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# Decay and Perversion in Jacksonian America: George Lippard's *The Quaker City*

KEITH LYDON



Keith Lydon is a graduating senior majoring in Criminal Justice and minoring in English. His research

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**I**n the United States, the period between the termination of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the commencement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by the struggle to forge a national identity that was uniquely American in its independence from European influence. American writers of this period understood that the creation of an American literature distinct from the influence of Europe and shaped by the social, political, and natural environment of the United States would provide the country with the first vestiges of the autonomous cultural identity it so desperately desired. However, this work proved to be problematic, as with little financial or even cultural incentive to develop this American literature, many of these writers, once so enthusiastic in assisting in the development of this fledgling nation, had resorted to writing in a style imitative of European literary models. Though largely unknown to or ignored by contemporary scholarship, American author George Lippard dutifully remained at the vanguard of the struggle known as the Subversive movement, convinced of his belief that literature is integral to the development of a national identity. Permeated with the scandalous, the sensational, and the gothic, Lippard's Subversive style is as wild, savage, and unrefined as the fledgling nation that served as its inspiration. Ultimately, though it may seem as though George Lippard and his Subversive utilization of the gothic and the sensational seem to be on the periphery of American literature, they actually had a powerful influence over the evolution of American literature as well as American cultural identity as a whole.

Lippard was deeply influenced by his alliance with the radical democrats, an extremist political group of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century committed to the eradication of what they perceived as the pervasive corruption within the American party system as well as the American government as a whole. He was also possessed of a religious fervor bordering on fanaticism, and considered literature an instrument with which it was possible to stimulate the social and political interest of society and subsequently advance societal reform (*Renaissance* 198, *City* xi). Through the intensely political novel *The Quaker City* (1845), Lippard seeks to expose the vast network of organized corruption that pervades American society, the institutionalization and subsequent perversion of religion, and the potential danger associated with the American proliferation of the ideals of the European Enlightenment.

The corruption and subsequent degradation of institutions over time and at the hands of the strong willed and powerful is a reoccurring theme in George

Lippard's personal and professional life. According to David Reynolds, one of the few scholars to study Lippard extensively, contempt for institutional corruption is a characteristic that can be traced to Lippard's ancestors, German Palatines who fled to America in an effort to escape religious persecution at the hands of the institutionally corrupt Roman Catholic Church (*City ix*). These tormented German pilgrims were granted asylum in a new land that promised unfathomable freedom and opportunity. The fierce appreciation and protectiveness of American ideals that this promise engendered within them was passed down through subsequent generations and became the driving creative force behind Lippard's work.

Lippard spent his formative years on an ancestral farm in Germantown, Pennsylvania under the care of his grandfather and two aunts where his frail form, strong mind, and intense nature made him stand out among his peers as "a queer fellow of no account" and brought to his attention at an unusually early age the arbitrary nature of social hierarchy and society's undervaluation of unique and critical thought. Haunted by his status as an outcast and a preoccupation with mortality, Lippard used religion as a means of comfort, painstakingly studying the bible and interpreting the word of God with his characteristic intense idealism that would be the foundation of his future unforgiving criticism of what he perceived to be misuse or exploitation of institutionalized religion in *The Quaker City* (*City x*).

In an effort to escape poverty, Lippard's aunts sold the family farm and the land it occupied, robbing Lippard of his youthful home and prompting him to brood over why "this old house, this bit of land could not have been spared from the land sharper and mortgage hunter" (*City x*). This experience embittered Lippard towards those "destroyers of the homestead" who participated in the American capitalist economic system, which in his view encouraged the utilization of the darkest aspects of human nature and placed greater value in profit, expansion, and urbanization than in morality, ethics, and even religion. In fact, in his mind the capitalist American economic system had become a formidable institution in its own right, and was responsible for the rapid replacement of the virtuous worship of God in small and rural communities with the blasphemous worship of the dollar in sprawling and dangerous cities (*Lippard 67*). If at this point in his life Lippard placed any genuine trust in institutionalized religion, his enrollment at Catherine Livingstone Garretson's Classical School in Rhinebeck, New York quickly extinguished it (*City xi*). Upon realizing that the school's clergyman director fell short of the level of devoutness and piety that Lippard believed a man in his position must possess, he deemed the school a breeding ground for future corrupt and hypocritical preachers and quickly left, his feelings for perverse religious institutions and duplicitous religious leaders

now forged into the almost militant hatred that would fuel his macabre and menacing portrayal of them in *The Quaker City* (*City xi*).

