

Thurber

Writings & Drawings

JAMES THURBER

WRITINGS AND DRAWINGS



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FROM

IS SEX NECESSARY?

OR

WHY YOU FEEL THE WAY YOU DO

The Nature of the American Male: A Study of Pedestalism

IN NO other civilized nation are the biological aspects of love so distorted and transcended by emphasis upon its sacredness as they are in the United States of America. In China it's all biology. In France it's a mixture of biology and humor. In America it's half, or two-thirds, *psyche*. The Frenchman's idea, by and large, is to get the woman interested in him as a male. The American idea is to point out, first of all, the great and beautiful part which the stars, and the infinite generally, play in Man's relationship to women. The French, Dutch, Brazilians, Danes, etc., can proceed in their amours on a basis entirely divorced from the *psyche*. The Chinese give it no thought at all, and never have given it any thought. The American would be lost without the *psyche*, lost and a little scared.

As a result of all this there is more confusion about love in America than in all the other countries put together. As soon as one gets the psychical mixed up with the physical—a thing which is likely to happen quite easily in a composing-room, but which should not happen anywhere else at all—one is almost certain to get appetite mixed up with worship. This is a whole lot like trying to play golf with a basketball, and is bound to lead to maladjustments.

The phenomenon of the American male's worship of the female, which is not so pronounced now as it was, but is still pretty pronounced, is of fairly recent origin. It developed, in fact, or reached its apex, anyway, in the early years of the present century. There was nothing like it in the preceding century. Throughout the nineteenth century the American man's amatory instincts had been essentially economic. Marriage was basically a patriotic concern, the idea being to have children for the sake of the commonwealth. This was bad enough, but nevertheless it is far less dangerous to get the commonwealth mixed up with love than to get the infinite mixed up with love.

There was not a single case of nervous breakdown, or neurosis, arising from amatory troubles, in the whole cycle from

1800 to 1900, barring a slight flare-up just before the Mexican and Civil wars. This was because love and marriage and children stood for progress, and progress is—or was—a calm, routine business. “Mrs. Hopkins,” a man would say to the lady of his choice (she was a widow in this case)—“Mrs. Hopkins, I am thinking, now that George* has been dead a year, you and I should get married and have offspring. They are about to build the Union Pacific, you know, and they will need men.” Because parents can’t always have men-children when they want them, this led to almost as many women as men working on the Union Pacific, which in turn led to the greater stature of women in the present Northwest than in any other part of the nation. But that is somewhat beside the point. The point is that men and women, husbands and wives, suitors and sweethearts, in the last century lived without much sentiment and without any psycho-physical confusion at all. They missed a certain amount of fun, but they avoided an even greater amount of pother (see Glossary). They did not worry each other with emotional didoes. There was no hint of Pleasure-Principle. Everything was empiric, almost somatic. †

This direct evasion of the Love Urge on the part of Americans of the last century was the nuclear complex of the psycho-neurosis as we know it today, and the basis for that remarkable reaction against patriotic sex which was to follow so soon after the Spanish-American war.

At the turn of the century, the nation was on a sound economic basis and men had the opportunity to direct their attention away from the mechanics of life to the pleasures of living. No race can leap lightly, however, from an economic value to an emotional value. There must be a long period of

*The late George Hopkins.

†The word “somatic” has been left out of the glossary because of the confusion which the dictionary itself seems to be in over the meaning of the term. “Pertaining to the wall of the body” is as close as the New International comes to what we have in mind here, but it goes right on to use “parietal” as a synonym and parietal means “pertaining to order within the buildings of a college.” Then again the word goes back to the old Indian, or East Indian, root *Soma* which means a god, a liquor, and an asclepiadaceous climbing shrub (*Sarcostemma acidum*). Furthermore, if your eyes stray even a fraction of an inch, in looking up “somatic,” you are in “sölvbergite” which includes the feldspars, ægirite, grorudite, and tinguaitite.

Übertragung, long and tedious. Men were not aware of this, thirty years ago, because the science of psychology was not far advanced, but nature came to their aid by supplying a tem-

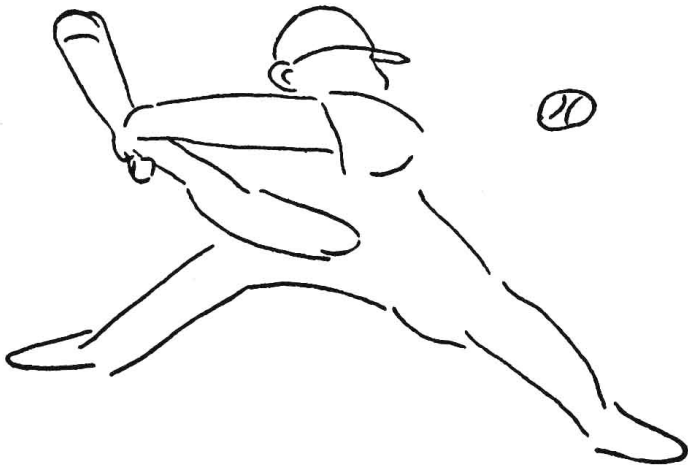


Fig. 1. Sex Substitutes (*Übertragung* Period): Baseball.

porary substitute for an emotional sex life, to tide them over during the period of *Übertragung*. This substitute took the form of games. Baseball assumed a new and enormous importance, prize-fighting reached its heyday; horse-racing became an absorption, bicycling a craze.

