

# SEX AND THE DOUBLE STANDARD

BY WAVERLEY ROOT

SOME months ago I published an article dealing with the impact of American soldiers on France, in which I suggested that the GIs had been misled by superficial observation of French customs into the belief that the French were immoral. This brought me a note from a reader who insisted that French standards of morality were far below ours. My answer to that was "Are the French Immoral?", which appeared in THE AMERICAN MERCURY for June 1947. The subject appears to be inexhaustible, for I have now received another objecting letter, this time on the question of the double standard.

"You leave untreated," my female correspondent writes, "a point to which I have been accustomed to cling in defending not only American over French morals, but 'Anglo-Saxon' morals in general over 'Latin' morals in general . . . namely, the issue of masculine fidelity in marriage.

"In Latin culture," she continues, "almost the entire burden of upholding sexual virtue falls upon the shoulders of women in the wife-mother

class, permitting to masculine instincts absolutely free rein both before and after marriage. . . . Wives have no choice but to shrug their shoulders. The *maîtresse* is as much accepted by them as by the man's cronies. This, plus the dowry system, has led to the dissociation of love and marriage, which may completely satisfy masculine needs and desires but cruelly prohibits the *jeune fille* from fully participating in erotic play.

"It is surprising to me that France, whose women are so charming and versatile, fell into the double standard."

This is what I call a meaty letter, and before entering upon the discussion of the double standard to which its author invites me, I want to comment on several of the points it makes. Can it be said that the wife-mothers of France are in fact "upholding sexual virtue" if, though themselves faithful, they condone the infidelity of their husbands? That they have no choice in the matter, as my correspondent states, I refuse to admit. Frenchwomen are fully capable of influencing their men, as the history of

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French politics, to cite one example, demonstrates.

As for the dowry system, it is now rapidly disappearing in France, but in any case I think it must be considered an effect, not a cause: the practice of giving dowries resulted from the fact that the French "dissociate love and marriage," rather than itself causing that dissociation.

The most interesting point of this letter, to my mind, is that it objects to the double standard not so much because it caters to the male, but because it "cruelly" restrains the female. In other words, why should the boys have all the fun? Now, this is an understandable attitude and one with which, like most males, I am ready to sympathize. (After all, how can the boys have fun if there are no girls to have fun with?) But my correspondent, in the tradition of that Puritanical morality which we still honor with lip service in the United States, would redress the unfairness of the situation by imposing on men the restraint she finds cruel because it is now applied to women.

Twenty years ago, with the brashness of youth, I, too, had no doubt that the double standard was all wrong, but my solution was to allow the girls the freedom I enjoyed. I was then a *naïf* dissenter from the majority opinion and certainly at odds with my New England upbringing. Today, when I find myself coming around to the opinion that the double standard is a natural development from the fact of masculine and fem-

inine differentiation, I seem still to be a dissenter, for the truth is that the American *jeune fille* participates fully, as my correspondent puts it, in erotic play.

To be sure, the girls, unwilling to forego an advantage, have not thrown away all of the double standard; they have dispensed only with that part of it which limited their own sexual freedom. Women still have the advantage in sidestepping unwanted advances. When a man makes a pass at a girl who doesn't welcome it, society stands behind her like a wall in her resistance. With a word, she can render his conduct contemptible, and he can only crawl away in complete apologetic abjection. He has demonstrated himself to be a cad, a churl and a bounder.

But let us suppose that the lady approaches the man. For him, she is prepared to make the supreme sacrifice. She offers him her virtue, her all. Let us assume he does not covet her all, but can any gentleman spurn such an offer? Not with impunity. Escape is difficult, and even if achieved, the ungrateful and usually graceless flight of the recreant proves him a cad, a churl and a bounder.

