

# The Nature of **Sex** and *Marriage*

by Frank J. Sheed

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The typical modern man practically never thinks about sex.

He dreams of it, of course, by day and by night; he craves for it; he pictures it, is stimulated or depressed by it, drools over it. But this frothing, steaming activity is not thinking. Drooling is not thinking, picturing is not thinking, craving is not thinking, dreaming is not thinking. Thinking means bringing the power of the mind to bear: thinking about sex means striving to see sex in its innermost reality and in the function it is meant to serve.

Our typical modern man, when he gives his mind to it at all, thinks of sex as something we are lucky enough to have; and he sees all its problems rolled into the one problem of how to get the most pleasure out of it. To that he gives himself with immoderate enthusiasm and very moderate success. Success, in fact, can never be more than moderate, because his procedure is folly.

Sex is a power of the whole man, one power among many: and man is not an isolated unit, but bound to his fellows in society: and his life on earth is not the whole of life, but only a beginning. To use the power of sex successfully we must use it in balance with the rest of our powers, for the service of the whole personality, within a social order, with eternity to come. And all this is too complex a matter to be left to instinct or chance, to desire or mood or the heat of the blood or the line of least resistance. It calls for hard thinking.

A summons to think about sex will be met with no enthusiasm. Men are not much given to thought about sex; as we have noted, they expect no fun from thought and are not much inclined to it or good at it: whereas they expect a great deal of fun from sex and persist in thinking (in the face of the evidence) that they are good at it. Not only that. They feel that there is something rather repellent, almost improper, in the association of sex and thinking. A man must be cold-blooded, they say, to use his reason on sex. The taunt of cold-bloodedness is one that we can bear with fortitude. To the man with fever, a normal temperature seems cold-blooded—but vitality goes with normal temperature, not with fever. And modern sex life is not, even by its own standards, very vital. Too many men who have reached middle life have to admit that for themselves sex has not lived up to its promise—that on balance their life has been rather more begloomed by sex than delighted by it. They have had plenty of glowing anticipation, a handful of glowing experiences, a mass of half-satisfactions and whole frustrations—with the horizon drawing in, and the worried feeling that the splendour has somehow eluded them. It is not from any brilliantly successful sexual life. of his own, that the typical man of

today can deride the idea of using the mind on sex. Upon sex, as indeed upon all our other powers, we *must* use reason. Instinct is excellent for the lower animals, but we are not lower animals, we are rational; and the price we pay for our rationality is that reason is our only safe guide, to ignore it is always disaster. There is something pathetic about the philosophers who decry reason and raise the standard of instinct, as about little boys who play at being Red Indians. The little boys would not survive ten minutes in a Red Indian world, the philosophers would perish rather more quickly than the rest of us—for this philosophy has a great attraction for pallid men—in a world of instinct. The instincts that guide the non-rational creature to the fulfilment of his life—to choosing the food that will nourish or constructing the habitation that will shelter or providing for the preservation of his own life and the continuance of his species—do not guide man. All of these things we have to learn. What we call our instincts are natural desires strongly felt—like the instinct of hunger to eat, or of cold to be warmed, or of maternal love to protect, or of gluttony to surfeit, or of sloth to idle, or of pride to rule, or of covetousness to snatch, or of envy to vie, or of anger to kill, or of sex to possess. In themselves they are a mixture of necessary and dangerous: reason must sort them out, evaluate and control them—diminish some, strengthen others. The growth of a world in which men can live as men has been the growth of reason's domination over the instincts—all the instincts, even the instinct of sex. There is no special privilege exempting sex alone from the control of reason. That it is more exciting than the others does not make it less in need of control but more. Any one of them, uncontrolled, can make human life unlivable—sex perhaps more so than the others. Over none of them will reason secure perfect control in the majority of us—certainly not over sex. But there is a world of difference between the man who aims at control though he only partially achieves it and the man who does not. Even partial control, which is all that most *will* achieve, is immensely worth striving for.

Thinking about sex will follow the same lines as thinking about any other thing—what does the law of God tell us, what does the nature of the thing itself tell us. Where the law of God is explicit and clearly known, we have enough for right action without further enquiry. But we should study the nature of the thing even then, as a way of understanding God's law better and of entering into the mind of God who gave the law. In this matter of sex, we shall begin with the nature of man and then go on to the law of God.

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If we consider sex in itself and ask what Nature had in mind in giving sex to human beings, there can be only one answer: Sex is meant for the production of children, as lungs for breathing or the digestive organs for nourishment. The physical and psychological mechanism is so complex in the man and in the woman, so delicately ordered for the generating of new life, that it would be monstrous to deny (nor, one imagines, has anyone ever denied) that that is what sex is meant for, that is why we have sexual powers. The fact that man can use sex for other, sterile purposes of his own choosing does not alter the certainty that child-bearing is sex's own purpose. I know that

to the modern reader there seems something quaint and old-world in asking what a thing is for; the modern question is always. What can I do with it? Yet it remains a first principle of the intelligent use of anything to ask what the thing is for—indeed that is almost a first principle of the intelligent misuse of anything. If you are going to pervert a thing, it is wise to know what you are perverting. And to ask what Nature has in mind can hardly be an unnatural opening for any discussion.