Now women, naturally intraverts, could not easily identify themselves with baseball or prize-fighting (they admired Christy Mathewson and Terry McGovern, but that was about all); they took but slowly to horse-racing; and they giggled and acted the fool when they first tried to balance themselves on a bicycle. They drew away from men and from men's concerns, therefore—there was no more of the old Union Pacific camaraderie—and began to surround the mere fact of their biological destiny with a nimbus of ineffability. It got so that in speaking of birth and other natural phenomena, women seemed often to be discussing something else, such as the Sistine Madonna or the aurora borealis. They became myste-

rious to themselves and to men; they became suddenly, in their own eyes, as capable of miracle and as worthy of worship as Juno and her sisters. This could not go on. The conflict was ineluctable.

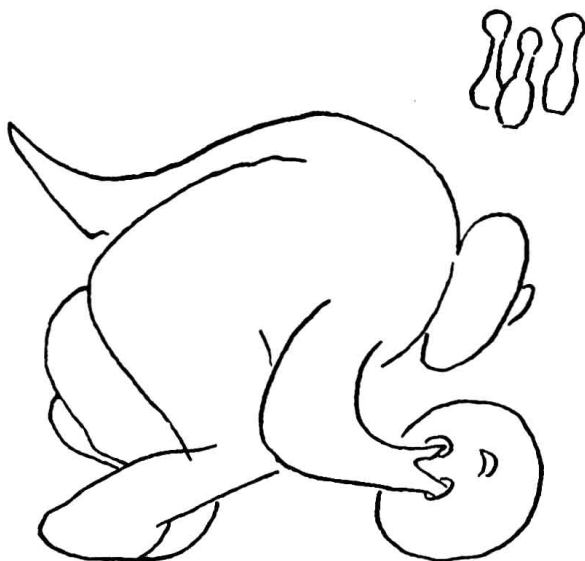
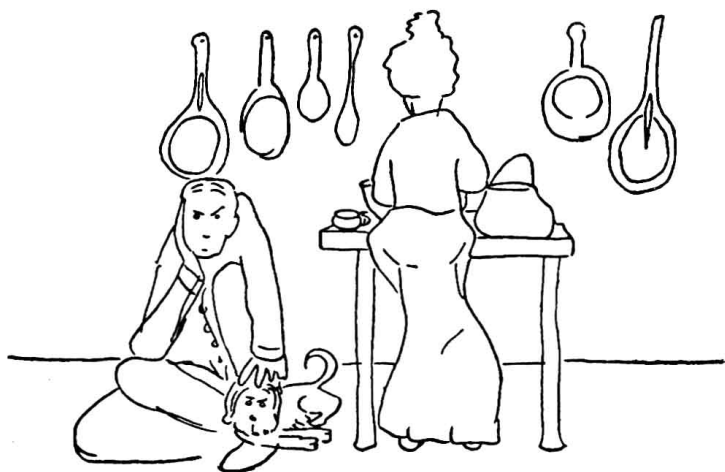


Fig. 2. Sex Substitutes (*Übertragung Period*): Bowling.

When men, wearied of games, turned to women with that urgency so notable in the American male for its simplicity and directness, they found them unprepared for acceptance and surrender. The process of adjustment in courtship and in marriage became more involved than it had ever been before in the history of the country, if not in the history of the world. The new outdoors type of American man, with all his strength and impetuosity, was not easily to be put off. But the female, equipped with a Defense far superior in polymorphous ingenuities to the rather simple Attack of the male, was prepared. She developed and perfected the Diversion Subterfuge. Its purpose was to put Man in his place. Its first manifestation was fudge-making.

The effectiveness of fudge-making in fending off the male and impressing him with the female's divine unapproachability

can not be over-estimated. Neither can its potentiality as a nuclear complex. The flitting from table to stove, the constant necessity of stirring the boiling confection, the running out-



FUDGE-MAKING

“The female, equipped with a Defense far superior in polymorphous ingenuities to the rather simple Attack of the male, developed, and perfected, the Diversion Subterfuge. The first manifestation of this remarkable phenomenon was fudge-making.”

of-doors to see if the candy had cooled and hardened, served to abort any objective demonstrations at all on the part of the male. He met this situation with a strong Masculine Protest. He began to bring a box of candy with him when he called, so that there would not be any more fudge-making. These years constituted the great Lowney's era in this country. Brought back to where she had started, face to face with the male's simple desire to sit down and hold her, the female, still intent upon avoidance of the tactual, retaliated by suggesting Indoor Pastimes—one of the greatest of all Delay Mechanisms. All manner of parlor games came into being at this period, notably charades,* which called for the presence of

*See Glossary, definition No. (1).