

Sex in Literature

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THE character of a civilization can generally be measured by its attitude toward the two related themes of death and sex. The fear of death engenders religious mysticism and faith in immortality. Excessive faith in the magical healing power of sex entails consequences of a different kind. The esoteric sex-cult, the product of sophistication and neurotic ennui, springs up only in the later, decadent stages of civilization.

The common people do not suffer from "sex on the brain." They never have. For them it is an instinct to be satisfied, preferably through institutional channels. In the matter of sex they are rock-ribbed conservatives. Sexual gratification is necessary and pleasurable, but they are aware that man also craves female companionship, a lifelong union based on the sentiment of love. He must have roots in society, family loyalties, emotional ties. There is no freedom without responsibility. Marriage is therefore the norm: the legalized and socially appropriate method for solemnizing the union of the sexes.

Many of the latter-day intellectuals, however, are differently constituted. For them there is no middle ground. Like the pendulum they

must swing from one extreme to another. Either sex is condemned as inherently evil or it is exalted beyond reason. It is vile and degrading or sacred, beautiful, life-renewing. One is the Christian ethos that the neo-Humanists adopted, an ethos of ascetic renunciation, its vision fixed on the ideal of immortality, the spirit delivered from the body of this death. This mortification of the flesh provoked the inevitable recoil. Inhibitions were broken down. Puritanism was the prime evil to be overcome. Men proved their manhood by defying taboos which ran counter to the fundamental needs of human nature.

The revolt against Puritanism in sex was bound to come. It is impossible to deny the body for long. Neurotic suffering is the price paid for such repression. In their determination to avoid neurotic conflict, however, the men of the twentieth century overrode all restraints, and experimented curiously with all the known refinements of physical passion. This decadence is not unprecedented. We behold it at its worst in the fictional world of Proust, where passion turns into perversion, and in a novel like *The Counterfeiters* by André Gide. But the complexity of love in all its forms

was first scientifically disclosed by Sigmund Freud. He gave it its classic expression. The rest is but a textual gloss. The Age of Freud gave birth to a sex-haunted, sex-tormented generation that embraced the cult of pan-sexualism as the new gospel of salvation.

The discoveries of psychoanalysis changed the whole course of modern life. It was no longer a question of satisfying physical desire. It was the mental component of sex that caused all the trouble. Sexual instincts were active in the unconscious. Their repression resulted in nervous disorders. Even dreams were charged with a preponderantly sexual content. In his paper on "Sexual Morality and Nervousness," Freud asserts that our entire civilization is based upon the suppression of instincts, particularly in the field of sex. Unlike Wilhelm Reich who has repudiated Freud by going beyond him, Freud maintained that the energy released by the effort at sublimation is capable of making valuable contributions to society. Each individual is able to achieve a certain degree of sublimation, depending on the strength of his original sexual instinct, but this process of sublimation cannot go on indefinitely. Direct sexual gratification must be obtained. If not, frustration takes its toll in the form of mental illness.

Though the libido, as Freud used the term, had a much wider meaning than the one commonly attached to sex, there can be no question that the Freudian conception of psychosexuality helped to bring up a generation that began to suffer more and

more from "sex on the brain." Freud placed so much emphasis on sex because in his clinical investigation he found that the neurotic attached supreme importance to the sexual instinct. Almost invariably it was some sexual repression which caused the neurosis. The strategic mistake Freud made lay in broadening the meaning of sexuality to include more than sexual union. Anything that partook of the experience of love—friendship, love for humanity, intellectual passion, the scientist's ardent quest for objective truth—was connected with the sexual instinct. The word "sex" thus ceased to have any precise meaning.

Freud refused to spare man his deep-seated illusions. In the manner of Schopenhauer, he pointed out how on the biological level the individual leads a double existence. In one respect the individual is gratifying his own will to pleasure, but in serving his own ends he is also insuring the perpetuation of the race. Biologically he is the slave of the immortal germ-plasm within him, in return for which he is permitted to enjoy the sensation of intense pleasure.

