none of this openly and utterly obscene matter reaches them [for] it forces a warring of elements in the soul, for which the child has as yet no moral strength. (280)

This and other passages echo Comstock’s belief almost exactly: keep questionable literature away from youth for they are innocent and can succumb to moral harm (and physical harm) with which they have not yet developed the resolve to deal. But what is questionable and “obscene” literature according to Comstock? Any literature that “breeds vulgarity, profanity, loose ideas of life, impurity of thought and deed” (*Traps* 25). Comstock firmly believed that, in addition to works of this sort leading to masturbation, the impact and effects of the books would reach deep into the family and into society and destroy both. He felt that people would not only damage the integrity

and peace within their homes, but that they would become questionable citizens in their morality and would break the law, thereby leading to a society of chaos, where good, hard-working people are undermined and ultimately burdened. To Comstock, obscene literature epitomized evil. Even established literature fell prey to being detrimental according to Comstock's classification of obscene works:

The cursed literature corrupts the thoughts, perverts the imagination, destroys the will power, renders impure the life, defiles the body, hardens the heart and damns the soul [...] The practice of spreading impure literature among the young is fast sinking them to the level of ancient heathendom. (qtd. in Beisel 162)

Comstock struggled to see the value of literature, even if scholarly and well-established, because he believed the obscenity he perceived within would trump and cancel out any merit the work had as a piece of literature. Therefore, the credibility of the book had no bearing on its ability to damage innocent readers.

How does Comstock know that reading literature of that sort would produce those results? Throughout his book, *Traps for the Young*, he cites numerous anecdotal accounts of children who committed awful deeds, and, when he spoke with the youth in question, he decided a certain book the child was reading was to be blamed.

A few months ago, in a small town in Massachusetts, I arrested a young man about twenty-one years of age, for sending most obscene and foul matter by mail. He was in the field with his father at work at the time of the arrest. He desired to go to his room to change his apparel before going to court. While in his room, and up to the moment of the finding of a pile of these vile five-cent story-papers in one corner, he had been perfectly cool and stolid. When these were discovered he started as though a nest of adders had been opened, and said with great feeling, "There! That's what has cursed me! That has brought me to this!" (29)

Because Comstock recounts so many such cases without any form of citation or proof of the existence of the youth to which he refers, it can be assumed fairly that he has either

fabricated or embellished these incidents to pad his case. It is also possible that he bought into the excuses of the youngsters that the literature they read was to blame, because they served to bolster Comstock's argument and crusade. Youth have a tendency to do what they can to deny responsibility for any wrongdoing, and because Comstock was well known then, it is plausible that these youth, and others referred to within the book, took advantage of the situation by casting blame where Comstock hoped it would land. Other than reference to personal experience, Comstock offers nothing concrete or tangible to support his claim of moral harm. He even states:

Few have had the opportunity of seeing and knowing the facts concerning the evils discussed in this book. For the sake of the thousands of children in the land, I appeal to every good citizen to carefully read the following pages, not to criticize, but to see what can be done to remedy the evils discussed. (6)

If the horrors of reading obscene books (and masturbating) result in moral, physical, and psychological effects that have the ability to affect a nation, would these consequences not be readily apparent to society? Comstock describes the evil and horrific outcomes of this problem as a contagion or epidemic, yet his statement that "few have had the opportunity of seeing and knowing the facts" saps the validity of the claims around which his book is centred. Heins claims that Comstock laid the foundation for modern censorship and used the protection of youth to legitimize it when he had absolutely no evidence to substantiate their need for protection (qtd. in Grossberg 591).

