

## Chamber Pots and Gibson Girls:

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## **“Chamber Pots and Gibson Girls: Clutter and Matter in John Sloan’s Graphic Art”**

**John Fagg, University of Birmingham<sup>1</sup>**

Washboard, basin, scarf, petticoat, jug, stool, bucket, boots, shawl, stockings. A dense mass of crosshatching lines over and through which run the shapes of these objects and from which emerge half-open doors and draws, patterned rugs and a picture hung slightly askew. Thread reels balance perilously on the windowsill, shoes are piled one on top of the other, clothes lie in heaps where they were dropped, stockings hang at the window to dry. A small boy and a cat taunt one another in wild play around the bedstead, rucking and scrabbling the sheets and threatening with sudden burst of movement or straggling limb to dislodge some precarious object and pitch the fragile domestic order into total disarray. In the midst of all this a woman -- legs crossed at the ankle, toes curled in concentration, a light nightgown catching and folding about her full figure -- sits oblivious in her rocking chair lost in the pages of a Yellow Press paper. John Sloan’s 1905 etching in subject and technique revels in a cluttered materiality that is set against the blank white spaces, orderly columns and crisp line illustration of the newspaper feature, which, at the center of the composition, gives the work its title, *The Women’s Page* (fig 1).

This sharp opposition that sets the stuff of the world against the space of mass media, and fleshy corporeality against smooth, idealized depictions of the body, proselytizes for realist art but also expresses a distinct (though related) tradition of materialist thought in which clutter and matter carry significant moral and satirical weight. The Enlightenment vision of humans as rational,

perfectible beings that Jonathan Swift, William Hogarth and other eighteenth-century satirists set out to mock and puncture was enthusiastically take up in early-twentieth-century America, where Progressive and commercial constructions of the ideal city, home, race, figure and complexion circulated widely. Sloan reacted to various manifestations of these ideas but most specifically and dramatically to their embodiment in Charles Dana Gibson's famous Gibson Girl. His response was an art insistent on the imperfections of the body and its intimate relationship with base matter that resonates with precedents including Swift's scatological poems, contemporaries like Isadora Duncan whose modern dance reveled in the freedom of the untrammelled body and the later taboo-shattering modernisms of D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce.

This essay departs from existing work on Sloan's urban realism, including Rebecca Zurier's *Picturing the City* and the Delaware Art Museum's *John Sloan's New York*, by taking his realist commitments as the product not only of his New York environment and its local iconography but also of his engagement with the national mass media for which he worked as an illustrator and the rich art and literary history that he absorbed as a voracious reader and autodidactic scholar. It takes up the emphasis placed on Sloan's work as a commercial illustrator in Michael Lobel's recent *John Sloan: Drawing on Illustration* but, locating his illustration and related work in a long iconographic quarrel about idealizing images, finds a figure more at odds with the medium.<sup>2</sup> It also moves on from the discussion of familiar, publically displayed and frequently analyzed works such as *The Women's Page* to address Sloan's previously unexplored satirical (and scatological) assault on the work of Gibson and his followers in images, that he referred to as distortions and made for semi-private consumption (frontispiece).

## **Realist Clutter**

*The Women's Page* is part of Sloan's 1905-6 *New York City Life* portfolio, a set of street and interior etchings made shortly after he followed his friends and fellow artists William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks and Everett Shinn in moving from Philadelphia to New York. Reflecting on its place within this group Sloan identified it as "perhaps the best all-around example, both in subject matter and treatment."<sup>3</sup> It epitomizes many of the traits of Sloan's printmaking and painting from this period, as it peers into the unkempt domestic spaces of his tenement neighbors in a manner that implies first-hand observation. It is the type work that led Glackens, Henri, Luks, Shinn and Sloan to be retrospectively dubbed "the Ashcan School" and celebrated as pioneering urban realists. The kind of clutter accrued in *The Women's Page* contributes to three of the ways -- a sense of on-the-spot fidelity, a kinship with the reality effects of realist novels, and a connection to the privileged field of documentary observation -- in which this group's art is understood as realism.

Responding to their training as sketch-artists for the *Philadelphia Press*, and to their mentor Henri's insistence that his friends and students work quickly from the life around them, several Ashcan artists adopted visual styles that convey (but are not necessarily the product of) proximity, immediacy and immersion in urban life. In works that prefigure Sloan's *New York City Life* series in theme and idiom, Shinn developed a mode of rough but precise mark making, eloquent of detail but seemingly as abrasive and frenetic as its city subjects. From the pastel and ink *Tenements at Hester Street* (1900, fig 2) pop the curl of a sleeper's toe between balcony railings and the tension in a finger pointed from

an open window. These precise observations are embedded within intense passages that detail cramped sleeping bodies worked in what art historian Sylvia Yount calls Shinn's "agitated line," which are set against quieter, more generalized expanses of urban space. Shinn and Sloan carefully compose their cluttered masses of bodies and things to create the sense of a scene at once quickly glimpsed and acutely observed.<sup>4</sup>

This investment in clutter establishes common ground with the realist and naturalist writers to whom Shinn, Sloan and the other Ashcan artists were frequently likened. In a clear-sighted review of the groups' 1908 exhibition *The Eight*, for which Sloan expressed gratitude in his diary, James Huneker asserts, "They are realists inasmuch as they paint what they see, let it be ugly, sordid or commonplace. Luks, Sloan, Glackens, born illustrators, are realists, as are Gorky, the late Frank Norris in 'McTeague' and Theodore Dreiser in 'Sister Carrie,' though very often in sheer artistry superior." Charles Wisner Barrell's extended appreciation of Sloan appeared in *The Craftsman* the following year and made similar comparisons:

the art of men like Eugene Higgins or John Sloan is ... obvious and direct, for it comes down to such bald realities as we find in the stories of Jack London and of the late Frank Norris, showing, in all its native tragedy or grotesqueness, the life of that part of humanity which to most of us is known only vaguely as the 'other half.'

Again, Sloan read this piece (in draft and published form) and commented on it in his diary vehemently denouncing the association with the "absolute 'fake'" Higgins but raising no objection to London and Norris.<sup>5</sup>

In realist and naturalist literature clutter facilitates the depiction of a plenitude of minor detail to produce what Roland Barthes termed reality effects, information surplus to the narrative that affirms the author's commitment to the task of transcribing the real. As literary historian Amy Kaplan observes of late-nineteenth-century city fiction, "we curiously treat the seamy side of urban life as the touchstone of 'the real' itself; thus the more slums, poverty, crime, and corruption, the more realistic the novel."<sup>6</sup> The amassed clutter of Sloan's interiors might thus be compared to, for example, the grotesque tenements of Stephen Crane's first novel, *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893), where "In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles" and in Maggie's family's apartment, "Fragments of various household utensils were scattered about the floor."<sup>7</sup> In the quasi-scientific environmental determinism of literary naturalism, chaotic, degraded tenement spaces generate and index chaotic, degenerate lives.

Barrell's reference to the "other half" aligns Sloan with the purview and authority of Jacob Riis's avowedly environmental determinist, proto-documentary book, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), and so suggests a further way in which his work is understood as realism. Riis's takes readers,

Up two flights of dark stairs, three, four, with new smells of cabbage, of onions, of frying fish, on every landing, whirring sewing machines behind closed doors betraying what goes on within... . The floor is littered ankle-deep with half-sewn garments. In the alcove, on a couch of many dozens of 'pants' ready for the finisher, a bare-legged baby with pinched face is asleep. A fence of piled-up clothing keeps him from rolling off on the floor.<sup>8</sup>

This cluttered prose description is followed by a halftone reproduction of the equally cluttered photograph, *'Knee-Pants' at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen – A Ludlow Street Sweater's Shop* (fig 3). Photo-historian Vicki Goldberg observes that the aesthetic of such images “approximated the conditions [Riis] was photographing: rough and ragged; crowded, cluttered and disordered; claustrophobic, fragmented, and off-balance.”<sup>9</sup> High quality prints of Riis's Ludlow Street photograph reveal an image that, like *The Women's Page*, assails the viewer with a plentitude of disorderly stuff. It too conveys the merging of workspace and living space, and includes improvised wall-coverings, pictures askew, piles of clothing, and, with the terrier under a chair at bottom left, a small animal. The girl who stares back at Riis's lens, like the blank space of Sloan's newspaper, provides a calm center to offset the apparent chaos. In Riis's and Sloan's tenement images clutter serves to assert eye-witness veracity: no artist confined to their garret or “expert” postulating from an ivory tower could, these compositions insist, have conjured quite such a disarray of things.

