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It's All About Sex . . .

THERE'S AN UGLY RUMOR circulating that English professors have dirty minds. It's not true, of course. We're no more dirty-minded than society at large, although that may not be of any great comfort. Well, let me assure you that English professors are not innately prurient. It's just that they can recognize the sexual intentions of writers, who may well have dirty minds. So how did all this smutty thinking find its way into world literature?

Blame it on Freud. He put it there.

More accurately, he found it and showed it to the rest of us. When he published *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, he unlocked the sexual potential of the subconscious. Tall buildings? Male sexuality. Rolling landscapes? Female sexuality.

Stairs? Sexual intercourse. Falling down stairs? Oh my. All of this may be regarded these days as so much hokum in the arena of psychoanalysis, but it's like gold in terms of literary analysis. Suddenly we discover that sex doesn't have to look like sex: other objects and activities can stand in for sexual organs and sex acts, which is good, since those organs and acts can only be arranged in so many ways and are not inevitably decorous. So landscapes can have a sexual component. So can bowls. Fires. Seashores. And 1949 Plymouths, one supposes. Virtually anything, if the writer so decides. Oh yes, Freud taught us well. And some of those he taught are writers. Suddenly, as the twentieth century gets rolling, two things are happening. Critics and readers are learning that sexuality may be encoded in their reading, while writers are learning that they can encode sexuality into their writing. Headaches, anyone?

Of course, the twentieth century didn't invent sexual symbolism. Consider the Grail legends. A knight, usually a very young one whose "manhood" is barely established, sallies forth bearing his lance, which will certainly do until a phallic symbol comes along. The knight becomes the emblem of pure, if untested, maleness in search of a chalice, the Holy Grail, which if you think about it is a symbol of female sexuality as understood once upon a time: the empty vessel, waiting to be filled. And the reason for seeking to bring together the lance and the chalice? Fertility. (Freud gets help here from Jessie L. Weston, Sir James Frazer, and Carl Jung, all of whom explain a great deal about mythic thinking, fertility myths, and archetypes.) Typically the knight rides out from a community that has fallen on hard times. Crops are failing, rains have stopped, livestock and possibly humans are dying or failing to be born, the kingdom is turning into a wasteland. We need to restore fertility and order, says the aging king, too old now to go in search of fertility symbols. Perhaps he can no longer use his

lance, so he sends the young man. It isn't wanton or wild sex, but it's still sex.

Flash-forward a millennium or so. Hang a left at New York and go to Hollywood. There's a moment in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) when Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade, at night, is leaning over Mary Astor's Brigid O'Shaughnessy, kissing her by a window, and then the next moment we're looking at the curtains of the window blowing gently in the morning sunlight. No Sam. No Brigid. Young viewers sometimes don't notice those curtains, so they want to know what happened between Sam and Brigid. It may seem a small detail, but it matters greatly that we understand so that we see how much Sam Spade's judgment may be compromised, and how difficult turning her in at the end is going to be. For those who remember a time when the movies not only didn't show people "doing it," they also didn't show people having done it or talking about having done it, those curtains might as well bear the following printed legend: *yes, they did. And they enjoyed it.* For people of that age, one of the sexiest shots in film consists of waves breaking on a beach. When the director cut to the waves on the beach, somebody was getting lucky. These abstractions were necessary under the Hayes Code, which controlled content in Hollywood films from around 1935 until 1965, more or less, throughout the height of the studio system. The Hayes Code said a lot of different things, but the one we're interested in was that you could stack bodies like cordwood if they were dead (although usually without blood), but living bodies couldn't get horizontal together. Husbands and wives were nearly always shown in separate beds. I noticed this once more the other night when I watched Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), where Claude Rains and Ingrid Bergman have twin beds. The man has never been born who, finding himself married to Ingrid Bergman, would assent to sleeping in twin beds. Even an evil Nazi like Claude

Rains. But in the movies in 1946, that's what happened. So film directors resorted to anything they could think of: waves, curtains, campfires, fireworks, you name it. And sometimes the results were dirtier than showing the real thing. At the end of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint find themselves rescued from the face of Mount Rushmore when the good guys kill Martin Landau before he can send our heroes to their deaths. In one of the truly great cuts, Grant, who is struggling to hold Miss Saint on the rock face, is suddenly pulling her up into the sleeping compartment of the train (and referring to her as Mrs. Thornhill); this shot is followed by an equally famous one—the last shot of the film—of the train entering a tunnel. No need to comment on that one.