After his departure from the Garretson's School and upon hearing of the impending death of his father, Lippard returned to Philadelphia but received no portion of his father's estate and was suddenly plunged into poverty (*City x*). Realizing his lack of options Lippard elected to remain in Philadelphia and acquired two law-assistant jobs as a means of financial support. Lippard's time in Philadelphia coincided with the great depression of 1837 to 1844 and his lack of money and homelessness allowed him firsthand experience of the social and political unrest that plagued the city in the form of bank failures, worker strikes, unemployment and starvation (*City xi*). It seemed to Lippard that among the indigent of Philadelphia, especially vulnerable were women, and all were fighting for survival while being attacked on all fronts by greed-crazed bankers, hypocritical preachers, a capricious and opportunistic news media and, perhaps most offensive, a lazy and self-indulgent literary community.

In Lippard's words, "a literature which does not work practically for the advancement of social reform, or which is too good or too dignified to picture all the wrongs of the great mass of humanity, is just good for nothing at all" (qtd.in *City viii*). Through his various life experiences Lippard had been gifted, or cursed depending on perspective, with firsthand knowledge of the many cancerous frauds that threatened the future moral function of not only the city of Philadelphia but the country as a whole. Lippard believed that the United States of America, a nation that shielded his Palatine ancestors from religious persecution and offered them freedom and opportunity, was decaying in the hands of new economic, religious, and political leaders while every day drifting farther and farther away from the intentions of the men involved in its foundation. To Lippard, religion had become a shadow of its former ethical and moral glory. The press had forsaken journalistic integrity and become at best an overly sentimental tranquilizer of the unruly masses and at worst an opportunistic scavenger. And most damning of all, the capitalist American economy had replaced the word of God and become an object of dedicated and feverish worship in its own right.

Lippard and others believed the United States was in need of literature capable of exposing the "social life, hidden sins, and inequities covered with the cloak of authority" that pervaded the country as well as a writer that would not flinch from the inevitably powerful backlash that comes with defying the authority of those in positions of power (qtd.in *City viii*). Lippard did not flinch but imbued such a wild and infernal energy into

*The Quaker City* that Reynolds' description of him as a "literary volcano constantly erupting with hot rage against America's ruling class" is inarguably apt (xii). Lippard was inspired by the actual criminal case of a Philadelphia man named Singleton Mercer, who in 1843 was acquitted of murdering Mahlon Herberton in retaliation for luring his sister to a secret location and seducing her with the promise of marriage. This true story of exploitation, murder and sexual deviance was used as the foundation for a novel that encapsulated all of the economic, religious, literary, legal, racist, and sexist corruption teeming just beneath the perceivable level of Philadelphia and by extension the United States, a story that eventually developed into *The Quaker City*.

### Corruption

Among the many themes explored in *The Quaker City* the vast network of organized corruption pervading the seemingly pious and respectable city of Philadelphia is foremost.

### The Evil of Influence

For the fiercely critical and idealistic Lippard it was not enough to complacently attribute the slow and steady degradation of the Enlightenment-inspired values upon which the United States was founded to inevitable social change. In *The Quaker City*, he articulates his belief that those responsible for this degradation, the powerful and influential, would ultimately reduce the country to a corrupt parody of its previous greatness. Additionally, Lippard often justifies his lack of allegiance to institutions by describing the men who control them as pious and respectable public figures worthy of emulation by day yet wild and drunken embodiments of corruption and debauchery by night. Through the social status and actions of the characters within *The Quaker City* Lippard asserts that those responsible for the orchestration of this corruption are not the uneducated, wretched and starving poor but rather the very men entrusted with maintaining the institutional integrity of the city of Philadelphia and by extension the United States as a whole.

