READING BETWEEN THE SHEETS: SEX AND SEXUALITY IN LITERATURE

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BAD SEX IN FICTION AWARD

• “Each year since 1993, the Bad Sex in Fiction Award has honoured an author who has produced an outstandingly bad scene of sexual description in an otherwise good novel. The purpose of the prize is to draw attention to poorly written, perfunctory or redundant passages of sexual description in modern fiction, and to discourage them. The prize is not intended to cover pornographic or expressly erotic literature.” (From the Literary Review website)
AWARDEES:

• “We streak like superheroes past suns and solar systems, we dive through shoals of quarks and atomic nuclei. In celebration of our breakthrough fourth star, statisticians the world over rejoice” from Manil Suri’s novel City of Devi

• “I found the Brie and broke off a fragment, sucking her nipple through it” from Jonathan Grimood’s The Last Banquet

• “I don’t really know what this [award] means. Is the award for bad sex writing? For good writing about bad sex? For making good people feel bad about sex? I can’t help but think it might widen my audience.” – Susan Choi, one of the 2013 nominees.

• http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2dwv8n_melanie-abrams-on-writing-sex-scenes-in-literary-fiction_news
GEOFFREY CHAUCER (C.1343-1400)
CANTERBURY TALES

• The Wife of Bath

• But wel I woot expres, withoute lye, God bad us for to wexe and multiplye: That gentil text can I wel understonde...

• But of no nombre mencioun made he,

• Of bigamy or of octogamy;

• Why sholde men speke of it vileinye
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

- Glossary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Language
- Filthy Shakespeare: Shakespeare’s Most Outrageous Sexual Puns
- Shakespeare, Sex and Love

“Shakespeare should not be put into the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays were written to please the foolish, the filthy for the filthy and the brutal for the brutal.” – Robert Bridges
EXPURGATING SHAKESPEARE
SEX AND SEXUALITY IN
SHAKESPEARE

• He married when he was only 19 and his wife was pregnant at the time, Premarital sex was a legal offence at the time.

• Amusing, entertaining, exciting, he gets a lot of fun out of it in his comedies. Many rude, bawdy passages.

• Sees sex as an inevitable component of love.

• He avoids using four letter words. Even the word “sex” is only used 17 times in all his works and often only to mean gender – the “fairer sex”

• Most of his sexual language is from puns and word play

• Complex treatment of sex – does not simplistically equate it with filth
• We find teenage sexuality in Romeo and Juliet where Juliet’s strong desire to consummate her marriage with Romeo is palpable.

• He deals with interracial sexuality in Othello. Iago makes it sound deviant when he says Othello “is an old, black ram tupping his white ewe”

• Female sexuality is portrayed as dark and suspicious. The female body is described as “the dark and vicious place”

• He deals with revulsion against sex. People talk about sexual nausea in King Lear

• Brothel scenes in the history plays
SHAKESPEARE’S SONNET CYCLE

He is probably most personal in his sonnets.
Sonnets 1-126 are addressed to a young man (the "fair youth" sonnets) and were most likely written in 1597.

The focus of the sonnets' homoerotic devotion was most likely William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke (1580-1630), a nephew of the poet Philip Sydney and the "W.H." of the dedication in Shakespeare's Sonnets.

Sonnets 1-17 are called the “procreation cycle”, one for each year of his life, urging the fair youth to marry.
They are developed around the theme of procreation – “from fairest creatures we desire increase”
Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight,
Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

He is aware of the difference between lust and love
Sexual desire can be a destructive thing
METAPHYSICAL POETS (1580-1670)

• “Art is the most passionate orgy within man’s grasp.” — John Donne
DONNE’S NOTION OF “ECSTASY”

• The inward union of the body and soul of man is achieved through the outward union of man and woman. Body and soul remain at odds within a person until he loves another person, for the reason that his soul realizes and knows itself through the experience of love, love being a state in which flesh, become subordinate or servant to the psyche, terminates its suppression of soul. During love, the soul is ecstatically freed from the body, transplanted into a richer soil, which is the soul of the other person, and thereby gains new strength and knowledge about itself in relation to its body. When at the termination of love’s ecstasy, the soul repairs to its body, the self is no longer a merely carnal or physical being, but a synthesis permitted by love’s potentiation of the soul. (Mitchell, 1968)
DONNE’S “THE EXTASIE”