Okay, you say, but that's film. What about books?

I barely know where to begin. Let's try something tame first, Ann Beattie's story "Janus" (1985). A youngish woman, married but not particularly in love with her husband, has had an affair with another man, the only tangible result of which is a bowl the lover bought for her. The woman, Andrea, comes more and more to identify with the bowl and to obsess over it. She's a real-estate agent, and she often places the bowl in a prominent place in clients' houses before she shows them; she gets up at night to check on it and make sure it's all right; and most tellingly, she will not permit her husband to put his keys in her bowl. Do you see the sexuality embedded in that set of images? How do keys work? Whose keys are they? Where can he not put them? Whose talisman is the bowl he can't put them in? Consider, for instance, that Hank Williams/George Thorogood classic, "Move It on Over," and the complaint about his lady changing locks and leaving him with a key that no longer fits. Every American should know enough of the blues to understand exactly what keys and locks signify, and to blush when they're referred to. That pattern of imagery is just

part of the much older tradition identified by Freud/Weston/Frazer/Jung about lances and swords and guns (and keys) as phallic symbols, chalices and grails (and bowls, of course, also) as symbols of female sexual organs. Back to Andrea's bowl: it really is about sex. Specifically, it's about her identity as a woman, an individual, and a sexual being, rather than as an extension of a lover or a husband. She fears being merely an auxiliary of some man's existence, although her autonomy, as symbolized by the bowl, is made problematic by its having been purchased for her by . . . a man. He only buys it, though, after seeing that she really connects with the bowl, so it really is hers in the end.

To talk about sex in literature almost inevitably leads to discussion of D. H. Lawrence. The great thing about Lawrence, from my point of view, is that you can never go wrong bringing sex into the analysis. Partly because sex had been taboo for so long and therefore was a largely untapped resource for the novelist, he worked tirelessly to explore the subject. His work has plenty of mentions of sexual relations, some oblique, some explicit, and in his last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), the great forbidden reading-fruit of everyone's youth, he pushes right past the limits of censorship of his time. The sexiest scene he ever wrote, though, is not a sex scene. It's wrestling. In *Women in Love*, the two main male characters wrestle one evening, in language in which the sexual charge is ferocious. They've been going on about blood brotherhoods and the closeness of their friendship, so the wrestling is not all that surprising. Lawrence isn't comfortable making them openly homosexual but he wants a relationship—and a physical expression—that is nearly as close as the love-and-sex relationship between man and woman. Ken Russell certainly understood what the scene was about when he filmed the novel back in 1969; I hadn't understood it, being too conditioned not to look for anything homoerotic and, I suppose, too

insecure as to what that might say about one of my favorite writers. Once I saw the film, though, I went back and reread the scene, and Russell got it right.

My favorite Lawrence story, bar none, is called "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1932), about a little boy who wants to please his mother. His father is a failure in business and therefore a great disappointment to the materialist mother. The son, Paul, senses the desperation for money in the house, senses his mother's dissatisfaction, senses the inability of his mother to love him, or anyone, in the face of her own colossal self-absorption. He connects the lack of his mother's love with the lack of money, then discovers that he can pick the winners of upcoming horse races if he rides his rocking horse to the point of exhaustion. Here's what Lawrence has to say:

He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it. When the two girls were playing dolls in the nursery, he would sit on his big rocking horse, charging madly into space, with a frenzy that made the little girls peer at him uneasily. Wildly the horse careered, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, the eyes had a strange glare in them. The girls dared not speak to them. . . . He knew the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it. . . . At last he stopped forcing his horse into the mechanical gallop and slid down.