Beyond staking this claim to authoritative witness clutter is imbued with moral weight in Riis's work. “Although his book aims to improve the living conditions of the poor,” Kaplan explains, “it appeals more immediately to the hearts and minds of his readers – the other ‘other half.’”<sup>10</sup> Cramped, disorderly environments were powerful evidence of unsuitable or degraded conditions for middle-class observers and a visceral spur to the Progressive reform movement. But, while acknowledging social inequality and the lack of space and air and privacy afforded by the tenements, Sloan's *New York City Life* etchings carry little of Riis's reform impulse or Crane's melodramatic sense of the horror of the slums. He later wrote, “Observations of life in furnished rooms back of my 23rd

Street studio inspired many of my etchings and paintings of this period. Done with sympathy but no 'social consciousness.'"<sup>11</sup>

Instead, clutter and matter in Sloan's art convey other kinds of meaning. *The Women's Page* strikes a fine balance between legibility and illegibility: as the layered textiles, overlapping bodies and blurred figures in Riis's photograph produce passages that genuinely strain legibility, Sloan's busy cross-hatching at first seems to describe an overwhelming mass of undifferentiated stuff. Strikingly, the lattice lines of the woman's hair intersect and conflate with those that demarcate the wall in front of her. But, as in the opening of this essay, all manner of things can be unpicked from this dense weave, including a sense of character and narrative that accord with Sloan's training and sensibility as an illustrator. Cross-hatching is arrested on narrative rather than mimetic grounds to isolate the cat and the stool it tiptoes on and so grant clarity to its interaction with the boy; while parts of the woman's body merge with the stuff of the apartment the white flesh of her neck and shoulders stand out from her surroundings. The initial impression of a deep confusion of objects and bodies expresses Sloan's commitment to the base materiality of the human body (of which more shortly). The revelation of character and narrative suggests a humorous or sententious message.

### **Moral Clutter**

*The Women's Page* participates in jokes and conventions that long predate early-twentieth-century realism and urban reform. Absorbed in her newspaper and so distracted from household chores, the protagonist has allowed clutter to accumulate and chaos to ensue. As much as they register the artists' commitment



to the real or constitute quasi-sociological evidence about the degraded conditions of the tenements, the things strewn about this scene provide a punch line or moral in the manner of the genre theme popularized in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings such as Nicholas Maes's *The Idle Servant* (1655) and Jan Steen's *The Dissolute Household* (1668). This iconographic tradition, which depicts some form of vice or folly, then piles up highly detailed debris to index the depth of the miscreants' sloth, lust, vanity or intoxication found its way into eighteenth-century British satire, in works such as William Hogarth's *The Distressed Poet* (fig 4, 1737), and on into Sloan's printmaking.<sup>12</sup>

Sloan's connection to the tradition of British graphic satire can be traced through direct influence. As a young man he saw his uncle Alexander Priestley's "elephant folios of Hogarth and [Thomas] Rowlandson prints" and later researched -- and when he could afford to collected -- work by these artists and the later illustrators George Du Maurier and John Leech. This influence was acknowledged by informed contemporaries including his close friend John Butler Yeats and the sympathetic art critic Henry McBride who both referred to him as the "American Hogarth," and Charles Wisner Barrell, who argued that "the point of similarity between the famous Englishman and the young American artist lies in the fact that both seem temperamentally akin in their appreciation of the common, everyday life of parlor and pave."<sup>13</sup>

The connection can also be understood in terms of correspondences between the everyday life and intellectual ferment of Hogarth's London and Sloan's New York. The rapid expansion of both cities created new and surprising proximities between social classes and facilitated fluid movement across cultural boundaries. Print historian Vic Gatrell writes that in eighteenth-century London,

“the politest of people gambled, fornicated and smelled more than a little, and lived with stinking privies, dung-laden streets, and illicitly tumbled beds – such low preoccupations and conditions part of their acknowledged and accommodated world.”<sup>14</sup> While sanitation had improved, this lived experience is not dissimilar to early-twentieth-century Chelsea where Sloan and his wife Dolly spent their first years in New York. Workers from the nearby Hudson River waterfront lived here in apartment and tenement buildings with filthy ashcans, poor ventilation and lack of privacy. The neighborhood was cut through by Sixth Avenue’s parade of cheap shops and entertainments and bordered by the notorious Tenderloin district. This too was a mixed environment where longshoremen, entertainers, stray Fifth Avenue shoppers and slumming pleasure-seekers rubbed shoulders. It is no surprise that these two urban environments would produce artists who, in like terms, juxtapose order and disorder, public and private, high and low.

In Hogarth’s *The Distressed Poet*, as in Sloan’s *The Women’s Page*, mirrors, pictures or documents hang askew; textiles are draped in convoluted rucks and folds; open doors create jarring angles and open receptacles dark recesses. These works sit alongside those of Maes and Steen in the long tradition of genre pictures of dissolute households in which animals run wild and steal food and children join the fray, while brooms and other cleaning utensils are prominently discarded, food is left to spoil or burn, and vessels set to overflow. These motifs and compositional techniques produce the humorous effect of “ordered disorder,” presenting a carefully composed vision of chaos that offer viewers the easy amusement of identifying the inventive range of matter amassed, but also allude to various kinds of local and proverbial knowledge to establish a

moralizing message.<sup>15</sup> Hogarth, the ardent moralist, casts his protagonist as a Grub Street hack, one of those “poets ragged and forlorn ... rhymers, dead as soon as born” who represented a “stock type” and frequent target for Jonathan Swift and other Augustan satirists, and so makes clear that the discomfort and penury of *The Distressed Poet* are the product of pretensions and ill-spent time and thus a wholly contemptible state.

Like *The Distressed Poet*, Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732) also contains a good deal of morally freighted chaos and clutter: overturned tables and broken china litter plates two and five; ointment and potion pots and bottles accumulate in plate three (fig 6). These glimpses into immoral and disorderly private spaces were, according to art historian Mark Hallett, “designed to be read against the more normative arrangements of the domestic interiors within which they were consumed.” The commercial success of Hogarth’s cluttered satirical prints and paintings was in part due to the way that these “environments of difference” flattered the tastes and lifestyles of the wealthy patrons who bought his canvases and the well-off subscribers who paid one guinea for the print portfolio.<sup>16</sup> Both the disarray in which they are kept and their role in creating a façade of beauty and glamour make the objects of the Moll Hackabout’s toilette signs of her fallen state. By contrast, while the things scattered throughout Sloan’s *New York City Life* interiors hint at moralizing messages, the etchings remain ambiguous and if anything invert the meaning clutter carried in Hogarth’s work. Sloan’s clutter in its meticulous detail and varied textures becomes a source of visual pleasure and a sign of his protagonists’ happiness.

A *New York Times* review of the 1915 “Exhibition of American Humorists,” in which Sloan showed several works including *The Women’s Page*, notes the

etching's discordance with the period's prevailing aesthetic, interprets it precisely within the dissolute household tradition and attempts to ascribe a didactic meaning:

[Sloan's] compositions are fuller than the fashionable tendency toward brevity encourages, but he makes each detail say something pertinent to the particular message involved. ... A fat woman, half dressed, with bare feet wriggling themselves free from the remembered discomfort of the shoes, sits reading in an untidy and poorly furnished room. The paper in her hands is open at that page which plays the title role in the drama depicted. A miserable child of the 'famine' type known to the hospitals sprawl on a much disordered bed. A dozen details speak of sloth and poverty.<sup>17</sup>

Among the details not specified by the reviewer, the metal pail below the window might well be used for "rushing the growler" (fetching beer from a saloon), a sign of local vice that featured prominently in Sloan's and other Ashcan artists' New York scenes. But to fix Sloan's perspective as that of a Riis-like Progressive tenement reformer requires some misreading and an unsympathetic eye. Far from sprawling half-starved and miserable on the bed, the boy is playing happily with a cat. To disdain the protagonist as a "fat woman" who feeds herself but neglects her son imposes a narrow vision of tenement life and of women's bodies, which Sloan did not share and which finds little purchase in his art. His diary lauds the "Healthy faced children, solid-legged, rich full color to their hair" (February 13, 1906) that he observed in tenement neighborhoods and abounds with praise for "big," "healthy" female acquaintances.<sup>18</sup>

The narrow, pointed, lace-up boots that the woman has recently freed herself from are placed daintily together, at once mirroring and admonishing her bare, carelessly-planted feet, which seem an unlikely fit to ever squeeze inside them. The stockings hanging in the window take on a similarly anthropomorphic quality and look more like stocking-clad legs than unworn garments, especially as the net curtains suggest frilly skirts hitched to the knee. Rather than indicting poverty and sloth Sloan's etching contrasts the body these empty garments will distort for public presentation with what it is for that body to be comfortably at home and free from constraint. "He will do the fat girl in the shoddy kimono with more love than the Fifth Avenue queen," wrote the painter and critic Guy Pene du Bois, "because one gives in to nature quite honestly and the other fights it with all the willful devices of conscious civilization."<sup>19</sup>

Similar terms shape other *New York City Life* etchings. In *The Show Case* (fig 5) socially uninhibited and sartorially unrestricted girls make fun of the extravagant Madame Ryanné corset -- advertised as "The Perfect Fit/Correct Form" -- and the effect that such a garment has on the stuck-up, trussed-up wealthy woman to their left. *Man, Wife and Child* (1905), in which the husband in undergarments with suspenders trailing leads a joyful dance around another cluttered apartment, depicts spontaneous, unconstrained family life; the seduction on a bedstead draped with discarded stockings glimpsed in *Turning Out the Light* (1905) reveals uninhibited female sexuality. In this company *The Women's Page* seems less like a moralizing sermon on the depravity of the tenements, or indeed like an expression of environmental determinism, than a celebration of stolen leisure, an acknowledgement of the possibilities and pleasures of difficult lives lived blessedly far from middle-class propriety.