For Comstock, the only literature children need is the Bible (*Traps* 244). This is not surprising given his level of religiosity and his fond reminiscences of his mother reading to him from the book. Comstock was not an avid reader, and in fact did not read the books he condemned in order to determine if they should be suppressed or not, but

one would expect, conventionally, that children should read stories. Yet Comstock states, “If children must have stories, let parents provide those that have a high moral tone” (12). This statement reflects contradiction. On one hand, he wants children to be children in all of their youthful innocence. Being a child includes stories and storybooks. A parent reading to a child, or encouraging a child to read, is a rite of passage and part of the development of a child, not only in learning how to read, but, also, in developing intellectually and creatively. Comstock inadvertently suggests a child wanting to hear or read stories is out of the ordinary: “If children *must* have stories [...],” as something that is not desirable or positive. Further, he is prescribing what should be read. His statement snatches away the joys of childhood he is trying to retain in his crusade. This makes one wonder if he truly has the best intentions of children at heart, or if he is merely using them as pawns to advance his purity movement. Nicola Beisel asks, “How do we distinguish actual concerns about children from the cynical use of rhetoric about children, often employed to justify reactionary or self-interested actions?” (203). How, indeed?

Because Comstock describes undesirable literature with such broad strokes, he cannot be relied upon to identify genuinely what “obscene” literature is, in order to determine if it can cause moral harm. Perhaps the only way to define it is to turn to the law. Before Comstock, few obscenity cases made their way through the court system. The most significant determiner of obscenity around Comstock’s time arrived in the United States from England. The Hicklin Test, as it became known, was born from the *Regina v Hicklin* trial in the United Kingdom in 1868. Essentially, if the work was identified “to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences,” then the work was obscene. It is important to note that, at this time, literary

works subjected to this test were not considered in their entirety but in parts. Ostensibly, a very moral and upstanding book could be ruled obscene by a jury's use of the Hicklin Test, even if only one passage within the book was questionable (Horowitz 433). Those arrested and prosecuted by Comstock had the Hicklin Test applied to them. So, for Comstock, he now had an official, legal ruling as to what obscene meant and was able to forge ahead with his crusade with the power of the law behind him. The problem with the Hicklin Test, however, is that it was subjective. What is the definition of "deprave" and "corrupt," how can one presume to know if the author of the work set out to "deprave and corrupt," what is and how is it possible to know whose minds were "open to such immoral influences"? Such as it was, the Hicklin Test endured until the 1950s.

"Obscene" has been defined in the context understood by Comstock and the courts of the nineteenth century, and, based on that definition, can literature containing obscenity actually cause moral harm? Andrew Koppelman, Professor of Law and Political Science at Northwestern University, addresses this exact question. Koppelman asserts that "unless it can be shown that good moral character is not a necessary element of well-being, it may be possible for us to suffer moral harm" (1642). To clarify Koppelman's point, because good moral character is necessary to humans and their well-being, we can suffer moral harm if our moral character is compromised. But can good moral character be affected by certain literature? Koppelman accepts that what we read influences us on some level, and that any work of literature "promotes certain desires and projects in the reader." As readers, our tendency is to assume the thinking of the implied author of the work (1643). If this is true, then as people of good moral character, we are open and vulnerable to the potential of being morally harmed because the impact of what

we read may be negative. Koppelman believes that the “best narratives are morally useful” because of “subtle, sensitive moral inference.” This inference basically mirrors the types of moral choices we have to make in our daily lives. He introduces the idea of “nonce beliefs” and “fixed norms” which refer to the “facts” that we absorb when we read. “Nonce beliefs” are with us only for the duration of the story, while we are reading it. The “fixed norms” are “beliefs on which the narrative depends for its effect but which also are by implication applicable in the ‘real’ world” (1644). In other words, fixed norms are those effects that stay with us after reading because the situation, circumstance, or message is plausible, possible, and relevant to real life. Koppelman sees fixed norms in a literary work as being good or having the ability to malign. It is unclear whether Koppelman is suggesting this could cause moral harm or whether he is just expressing the levels to which one engages with a text. It is possible, perhaps, that one could be harmed by such a significant level of literary engagement which contains textual malignancy, but it seems more likely that most people would exercise the same moral judgment with what is contained in what they read as they do in their daily lives, thereby decreasing or even eliminating the possibility of moral harm. Looking specifically at literature with sexual content, which was first and foremost Comstock’s concern, Koppelman says the following:

To the extent that the reader succumbs to the narrative he becomes complicit in the narrative’s fixed norms. Sexual arousal is an especially profound way to succumb. This, however, is only to say that the rhetorical appeal of a text that promotes bad fixed norms may be greater if the text is sexually arousing. An arousing text that does not promote bad fixed norms will be harmless, perhaps even valuable. Sex itself is not the problem. (1652)

