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Brimley Johnson**

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**MORAL POISON  
IN MODERN FICTION**

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**MORAL POISON  
IN  
MODERN FICTION**

**BY**

**R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON**

**AUTHOR OF**

**"SOME CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS," ETC.**



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## **FOREWORD**

I have not systematically searched modern fiction to illustrate or support the arguments of this book. Every novel quoted, or even mentioned, has come before me in the day's work, as a reviewer. It is scarcely necessary to add that no personal reflection upon any writer has even crossed my mind. I am not here concerned with the cause or motive of literature, but with its effect.

R. B. J.

## I

**"THEY STRUGGLED ALONG LIKE THE REST OF THEIR YOUNG WORLD, THE EYE FOR THE EYE, THE TOOTH FOR THE TOOTH, LUST AND LOVING ALIKE ONLY IN RETURN FOR LOVING AND LUST."**

It is a grim enough charge against our generation. Dare we pronounce it untrue? Upon what theories of private morality are the young now fed?

Morals are, obviously, influenced in most cases by example and the atmosphere of the home; but are not these themselves mainly produced, whether consciously or not, by the teaching and tone of these who profess to think? In these latter days most thought reaches us through fiction, most emotion through drama.

*Without hesitation, I would maintain that an immense number of novels now being written contain much deadly poison.*

Let me not be misunderstood. I have no wish to draw down the blinds again upon vital questions of sex, to bring out once more the comfortable "wraps" of Victorian days, to uphold reserve if not silence, or shut the door upon open talk. Nor would I say to youth: "We are older and *therefore* we know; believe us, things were far better and happier in our time."

[8]

Such a reproach were neither wise nor true. Human nature, like all forms of life, always grows and improves (in a long view), steps on towards the Ideal. But to-day we must face the sharp arrest of all normal progress, the actual throw-back to savagery, caused by the war: which came, as a moral influence, upon minds unsettled by the Revolution of Ideas that had set in before 1914.

Revolution may, and in fact does, largely express itself by exaggeration, but it is not Anarchy. The ideas then first revealed were due to a natural and healthy awakening among advanced thinkers. Winds blew upon our comfortable complacencies. The moral assumptions we had accepted, and refused to discuss, were boldly questioned. The Sex-Revolt had begun.

And rightly. Many reforms were badly needed in the legal applications of morality; the ideal of purity had stiffened into conventions that chained the mind and stifled the heart. There was a taint of insincerity over the realities of life: the false gods of narrow-minded respectability, breeding secret sin.

[9]

Wider knowledge; the sifting of old ideas and the questioning of fixed thought, can harm none. On the whole, moreover, protest was made in earnest, with a due sense of responsibility. It was not, as to-day, wildly shouted on the housetops; without reflection, undigested; in a riot of burning words.

There were, of course, wild statements made in bitter anger; foolish experiments attempted; in some quarters, merely a new cant and upside-down convention upheld to replace the old. But, on the whole, still only among the few. In all probability, under normal conditions, the needed frank discussion and honest thought would have sifted the true from the false, before the temporary confusion had inflamed popular imagination, and uprooted, without reforming, the habits and thought of daily life.

Looking back, I think, one can fairly summarize the position then arrived at by advanced thinkers, that was beginning to be generally discussed:

That there is nothing inherently evil in the human body, to be hidden up, and if possible ignored; particularly, that the instincts of sex are natural and healthy, a vital part of pure love.

[10]

That women are moved by physical "desires" equally with men, though more habituated to restraint; wherefore the old one-sided tolerance towards men, "who cannot help themselves," is utterly false and, combined with the conventional innocence of women, creates morbid barriers between the sexes, whereby "the woman pays."

That these truths should be known and faced by both sexes *before*, not after, marriage; with all the consequences they involve and the dangers they should enable us to avoid: the risks of a "sheltered" youth and the real meaning of purity, true and false passion or love, marriage wrecked by ignorance, divorce, the unmarried mother, birth control, the position of the prostitute, etc.

Truth, the ventilation of morality, the honest consideration of problems which may at any moment take us unawares, should not defile the heart or suggest evil thought. Real knowledge strengthens the will; and we must look at sin, see it clearly, if we can ever hope to conquer it.

[11]

If some of us felt that these, in a sense "new," truths were rather hurried upon us, often crudely expressed and applied; we knew that each generation must seek its own light, and add

something to inherited wisdom. We saw children cramped and losing *themselves* in their fathers' fetters; we saw injustice, misery, and wasted lives; many a marriage that proved a prison or a doll's house. We learned honestly to face, almost for the first time, the terrible abuse of sex behind drawn blinds that, seeming an integral part of civilization, was eating away the very heart of humanity and condemning, with grim cynicism, the complacency of the old code.



## II

### THEN CAME THE WAR!

—Which meant that thousands of boys and girls were suddenly snatched away from their homes and parents, flung out into the heat of life, under conditions of abnormal, and wholly vile, excitement. They had to act and think for themselves without guidance, training, or experience: to face problems almost entirely new to young and old alike.

Practically, there were no safeguards.

It was not that men rebelled against and defied the established traditions: these simply did not apply to life as it burst upon our sons and daughters. Normal existence was wiped out by a flash of lightning. The old duties, habits, manners, responsibilities, were rudely cast aside: for what seemed, and perhaps was, a higher call. The whole of life was revised in a few hours; and it is no exaggeration to say that none knew their way about the new world.

Only a clear understanding of what war really meant for us, can reveal the special problems of to-day in their relation to the permanent, which are the only real, emotions and instincts of human nature. [13]

To a large extent, the mental and moral growth of all young men was abruptly stopped short. Those who have come back, physically fit, are—in all the essentials of character—five years younger than by the calendar, though more "fixed" in their few ideas. Many are further hampered and—in a sense—abnormal; maimed, diseased, or nerve-shattered; definitely unbalanced in some way; only half themselves, liable to sudden loss, or defiance, of self-control.

For five years they were not men, but screws in a vast evil machine. They had, indeed, experience of death; none of life. They had, practically, no responsibility towards, or for, themselves; no sense of duty before them except obedience; no aim beyond a standardized efficiency. They lost every influence of home, neighbourliness, citizenship, and above all the refinement and sanctity of love. To live for the moment became their Ideal; in a vision of noble patriotism and sublime self-sacrifice. It was not for them to plan, look forward, build up life and character for themselves. [14]

This unnatural and irresponsible existence, moreover, was to be spent among scenes of appalling savagery and the worst primitive passions.

"The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps;  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime."

Only devils can serve the Devil of War; and *the supreme sacrifice our sons made for us was the sacrifice of their humanity.*

To "do their bit," they put away themselves.

But this abnormal, unreal existence, these lives in the Flame of Hate, hardened and coarsened by the day's work, positively *had* to discover some outlet; quick, sure ways to forget. Quite unused to the normal "decencies," without experience in "ordering" themselves, the sex-instinct became explosive, a sense-riot unrestrained. Remember, that to men (and women, for that matter), hard working at high pressure, leading a strained and feverish life, the sex-thirst springs out. There is no drug for worn-out bodies and souls so easy and so sweet-savoured, so prompt in its effects, for the moment so complete. In those days few stopped to count the cost, face the consequences, or note the weakening of the will. With death "round the corner," why stop to think? Life was all snatching; action meant a shrewd blow, careless of what, in ourselves or in another, we killed by the way. [15]

And for girls and young women there was one Rule of Life—"give the men a good time." I know the inspiring motive, however little conscious in some, was a generous self-forgetting. To give is always ennobling, and God forbid one should ever, by thought or word, belittle the selfless heroism born in woman.

But then, our daughters had no chance to know and choose, no test between real emotion and fevered desire—their own or another's. Inheriting a beautiful home-womanliness, the flower of sheltered innocence, they had to make and be themselves in the open of a new world. Nobility shone out among us in those days, miracles beyond belief of what woman can do and suffer for big, or small, men: a new vision of the mothering of humanity that brought God to our side. Also, alas, terrible shattering of English girlhood, ugly staining of the pure in heart, feverish unrest, a fury of overdoing, a hard glitter of cold joy. Always haste, never growth. Wherefore to-day our morality is an ash-heap, which some weep over, others kick up. [16]

*Dare we refuse to face the black awakening to disillusion?*

### III

[17]

#### BECAUSE WHILE THEY LIVED VIOLENTLY, YOUTH ALSO THOUGHT HARD.

What was their "food for thought"? Largely away from, and independent of, personal influence from the intimacies of home life; almost entirely freed from authority even in daily conduct, and from the restraints of an accepted moral code; they talked and read. All the rebellions and revolts of before 1914 were conspicuously abroad. Above all, then and to-day, the novels (devoured for distraction) had forced sex-problems upon the most thoughtless; demanded for all on the threshold of life full licence for self-expression; analysed what they called the soul in undigested detail; lingered over body-contact, flushes and fires of the flesh; loudly proclaimed new Laws of Love.