There is, then, a further way -- a continuum of moral and intellectual experience and perspective -- through which Sloan may be linked to the tradition of Hogarth and his contemporaries. While, as Mark Hallett suggests, Hogarth's cluttered surfaces affirmed the virtue of the presumably better-maintained environs in which they were displayed, the deeper moral meaning of *The Harlot's Progress* was less flattering to London's "respectable" citizens. As Hogarth's biographer Ronald Paulson writes, "the 'progress' of the suffering protagonist is only a pretext for the author's other subject, which is the people on whom she models herself, who exploit and destroy her, and who continue to flourish themselves." This group includes the bawds, pimps and johns, but also the magistrates, doctors and clergy who populate the prints and, by wider implication, the members of the "high society" that Moll aspires to join. In line with what art historian David Bindman characterizes as Hogarth's recurrent "search for a middle way between extremes," his prints critique aspects of polite society without wholly contravening or directly contesting its terms. This would be left to the print satirists who followed him, to Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray, who confronted a society obsessed with decorum and refinement, and an intellectual ferment dominated by claims for human progress and the perfectibility of the human mind, with graphic evidence of indecorous behaviour and base, imperfect human bodies.<sup>20</sup> Sloan likewise encountered and responded to an early-twentieth-century America bound by genteel convention and wedded to the creed of Progressivism, which sent reformers prying into tenement homes, stocked newsstands with magazines full of advice columns and improving fictions, and gave rise to an arrogant, bumptious public discourse ripe for satire.

Seen in this way the comic charge of *The Women's Page* is directed not at the working-class woman in her nightgown and disarray but at the well-dressed leisure-class lady in the newspaper spread. It is addressed to the wider culture of corseted, tightly-laced women and rooms cleaned and primed for presentation from which the newspaper's illustration is derived. Where this image, like the famous illustration style of Charles Dana Gibson that it brings to mind, is composed of smooth penstrokes that follow Hogarth's serpentine "line of beauty," Sloan's woman, viewed from behind in a loose garment that exposes an expanse of flesh, is depicted in a manner that actively resists idealization. A bulge of flesh at her nape creates sharp intersections, arresting any notion of a graceful flow from neck to shoulders. Sloan's emphasis on the cluttered materiality of genuinely inhabited spaces and the physical materiality of real bodies offered not affirmation but rebuke to the more orderly surroundings in which his work might be placed, including the various exhibition spaces where the New York City Life etchings were shown; the servant-cleaned homes of wealthy patrons like the lawyer and collector John Quinn who he must, given his desire to sell the set as a complete portfolio, have conceived as buyers; and the pages of the mass-market magazines in which he sought to place his etchings and make a living as a commercial illustrator. Bodies sag and bulge when freed from constraints; clutter accrues when people have better things to do than housekeeping.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Matter of Commercial Illustration**

*The Women's Page's* celebration of working-class reading amidst abandoned housework kicks against prevailing trends in early-twentieth-century American works of fine art and commercial illustration. In paintings whose seemingly

conservative aesthetic (and undeniable commercial success) Sloan dismissed as “the poor Boston Brand of American Art!” (November 8, 1906), Edmund C. Tarbell and Frank W. Benson place middle-class women in settings that were, as the art historian Bailey Van Hook observes, “clean, spacious, and usually uncluttered, except for a few choice aesthetic objects.” In Tarbell’s *Girls Reading* (1907), which depicts three well-dressed young women in spacious, light filled quarters absorbed in the quiet contemplation of their books, the art critic Charles Caffin found “a lesson in the holiness of beauty.”<sup>22</sup> Here, and more explicitly in the artist’s 1909 solo *Girl Reading* (fig 7), the setting is purged of distraction and tension, of any hint of work that might cast reading as a slothful or wasteful diversion. The abeyance of the material world creates a rarified atmosphere; the women and their reading are elevated to the spiritual plane on which Caffin encountered them.

In likeminded commercial illustrations Charles Dana Gibson’s wildly popular Girls lounge, plot and swoon in barely delineated chambers. The idealizing effect of stripping away detail and setting is exemplified by *The Eternal Question* (1903 fig 8), one of Gibson’s first contributions to *Collier’s Weekly* following the one-hundred-drawings-for-\$100,000 deal he famously struck with the magazine to make him the highest paid illustrator in America. Posed by the actress-model Evelyn Nesbit, with her hair twisted into a question mark, *The Eternal Question* implies that, as cultural historian Carolyn Kitch puts it, “the female sex was an enigma.”<sup>23</sup> The power of (New) women to beguile, confound and hold sway over their suitors was one of the recurring comic conceits that were, by 1903, so firmly associated with the Girl that they, like her fine gowns and hourglass figure, could be invoked with the slightest gesture of Gibson’s pen.



*The Eternal Question* took “the fashionable tendency toward brevity” -- and specifically Gibson’s familiar strategy wherein the Girl’s limbs and skirts dissolve into blank space or trail off into increasingly abstract hatchings and squiggles -- to an extreme. As a kind of signature for the era’s most successful illustrator, it stands for restraint, simplicity, and much left to the imagination.

This less-is-more commercial aesthetic extended beyond Gibson’s illustrations (and Tarbell’s canvases) to the interiors of their middle-class admirers’ homes. As the rise of industrial scale production and distribution created an early-twentieth-century society marked by abundance, clutter took on new meanings in definitions of class and taste. The notoriously overstuffed aesthetic of the Gilded Age no longer served to distinguish the middle-class home, as working-class people, like Sloan’s tenement dwellers, could gather substantial collections of cheap things. Commenting on early-twentieth-century working-class New Yorker’s efforts to make their (often) temporary accommodations feel like home, literary historian Betsy Klimasmith writes, “the abundance of objects contained in the tenement marked it as anti-modern – the very opposite of the straight lines and smooth walls that were coming into vogue at the time.” Klimasmith’s suggestion that “the modern aesthetic changed to reject what tenement dwellers imitated” is apparent in *Ladies’ Home Journal* editorials of the 1890s, where Edward Bok argued that “The curse of the American home today is useless bric-a-brac” and that “It is only because we have got away from the simple and the natural that so many of our homes are cluttered up as they are.” This was at once a means of establishing class distinction, a reaction to the health risks associated with clutter and part of a wider Progressive Era embrace of “the simple life.”<sup>24</sup>

The same aesthetic also shaped the design and content of the mass-market-magazines as they moved away from the nineteenth-century periodical-as-miscellany, with its crowd of advertisements, cramped contents page, tiny font and abhorrence of blank space. Just as the turn towards uncluttered living arose from a leisure class will-to-distinction at the moment when mass production rendered the simple accumulation of things an insufficient sign of wealth and status, so magazines that sought middle-class readers in a saturated market turned away from the promise of quantity created by a cluttered page. As it rose to become the largest selling weekly during the first decade of the twentieth century, the *Saturday Evening Post* shed decorative embellishments and taglines from its cover to embrace the iconic design in which masthead and illustrated figure are set on an unmarked white background. The cover designs of *Collier's*, *McClure's Magazine* and other publications followed the same trajectory, while inside the magazines blank spaces and wide margins separated out text, headings, images and advertisements.<sup>25</sup>

There was a place for Sloan's clutter in these magazines and he was often commissioned to represent their "other." His title page illustration for local colorist Joseph C. Lincoln's 1906 magazine story "Idella and the White Plague" shares much in composition and technique with *The Women's Page* of the previous year. In both works the viewer looks over the shoulder of a woman seated to the right of center with a window to her right and a mass of clutter and chaos all around her. As before this mess is depicted in such a way that it at first seems like an undifferentiated mass but on close inspection reveals a great many of the specific details of Lincoln's story. Where the etching created juxtaposition by interpolating a page of commercial illustration into its cluttered, crosshatched

space, the illustration stands contrasts with the clean, commodious format of the *McClure's* page on which it appeared (fig 9).