Say what you will, I think he's talking about masturbation. When I teach this story, I try to lead the students to this idea without insisting on it. Usually there is one hardy and perceptive soul who gets it and asks, with something between a smirk and a cringe, the question I'm hoping for. One or two others nod, as if they sort of thought that but were afraid to think it through. Thirty-five others look like the ceiling is about to fall.

Is it really?

Let's look at the pattern that's set up: child wants to sup-

plant father in his mother's affections, child desperately wants mother's approval and love, child engages in highly secretive behavior involving frenetic, rhythmic activity that culminates in transporting loss of consciousness. What does that sound like to you? This is one of the clearest Oedipal situations ever captured in fiction, and for good reason. Lawrence was part of the first generation to read Freud and so, for the first time, to consciously employ Freudian thinking in literature. The notion of sublimation kicks in here, for both character and writer. Obviously, sexual engagement with the mother is not an option, so Lawrence sends the boy, Paul, in search of the luck his mother desires so terribly. The means of his search is sufficiently creepy that it frightens his presexual sisters and causes consternation among the adults, who feel that he's too big for a rocking horse.

Is it really masturbation? Not literally. That would be icky and not particularly interesting. But symbolically it fulfills the function of masturbation. Think of it as a surrogate for a surrogate for sex. What could be clearer?

Why? Part of the reason for all this disguised sex is that, historically, writers and artists couldn't make much use of the real thing. Lawrence, for instance, had numerous novels suppressed and undertook a monumental battle with the British censors. Same as in film.

Another reason is that scenes in which sex is coded rather than explicit can work at multiple levels and sometimes be more intense than literal depictions. Those multiple levels have traditionally been to protect innocents. Dickens, who could be very suggestive, was aware that his novels were often read around the family breakfast table, and he wanted to protect children from anything luridly sexual, as well as to provide wives with plausible deniability. With a scene of encoded sex, Mother could pretend not to notice that something untoward was going on while Father was enjoying his private smirk.

There's a scene in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) in which the two villains, Mr. Venus and Silas Wegg, are plotting evil. In fact, Silas Wegg is reading some financial news of a very tantalizing nature to the seated Mr. Venus, whose pegleg begins to rise from the floor until, at the moment of greatest excitement, it is pointing straight out in front of him. And then he falls over. Various family members could see this as either slapstick buffoonery or as quite suggestive slapstick buffoonery. In any case, everybody gets a giggle.

Even in our highly permissive age, though, sex often doesn't appear in its own guise. It is displaced into other areas of experience in much the same way it is in our own lives and our own consciousnesses. Ann Beattie's character Andrea doesn't think of her problems as being chiefly sexual or romantic. But they are, as we and her creator can see. So it's unlikely that her sexual issues will present themselves in terms of sexual organs and acts; much more likely they'll look like . . . a bowl and some keys.

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. . . Except Sex

EVER TRY TO WRITE A SEX SCENE? No, seriously. Tell you what: go try. In the interest of good taste, I'll request that you limit yourself to members of the same species and for clarity that you limit yourself to a mere pair of participants, but aside from that, no restrictions. Let 'em do whatever you want. Then when you come back, in a day, in a week, in a month, you'll have found out what most writers already know: describing two human beings engaging in the most intimate of shared acts is very nearly the least rewarding enterprise a writer can undertake.

Don't feel bad. You never had a chance. What are your options? The possible circumstances that lead two people to sexual congress are virtually limitless, but the act itself? How

many options do you have? You can describe the business clinically as if it were a do-it-yourself manual—insert tab A into slot B—but there are not that many tabs or slots, whether you use the Anglo-Saxon names or their Latinate alternatives. Frankly there just isn't that much variety, with or without the Reddi-Wip, and besides, it's been written in the mass of pornography ad nauseam. You can opt for the soft-core approach, describing parts and movements in a haze of breathy metaphors and heroic adverbs: *he achingly stroked her quivering seiff as it rode the waves of her desire, etc.* This second sort is hard to write without seeming (a) quaint, (b) squeamish, (c) hugely embarrassed, (d) inept. To tell the truth, most writing that deals directly with sex makes you wish for the good old days of the billowing curtain and the gently lapping waves.