Thus central to psychoanalysis is the theory of sexuality. It refuses to cover the subject with a verbal fig-leaf. Wilhelm Reich, a deserter from the Freudian camp, outstrips his master in emphasizing the role of sexuality in civilization. In his book, *The Function of the Orgasm*, published in 1942, he goes so far as to assert that the problem of sexuality "permeates by its very nature every field of scientific investigation. Its central phenomenon,

the *orgasm*, is the focal point of problems arising in the field of psychology, biology and sociology." Here is what purports to be an experimentally developed, scientific theory of sexuality, which argues that sexual repression creates the ideological soil for the growth of fascism. The denial of pleasure makes possible the acceptance of life-denying ideologies. Men are afraid to be free, to trust themselves to their instincts.

Sex has become the new "scientific" religion and Reich is its prophet. In *The Sexual Revolution*, Reich charges that Western civilization is so constituted that sexual repression is unavoidable, yet it is neither necessary nor desirable. Furthermore, unlike Freud, he denies that sublimations are of any value. In fact, he states that the "natural," harmonious and complete fulfillment of the sex instinct would bring about not only the integration of the individual but also the salvation of society. What is even more startling, he attacks the idea of lifelong monogamous marriage as a form of bondage that cripples the personality. He vigorously attacks the belief that adolescents should live in sexual abstinence. Our present conflicts and suffering are all caused by socially imposed sexual taboos. Since everything has been tried and failed—religion, mysticism, metaphysics, Freudianism, Communism—Reich preaches the new gospel of sexual redemption.

How much truth is there in Freud's theory of sexuality? In *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, Malinowski sought to test

psychoanalytic theory in the light of anthropological findings. He discovered that repression of sexual instinct is a mental by-product of the evolution of culture. In Melanesia there were no taboos on sexual exploration. The children run about naked. At the age of three or four they become aware of sexuality, and their curiosity is not inhibited in any way. During the period of later childhood which extends from five till puberty, they acquire a sense of increasing independence. Without interference from parents or elders, they are able to gratify their sensuality directly and unashamedly. The older generation does not regard "copulation amusements" as reprehensible. On the contrary, they take it for granted, and even jest about it. Melanesian society gives free play to juvenile sexuality, and the result is a people happily free from all neuroses.

Freud, however, went so far as to argue that sexual energy is diverted and applied to cultural ends: a process technically known as "sublimation." Art, too, is sex. The dream is a substitute expression for repressed sexual desire. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of modernist writers hailed Freud as the Great Emancipator. Those who had been ashamed or afraid of sex were now at last set free. Freud tore off the chains that bound them: the inhibitions, the ascetic self-denials, the Puritanic hypocrisy, the neurotic frustrations, the compulsive fears.

The back-to-sex movement gained furious momentum. Here was the primal fountain of joy, the true

elixir of youth, the secret of salvation. Whatever was wrong with modern man could be traced back to the evil of damming up this genitalian source of energy. The intellectuals could now establish contact with life-giving earth and recapture the ecstasy of primitive passion. They could sprout horns, grow roots downward like a tree, feel their blood flow in harmony with the cosmic beat. Remy de Gourmont, the French critic, declared that beauty is a sexual illusion "intimately connected with the idea of carnal pleasure." The finest works of art are those which portray the human body in its pure nakedness. When we respond to a work of literature or art, we are put in a state "favorable to the reception of erotic emotion."

There was something feverish and despairing, if not abnormal, in this exaggerated attachment to sex. Those who make a fetish of sex are committing intellectual suicide; they are spiritually empty vessels waiting to be filled with organic sensations. It was the fever of excess which pointed to a fundamental contradiction. With these moderns the sex instinct was not, as with Melanesians, a function to be spontaneously fulfilled. The well-fed person does not rave about food, yet hunger too is an organic instinct.

The intellectuals were obsessed with the subject of sex. They had "sex on the brain." In their eagerness to be primitive and earthy and non-intellectual, they behaved in a manner that was not only artificial but suspiciously abnormal. They made a god of sex, a physiological

god. Like little children in a fit of naughtiness, they enjoyed uttering forbidden words. They experimented with new possibilities of sexual pleasure and, like Frank Harris, recorded their experiences for the eyes of posterity. In loudly and lyrically proclaiming that sex was clean and good and beautiful and healing, they betrayed the obvious fact that they believed it was "dirty." They protested entirely too much. Like the blasphemer who, in cursing God, betrays his innate religiosity, these sex-worshippers betrayed acute symptoms of an uneasy conscience.