The whole experience of mankind, our most sacred instincts, are flouted with contempt. The conflicting claims, which none can avoid, between young and old, have been flung off. The old distinctions between wrong and right are categorically denied; all now demand an absolutely fresh start based on universal knowledge of sin, absolute freedom for the individual, frank discussion of physical intimacies, full rights to the Egoist—"a commonplace promiscuity that masquerades as liberty, as courageousness, as art. A slimy, glittering snail-track threaded through all society."

[18]

And we have not, even yet, gone far enough! since, it is said, "Conversation is over-sexed, the novel under-sexed, therefore untrue, therefore insincere." By this creed, there is only one *real* thing in life—physical passion.

I do not suggest that contemporary thought is *all* evil, unclean or false. Many of our writers are serious, pure-minded men and women, rightly indignant with old falsehoods, honestly seeking new light. Much of their work, too, reveals both sincerity and truth, a finer instinct for the ideal than the Victorians ever knew. Their courage is heroic, their frankness most wise.

But they are, on the whole, prone to haste. They denounce often without understanding; eager to knock down, without preparation to build up. *There is a large body of new doctrine, or interpretation of life and manhood, which is false, morbid, and poisonous in its effects.*

[19]

Above all, the message has taken youth unprepared—just when (more than ever before in the history of the world) they needed quiet patience for complete understanding. *And* it has, naturally, proved an attractive instrument for cheap sensation-mongers to feed novelty and excitement, in second-rate, widely read, novels. The appeal here is far more dangerous, because it lacks thought or any sense of responsibility in the writers. These insincere books, written for success to catch the crowd, even when slightly more veiled in phrase, are far more suggestive and unclean. They present conclusions without reasons, gospels without faith. They partly create, and largely reflect, life as it is for the moment. Taking evil for granted, they do devil's work.

Such are the prevailing influences of the day; very mixed, of grave peril, that have already done much to prolong the crime of war.

But the following pages shall not be given to mere abuse, idle complaints, or dogmatic assertion.

It is necessary, quite frankly, but with all possible *clear* thinking, to examine and present the new moral teaching, to sift true from false; to declare how much has come from more knowledge and understanding, and how much from unreasoning anger, impatience of control, the search for novelty and pride in revolt. Where, too, mere dirt has stained the page.

[20]

**WHAT, THEN, WERE THE NEW MORAL PROBLEMS, WHAT WAS THE FRANK  
OUTLOOK, RAISED AND ADOPTED BEFORE THE WAR?**

What are their effects, for good and evil, upon modern literature?

We recognize the physical expression of love as itself no way impure or unclean: but as a part of true passion. We know that sin means a state of mind or emotion, a false conception of moral values; and that virtue is not secured by legal sanction. We recognize, frankly, man's weakness and the complexity of social life; wherefore the dangers and temptations of ill-doing must be faced and understood.

Finally, we believe that *knowledge brings strength*; and, therefore, these "difficult" questions cannot, and should not, be ignored in conversation or in books: above all, not by those who, whether intentionally or not, do influence thought by their power to create character in fiction.

This awakening to a new view of Truth, however, has produced an atmosphere in modern novels which—whatever the aim or intention of modern novelists, leads to grave evil. [22]

1. The determination to call a spade a spade, complete frankness in words, too often ignores the relative importance of things or deeds thus exposed. It tends, unavoidably, to over-emphasize the physical, no less than our grandparents exaggerated the romantic.

2. A recognition of the unmarried mother and the refusal to boycott a whole class, produce detailed and frank pictures of "gay life," in which the pleasures and even the moral conquests are so brought into prominence as to convey the totally false impression that such conditions are freer, and therefore better, than prosaic domesticity.

3. The gospel of self-expression in emotion, itself a fine ideal inspiring sincerity, is too often so violently proclaimed as to ignore any consideration for others and the "consequences" to oneself:—the inevitable weakening of the will.

4. In particular, the glorification of burning passion which (as a physical fact) cannot be continuous, is revealed to justify the lie that, as the *nature* of love changes or grows, it also turns cold and dies. Therefore, they seek to show that the noblest love does not last, that men and women alike need constant change in emotion, that marriage is not a bond but bondage. [23]

Everywhere, they confound the abuses of truth with truth itself; proclaim an ideal false simply because it has been degraded and misunderstood. They condemn because we cannot attain.

Obviously, however, the novelists may still reply, "We are concerned with life not with ideals. If these things be sin, we must write of sin." That we all admit. The novel with any ambition towards truth dare not ignore temptation or the failure to resist. It must reveal human nature, no less at its worst than its best; face the struggle between faith and disloyalty to oneself; picture life's cruel ironies and the tyranny of fate.

*But that can never excuse doubt, or confusion between right and wrong, exalting evil, or perversion of the truth.*

## THE "SPADE" IDEAL IN FICTION

This has been summarized once for all in his description of what Mr. W. L. George calls a "sincere" novel: "There would be as many scenes in the bedroom as in the drawing-room, probably more, given that human beings spend more time in the former than the latter apartment."

There is nothing sincere in that definition except its nasty flavour; the lust it suggests. The actual effect, if not the intention, is a quick shock to our natural instincts.

Any possible value it might appear to possess at first sight, as a serious argument, has been lost by the insincere reason given. Mr. George himself is far too good an artist not to know that *real* life is *not* measured by length of hours. Crises are, nearly always, swift. Too often, a character is lost or won in a moment; we grow old in a night; gain the happiness of a lifetime by the right word. How many a man is bound to "spend more time" over his ledger than beside his lady!

[25]

This weak reasoning gives the realists away. They are so set on the letter of truth as to deny its spirit. Aiming at exact photographic reproduction of life, they lose all sense of proportion and real values, hiding the wood in the trees. Whether or not the material facts be true, the reality is false, the proportions misplaced, the picture out of focus.

In practice, moreover, they do select no less arbitrarily than the romantic Victorians. In their view, "one can only get at most women's minds through their bodies."

But Mr. George has only *expressed* one reason for his contention; even if *that* be seriously intended. The argument really *means* that, often, if not always, the most vital moments of our life are spent in the bedroom; a half-truth more dangerous and misleading than a lie.

What the word "bedroom" in this sentence honestly stands for is obviously something quite real; but it does not reveal or test character, and can never in any way complete a *true* picture of life. The accidents of expression are not truth itself.

In a recent drama of temperament called *Enter Madame*, the author's mere instinct for stage-effects has, as it were by accident, provided an illustration that proves our point. The hero of this spontaneous and light-hearted drama is attracted by two women of whom one largely appeals to his passions (though *not* his lust); and the other appears to possess what modernists would call the "tame" comforting qualities of a "good" wife. He chooses passion in the end, following his love *off the stage*, into a bedroom. In this scene we have the whole truth; no added sincerity in the presentment, no shade of character the most minute, would have been added by opening that door. The emotional decision was the reality.

[26]

To the realist the play would probably seem a square fight between wife and mistress—with the inevitable result!

But, in actual fact, almost every detail went to confound the new morality. The passionate woman was the hero's wife, whom he had just divorced—to achieve domesticity. She did *not* exclusively depend upon the physical appeal; though it was used to bring him back. They had a thousand other, more subtle, points of sympathy and mutual attraction, despite the exasperating petty irritations of life, which she would not allow to wreck their love. On the other hand, it was not any fixed aversion to marriage, any weakness in the bond itself, that caused her rival's failure. She simply was not, when—as it were—put to the test, his spiritual mate. For him, she was the wrong woman.

[27]

Most certainly this play was not inspired by any conscious theories on life or art. A straightforward, workmanlike picture of everyday people; its very lack of intention made it the more convincing. The author had no axe to grind.

