

# SEX IN AMERICAN FICTION

BY FLOYD DELL

I AM one of those many readers who are usually bored and sometimes disgusted by the crudity and coarseness in the treatment of sex which is now so widespread in American fiction. But before I proceed to express myself further on this subject I should, in fairness to my readers, report two autobiographical facts.

One is the fact that I am now an elderly person, and elderly persons are well known to be prudish and squeamish. There is, in consequence, a tendency not to care what they think about sex, in current fiction or anyplace else.

The other fact is that I used to write fiction myself, and that I sometimes shocked people by its frank treatment of sex. I can recall the publisher of the *Smart Set* telling me — and quite proudly, to my surprise: “Your story caused more cancellations of subscriptions than any other story we ever published.”

And I can recall, too, that some of my novels were banned in Boston, and that one of them was denounced by my friend Upton Sinclair, in a lurid syndicated review which held my novel responsible in advance for

causing the moral breakdown of the youth of the entire land. That hurt my feelings, and I protested to Upton. He replied cheerily that his review ought to increase my sales.

Times and tastes have changed rapidly, and those literary productions of mine might now, I suppose, be listed as recommended reading in Epworth League circles, on account of the refinement of their language. However, it is true that in their day they shocked some people. And it is true, too, that it hurt my feelings to be denounced.

I wouldn't want to hurt the feelings of any writer. I could certainly not denounce anyone for encouraging young people to loose living. On the contrary, my chief objection to most of these stories is that they make sex so dismal and repellent a subject. If I were a young reader and believed half of what I found in the stories, I should want to flee into the desert and avoid the company of the other sex entirely.

Take *Whereunder Crawling Cooped*, the latest novel of that distinguished writer, George Gassoway — an imaginary book, I hasten to say, by an imaginary writer, one noted for his

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relentless realism and dumfounding frankness.

Mr. Gassoway's tale is laid in Wampum City, site of the Swansdown Mattress Company. There is an impressive amount of information on postwar conditions in the mattress-manufacturing industry. The characters are represented as typical Americans, a representative segment of our population. The story opens with Mr. Sparlow, the sales manager of the Swansdown Company, hastily putting Birdie, his pretty, dark-eyed secretary, off his knee as he rises to greet his wife, Eudora, a glacial blonde with a Vassar education. Meanwhile, in the corridor, the burly red-haired janitor, Hunkins, thinks darkly about the atomic bomb.

After this fine start, I feel some disappointment when the characters merely say stupid things and exhibit repulsive manners. Most of them seem to be brought in only as targets for the author's social satire. It cannot be complained that no such people exist in real life. Even such a dummy as Mr. Sparlow may have infinite riches of interest hidden behind his smug exterior. But no — it appears that Mr. Sparlow's inner life is devoid of interest, except for the fact that he is, as one might say, a frustrated character. The author goes into his frustration in some clinical detail. Birdie, too, much to my surprise, is also a frustrated character. Eudora, of course, is a frightfully frustrated character. They are all (except Hunkins) frustrated characters.

The atmosphere of frustration thickens as the scene of inaction changes with rapid utility from office to boudoir to motor-car to cocktail lounge, and the things that are said get stupider and stupider. Anyway, now I know where I am: in an Americanized sociologized rendition of James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence; and I know what is coming next. Hunkins and the glacial Eudora will put on a scene, unfrustrated for a change and owing much to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, down in the furnace room, where they have gone to discuss the atomic bomb. But how it all turns out I shall never know — I have put aside this serious interpretation of American life and am reading a good detective story.

## II

It does not take much of a literary detective to trace the elements of Mr. Gassoway's story back to Joyce and Lawrence, who have exerted a hypnotic influence upon a whole generation of American writers, some of them even more talented than Mr. Gassoway. It is they, Joyce and Lawrence, between them, who have made sex the dull sickening subject that it is today in so much of American fiction.

Joyce was horrified by what seemed to him the nastiness of life (especially sex); he felt a morbid guilt over his own adolescent participation in its vileness, and he went to great lengths to pass on his disgust to his readers. Although his *Ulysses* can be taken as

a picture of some highly unpleasant things in Dublin, the core of his peculiar and intense literary activity seems a kind of civilian shell-shock about human sexual behavior. Without understanding, without humor, without forgiveness, without hope, he paints for us a fantastic world centering in sexual drives that to him have no meaning, no purpose, no beauty, no bravery and no fun in them at all.

