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David L. Rowland
*Valparaiso University*, david.rowland@valpo.edu

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## Recommended Citation

Rowland, D. L. (2016). The enigma of sexual desire, part 1: a brief review of classical, historical, philosophical, and literary perspectives. Current Sexual Health Reports, 8(3), 158–162. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-016-0078-x

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Curr Sex Health Rep (2016) 8:158–162
DOI 10.1007/s11930-016-0078-x

INTEGRATING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL (B MCCARTHY, RT SEGRAVES AND AH CLAYTON, SECTION EDITORS)

# The Enigma of Sexual Desire, Part 1: A Brief Review of Classical, Historical, Philosophical, and Literary Perspectives

**David L. Rowland**[1]

Published online: 13 May 2016
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**Abstract** Throughout human history and across cultures, sexual desire has been of interest to the general public and, now more recently, to the medical/psychological community. Part 1 of this two part series examines the historical aspects of the concept of sexual desire throughout its many transformations, beginning with the writings and mythologies of the ancient Greeks and extending through the ages to the present through the writings of philosophers, playwrights, novelists, and historians. We explore the concept of desire as both a tolerated and celebrated construct over the ages, discussing Western sociocultural perspectives regarding its nature and condition. In our view, such an historical perspective both provides a foundation for the scientific investigation of sexual desire and sheds light on issues currently being discussed with respect to sexual desire, as delineated in Part 2.

**Keywords** Sexual desire · Sexual motivation · Classical-historical · Literary · Philosophical

## Introduction

> What desire can be contrary to nature, since it was given to man by nature itself?
> –Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*

This article is part of the Topical Collection on *Integrating the Psychosocial*

✉ David L. Rowland
david.rowland@valpo.edu

[1] Department of Psychology, Valparaiso University, 1001 Campus Drive, Valparaiso, IN 46383, USA

Libido, lust, sexual drive, desire, sexual interest, sexual urge… Call it what you will, it has been a topic of deep interest since humans first found words to describe their sexual/romantic interactions. It has altered history, led to the rise and fall of empires, been romanticized and demonized in writings and literary works, and been the object of control, curbing, and/or suppression by both the Church and the State.

Pervasive and long lasting as the concept is, the idea of sexual desire eludes precise description—it is neither tangible nor directly observable, although most people can identify it when they experience it. Its embodiment in language has been the subject of discussion ever since it was first placed under the scrutiny of scientific investigation. The conditions that give rise to it are broad and often inexplicable—individuals themselves are frequently puzzled by the origins of their own feelings of desire and lust. Although children may experience rudimentary forms of sexual desire, its onset is typically associated with puberty and adolescence.

In this two part series, we explore the concept of sexual desire, not only as a contemporary idea that has undergone recent revision in sexual medicine, but as a concept that has been of interest to the general populace over time, and more specifically to sexologists and psychologists since the late 1800s. We begin in part 1 with selective reference to various non-science writers, including philosophers, novelists/authors, historians, and theologians, with the intent of capturing perspectives from those writers. Then, in part 2, we track the development of the concept of sexual desire as it became a topic of academic interest and study, explicating a number of significant viewpoints along the way. With the advent of psychological science and medicine, this driving life force—in the popular literature alternately viewed as either good or evil, or sometimes just a necessary bother—has been dissected and analyzed as a phenomenon to explain psychological processes such as thoughts, feelings, motives, attitudes, and behaviors.

Although "sexual desire" is the nominal topic of this paper, we define the concept broadly. While not all terms are synonymous—libido, passion, desire, interest, and drive, each

conveying its own nuance—we treat them as equals: they all embrace a common element of the human experience—the desire for sex and/or sexual intimacy with another. While the sexological/sexual medicine community has preferred the term sexual desire—such language having now become firmly entrenched in clinical texts—the understanding of this human phenomenon extends beyond the boundaries of science and medicine. Although precision and consensus may be sacrificed as a result of using broad terminology, substantial insight is inevitably gained.

> Desire makes everything blossom; possession makes everything wither and fade.
> –Marcel Proust, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*

### Aims of This Two Part Paper

The goal of part 1 of this treatise is to recognize the rich and varied understanding of sexual desire as a phenomenon critical to the human experience that has shaped (and continues to shape) Western thinking. The goals of part 2 are (1) to track the various lines of academic/scientific thinking regarding this concept and (2) to provide reflection and commentary on the status of the concept of sexual desire.