I honestly believe that if D. H. Lawrence could see the sorry state of sex scenes that developed within a generation of his death, he would retract *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The truth is that most of the time when writers deal with sex, they avoid writing about the act itself. There are a lot of scenes that jump from the first button being undone to a postcoital cigarette (metaphorically, that is) or that cut from the unbuttoning to another scene entirely. The further truth is that even when they write about sex, they're really writing about something else.

Drives you crazy, doesn't it? When they're writing about other things, they really mean sex, and when they write about sex, they really mean something else. If they write about sex and mean strictly sex, we have a word for that. Pornography.

In the Victorian age, sex was nearly impossible to find in polite literature, due to rigid censorship both official and self-imposed. Not surprisingly, there was plenty of impolite literature. The era was unsurpassed in its production of pornography. Maybe it was that mountain of dirty writing that used up all the possibilities of writing about sex.

Even in the modernist period, though, there were limits.

Hemingway was restricted in his use of curse words. Joyce's *Ulysses* was censored, banned, and confiscated in both the United Kingdom and the United States, in part for its sexual references (lots of sex thought, even if the only sex act shown in it is onanistic). Constance Chatterley and her lover, Mellors, really broke ground in plainly shown and plainspoken sex, although the novel's obscenity trial, effectively ending censorship in the United States, did not take place until 1959.

Strangely, with less than a century of sexual writing as standard practice, there is almost nothing left but cliché.

There's a very famous sex scene in John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) between the two main characters, Charles and Sarah. In fact, it's the only sex scene in the novel, which is odd, given the extent to which the novel is about love and sex. Our lovers enter her bedroom in a seedy hotel, he carrying her from the sitting room because she has sprained her ankle. He lays her on the bed and joins her amid frenetic shifting and removal of clothing, which, this book being set in Victorian times, is considerable. Soon the deed is done and he lies spent beside her, at which point the narrator points out that "precisely ninety seconds" have elapsed since he walked from her to look into the bedroom. In that time he walked back, picked her up, carried her to the bed, fumbled and groped, and consummated their love. Now there are several possible constructions we can put on this particular description of the act of love. Perhaps Fowles wants to address, for reasons unknown, the shortcomings of Victorian males in the ardor department. Perhaps he wants to ridicule his poor hero. Perhaps he wants to make some point about male sexual inadequacy or the fallibility of desire. Perhaps he wants to accentuate the comic or ironic incongruity between the brevity of the sexual act and its consequences. Of the first of these, why bother? Besides, he admits in a famous essay on the crafting of the novel that he really has no knowledge of nineteenth-century lovemaking,

and in depicting sex between a Victorian man and woman what he's really writing is "science fiction." Of the second, it seems needlessly cruel, particularly when we've recently seen Charles in the arms of a young prostitute, where, rather than making love, he vomits into a pillow. Must he always be beset with performance issues? Of the third, sixty thousand words seems rather a lot with which to surround a tiny treatise on male sexuality. Of the fourth possibility, we know that incongruities, comic or otherwise, fascinate the novelist.

Let's consider another possibility, though. Charles has traveled from Lyme Regis, in the southwest, to London, where he has met with his future father-in-law, Mr. Freeman. Charles is horrified at the ill-judged marriage he has brought upon himself, complete with an offer of a job in business (anathema to a Victorian gentleman). He sees that he does not love the woman he is engaged to nor the conformity which she and her father, as members of the rising middle class, covet. He seems to be on a tether between the poles of his restricted future, with Mr. Freeman and the horrors of a life in commerce at one end in London, and his fiancée, Ernestina, at the other in Lyme Regis. Charles has come back through Exeter, where the seedy hotel is located, in full-panic flight. Sarah, the "fallen" woman (although we find out she probably is not), represents both the forbidden fruit, always tempting, and the way out of the marital disaster that he envisions awaiting him. His fascination with Sarah, which has been building throughout the novel, is a fascination with the unconventional aspects of himself, as well as with the possibilities of freedom and individual autonomy she represents. Sarah is the future, the twentieth century, for which Charles may not be ready. He carries not a woman but an entire constellation of possibilities into the bedroom. What chance does his sexual performance have?