The respectable Colonel Mutchins, for example, is known throughout the city for his portly stature and kind disposition; however when under the influence of alcohol and surrounded by the cloaking effect of night Mutchins casts off his burdensome civil duties and suggests that his partners in debauchery, "think how many bells are to be pulled, how many watch-boxes are to be attacked, how many – curse the thing, I believe I'm toddied – watchmen to be licked" (8). Drunken, foolish Mutchins sounds more like a mischievous schoolboy than a man of substantial public responsibility. Sylvester J. Petriken, editor and proprietor of *Ladies Western Hemisphere*, enjoys the public reputation of a journalist committed to producing a literature dedicated to exposing injustice and facilitating social

change. In reality Petriken is a meek and dispassionate fraud who publishes only overly sentimental and ineffectual drivel (12). Gustavas Lorrimer is charming, intelligent, and possesses the strong constitution of a leader that is both so rare and so necessary in order to maintain American ideals and bring about beneficial social change. Hidden from the eye of the public by wealth and influence, however, Lorrimer is defined by his narcissism and sexual deviance, using his charm and superior leadership ability to manipulate others weaker than he into carrying out his will. Lorrimer describes his relationship with Petriken and Mutchins thus: "they hire themselves to me for the season – I use and, of course, despise them" (22). The character of Gustavas Lorrimer is particularly disturbing to Lippard because he represents the superior ability of those with wealth and influence to alter the institution of the United States over those who wish to maintain the authentic vision of the founding fathers.

By populating the pages of the fictional *Quaker City* with wealthy, influential and respected public figures that are revealed to be licentious, immoral and wicked monsters who commit debauched and deadly crimes throughout the dark streets and even in sight of the State House of Philadelphia, Lippard levels a sharp criticism against those charged with maintaining the original idealistic integrity of the country (7). It was Lippard's intention that when the public read *The Quaker City* they would follow the example of Byrnewood Arlington after he stepped for the first time through the doorway of the infamous Monk Hall and "obtain a few fresh ideas of the nature of the *secret life* of this good Quaker City" (23).

### Religion Threatened

Another prominent theme explored by Lippard in *The Quaker City* is the dangerous and corrupt nature of institutionalized religion in Philadelphia and by extension the United States as a whole. Through the description of the nefarious Reverend Doctor F.A.T. Pyne and his relentless exploitation of the misguided members of his independent religious association known as The Free Believers and True Repenters, Lippard argues that institutionalized religion is merely another means by which the wealthy and the influential profit by perverting the original vision of the founding fathers. Furthermore, Lippard believes the corruption pervading institutionalized religion directly contributes to the erosion of religious integrity. Worse still, it also causes the disintegration of the social cohesion provided by religion that was thought by the founding fathers to be an essential element of a secular nation without access to the cohering force of monarchical government. The Oyster Saloon of Samuel Chiffin, a subterranean den of gluttony, greed, and sloth populated by the lowest level of Philadelphia society, was originally built "for the accommodation of the brothers of

some old-time monastery” (10). The former monastery, originally intended to house men so pious that they had dedicated their lives to the worship of God, has been converted to a filthy pit of corruption and filled with the dregs of Philadelphia society. The transformation of this once sacred place of religious worship into a testament to capitalistic immorality serves as Lippard’s rather blunt assessment of what was becoming of the country. Lippard goes on to describe the Oyster Saloon of Samuel Chiffin as similar to “the caverns of old story” filled with “antediluvians rowdies” attempting to lure unwary travelers into their clutches, suggesting that establishments like this were the rebirth of something that God had deemed so undesirable that he forcefully erased it from the face of the earth (10).