As in life, we saw that the best feelings of an ordinary decent sort of man are expressed, as his ultimate happiness is secured, by 'putting up with his wife's tantrums for love of her dear self.' That is, by some kind of self-control about the small things of life for the sake of the big; an instinctive knowledge of values or sense of proportion; mutual accommodation, and self-expression in self-sacrifice. He would not rush away from her for a change or new experience, to that placid domesticity which, because he had missed it, he—for a moment—supposed would prove ideal.

Nevertheless, it is absolutely clear that his decision does *not* establish the superiority of passion-storms over carpet slippers. He chose between two women, not between two modes of life: a matter of temperament, and the man's individual, permanent feeling. Though married, he had not—as he too hastily imagined—fallen "out of" love.

[28]

Life is distorted to-day by the orgy of crude passion in most second-rate fiction, of which Mr. Evan Morgan's *Trial by Ordeal* is an extreme case. Unfortunately such novelists have the smart air of being absolutely at home all over the world, without really knowing their way about anywhere.

The leading lady of this brightly variegated human manure-heap is a "vampire, like a sea-breeze, like the noise of a waterfall at night"; her familiar ally is a discreet "sort of lady dressmaker, whose sons, numbering almost equally with her lovers, had forced her to take to a genteel trade." It is a picture of life among "bolsters with the temperaments of wood-lice; . . . among talented women, gifted women, immoral women."

Here Miss Hazell O'Neill "netted a half-blind poet, whom she took out and dusted on bright days and holidays." Him she ultimately left, as part of her luggage, to a landlady in Jersey; and proceeded to "smash a sculptor with his own statue." [29]

Caught at last by "romance," falling in love with a man who wondered—"would she be more trouble than she was worth"; this determined young woman "leapt up and began undressing . . . plunged into the water"; so that "the momentary glance he had of her naked beauty, the excitement, overcame him."

The hero, in his "first affair" with "the daughter of a very respectable God-fearing parson," carefully taught her the new ideals of "free love, free conscience, free everything . . . hoping himself to reap the fruit of his labours." Submitting, however, to the "ceremonial" of marriage, he was caught in his own trap. She was now "enlightened," and "dreading suddenly the binding nature of the service," ran away, at the eleventh hour, with another man.

Afterwards "she came back ill, very ill, and he left her to sink or swim." Such is the chivalry of free love; that ultimately drove her to become "a horrible, decadent, drug-maniac."

Of his "spiritual" union with another, we read: "Both were exhausted, the *emotions of the soul* had overpowered them, they fell fainting against the cool grey stone, and there, like a burning picture of all the romances there have been since the beginning of time, they leant in the twilight." [30]

By all means call a spade a spade; but do not imagine that all life is spades. To insist upon bedroom scenes in fiction or drama, and all the nakedness of phrase such a conception of art implies, does, and must, often suggest the sly and coarse innuendo. It is the same with all *excess* of emphasis on physical detail. When Mr. D. H. Lawrence dwells on the feverish symptoms (mainly skin-deep) of his lovers, describes their breasts and loins, he is—actually—playing with the obscene.

The reticence we demand is not based on any pretence that our bodies are unclean, on any conventional association between mere words and thoughts.

A nude painting may be supremely, spiritually, beautiful: it may be lewd: but it is not, as many would now declare, more real *because* of its nudity.

Can we *honestly* say that the increasing undress on stage or in daily life provokes more deep, true and sincere feeling, reveals more of a girl's or a woman's real and best self? We know it does not. *It distracts our thoughts from the woman herself* to memories of purely animal and gross experience, tempts us to lower depths. It matters not, in the book or in the play, that innocence prevail. I have heard men, for example, when the curtain fell at *The Sign of the Cross*, chuckling over the public attack on a girl's body (though it failed), with gay plans for vile conquests. [31]

Obviously, there can be no fixed verbal rule. To say that no writer may use certain words or describe certain actions and things; no playwright may paint certain scenes; would be to "speak as a fool." Each case must be determined by its inner spiritual truth.

In one sense our selection of phrase must be a matter of taste and good feeling; in another, it comes from our artistic instinct. What I maintain, and have tried to show, is that modern novels are, too often, both poisonous *and* untrue to life because their choice of words and, indeed, their whole picture of life, is dominated by a false view: that, if only your figures are naked they *must* be true, that our bodies cannot lie. *In angry revolt against the half-truths of the past, they snatch at the other half and swear it is the whole.* [32]

Let the writer be sure that he cares only for truth; and loyalty to his vision will give him the right, clean thoughts and words.

Let the reader trust to his own natural instincts. Almost certainly, if a phrase or thought either shock or suggest the unclean, it is itself—as then used—unclean, false to life and nature; *and* also bad art. If you are told that the first slight shock, prick of the conscience, impulse to shrink away, is false hypocrisy, *do not believe it.*

Nearly always the most inexperienced youth *feels straight*. Once the poison is drunk and you have let yourself go with the injected delirium, you will have lost the power to see and feel for yourself.

**NOVELS OF "GAY LIFE," WITH THE PROSTITUTE HEROINE, ARE, QUITE OBVIOUSLY,  
STRONG MORAL INTOXICANTS.**

One does not pronounce the subject forbidden. We know, and recognize, that a man's mistress *may* be a nobler woman than his wife, the love between them more real; we know and recognize where mere passion may lead; and we do not carelessly push beyond the pale, those whom a hundred different circumstances—quite different degrees of moral weakness or reckless defiance through special trouble—may have led to live on man's desires. We do not dismiss them from thought, reading, and conversation.

Nevertheless many novels now written use these most grave issues for mere dramatic effect, or to confound morality; and, to these ends, offer a falsely attractive picture of emotional adventure. In his terrible *Bed of Roses*, on the other hand, Mr. W. L. George treats his theme with the definite object of exposing the tragedy of a young woman with no training, suddenly forced to earn her living; and of expressing his righteous anger against the conditions of civilization. Because, he declares, "a woman can scratch up a living but not a future; and the only job she's really fit for is to be a man's keep, legal or illegal, permanent or temporary." The narrative itself is most emphatically not free from offence, but the motive is honest and sincere. [34]

Mr. Gilbert Cannan, again, with less earnest intention but still legitimately, seems to have written *Pink Roses* to illustrate the demoralizing effects of the war on a quite decent, average young man, who was "left out" of things—through a weak heart. He drifts into an experiment of lust, but is not finally destroyed, because he recognized from the first that he had only sought the adventure—to fill the blank years.

The frail "Cora" of Mr. Snaith's *Sailor* merely stands for temptation, which no novelist can omit. The episode is not shirked, but it is treated with all the traditional reticence, which puts it outside our discussion here.

In these examples the motive may be acknowledged towards justification; but such books as Mr. W. L. George's *Confessions of Ursula Trent* only respond to a morbid preference for melodramatic atmosphere: they assume, and encourage, our interest in the unclean. [35]

To heighten the effect, they are—almost inevitably—untrue. The attractions and drama are exaggerated, giving a false glamour to the gravest tragedy of human nature. There is here obvious adventure, and far greater variety or colour than we can, most of us, reach in ordinary respectable life. There is even some real liberty for the individual (though far less than these superficial narratives suggest), in dramatic contrast to the slaving drudgery and imprisoned minds—of underpaid long hours of toil and drab unloving homes.

The hopeless tragedy, the bitter knowledge, the utter weariness and the slavery of the soul do not provide the novelist with dramatic material, and are—to a large extent—left out of the picture. He slurs over, or altogether ignores, the blunting of moral sense, the coarsening of moral fibre, the lowering of all ideals: the gradual loss of power over oneself, loss of will, loss of freedom, loss—even—of desire. He may use the more obvious foulness and brutality as an occasion for drama—naturally not wishing to be transparently unreal. The moral tragedy is not *there*. [36]

But by his own art standard, that demands the exact truth, he is condemned; and he is guilty of just that falsehood which he set out to expose and revile—of treating his characters as a *class apart*, rather types than individuals. As the Victorians assumed, without charity, they were always lower than the "respectable"; he almost conveys the impression that they are necessarily higher—as careless, and far more dangerous, an assumption.

We can perhaps see more clearly where this perverse attack upon convention really leads from another example of fiction, frankly designed to sell.