- We see by this it was not sex,
  We see we saw not what did move;
But as all several souls contain
  Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mix’d souls doth mix again
  And makes both one, each this and that (31-36).
METAPHYSICAL “CONCEITS” IN THE SERVICE OF SEX

• “The Flea”

• Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
  How little that which thou deniest me is;
  It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
  And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
  Thou know'st that this cannot be said
  A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
    Yet this enjoys before it woo,
    And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;
    And this, alas! is more than we would do.

  O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
  Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
  This flea is you and I, and this
  Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is. (Donne)
METAPHYSICAL “CONCEITS” IN THE SERVICE OF SEX

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhZuxUyNA14
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUNnVFJbAtk

- A Dance to the Music of Time, by Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665)
OSCAR WILDE (1854-1900)

“Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power.”
WHO WAS ALFRED DOUGLAS?

• In 1891 Wilde was introduced to Alfred Douglas, a handsome and spoilt Oxford undergraduate, with whom he had a flamboyant, reckless, indulgent and tempestuous affair.

• In June 1894, Lord Alfred's father, The Marquess of Queensberry called on Wilde at 16 Tite Street, without an appointment, and clarified his stance: "I do not say that you are it, but you look it, and pose at it, which is just as bad. And if I catch you and my son again in any public restaurant I will thrash you" to which Wilde responded: "I don't know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot on sight".

• On the 18 February 1895, the Marquess left his calling card at Wilde's club, inscribed: "For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite"
THE TRIAL OF OSCAR WILDE

- Wilde was arrested for "gross indecency" and imprisoned at Holloway where he received daily visits from Douglas.
- Wilde spoke eloquently when asked about his homosexuality:
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwhYn-P7hLg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwhYn-P7hLg)

- This response was, however, counterproductive in a legal sense as it only served to reinforce the charges of homosexual behavior.
- The trial had become too politicised to be dropped and Wilde was imprisoned in London under very harsh conditions of hard labour.
THE HAPPY PRINCE (1888)

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot-Yv_NtKCK
SEX IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

• *Daniel Deronda* (1876) by George Eliot

• *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) by Thomas Hardy
WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN THE 19C.

• There was an idea in the 19th century that women did not feel sexual desire.
• Female sexual desire was considered unnatural and it was improper for women to show sexual desire.
• In literature, female sexuality has often been associated with madness.
• This came from male fear of female sexuality and the belief that the awakening of female sexuality might lead to the moral undoing of society.
WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN THE 19C.

- **Lady Lilith** (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1868)
- The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
- Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
- And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
- Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
- Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
- And round his heart one strangling golden hair.
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830-1894)
“Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other’s wings,
They lay down in their curtain’d bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipp’d with gold for awful kings.
Moon and stars gaz’d in at them,
Wind sang to them lullaby,
Lumbering owls forbore to fly,
Not a bat flapp’d to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Lock’d together in one nest.”
“One may lead a horse to water,
Twenty cannot make him drink,
Though the goblins cuff’d and caught her,
Coax’d and sought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratch’d her, pinch’d her black as ink,
Kick’d and knock’d her,
Maul’d and mock’d her,
Lizzie utter’d not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in;
But laugh’d in heart to feel the drip
Of juice that syrpp’d all her face,
And lodg’d in dimples of her chin,
And streak’d her neck which quaked like curd.”
“She cried, “Laura,” up the garden,
‘Did you miss me? Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me:
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men’…
She clung about her sister,
Kiss’d and kiss’d and kiss’d her:
Tears once again
Refresh’d her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain
After long sultry drouth;
Shaking with aguish fear, and pain,
She kiss’d and kiss’d her with a hungry mouth.”
SEX IN FAIRY TALES

• Fairy tales have a complex history.
• The original versions of many of the most popular fairy tales, were replete with sex and violence.
• Fairy tales began as oral stories and were not meant for children.
• Charles Perrault’s collection of tales were written to be presented at the Court of Versailles and each one ended with a moralistic verse.
• It is only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that fairy tales came to be written for children.
**SANITIZING THE FAIRY TALES**