But to say that Nature had children in mind when she gave human beings sex does not mean that when two people decide to marry their motive is to have children. If a man draws a girl's attention to the falling birthrate and asks her to marry him in order to improve it, she would be well advised to refuse him: his wooing is a good deal too sociological. People marry, usually anyhow, because they want each other: they may want children too, or they may merely see their advent as probable but regrettable: either way, their purpose in marrying is not to have children but to have each other: and Nature does not mind a bit. She is all for people having their own purposes, provided they do not frustrate hers.

Because custom dulls wonder, dulls advertence even, we hardly realize how extraordinary it is that sex should be for child-bearing. It is extraordinary in two ways. For in the first place it gives a grandeur to sex—a remote and even unwanted grandeur you may feel it, but a grandeur that is incomparable. Against this view of sex stand two very different types. There is the Puritan with his conviction that any activity with such intense pleasure in it must be sinful; and there is the hedonist gathering rosebuds while he may, very fond of rosebuds, indeed, but unable to take them too seriously—there are so many of them and so gatherable: sexual experiences, he will say, are merely thrills in the body, therefore of small consequence. For all their perversions, the paganisms which have centred their rituals upon sex's mystery are nobler than either. The hedonist is denying the plain fact that, even as a bodily experience, the sexual act is like no other, it engages the body more profoundly, at once troubles and concentrates the whole personality in its depth: the excitement of rosebuds is paler. Hedonist and Puritan alike ignore the fundamental relation of sex to the generation of new life, the first fact about sex—that by it man cooperates with God in the production of other men, living beings, immortal beings. Creation is the work of omnipotence. But procreation is pro-creation, a kind of deputy creation. So that sex in its essential nature is man's greatest glory in the physical order.

Sex as men have it, of course, sex existential as we may call it, is not always, or perhaps even commonly, glorious. Which brings us to the second way in which it is extraordinary that sex should be for child-bearing. It is extraordinary because the bearing and rearing of children requires a maximum of order, stability, tranquillity: and sex is the most turbulent of man's powers.

What clouds almost all present discussion of sex is that its demonic energy is not adverted to: the sex reformers write of it as though it were a sort of amiable pet, to be played with and put back in its little basket.

But sex is not like that: in its beauty and ferocity it can be more like a tiger, and even in the mildest it is no domestic pet. Man does not play with sex: it is nearer the truth to say that sex plays with him, and it can be a destructive game. For sex begins powerful and can become uncontrollable. Short of that extreme, it can become a vast tyranny, harrying the individual man, poisoning every sort of human relationship. As I say, the sex reformers seem unaware of this, and probably many of them are so. William Morris is an example. In *News from Nowhere* he chisels this little gem of understatement for us: "For, you know, love is not a very reasonable thing, and perversity and self-will are commoner than some of our moralists think." They are indeed. One gets the feeling that a lot of writing on sex is done by the undersexed—men who honestly cannot imagine what all the fuss is about because in themselves there is no fuss: like the headmaster who wondered why boys could not be taught to discuss their own sexual make-up as calmly as they would discuss the machinery of a motor-car. The early Christian writers— St. Jerome, for instance—repel us by the frenzy of their tirades against women, but at least they knew that there was a frenzy in sex. The frenzy is still there, and anyone who is not aware of it should not write about sex at all.

So we return to our anomaly: the continuation of the race, which requires above all things an ordered framework of life, is entrusted to sex, which of itself makes for chaos. It is in marriage that these two irreconcilables are reconciled. The critics of marriage have simply not realized how incredibly difficult, and how totally necessary, is the reconciliation it effects. In marriage sex loses none of its strength, but it serves life.

But if marriage is to serve life fully—bring the child not only to birth but to maturity—it must be permanent. The newborn child has to be shaped into a fully developed member of the human race; and for this he needs both parents. Humanity is not man or woman, but both in union. A child brought up by a father only or a mother only is only half-educated. He needs what the male can give him and what the female can give him. And he needs these not as two separate influences, each pushing him its own way, so that he moves on some compromise line that is neither, but as one fused influence, wholly human, male and female affecting him as conjoined not as competing influences. For that the parents must be united—and indissolubly united. It is not enough that they should agree to live together only while the children need them—because then they would already be separated in spirit, and their two influences would bear upon the child as two not as one. So that if nature is to solve its problem and reconcile its irreconcilables, to make sex serve life, it needs unbreakable marriage.

Are we, then, to see the love of the man and woman for each other as a trap set by nature to lure them into prison, with every sentence a life-sentence? Are human beings no more than pawns in nature's game of preserving the race?

Nothing could be further from the reality. Men, in nature's plan, are never pawns. They cannot serve nature's purpose without serving their own. In marriage the power of sex is not weakened. Marriage provides strong banks within which sex can course at the utmost of its power, but for the service of life and not for destruction.