But if the needs of the body cannot be denied with impunity neither can those of the mind and spirit. The historic wisdom of the race is not to be lightly set aside. Define love between the sexes how you please, it is still not to be confused with animal lust. Love is compounded of tenderness, love is a human partnership, a mutual sharing of life-experiences. Out of it is born the feeling of loyalty and oneness, the sense of unutterable devotion. Out of it emerges poetry, song, music, art. Ideals? Of course! But why not? Why confuse them with illusions? They condition the responses of the body just as the body affects the functioning mind. Man cannot afford to neglect either aspect of his being, the physical or the spiritual. It is time to call a halt to this intellectualized sex mania. The writers have gone far enough with this dangerous "primitivistic" nonsense.

The writer must not, of course, be prevented from reporting the

truth of life as he sees it. Freedom of expression must be safeguarded if literature is to flourish. But if the writer deviates from the truth he should not be surprised when the critic pounces upon him and exposes his guilt.

Take the case of D. H. Lawrence whose influence today is still strong. Out of his personal obsession he gradually evolved a cosmic philosophy of sex. Sex was the health of life, of the earth earthy, a return to the primordial blood-stream. Only through sexual fulfillment could the soul grow unified and whole. Through man, the woman finds herself, through woman the man. It is a process of rebirth, a consummation that emancipates the spirit of man from paralyzing inhibitions.

In a generation by no means mealy-mouthed, Lawrence's gospel, as voiced in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, brought the pack snarling at his heels, but he had only himself to blame if his message was misinterpreted. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, like his other novels (*The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *Aaron's Rod*), is an impassioned, propagandistic presentation of his philosophy of sex. Connie, the heroine, is a typical girl of her generation, imbued with the then current ideals of self-expression, intellectuality and idealism. Attracted by the mind of Lord Chatterley, who is away from the front on a month's leave, she marries him. He returns from the war a cripple, the lower half of his body paralyzed. Representing caste, tradition, aristocracy, he is the spineless, shell-shocked representative of a pseudo-idealistic age. He tries to keep her

enslaved with his ideal of psychic communion, but her organism rebels at this starvation of her biological needs and she falls in love with Mellors, her husband's gamekeeper. Mellors, descended from the lower classes, is sensual, fearless, upright, close to the earth. It is he who reveals to Connie that her feelings are not dead, it is he who brings her happiness and a renewed desire to live. He has made her unashamed, filled her with the maddening joy of the mating instinct. Now she is awakened, able to taste the poetry and beauty of passion, to enjoy the poetry and beauty of life.

When this novel was savagely attacked for its copious use of the unprintable four-letter word, Lawrence fought back desperately. In self-defense, he denounced his age as restless, diseased, perverted. Restless because it crushes its basic instincts; diseased because it denies the animal functions of the human body; perverted because it seeks unavailingly to sublimate the beauty and passion of sex. To deify the mind at the expense of the body is a sure mark of decadence. For Lawrence, salvation lay in the complete and free giving of the self to sex. One must let oneself go—that is his message of primitive spontaneity. Sex is more than procreation. It is a creative force, a source of joy and strength and wisdom. What mattered supremely was the instinctive consciousness, and this was being deliberately destroyed. Civilized man has acquired a pathological horror of sex, and this has poisoned our human relations and stifled the creative energy of the writer. On

the healthy functioning of the sexual instinct depend many other deep instincts, and the artist who repudiates sex is cut off from the roots of his being. The history of our age, Lawrence declares, "is the nauseating and repulsive history of the crucifixion of the procreative body for the glorification of the spirit, the mental consciousness."

Lawrence was wrong in his emphasis, however justified his intentions may have been. Sex is not salvation. It never was, it never will be. The belief that sex is salvation points to the spiritual malaise of our time. It is not the plunge into sex which is so disturbing a phenomenon. Sex as heresy, sex as defiance, sex as religion: that is the danger, that is the aberration. It is only when a writer has nothing else to say that he exploits the emotions aroused by the theme of sexuality. When the variations on this theme become tiresome, he digs down, Surrealist-fashion, into the unconscious. The underground of the mind is also rich with the golden seed of sex. Sex dominates the organism, sex occupies its sleeping and waking hours, sex suffuses the mind and usurps the dream. There is no escape.