Comstock would not agree. For him, sex is most definitely the problem. As long as the text contained sex, especially if it incited arousal (which could lead to masturbation), Comstock would consider it harmful. Koppelman's work delves far deeper into details and kinds of pornography that could elicit harm, but in the interest of offering a final answer to the question of whether or not obscenity can cause moral harm, Koppelman believes it can, but not just in a certain kind of text. The text must be coupled with a certain kind of reader (1679). Harm is possible, but not guaranteed.

With an understanding of nineteenth-century life and moral views, along with what motivated Comstock in his crusade, and a sketchy idea of "obscenity," the question that remains to be answered is whether or not censorship was the correct approach in dealing with the fears of the corruption of youth, given that literature could in fact cause moral harm under certain conditions. Comstock's approach was one of "see no evil," which translated to youth not seeing certain works. This extended to adults not seeing those works either, as he endeavored to remove the literature in question completely. Is censorship a viable, effective option for dealing with the neuroses of self-appointed moral guardians? The question of whether censorship is right or wrong can be distilled to two issues: the protection of the reader and the right to free speech. While the freedom of speech is constitutionally supported in the United States, and is of the utmost importance, it will not be addressed here, as it is a topic unto itself, and it was not taken into consideration by Comstock during his moral reign. The protection of the reader will be the point of discussion.

Because moral harm from reading literature exists as a possibility, according to Koppelman, it stands to reason that adults would want to protect children from the

occurrence of that right combination of “text and reader” and thus censor what literature their children consume. But what about the potential harm or negative effects on a child or impressionable reader from being allowed to *only* read approved and sanitized literature? If one reflects for a moment on Koppelman’s idea of fixed norms and readers’ natural and inherent response of taking something relevant, whether good or bad, away from what they read, is it not to the benefit of readers to have to grapple with the (im)morality that comes from the pages? It would seem that part of developing intellect, good moral character, and appropriate decision-making would come from being placed in situations (even textually), where reactions are evoked and thoughts of “what would I do?” can be explored. If youth are only permitted to read books of “moral hero[es] whose chief trait[s] of character [are] standing for the right” (*Traps* 12), those young people will get a skewed vision of the world and will find themselves unable to cope in more realistic and gritty situations. It is this notion that is at the crux of the debate against censorship and the protection of children. While censors believe they are shielding children by not letting them read questionable literature, those who disagree with censorship wholeheartedly believe that harm is actually generated for the reader who is not allowed the freedom of choice in reading. Heins tells us:

It [. . .] deprives youngsters of the ability to confront and work through the messiness of life – the things that are gross, shocking, embarrassing, or scary. From children’s fascination with ‘dirty noses and dirty bottoms’ to their pleasure in cartoon violence, adults’ efforts to censor may actually get in the way of socialization. (256)

All of the things Comstock wants youth to avoid in their reading are actually imperative to their moral and intellectual development, and removing literature that deals with the

ugly side of life renders them incapable of that development and subsequent ability to cope in future situations in which they will inevitably find themselves.

Once again, Comstock has the support of some of his contemporaries on this issue:

There are two inflexible rules which every parent should obey and make the child obey, in respect to all reading outside of that required and suggested by a competent and trusted teacher in connection with schoolwork. The first rule is, get the best and widest knowledge possible to you in respect to mentally and morally desirable books and papers for your children to read. The second rule is, allow no child to read anything which you have not selected yourself understandingly. (Spencer 288)

The first question is who created these “inflexible rules” which must be “obeyed”? Most likely Comstock did, as he was a contributor to this book, even though was not the author of this particular piece. The sentiment epitomizes Comstock’s point of view. It is interesting to note that “mentally and morally desirable books” to the purity contingent of the nineteenth century only included those with moral heroes and goodness. There was no consideration then that less perfect and less pretty literature could have been of moral benefit, too. Another contemporary of Comstock opposed him quite strongly, however, and expressed his disagreement in his 1903 booklet *Who Is the Enemy: Anthony Comstock or You?* Edwin Walker believes that it is a “greater wrong” for children to grow up in ignorance because of literary censorship, as it means they will be forced to find the answers to all of their questions and curiosities in the “gutter” (15). He states:

Better for our children and better for the race that the little ones be familiar with every detail of human sexual life that they can see by means of pen and types, or brush and chisel, and of nature, than that they should look upon the degrading caricatures of the body of a woman which are blazoned shamelessly upon our bulletin board. [. . .] Better for the child to know of and see every expression of love and re-adjustment of life than to

look without disgust and horror upon expressions of hate and cruelty and needless destruction of life. (15)

Walker recognizes the need for children to be educated in all facets of life, not just in the positive aspects of it; ignorance will not enable appropriate reactions. He believes that knowledge can be gained through literature and art, so that it does not have to be found in less desirable ways, which is where the real harm lies. Walker sees no harm in the nineteenth century child being aware of sexuality. This completely contradicts the antimasturbation campaign of that time, but it clearly illustrates that the fears of children being knowledgeable about sex were only given credence entertained by those associated with the purity movement of the nineteenth-century.

Schools and libraries [as well as our homes] alike exist to educate, not indoctrinate. To educate is to open minds to many points of view and many thoughts. To indoctrinate is to close minds to all but one thought and one point of view. (Donelson 18)

Comstock and his supporters sought to indoctrinate. His one thought and one point of view was retaining purity of youth. Obviously, there were many who were pro-purity, enough at least to support Comstock's enduring crusade, but there were also many who did not support censorship because they did not believe it was in the best interest of youth. With the vehemence Comstock shows in support of censorship, there is as much strength spoken out against it. History has proven this, and the arguments for both sides always seem to remain the same. Because there is no hard, scientific evidence as to the corrupting nature of literature, it can be asserted that censorship does little to protect youth and in fact may actually create more harm.

In *Traps for the Young*, Comstock implored, begged, and pleaded with parents to be the guardians of what reading material they brought into their homes and to dictate to

their children what they will and will not be allowed to read, yet he categorically usurped their parental rights to make those decisions by obliterating available stock. By doing this, he projected to parents that he did not trust them. He projected to society that he is the only one who knows what is acceptable and what was not. Wayne Booth, who is associated with the *Students' Right to Read*, lists for teachers the steps a “good censor” takes when determining which books would be appropriate for the classroom. According to Booth’s ideas, Comstock would not fall into the category of “good” censor.

1. He will refuse to draw any conclusion whatever from any element of a work taken out of its context. This means he will read the work as a whole.
2. He will not be satisfied with one reading. What the censor should be interested in is what the student will get after such reflective rereading. [...] This means the censor must go through the same process.
3. The true values of a work-the real moral centre which we may or may not want to rule out of our children’s experience-cannot usually be identified with the expressed values of any one character. (160)

Because Comstock did not read most, if any, of the works he sought to restrict, he would not have been able to achieve any of the important aspects of thoughtful censorship. His slash and burn technique was based on complete subjectivity and what was morally good and bad to him, and to him only. Even if censorship was the correct approach to consider, Comstock did not engage with it and employ it properly. Again, this calls into question the real motivation and driving force behind his crusade.

The kind of censorship practiced by Comstock did not only affect the children he took it upon himself to watch over. The complete removal of literary works impacted adults as well; booksellers and publishers were fined and incarcerated for selling books Comstock deemed to be obscene. Because Comstock did not want to chance “evil” literature falling into the hands of minors, he had it removed completely. One could

argue that by taking and making the books non-existent, he reduced the likelihood of youth happening upon it. Because of his broad-sweeping approach, however, as well as his fervent hatred for obscenity, it is not out of the realm of possibility that he did not want anyone to have it and, in fact, this was more likely the case. Comstock, like other purity proponents, was fuelled by his own beliefs, beliefs that were instilled in him by his mother, his religion, and the standards of the era in which he lived. For Comstock, there was no grey area. He could not accept that a piece of literature could be morally sound if there was even one line of “obscene” material within it. Literature was either black or white: obscene or not, censored or not. Was nineteenth-century literature really so offensive that Comstock needed to take such an overzealous approach? Heins states:

Censorship is an avoidance technique that addresses adult anxieties and satisfies symbolic concerns, but ultimately does nothing to resolve social problems or affirmatively help adolescents and children cope with their environments and impulses or navigate the dense and insistent media barrage that surrounds them. (257)

Comstock’s anxiety was about sex and, in order to cope with it, he needed to make it his life’s focus. This sexual anxiety typifies Victorian ideas, for if for one’s entire life the notion of sex is presented as something that is bad and must be repressed, then it is not surprising that tension and anxiety about the issue would surface. Comstock would have found himself in the middle of a battle between Victorian views on sex and those of emerging modernists. While Victorians saw a rigid and significant divide between humans and animals (savages), “the quintessential aim of modernists [had] been to reconnect all that the Victorian moral dichotomy tore asunder – to integrate once more the human and the animal, the civilized and the savage” (Singal 12). Comstock projected his anxiety onto youth, who might have been well placed to follow the up and coming

modernist era, and to use them as the scapegoats in order to perpetuate the rapidly diminishing era of purity, which he had no intention of relinquishing. This is not to suggest that he did not care about children or did not take their welfare to heart but, paired with his angst, the result was a misguided crusade that served only to destroy the lives of many and advance his own notoriety. One man's ideas should not be able to wield such power over others, especially when those ideas are subjective and unproven.

Koppelman argues that censorship has its place in protecting children because they “often lack the necessary critical resources to defend themselves from such harm,” but he believes the job of censorship belongs solely to the parents” (1679). He says as well: “It is not a light thing to treat adult citizens as if they were children,” which is exactly what Anthony Comstock did.

The debate as to whether censorship is necessary to protect children and should be permitted has played on for many centuries. In fact, it started with Book II of Plato's *Republic*:

A young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is more important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thought. (qtd. in Heins 3)

Comstock held a similar view to Plato. The fact that the issue has endured from antiquity until the twenty-first century is a testament to how challenging an issue it is.

Assumptions can be made on both sides of the argument, and both can be substantiated but only through artificial conventions such as the law. Science has neither conclusively proven nor disproven the theories that surround the debate. Ultimately, it is up to individuals to make their own choice for self and offspring. The issue with censorship

when associated with Comstock, however, also had to include Comstock himself and how he approached and conducted his crusade. In the way Comstock deplored literature that was immoral and debased, he was accused time and time again of debasing those whom he sought in the name of morality. He detested things immoral, yet he undertook immoral behaviors to accomplish his goals.

He took printing plates, which had been used to publish a surgeon's "obscene" books, from a woman whose husband was arrested for those plates. They were valued at \$30,000, he only gave her \$450, and the whole event led to her husband's death (Broun 91). Numerous times, Comstock would write to publishing houses under a pseudonym in order to get them to mail questionable literature to him. When they did, they were arrested. His modes of entrapment, which are ironically recounted in his book *Traps for the Young*, also extended to dressing in disguise and entering bookstores with requests for similar publications. When the shopkeeper complied, he was arrested. Comstock even went so far as to have an accomplice order some indecent material from a law-abiding storeowner who did not stock or carry such things. The accomplice insisted that the man find where the items could be ordered and then order it in for him. Reluctantly, the storeowner agreed and when the goods were procured, Comstock promptly arrested him (Bennett 25). Comstock drove some of his victims to commit suicide. Ida Craddock's suicide note stated: "I am taking my life because a judge at the instigation of Anthony Comstock has declared me guilty of a crime I did not commit – the circulation of obscene literature" (212). Broun and Leech say:

It is not recorded that Comstock ever listed Miss Craddock's death among his achievements in the cause of purity. Restell, we remember, was the fifteenth whom he drove to self-destruction. [In his notebook] Comstock had left off bragging about suicides. (212)

How could a “moral,” God-fearing man believe he was acting in God’s name in this way for his crusade? Some believe he stole money, misrepresented himself, participated in entrapment, and did not possess enough decency to feel guilty about people whom he drove to their graves. This man was not moral and represented a complete contradiction.