This Joycian vision of life has been taken over to a large extent by various American writers to whom it does not rightfully belong, since their own emotional attitudes are really less neurotic. By these writers it is used, with or without the cockeyed syntax of the original, as a kind of vehicle for social criticism. It can be used to show up the vulgarity of the bourgeoisie or the miseries of the poor, or it can serve as a means of damning the whole human race. It has a false erotic robustness which conceals the absence of any real sexuality. The characters talk and drink, talk and drink, and occasionally a couple of them go to bed; but it doesn't mean a thing. Sometimes there is a hero (or heroine) whose life is one long erotic pilgrimage, unsatisfactory to all concerned. The original Joycian effect is, of course, confused by American writers who can't help putting in a little love; but the romantic, passionate, protective and parental aspects of love would wreck the Joycian scheme, so they tend to get left out, and what remains is pretty dreary.

The Joycian fantasy doesn't, of

course, provide for any contrast, anything to show what life and love can be or should be — which, for purposes of social criticism, is really needed. Contrast of a sort, however, is sometimes provided in our fiction by the old device, dear to sentimental young reporters, of finding in the vagabond, the jailbird and the prostitute those fine feelings and heroic virtues which are supposedly non-existent in the respectable classes.

The total absence of drama in the Joycian view of sex requires that drama be taken from some other source. The old love-triangle won't fit into the Joycian scheme; in fact, nothing that gives serious value to sex will really fit into it. But D. H. Lawrence provided a dramatic view of the relation of the sexes that could be tacked on to the Joycian scheme.

Lawrence, whose best literary effects are not easily imitated, is currently honored as the founder of the cult of four-letter words — a literary cult which began as a neurosis and ended as a nuisance. The neurotic elements in Lawrence's writings were accompanied by such splendid other qualities that to isolate and harp on the neurotic may seem both disrespectful and unjust. If the Lawrencian neurosis had not been so fruitful of imitation, there would have been no occasion to harp upon it. At any rate, the four-letter-word cult was originally the hysterical attempt of literary Little Lord Fauntleroy to get rid of their velvet jackets and cut themselves loose from the maternal apron-

strings. Refinement of language, good manners, and in general all that we owe to woman and civilization — these were repudiated, replaced by coarse language, bad manners and a febrile brutality. Adult attitudes toward sex were discarded and replaced by childish, early adolescent or bar-room attitudes. The Lawrencian disciples got a tremendous kick out of those four-letter words. They showed Mama where she got off. A fine manly thing to do, they thought. But in later American literary manifestations, these cult practices became merged with those of the doggedly dull phonographic technicians, who faithfully copy down what they hear people say, and the stupider the better.

### III

Backing up that original attempt at an assertion of masculinity by those who were doubtful about their possession of it, the Lawrencian philosophy of sex established an imposing pseudo-masculinity by cracking the whip over woman, seeking to deprive her of the power to boss them around. She was warned against being intellectual and sent back to bed; it was a mistake for her to think, talk, read books or hold a job; her true destiny, she was given to understand, was passive subjection to primitive, rip-snorting masculinity. All this was akin to the Nietzschean stuff later adopted officially by the Nazis. It had an unmistakable streak of sadism in it.

The attraction of this tosh for many

American writers was in the story pattern that it provided. Story-writers get tired of the old patterns but are hard put to find new ones. They grasp eagerly at anything new, and then work that to death. From Shaw they had finally taken the idea of woman as the pursuer in the love-chase, an idea they could have found in Shakespeare. From Freud they took the theme of the Mother Complex and some muddled notions about the Unconscious. And now from Lawrence they got the pattern of a sex-drama. This consists of a struggle for supremacy between woman and man, typically a sex-duel between the intellectualized and frigid female and the would-be masterful male. The aim of the icy female in this sex-duel is to reduce the male to infantile subjection and helplessness — to turn him back into a little Lord Fauntleroy, poor fellow, instead of properly submitting herself to his masterful masculinity. This theme was not entirely new, but it had new literary possibilities, based on evidences of its actual existence as revealed in the psychological doctor-books.

