

PSYCHOLOGY REVIVALS

# Youth and Sex

A Psychological Study

Meyrick Booth





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## Youth and Sex

Originally published in 1932, *Youth and Sex* was a book for those who wished to keep abreast of modern thought. A short review of the psychology of childhood and adolescence from a modern standpoint forms the core of the book. A preliminary section deals with the ethical and social problems of the day in relation to education, and with the conflict between the old generation and the new, while the concluding chapters review such questions as "The Girl and Her Education", "Sex Instruction", "The Marriage Question", etc. An up-to-date bibliography put the reader in touch with the best recent literature of the time. Today it can be read in its historical context.

This book is a re-issue originally published in 1932. The language used and views portrayed are a reflection of its era and no offence is meant by the Publishers to any reader by this re-publication.



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# YOUTH AND SEX

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

*by*

MEYRICK BOOTH

B.Sc., PH.D.

LONDON

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TO  
MY WIFE



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**PART I**  
**THE MODERN BACKGROUND**



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CHAPTER I  
THE WORLD IN TRANSITION

- a.* ANTI-VICTORIANISM
- b.* THE REVOLT AGAINST MONOGAMY
- c.* THE SOUTH SEA PARADISE
- d.* CHAOS
- e.* THE NEED FOR A POSITIVE ETHIC

*a.* ANTI-VICTORIANISM

It is, to-day, impossible to approach the problems of Youth and Sex along the lines which thirty, or even twenty, years ago would have seemed convincing.

The troubles and conflicts of society cannot be separated from those of the individual. The boy or girl of to-day cannot be isolated from the world-shaking movements of present-day life.

When universally accepted values, in social life and morals, constituted a rigid framework, within which youth quietly grew to maturity, we lived in a simpler and easier world.

The whole of western life has now become insecure and problematical.

We find ourselves in the midst of a vast movement of disintegration and transition. All accepted standards are challenged.

Any approach to the basic psychological questions with which this book is concerned is, in my opinion, *unreal* and misleading, which does not fully take into account not only the personal and individual factors but also the epoch-making social and ethical movements which now complicate the entire situation.

It is impossible for the educator to evade the special problems created by the confused situation of to-day. Sooner or later the attempt to make use of mere phrases will be found out. In a recent educational work, for example, I read that "young people should be taught respect for the moral law." But what is "the moral law" to the young man or woman of the modern great city?

Nothing could be more illusory than the idea that the chaos in the world of moral values can be concealed from the young. They are intuitively aware of it long before they grasp it intellectually.

To a demand to respect "the moral law" the modern emancipated adolescent says, "Yes, but do you mean the law of Christianity, the law of Nietzsche, the law of Bernard Shaw, the law of the cinema stage, the law of my office or factory mates, the law of the business world, the law of communism, or the law of individualism?"

In a society such as that of Victorian England, when Christian values were not challenged, even by non-Christians (save in very rare instances, which did not come to the notice of youth), we possessed a moral standard which offered youth a clearly defined goal. To-day, when a dozen conflicting conceptions of morality hold the field (and will be forced upon the boy or girl the moment they read fiction or visit the theatre), we can no longer fall back upon phrases like "the moral law." The truth is that comparatively few people realise the full extent of the revolution in fundamentals that has taken place in England during the last few years. From a nation composed of a large majority of Christians (if very imperfect ones!) we have become a people in which (perhaps) scarcely 25 per cent of the population can be reckoned as more than nominally Christian.

The Victorians, even when they attacked Christianity, believed firmly in the family and monogamy. So deeply rooted were their moral convictions that they did not even enter the area of questioning.

Now, however, the whole subject of sexual ethics has been thrown into the melting-pot. In every other novel written by a man, and in fully three-quarters of those written by women, the institution of marriage is challenged. In the course of a very extensive perusal of periodical literature I find it a rare event to come across any article dealing with marriage which is not more or less definitely anti-monogamous (if we except those written by Catholics).

No proposal is too fantastic to find favour with the modern reading public. A well-known young woman journalist suggests the legalisation of concubinage in England, and her ideas are quite well received. The fear of being thought "Victorian" seems to be extraordinarily effective in preventing any adverse criticism of the most revolutionary sexual proposals. If fifty years ago it was the correct thing to be orthodox, to-day those who do not hold "advanced" views on moral questions are soon made to feel that they are back-numbers. *Man muss mitmachen!*

The modern world is full of people so desperately afraid of being regarded as "out-of-date" that they will agree to accept almost any sort of conduct or opinion that is sufficiently far removed from the standards which they associate with horsehair sofas and the Albert Memorial. We have, in fact, to-day a *new cant*—the cant of *emancipation*. At all costs one must not run the terrible risk of being thought respectable and Victorian.

The other day a perfectly blameless and domesticated

young woman related to an old lady friend of mine, born in the fifties of last century, a tale about a man acquaintance of hers who invited his wife's sister to stay with him, and after a few weeks had sex relations with her, resulting in the birth of a baby. The old lady, not, I think, without some reason, expressed indignation, and met with the rebuke, "Well, you *are* a Victorian!" This was in quite ordinary English middle-class circles—in Yorkshire, to be precise.