It is, indeed, hard to detect the serious object or thought behind such books as *The Age of Consent*. The publisher claims "extraordinary delicacy" for its treatment of a "difficult, perilous, and exciting situation," which is "modern in the fullest sense." There is, we admit, nothing coarse here in language or thought, a welcome exception to-day; and the combination of essential purity, in a very real sense, with a courageous acceptance of life, is revealed with real understanding of morality and of our natural instincts. [37]

In other words, Pamela is a true woman; with exceptional possession of herself, heroic impulse and a clean mind; capable of sustained, genuine self-sacrifice and self-restraint.

*But when we consider the tests by which her nature is revealed and developed, the sordid vice in which she grew from girl to woman; the whole impression is reversed.* Circumstances and atmosphere are violently morbid and also quite abnormal. We have not only every conceivable variety in the cruel and profit-sharing intrigues of lust (with no sudden impulse to excuse, if not condone); but illustration and discussion of the most extreme and vile form of criminal mania that serves no purpose but to heighten the crude sensationalism.

The legal problem suggested by the title (a "practical" issue of grave importance to public

morality) is only used for the mechanism of the plot; and spiritual purity is fertilized by manure. This, of course, may be achieved by a strong nature: virtue does sometimes triumph against long odds. But such books without doubt imply that the surroundings of loathly sin *provide the most favourable soil* for the growth and strengthening of a girl's innocence to perfect womanhood. Which is a lie.

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*Can we finally hesitate to proclaim that too many novels, written round "gay life," create moods and stimulate emotions, by which truth and the Right are hidden or denied?*

## WHAT DO THE "NEW" WRITERS AND THINKERS TO-DAY ACTUALLY TEACH? HOW DO THEY INTERPRET LIFE AND LOVE?

We have, so far, considered rather the effects of "new" morality than the morality itself; and, to some extent, dwelt more upon the characteristics of modern fiction than on the thought it expounds.

It is now necessary to examine the actual teaching, or interpretation, of life and love.

The poison permeating literature and society seems to have its main origin in over-emphasis and a determination to reform by destruction.

A violent, but not altogether unjustified, reaction against our old moral rules and formulæ, which laid undue stress on "appearances," has led to a passionate declaration that the first right and duty of every man or woman is to express himself or herself at all costs. The one sin now held unpardonable is hypocrisy, or the insincere moulding of oneself by rule; falling in line, accepting any authority or tradition, any form of self-sacrifice. There is great confusion here between good and evil. We have already more than once explained that we of the older days frankly admit our mistake. We did conform over-much, fixed our ideals in a groove, and—with too anxious love—sought to guide and direct youth, rather than help and stimulate them to be their best selves.

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But, if we laid too great stress on restraint, control, sacrifice, and mere orderliness; the new thinkers have, here again, missed the truth by their fiery haste. As the clear-sighted heroine of a recent novel has remarked, "It was a great and fine act to let yourself go—only no one said precisely where you went to."

Their Self is not a complete purposeful human being, of strong character and sustained courage, clear faith, and reasonable hope: certainly not of any charity whatsoever. *The ego they would exalt is a mere riot of moods.* They snatch at a moment's joy, utter a moment's emotion, act on a moment's thought. There is no idea of "finding" oneself *before* expressing oneself. Every passing fancy, feverish excitement, sudden hate, is to be flung out upon a bewildered world; above all to the confounding and wounding of steadier souls—the old, the middle-aged, or any that bear another's burden. Such tempestuous demands on life are based on anger against parental preachments and on a curious lack of self-confidence. Seeing the glory of youth's capacity for enthusiasm, they seem always afraid that it will fade and die unless encouraged perpetually to explode. They will not tolerate any idea of growth and strength through self-control, any appeal to the higher, deeper Self, built up on loving service and kindness to one's fellow-men.

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No theory of life ever produced such weak, formless, and utterly miserable human beings. *They quickly cease to have any self to express.* Swayed in a thousand contrary directions by every idle mood, they become more absolutely slaves to chance encounter and a thoughtless word than one would have supposed possible to an intelligent man or woman, with any pride in self or any standard of honour. It should be obvious that such a perpetual series of unconsidered experiments in emotion must wear out all independent thought, all strength of will, all capacity for judgment.

Miss Sheila Kaye Smith does not teach this ideal in *Joanna Godden*, but she exposes it with her usual grim sincerity. The heroine of that profound tragedy kills her lonely soul by a perpetual struggle to snatch happiness for herself. Originally a strong woman, she goes on "blundering worse and worse," until "there she stood, nearly forty years old, her lover, her sister, her farm, her home, her good name, all lost."

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A novel in which we can, however, clearly detect confusion between love and the quick, vicious, response to every sensuous impression, is *The Sleeping Fire* of W. E. B. Henderson, described by its author as a tale of "the urge in woman . . . where the flesh, crying like an infant for food, is yet held back by scruples of a spirit that bows to circumstance, from fastening on the breast of personal choice."

Here "the woman," Viva Barrington, is, again and again, described as "a human soul, innately decent and fine"; and yet she "suddenly kindled" at any man's mere touch. The young guardsman whom "considerable practice had enabled to use his fine eyes with much effect," declared "she could be no end o' fun, if she'd only let herself go." In fact, he took up a bet, "ten to one in quids," that he would kiss her before the last supper dance; "a real live kiss, mind you, where she gives as good as she gets. None of your stolen pecks."

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As this "splendid specimen of the vigorous young male smoothed back her hair, devouring her with his eyes . . . a delicious languor . . . as of one yielding to an anæsthetic . . . was stealing over her. Husband, children—everything of her outside life slipped away."

And at his kiss "primordial passion" awoke. "Feeling herself a live coal of shame from head to foot she raised herself slightly upwards towards him, and with closed eyes and utter abandon, passionately returned the pressure of his lips."

This "pure" woman, already a mother, is fired by a "vulgar wager," a vain boy wanting to kiss



her "for the mere enjoyment of the contact," in the conservatory, heated by champagne and the dance. There is no attempt to suggest real feeling, the passionate awakening that *may* come after a foolish marriage; when the "right man" stirs unknown depths, beating down "fears, doubts, self-distrusts." She crumples up at the first chance shot.

No wonder that, after some months' experimenting among men, she grows "afraid—afraid! . . . now I know I'm liable to—to kindle, suddenly, inexplicably. . . . There's a man here—one of those to-night. He's unclean, through and through. I never used to attract that type. And now apparently I do. The 'sleeping fire' . . . he sees it in me and tries to feed it. He sickens me! Oh, I'm frightened. Suppose one day that type *ceased* to sicken me. I've seen the demi-monde at the tables. Their faces haunt me. *They* began with the sleeping fire, and men fed it and fed it till it became a furnace . . . for me, it's been like summer lightning so far . . . only summer lightning. Look after me, help me, lest it ever be forked lightning . . . the lightning that can strike and destroy."

So she appeals to the husband she had originally accepted as "a crutch," and who had looked upon her as "furniture." Fortunately—for the children, because he has "changed, broadened in outlook and understanding"—he is ready "to build afresh, stone by stone."

We admit that Mr. Henderson's moral is sound enough; he has, indeed, found "the way of salvation." But he has *not* drawn for us the "innately decent and fine woman." Viva is weak and abnormally sensual from the first; pulled out of the mire by luck, human kindness, and a dim taste for "the things that are good, decent, and worth while"; *inherited from clean-living forebears*.

The danger for her was exceptional, not "that *natural* yearning" against which "*all women* must be *eternally* on their guard." Her husband, we notice, hoped to guard his daughter "*against her mother's tendency*."

We have a precisely similar situation in *The Mother of All Living* by Mr. Keable. An emotional, but high-minded woman, whose husband was not aggressively incompatible, is here suddenly stirred to the depths—practically at first sight—by a cynical, handsome man of the world. There is absolutely no attempt whatever to even suggest any natural affinity in mind or tastes between the two; no urge except the unexplained, and inexplicable, mystery of the spark that fires sex. The abandon to which this unnatural awakening leads up belongs to quite a different type of woman; and when, at the eleventh hour, she repents in melodrama, we have still a third personality, no way like the girl her husband wooed and won.

This is, perhaps, why Mr. Keable calls her *The Mother of all Living*, Eve incarnate, the World-Woman. As Mr. Masefield draws Mary Queen of Scots—too "big" for one lover. Both writers chose to forget, or to ignore, that love has no meaning, unless one's *whole* self is expressed.