### **The Center of Perversity: Monk Hall**

Through his description of the infamous Monk Hall and the abominable crimes perpetrated within its walls by the wealthy and influential members of Philadelphian society, Lippard reflects the truly perverse nature of American society as a whole, which he believed had become a safe haven where the powerful American elite could indulge in dark depravity without fear of suspicion or consequence. Monk Hall itself, where much of the novel’s action takes place, had originally been constructed by a “wealthy foreigner, sometime previous to the revolution,” and the strange gothic design of this residence combined with the fact that it descended just as deeply underground as it ascended into the air indicated that this person possessed a mind “rendered whimsical and capricious by excessive wealth” (46). This mysterious foreigner was dubbed a “libertine, a gourmand, an astrologer and a wizard” as a consequence of his habit of throwing lavish and drunken feasts late into the night, though he never left the seclusion of his forbidding residence during the day (47). The pattern of fear, mistrust, and religious corruption associated with the proprietors of Monk Hall continues when the residence is occupied by a Catholic priest and utilized as a nunnery, monastery and secluded refuge for what Lippard considers to be a corrupt version of Christianity (47). Lippard is careful to state that after the American Revolution the wild and unsettled regions of Philadelphia began to give way to neat brick buildings and tangled city streets as urbanization and expansion concealed Monk Hall and all fearful legends associated with it. Monk Hall is so buried in urban sprawl that if the original owner were to rise from the grave and attempt to visit his old home “he would have had to wind up a narrow ally, turn down a court, strike up an avenue, which it would take some knowledge of municipal geography to navigate.” The maze of city streets hiding Monk Hall repress the city’s natural fear and suspicion of the gothic style and leave its citizens vulnerable to corruption (48).

Hiding in plain sight yet erased from the memory of the ignorant and complacent citizens of Philadelphia, the corruption within Monk Hall was left to fester and rot so that by the time Byrnewood Arlington stands within its unhallowed walls it has become an awesome monument to godlessness, religious depravity and sexual perversion. Paintings of the god Bacchus, “while his hand swung aloft, a goblet filled with the purple blood of the grape” and the Goddess Venus, “with a softened radiance falling over her uncovered form,” decorate the walls of Monk Hall and suggest that the inhabitants have rejected God in favor of pagan embodiments of sex, alcohol and celebration (54). Continuing the pattern of pagan-inspired decoration, the corridors of Monk Hall are ornamented with “uncouth sculptures of fawns and satyrs, and hideous creations of classical mythology” (54). Lippard soon trades thinly veiled suggestions of religious irreverence for clear and sharp accusations of blasphemy with the description of the effigy of a monk, “whose long black robes fell drooping to the floor, while his cowl hung heavily over his brow,” and from beneath this cowl “glared a fleshless skeleton head, with orbless eye-sockets,” the abandoned and desiccated corpse representative of the extant form of Christianity (54). Through vivid descriptions of mythological pagan creatures, allusions to pantheistic worship and the representation of Christianity as a long dead carcass, Lippard assesses religion in the United States and finds it withered almost to nothingness and the country as a whole teetering on the edge of ruin in the vein of the Roman Empire. All this occurs while its people, shrouded in ignorance and complacency, enjoy a uniquely American period of bread and circuses.

### **The Fall of Religion and the Rise of Capitalism**

Like Lippard, the founding generation believed that for society to be successful and peaceful, humanity must be guided by an idea more complex than individualistic compulsion. And like many of the founders, Lippard believed that the force capable of pacifying self-centered human desire was religion, more specifically Christianity. But according to Lippard, institutionalized religion had become dominated by the wealthy and influential elite and deviated far from the original word of God. This deviation had subsequently allowed “authentic” religion to be replaced as the primary source of social control by the increasingly powerful institution of capitalism. For Lippard, the impending prospect of capitalism supplanting religion as the central binding American institutional force presented a great and terrible danger. Through the inhuman subjugation of the indigent by the wealthy described in *The Quaker City* Lippard asserts that allowing capitalism, which counts individualistic competition, monetary gain, and unrelenting expansion as priorities of the highest order, to surpass religion as the defining American moral influence will result in the country’s metamorphosis into an archaic empire ruled by a wealthy aristocracy

