

POST COITUM TRISTRUM

Modern Fiction's Sex Offenders

JUDITH CHETTLE

It has not been easy in recent years to maintain the distinction between discriminating readers of contemporary literature and the presumed perverts who slink into adult book stores and movies. The respectable reader can, by a conscientious perusal of what the critics have praised, be just as acquainted with sexual matters once thought taboo in decent society. Sodomy, sadism, fellatio, and cunnilingus have become literary staples as familiar as death from consumption, unrequited love, and the loss of great fortunes once were. In part, this has been a normal corrective response, a reaction against excesses of prudery, but it is also the result of changes in political and philosophical attitudes to sex and society.

The sexual revolution of the last 20 years has been more socially devastating than the French Revolution. No age group, no sex, no race, no class has been excluded from its message or immune to its influence. No aspect of life, least of all literature, has been untouched.

In the past, the place of sex in literature was as cyclical as the weather, the economy, and the luck of men and women. Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans treated it as an absurd if natural part of life. The Puritans reacted against what they perceived as celebrations of licentiousness, but after the Restoration, attitudes again changed so that by the 18th century sexual adventures in literature were commonplace. The hero of one Smollett novel even suffers from venereal disease. Sexual adventures, seductions, and lusting scoundrels were described in an easygoing, at times almost affectionate manner. There was no obligation to score points, to make statements about the liberation of the psyche, or the imperative of orgasm. Sex was simply a natural fact of life, something that occurred, if you were fortunate, many times on the journey between birth and death.

The Victorians, who became a byword for prudery, preferred to maintain a general silence on the subject. It was the one lurking presence that threatened to disrupt the celebration of progress in which they were engaged. Sexual tension, which is often the key to much human behavior, is conspicuously absent from Victorian literature: the door to the bedroom shuts in the evening and opens again only in the morning.

After World War I, the pendulum began to swing slowly in the other direction, though Waugh, Huxley, and Lawrence, all once thought daring and naughty, now seem almost as piquantly evasive as their Victorian predecessors. Even Lawrence's notorious *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, though written with the same sensuous power that is present in "The Song of Solomon," is as useful for really understanding the mechanics of sex as Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* might be to a novice sailor.

Cultural Revolution

But the pace picked up after World War II, when narrow definitions of obscenity were successfully questioned in courts both in England and America. A post-war generation, impatient with the priggish complacency of the past and the laws defining personal conduct, began to question all authority, particularly moral authority. The language of politics was appropriated for personal and more self-centered ends—the legalization of drugs, the removal of barriers to sex before, after, or instead of marriage, abortion on demand, liberal divorce laws, and the recognition of homosexuality as a legitimate preference. Writers, musicians, and artists expressed their sympathy with these goals by denouncing any necessity for moral authority, social convention, and traditional form.

The moment, not the hour, was to be celebrated. This was possible in a limited sense in the theater—*Hair* was a dazzling spectacle a decade or so ago, though it might have little to say to the 80s. But literature is not so evanescent. For good or ill, it remains a permanent record. And here the pendulum swung as wildly as a Geiger counter on a uranium mine. Every aspect of sexuality and sexual liberty was suddenly legitimate material for writers, and it was thought fitting to give sex not merely a significant but the central role in any work.

Sexual passages now replaced the ubiquitous 19th century invocations of the Almighty. Men and women worried about their sexual performance rather than the possibility of damnation, about their potential for

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orgasm rather than the immortality of their souls. Moral dilemmas of a philosophical kind were replaced by the need to copulate as frequently and as variously as possible. George Orwell's laugh from the belly became an uncontrollable leer that dominated most plots, defined the lives of the characters, and seemed the major focus of their ambition.

In more recent years, writers like Reynolds Price, Scott Spencer, John Irving, William Styron, Norman Mailer, John Updike, E.L. Doctorow, and John Hawkes have given sex so prominent a place in their works that it seems disproportionately to dominate the story.

Hawkes, for example, celebrates sex lyrically but unremittingly. His hero, Cyril, in *The Blood Oranges* boasts:

Need I insist that the only enemy of the mature marriage is monogamy? That anything less than sexual multiplicity (body upon body, voice on voice) is naive? That our sexual selves are merely idylers (sic) in a vast wood?

And he proceeds to prove his claim. E.L. Doctorow, acutely sensitive to fashion, explicitly describes in *Loon Lake* how 80 to 100 men line up to rape the mentally retarded Fanny the Fat Lady of a travelling freak show. Scott Spencer devotes so much space to detailed accounts of lovemaking that at times it is hard to know whether one is reading a work of fiction or a how-to-book. John Irving creates characters who mutilate, masquerade as animals to extend their sexual versatility, commit incest, and take sexual advantage of unconscious, badly burned patients. Even in William Styron's acclaimed *Sophie's Choice*, there are numerous, lengthy, and explicit passages, as if sex, and not the tragedy of Sophie's life, was the point of the story.