Mr. Temple Thurston, again, in *The Green Bough*, seems resolutely determined to uphold Pope's dictum that "every woman is at heart a rake."

Mary, indeed, is a woman "whom life had discarded and thrown aside"; whom, therefore, we are ready to judge leniently. It does *not*, therefore, follow "How vast a degree of false modesty there is in the world . . . it had *all been false* that modesty which their mother had taught them."

She, at any rate without modesty, sought and found love. So fine a thing this that she took it, without hesitation, from a married man, who had told her how much he loved his wife. "It happened—in a fortnight."

Of her sisters, reproaching her, she declares "Jane thinks herself a true woman just because she's clung to modesty and chastity and a fierce reserve; but these things are only of true value when they're needed, and what man has needed them of us? *Who cares at all whether we've been chaste or pure?* None but ourselves! And what made us care *but those false values* that make Jane's shame of me? . . . You're not really ashamed of me. You're *envious, jealous, and you're stung with spite*. Calling me a servant girl or a woman of the streets only feeds your spite, it doesn't satisfy your heart. *You'd give all you know to have what I have*. . . . I'm going to have a child. . . . It's not a sin. It's not a shame. It's the most wonderful thing in the world."

*There is one unanswerable reply to that fearful charge—"What man has needed chastity of us, who cares?"—a son's honouring of his mother, the man's instinct to defend his wife, his sister, or his child.*

False, or forced, "modesty" may degenerate into "spite"; but it will be a sad day for human nature when all women are "jealous" of the "free!"

Mr. Thurston seems to claim, in this novel, to be "the one man in the world who understands the truth about women." This is his reading of truth!

It had been "the one night of her lover's life"; but he went back to that "wonderful woman," his wife, who had "as big a heart as all this stretch of acres and that breadth of sea." To Mary, he wrote, "I blame myself utterly and I blame myself alone. . . . So many another woman would have reckoned the cost before she knew the full account. You said nothing. *You are wonderful, Mary*, and if any woman deserves to escape the consequences of passion, it is you."

"God!" she cried, "was that the little mind her own had met with? . . . She knew how in the deepest recesses of her soul there did not live a father to her child. . . . If this was a man, then

men were nothing to women. Two nights of burning passion he had been with her and for those moments they had been inseparably one. But now he had gone as though the whole world divided them. . . . With that letter he had cancelled all existence in the meaning of life. There was no meaning in him."

He was "the mere servant of Nature, whipped with passion to her purpose . . . no father at all."

Wherefore *she tries to explain* to him: "Women are not complicated. It is only the laws that make us appear so. . . . That first of our two nights on the cliffs, did you find me complicated or difficult of understanding? I showed, as well as gave you myself, and this is how you have treated that revelation. . . . *Why do you hint about shame to me? Did you think I shared what you call your weakness? Did you think for those moments that, as you say of yourself, I forgot or lost restraint?* . . . You would not believe me if I told you that all women in their essence are the same. It is only with so many that . . . the hollow dignity of social position, the chimera of good repute . . . are more attractive and alluring than the pain and discomfort and difficulty of bringing children into a competitive world. . . . But starve one of these women . . . deny to her the first function which justifies her existence . . . and you will find her behave as I behaved. . . . I had no shame then. I loved. Loving no longer, I still now have no shame because, and believe me it is not in anger, we have no cause to meet again."

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On the other hand, Miss E. M. Delafield's *Humbug* reveals with startling clearness the falseness of self-seeking in passion. Her argument is the more convincing because her heroine, Lily Stellingthorpe, has the best of reasons for adopting the new ideal, the strongest possible temptation to follow a false light. Her sensitive and vital nature had been cramped from birth by "a good woman's capacity for the falsification of moral values." Her father literally drove her along the same demoralizing groove. Love and respect for their honest, but kind, goodness almost compel insincerity and the complete self-annihilation. Under such influences, she acquires a *good* husband. He, alas, dictates her conscience, assumes that so sweet a woman will conform to type. It seems almost a brutal sin for her to act, think, or even feel, for herself. Steadily she grows more hidden, secret, and hypocritical.

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This careful preparation for modern self-passion is admirably drawn. We can scarcely deny that any sudden outburst of even cruel selfishness or revolt might be excused, if not absolutely justified, for *her*.

Inevitably the occasion comes. The expected lover appears, young, ardent, understanding; all, it seems to her revived free impulse, that she had been seeking for many years. Lily, however, does not snatch at happiness, flare out herself. She looks into herself, getting herself—as it were—in order, before so fateful a choice.

She thought first, *as she had been told by a sympathetic schoolmistress*, "What I need, what I must have, if I am ever to fulfil myself—is romance. I must learn not to be afraid of life. Some day, I shall love. Am I to pretend to myself that such a thing is out of the question because I am married?" Why not strike for freedom, and begin life again? She "thought that the conflict lay, as so often, between sincerity and sentiment." Only sentiment made it "impossible for her to be ruthless" to her husband.

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"*Then illumination came to her, searing and vivid.*"

The lover was, after all, a mere "pretext," an opportunity for one more experiment with life, one more feverish attempt to find some false image of herself.

"Was the freedom for which she looked to be based upon yet another artificial value? After all, why should she arrogate to herself the right of deciding what her greatest happiness was to be? . . . The long, long way round that it had been, to arrive at last at her own convictions, and cease to try and wrench them into line with those of other people!"

"The gift" of herself "had been made" to her husband. Her real self lay with him and with their coming child.

So she conquered the final test, escaped "applying a general law to a particular case—taking one's values ready-made—the old, old humbug." As "the last comforting falsity fell from her she saw . . . the truth."

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This was the truth *for her*. It is not offered as an argument for or against a dogmatic rule that no woman may ever be justified in leaving her husband.

What this thoroughly modern and sincere novel *does* establish, is the equal folly, and almost greater moral danger, of the opposite dogma: that self-expression for its own sake, the mere putting a moment's apparent happiness above all other claims or aims, without considering the future, or seeking to find one's real self, *is a false and evil ideal*.

*Miss Delafield gives the "new" morality a fair, and even an eloquent, hearing, chooses a case where all the circumstances seem combined for its support, and then exposes the fallacy of its reasoning.*

### WHAT, THEN, IS THIS NEW LOVE? IT IS SEX-CONFLICT.

The most obvious, and the most sincere, form of self-expression rests on pure emotion—a natural and healthy impulse. The right thus to express oneself belongs, as we acknowledge to-day, to women no less than men.

But, largely misled by their over-insistence upon the physical in human nature, too many modern thinkers confuse fierce excitement with deep emotion. Also seeing, and wisely exalting, the glory of youth's dream, they sanction, and even advise, thoughtless haste and action on every impulse.

It is now taught, not only that physical passion stands for, or rather *is*, the Love of which it forms only a part; but that the fire of sudden desire is the only true, or natural, expression of love itself.

Such a view has been, again and again, formally stated with quite serious, honest intent by our leading novelists. It is assumed, without argument or justification, in most second-rate popular fiction; thereby reaching and poisoning the very readers least qualified to resist evil influence and, as we have shown, particularly ill-equipped to-day. [54]

For Mr. Cannan's Matilda love is a "kiss of the lips, a surrender to the flood of perilous feeling, a tampering with forces that might or might not sweep you to ruin; a matter of fancy, dalliance, and risk." His Cora, the "natural light of love," "kissed" her lover's "eyes, his lips, his ears, and bit the tip of his nose until it was bruised and swollen."

He may well ask: "Does any man want any woman, or any woman any man? Are these wild flashes more than things of a moment? . . . Is not every woman any man's woman? Is not every man any woman's man? Why property? Why impossible pledges? Why pretend so much that is obviously false? Why build upon a lie and call it sacred? . . . Why do men and women live hideously together? . . . Why, and why again?"