The Lawrencian fantasy is used by various American writers for the purposes of social satire — the icy Young Lady being made to stand somehow for the existing property system of which she may be supposed to be the flower. The Young Lady is sometimes contrasted with the Earth Woman. If the hero is unfortunately married to the Young Lady, then his sweetie on the side can be an Earth Woman. But

more essential drama is provided by having the hero win the sex-duel with the impudent Young Lady by triumphantly converting her into his Earth Woman. Her conversion to Earth-womanliness may be accompanied by discourses on sociological themes by the hero, or the mental relationship of the two may be confined to the narrowest verbal range. This may not seem much of a drama; but if the other characters are all frustrated, something can be made of it, as with Hunkins and Eudora down in the furnace room.

All story-patterns, old and new, have some elements of truth to life in them. The trouble with the Joycian-Lawrencian fantasia is that it requires a set of characters who are all neurotics. Despite the broad sociological pretensions of these novels, their characters are too clinically selected. The one thing that it is scarcely possible to find in them is any variety of emotional health. But there are, I should say, at least several varieties of sexual behavior, conventional and unconventional, that are interesting and dramatic, open to observation and to some extent within the personal experience of writers, which fall happily outside the range of the psychiatric clinic; it would certainly be too bad if there were not. I, myself, don't believe that sexual frustration is endemic in American life. While I am about it, let me say that I believe that the capacity for normal sexual enjoyment is the general rule rather than the astounding exception, among

women as well as men. I don't believe that there is anything about intellectuality or education that is conducive to neurosis. I believe that mutual trustfulness and helpfulness between the sexes is far commoner than hostility, and that romantic emotions and attitudes toward attractive persons of the other sex come quite naturally to most people. I believe, too, that most people are as mannerly as they know how to be, at least when sober, and that both in real life and in stories there is a distinction between sexual frankness and neurotic rudeness. In short, I don't recognize the Joycian-Lawrencian story-book world as the one I have been living in all my life.

#### IV

Story-writers, to be sure, must select characters and incidents and contrive conversation to suit their own purposes; but a pseudo-psychiatric method of selection makes for a wearisome monotony in fiction. Whatever was once striking in this technique has become long since worn-out and stale. One eminent critic remarked that, with all due respect to the novels of Henry James, he doesn't wish to have any more of them, especially when they are written by other people. This remark might be applied even more fervently to the Joycian-Lawrencian fiction manufactured on American typewriters. The sour neurotic notes of contempt for sex and hostility toward women have been sounded just about long enough in current fiction.

Such books as these serve, with

young readers at any rate, to make up for the deficiencies of the movies. The younger that people are, generally speaking, the more it is true that in their lives the novel has been displaced by the movies as a source of story-enjoyment. But the movies cannot give much social criticism, nor go very deeply into the minds of the characters; and, operating under a censorship from which the novel has largely escaped, the movies are very restricted in their dealings with sexual matters.

Current American fiction of the kind that professes to be serious is invited, it would seem, to make up for the deficiencies of the movies by going in heavily for sex; and it will not matter much how crudely these literary vitamins are presented, for the stories containing them will not be judged by their main audience in accordance with any of the traditional standards of fiction. Hemingway will be judged largely by readers who learned about fiction from Hemingway. Some more erudite young readers will of course have graduated at once from the Rover Boys to Joyce, Proust, Gertrude Stein and Kafka. But the number of serious novels not of recent vintage read voluntarily by a young reader of the movie-going generation can often be counted on his fingers.

I used to look forward, as a young idealist, to the time when American fiction would be free to deal frankly with the sexual side of life. I believed that our fiction would be, as a result of that freedom, gayer and sweeter, healthier and saner. The results of

the freedom, so far, have not come up to my expectations. I suppose I should have realized that when the lid was lifted from that seething cauldron of repressions, what would emerge first in fiction would be the neurotic fantasies of guilt and fear.