There is a common error here—that the great lover is the multiple lover, that sex is made perfect in promiscuity. But it is in the love of one for one that men have always seen sex supremely manifested. Not in Henry VIII or Casanova is sex glorified, but comic, clownish.

And it calls for no long reflection to see why. There is no vitality or mastery in barely being able to totter from one woman to the next, any more than in barely being able to last from one cigarette to the next. There is no mastery in being unable to say no. About the sex-ridden there is a prowling restlessness that is a far cry from vitality. Casual promiscuity is evidence not of sexual potency but only of weakness of control. There is no strength where control is not strong. The phrase sexual impotence is always taken to mean impotence for the sexual act; but there is an impotence before the demands of sex which is entitled to the same name.

Marriage, as the union of one man and one woman, gives opportunity for a splendour of sex impossible outside it, and this both at the level of technique, which does not concern us here, and at the deeper level of personality, which does. The sexual act, merely as a union of bodies, can give exquisite physical pleasure (though it is surprising how often it does not). But it has a double defect.

First, it cannot continue to satisfy even at its own unambitious level: it follows the law of diminishing returns that governs the merely physical pleasures—the dose must be increased to give the same effect. The body craves for the sensation, but after a time grows used to it, is unstimulated by it and craves for more intense sensation. But the act in its essence does not allow for much increase of the dose: so that a man either settles down grimly to a craving he must be for ever yielding to with less and less fruit of satisfaction, or else exhausts his inventiveness in perversions that will for a while bring back the first excitements. It is the universal human experience that a point comes when the craving for the act is overmastering and the pleasure from the act all but nil, so that the act can be neither refused nor enjoyed: that being the way of the body's cravings.

Second, a union of bodies is not the fulness of sexual union. It is valid only as an expression of the union of two personalities. Apart from that, it is a meaningless acrobatic. In other words, the sex act is not the marriage union, but is a marvellous way of expressing the marriage union. When, into the union of bodies, all the shared life and shared love of a man and a woman are poured, then you have the sexual union in its fulness. And in this sense it is no paradox to say that the promiscuous, however many experiences they may have had, remain inexperienced. The giving of the bodies at once symbolizes, expresses, and helps to effect, the giving of the selves. The completer the self-giving, the richer the bodily union. The giving of one's self to another is the decisive act, the act that transforms. While the self is un-given, one remains isolated, singular, single. Those who have never made the gift of self retain, through any number of bodily unions, a sort of unclean virginalness.

But the giving of a self and the receiving of a self, the union of personalities—all these can only in their completeness be of one to one—they belong in marriage, and precisely in marriage that is indissoluble. They are not always found in marriage—we shall be looking at this later—but they are not easily to be had outside it. Where they are found, there is sexual union in its perfection; so that, in falling in with the plan nature has for the carrying on of the race, sex is enriched. The bodily union merely as such—and indeed the whole sexual experience of which it is the normal culmination—can bring a new value into ordinary life, a heightened awareness, an intensification of all vital processes. The thing called glamour is real and valuable. But *in* marriage as nature would have it all this is increased and given a new hope of permanence. The sexual union has more to utter; and there is not the certainty of ultimate boredom which goes with all purely bodily pleasures. For while one soon comes to an end of what the body has to give, there is no end to the exploration of a personality. So that an act which must become stale when repeated for its own sake, need never become stale when it is regarded as the expression of a profounder reality that is always growing.

Falling in with nature's plan is, then, sheer gain for sex. It is sheer gain for the whole personality. A man and a woman represent, each of them, half of human nature: each needs the other for completion. But the completion will not come from mere contact or cohabitation. There is something here faintly like what happens when two parts of hydrogen are brought together with one part of oxygen: you would expect water, since those are water's constituents: but you will not get it until you send an electric spark through. Humanity is composed of man and woman: but putting a man and woman together does not of itself constitute the true human compound: something else must happen, something electric perhaps. There must be that real giving and receiving we have already spoken of, a free-will offering of the self by each to the other. Obviously you can have marriage where this mutual giving is at the barest minimum; but it is not marriage at its best, and it does not bring the enrichment of personality that each needs. In some marriages it comes quickly, in some slowly, in some hardly at all. But the quality of the marriage is measured by it. Especially is the *permanence* of marriage linked to it. There is no such thing as a permanent union of flesh that is only that. One remembers W. S. Gilbert's young man, who defended his infidelity so eloquently:

You cannot eat breakfast all day  
Nor is it the act of a sinner  
When breakfast is taken away  
To turn your attention to dinner.  
And it's not in the range of belief  
That you should hold him as a glutton  
Who when he is tired of beef  
Determines to tackle the mutton.

It could not be better put. Modern sex life is a series of quick-change acts, hardly more emotionally significant than tiring of beef and tackling mutton. To ask for lifelong fidelity where there is no union of personalities really is to ask for the moon.

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