#### *b.* THE REVOLT AGAINST MONOGAMY

The revolt against monogamy and the family—in fact against the whole Christian ethic in sex matters—is by no means (as is often supposed by the ill-informed) an affair of little cliques, of Bohemians, dwellers in Chelsea or Greenwich Village, N.Y. It now permeates (in very varying degrees) almost the entire community, having filtered downwards (or been absorbed upwards) from the *intelligentsia* who have for some time been its main propagandists. We must not forget that almost all writers of importance in England during the last thirty years have used their influence to undermine the family. Is it supposed that no result has been produced upon the mind of the nation? It would be a very strange situation if there were no relationship between the literature of a period and the actual state of feeling in the country producing the literature.

Those who are acquainted, at first hand, with the conditions obtaining in the England of to-day know that the sentiments of "the new morality" are heard, not only in the "advanced" circles of London, but just as frequently from the lips of factory girls, young engineers,

or shop-assistants in Lancashire and Yorkshire or the Midlands.

The true significance of this revolt, to the parent and educator, is very far indeed from being adequately realised. *It is a central factor in the modern problem of Youth and Sex.*

We shall see later what a vital rôle in the development of youth is played by the *Zeitgeist*—even when those subjected to its all-pervading influence are too young to form intellectual impressions of a definite nature.

The temperamental optimism of the English, their notorious unwillingness to look awkward and unwelcome facts in the face, is probably, more than anything else, responsible for the general refusal to acknowledge the real importance of this revolt. We shrink from the idea that the comfortable security of Victorian morals is no longer existent for our children, and shelter behind soothing phrases—"a passing reaction," "those horrid novelists," and the like.

When Mr. Montgomery Belgion, in his illuminating book, *Our Present Philosophy of Life*, declared that the revolutionary sexual life-outlook of a Shaw, a Russell, or a Gide was to-day far more influential than the teaching of the Churches, some of his critics attempted to answer him with the childish objection that if a poll was taken in England the views mentioned by him would meet with very scanty support. This may be true. But is it seriously supposed that this is a *numerical* question? Let such a poll be taken not amongst the mass of the people but amongst novelists, dramatists, poets, artists, and reviewers—in short, where formative forces are at work—and who would venture to say that these views would receive only a small proportion of the votes?

Is it possible for any intelligent person to argue that the impingement upon the mind of the adolescent of a constant stream of suggestion, running directly contrary to all that he has (in most cases) been taught as to sexual matters at home and at school, can be without a deep influence upon his development?

Jack has been told at home, at school, and in church or chapel, that boys and girls should lead "pure lives," or in other words refrain from having sexual intercourse before marriage. At the age of, say, seventeen (or earlier) he begins to read for himself and to go to the theatre and cinema. He at once meets the view that chastity is "out-of-date," "Victorian," "injurious to health," and so forth, and he is told, either directly or indirectly, that temporary sex unions are not only "modern," but indeed essential to his health and moral development.<sup>1</sup>

It may be said he will not necessarily accept the views thus put before him. But even if he does not, the important fact is that *his life-outlook is rendered insecure*. He now realises that there are different opinions on these vital matters, and his confidence in a simple "right and wrong" is shattered. Those who are in touch with youth

<sup>1</sup> To take a real example: Ethel B., aged seventeen, who is being carefully educated according to Church of England ideas at great expense to her parents, is at home for the holidays; on the library table she picks up the current issue of one of our best-known literary weeklies and reads a middle-article by one of the most prominent of English women writers, arguing that no girl should marry without previously obtaining sexual experience (with the aid of birth control) from one, or more, of her boy friends. What is Ethel to think on reading these views in a journal which she knows to command the respect of her parents? I am not suggesting that the Press ought to be made safe for youth—far from it; I am merely pointing out, for the benefit of those who still wear blinkers, that a state of things now exists which immeasurably confuses the whole problem of sex and education.

know that what I say is true. Jack grows up doubting and questioning. Although the older generation may find it hard to believe it, tens of thousands of our best boys and girls, now passing through the most critical period of their lives, have entirely lost all bearings in a moral sense: this applies even to those who come from homes where the traditional values are respected.

A few months ago a case was brought to my notice of a young university woman student who said to one of her tutors, with whom she was on friendly terms: "Do you think I ought to have sex intercourse with boy friends? Many of my friends do it, and they tell me I ought to, for the sake of the experience. I feel so puzzled as to what is right." Such a question as this, which was asked in good faith, throws a vivid light on the vastly changed conditions of life in England since the war.

The difficulties of the situation are added to by the fact that a large proportion of the older generation still keep their heads firmly buried in the sand, and refuse entirely to aid those who (like myself) are seeking to clarify the situation and bring some order into the chaos. These ostriches, perceiving no problem, cannot understand what all the fuss is about. The Bishop of London, who referred to the dangers of "companionate marriage" in a speech made while I was writing this chapter, was at once attacked by a leading London daily on the ground that his fears were imaginary, and that our young unmarried people (so it was implied) all lived chaste lives! It is this type of obstinate refusal to face plain facts that causes an acute foreign observer, M. André Siegfried, to speak of our "vague, indolent method of setting aside realities" and our unwillingness even to formulate problems, let alone solve them! (*England's Crisis*, p. 141.)