# The Beauty of Sex

Grant Allen

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From beginning to end, there is no feeling of our nature against which asceticism has made so dead a set as the sexual instinct. It has spoken of it always as one of "the lower pleasures"; it has treated it as something to be despised, vilified, slighted. It has regarded it as a function to be ashamed of, a faculty allied to all things gross and coarse and evil–a mark, as it were, of our "fallen" condition.

I maintain, on the contrary, that everything high and ennobling in our nature springs directly out of the sexual instinct. Its alliance is wholly with whatever is purest and most beautiful within us. To it we owe our love of bright colours, graceful form, melodious sound, rhythmical motion. To it we owe the evolution of music, of poetry, of romance, of *belles lettres*; the evolution of painting, of sculpture, of decorative art, of dramatic entertainment. To it we owe the entire existence of our aesthetic sense, which is, in the last resort, a secondary sexual attribute. From it springs the love of beauty; around it all beautiful arts still circle as their centre. Its subtle aroma pervades all literature. And to it too we owe the paternal, maternal and marital relations; the growth of the affections, the love of little pattering feet and baby laughter ; the home, with all the associations that cluster around it; in one word, the heart and all that is best in it. Our aesthetic emotions, our family and social affections, our arts, our loves —these are part of our debt to what asceticism would tell us are our "lower" faculties

If we look around among the inferior animals, we shall see that the germs of everything which is best in humanity took their rise with them in the sexual instinct. The song of the nightingale or of Shelley's skylark is a song that has been acquired by the bird himself to charm the ears of his attentive partner. The chirp of the cricket, the cheerful note of the grasshopper, the twittering of the sparrow, the pleasant caw of the rookery—all these, as Darwin showed, are direct products of sexual selection. Every pleasant sound that greets our ears from hedge or copse in 'a summer walk has the self-same origin.

If we were to take away from the country the music conferred upon it by the sense of sex, we should have taken away every vocal charm it possesses, save the murmur of the brooks and the whispering of the breeze through the leaves at evening. No thrush, no linnet, no blackbird would be left us; no rattle of the nightjar over the twilight fields; no chirp of insect, no chatter of tree-frog, no cry of cuckoo from the leafy covert. The whip-poor-will and the bobolink would be mute as the serpent. Every beautiful voice in wild nature, from the mocking-bird to the cicala,

is in essence a love-call; and without such love-calls the music of the fields would be mute, the forest would be silent.

Not otherwise is it with the beauty which appeals to the eye. Every lovely object in organic nature owes its loveliness direct to sexual selection. The whole aesthetic sense in animals had this for its origin. Every spot on the feathery wings of butterflies was thus produced; every eye on the gorgeous glancing plumage of the peacock. The bronze and golden beetles, the flashing blue of the dragon-fly, the brilliant colours of tropical moths, the lamp of the glow-worm, the gleaming light of the firefly in the thicket, spring from the same source. The infinite variety of crest and gorget among the iridescent humming birds; the glow of the trogon, the barbets among the palm blossoms; the exquisite plumage of the birds of paradise; the ball-and-socket ornament of the argus pheasant; the infinite hues of parrot and macaw; the strange bill of the gaudy toucan, and the crimson wattles of the turkey, still tell one story. The sun-birds deck themselves for their courtship in ruby and topaz, in chrysophrase and sapphire. Even the antlers of the deer, the twisted horns of antelopes, and the graceful forms or dappled coats of so many other mammals have been developed in like manner by sexual selection.

The very fish in the sea show similar results of aesthetic preferences. The butterfly fins of the gurnard and the courting colours of the stickleback have but one explanation. I need not elaborate this point; Darwin has already made it familiar to most of us. Throughout the animal world, almost every beautiful hue, almost every decorative adjunct, is traceable to the action of these "lower" passions. Animals are pleasing to the eye just in proportion to the amount of aesthetic selection that their mates have exercised upon them; and they are most pleasing of all when most sexually vigorous, especially at the culminating point of the pairing season.