## Historical and Non-Science Perspectives: Influences on Western Thinking

Sexual desire has been viewed as both the blessing and the bane of human existence. The theme is frequently encountered in literature and history, and no less in religious scripture and other interpretive writings. Desire is concomitantly viewed as a great motivator (e.g., F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda, Ferdinand and Isabella), and something to be tolerated (e.g., Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson), and a great destroyer (e.g., Antony and Cleopatra). In this section, we select samples, writings, and examples of sexual desire throughout the ages, illustrating society's somewhat schizoid (i.e., changing frequently between opposite states) view toward the construct.

> It is not poverty which produces sorrow, but desire.
> –Epictetus, Greek Stoic philosopher, *Fragments*

### The Classical Writers

Greek and Roman mythology and folklore (stories handed down orally about the gods or, respectively, ordinary people) and writings have much to say about sexual desire, both directly and indirectly. Sex and desire were discussed openly by philosophers, represented in their gods (Aphrodite and Eros; pleasure was the offspring resulting from the union of Eros and Psyche), often presented as an important theme within mythology and plays, and commonly depicted in artistic work on pottery or murals in brothels and private houses. For example, the *Odyssey* contains elements of desire and romance in the context of Menelaus, Helen of Troy, and Paris; the story of Leander and Hero conjures up images of long-lasting passion and desire,[1] and the enslavement of Daphne and Chloe by passion and love is still recounted today [1•, 2]. The Roman poet Ovid (second century A.D.), in his *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love) and two-related volumes [3, 4], essentially provided tips on relationships, including a manual for various sexual positions and how to increase desire in a potential partner, although he was later banished from the Roman Empire by Augustus on the grounds that this work undermined the institution of marriage. The Roman poet Catullus and Greek lyricist Sappho were both noted for their erotic poems [5].

While it is difficult to provide a succinct summary of classical thinking, several themes appear to predominate and/or recur. Sexual desire was viewed as a natural urge, and for the most part was seen as acceptable when both controlled and expressed within an appropriate context. Although Greeks were generally monogamous, that context may not have necessarily been marriage, as marriage was typically arranged and understood as the means for producing offspring and heirs. Rather for men, courtesans and concubines appeared to serve as an outlet for sexual urges [1•, 6]. In Greek mythology and tragedy, problems typically arose when sexual desire went unchecked—unrestrained female desire in particular was seen as destructive, as presented in Euripides' *Hyppolitus* or Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, women who were willing to lie and scheme to achieve selfish aims [7]. But Livy's later narrative about Rome iterates a similar point regarding men [8]. Thus, much classical writing about sexual desire revolved around the importance of restraint, with prolonged sexual indulgence leading not only to personal ruin but also, according to some, to physical problems.

Greek philosophers expounded on some of these ideas [1•]. Plato takes a favorable view toward love and desire, identifying them as superhuman inspiration, but relegating this initially to pederastic unions, until sometime later repudiating his own perspective and identifying desire as necessary for procreation. Aristotle, on the other hand, paid less attention to affection and desire, viewing it intellectually as a gift from god and as a potential path toward virtue. In contrast, the Epicureans viewed love as an impetuous appetite for sexual pleasure, accompanied by frenzy and torment—thus a quality that had few if any benefits and many possible downsides. The

[1] Leander swam across the straits each night to Hero, guided by a lamp that she lit on top of her house. Hero jumps to her death when her lover, Leander, could not find his way one night as he swam across the straits because the stormy night had extinguished the lamp.

Epicurean poet Lucretius attempted to sever the tie between the sentiment of love (something to be avoided) and the physical pleasure of intercourse (something considered beneficial). The Stoics and Cynics, respectively, championed sexual passion or rejected it as being contrary to a life of virtue.

Thus, both the Greeks and the Romans had mixed views toward sexual desire, accepting it as a part of human nature, extolling it in some instances as an important aspect of loving relationships yet advocating the need to conquer it in others. Left unchecked, it could bring both torment to oneself and ruin to others. They acknowledged that women have sexual desire, but warned against its ill-effects should it become too strong. At the same time, no moral judgments were made, no sins committed, no guilt felt, no forbidden fruit tasted—excess was not a matter of right or wrong, but simply something that could lead to serious trouble. Self-control was viewed as a noble virtue.

> If I had a desire, it would be to be free from desire.
> —Charles Manson

## Issues of Religion, Morality, and Medicine

Early Christian church writers pondered the question of sexuality and human nature. In some respects, they paid homage to the admirable virtues of ancient Greece; in other respects, they carried ideas much further. St. Paul, for example, praises celibacy over marriage (“It is good for a man not to touch a woman”), yet recognizes that human nature (sexual desire) is a powerful force to be reckoned, so “to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife and every woman have her own husband…..if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn” [9]. He continues by stating: “He who marries does *well,* and he who refrains from marrying will do *better*,” thus recognizing the inevitability of human nature while cautioning against it as the lesser of two choices. In effect, “put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” [9].