Sloan depicts the moment when Lincoln's malingering ne'er-do-well Washington Sparrow learns that his eldest daughter, Idella, has eloped. He had been "reclining in the rocking-chair with the burst cane seat" with his numerous children "scattered here and there about the room, on the floor and the broken-down couch" and, on hearing this news, he "fell heavily back into the rocker." Idella returns with her carpenter husband to restore order to the family's "rattle-trap shanty in the woods." With advice culled from "a dog's-eared copy of a popular periodical," she sets out to cure her father's ailments, instituting a round-the-clock fresh air cure for the "consumption" and a diet of warm milk for the "nervous dyspepsia." Forced to either admit that he is cured and so fit to work or else continue with this treatment, Washy sets out with Idella's husband for a nearby construction site. Sloan's final illustration (fig 10) shows the two men trudging through a wintery landscape, the expanses of white snow creating a sharp distinction between this bright image of order restored and the dark hatching and clutter of the opening scene. The immediate visual contrast between these bookend illustrations reinforces the message of Lincoln's didactic tale, which was one of many magazine stories in which young people return to cleanse and revitalize the family home, and so dramatize the process by which the magazines purged themselves of their nineteenth-century legacy.<sup>26</sup>

Robert W. Chambers' profile of his friend and fellow illustrator Charles Dana Gibson for *Collier's* 1905 "Gibson Number" places considerable emphasis on just how clean Charles Dana Gibson is. In an early section detailing "The Artist's Personality" Chambers informs the reader that Gibson has "the

wholesome, clean-minded, restless intelligence of an adolescent”; that “in the work ... one is aware of the splendid vigor of a wholesome and clean-minded man”; and that while his “wit crystalline,” “satire generous” and “technical capability” are important, “it is of the greatest importance that he who wields these powers is a clean, high-minded gentleman.” This theme is reasserted on the final page, which explains that Gibson bears “much of the nobility and cleanliness of Thackeray.”<sup>27</sup>

This was of course the construction and maintenance of a mythologized persona, and, especially given the surely tongue-in-cheek hyperbole of the piece, Gibson may well have colluded with his friend. A decade earlier Gibson had been a guest at the infamous “Pie Girl Dinner,” a gathering of New York’s artistic and business elites at the culmination of which, in an entertainment designed by the architect Stanford White, a 16-year-old artists’ model named Susie Johnson emerged, almost naked, from a large pie. As art historian Sarah Burns notes, while, following the scandal caused by Johnson’s subsequent disappearance, the press condemned the party and branded attendees such as White immoral, Gibson remained untouched. “Fortunately for the wholesome illustrator, whatever might tarnish his reputation was simply ignored or repressed,” Burns argues. “He could have attended a dozen Pie Girl Dinners without denaturing his image, because so much hinged on keeping it uncorrupted.”<sup>28</sup>

Cleanliness was more than a facet of Gibson’s public persona: as Chambers’ analysis makes clear it could also be seen as a defining feature of his art. According to Chambers “The work of Dana Gibson appears to be accomplished *premier coup*” -- that is *at first stroke* and so absent of sketchy or tentative lines -- and this “is as it should be; the public has no business behind

the scenes.” He goes on to describe Gibson as “master of transposed values – of texture, and of that fine sense of space so rare, so welcome when part of an equipment such as his.” Gibson’s cleanliness is manifest not only in this clarity of line and sense of space, but in his work’s moral effect: “no intellect has been dulled, no intelligence stultified, no low-grade mind permitted the complacent inertia which for example is the sordid consequence of the ‘colored supplement,’ which every week drags lower the intellects of the great unwashed.”<sup>29</sup> A dichotomy is thus established between Gibson’s clean-minded, high-minded art and that which is dull, low and dirty.

As the new magazine format correlated with ideals of home decoration, so Gibson’s aesthetic moved beyond the page. The popular press frequently appealed to him as an arbiter of female beauty and encouraged women to imitate his creation. In a 1903 column on “The American Girl Face” beauty expert Marian Martineau explained how to “get the features made familiar by famous artists.” To avoid lines, creases and furrows in order to achieve the “wide, smooth forehead” essential to the type, Martineau insisted on a regimen that begins with “The steaming of the forehead,” which, fortunately, “does not mean its parboiling” but only “the thorough heating of the skin until the cuticle is in such a state as to permit the rubbing out of the blackheads.” Seamlessly conflating art and life, Martineau explains that to complete the two-step process, “Many a Gibson girl has her forehead daily made wide and smooth with a massage of warm oil.” For Martineau this part of the body is important because it can be read like a page: “There is no better index of one’s personal habits than the state of one’s forehead.” In life, as is Gibson’s art, the ideal is blank and unmarked.<sup>30</sup>

In a 1910 *New York Times* interview that has “The Gibson Girl Analyzed

by her Originator,” Gibson took up this merging of art and life along with the high/low dichotomy established in Chambers’ profile:

But there really is, I believe, a reason why the woman of America has reached a higher type of beauty, just as she has undoubtedly reached a higher mental plane, than any other woman in the world. It has been the attitude of men toward her. And in American pictures woman has been notable because the artist has approached and treated her with an innate respect – with gallantry, if you care to use the term; but with no more than she deserves.<sup>31</sup>

Talk of a “higher type of beauty,” a “higher mental plane” and, in the same interview, “natural selection,” derives from what art historian Jennifer Greenhill characterises as the artist’s “evolutionary vision of a future when racial and ethnic variables would be sloughed off to reveal an increasingly purified – that is, for Gibson, Anglofied – American woman.” These ideas about racial purity were informed by and contributed to the Progressive Era revival, fueled by eugenics and pseudo-Darwinian theories, of the Enlightenment discourse of human perfectibility and, like the related claims for cleanliness, found expression in Gibson’s black and white technique. “Gibson’s experimental use of the blank page, his investment in it as organizing principle of his art and sign of his position in the avant-garde,” is shown, in Greenhill’s compelling analysis, to “reinforce” his racial agenda.<sup>32</sup> Put (too) simply abstract white space equates to pure white womanhood. But the absences and abbreviations that define Gibson’s illustrations also make other claims for the state of female perfection. They imply that to present an ideal, and to be treated with respect and gallantry by the artist, Girls must be excised from the social space in which real women live and breathe

and disassociated from all but the most euphemistic gestures towards the human body.

Art historian Michael Lobel places Sloan “in dialogue” with Gibson and the commercial illustration aesthetic that he exemplified. Through detailed analysis of Sloan’s allusion to contemporary newspaper illustration practices in *The Women’s Page* and his direct reference to Gibson’s illustration *The Greatest Game in the World* on a January 1904 *Collier’s* cover (fig. 11), Lobel shows Sloan “engaging with illustration, and its widespread prevalence in contemporary culture, and making them the very subject of a picture.” Specifically, the latter cover illustration “touches on Gibson’s enormous success and the competition to get a piece of it” and “illuminates Sloan’s professional distance from Gibson.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast to these relatively respectful interactions, a further instance in which Sloan appropriates and reworks an archetypal Gibson Girl illustration suggests not dialogue or homage but critique and iconoclasm (fig 12).

*Conspirators* first appeared in *Life* in 1902 but Sloan works from the version reprinted in the *New York World* in February 1907. Cupid -- who in the familiar guise of a chubby cherub, depicted both with and without his bow and arrow, made regular appearances in Gibson’s work -- perches on the Girl’s shoulder whispering in her ear. Her eyebrows are raised and her lids droop dreamily, revealing eyes that loll to the left as if lost in sensual reverie. Gibson gives only the head and shoulders of the Girl, trailing off, in the manner of *The Eternal Question*, at the low-cut neckline of her dress. A loose arrangement of squiggles that begins as a frilled sleeve runs along the horizontal to become Gibson’s equally loose signature. The artist here draws -- and signs off on -- a line below which all is left to the viewer’s imagination.