For the most part, even our sexiest writing doesn't have all that much sex in it. Okay, except Henry Miller's novels, which really do have that much sex in them, and it's pretty much about the sex. But even with Miller, the sex is on one level symbolic action claiming for the individual freedom from convention and for the writer freedom from censorship. He's celebrating the removal of restrictions and writing hot sex.

But look at Miller's sometime pal Lawrence Durrell. (What is it about people named Lawrence and sex, anyway?) His *Alexandria Quartet*—the novels *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive*, and *Clea* (1957–60)—is chiefly about the forces of politics and history and the impossibility of the individual escaping those forces, although it registers in readers' minds as heavily slanted toward the sexual. A lot of sex talk, of reports of sex, and of scenes taking place immediately before or immediately after sex. I would maintain this is not from trepidation on the writer's part (it's hard to find any evidence of Durrell being inhibited about much of anything) but from his sense that in novels so overheated by passion, the sexiest thing he can do is show everything but the lovemaking itself. Moreover, the sex that occurs is invariably tied up with something else: cover for espionage, personal sacrifice, psychological neediness, desire for power over someone else. He presents virtually no sexual encounters that can be described as healthy, robust meetings of lovers. Sex in *Alexandria* is really pretty creepy when all's said and done. And it's all done.

Two of the most notorious novels of that same period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958) are famous for bad sex. Not bad as in unsatisfactory; bad as in evil. The protagonist of Burgess's novel is a fifteen-year-old leader of a gang whose specialties are theft with violence, violence without theft, and rape, to which he refers as "the old in-out in-out." The rapes we "see" do in fact take place in the narra-

tive, but they are strangely distanced from us. For one thing, as many potential readers already know, Alex narrates in a patois he calls Nadsat, a mix of English and slang words, many of them of Slavic origin. The effect of this linguistic mode is to describe things in such alien ways that the acts themselves seem alien as well. For another thing, Alex is so interested in his own delight at stage-managing the violence and rape, and in the terror and cries of the victims, that he almost neglects the sexual particulars. His most straightforward narration of a sexual scene is when he picks up two prepubescent girls; even then, he's more interested in their cries of pain and outrage than in the activity occasioning them. Beyond that, Burgess is interested in depravity, not prurience. He's writing a novel of ideas with an attractive/revolting main character, so his chief concern is not to make the sex and violence interesting, but to make Alex sufficiently revolting—and he succeeds admirably. Some would say too well.

Lolita is a slightly different case. Nabokov has to make his middle-aged protagonist, Humbert Humbert, depraved, certainly, but part of the revulsion we feel at his interest in his underage stepdaughter Lolita lies in the way our sympathy is co-opted by this monster narrating the story. He's so charming we are nearly taken in, but then he reminds us what he is doing to this young girl and we're outraged again. Nabokov being Nabokov, though, there's a kind of "gotcha!" in it: we're disgusted by Humbert, but sufficiently fascinated to keep reading. The sex, then, like the narrative, is a kind of linguistic-philosophical game that ensnares us and implicates us in the crimes we would officially denounce. Nor is there that much sex in the novel. Only a small amount of pederasty is even remotely tolerable. Much of the novel's notoriety, actually, beyond the fact that it has any pederasty, lies in its triple-X imitators. The word "Lolita" almost immediately became a staple in titles of a certain kind of pornographic film: *Teenage Lolitas*,

Wanton Teenage Lolitas, *Really Wanton Teenage Lolitas*, titles like that. Really original dirty-movie titles. There, presumably, the sex is strictly about sex.

What's that? You think it's just a guy thing?