## II

Let us consider the double standard with the facts of physiology in mind. Nature appears to have arranged matters in such a way as to encourage all members of the animal kingdom to reproduce to the limit of their ability. Since a single action on the part of

the reproductive machinery of the male, a very small fraction of his potentiality, customarily keeps the reproductive machinery of the female completely absorbed for a time, the harem is the rule among animals. A single bull or a single boar may serve the cows or sows of a whole county. One rooster is enough for the hen-house. The stag moves majestically through the fields in the company of half a dozen does (until the season when he tires of feminine company and heads alone for the woods). A bull seal rules a whole beachful of female seals, and the male camel can play husband adequately for some three hundred females.

However, man is not the only monogamous animal. Others are the ostrich, the vulture, the Canada goose, the parrot and (perhaps) the brown bear. But it is pertinent to note that the practice of monogamy decreases as domesticity increases. The ostrich, for instance, monogamous in the wild state, becomes polygamous when domesticated; and man is surely the most domesticated of animals.

It can hardly be argued that man is *naturally* monogamous. If families have tended to grow up in most parts of the world about a single pair of parents, the reason seems to be chiefly economic: that is, a man usually has all he can do to support one wife, without taking on more. Hence the decline of plural marriages in societies which permit it; Mohammedans, for example, are permitted to take four

wives, but they seldom do because they can't afford it. Polygamy usually persists where the woman is still a beast of burden, and is therefore an asset rather than a liability to her husband; in many African communities the value of a wife is recognized by the customs of exacting a purchase prize for her and of assessing a man's wealth by counting his cows and wives.

The probability that it is economics, and not physiology, which has fastened the institution of monogamy upon man, leads us to the first reason for the natural development of the double standard: it is the woman who bears the babies. The young man who has violated society's sexual mores may bring sorrow to his parents — but that is all he brings them. It has not yet been found necessary to establish homes for the care of unmarried fathers.

My correspondent would no doubt answer that this argument really begs the question, for if the moral standards which tolerate greater freedom for men than for women were altered, that would mean also the abolition of the social embarrassment which now deters young women from risking unmarried motherhood. There are, indeed, any number of communities in which that embarrassment does not exist. There is even one tribe (I have forgotten whether it is African or South American) in which no young woman can expect to find a husband until after she has borne a child and this demonstrated her capacity for

fulfilling that important function.

In the days of my youth, when I was a fervent advocate of votes and equal rights for women, I would not have admitted that there were psychological differences between the two sexes. To me political equality seemed to imply uniformity. To argue that one sex followed different mental processes from the other seemed to assume that one must be inferior to the other. Distinction without hierarchy was too complex a concept for my adolescent mind. But since then we know that science has progressively lessened the area of the human personality which may be conceived of as a thing apart. Today, we can increase or decrease the intelligence of cretins by granting or withholding injections of thyroid extract; we can trace characteristics hitherto considered "spiritual" to the development of the endocrinal glands; we can pursue the most complicated manifestations of the human conscience through the intricacies of the unconscious; we apply in psychosomatic medicine the conclusion that there is no mental or moral or spiritual activity disconnected from the mechanisms of the body; and so it has become easier to accept the fact that a certain set of mental patterns may be normally transmitted to one sex rather than to the other.

In short, it can be said that our mores permit men and women to follow different paths of sexual conduct because men and women react differently to sexual situations. This

is not precisely a new discovery. Byron informed us long ago that while love is of man's life a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence. At the same time, one can make out a good case for the argument that male love is more dependable and more profound than female love. Where the essential difference comes in, I should say, is in the different emphasis placed on the physical act of love by men and by women.

We are accustomed to think of woman as the more delicate, the more spiritual, the more subtle vessel. It is nevertheless the physiological fact that she is tied down, much more than man, to the purely physical job of reproduction. The Freudians might suggest that it is to compensate for this that she attempts to disdain physical matters. It would also be consonant with Freudian theories to point out that the attempt is unsuccessful. To woman, if one may speak in generalizations, the physical act is of enormous importance. To man, it is a detail. Thus a man may be, in the physical sense of the word, unfaithful to a woman without ever having wavered, in his mind, from his devotion to her. But a woman who has been physically unfaithful to a man is obsessed with a sense of guilt; this establishes a psychological barrier between herself and her mate, a barrier which does not appear in the mind of the physically unfaithful male, whose conscience usually does not trouble him excessively though he may be apprehensive of being found out.