Sloan leaves Gibson's drawing extant and, aside from one or two slight additions to indicate the Girl's left shoulder, begins his work below this line. He adds suggestions of a broader waistline than the conventional Gibson Girl hourglass, lopsided and misshapen breasts, and erect nipples that poke through the fabric of her dress. Who is being dirty here? By introducing signs of arousal is Sloan imposing a sordid interpretation on clean-minded work, or reviving an earlier erotically charged mythology and iconography of Cupid, disavowed by a genteel mass culture that would soon reinvent the figure as "Kewpie" in Rose O'Neill's comic strip and spin-off dolls? Is he failing to treat this image of an American woman with "respect" or rather calling out the overtly sexual nature of the Girl's appeal, which her creator and admirers sublimate with layers of innuendo and idealization? The vertical division of the work -- Gibson/Sloan, high/low, clean mind/dirty body -- and its breakdown of that division suggest the cultural pattern identified by theorists Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in which "the 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover ... that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life."<sup>34</sup> What in Cupid's whisperings occasions the Girl's glazed, faraway stare in Gibson's drawing if not carnal knowledge, if not dirty secrets?

Sloan's iconoclastic attack on this Gibson Girl may have been occasioned in part by his aesthetic and professional frustration with the world of commercial illustration. Despite the early success of his Gibson-referencing 1904 *Collier's* cover, Sloan's persistent efforts to get a foothold at *McClure's*, *Collier's* and the *Post* never delivered the artistic freedom, prestigious commissions or large fees granted to the era's celebrity illustrators. While he enjoyed a good



relationship with *Collier's* during William Bradley's brief tenure as art editor, the magazine tried to reduce his fee soon after Bradley quit. "I can hardly afford to quarrel with them," Sloan lamented. "I have no hold anywhere sufficient to make my work missed on its non-appearance" (January 21, 1911). His experience at *McClure's* was even worse: he received less than the standard rate for his "Idella" illustrations with the art editor E. G. M. Russell later explaining that he could only offer occasional commissions as "now and then is all the public will stand" of work like Sloan's (January 16, 1907). At the end of a trying day of such rejections Sloan concluded, "I'm out of humor with the conditions of things" (April 25, 1907). When his friend, the illustrator Henry Reuterdaahl, took a selection of the *New York City Life* etchings to Peter Collier, the publisher rejected them for reproduction on the basis that "while he appreciated them himself he felt that his millions of readers were not educated to that point" (July 17, 1906). Sloan's art did not fit the aesthetic or ideology the magazine sought to encourage in its readers.

Sloan's response to Gibson had a political dimension too. His commitment to socialism began to emerge through his friendship with Charles Wisner Barrell in 1908, and culminated in his work for *The Masses* during the following decade. In a 1915 article, the *Masses'* editor Max Eastman asked, "What is the Matter with Magazine Art?" He concluded that it "makes an ideal of monotony. 'The Gibson Girl,' 'The Christy Girl,' 'The Stanlaws Girl,' 'The Harrison Fisher Girl.'" The artist who put his name to such images had, Eastman claimed, "turned himself into a reproducing machine." Identifying Gibson as "the original discoverer of the psycho-physical law that an anatomically impossible amount of space between the eye and the eye-brow of the female produces a romantic reaction in the

male,” Eastman, like Sloan, drew attention to the way that the Girl played on base instincts rather than high-minded ideals: “It was long known that certain slight physical abnormalities are a sex stimulus. We found that out almost as soon as we came down from the trees... .” Gibson and his imitators were, according to Eastman, concerned only with money-making formulae that work to “give neither intense pleasures nor intense displeasures to a few, but to please everybody a little all the time, namely about ten or fifteen cents’ worth.” On hearing Peter Collier’s reason for rejecting the New York City Life etchings Sloan noted that this was “all rot”: “The reason that it’s hard to reach the ‘common people’ is that educated idiots in droves block the path – protecting them” (July 17, 1906). Almost a decade later Eastman echoed this position, claiming that “It would not take ‘the people’ long to discover and express their likings for true art, if enough true art, enough kinds of true art, were offered to them.”<sup>35</sup>

The assertion that commercial art was about profitable compromises and that it alternately pandered to, manipulated and blinded audiences would become a fixture of the left’s critique of mass culture. So too would the widespread failure of those on the left to “get” popular culture or to allow it more than one layer of meaning. Sloan did not fall into that category: he enjoyed the movies, Coney Island, maybe even the magazine stories he diligently read and researched when preparing illustrations. But he wanted popular culture, or at least popular illustration, to be different, to contain more of the stuff of the world. If Gibson’s *premier coup* pen and sense of space could stand for clean-mindedness or express a vision of purity, then Sloan’s agitated line and densely worked compositions were surely its antithesis. His instinct to reveal dirty

thoughts and tendency to revel in dirt, clutter and chaos set him against the era's genteel conventions and clean commercial aesthetic.

### **Distorted Bodies**

Sloan's take on Gibson's *Conspirators* is one of a group of works that he referred to as his "distortions," in which commercial illustrations culled from mass-market magazines were ingeniously embellished to humorous ends. The Delaware Art Museum holds more than fifty of these images, mostly based on *McClure's*, *Collier's* and *Saturday Evening Post* cover and advertising art dating from 1907-09, but with a late-career return to the practice on *Life* magazine covers in the mid 1940s. In what may be the only contemporaneous record of these works, Sloan's diary notes, "Met [his friend, fellow illustrator and Henri student] Miss [Bessie] Marsh. She says that a writer of her acquaintance would like to try [to see] how *Colliers* would respond to our idea [of] publishing the distortions of *Collier* covers that I have now and then made" (May 26, 1907). While the audacious plan to publish these parodies of *Collier's* in *Collier's* didn't come off, and I have found no record of their publication or exhibition elsewhere, Sloan's reference to an unnamed friend-of-a-friend suggests that the distortions were well-known within his broad social circle.

As art historian Heather Campbell Coyle's recent study explains, the Pennsylvania Academy art students who gathered around Robert Henri participated in the vogue for caricature exhibitions that spread from Paris to Philadelphia, New York and Boston in the years around 1900. Sloan's prize-winning entry to the groups' 1894 exhibition was, in Coyle's words, an "opportunistic transformation with a critical edge" that reimagined John Singer

Sargent's "*Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth* (1889) as "Lady Macbroth" replacing the crown from the original with a bowl of soup. Once relocated to New York Henri, Sloan and their peers were encouraged to paint humorous murals on their friend and patron James Moore's basement walls. In his 1906 diary Sloan records "an amusing decoration added by Glackens," explains that "Owing to the breadth of the humor J. M. says it will be painted out," and concludes with regret, "It's worth keeping tho' Comstock would not be pleased" (March 31). That mocking opposition to the atmosphere and policy of censorship symbolized in early-twentieth-century New York by the United States Postal Inspector and fervent moralizer Anthony Comstock was a recurring theme in the group's social life. One evening in 1907 Sloan listened while his wife Dolly read sexually explicit passages from the English edition of George Moore's *Memoirs of My Dead Life*, which Henri then copied into the censored American edition. This was at once a bohemian entertainment in which a woman read aloud a man's frank recollection of his sexual experiences in the company of her husband and his best friend, and a further private challenge to Comstockery, the serious intent of which was marked by Henri's dedicated act of transcription.<sup>36</sup> In this context of semi-private satirical production and taboo-baiting entertainments it is easy to imagine the distortions being laid out for visitors to Sloan's studio or apartment.

The most successful of these works variously include the inventive visual puns and plays of Sloan's student caricatures; acknowledgment that in contrast to these caricatures the original (mass reproduced) work is also present; a subtle teasing out and "distortion" of the original image's latent qualities; scatological and pornographic elements that challenge genteel conventions; and the reintroduction of the world of material things and functioning bodies to

commercial illustration. The distortions are sometimes surreal, often witty, and generally more technically sophisticated than the crude reworking of *Conspirators*. The ingenuity and range of techniques employed to disguise the join between the original and its distorted reworking, as well as the fact that he sometimes signed them, suggests that Sloan took these jokes quite seriously.

Pretty girl illustrations of the kind decried by Max Eastman were the inspiration for Sloan's most satirical distortions. In a striking example Sloan takes Harrison Fisher's December 1908 *Saturday Evening Post* cover and introduces an inappropriate suitor and the surreal pick-up line, "Aint it oval, Mabel?" (fig 13). As Eastman noted, Fisher had successfully coined his own type, a softer, girl-next-door alternative to Gibson's aloof, imposing creation. Sloan takes up the invitation of this more accessible fantasy, and the explicit encouragement to imaginative projection created by the cover's composition -- in which the girl, neck craned and lips primed, poses as one half of a kissing couple -- to introduce a regular **schmo** into the pristine space of popular culture.