I might have reflected that very good writers are sometimes extremely neurotic on the subject of sex. I might have thought of Tolstoi, the prince of realistic novelists. In his greatest novels he stops short at the bedroom door; but we do not have to guess what would have been the result if he had taken us inside, for there is *The Kreutzer Sonata* to tell us. That wild and painful farrago of neurotic conflict and guilt is Tolstoi in the bedroom. Is it not possible, though, that he would have understood and portrayed sympathetically the sexual behavior of people less tormented than himself? Perhaps, but it is doubtful. On that subject he was capable of losing touch with reality, truth, humor, beauty, tenderness and sanity. *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* are unquestionably the better for the absence of bedroom scenes dominated stormily by an agonized moralist. And it is surely our great good fortune that Victorian literary manners locked Dickens and Thackeray firmly out of the bedroom; the alternative staggers the imagination. Think of the pens that described the death of little Nell and the manners of the Marquis of Steyne turned loose upon bedroom scenes! Heaven has been kind in sparing us that.

## V

It would be unpatriotic, no doubt, to attribute hypothetical neurotic attitudes to our distinguished American writers of the past. It is conceivable that we have lost something of great literary value as a result of repressive literary conventions which kept Hawthorne, Howells, Mark Twain and Henry James from including detailed and intimate bedroom scenes in their novels. Yet I rather doubt it. Had each of these writers written such a chapter and locked it up, and were those suppressed chapters now published, the results would certainly be instructive. They would not, I am sure, be as crude as the comparable passages in current American fiction, for these writers came too early to sit at the feet of Joyce and Lawrence and learn from them how to make mudpies. And if such chapters by any chance revealed neurotic attitudes on the part of their authors, these would at least be their own neurotic attitudes, honestly come by, not taken over from a couple of other fellows.

The argument is sometimes made that since the great novelists of the past got along so well with less freedom, while the writers of the present day do so badly with their freedom,

why shouldn't fiction give up a little of its freedom? That seems to me impossible. The forces of censorship are not reasonable; they are hysterical and relentless; their aim is to destroy all freedom of expression. They know just what is good for us to read, write, say and think; they are implacably determined to rule our minds, and they have no hesitation in using any instrument to punish recalcitrants. Their fears are limitless and their efforts at control are limitless. Give in to the censor, and soon he will be finding improper and subversive ideas in the Earthworm Tractor stories.

As a matter of fact, the literary freedom thus far achieved is not nearly so great as it is supposed to be. I expect much more freedom to be achieved; but I do not expect it to be successfully used by writers who despise their characters, and who are as neurotic as the censors are. I expect to be bored, disgusted and shocked by humorless, unkind, crude and incompetent accounts of the sexual behavior of slobs and louts and loons. But I do not propose to call in the police to protect my sensibilities. I can always turn to detective stories and to the stories in the women's magazines — both of which branches of our literature are improving remarkably.





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# DOWN TO EARTH

by ALAN DEVOE

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## THE BLUE JAY

IT MIGHT seem to superficial speculation that the bitterest season of mid-winter must be a dull and unrewarding time for nature-minded countrymen. It might readily be supposed that however fascinating to a naturalist the contemplation of his surrounding earth-life in the green and flowering times of the year, there could surely be small pleasure for him in the sullen gray-white landscape of snowbound January.

But in fact it is otherwise. It is true that in January the life of earth comes about as close as it ever does to arrest and sleep. The great company of warm-weather birds is thinned to a sparse few. Bats are vanished into hibernation; woodchucks are invisible under the earth; skunks are sleeping; raccoons are sleeping; whole troops and multitudes of living things have withdrawn in migration or hibernation or death. In the stillness, whiteness, and murderous cold, it requires a difficult act of the imagination to realize that all the warm potency of

life is still continuing now, hardy as ever and only pausing, in the hidden seed and the hidden root. It requires a kind of act of faith to be assured that in a few weeks the song sparrows and meadowlarks will be flooding the thawed countryside with their tumultuous spring songs, and the skunk cabbages be flowering. January is indeed a gray and rigorous and bitter time, and the visible stir of earth-life is ominously little.

It is precisely on this account, however, that those creatures which can in fact persistingly be seen are seen now with an exceptional vividness, a particular intensity. It is only starving men who truly discover the fullness of the taste of food. It is only men who have been long ill who can perceive, with a rush of awareness and a focused delight, the shining glory of simply being healthy. In all experience, there is a law of diminishing returns. Enough is not as good as a feast. Enough brings the sluggishness and slowness that become apathy and can become despair. What gives the fillip to feasts is a touch of the experience of