Definitely not. Djuna Barnes, a contemporary of Lawrence and Joyce, investigates the world of sexual desire, fulfillment, and frustration in her dark classic, *Nightwood* (1937). The poet Mina Loy could have made T. S. Eliot faint. Modern women writers—as diverse as Anais Nin, Doris Lessing, Joyce Carol Oates, Iris Murdoch, and Edna O'Brien—ever since have investigated ways of writing about sex. I suspect O'Brien holds the distinction of having more books banned in Ireland than any other Irish novelist. Sex in her books nearly always takes on a political cast as characters explore their sexuality while at the same time throwing off the restrictions of a conservative, repressed, religious society. O'Brien's writing about sex is really writing about liberation, or sometimes the failure of liberation; it's religious or political or artistic subversion.

The queen of sexual subversiveness, though, must be the late Angela Carter. Like O'Brien, Carter can write a very convincing sex scene. And also like her, she almost never lets it be only about sex. Carter nearly always intends to upset the patriarchal apple cart. To call her writing women's liberation is to largely miss her point; Carter attempts to discover paths by which women can attain the standing in the world that male-dominated society has largely denied them, and in so doing she would liberate all of us, men and women alike. In her world, sex can be wildly disruptive. In her last novel, *Wise Children*, when the main character and narrator, Dora Chance, engages in sex, the aim is usually self-expression or exertion of control over her life. As a woman and a minor entertainer, she has comparatively little control, and as an illegitimate orphan whose father refuses to recognize her and her twin, Nora, she has even less. Taking some form of control once in a

while therefore becomes all the more essential. She “borrows” Nora’s boyfriend for her sexual initiation (he’s none the wiser). Later she makes love to the boy of her dreams at a party during which her father’s mansion burns to cinders. And finally, as a septuagenarian, she makes love to her hundred-year-old uncle, again while a very considerable shock is being delivered to her father, who is her uncle’s twin. I’m not sure I can decode all the things that scene means, but I’m pretty sure it is not primarily about sex. Or aesthetics. If nothing else, it is a radical assertion of the life force. It can also be attacked from almost every angle on the psychological and sexual-political compasses. Also, right after their lovemaking, her uncle makes his twin nieces mothers for the first time, presenting them with orphaned twins, grand-nephew and -niece. In Carter’s experience, human parthenogenesis remains somewhere in the future, so sex is still required to produce babies. Even symbolically.

Now here’s the thing about that: you’re going to figure it out. You don’t need me to tell you that this scene involving sex among the very old means something. Moreover, your guess is as good as mine when it comes to what it means. Maybe better. The image of these two elderly people making violent (the downstairs chandelier sways alarmingly) love in the bed of their father/brother is so rich with possibilities that you almost can’t go wrong, and perhaps no one can extract all its possibilities. So go for it.

That’s generally true. You just *know* that these scenes mean something more than what’s going on in them. It’s true in life as well, where sex can be pleasure, sacrifice, submission, rebellion, resignation, supplication, domination, enlightenment, the whole works. Just the other day a student mentioned a sex scene in a novel. “What’s up with that?” she asked. “It has to be about something else. It’s just so weird and creepy that it has to be about something else. Does it mean . . .” And then she told us exactly what it meant. All I could add was that it’s

not only true of weird sex. Sometimes even good literary sex is about something else.

Oh, right. You can’t really write about modern literary sex and skip over *it*, can you? Here’s the thing. Lawrence didn’t approve of strong language in private life and was almost prudish in some ways on the subject of promiscuity. Yet very near the end of his life, only in his early forties and dying of tuberculosis, he pens this outrageously frank, open novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, about love and sex between members of two very different classes, between a peer’s wife and her husband’s gamekeeper, a man who uses all the Anglo-Saxon words for body parts and functions. Lawrence knows he won’t write many more novels, he’s coughing up his lungs, and he’s pouring his life into this dirty story that’s so far beyond anything he’s already written—and had censored—that he knows, even if he pretends not to, that this thing will never have a wide readership in his lifetime. So now it’s my turn.

What’s up with that?