Sex and Politics

Some writers sought to justify their treatment of sex in terms of a fashionable political philosophy, using the rhetoric of Marxism to describe their aims, though ironically, Marxist countries are notoriously prudish about such matters. For them, the sexual revolution was as much a political as a sociological phenomenon.

Writer Robert Heinlein proclaims in *Stranger in a Strange Land* "the miracle of bipolar reproduction" [sex] as a way of bringing about a revolution of feeling. His hero, Michael Smith, preaches the virtues of collective sexual activity and establishes communal "nests" which

succeed in eliminating jealousy, possessiveness, and anger.

Liberated sexual behavior and writing was seen as a defeat for the bourgeoisie and their narrow, inhibiting values. Similarly, lesbian and homosexual grievances were discussed in terms more appropriate to subjects of totalitarian states. Radical feminists talked of sex in language usually reserved for the class struggle—men were the oppressor class, women the oppressed. Women were

seen as the victims of a capitalist, economic system organized by males, and rape was regarded as an act of war. In *The Women's Room*, Marilyn French describes the women who were the dutiful suburban wives of the 1950s and their transition to more radical views. As one of her leading characters puts it:

Whatever they may be in public life, whatever their relation with men, in their relations with women, all men are rapists, and that's all they are. They

rape us with their eyes, their laws, and their codes. . . . For forty-odd years I've been a member of an oppressed people consorting with the enemy, advancing the enemy's cause. In some places that's called slavery. I'm through with it. I want to work with these women, those who give their lives up for our [feminist] cause.

What is essentially a private and social matter became, like so much in the late 20th century, a political issue. An act of deep personal responsibility was burdened with all the baggage of the age—sloppy reasoning, unrealistic expectations, and the illusion that happiness can be legally prescribed and guaranteed with the same authority as voting rights, fair trials, and highway codes.

Perhaps contemporary attitudes towards sex were in reality more a retreat than the advance they appeared to be. Unable to examine the larger questions satisfactorily, and perhaps uneasy that such questions still lingered—Banquo's ghost haunting our revels of liberation—writers embraced sex in all its varieties as a far easier subject to deal with. Their advocacy of modernism gave them a cloak of intellectual respectability, ultimately as insubstantial as the Emperor's new clothes.

There is a further problem with making sex the central part of any book: a writer, to ensure his reputation for originality, must always go one better than his competitors. New couplings, ever more exotic groupings, and innovative variations must be devised, reaching an all-time low in the books by Jerzy Kosinski, where the plot



stays the same—tall, dark, enigmatic stranger pursues beautiful, younger woman—but the sex gets progressively kinkier in each succeeding book. In *Passion Play*, the polo-playing hero, Fabian, travels around the country in his spacious van home, having sexual encounters with transsexuals, anonymous members of a sex club, underage girls, and others whom he first restrains with stable tackle and riding harnesses. “A swarm of bridles and webs . . . waited in the corner of the room . . . one by one he would place them upon her, harnessing and rigging her with them . . .” and so on.

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It can be argued that even those books which profess to be militantly frank have not dealt with the more profound aspects of sex. They have been eloquent about the how-tos and the who-tos but they have never quite satisfactorily grappled with the wider implications of sex. The pill, legalized abortion, antibiotics for venereal diseases, vasectomies, and so on have minimized some of its more profound consequences, but sex is still an act of enormously explosive potential: an act of putative creation that mimics on a much smaller scale the cosmic origins of life. And there are other questions that could be raised—why does sex drive men and women to violence, to murder, to infidelity, to the breaking of universal taboos? Why should celibacy be regarded as the religious ideal for some faiths? But this sort of question is seldom even asked. As a result, sex is reduced to a sort of “feel good about yourself” exercise routine, which is a disservice to both readers and literature.

What so many contemporary writers seem to forget is the fact that, though it is an act of obliteration, of love, of comfort, of necessity, it is no answer to those questions which, however much we may pretend otherwise, still need to be addressed. The eternal imponderables of why there is suffering, pain, injustice, unfairness, and why we are here in this vast universe, still remain.

But there are signs that a reaction is setting in. Horrified by herpes, increasing teenage pregnancies, child pornography, burgeoning divorce statistics, and the epidemic of AIDS, more and more people are questioning promiscuity and value-free standards of behavior. Frothy life-style pages and magazines now proclaim the “new celibacy,” the “emptiness of sex without commitment,” and the “need for monogamy.” In fiction, a number of books recently on the bestseller list, among them Anne Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Gail Godwin’s *A Mother and Two Daughters*, and Judith Guest’s *Ordinary People*, reflect this desire for affirmations of

family ties, of love, of responsibilities, and a sense of some purpose. Sex has not been banished from these books. It has its due place in the order of things, but it is now a more mature and responsible creation, no longer the exhibitionistic, self-centered brat that was so recently let loose to shock and titillate while it postured across the pages. The fact that books like these are selling so well is a tribute to the changing times and an acknowledgment of needs that have too long been neglected.