and dedicated to brutal economic Darwinism. Emblematic of this process is the fate of the Oyster Saloon of Samuel Chiffin, once a monastery occupied by pious men of extraordinary faith in God but now an unhallowed den of capitalistic greed run by a man whose feverish mutterings of “Four bottles o’ Cham at two dollars a bottle—four times two is eight” and “They’ll drink six more. Let’s call it twelve all together. Say twenty-four shiners for dinner and all” mirror Lippard’s fear and hatred of capitalism (11).

### The Destructive Influence of Capitalism

Lippard theorizes that increased exposure to capitalism combined with decreased exposure to the moralizing influence of religion would inevitably turn the idealistic and enterprising people of the United States into the blasphemous, licentious and unfeeling characters featured within *The Quaker City*. When Gustavas Lorrimer declares to his dedicated band of followers that he plans on the seduction and subsequent destruction of an innocent girl, the first impulse of Byrnewood Arlington is not to express disgust for this evil plan but instead to announce “I will stake this hundred dollars that the girl who seeks your arms to-night, is not respectable, is not connected with one of the first families in the city, and more than all has never been any better than a common lady of the side walk” coldly disregarding the safety of an innocent person in favor of monetary gain (15). Lorrimer of course accepts the bet and recruits the faithful dogs Petriken and Mutchins to the blasphemous task of orchestrating a sham of a wedding designed to trick the young woman into thinking she is respectably linked to Lorrimer in the eyes of God. These meek and corrupted men easily agree to assist in the seduction for the meager price of fifty dollars with exclamations by Petriken of “Fifty dollars! Egad that ‘ill buy two steel engravings and three fashion plates for the next number of the *Ladies Western Hemisphere*,” and “Economy is wealth, and the best way to learn how to fly is to creep—creep very low, remarkably low, *damned* low—always creep!” displaying both his preoccupation with monetary gain and his understanding that in order to be successful in a capitalist society one must be willing to utterly sacrifice morality and basic human compassion (16).

Lippard illustrates this tendency of capitalism to prioritize monetary gain over concern for humanity by describing the “Monks” of Monk Hall’s ability to exist immune to the curiosity of Philadelphia merely because they pay rent in full and on schedule. Monk Hall itself is rented the under the name Abija K. Jones but the true identity of the renter was the murderous and mentally unstable caretaker Devil-Bug, a secret that the legal owner of the house, “a good Christian, who had a pew in --- church” would have been able to uncover easily if he hadn’t been too busy “cramming Abija’s rent money into the same

pocket book that contained some tract society receipts” and remarking to himself, “Good tenant that!—pays his rent with the regularity of clockwork” (49).

The deadened sense of morality that began to pervade the United States as a result of the increased influence of capitalism is reflected by Lippard through the inability of the citizens of *The Quaker City* to see Monk Hall, an institution protected by the powerful and used to propagate corruption, as anything but a simple home “kept by a reputable old lady, and supported by the purses of goodly citizens, whose names you never hear without the addition of ‘respectable’, ‘celebrated’, or –ha-ha-‘pious’-most ‘*pious*’ (22). Only those who had consciously abandoned morality and concern for humanity could comprehend Monk Hall for what it truly was, a godless altar to capitalism shielded from the arbitrary and corrupt institution of the law by the wealth and influence of its patrons, “where the very devil is played under a cloak, and sin grows fat within the shelter of quiet rooms and impenetrable walls,” and the vile and manipulative words of a man like Gustavas Lorrimer could be greeted with sacrilegious shouts of “Huzza! Bravo—The *Reverend* Gus Lorrimer preaches” (23). Through the description of the brutal fight between the creditors of Monk Algernon Fitz-Cowles over his large debt as “a forest of flying fists, rising up and down, a mass of angry faces all mingled together,” Lippard reflects his vision of the people of the United States under the destructive influence of capitalism. Through the description of the men “twisting and winding all about, with so much rapidity, that they all looked like the different limb of some strange monster, undergoing a violent epileptic fit” (172) Lippard describes the contorted and self-destructive institution of capitalism itself.