## III

It is always possible that the different attitude of women is not innate, but a product of their education, their economic position in our society and our whole thinking about sexual relationships. But I am inclined to suspect that it goes deeper than that. For the purpose of the reproduction of the species, it is advantageous for women to be constant and for men to be inconstant. It is also consistent with the fact that women are the repositories of the greater part of the machinery of reproduction that they should attach greater importance to the physical maneuvers which set it into operation. It would be my suspicion that we must look into the profoundest and most primitive physiological differences between the sexes for the explanation of woman's much greater tendency to attach herself completely and without reserve to her mate (to have him, as the French put it, "in her skin").

This would explain an observation I have made, probably shocking to conventional moralists, that while nothing breaks up a marriage more surely than infidelity on the part of a wife, many of the happiest marriages I know are those in which the husband is — discreetly, of course — unfaithful. When the wife is unfaithful, it is probably a sign that the marriage is already on the rocks. Her need to lavish her devotion on a single man has been rebuffed. If she experiments widely enough, she will find, sooner

or later, another man to whom she may transfer her devotion, and the rupture of the first union will then become complete.

But to the man, other, and, I think we are justified in saying, profounder links with his wife are more important than mere mechanical physical fidelity; therefore he does not violate his own feelings towards his wife if he strays, occasionally, into other pastures. To him, the physical relationship is not so much the sublimation of a passion as the satisfaction of an appetite; and the appetite becomes cloyed if it is restricted, day in and day out, to an unvarying menu. A man with a beautiful wife becomes unable, in a year or so, to see her beauty, for the familiarity of her appearance dulls for him the sensations it evokes in others. In the same way, though it is grievous to admit it in the presence of ladies, a sexual diet limited to one woman eventually palls on the most moral of men. From observation of the marriages of my friends, I would estimate that most husbands begin to tire of their wives in about ten years.

What happens then? The man of the single standard maintains a fidelity which, whether he admits it to himself or not, is irksome to him. He envies bachelors. His wife gradually assumes the aspect of an obstacle between himself and a fuller life. This is particularly true if, as a young man, he forebore to sow wild oats. He now sees the period approaching when his sexual opportunities will end and he begins to regret that he has accepted



which is primarily economic, for the purpose of raising children. It is too important an undertaking to be upset, in his view, by the whimsical behavior of the emotions. Love, with him, does not take priority over all else, as it does for romantic Americans. The family is more important. If love wears thin between husband and wife, he does not, like the American, rush to the divorce court and break up his family. Mindful of his duty to the community, he preserves the family by taking a mistress; and in that solution to the problem his friends and his wife (not always, it must be admitted, with heartfelt joy) acquiesce. To the Frenchman, the American attitude appears to be self-

indulgent, irresponsible, asocial and immature. Those American children, he notes disapprovingly, want to play, insist on having fun always, even about so serious a matter as marriage.

Well, there you have a different point of view. I do not propose to defend one over the other. But we Americans are the inventors, thanks to William James, of pragmatism; and by the pragmatic test, the French system seems to have worked out better. It has produced fewer wrecked families and fewer wrecked lives. If this is the result of the double standard, then surely it cannot be said that the double standard is nothing more than an arbitrary and vicious invention of my own selfish sex.

## EXPERIENCE

BY JOHN VAN BRAKLE

When I was young and sorrow came  
To some of those I knew,  
I'd bow my head in silence or  
I'd stare into the blue;  
But now that time has lined my face  
And grief has passed my way,  
I know that if I could go back,  
I would have words to say.