Another pointer is the extraordinary revival of interest in the British writer Barbara Pym who, though her work had been compared to Jane Austen’s, was unable to persuade her publisher to accept any of her writings in the 1970s. Pym’s novels all deal with spinsters and Anglican clergymen. They are chronicles of manners and were deemed too tepid and sexless for contemporary taste at that time. A year before her death in 1980, however, a new Pym book was published, and since then not only have all her works been reprinted in both hard and paperback editions, but a collection of her letters appeared earlier this year—always an indication of wide interest.


Perhaps most notable of all is the recent success of “. . . *And Ladies of The Club*” by Helen Hooven Santmyer. On the bestseller list for over nine months, the book is a weighty, multi-family saga set in a small Ohio town where marriage celebrations are followed next by birth announcements without any intervening obligatory explicit sexual passages.

The Emperor’s New Clothes

Some middle ground does need to exist—some place between the smirking denial and loud silence of the Victorian writers, and the recent obsessive detailing of every possible nuance of copulation, and these books are hopeful portents for the times ahead. The knowledge of the sexual element in the lives of characters in novels is germane to our understanding, but mere descriptions of the parts of the body being moved about can only be done in so many ways.

And such description adds little if anything to our knowledge of the characters doing all the moving about. They are awfully energetic, suspiciously so, but they never have much to say either before or after. Ultimately we learn little about either the characters or the essence of an act which still retains its mysterious elusiveness.

Fearful perhaps of being pronounced unfashionable, irrelevant, repressed psychologically and physically unsound, even conservative, the writers of the last two decades have articulated with little or no thought the tenets of the sexual revolution. It is a revolution which, like most other revolutions, is turning out to have delivered much less than it promised.

Although it is still too early to tell, we seem poised on the cusp of a new cycle, a time for a reassessment of artistic perceptions and ideals. The best writers have always responded to the underlying regenerative impulses released by change. At its most profound, changes in fashion mean another chance, another go at the brass ring, an opportunity perhaps to gain once and for all an exact insight or a vision of a universal truth. 

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Charles Burton Marshall

statesman, educator, writer

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BOOK REVIEWS



Reducing Our Options

The Pentagon and the Art of War, by Edward Luttwak (New York: Institute for Contemporary Studies/Simon and Schuster, \$17.95).

Reviewed by Seth Cropsey

The *Pentagon and the Art of War* is a straightforward, harsh attack on the American military from a defense intellectual who is ordinarily identified as a hawk. Its author, Edward Luttwak, has earned a reputation in recent years by criticizing the American military for failing to possess the virtues he has praised formerly in works on the Israeli Army and on the strategies of both Imperial Rome and the Soviet Union.

The Pentagon and the Art of War is made up of three interwoven parts: 1) Mr. Luttwak's understanding of the fundamentals of the art of war; 2) his assertion that the American armed forces and those in Congress who oversee the military budget fail to grasp these; and 3) his prescriptions about how to remedy the situation. It is an intelligent, useful book, but when Mr. Luttwak gets away from the art of war and into his ideas about policy, the argument, owing to its disregard of both democratic political institutions and the geopolitical position of the United States as a maritime power, turns impractical and doctrinaire.

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As a student of war and strategy, Mr. Luttwak's chief interests are how to accomplish political goals without war, and then how to defeat the enemy if war is the only recourse. Mr. Luttwak contends that Congress, together with what

ment focus media attention on the minutest, most easily grasped things in the hope that a clue about the purchase of a small part will yield an important understanding about the effectiveness of the whole.

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he calls the "Administrator's Delusion," conspire to divert national attention from these objects. Thus, "fraud, waste, and mismanagement—the classic trio—are) endlessly pursued . . . and endlessly denounced, even though they account for mere percentage points of the total budget, and have no relevance to the failure of combat." The January 1984 Annual Report of the Defense Department to Congress, for example, observes under the heading of "Activities to Curb Waste, Fraud, and Abuse," that in the previous year 16,357 cases were closed, 8023 were referred for prosecution or administrative action, 657 convictions were obtained, and \$14.8 million was recovered. Mr. Luttwak notes that this represents 0.00006 percent of the total Pentagon budget.

Do the overpriced claw-hammer and toilet seat affairs show that the public is frivolous about national defense? No, says Mr. Luttwak: the problem is that the size and complexity of the military establish-

And this is the root of most evil. Mr. Luttwak's strongest argument is that war is not commerce, that it cannot be fathomed or planned according to the optimal solution approach of a businessman, who need not worry about being bombed by a vanquished competitor, or of an engineer, who is not required to span a river that alters its course after the drawings are done. The most important elements of military power cannot be reduced to numbers and graphs.

The Perils of Efficiency

Commercial efficiency, for example, dictates standardization of as many weapons as possible for use by the various services; but if our armed forces possessed only one type of anti-aircraft missile, enemy pilots would have a much easier job. More models, however, cost more money because of the multiple research and development, production, and spare-parts costs, and also because any economies of scale are inevitably shortened. Efficient