### The Danger of the Enlightenment

Though Lippard was particularly anxious about the corruption of American identity by the expanding influence of institutionalized capitalism, there were sections of the idealistic legacy of the United States that he believed had the potential to be just as dangerous as capitalism if taken out of context, namely the values of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinking, with its emphasis on reason, the power of human understanding and individual freedom, had inspired the persecuted colonial subjects of the British Empire to cast off the yoke of oppression and forge a new nation. Through *The Quaker City* Lippard asserts that though the United States was founded on the belief that the betterment of humanity is possible by the agency of human reason and understanding, without the social cohesion provided by religion this humanistic perspective has the potential to bring about the destruction of the nation, especially if perverted to achieve the purposes of the wealthy and influential elite.

To Lippard, the United States in its original form had the potential to become as near a perfect society as was possible on earth because it proposed the use of religion as a means of governing the behavior of its fundamentally debauched citizens. Convinced of the concept that the only method by which the corruption that pervaded the United States could be overcome was the resurrection of what he perceived to be the superior values of the past, the majority of Lippard's early writings consisted of the exaggerative reimagining of significant American historical events. The historical figures that populated Lippard's revised American history included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, each figure depicted not only as a hero, but a hero inarguably aligned with Lippard's ideology (*Lippard* 67). In Lippard's view, the only aspect of the United States that did not lend itself to perfection was the country's Enlightenment-based belief that too intense a reliance on religion would restrict the fledgling nation from testing the boundaries of human understanding through scientific, philosophical and technological progress, a concept that he believed encouraged human arrogance and challenged the status of the word of God as the universal truth. Lippard demonstrates the danger of casting aside the moral guidance of religion in his description of Albert Livingstone, a man whose mind "had only found use for the display of its tame powers" in his experience so far, "while its dark and desperate elements, from the want of adversity, revenge or hate to rouse them into action, had lain still and dormant for some twenty years of active life" (36). Livingstone was a kind and gentle man, but he, along with the rest of humanity, had the potential to become a hateful, vindictive and murderous monster without the constraints of society and the guidance of religion. According to Lippard and reflected within *The Quaker City*, the majority of men are similar to Livingstone in the sense that "he never dreamed himself that he carried a living hell within his soul" (36) and in the protective confines of civilization become complacent in the misguided supposition that they are intrinsically virtuous. Convinced that this blasphemous ideology had taken root in his own nation, Lippard writes *The Quaker City* as a means of imploring his fellow Americans to accept Christ as their savior before the absence of the moralizing influence of religion reduces the great United States into nothing more than a pack of bloodthirsty beasts.

### Women as Victims in Monk Hall

Lippard was convinced that without religious reverence it was simply not possible for human beings to lead good and virtuous lives. When describing Mary Arlington, the purest and most virtuous female character in *The Quaker City*, Lippard is careful to state that even in the throes of attraction she is not under the influence of "feverish sensual passion" and was not drawn to Gustavas Lorrimer because "his eyes were bright, his form

magnificent, his countenance full of healthy manliness" (84). Mary was drawn to Gustavas Lorrimer because she believed he was an honorable man and she loved him in the sublime and spiritual manner that was intended by God. In Lippard's view women are more attuned to the sublime and spiritual influence of God than they are to the sinful and depraved influence of humanity and so for them the animalistic nature to which all humans are prone "is a passive thing that must be roused ere it will develop itself into action" (85). Subsequently, women who are engaged by men on a purely intellectual level will remain loyal and godly companions. However, if a man who has cast off religious influence in favor of the arrogant Enlightenment-based belief in the power of human understanding should decide to engage a woman in a less transcendent sense, and "play with her animal nature as you would with the machinery of a watch," the purity of said woman is tainted forever and she becomes "but a mere animal" (85).

