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STUDIES IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX, VOLUME IV

Sexual Selection In Man

I. Touch. Ii. Smell. Iii. Hearing. Iv. Vision.

by

HAVELOCK ELLIS

1927

PREFACE.

As in many other of these Studies, and perhaps more than in most, the task attempted in the present volume is mainly of a tentative and preliminary character. There is here little scope yet for the presentation

of definite scientific results. However it may be in the physical universe, in the cosmos of science our knowledge must be nebulous before it constellates into definitely measurable shapes, and nothing is gained by attempting to anticipate the evolutionary process. Thus it is that here, for the most part, we have to content ourselves at present with the task of mapping out the field in broad and general outlines, bringing together the facts and considerations which indicate the direction in which more extended and precise results will in the future be probably found.

In his famous Descent of Man, wherein he first set forth the doctrine of sexual selection, Darwin injured an essentially sound principle by introducing into it a psychological confusion whereby the physiological sensory stimuli through which sexual selection operates were regarded as equivalent to æsthetic preferences. This confusion misled many, and it is only within recent years (as has been set forth in the "Analysis of the Sexual Impulse" in the previous volume of these Studies) that the investigations and criticisms of numerous workers have placed the doctrine of sexual selection on a firm basis by eliminating its hazardous æsthetic element. Love springs up as a response to a number of stimuli to tumescence, the object that most adequately arouses tumescence being that which evokes love; the question of æsthetic beauty, although it develops on this basis, is not itself fundamental and need not even be consciously present at all. When we look at these phenomena in their broadest biological aspects, love is only to a limited extent a response to beauty; to a greater extent beauty is simply a name for the complexus of stimuli which most adequately arouses love. If we analyze these stimuli to tumescence as they proceed from a person of the opposite sex we find that they are all appeals which must come through the channels of four senses: touch, smell, hearing, and, above all, vision. When a man or a woman experiences sexual love for one particular person from among the multitude by which he or she is surrounded, this is due to the influences of a group of stimuli coming through the channels of one or more of these senses. There has been a sexual selection conditioned by sensory stimuli. This is true even of the finer and more spiritual influences that proceed from one person to another, although, in order to grasp the phenomena adequately, it is best to insist on the more fundamental and less complex forms which they assume. In this sense sexual selection is no longer a hypothesis concerning the truth of which it is possible to dispute; it is a self-evident fact. The difficulty is not as to its existence, but as to the methods by which it may be most precisely measured. It is fundamentally a psychological process, and should be approached from the psychological side. This is the reason for dealing with it here. Obscure as the psychological aspects of sexual selection still remain, they are full of fascination, for they reveal to us the more intimate sides of human evolution, of the process whereby man is molded into the shapes we know.

HAVELOCK ELLIS.

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SEXUAL SELECTION IN MAN.

The External Sensory Stimuli Affecting Selection in Man--The Four Senses Involved.

Tumescence--the process by which the organism is brought into the physical and psychic state necessary to insure conjugation and detumescence--to some extent comes about through the spontaneous action of internal forces. To that extent it is analogous to the physical and psychic changes which accompany the gradual filling of the bladder and precede its evacuation. But even among animals who are by no means high in the zoölogical scale the process is more complicated than this. External stimuli act at every stage, arousing or heightening the process of tumescence, and in normal human beings it may be said that the process is never completed without the aid of such stimuli, for even in the auto-erotic sphere external stimuli are still active, either actually or in imagination.

The chief stimuli which influence tumescence and thus direct sexual choice come chiefly--indeed, exclusively--through the four senses of touch, smell, hearing, and sight. All the phenomena of sexual selection, so far as they are based externally, act through these four senses.[1] The reality of the influence thus exerted may be demonstrated statistically even in civilized man, and it has been shown that, as regards, for instance, eye-color, conjugal partners differ sensibly from the unmarried persons by whom they are surrounded. When, therefore, we are exploring the nature of the influence which stimuli, acting through the sensory channels, exert on the strength and direction of the sexual impulse, we are intimately concerned with the process by which the actual form and color, not alone of living things generally, but of our own species, have been shaped and are still being shaped. At the same time, it is probable, we are exploring the mystery which underlies all the subtle appreciations, all the emotional undertones, which are woven in the web of the whole world as it appeals to us through those sensory passages by which alone it can reach us. We are here approaching, therefore, a fundamental subject of

unsurpassable importance, a subject which has not yet been accurately explored save at a few isolated points and one which it is therefore impossible to deal with fully and adequately. Yet it cannot be passed over, for it enters into the whole psychology of the sexual instinct.