Compare Paul’s view with the writings of fourth century influential Christian theologian St. Augustine. A libertine in his early years, Augustine eventually came to regret his early cavorting, and is perhaps noted for his *Confessions* in which he identifies sexual impulses as negative and debasing, describing them as a disease, a shackle, a thorn, a whirlpool, and an open sore that must be scratched. Desire was a compulsion that could only be controlled with God’s help. Augustine was not the only one to advocate that sex and marriage were best given up, but his view—that sex and original sin were to be equated—helped cast Western society’s negativism toward sexuality. In his *The City of God,* St. Augustine says, “Man’s transgression (i.e., Adam and Eve’s sin) did not annul the blessing of fertility bestowed upon him before he sinned, but infected it with the disease of lust” [10, 11].

So while Christianity replaced the seductive Eve with the virginal Mary, tolerated sex within marriage, and viewed procreation as the only legitimate reason for sex (pleasure was not the purpose of sex, but rather a collateral benefit, though not shared, or to be shared, equally by men and women), theory and practice seldom fully coincided. Despite strong strictures against pre-marital and extra-marital sex, certain sexual positions and activities, homosexuality, and prostitution, sexual dalliances were not uncommon. In fact, the Church of the Middle Ages was known for licentiousness and sexual liaisons among the (supposedly celibate) hierarchy and clergy, an attestation to the power of sexual urges and a trend that led both to the Reformation (that abandoned celibacy) and eventually to further strictures upon both clergy and laity.

Not surprisingly, however, history is peppered with exceptions to uniformity of thought and behavior about sexual desire. For example, the eighteenth century *Encyclopedie* states that “masturbation…motivated only by need is not in any way harmful and, therefore, in no way wrong,” a perspective that led Rousseau to reaffirm the dangers of this type of sexual activity, despite his own admission of guilt [12]. Further, during the nineteenth century, numerous investigations and conversations were occurring among physicians in England and continental Europe regarding sexuality, pleasure, fertility, and reproduction [13]. For example, long-standing questions regarding the relationship of fertility to pleasure in women were a topic of debate (was there a correlation between orgasm and conception?). Indeed, in the first systematic survey of its sort, a well-known London surgeon originally convinced that the absence of sexual pleasure (orgasm) was the major cause of infertility in women, was surprised to learn that 79 % of sterile women who sought his consultation reported sexual desire, and 68 % reported sexual pleasure. Thus not only was there active discussion of issues surrounding sexual desire and pleasure in women during this time, but numerous case studies, hypotheses (many proposed by Freud), anatomical analyses, and even surveys investigating the issue were reported and distributed within medical circles.

Nevertheless, tolerance of sex as a necessary annoyance was once again roundly reinforced during the nineteenth century Victorian era, to the extent that sex for pleasure (rather than procreation) was viewed as sinful, especially for women who were seen as asexual vessels intended only for procreation. Indeed, the catchall phrase “lie back and think of England” presumably had its origins from this era. Victorian principles, both culturally and religiously reinforced, took root across the Atlantic and were strongly promulgated in parts of America, for example, in the American South/Mississippi Delta region. Perhaps the obvious conclusion from the disinterested observer of these times was that men were afflicted by their sexual desire, learned to tolerate it, and more nobly confine it to marriage and that women had no sexual desire (or if they did it was improper and scandalous) and for the most part endured sex for the purpose of procreation. Thus, the idea of

the asexual, non-desirous woman was assumed and accepted, an image that was later to be questioned during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Even before that, however, expression of sexual drive was forbidden in most societies, masturbation (perhaps the rawest expression of sexual drive) being prohibited by various Christian and Muslim groups.[2]

With the waning influence of religious orthodoxy, the latter half of the twentieth century ushered in birth control, Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, the sexual revolution, free love, equal rights, and women's empowerment—and a new attitude toward sex that valued both sexual desire and sexual pleasure e.g.,[15]. With it came new perspectives and definitions within psychiatry and medicine regarding revised norms for sexual expression and behavior. In the USA, this new freedom was later mitigated by the AIDS epidemic, teen pregnancy, a backlash of "family values" promoted by the Christian right, and abstinence, resulting in a cultural divide regarding sexual openness that persists yet today in the USA.