Because the arguments surrounding censorship, including in his century, are so well-balanced for both sides, it is fair to assume that Comstock did not make a genuine impact in favor of it, or against it for that matter. Had he been influential, the balance would have been thrown off from his time forward. Although he is all but forgotten now, and many people in this century have never even heard of him, those who were affected by him directly seem to have suffered greatly. Authors who had to endure legal battles and suppression at Comstock’s hand were forced to defend their creative rights as writers, and the fact that Comstock had not even read the books he was condemning added insult to injury and diminished credibility against the forces of this powerful man. Basically, their work was considered very tainted because Comstock did not even need to read it to make the determination that it should be censored.

Publishers and booksellers lost their livelihood, their families, their freedom, and even their lives at the hands of this moral crusader. Because he deemed it so, certain books could not be published or sold, simply because this representative of the Society for the Suppression of Vice had decided that the works were obscene. Consumers were not free to purchase literary material they wanted because the books were no longer available. What Comstock did inadvertently spark was an underground publishing industry in order to meet the increased demand for books that were considered desirable, simply because they were forbidden.

Comstock was a moral crusader, and initially he may have begun his battle with the best of intentions, but he was not the upstanding moral hero he believed himself to be and that he promoted to youth. Comstock was a contradiction in Victorian terms. He did not live in a morally-positive way because of the tactics he employed, and he contradicted the idea of what a Victorian “human” was: he was not educated, nor refined, lacked manners, and had no interest in art. For all intents and purposes, he may have been a Victorian by association of the era in which he lived, but in trying to promote nineteenth-century beliefs to satisfy his own anxieties, he was a negative representation. A desire for fame and power overtook any good he might have accomplished, and ultimately he became what he so abhorred: immoral.

As Comstock approached the cusp between Victorianism and modernism, at the *fin-de-siècle*, he battled the change all the way. He wanted America to retain the wholesomeness he believed it practiced. He was fearful the modernist ideas that were cropping up in literature were being heartily consumed by all walks of life. He believed the readers to be incapable of discerning right from wrong if they read it, and, thus, put the moral fiber of society at risk. Singal tell us:

If the Victorians sought to place a firm barrier between the “higher” mental functions, such as rational thought and spirituality, and those “lower” instincts and passions that Freud would in time ascribe to the “id,” modernists strove to unite these two levels of the psyche. Thus where the Victorians held “sincerity” to be their most prized character trait, with its injunction that a person’s conscious self remain honest and consistent, modernists have demanded nothing less than “authenticity,” which requires a blending of the conscious and the unconscious strata of the mind so that the self presented to the world is the “true” self in every respect. (14)

For Comstock, the conscious self in literature was entrenched in good morals and exemplary citizenry, and therefore represents the Victorian barrier. Perhaps, however, he

did have a smattering of modernist in him, for he characterized the blending of conscious and unconscious strata with his inability to behave according to the moral code he dedicated his life to promoting.

Comstock died of pneumonia in 1915, after being plagued by an injury for many years, a blow to the head, inflicted by an anonymous enemy. In the final moment of his crusade, which is synonymous with his life, Comstock had fallen out of favor with the New York Society of the Suppression of Vice, in the hands of his successor, John Sumner. Sumner announced that the Society would “return to its original intention – the protection of the youth of both sexes” from which Comstock was believed to have diverged (qtd. in Bates 198). Comstock’s funeral was elaborate and the eulogy in the *New York Times* proclaimed him as “a thoroughly honest man who through a long life, for the scantiest of material rewards, devoted his courage and energy to the protection of society from a detestable and dangerous group of enemies” (qtd. in Bates 200). Free-love advocate, and Comstock detester, Moses Hull, reflected on the man with very different words:

When I trace out the life of this man, I honestly conclude that, if there is an endless hell, where the devil reigns because he is the greatest sinner that ever lived, – when Anthony goes to that place, his Satanic Majesty will arise, doff his hat, make his lowest bow, and say: “Mr. Comstock, you have beaten me; please take the chair.” (qtd. in Beisel 94)

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