Of the four senses--touch, smell, hearing, and sight--with which we are here concerned, touch is the most primitive, and it may be said to be the most important, though it is usually the last to make its appeal felt. Smell, which occupies the chief place among many animals, is of comparatively less importance, though of considerable interest, in man; it is only less intimate and final than touch. Sight occupies an intermediate position, and on this account, and also on account of the very great part played by vision in life generally as well as in art, it is the most important of all the senses from the human sexual point of view. Hearing, from the same point of view, is the most remote of all the senses in its appeal to the sexual impulse, and on that account it is, when it intervenes, among the first to make its influence felt.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Taste must, I believe, be excluded, for if we abstract the parts of touch and smell, even in those abnormal sexual acts in which it may seem to be affected, taste could scarcely have any influence. Most of our "tasting," as Waller puts it, is done by the nose, which, in man, is in specially close relationship, posteriorly, with the mouth. There are at most four taste sensations--sweet, bitter, salt, and sour--if even all of these are simple tastes. What commonly pass for taste sensations, as shown by some experiments of G.T.W. Patrick (*Psychological Review*, 1898, p. 160), are the composite results of the mingling of sensations of smell, touch, temperature, sight, and taste.

TOUCH.

I.

The Primitive Character of the Skin--Its Qualities--Touch the Earliest Source of Sensory Pleasure--The Characteristics of Touch--As the Alpha and Omega of Affection--The Sexual Organs a Special Adaptation of Touch--Sexual Attraction as Originated by Touch--Sexual Hyperæsthesia to Touch--The Sexual Associations of Acne.

We are accustomed to regard the skin as mainly owing its existence to the need for the protection of the delicate vessels, nerves, viscera, and muscles underneath. Undoubtedly it performs, and by its tough and elastic texture is well fitted to perform, this extremely important service. But the skin is not merely a method of protection against the external world; it is also a method of bringing us into sensitive contact with the external world. It is thus, as the organ of touch, the seat of the most widely diffused sense we possess, and, moreover, the sense which is the most ancient and fundamental of all--the mother of the other senses.

It is scarcely necessary to insist that the primitive nature of the sensory function of the skin with the derivative nature of the other

senses, is a well ascertained and demonstrable fact. The lower we descend in the animal scale, the more varied we find the functions of the skin to be, and if in the higher animals much of the complexity has disappeared, that is only because the specialization of the various skin regions into distinct organs has rendered this complexity unnecessary. Even yet, however, in man himself the skin still retains, in a more or less latent condition, much of its varied and primary power, and the analysis of pathological and even normal phenomena serves to bring these old powers into clear light.

Woods Hutchinson (Studies in Human and Comparative Pathology, 1901, Chapters VII and VIII) has admirably set forth the immense importance of the skin, as in the first place "a tissue which is silk to the touch, the most exquisitely beautiful surface in the universe to the eye, and yet a wall of adamant against hostile attack. Impervious alike, by virtue of its wonderful responsive vitality, to moisture and drought, cold and heat, electrical changes, hostile bacteria, the most virulent of poisons and the deadliest of gases, it is one of the real Wonders of the World. More beautiful than velvet, softer and more pliable than silk, more impervious than rubber, and more durable under exposure than steel, well-nigh as resistant to electric currents as glass, it is one of the toughest and most dangerproof substances in the three kingdoms of nature" (although, as this author adds, we "hardly dare permit it to see the sunlight or breathe the open air"). But it is more than this. It is, as Woods Hutchinson expresses it, the creator of the entire body; its embryonic infoldings form the alimentary canal, the brain, the spinal cord, while every sense is but a specialization of its general organic activity. It is furthermore a kind of "skin-heart," promoting the circulation by its own energy; it is the great heat-regulating organ of the body; it is an excretory organ only second to the kidneys, which descend from it, and finally it still remains the seat of touch.

It may be added that the extreme beauty of the skin as a surface is very clearly brought out by the inadequacy of the comparisons commonly used in order to express its beauty. Snow, marble, alabaster, ivory, milk, cream, silk, velvet, and all the other conventional similes furnish surfaces which from any point of view are incomparably inferior to the skin itself. (Cf. Stratz, Die Schönheit des Weiblichen Körpers, Chapter XII.)

With reference to the extraordinary vitality of the skin, emphasized by Woods Hutchinson, it may be added that, when experimenting on the skin with the electric current, Waller found that healthy skin showed signs of life ten days or more after excision. It has been found also that fragments of skin which have been preserved in sterile fluid for even as long as nine months may still be successfully transplanted on to the body. (British Medical Journal, July 19, 1902.)

Everything indicates, remark Stanley Hall and Donaldson ("Motor Sensations in the Skin," Mind, 1885), that the skin is "not only the primeval and most reliable source of our knowledge of the external world or the archæological field of psychology," but a field in which work may shed light on some of the most fundamental problems of psychic action. Groos (Spiele der

Menschen_, pp. 8-16) also deals with the primitive character of touch sensations.

Touch sensations are without doubt the first of all the sensory impressions to prove pleasurable. We should, indeed, expect this from the fact that the skin reflexes have already appeared before birth, while a pleasurable sensitiveness of the lips is doubtless a factor in the child's response to the contact of the maternal nipple. Very early memories of sensory pleasure seem to be frequently, perhaps most frequently, tactile in character, though this fact is often disguised in recollection, owing to tactile impression being vague and diffused; there is thus in Elizabeth Potwin's "Study of Early Memories" (Psychological Review, November, 1901) no separate group of tactile memories, and the more elaborate investigation by Colegrove ("Individual Memories," American Journal of Psychology, January, 1899) yields no decisive results under this head. See, however, Stanley Hall's valuable study, "Some Aspects of the Early Sense of Self," American Journal of Psychology, April, 1898. Külpe has a discussion of the psychology of cutaneous sensations (Outlines of Psychology [English translation], pp. 87 et seq.)