The delirium tremens of sex gives rise, as we have pointed out, to the metaphysical despair of our generation. To be obsessed with sex, it seems, is to be truly alive; to deny the body is to sign a covenant with death. Life is opposed to death, sexuality to false spirituality. It is the overestimation of the value of sex, which yields to the feeling of despair. This despair, nihilistic in

its rejection of culture, was evident in the early work of Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*. To concentrate all feeling, all energy, in the genitalia is to renounce all those values which historic experience has shown to be precious and specifically human. Sex as salvation implies that ideals and aspirations do not exist. The world of the spirit is portrayed as a bloodless world of phantom abstractions, whereas the world of the flesh is substantial, real, radiant, supremely satisfying. What is wrong with all this is the crude identification of sex with love. *Farewell to Arms* makes love out to be a fraudulent social convention, a meaningless lie. Sex, not love, is the true symbol of union. Sex is spirit, sex is love, sex is creation. The cure for the temptation of sex, according to this earthy, Adamic philosophy, is to yield to it without shame. Go the whole hog and the obsession will die a natural death.

It needed but the test of collective experience to demonstrate the monstrous fallacy of this reasoning. The protest against hypocritical sexual restraints proved liberating and wholesome. The body could not bear the manacles which had been clamped down on its aching and rebellious flesh. But once the emancipation had been effected, the need for humanizing and socializing the sexual instinct should have been apparent even to the most revolutionary exponent of the new sexual morality.

For if the overestimation of the sexual function springs from the conviction that there are no ideals worth having, it results finally in a sickness of the soul that cannot be

healed. Once the fever of lust is spent, what is left? There is no despair equal to that of the man who has given all to sex. Many writers in the past have described the void of emptiness in which they sank, the sense of utter wretchedness that overcame them, when they groveled before the shrine of Venus and worshipped no other gods. For sex is but one beat of the cosmic rhythm of life. To suppress it results in frustration, maladjustment, unhappiness. To suppress everything else in order to give it "free" expression exacts an even greater toll of suffering.

That is why Henry Miller's banned books, *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, despite their flashes of inspired brilliance, are so revolting. They are not revolting simply because the author (an expatriate, now returned to this country, who has been strongly influenced by the Laurentian cult) keeps on using the four-letter word which offends so terribly against Anglo-Saxon morality. His stories of sexual adventures, night and day, are not only repulsive but boring. His sex-mania betrays the emptiness of his soul. He has nothing important to say. There is nothing to live for except food and sex. As for the rest of the world, it doesn't concern him in the least. People? He observes them as if they were so many neurotic ants copulating on an ant-hill: their epileptic seizures of desire, their suffering, their ridiculous megalomania, their "spiritualized" ideals, their fears and diseases. The spectacle is highly diverting, but when they trespass on his inviolable

ego, he brutally shakes them off. Let them live or die—what does it matter to him?

But of one thing he is sure: all feelings, all aspirations, all ideals converge and find their consummation in the despised sex orgasm. That alone is real and has the power to bring one in closer communion with the earth. The rest is rhetoric, the effluvia of literature. Henry Miller is convinced that for the past century our world has been dying, just rotting away, and all because men have been deceiving themselves too long with illusions. The deception cannot be kept up any longer. "When a hungry, desperate spirit appears and makes the guinea pigs squeal it is because he knows where to put the live wire of sex . . ." Henry Miller knows!

In the work of Robinson Jeffers, the California poet, morbid preoccupation with sex is joined to an obsession with the theme of death. D. H. Lawrence sought to glorify the carnal instincts. Jeffers beholds in sex the loathsome power which turns man into a beast. Sex deprives man of freedom, robs him of peace. Its consummation brings no lasting relief. Sex drives humanity mad; it is the source of diabolical cruelty, of hatred and disease and perversion. Only in death does the body find release from desire. Hence sex is the essential cause of tragedy. It lures men to their destruction. Sexual union, in Jeffers' poetry, is the prelude to death. Pan-sexualism ends in unadulterated, titanic pessimism.