With a cynic's frankness Mr. W. L. George answers why:

"Men may have us," said his Victoria, "as breeders and housekeepers, but the mistress is the root of all." This is not, as one might suppose, a confession of sin; for "Love is outside marriage, because love's too big to stay inside . . . don't you see that of itself it carries the one sanctity that may exist between men and women? That it cannot be bound because it is as light airs, imponderable; so fierce that all things it touches it burns, so sweet that whosoever has drunk shall ever more be thirsty." [55]

*Because a man soon tires of such burning sweetness, he must satisfy his thirst elsewhere.*

Woman, indeed, he is annoyed to find, is still unable to "understand love in its neurotic moods; she cannot yet understand that a greater intensity might creep into passion if one *knew* it to be transient, that one might love more urgently, with greater fierceness, if one *knew* that soon the body, temple of that love, would fade, wither, die, then decay . . . that haste to live made living more intense."

WHAT, THEN, IS THIS LOVE. IT IS A SEX-CONFLICT; wherein the man "has to make war, to conquer." The woman begs him "to hurt her, to set his imprint upon her"; even when "about to conquer" she must wear "the slave look." This is precisely the woman he also finds, more crudely phrased, in the "mean streets": "If yer lives alone nothing 'appens . . . stuck in the mud like. But when yer've got a 'usband, things 'as wot they calls zest . . . if 'e do come 'ome . . . p'r'aps 'e'll give yer one in the mouf. Variety, that's wot it is, variety. . . . He may lift his elbow a bit and all that, but anyhow 'e's a man." If he does *not* come home, love means "waking up in the middle of the night and running about the room like a crazy thing because she'd dreamed he was with some other girl." In the afternoon it meant "feeling all soft and swoony just because he helped you into the 'bus by the elbow." [56]

More thoughtful or intelligent young ladies come "to think there's no such thing as a pure-minded girl." Marriage is "merely evidence that the girl has held out" and "only a dodge for getting rid of being in love."

Mr. Hugh Walpole once very sensibly remarked that "people don't want to know what a young ass thinks about life if he can't tell a story." Perhaps, if such muddled ideas were only expressed by these solemn and very intellectual young men (who, however, can "tell a story"), we might be disposed to leave the matter in their hands and trust to time for their enlightening. [57]

But, unfortunately, the same false "new love" is about us everywhere. It is a commonplace to boys and girls, and has crept into the great majority of second-rate, easily read, novels published to-day.

What does it really mean? How has it come about?

In the first place, the new thinkers have done precisely what they are always protesting against. They confuse "marriage" with the legal contract. A great part of their abuse, half their

plea for the greater sincerity of free love, has no standing against spiritual marriage, founded on true love.

Nevertheless the argument against *permanency* remains. The demand for continual new adventure in emotion (set out to condone both intimacy without marriage or disloyalty to marriage) does rest on something which has the appearance of truth and reason.

The fiery, swooning passion of mere bodily impulse *does not last*. But even physical passion, the sex-urge, means more than that. Our new teachers ignore what all experience has proved and science taught—that *every* physical impulse—whether to eat or drink, work or play—demands restraint for its fruition. The value of self-control is no less of the body than the soul. [58]

It is the fever-bred passion, born of stimulated sex-consciousness, that must snatch at every chance for expression and demands constant change. This, indeed, does weary and satiate the spirit, weaken bodily vigour, and destroy manhood. Bid us look for, welcome, and artificially develop every first faint stirring of the sex-urge, and you make us slaves indeed. If you consider less fundamental desires and pleasures of the body, you will admit at once that feverish, uncontrolled, and constant straining to put out all your strength at once, can produce no kind of good sportsman. Who more rigorously disciplines himself than the athlete? The power to be passionate, to express the love of the flesh, dies before it has ever been really attained, for those who always at once yield to mere craving. Their "deeply sensual associations" are "always robbed of mystery and delight when long-balked attraction comes to a tardy blooming."

And as Scott told us long ago, "It is no small aggravation of this jaded and uncomfortable state of mind, that the voluptuary cannot renounce the pursuits with which he is satiated, but must continue, for his character's sake, or from the mere force of habit, to take all the toil, fatigue, and danger of the chase, while he has so little real interest in the termination." [59]

That is, they quickly lose the very pleasures which were their object and their excuse.

*I have known, or read of, no more miserable and weak human beings than many of the men and women in modern fiction.*

Does it then follow that spiritual love, a true union of souls, for which we claim a higher and a more lasting happiness, is a thing apart, wherein the physical must be kept under, put aside; or, if conceded to our common weakness (the penalty of our earthly existence), should be calmly and occasionally indulged, only under official licence, in secret as a shameful deed? Certainly *not*. The pure know far more of passion than the loose. But, as other bodily pleasure, i.e., self-expression, gains strength and depth by taking responsibility for itself, "ordering" itself; so, above all, does our strongest, and most ultimate, physical need.

It is the true passion, naturally found in comradeship and love, spontaneously constant and controlled, which will complete man's vitality, deepen and strengthen, while it steadies, physique. Spiritually the one expresses itself by *taking*, the other achieves itself by *giving*. [60]

The biggest adventure in life, the deepest and truest feelings do, actually, involve that emotional abandon, or complete self-forgetting, which modernists exalt. But the giving away of one's whole self, that is, expressing one's whole self in passionate service, is *not* achieved by sudden, untested intimacy. It can only come, or grow, for those who seek understanding of each other, suffer the first mystery—(stirring the wonder dreams of youth)—to unfold and reveal itself in steady, controlled devotion to the vision of romance. Then, and only then (soon or late, as the individual self prompts), he shall dare, *because he knows*.

In other words, the physical passion, in which to-day men find the *birth* of love, belongs in nature to maturity and completion, when man has gained the courage to be himself and express himself. It is the harvest of pure romance, only possible to those who have earned full knowledge of themselves and of each other.

The humdrum pictures of insincere marriage, with which fiction is crowded to-day, come from mistakes or spiritual failure to be one's best self, *not* from constancy and faith. The need to perpetually revive intense emotion with a new mistress can never be felt in a true marriage. It is inevitable for so-called "free" love, the bitterest slavery of man. [61]

For wedded love—that is, the permanent union of body and soul—there is ever a new and wonderful adventure, the deepening mystery of the closer bond. And the highest happiness, which is *intense* emotion, has the gravest responsibilities, demanding the greatest courage and hope. As Mr. Middleton Murray has written in *The Things We Are*: "The taking of a wife or the taking of a friend is an eternal act; if it be less, it is a treachery, a degradation."

It is true, certainly, that the *nature* of love and passion may change with time and the comradeship of daily life; but the change is not a weakening, not even a lowering of the pulse. Its ardour does not diminish but conquers life more completely. It is, actually, the constant and faithful heart, which has most strength to bear with, or to ennoble, the deadening trivialities of existence (that no free lover can escape), to make small things great; which finds most courage to face Fate. [62]

The deadening influence of constant "experiments" in passion ("walking round and round the thing you want, gloating over it with your eyes"); the bitter tragedy of a life that is "one long series of eager conquests turned to listless ones," has been dramatically exposed, with unflinching realism, by Miss Olive Mary Salter in her *God's Wages*; which also reveals "that love

beyond self which is human companionship."

For Anne Verity, we read, "marriage" had been "the finger-post to Death." In "making man her own she made him stale. . . . There was no end to those upon whom she had lived and left them to pay the bill." Always "life must be savoured anew by fresh interests, hashed up aspects of the same old facts served up over and over again to one's easily deceived palate." It was "her vanity that must be ministered to afresh, its staleness and satiation relieved by the sacrifice of someone else's young virility."

She found that "love doesn't stay with this generation, it touches us and flies again. . . . It's this awful quality of inconstancy in me, as if my heart had got a hole in it. . . . We've lost the art of looking on at anybody but ourselves."

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But, at long last, when a man explained to her: "I want you to love my mind, that lives, instead of my body, that will die," she awoke.

She learnt then, that "the right man, or the right woman for the matter of that, isn't ever ready made. It needs effort of the most intense kind to fit a man perfectly into a woman's life, a woman perfectly into a man's."

*Wherefore, "Love, real love, is the consummation of great effort, neither more nor less."*

## WHO IS THE "IDEAL" MISTRESS?

The most determined advocates of free-love have never upheld the old, lazy indulgence towards man and his "wild oats." The ideal mistress, whom they so confidently exalt over the wife, is not the "kept woman" behind Victorian respectability. Modern writers have, boldly and justly, attacked that discreet indiscretion with the unanswerable logic of facts. If we allow men licence, justice demands equal liberty for women. Sin is not less, but greater, for being in secret, however flimsy the veil.

