

STUDIES IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX, VOLUME V

Erotic Symbolism
The Mechanism of Detumescence
The Psychic State in Pregnancy

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1927

PREFACE.

In this volume the terminal phenomena of the sexual process are discussed, before an attempt is finally made, in the concluding volume, to consider the bearings of the psychology of sex on that part of morals which may be called "social hygiene."

Under "Erotic Symbolism" I include practically all the aberrations of the sexual instinct, although some of these have seemed of sufficient importance for separate discussion in previous volumes. It is highly probable that many readers will consider that the name scarcely suffices to cover manifestations so numerous and so varied. The term "sexual equivalents" will seem preferable to some. While, however, it may be fully admitted that these perversions are "sexual equivalents"--or at all events equivalents of the normal sexual impulse--that term is merely a descriptive label which tells us nothing of the

phenomena. "Sexual Symbolism" gives us the key to the process, the key that makes all these perversions intelligible. In all of them--very clearly in some, as in shoe-fetichism; more obscurely in others, as in exhibitionism--it has come about by causes congenital, acquired, or both, that some object or class of objects, some act or group of acts, has acquired a dynamic power over the psycho-physical mechanism of the sexual process, deflecting it from its normal adjustment to the whole of a beloved person of the opposite sex. There has been a transmutation of values, and certain objects, certain acts, have acquired an emotional value which for the normal person they do not possess. Such objects and acts are properly, it seems to me, termed symbols, and that term embodies the only justification that in most cases these manifestations can legitimately claim.

"The Mechanism of Detumescence" brings us at last to the final climax for which the earlier and more prolonged stage of tumescence, which has occupied us so often in these Studies, is the elaborate preliminary.

"The art of love," a clever woman novelist has written, "is the art of preparation." That "preparation" is, on the physiological side, the production of tumescence, and all courtship is concerned in building up tumescence. But the final conjugation of two individuals in an explosion of detumescence, thus slowly brought about, though it is largely an involuntary act, is still not without its psychological implications and consequences; and it is therefore a matter for regret that so little is

yet known about it. The one physiological act in which two individuals are lifted out of all ends that center in self and become the instrument of those higher forces which fashion the species, can never be an act to be slurred over as trivial or unworthy of study.

In the brief study of "The Psychic State in Pregnancy" we at last touch the point at which the whole complex process of sex reaches its goal. A woman with a child in her womb is the everlasting miracle which all the romance of love, all the cunning devices of tumescence and detumescence, have been invented to make manifest. The psychic state of the woman who thus occupies the supreme position which life has to offer cannot fail to be of exceeding interest from many points of view, and not least because the maternal instinct is one of the elements even of love between the sexes. But the psychology of pregnancy is full of involved problems, and here again, as so often in the wide field we have traversed, we stand at the threshold of a door it is not yet given us to pass.

HAVELOCK ELLIS.

Carbis Water, Lelant, Cornwall.

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By "erotic symbolism" I mean that tendency whereby the lover's attention is diverted from the central focus of sexual attraction to some object or process which is on the periphery of that focus, or is even outside of it altogether, though recalling it by association of contiguity or of similarity. It thus happens that tumescence, or even in extreme cases detumescence, may be provoked by the contemplation of acts or objects which are away from the end of sexual conjugation.[1]

In considering the phenomena of sexual selection in a previous volume,[2] it was found that there are four or five main factors in the constitution of beauty in so far as beauty determines sexual selection. Erotic symbolism is founded on the factor of individual taste in beauty; it arises as a specialized development of that factor, but it is, nevertheless, incorrect to merge it in sexual selection. The attractive characteristics of a beloved woman or man, from the point of view of sexual selection, are a complex but harmonious whole leading up to a desire for the complete possession of the person who displays them. There is no tendency to isolate and dissociate any single character from the individual and to concentrate attention upon that character at the expense of the attention bestowed upon the individual generally. As soon as such a tendency begins to show itself, even though only in a slight or temporary form, we may say that there is erotic symbolism.

Erotic symbolism is, however, by no means confined to the individualizing

tendency to concentrate amorous attention upon some single characteristic of the adult woman or man who is normally the object of sexual love. The adult human being may not be concerned at all, the attractive object or act may not even be human, not even animal, and we may still be concerned with a symbol which has parasitically rooted itself on the fruitful site of sexual emotion and absorbed to itself the energy which normally goes into the channels of healthy human love having for its final end the procreation of the species. Thus understood in its widest sense, it may be said that every sexual perversion, even homosexuality, is a form of erotic symbolism, for we shall find that in every case some object or act that for the normal human being has little or no erotic value, has assumed such value in a supreme degree; that is to say, it has become a symbol of the normal object of love. Certain perversions are, however, of such great importance on account of their wide relationships, that they cannot be adequately discussed merely as forms of erotic symbolism. This is notably the case as regards homosexuality, auto-erotism, and algolagnia, all of which phenomena have therefore been separately discussed in previous studies. We are now mainly concerned with manifestations which are more narrowly and exclusively symbolical.