In the spring of 1908 Sloan's diary records an evening when Dolly and her friends went out and he "read Rabelais while they were gone" (March 3). The distortion of Fisher's cover, which he likely made later that year, is an overtly carnivalesque, Rabelaisian image. The tessellation of the two figures' lips and the symmetry of their chins and necks establish a rhetoric of opposition and inversion. Fisher's Girl's smooth skin is rendered in the subtlest gradations of flesh tones that the *Post's* two-color printing process would allow; Sloan's man is delineated in coarse pencil lines. She looks up; he looks down. Her lips are thin and gently pressed together; his are full and rubbery. Grotesque and excessive, with fingers so large that when clasped to her hands there is no space for the

pinky, which hangs flaccid, he makes manifest the fleshy, material body and so calls out its absence in Fisher's ideal. This fat, warty, stubbly, exaggeratedly lowbrow figure is also an inversion of the erect, chiseled "college man" type that he displaces as object of the girl's affections. Sloan takes up the invitation presented by Fisher's mistletoe -- which, in its sanction of illicit Christmas kisses, is a boundaried, sanitized remnant of older midwinter rites -- to enact carnival and to turn the world upside-down.

Sloan most fully realizes the subtle and satiric potential of the technique in a distortion based on another 1908 "pretty girl" cover, which was made for *Collier's* by Sewell Collins, a less well-known illustrator than Gibson or Fisher who worked in a range of styles while also pursuing a career in the theater (fig 14). Collins's Girl shares much with Gibson's and Fisher's, including the pompadour hairstyle, the "anatomically impossible amount of space between the eye and the eye-brow", and the tendency, exemplified by *The Eternal Question*, to disconnect women from their bodies and from their social and material surroundings. But she seems less poised than the other Girls: her brows don't arch; her sideways glance seems wary rather than seductive; while elaborately arranged her hair is a dense thatch from which frizzy strands unfurl. It is hard to place the lines that trail down from her chin but they suggest a high-buttoned collar in contrast to the other Girls' low necklines. These signs of discomposure and imperfection are underscored by Collins's illustration technique, which vacillates awkwardly between Gibson's crisp flourishes and Fisher's subtle shading. As Sloan draws out the sublimated "bottom" in Gibson's *Conspirators* and takes up the invitation to fantasize presented by Fisher's mistletoe cover, his distortion of Collin's Girl accentuates its deviations from the ideal.

Sloan takes Collins's disembodied girl and goes to great lengths to reacquaint her with the bodily stuff of the world, not just through the scatological inclusion of the chamber pot on which she perches but with thickened eyebrows and bags beneath the eyes; with a return to a world of practical things such as ladies' union suits with back-flaps; and with fat black lines, and dense hatching and shading (fig 15). A plume of straggly hair is pulled together at the top of her head. The uncertain lines with which Collins formed her chin multiply to suggest creases and crevices at the join with her neck. An excessive emphasis on dirt and disorder registers in the dark, scribbled patch of charcoal behind her bottom that vigorously impresses matter onto the magazine cover, and verges on loss of control. Sloan's realist, satirical response to the type of the idealized, disembodied magazine pretty girl crystallized in Gibson's *Eternal Question* and reiterated in Fisher's and Collins' work is to insist on the dirty, mundane materiality of the human body.

### **Body Politics**

It is in the disembodied guise of *The Eternal Question* that Evelyn Nesbit first appears to readers of E. L. Doctorow's 1975 novel *Ragtime*. Doctorow casts Nesbit as "the first sex goddess in American history" and casts her into a social vortex where wealth and poverty, politics and entertainment, activism and celebrity collide. Sloan's early years in New York City seem from his diaries a little like *Ragtime*. He visited Charles Dana Gibson's studio for after-hours entertainments; watched from the public gallery as Nesbit testified in the trial of husband Harry K. Thaw for the murder of her lover Stanford White; attended the anarchist Emma Goldman's lectures; took trips to Coney Island with John Quinn;

and met the Socialist leaders Eugene Debs and “Big Bill” Haywood. Sloan’s and *Ragtime*’s New York is a space of negotiation between private and public worlds, between the old social order and a fast emerging modernity. In *Ragtime* Doctorow enacts the potential and the right of the historical novel to say things about private lives and desires, and about the place of those lives and desires within the broad sweep of history, which go beyond the bounds of the historical record. Sloan’s semi-private distortions are also a negotiation between the rich satirical and materialist tradition that he drew from Hogarth and his contemporaries and, as *Ragtime* helps us to see, the nascent modernity and increasingly permissive public discourse of early-twentieth-century America.

Among the desires of the era elucidated by *Ragtime* was the urge to strip away the idealizing apparatus of the Gibson Girl, to expose her secrets and to reacquaint her with the body. Mother’s Younger Brother cuts *The Eternal Question* from *Collier’s* and pins it to his bedroom wall in an act of celebrity worship and sexual obsession. He is later acquainted with Nesbit’s actual body in the novel’s typically heightened, ludic fashion, as he bursts, in a flurry of “great filamented spurts of jism,” from the closet where he has secretly observed her being washed and massaged and encouraged to masturbate by Emma Goldman. This sequence of events dramatizes the sublimated sexuality of disembodied girl illustrations and the eruption of the fantasizer into the world of the fantasy visualized in Sloan’s *Conspirators* and Harrison Fisher distortions. Doctorow also suggests the feminist stake in debunking the idealized fantasy when, before unlacing and removing her clothes, his fictionalized Goldman lectures Nesbit on the evils of corsets: “Look at me, even with my figure I have not one foundation



garment, I wear everything loose and free-flowing, I give my body the freedom to breathe and to be.”<sup>37</sup>

On first seeing the real Emma Goldman, during her Carnegie Hall lecture series, Sloan noted her “small, stocky” figure and her “strong and earnest” character, concluding that she “almost, in fact, is handsome” (October 22, 1911). He also praised her “bravery and clear thought and untrammelled point of view.” This appreciation recalls his earlier encounter with another strong, unconventional, uncorsetted woman:

Isadora Duncan! ... I feel that she dances a symbol of human animal happiness as it should be, free from the unnatural trammels. Not angelic, materialistic; not superhuman, but the greatest human love of life. Her great big thighs, her small head, her full solid loins, belly; clean, all clean. She dances away civilization’s tainted brain vapors; wholly human and holy — part of God. (November 16, 1909)

These celebrations of the untrammelled female body resonate with the socialist and feminist Greenwich Village circles in which, by 1908, John and Dolly Sloan were beginning to move, and with the nascent modernism fostered by that milieu.

Sloan’s exclamation “clean, all clean” is quite unlike Gibson’s genteel “clean-mindedness,” and speaks instead for the modernist urge to cleanse language and culture of taboos and old associations. His 1911 painting, *Isadora Duncan*, with the graceful figure proportioned as in the diary description and isolated against rectangular forms bisected by the curved pools of spotlighted stage, is arguably the least cluttered composition of his early period if not his entire *oeuvre* (fig 16). The sparse, near-abstract qualities of this composition

were transferred to Sloan's 1915 etching of the same title, which was included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 exhibition *The Art of Isadora Duncan*, and express the clarity and directness which high modernism valued in Duncan's demystification of the body. Introducing the exhibition Lincoln Kirstein celebrated "the cleansing attitude of [Duncan's] fresh vision" and reported that, when asked how she would be remembered, she replied, "I freed women from corsets."<sup>38</sup>

In his consideration of "the body represented in language," Peter Brooks suggests that "one could see the modern as characterized by a breaking of reticence, a greater openness, about the body," and finds this tendency exemplified in James Joyce's and D. H. Lawrence's taboo-breaking, censored novels *Ulysses* (1922) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Where Lawrence follows Duncan in pursuing the sensual exploration of the body,

In the case of *Ulysses*, the body is seen in intimate detail that even the most thoroughgoing realism of the nineteenth century did not attempt: Leopold Bloom seated over his rising stench in the outhouse; his masturbatory voyeurism with Gerty McDowell; Molly's monologue which consists in good part of reveries on her lovers' bodies and her own, including reflections on urination and menstruation.

*Ulysses* offers, for Brooks, "a summation (and a critique) of the realist tradition," in its insistence on the bladders and bowels left out of the previous generation's assault on the genteel tradition. It is also, as the novelist Tom McCarthy observes, a book "mired in excremental language and imagery: water closets, commodes, sewers, 'clotted hinderparts', 'slopperish matter,'" and so a statement too then of

modernism's drive to "bring things down in the world." "*Ulysses*," writes McCarthy, "makes matter of everything."<sup>39</sup>

Union suits and chamber pots make a case for Sloan's distortion as a proto-feminist, proto-modernist statement. Union suits were first marketed as the "emancipation union under flannel," and later promoted, in advertisements for the Lewis Knitting Company, by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.<sup>40</sup> Dressed thus the girl is freed from the swan-bill corset typically worn by Gibson Girls and their imitators. Chamber pots acknowledge the bladder and bowels and base matter of the body. In a work presumably intended for semi-private consumption, and in an exaggerated, caricature idiom, Sloan extends the strain of materialist corporeal frankness present in his realist, publically displayed works such as *The Women's Page*. He implies a critique of the limitations of public discourse and of realist art and acknowledges ideas about the body that would result in censorship and scandal when voiced in novels published two decades later. But the distortion seems too bawdy, too vindictive to be read as a pure-minded attempt to free women from the constraints of corsets or society at large from genteel conventions. What purpose the subtle addition of black lines that gently tease the girl's eyebrows upward and inward, the reddish flush and sheen of her cheeks and the box of pills in her hand other than to imply that she is straining constipated over her chamber pot? What, if not misogyny, explains this excessive desire to expose, to subject to discomfort, and to humiliate?