- Fairy tales have come to be sanitized so much over the last century, that they are no longer recognizable to the original.
- Scholars like Jack Zipes have called for recuperating the original versions.
- He does this in a gutsy translation - *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (2014) – including all 156 stories from the 1812 and 1815 editions.
• Snow White is awakened not by true love’s kiss but by true love’s rape:

“As he contemplated her many charms, he suddenly felt his blood course hotly through his veins. The prince lifted her in his arms and carried her to a bed, whereon he gathered the first fruits of love while she slept on. When he was through, he left the princess, and returned to his own kingdom, where, in the pressing business of his realm, he thought no more of the incident."

• Little Red Riding Hood: The wolf is trying to eat the little girl by pretending to be her grandmother sleeping in the bed. The wolf symbolizes aggressive, animalistic men who can’t control their desires.

• Rapunzel: The Prince is the one who imprisons her in the tower because he is pregnant with his child. He spends days frolicking with her right before she is imprisoned.
SEX IN FAIRY TALES
CULTURAL SHIFT IN THE 20\textsuperscript{TH} CENTURY

• Until the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, any book with explicit sexual content, was likely to be censored or banned and the publisher could be prosecuted

• Three events changed this:

• Publication of Nabokov’s \textit{Lolita} in 1958

• The Obscene Publications Act 1959 significantly reformed the law related to obscenity

• Penguin was prosecuted and acquitted for publishing D. H. Lawrence’s novel \textit{Lady Chatterley’s Lover} in 1959

• \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DOhCS4k-30}
LADY CHATTERLEY’S LOVER (1960)

• It was first published in Florence, Italy in 1928
• It is the story of the sexual relationship between an aristocratic woman, Lady Constance and her husband’s gamekeeper, Mellors.
• “I want men and women to be able to think sex fully, completely, honestly and cleanly. Even if we can’t act sexually to our complete satisfaction, let us at least think sexually, complete and clean.” – Lawrence
• He wanted to take words that were classified as dirty and sanitize the vocabulary
• When asked to expurgate the novel, he said “Impossible! I might as well try to clip my own nose into shape with scissors. The book bleeds.”
LOLITA (1958)

• Written by the Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov
• The novel tells the story of Humbert Humbert’s relationship with Lolita, a 12 year old girl whom he sexually exploits.
• Despite the disturbing subject matter, it is widely regarded as a literary masterpieces, mainly because of its poetic style – “poerotic”
GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE

• Love Poem

• Speak earth and bless me with what is richest
make sky flow honey out of my hips
rigis mountains
spread over a valley
carved out by the mouth of rain.

And I knew when I entered her I was
high wind in her forests hollow
fingers whispering sound
honey flowed
from the split cup
impaled on a lance of tongues
on the tips of her breasts on her navel
and my breath
howling into her entrances
through lungs of pain.

Greedy as herring-gulls
or a child
I swing out over the earth
over and over
again.

- Audre Lorde
WHY HAVE SEX AND SEXUALITY IN LITERATURE?

• Did the failure of the 1960 Lady Chatterley’s Lover obscenity prosecution have a detrimental effect on the literature that came afterwards?

• “Instead of a blanket prohibition, there was almost the reverse: not just a writerly desire, but a commercial obligation to write in a detailed way about sex.” – Julian Barnes
FROM “TWENTY ONE LOVE POEMS” BY ADRIENNE RICH

• V

• This apartment full of books could crack open
to the thick jaws, the bulging eyes
of monsters, easily: Once open the books, you have to face
the underside of everything you’ve loved—
the rack and pincers held in readiness, the gag
even the best voices have had to mumble through,
the silence burying unwanted children—
women, deviants, witnesses—in desert sand.
Kenneth tells me he’s been arranging his books
so he can look at Blake and Kafka while he types;
yes; and we still have to reckon with Swift
loathing the woman’s flesh while praising her mind,
Goethe’s dread of the Mothers, Claudel vilifying Gide,
and the ghosts—their hands clasped for centuries—
of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake,
centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
and we still have to stare into the absence
of men who would not, women who could not, speak
to our life—this still unexcavated hole
called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.