A portion of the field of erotic symbolism is covered by what Binet (followed by Lombroso, Krafft-Ebing, and others) has termed "erotic fetichism," or the tendency whereby sexual attraction is unduly exerted by some special part or peculiarity of the body, or by some

inanimate object
which has become associated with it. Such erotic
symbolism of object
cannot, however, be dissociated from the even more
important erotic
symbolism of process, and the two are so closely bound
together that we
cannot attain a truly scientific view of them until we
regard them broadly
as related parts of a common psychic tendency. If, as
Groos asserts,[3] a
symbol has two chief meanings, one in which it indicates
a physical
process which stands for a psychic process, and another
in which it
indicates a part which represents the whole, erotic
symbolism of act
corresponds to the first of these chief meanings, and
erotic symbolism of
object to the other.

Although it is not impossible to find some germs of
erotic symbolism in
animals, in its more pronounced manifestations it is
only found in the
human species. It could not be otherwise, for such
symbolism involves not
only the play of fancy and imagination, the idealizing
aptitude, but also
a certain amount of power of concentrating the attention
on a point
outside the natural path of instinct and the ability to
form new mental
constructions around that point. There are, indeed, as
we shall see,
elementary forms of erotic symbolism which are not
uncommonly associated
with feeble-mindedness, but even these are still
peculiarly human, and in
its less crude manifestations erotic symbolism easily
lends itself to
every degree of human refinement and intelligence.

"It depends primarily upon an increase of the
psychological

process of representation," Colin Scott remarks of sexual symbolism generally, "involving greater powers of comparison and analysis as compared with the lower animals. The outer impressions come to be clearly distinguished as such, but at the same time are often treated as symbols of inner experiences, and a meaning read into them which they would not otherwise possess.

Symbolism or fetichism is, indeed, just the capacity to see meaning, to emphasize something for the sake of other things which do not appear. In brain terms it indicates an activity of the higher centers, a sort of side-tracking or long-circuiting of the primitive energy; ... Rosetti's poem, 'The Woodspurge,' gives a concrete example of the formation of such a symbol. Here the otherwise insignificant presentation of the three-cupped woodspurge, representing originally a mere side-current of the stream of consciousness, becomes the intellectual symbol or fetich of the whole psychosis forever after. It seems, indeed, as if the stronger the emotion the more likely will become the formation of an overlying symbolism, which serves to focus and stand in the place of something greater than itself; nowhere at least is symbolism a more characteristic feature than as an expression of the sexual instinct. The passion of sex, with its immense hereditary background, in early man became centered often upon the most trivial and unimportant features....

This

symbolism, now become fetichistic, or symbolic in a bad sense, is

at least an exercise of the increasing representative power of

man, upon which so much of his advancement has depended, while it

also served to express and help to purify his most perennial

emotion." (Colin Scott, "Sex and Art," American Journal of

Psychology, vol. vii, No. 2, p. 189.)

In the study of "Love and Pain" in a previous volume, the analysis of the

large and complex mass of sexual phenomena which are associated with pain,

gradually resolved them to a considerable extent into a special case of

erotic symbolism; pain or restraint, whether inflicted on or by the loved

person, becomes, by a psychic process that is usually unconscious, the

symbol of the sexual mechanism, and hence arouses the same emotions as

that mechanism normally arouses. We may now attempt to deal more broadly

and comprehensively with the normal and abnormal aspects of erotic

symbolism in some of their most typical and least mixed forms.