Harriet Martineau, at the beginning of her Autobiography, referring to the vivid character of tactile sensations in early childhood, remarks, concerning an early memory of touching a velvet button, that "the rapture of the sensation was really monstrous." And a lady tells me that one of her earliest memories at the age of 3 is of the exquisite sensation of the casual contact of a cool stone with the vulva in the act of urinating. Such sensations, of course, cannot be termed specifically sexual, though they help to furnish the tactile basis on which the specifically sexual sensations develop.

The elementary sensitiveness of the skin is shown by the fact that moderate excitation suffices to raise the temperature, while Heidenhain and others have shown that in animals cutaneous stimuli modify the sensibility of the brain cortex, slight stimulus increasing excitability and strong stimulus diminishing it. Féré has shown that the slight stimulus to the skin furnished by placing a piece of metal on the arm or elsewhere suffices to increase the output of work with the ergograph. (Féré, Comptes Rendus Société de Biologie, July 12, 1902; id., Pathologic des Emotions, pp. 40 et seq.)

Féré found that the application of a mustard plaster to the skin, or an icebag, or a hot-water bottle, or even a light touch with a painter's brush, all exerted a powerful effect in increasing muscular work with the ergograph. "The tonic effect of cutaneous excitation," he remarks, "throws light on the psychology of the caress. It is always the most sensitive parts of the body which seek to give or to receive caresses. Many animals rub or lick each other. The mucous surfaces share in this irritability of the skin. The kiss is not only an expression of feeling; it is a means of provoking it. Cataglottism is by no means confined to pigeons. The tonic value of cutaneous stimulation is indeed a commonly accepted idea. Wrestlers rub their hands or limbs, and the hand-shake also is not without its physiological basis.

"Cutaneous excitations may cause painful sensations to cease. Many massage practices which favor work act chiefly as sensorial stimulants; on this account many nervous persons cannot abandon them, and the Greeks and Romans found in massage not only health, but pleasure. Lauder Brunton regards many common manoeuvres, like scratching the head and pulling the mustache, as methods of dilating the bloodvessels of the brain by stimulating the facial nerve. The motor reactions of cutaneous excitations favor this hypothesis." (Féré, *Travail et Plaisir*, Chapter XV, "Influence des Excitations du Toucher sur le Travail.")

The main characteristics of the primitive sense of touch are its wide diffusion over the whole body and the massive vagueness and imprecision of the messages it sends to the brain. This is the reason, why it is, of all the senses, the least intellectual and the least æsthetic; it is also the reason why it is, of all the senses, the most-profoundly emotional. "Touch," wrote Bain in his *Emotions and Will*, "is both the alpha and the omega of affection," and he insisted on the special significance in this connection of "tenderness"--a characteristic emotional quality of affection which is directly founded on sensations of touch. If tenderness is the alpha of affection, even between the sexes, its omega is to be found in the sexual embrace, which may be said to be a method of obtaining, through a specialized organization of the skin, the most exquisite and intense sensations of touch.

"We believe nothing is so exciting to the instinct or mere passions as the presence of the hand or those tactile caresses which mark affection," states the anonymous author of an article on "Woman in her Psychological Relations," in the *Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 1851. "They are the most general stimuli in lower animals. The first recourse in difficulty or danger, and the primary solace in anguish, for woman is the bosom of her husband or her lover. She seeks solace and protection and repose on that part of the body where she herself places the objects of her own affection. Woman appears to have the same instinctive impulse in this respect all over the world."

It is because the sexual orgasm is founded on a special adaptation and intensification of touch sensations that the sense of touch generally is to be regarded as occupying the very first place in reference to the sexual emotions. Féré, Mantegazza, Penta, and most other writers on this question are here agreed. Touch sensations constitute a vast gamut for the expression of affection, with at one end the note of minimum personal affection in the brief and limited touch involved by the conventional hand-shake and the conventional kiss, and at the other end the final and intimate contact in which passion finds the supreme satisfaction of its most profound desire. The intermediate region has its great significance for us because it offers a field in which affection has its full scope, but in which every road may possibly lead to the goal of sexual love. It is the intimacy of touch contacts, their inevitable approach to the threshold of sexual emotion, which leads to a jealous and instinctive parsimony in the contact of skin and skin and to the tendency with the increased sensitiveness of the nervous system involved by civilization to restrain even the conventional touch manifestation of ordinary affection and esteem. In China fathers leave off kissing their daughters while they are still young children. In England the kiss as an ordinary greeting between men and women--a custom inherited from classic and early Christian antiquity--still persisted to the beginning of the eighteenth century. In

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