Misogyny and chamber pots place Sloan's distortion in the tradition of eighteenth-century British print satire. As Vic Gatrell notes, "From Hogarth's *Punishment Inflicted on Lemuel Gulliver* [1726] ... and on until the 1810s, engravers deployed buttocks, chamberpots, enemas, farts, urine and turds as

recurrent elements in their symbolic language.” Chamber pots feature prominently in Hogarth’s *Four Times of the Day: Night* (1738), Thomas Rowlandson’s *The Hospital for Lunatics* (1789) and James Gillray’s *A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of Digestion* (1792). The gaudy, high-toned coloration and disproportioned head and body of Sloan’s distortion further its association with Rowlandson’s and Gillray’s iconography. Sloan had long been familiar with these artists and was aware of their edgier work: in November 1908 he “priced a large folio book with suppressed plates ... Gillray’s Works” in a midtown “Hock Shop,” but at \$40 could not afford the purchase (Nov 23, 1908). Gillray’s *The Whore’s Last Shift* (fig 17), in which a woman identified as a prostitute performs her “last shift” for the night by washing her threadbare “last shift” in her chamber pot amidst the cluttered, scattered mess of her lodgings, provides a striking precedent for Sloan’s distortion. The print’s ambiguous motives and sympathies lead Gatrell to ask, “is it contemptuous of the poor woman or does it seek to disclose the poignancy of her plight?”<sup>41</sup> Both Gillray and Sloan thus appear to slip between a pointed satirical subversion of the feminine ideal and less marshaled deprecatory, and seemingly misogynistic, urges.

While Gillray’s print is closely associated with another work of eighteenth-century satire open to this charge, Jonathan Swift’s “Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” (1731), it is still another of the late scatological poems, “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1732), that provides the strongest Swiftian precedent for Sloan’s distortion. Finding his lover’s chamber vacant, Strephon “Stole in, and took a strict Survey / Of all the Litter as it lay.” The litany that follows once more details a mass of scattered things:

Here Gallypots and Vials plac'd,  
Some fill'd with washes, some with Paste,  
Some with Pomatum, Paints and Slops,  
And Ointments good for scabby Chops.

This catalogue culminates with Strephon's reaction to the contents of Celia's chamber pot, which he encounters not with his eyes but with his hand:

Thus finishing his grand Survey,  
Disgusted *Strephon* stole away  
Repeating in his amorous Fits,  
Oh! *Celia, Celia, Celia* shits!<sup>42</sup>

Peter Brooks identifies that refrain as a precedent for Joyce's "parodic and satiric ... matter-of-fact ... comic" take on the body. Swiftian "Satire deflates and debases," writes historian Roy Porter. "It is an art which topples greatness, undermines pretensions and punishes pride by revealing the low in the pretendedly high, the filth in the pure, the folly in reason." Vic Gatrell suggests that this particular line of satire arose from the historical circumstances of London as inhabited at various points in the eighteenth-century by Swift, Hogarth and Gillray and where a "Bog-house Miscellany" recorded the popular graffiti "Good lord, who could think / That such fine folks should stink."<sup>43</sup> Sloan's satirical insight that Gibson Girls and their imitators also shit and stink took shape amid the social mix and domestic proximity of his Chelsea neighbourhood and takes aim at the Progressive claims for human perfectibility to which Gibson yoked his art.

Sloan recalled reading Swift, together with Zola, Balzac, Maupassant and Voltaire, while working as a cashier at Porter and Coates's Philadelphia

bookstore.<sup>44</sup> That grouping, alongside classic French realism and naturalism (and Voltaire), is suggestive of the ways in which as a young man he may have read and understood Swift. More specific claims can be made for Sloan's awareness of Swift in 1908 -- the year, given the publication date of the source material, that he likely made the distortion of Sewell Collins's cover -- as that summer he purchased Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature* (1863-4/1871?). This was a book Sloan had long coveted and clearly cherished as several of his diary entries refer to evenings spent reading Taine, and the following year he noted his pleasure at obtaining a "nice" two-volume edition. In Taine's interpretation of "A Description of a City Shower" (1710), Sloan encountered Swift as, amongst other things, a proto-realist: "When he wishes to paint the rain, he describes 'filth of all hues and odours,' the 'swelling kennels,' the 'dead cats,' 'turnip-tops,' 'stinking sprats,' which 'come tumbling down the flood.' His long verses whirl all this filth in their eddies."<sup>45</sup> Swift thus stands as a satirical precedent for the emergence of realism in the nineteenth-century French novels that Sloan first read him alongside. The urge to confront dirt and decay and degraded matter here stems from a satirist's drive to peel back the façade of civility, to uncover the sordid workings of the city or, in other instances, of the human body.

Where his account of the early poem "A Description of a City Shower" is detailed and direct, Taine writes of the later scatology that he "cannot do more than hint at the length to which Swift carries us." But he does acknowledge the content of "The Lady's Dressing Room" and other poems in an extended comparison to Rabelais. Where, in Rabelais, "the bodily functions become poetical," Taine argues that Swift's

cruel positive mind ... clings only to vileness; it will only see what is behind things; armed with sorrow and boldness, it spares no ignoble detail, no obscene word. Swift enters the dressing-room, relates the disenchantments of love, dishonors it by a medley of drugs and physic, describes the cosmetics and a great many more things.

Taine's tantalising hints mean that Sloan was at least aware of these poems, but are typical of nineteenth-century editorial practice and scholarship in which the scatological poems and the final book of *Gulliver's Travels* were essentially suppressed. Victorian mores bequeathed to the early twentieth century a Swift admired for his caustic satire but belittled as a man driven insane in later life by his obsession with excrement. This interpretation is exemplified by D. H. Lawrence's introduction to the collection *Pansies* (which appeared in 1929, the year after *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) where he misremembers a poem in which "every verse ends with the mad, maddened refrain: 'But – Celia, Celia, Celia shits!'" For Lawrence, Swift exemplifies the "degraded taboo-insanity" against which he articulates the modernist imperative -- borne out in the collection's frank, liberated (and quickly censored) poems -- wherein "The simple and natural 'obscene' words must be cleaned up of all their depraved fear-associations, and readmitted into the consciousness to take their natural place."<sup>46</sup>

In "The Lady's Dressing Room" Strephon finds towels "With dirt, and sweat, and earwax grimed" and stockings "Stained with the marks of stinking toes." Such "excesses," such "lingered over and scrutinized excretions," create, for literary historian Laura Baudot, "a kind of political imperative in determining whether the poem is as extravagantly misogynistic as it seems and to locating

Swift's relationship to the material uncovered by the poem." Baudot resolves this problem through attention to Swift's "antitranscendent" philosophical materialism.<sup>47</sup> Accepting that humanity has no access to the divine, the poem celebrates our filthiness, making it not the undoing but the source of beauty in the final couplet: "Such order from confusion sprung/Such gaudy tulips raised from dung." When Sloan hails Isadora Duncan as "materialistic, not angelic" he rejects the higher plane and finds beauty and power in her ability to inhabit and perform her body as it is. Likewise, the Sewell Collins distortion does not deny the girl her prettiness -- indeed one of the distinctive features of the distortion form is that it preserves the original image within the caricature -- but instead unites that beauty with a body that is in the midst of insisting on its own materiality and inextricable involvement in filth.