"When our human imagination seeks to animate artificial things," Huysmans

writes in Là-bas, "it is compelled to reproduce the movements of animals

in the act of propagation. Look at machines, at the play of pistons in the

cylinders; they are Romeos of steel in Juliets of cast-iron." And not only

in the work of man's hands but throughout Nature we find sexual symbols

which are the less deniable since, for the most part, they make not the

slightest appeal to even the most morbid human

imagination. Language is full of metaphorical symbols of sex which constantly tend to lose their poetic symbolism and to become commonplace. Semen is but seed, and for the Latins especially the whole process of human sex, as well as the male and female organs, constantly presented itself in symbols derived from agricultural and horticultural life. The testicles were beans (*_fabæ_*) and fruit or apples (*_poma_* and *_mala_*); the penis was a tree (*_arbor_*), or a stalk (*_thyrsus_*), or a root (*_radix_*), or a sickle (*_falx_*), or a ploughshare (*_vomer_*). The semen, again, was dew (*_ros_*). The labia majora or minora were wings (*_alæ_*); the vulva and vagina were a field (*_ager_* and *_campus_*), or a ploughed furrow (*_sulcus_*), or a vineyard (*_vinea_*), or a fountain (*_fons_*), while the pudendal hair was herbage (*_plantaria_*).[4] In other languages it is not difficult to trace similar and even identical imagery applied to sexual organs and sexual acts. Thus it is noteworthy that Shakespeare more than once applies the term "ploughed" to a woman who has had sexual intercourse. The Talmud calls the labia minora the doors, the labia majora hinges, and the clitoris the key. The Greeks appear not only to have found in the myrtle-berry, the fruit of a plant sacred to Venus, the image of the clitoris, but also in the rose an image of the feminine labia; in the poetic literature of many countries, indeed, this imagery of the rose may be traced in a more or less veiled manner.[5]

The widespread symbolism of sex arose in the theories and conceptions of

primitive peoples concerning the function of generation and its nearest analogies in Nature; it was continued for the sake of the vigorous and expressive terminology which it furnished both for daily life and for literature; its final survivals were cultivated because they furnished a delicately æsthetic method of approaching matters which a growing refinement of sentiment made it difficult for lovers and poets to approach in a more crude and direct manner. Its existence is of interest to us now because it shows the objective validity of the basis on which erotic symbolism, as we have here to understand it, develops. But from first to last it is a distinct phenomenon, having a more or less reasoned and intellectual basis, and it scarcely serves in any degree to feed the sexual impulse. Erotic symbolism is not intellectual but emotional in its origin; it starts into being, obscurely, with but a dim consciousness or for the most part none at all, either suddenly from the shock of some usually youthful experience, or more gradually through an instinctive brooding on those things which are most intimately associated with a sexually desirable person.

The kind of soil on which the germs of erotic symbolism may develop is well seen in cases of sexual hyperæsthesia. In such cases all the emotionally sexual analogies and resemblances, which in erotic symbolism are fixed and organized, may be traced in vague and passing forms, a single hyperæsthetic individual perhaps presenting a great variety of germinal

symbolisms.

Thus it has been recorded of an Italian nun (whose sister became a prostitute) that from the age of 8 she had desire for coitus, from the age of 10 masturbated, and later had homosexual feelings, that the same feelings and practices continued after she had taken the veil, though from time to time they assumed religious equivalents. The mere contact, indeed, of a priest's hand, the news of the presentation of an ecclesiastic she had known to a bishopric, the sight of an ape, the contemplation of the crucified Christ, the figure of a toy, the picture of a demon, the act of defecation in the children entrusted to her care (whom, on this account, and against the regulations, she would accompany to the closets), especially the sight and the mere recollection of flies in sexual connection--all these things sufficed to produce in her a powerful orgasm.

(_Archivio di Psichiatria_, 1902, fasc. II-III, p. 338.)

A boy of 15 (given to masturbation), studied by Macdonald in America, was similarly hyperæsthetic to the symbols of sexual emotion. "I like amusing myself with my comrades," he told Macdonald, "rolling ourselves into a ball, which gives one a funny kind of warmth. I have a special pleasure in talking about some things. It is the same when the governess kisses me on saying good night or when I lean against her breast.

I have that
sensation, too, when I see some of the pictures in
the comic
papers, but only in those representing a woman, as
when a young
man skating trips up a girl so that her clothes are
raised a
little. When I read how a man saved a young girl
from drowning,
so that they swam together, I had the same
sensation. Looking at
the statues of women in the museum produces the same
effect, or
when I see naked babies, or when a mother suckles a
child. I
have often had that sensation when reading novels I
ought not to
read, or when looking at a new-born calf, or seeing
dogs and cows
and horses mounting on each other. When I see a girl
flirting
with a boy, or leaning on his shoulder or with his
arm round her
waist, I have an erection. It is the same when I see
women and
little girls in bathing costume, or when boys talk
of what their
fathers and mothers do together. In the Natural
History Museum I
often see things which give me that sensation. One
day when I
read how a man killed a young girl and carried her
into a wood
and undressed her I had a feeling of enjoyment. When
I read of
men who were bastards the idea of a woman having a
child in that
way gives me this sensation. Some dances, and seeing
young girls
astride a horse, excited me, too, and so in a circus
when a woman
was shot out of a cannon and her skirts flew in the
air. It has
no effect on me when I see men naked. Sometimes I
enjoy seeing

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