The exploitation of the mystery of sex is a thriving literary industry. The advance-guard writers have

simply cashed in on its possibilities. The recipe is old, though new spicy ingredients have been added from time to time. The Surrealists, like Salvador Dali, in their exploration of the unconscious, achieve their most sensational imagery by playing variations on the erotic motive. The sexual theme is rendered more fruitful for literary treatment by the revival of interest in the secrets of perversion.

In the aftermath of war, particularly in the period of intense anxiety generated by the realization that the culture of the West may be wiped out by atomic warfare, the cult of pan-sexualism may again be looked upon as the road to salvation. (It is significant that women writers have on the whole played but a minor role in this movement.) War breaks down the moral inhibitions that civilization imposes. The young who have spent years amidst scenes of blood and death are liable to find the process of social adjustment painfully difficult, especially if the conditions of peace do not live up to their expectations. Then like their fathers after the war, they may begin to wonder whether the war had not been fought in vain. In the bitterness of their disillusionment they

may reject all ideals as so many civilized lies and fall back on sex as the only reality.

The indulgence in sex for the sake of sex is, like every other form of excess, a sheer perversion. Those who are tempted to play this game should bear in mind that it has been tried numerous times in the history of the race and each time with disastrous results. The sex-fevered moderns have themselves borne testimony to the unhappy effects of surrendering to the sex mania. The price for such indulgence is restlessness, a sense of unfulfilment, neurasthenic pessimism. Those who have no other aim in life except promiscuous fornication are inviting the furies of nervous breakdown. Man does not live by sex alone. If we have lost our integrity, we shall certainly not recover it by celebrating the orgiastic potentialities of the sexual instinct. Modern literature, by supporting this cult, has gone off on the wrong track. Writers like Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller are not purveyors of pornography; they are serious, highly talented, imaginative creators but they have gone to extremes in their exploration of sex. It is time to call a halt.

America is still the land of opportunity, where a man can start out digging ditches, and wind up behind a desk—if he doesn't mind the financial sacrifice.

—*Kansas City Star*

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During last winter's coal crisis in England, the British government, which uses advertisements extensively to warn, instruct, or pacify the populace when new crises or ration orders impend, gave this eyebrow lifting counsel to the nation's businessmen: "Owing to the shortage of fuel, employers are asked to take advantage of their typists between the hours of 12 and 2."



The Theatre Arts

By John Gassner

THIS has been an eventful month in the theatre. After a slow start, the theatre found itself with several successes and had virtually established its pattern within a few weeks. The successes were *Command Decision*, *The Heiress*, the Maurice Evans revival of *Man and Superman*, and the musical drama, *Allegro*. The pattern was formed by these plays and a number of other ventures, including the usual unsuitable imports from England, a race-track comedy, an undramatic verse play, a Negro drama, a social drama, and a diverting standard musical comedy, *High Button Shoes*.

The play worth the closest scrutiny is *Command Decision* by William Wister Haines because it departs most flagrantly from the formulas supposed to ensure success. It is completely devoid of romance, and there isn't a woman in the cast. War plays were supposed to be drugs on the market, as the second World War was allegedly something the public wanted to forget. Moreover, by democratic consent the standard war play, if it was to be acceptable

at all, was expected to deal with the common man. Violating these canons, as well as foregoing the inverted romanticism of *Journey's End*, the play with which it can be most reasonably compared, *Command Decision* details the struggles of a brigadier general who tries to knock out Germany's production of jet-propelled fighter planes before they can wrest the command of the air from the democracies. To accomplish this he must send bombers into the heart of Germany without fighter plane protection. The cost is frightful. Since Brigadier General Dennis is not a callous officer, his anguish and his wrestling with his conscience are fearful. His most conspicuous conflict, however, is with the higher brass who want to play a safe game, rolling up scores of easy coastal targets to impress Congress. Members of that august body actually come to investigate the situation when the commander's bomber losses mount to staggering figures. Between him and the uncomprehending politicians stands Major General Kane, his commanding officer and comrade of those