It is difficult, nevertheless, to see how *mutual* infidelity can actually remove the admitted evils of a situation it makes more complex; or to believe that publicity can, of itself, turn black to white. By some curious twist of reasoning, it really would seem that they maintain: "By lifting the blinds, we have created a 'new' woman, the ideal of all the ages."

For where, after all, have they turned to find her, save to their knowledge and experience of the past? We cannot, positively, reconstruct human nature. [65]

There is a clear and concise exposition of the whole theory in Miss Romer Wilson's last novel, *The Death of Society*. It is the story of Mr. Smith and his short visit to a distinguished Norwegian writer. He, quite openly, worships the old man's young wife—"his girl, his woman, his desire"—and though for them "time was so short they could not afford to sleep," it is expressly stated that "*she, the perfect woman in whom all women live, raised him to perfect manhood.*" "Now," he said, "I have confidence to do what I think right. . . . I do not care for opinion any longer."

Together, "they fell into the deep pool of love," when she "was too far gone in bliss to reply."

"Many men," she said, "men who came to see my husband, thought that I was part of the visit, and that no man who thought well of himself should go away without seducing me." But "that is how you seduced me, because I saw love sprang straight from your heart and not from custom."

"There was an Italian man who loved me, but not more than the books with gold covers on his shelves. . . . He said I was the Muse of Comedy. . . . There was a Frenchman who said I was the Muse of Poetry. . . . There was a Russian who said nothing. . . . He loved me because we were both animals; but only you love me because I am part of your life and so I love you equally." [66]

Miss Wilson, indeed, attempts to impart a unique atmosphere into this commonplace intrigue by a remarkable device. Smith "cannot speak German, nor speak Norwegian." *She* knows only a few words of English. "I like to *pretend* you hear," said Rosa, "I have always pretended"; and he "could address her in whatever words he liked," since "lovers' language is universal."

By this method they do, in fact, hold conversations by the hour, answering each other with quite miraculous preciseness; understanding, we are expected to believe, the intimacies of thought and feeling behind each phrase: "though he had no idea what she had said, word for word." The intention, obviously, is to suggest some special mysterious, if not miraculous, bond of the spirit knitting two souls in one. The comment of a plain man, who deals with facts, must be that inarticulate love can be only physical. It does not elevate, but further degrades, their intimacy. He "had gone back to the dust to learn about God." [67]

They parted, however, because "they loved each other too much to ask for each other's lives." Meanwhile, "in patience and humility" they must wait "until after the Death of Society"—when they can be together.

"How should I act," said Rosa, "if there were no such a thing as Society? I know how I should act. . . . I owe nothing to either man or woman. My name? My husband's name?—these belong to Society. . . . I will not leave my husband, because he is an old man, nor my daughters, because they are young; but if I give you a day of love, and again a day perhaps, whom shall I hurt? . . . My soul belongs to nobody: I—Rosa Christiansen—am my own. *My body is my soul's servant and friend, and by it I can know other souls as I know my own.* . . . Oh! oh! My soul is mine, and loves your soul!"

We see that the "perfect woman" still kept on husband and home.

And Smith, thus "proudly numbering himself among the angels," also found time for a secondary, but quite passionate, intercourse with one of the daughters of the house, who willingly gives him everything she has; because she loves him so much, he is all she wants. [68]

He "kissed her violently on the face . . . squeezed her ribs as tight as ever he dared," and replied without hesitation, "I love you as I love flowers and the trees and the sky. I love you because you are lovable as a wet or fine day is lovable. Why, yes, I must confess that I love you. . . . I believe all men love a great many women. . . . I am a Bluebeard with a cellar full of wives. . . . You see, God hasn't created the woman yet who represents the whole of female perfection. Don't mistake me, Nathalia; I am not a beast. I don't run after women solely as women. . . . He began to stroke her head as he thought of all those past and bygone romances."

And so on—! Strangely enough, "his heart was filled with deep and tender *respect for her.*"

More frequently, however, the novelists of this school seem to have gone back to the casual lusts of *Tom Jones*, with the rôle of hero and heroine reversed. There are many tales, almost romantic, of Sir Galahad waiting and tilting for Cleopatra or Mary Queen of Scots. Too often, marriage is merely evidence that "the *man* has held out."

Still we maintain that the modernists are really looking to the old-world "kept" woman for their ideal of more or less open and, as it were, established free love. We find clear, specific complaints against the new system: "They had lapsed into a relation which slowly from irregular grew regular. It was not marriage, but it was in the nature of marriage." Now, "after two and a half years . . . she had done wifely things for him. . . . Love and domestic economy; it was very like marriage after all."

[69]

What then, frankly speaking, is the real charm of the new mistress-love? Most obviously it comes, ultimately, from the holiday spirit; its freedom from sordid or petty cares, the prose of our daily life, business or home worries, the responsibilities that dull the eye and wear down body and soul: which *means* the incarnation of selfishness.

Outspoken and simply coarse writers of the past centuries expose this fact by their frank hints on "the honeymoon"; of which we acknowledge the underlying truth.

It has been cynically maintained, nor dare one quite deny, that our romance-lady, the sheltered and innocent pure girl, would have been broken long ago but for the "outlet," to mere males, of her under-sister. I would suggest that the new "ideal" mistress is certainly no less, probably more, dependent upon the housewife—the tame, tied woman who bears her lover's name.

[70]

We can none of us escape "the day's work." Under the conventional "wild oats" scheme of life, we *can* place the whole burden upon the wife: and so find elsewhere "The Woman"—passionately and emotionally our ideal.

But no theory of free love was ever based upon two establishments. The whole weight of the new thought cries out for open, frank *leaving one woman* and *going to the other*; where possible by mutual consent. The secrecy, the misunderstanding, *the divided allegiance*, of the old world, is the very evil they are clamouring to wipe out. Yet *can* we leave our bills, our servants, and our children behind with the fixtures of the old "home to let"? Can we spend our life, or for that matter, more than a few days or weeks, in one perpetual holiday among the "beach-flappers" of Miss Amber Reeves' unstable *Helen in Love* and the boys they so gaily and easily annex?

The truth, of course, cannot be denied. These new, glorified sex-contracts (whether entirely free, or on a "short lease" subject to "things going well") will, and must, involve all the trials of domesticity, without the compensations of a shared responsibility: a real bond to halve our sorrows and double our joys. There will, moreover, be a thousand times more occasion for incompatibility, the jar of nerves; where there is no steady, devoted endeavour towards mutual forbearance and understanding, no spur to forgive—in courageous hope. Life in hotels may, superficially, expose less friction; but it quickly destroys any reality in comradeship. Only daily service can build up Love.

[71]

The mistress, in fact, remains an enervating luxury, a habit of living beyond our emotional means, a sparkling drug.

*We have not found the Ideal, because it does not exist.*

## HERE ARE TWO PICTURES OF FREE LOVE!

"After all, what is life for me? *Strange doors in strange houses, strange men and strange intimacies*. Sometimes weirdly grotesque and incredibly beastly. The secret vileness of human nature flung at me. Man revealing himself, through individual after individual, as utterly contemptible. I tell you, my dear eager fool, it is beyond my conception ever to regard a man as higher than a frog, as less repulsive."

It is a cry from Mr. Compton Mackenzie's glittering land of many, and strange, sins—surely a nightmare of hell itself; cry of the gallant Sylvia Scarlett, writing her own epitaph—"Here lies Sylvia Scarlett *who was always running away*."

On the surface, indeed, it is a gay enough scene Mr. Mackenzie has painted for us, when "her arm was twined round him like ivy, and their two hands came together like leaves."

Glittering and hot in the first flush of adventure, we see youth's brave curiosity endlessly awake. Yet it was cold, hard, and "strange" at the core: always, everywhere, a "stranger" upon the earth. Sylvia "was always running away"—from men and from herself; so weary, so hurt, and so afraid. For there was none to share the burden and the joy, no footing for her; nothing to hold on to and steady life, no future to build: weary and restless and alone. She could never stay anywhere, with anyone; searching for ever, for she knows not what. For "life, which means freedom and space and movement, she is willing to pay with utter loneliness at the end."