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Sloan's graphic humor negates the claim made by Lawrence and others for a modernist break from the taboo-ridden past. In dialogue with Swift and Hogarth, Zola and Crane, Goldman and Duncan, Sloan is embedded within a current of materialist thought (and frankness regarding the body) that runs from Augustan satire, through nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, to the ferment of early-twentieth-century Greenwich Village and on into Lawrence's and Joyce's modernism. The visible signs of bodily functions that Sloan sketched over Sewell Collins's *Collier's* cover certainly work to humiliate the Girl depicted. She bears the brunt of a nascent critique of popular culture mixed perhaps with professional frustration at the work of more commercially successful artists. But those marks bring her into the real world, into the imperfect but honest life depicted in *The Women's Page*; into Sloan's sympathy with bodies that work and



sweat and live; and into the stylistic repertoire and moral domain of realist, materialist art. As Swift's disgust is, ultimately, directed not at Celia who shits but at Strephon whose love depends on believing that she does not, so Sloan, between *The Women's Page* and the Sewell Collins distortion, suggests that it is better to strain away in a densely cross-hatched world of washboards, chamber pots and constipation pills than languish disembodied in a stylized, idealized vacuum.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Heather Campbell Coyle and Joyce K. Schiller, *John Sloan's New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Michael Lobel, *John Sloan: Drawing on Illustration* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Peter Morse, *John Sloan's Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné of Etchings, Lithographs, and Posters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969) 141.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia L. Yount, "Consuming Drama: Everett Shinn and the Spectacular City," *American Art* 6.4 (autumn 1992): 91. On Henri's emphasis on quick technique and first-hand urban observation, see Zurier, 123-25.

<sup>5</sup> James Huneker, "Eight Painters: First Article" *New York Sun* (February 9, 1908) 8; Charles Wisner Barrell, "The Real Drama of the Slums, As Told in John Sloan's Etching," *The Craftsman* 15.5 (February 1909) 559; *John Sloan's Diaries (1906-13)* February 9, 1908 and January 18, 1909. All references are to the unpublished version of the Diary transcribed and annotated by Judith O'Toole and based on originals in Delaware Art Museum's John Sloan Manuscript Collection. Dates for subsequent entries are given in parenthesis.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 44.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Crane, *Maggie. Bowery Tales. The University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Volume 1 (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1969) 11, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890) 124.

<sup>9</sup> Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991) 168.

<sup>10</sup> Kaplan, 46.

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Farr Sloan, ed. *John Sloan: New York Etchings (1905–1949)*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1978) 7.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Hallett discusses Hogarth's debt to Steen in *Hogarth* (London: Phaidon, 2000) 274; David Bindman points to the ways that he also sought to distance himself from Dutch painting in *Hogarth and his Times: Serious Comedy* (London: British Museum, 1997) 17.

<sup>13</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York: Dutton, 1955) 5; Yeats and McBride quoted in John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995) 149, 215; Barrell, "The Real Drama of the Slums," 560. Sloan also had direct knowledge of the work of Steen and his contemporaries, which he saw in Philadelphia in the collections amassed by P. A. B. Widener and John G. Johnson.

<sup>14</sup> Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (NY: Walter & Co 2006) 9. For more on squalor in Hogarth's London see Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England 1600-1770* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> On "ordered disorder" and other entertaining practices in Steen's painting see Mariët Westermann, "How Was Jan Steen Funny? Strategies and Functions of Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century" in *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Jan Bremner and Herman Roodenberg eds. (Polity Press, 1997) 159-164; on the development of this iconography in seventeenth-century Dutch art see Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004) pp\*-208; on its moral implications see Simon Schama, "The Unruly Realm: Appetite and Restraint in Seventeenth Century Holland," *Daedalus*, 108.3, Hypocrisy, Illusion, and Evasion (Summer, 1979). On the issues at stake in reading Dutch genre paintings in these ways see Westermann, "After Iconography and Iconoclasm: Current Research in Netherlandish Art, 1566-1700," *The Art Bulletin* 84.2 (June, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Hallett, *The Spectacle of Difference: Graphic Satire in the Age of Hogarth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 124. On the subscription sale of *The Harlot's Progress* see Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: Vol. I: The 'Modern Moral Subject,' 1697-1732* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1992) 301-314.

<sup>17</sup> "Exhibition of American Humor," *New York Times* (April 18, 1915) Sunday magazine, 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> For an extended discussion of this point see Patricia Hills, "John Sloan's Images of Working-Class Women: A Case Study of the Roles and Interrelationships of Politics, Personality, and Patrons in the Development of Sloan's Art, 1905–16" *Prospects*, 5 (1980) 157-196.

<sup>19</sup> Guy Pene du Bois, *John Sloan* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1931) 11.

<sup>20</sup> Paulson, *Hogarth*, 254; David Bindman, *Hogarth and his Times*, 57; on the shift in sensibility from Hogarth to Rowlandson and Gillray see Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter*; on Swift and his peer's attack on "homo rationalis" see Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004) pp148-66.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Helen Farr Sloan, *John Sloan*, n. pag. Richard Hoggart would later describe the pleasures of working-class home-life as "a cluttered and congested setting, a burrow deeply away from the outside world," in *The Uses of Literacy*:

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*Aspects of Working-Class Life With Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 34.

<sup>22</sup> Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania UP, 2004) 104; Charles Caffin, "The Art of Edmund C. Tarbell," *Harper's Monthly* (June, 1908) 72.

<sup>23</sup> Caroline Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of a Visual Stereotype* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001) 41

<sup>24</sup> Betsy Klimasmith, *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930* (Hannover N.H.: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005) 125; for Bok quote and discussion of "progressive simplicity," see David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 187-88.

<sup>25</sup> On changes to the design, business practices and purpose of these magazines in the years around 1900 see, Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London: Verso, 1996) 175-185, 223-230; Ellen Mazur Thomson highlights the role of John Adams Thayer in redesigning the advertising pages of Curtis publications so that they no longer appeared as an "ugly black mess," and of Will Bradley's wider influence over his long and varied career in magazines in *The Origins of Graphic Design in America, 1870-1920* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997) 81-82.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph C. Lincoln, "Idella and the White Plague," *McClure's Magazine* (May 1906) 104-112.

<sup>27</sup> Robert W. Chambers, "Ave Atque Vale, Gibson!" *Collier's Weekly* (October 21, 1905) 14-18.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art & Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996) 113.

<sup>29</sup> Chambers, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Marian Martineau, "The American Girl Face: Marian Martineau Tells How to Get the Features Made Familiar by Famous Artists," *The St. Louis Republic* (March 8, 1903) n. pag.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Marshall, "The Gibson Girl Analyzed by her Originator," *New York Times* (November 20, 1910) SM6.

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer A. Greenhill, "Troubled Abstraction: Whiteness in Charles Dana Gibson and George Du Maurier," *Art History* 34.4 (2011): 749.

<sup>33</sup> Lobel, *John Sloan*, 43-47.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 5.

<sup>35</sup> Max Eastman, "What is the Matter with Magazine Art?" *The Masses* 6 (January 1915) 16.

<sup>36</sup> Heather Campbell Coyle, *Laughing Matters: Art Caricature in America, 1878-1918*, PhD Dissertation University of Delaware, 2007. The annotated copy of George Moore's *Memoirs* is held in the Archives of American Art Robert Henri Papers, Reels 885-88.

<sup>37</sup> E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975) 48, 52. For a compelling case for the novel as history see Doctorow's essay "False Documents," *American Review* 26 (1977): 215-32.

<sup>38</sup> Lincoln Kirstein, "Isadora Duncan," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 9.2 (Nov., 1941) 10.

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Brooks, *Body Works: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993) 260; Tom McCarthy, "Ulysses' and Its Wake," *London Review of Books*, 36.12 (19 June 2014) 39-41.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Florey, *Women's Suffrage Memorabilia: An Illustrated Historical Study* (New York: McFarland, 2013) 88.

<sup>41</sup> Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, 179; Vic Gatrell, "London and the Pleasure Principle: Tate Britain Hogarth Exhibition, Symposium 9 February 2007" *Literary London* <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2008/gatrell.html>> Accessed 14 December, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Swift, "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1732) in *The Complete Poems*, Pat Rogers ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 448-52.

<sup>43</sup> Brooks *Body Works*, 261; Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, 148; Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, 181.

<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Zurier, 253.

<sup>45</sup> H. A. Taine, *History of English Literature*, vol. 2 trans H. Van Laun (London: Chatto and Windus, 1887) 139. Sloan Diary entries on buying and reading Taine: August 1, 15, 21 and 23, 1908 and May 26, 1909.

<sup>46</sup> Taine, 140 (in Van Laun's English translation the examples in this final sentence are footnoted with poem titles – including "The Lady's Dressing Room"); on the "Victorian" Swift see, Milton Voigt, *Swift and the Twentieth Century* (Detroit, Wayne State UP, 1964); D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Michael Herbert (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 286-7.

<sup>47</sup> Laura Baudot, "What Not To Avoid in Swift's 'The Lady's Dressing Room'," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 49.3 (Summer 2009): 637-38, 640. For further discussion of Swift and misogyny see Louise Barnett, *Jonathan Swift in the Company of Women* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007) 125-153.