As Sylvester J. Petriken remarks before officiating over the fraudulent wedding ceremony of Mary Arlington, "when a man's fit for nothin' else, he can always find fools enough to build him a church, and glorify him into a saint" (94). Through this telling statement, Lippard postulates that just as capitalism has the potential to create the wealthy, influential, and depraved monster Gustavas Lorrimer, the proliferation of Enlightenment values has the potential to create a figure even more capable of eroding the idealistic legacy of the United States. This figure – in *The Quaker City*, it arrives in the person of the mysterious Maroni – would disguise itself as a symbol of hope while perverting such Enlightenment concepts as trust in human understanding, belief in progress, and value of individual freedom, as a means of convincing humanity of the corrupt and archaic nature of religion. This figure would have the ability to suppress any resistance to its deceptive assurances that mankind had finally stepped out of the shadow of a false god and into the light of human potential. Once humanity had divorced itself from the moralizing force of religion this figure would convert these weak willed and arrogant individuals into the followers of a new and fallacious faith while achieving god-like status in its own right.

The mysterious and seemingly omnipotent Ravoni is a man whose extensive knowledge of science, philosophy, and law surpasses that of the greatest minds in the country and inspires in his students a strong admiration that quickly develops into zealous worship. Ravoni preaches a dangerous message: "there is no God. There is no Heaven. There is no Hell." He emphatically states of himself, "I believe in God, but my God is the Power of a Giant Will. In a Heaven, but it is that Heaven which springs forth from the refused cultivation of all the senses. In a Hell I believe – it is the Hell of Annihilation" (424).

Through these words Ravoni clearly states that the worship of a fictional celestial authority is foolish and that true meaning in life is not attained through an outside source but only through the endless pursuit of individual pleasure.

Through the excited exclamations of the godless libertine Gustavas Lorrimer – “Everything is fleeting and nothing stable” and “One word my fellow-Enjoy! Enjoy till the last nerve loses its delicacy of sense, enjoy till the last sinew is unstrung, enjoy till the eye flings out its last glance, till the voice cracks and the blood stagnates” (23) – Lippard predicts that if the demoralized Enlightenment teachings of Ravoni are allowed to flourish, human civilization will inevitably be torn asunder by the newly unleashed force of self-centered human impulse. Reservations about the morality of actions intended to augment human understanding will crumble in the absence of God, and make commonplace the atrocities committed by the corrupt students of Ravoni, who callously dissects the bodies of men, women, and children without once considering that the unquenchable thirst for knowledge had compelled them to destroy “rare relics of the Temple which yesterday enshrined a Soul, borne of the Living God” (437).

In Ravoni’s world, the appreciation of human reason, rationality and personal freedom that characterize the United States of America will be replaced by the relentless and animalistic pursuit of self-interest culminating in the reduction of a once great nation to dry bones and unhallowed dust. And in this desolate wasteland a figure much like Ravoni will rise and triumphantly enslave all those who had joined him in rejection of God, assisted him in the destruction of the institution of the United States and been foolish enough to believe his promises of ultimate freedom would amount to anything but total subjugation.

Lippard perceived literature as an instrument with which it was possible to stimulate the social and political interest of society as well as subsequently advance societal reform. Through the intensely political *The Quaker City* Lippard seeks to expose the vast network of organized corruption that pervades American society, the institutionalization and subsequent perversion of religion and the potential danger associated with the American proliferation of the ideals of the European Enlightenment. Though his extreme political ideology and intense utilization of such Subversive literary elements as the gothic and the sensational have characterized him as a radical outlier in the minds of many contemporary literary scholars and subsequently relegated him to the status of a footnote in the history of the development of the literary identity of his fledgling nation, the prodigious influence of Lippard’s wild, tempestuous and sometimes frightening work remains clearly discernable within American literature to this day.

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