[73]

For the wanderers there is no end we dare tell. Mr. Mackenzie has "a jolly conception of the adventurous men of London, with all its sly and labyrinthine romance"; but has he ever thought of following beside any of the men and women who flutter across his page—we cannot say to their homes, for they have none? Dare he *live* with "the muslin and patchouli, the aspidestras and yellowing photographs, as in unseen basements children whined, while on the mantelpiece garish vases rattled to the vibration of the traffic"; or with Mrs. Smith "creeping about the stairs like a spider?" Dare he see his shrewd, bright Daisy die?

[74]

To the novelist, indeed, they do not matter. They have played their part in his drama, and may shuffle off to the wings. *They are human beings in real life*. And for the truth about them, we could tell such a dreary, monotonous, bitter and tragic sheaf of "Lonely Lives." We should show them to you, wandering round and round, in and out, under bright lights or behind dark corners; every year more weak and frightened, till strength fails them even for movement without hope, and they slip away into some silent pond.

And finally, from the first, if all love means constant change to revive passion, a life of continual experiment in emotion; we dare not face the child.

Novelists to-day, indeed, have given much thought to children. "You know," wrote Mr. Mackenzie, "that if I were to set down all I could remember of my childhood the work would not yet have reached beyond the fifth year." They all often remember much, with rare understanding and delicate insight. Heroes and heroines, to-day, are introduced to us in the cradle, and for many a chapter remain nursery-bound. But, curiously enough, we meet them all *at home, in a family group*. Every one of the "newest" men and women, in modern novels, were brought up by their parents (or nearest relatives), and did inherit the great gift of influences they make no attempt to hand on. To fight fate they had, at least, the traditional defence: *a self moulded by a mother's and father's love*.

[75]

Fiction has not yet faced the offspring of Free Love.

They are still, however, bravely inspired by visions of mother-love. The faith and loyalty they forbid to lovers, is still honoured in sons. How many of Mr. Cannan's young heroines, for instance, could ever have mothered his own Renè Fourny or the "Three Pretty Men." The Mrs. Morel of D. H. Lawrence, most passionately tempestuous of all the moderns, comes very near to the ideal. Few women have lived more absolutely or continuously for, and in, their child. Yet few women can have had better excuse or more temptation to desertion, greater need for a new start. *Here was no love and no home, save what she made by loyal constancy to the building up of the child she had borne*.

Who would condemn more fiercely, and with more bitter tears, the teaching of these men than the great mothers they have so nobly created?

[76]

There would be none such in life so lived.

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Could any novelist have drawn for us a more mad picture of the emotions aroused by sex-licence than may be read in *The Jewel in the Lotus* by Rosita Forbes? The heroine, Corona, "who paints, you know," is not, professionally, a gay woman. She had, perhaps justifiably, divorced her first husband; and achieved something like real love with a Spanish Catholic, whose religion alone prevented the legal sanction. He, however, died suddenly before the story opens; and "from



that time Corona deliberately cut away the soft side of life . . . she fought her lonely battle and she won."

But "*she did not attempt to shut sex out of her life again*. On the contrary, *there were many incidents* in many countries, but to no single lover did she give any part of her soul. For a little while they drifted into her life, fulfilling the need her loneliness had of companionship. She paid the price asked for affection, sympathy, kindness, and *it left no mark on her*. Sometimes passion took her and she *loved like a man* for a time and then forgot, but nothing and no one interfered with the strange, new force she was developing."

[77]

"At thirty-five she was a woman, strong, courageous, intelligent, a brilliant conversationalist"—in fact, a popular Society Queen. Her "existence had been an orgy of sensation."

Then the boy, Gerald, came into her life. He had a "wonderful" mother: "There's nothing I would not tell her, nothing that we do not talk over." It was his plan, and hers, for him not to marry "for ages, not for ten years, if then. You see, I want to make my castle first. Then I will ask someone to live in it. I want to give my wife everything. I want to stick her up in the public view and just arrange things for her quietly."

But his mother was "broad-minded." When "she sees a woman obviously happy, she feels that she probably has a lover." She "wouldn't want all the best" of her son's life. "She knows I don't mean to marry, and she knows also that no man goes very far without a woman in his life."

And, *not* "necessarily, in the background. I can imagine a very great friendship developing into something more passionate while one was young and impulsive, and then slipping gradually back into a wonderful comradeship."

[78]

"And," he added, "I should never marry a woman who would mind my having *friends!*"

All this he tells Corona—"very quietly and simply"; and then, "kissing her face swiftly, hotly, . . . till she bit him"; with incredible *naivete*, explains that he had talked about her with his mother—"She feels I should be safe with you" and "she would be a good friend to my mistress."

In her first blaze of anger and scorn Corona spits out: "I suppose Sir Henry is your mother's lover"; and the boy cries, "No, he is not! How dare you suggest it? *My mother is much too fine a woman to have a lover*. She never had one and never will have."

This is the truth none can escape: the one answer possible for any decent boy: the inspiration of all the youth of all ages, who have made for us a fair world, illumined by faith, courage, and hope.

**HAVE WE ALREADY FORGOTTEN THE NATURAL LOYALTY OF YOUTH. HOW ARE WE  
PAYING—OUR DEBT TO THEM?**

Honour the dead, care for those who saved the homes: for, as we have here striven to show, never before has youth been in such dire need of sympathy, understanding, and help. Too soon we forget that war blasts humanity, a state of war makes us all brutes, degrades every man, woman, and child, in every part of their nature, for all hours of their lives. Youth, indeed, was rudderless through no fault of its own and, when least prepared, most needing a clear vision, it has been tossed into such a medley of mad notions as never before deluded mankind.

We were, indeed, at the approach of Dawn; new light was breaking over the mists of Victorian morality. To recover the *real* progress, which has been diverted into a mere riot of attack, we have endeavoured to gather together, examine, and clearly state what the "new" morality *really means and leads to*, how it has come to be upheld. Without denying in some the honest seeking of truth, we have sought to make clear where the teaching around us to-day is untrue, destructive of reality, and poisonous in its effect.

[80]

As now proclaimed, this teaching cannot escape its responsibility for much evil talk, thought, and emotion, for many black deeds. Under its influence, thoughtless humanity is fast coming to believe and say that all love, or even comradeship, between the sexes without immediate physical satisfaction is hypocritical and unreal; that is, cramped by forced self-denial or an evidence of cold blood and incapacity for real love. The young live feverishly by this conviction: they flaunt their passions, their falls and their conquests, before the world. They jest at sin, sneer at restraint, and spare no thought for purity. Kindness, courtesy, thought for others, are cast to the winds. At all costs, they must be themselves, and snatch the hour's joy.

Such feverish disorder of emotion—the swooning delirium, sudden fires, and complete abandon of balance—is not natural to wholesome humanity; but, as we have seen, *it can easily be produced by suggestion*. Now that popular novelists casually produce drama and crude excitement by smart tales of such over-sexed human beings, an immense body of readers, without knowledge or experience to combat the falseness of the picture, have come to accept it as a *normal record* of real life. They are adapting themselves to its alluring thrills, modelling their lives to its pattern, and acting upon its teaching. From men and women, they may too soon become mere male and female, as God did *not* create them. The whole history of mankind, our centuries of growth from cave-man to the last word in civilization, have established truths which remain true. Our right to be ourselves can never wipe out our duty to others. There is an eternal and infinite difference between Right and Wrong, and those who ignore this *cannot escape the penalty*. Love is not lust. All that is finest and noblest in human nature has been built upon a pure and constant loyalty; of which the eternal symbol (however smirched and stained by folly or sin) is marriage and the home. Character, which ultimately rules the world, grows straight amidst the influence of family life. The permanent ideal for man and woman; creating new life, bearing and cherishing each new generation, is a complete union of the whole nature, spiritual and physical, whereof the spiritual bond must be supreme.

[81]

[82]

*Self-control, restraint, and, if needs be, Sacrifice, are the highest expression of Self.*

If we may not refuse new light, we can never forget old truth. The foundations of morality have been established by our gradual emergence from that state of savagery, into which we were again for a few years submerged by war.

Those who blot out the Vision attained by centuries of man's upward fight, thereby confounding the ultimate issues of right and wrong, setting the body above the soul, *are intoxicating and poisoning humanity as with a deadly drug.*

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The following correction has been made to the original text:

Page 55: because it is as light airs[original has "a light as air"], imponderable

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MORAL POISON IN MODERN FICTION \*\*\*

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