Everybody knows how love, in one form or another, subtly animates all our romance and all our poetry; our Sappho and our Catullus, our Antony and Cleopatra, our Romeo and Juliet, our Othello and Desdemona, our Faust and Marguerite, our Laura, our Beatrice, our Paolo and Francesca, our Epipsychidion. Everybody knows that without it we would have no Titian, no Donatello, no Raphael, no Andrea. The beauty of woman gives us half our painting and three-fourths of our sculpture. Our most exquisite imaginings realise themselves in marble as the Venus of Melos, or on living canvas as the Madonna della Sedia.

Filch away from external nature what it owes to the sex-instinct, and you will have lost every bright flower, every gay fruit, every songbird, every butterfly, every wearer of brilliant plumage or decorative adjuncts; filch away from human art what it owes to the sex-instinct, and you will have lost the best part of our poetry, the best part of our romance, the best part of our painting, and all but the whole of our sculpture.

Now, who are the people who make the most of what Puritans would have us believe are our "lowest" passions? Are they the coarsest, the vulgarist, the most money-grubbing among us? Not a bit of it. They are the Dantes, the Petrarchs, the Shelleys, the Keatses. They are the poets, the painters, the composers, the singers. They are the salt of the earth, the pick and pink of humanity. They are the most gifted, the most imaginative, the most beautiful-minded, the most dainty-souled. Wherever we find the world well lost for love, it is not by a Methodist haberdasher or a prize-fighting coalheaver, but by an Abelard and an Heloise, by a George Sand and a Chopin, by a Mary Wollstonecraft, by a Mary Godwin, by a Claire Clairmont, by a George Eliot. It is our Chastelards and our Rizzios who live in song and story. It is our Goethes and our Rousseaus who leave us a history of their loves.

Search the Dictionary of Biography through, and, if you find a man in whose life these "lower passions" played a conspicuous part, you may be sure it is a Del Sarto, a Lippi, a Byron, a Rossetti, a Liszt, a De Musset. Poets never make light of these "lower" feelings; painters never make light of them. In contemporary literature will any man learn to despise "mere sex," think you, from Browning and Meredith, from Swinburne and Hardy? What say you, Norman Gale? What say you, Le Gallienne? Even in Puritan England, when you get a great poet, like our virile Milton, you find him rebelling against "Whatever hypocrites austerely talk of purity, and place, and innocence." Even in Puritan America, when you get a great soul, like good gray Walt Whitman, you find him proclaiming with a trumpet voice "the equal honour and dignity of all our members and our functions."

And who, on the other hand, are they that dare to decry this mother-sense of the affections and the aesthetic faculties? The lean and haggard 'ascetics of the Thebaid; the vile St. Antonies, pursued by swinish dreams and unclean images; the monks and nuns of the Middle Ages; the like-minded fanatics of the nineteenth century. The idea of the essential impurity and danger of sex began with the savage. To avoid its fancied perils is the object of all initiations and mysteries. Repression and mutilation were enjoined on priests. Asceticism hates the light, the air, the tub, the sunshine. It hates social life, wide sympathy, broad thought, intellectual freedom. It hates painting and sculpture, nude limbs of classic nymphs, romance and poetry, the drama, the dance, innocent love, innocent pleasure. It refuses and restrains. It worships its pain-loving god with painful exercises. It works out its own salvation in fear and trembling; its own selfish salvation is all it cares for. It dwells in bare whitewashed cells of dreary monasteries, scourging its own shoulders with the thong of St. Dominic, or "turning the treadmill of repeated prayer." It substitutes for culture, aesthetic feeling, the domestic sympathies and expansive sentiments, its own vile ideal of salvation by self-torture…

The hedonist, therefore, recognises in the sex-instinct the origin and basis of all that is best and highest within us. He is not ashamed of it, like the hermits who find that uncleanliness is next to godliness, and hold fresh linen an abomination. He is not afraid of it, like the timid moralists who think our instincts and impulses were given us by heaven in order that we might disobey them. He faces facts, and fears no phantoms. His object will always be so to use these functions as not to abuse them, either by enforced abstinence or by acquiescence in a hateful *regime* of vice, disease, and practical slavery for a large body of women. He knows that to be pure is not to be an anchorite, and that chastity means a profound disinclination to give the body where the heart is not given in unison.

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