"But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage."
–William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

## Literature

As noted above, far from uniformity in thinking/attitudes over the ages, alternative attitudes toward sexuality and desire have often been endorsed by various countercultures and subcultures and/or during various epochs of the Christian era, some of which were captured in the writings of poets, novelists, and playwrights. Sometimes reflecting the predominating attitudes, sometimes challenging them, and sometimes provoking alternative attitudes, the literature of the day provided frequent exploration of and social commentary on issues of sexual desire. For example, the twelfth century tale of Tristan and Isolde, the story of a forbidden but passionate and lusty relationship between a knight and princess, ends either in tragedy and death, or "happily ever after," depending on the specific version. The narrative, which exalts love and passion over pre-arranged conjugal unions (status quo for the times), most likely influenced the romance of the Arthurian legend—the love triangle involving Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot—and marked a reaction to Christianity and the doctrine of marriage [16].

Nevertheless, the Middle Ages also gave rise to the concept of chivalry, including ideas of a "proper sexuality." The main text of the time, Andreas Capellanus' work *The Book of Courtly Love* (1186–1190), instructed that the knight experiencing desire for a lady should sublimate that desire, with the ideal being to worship her from afar [17]. Love entered in at the eye—literally an image of the beloved entered the knight/squire's body through his eye—and devotion was the proper expression of love/desire. In fact, the lady was supposed to act with indifference or even cruelty to her knight so he could prove her strong love for her. Glancing at one another and perhaps receiving a token (like a scarf or some small "favor") was the extent of physical contact between them. The cult of courtly love developed around Eleanor of Aquitaine, considered the ideal queen at the time, and foreshadowed the virgin queen notion of the Renaissance (see below). The Knight's Tale, the first of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (late fourteenth century), represents the quintessential depiction of this ideology [18].

Later, diversity of perspective was common not only in Britain but also in continental Europe and the USA. For example, although the Church and the State strictures were basically unchanged, precept and practice diverged substantially. Despite the glorification of the virgin queen image, sixteenth century Elizabethan attitudes toward sexual activity were generally quite open—prostitution and promiscuity (extra- and pre-marital sex) appeared to be not infrequent as indicated by the legal records, art, and writings of the time. Shakespeare, the dominant playwright of the period and himself father of an illegitimate child, included sexuality and gender as major themes, with frequent commentary on fluidity of gender roles as well as on the nature of sexual desire. He explored the nature of desire in both his sonnets and plays, often wrestling with the tension between raw sexual desire that seeks immediate gratification and desire as part of a loving relationship, though not necessarily within the context of marriage [19].

Various iconoclastic literary works appeared periodically over the next centuries. *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Cleland, 1749) rattled English society and was for years banned in many countries as prurient and pornographic [20]. Notorious for its vivid depiction of sexual exploits, the novel engages the reader in erotic and seductive fantasies as Fanny describes her world of lust, sexual hunger, and pleasure. Fanny's perspective was "matter of fact" and non-judgmental. More recently, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) shocked sensibilities, written as a somewhat autobiographical narrative about his sexual exploits while in Paris—Miller was considered a disciplined writer who saw sexual freedom as an adjunct to other personal liberties. His discourse about sex was less about communion with another, and more about the raw biological instinct that could serve as its own endpoint [21]. In theater, plays such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Tennessee Williams,

[2] Although Islamic perspectives on sexuality have not been discussed here, there appears to be less negativity/guilt surrounding sex (at least in men) and a general recognition of human nature's imperative to procreate through strong sexual urges [14]. At the same time, elements of the Islamic view toward women (or at least its cultural interpretation in some parts of the world) do not generally align well with contemporary Western thinking.

1947) and, more poignantly, *Desire under the Elms* (Eugene O'Neill, 1924) explored issues of sexuality and desire, the latter play being something of modern version of Euripides' *Hippolytus* involving the taboo theme of a father returning home with a new wife who then falls in love with her stepson [22, 23].

Many notable writers (Philip Roth, Erica Jong, John Updike, Vladimir Nabokov, to name a few) followed in the wake of early twentieth century authors' exploration of sexuality, using the new sexual awareness supported by the new age of sex research to explore the mystique of sexual desire and its relationship to love and human connection. In some respects, these authors' writings parallel the rise in the scientific study of sexuality: while science investigated sexuality from a sterile, laboratory point of view, the literary community explored the phenomenological side of sexuality, attempting to find communion with others and meaning (or lack of it) through sexual experiences or exploits [24]. The discussion is far from over and continues to be both ongoing and lively, with contemporary commentary including homoerotic and women's sexual desire [25, 26].

## Conclusions

Sexual desire has been alternately viewed as positive or negative; social systems have indicated the need to control or curb it, with wide variation depending on the situation (extra-marital, pre-marital) and the object of desire (children/adolescents, person of the same sex). From the classical standpoint, self-control was seen as a noble virtue; during the later Christian era, it was seen as an issue of morality, often being written into the Church and State law. In contemporary Western society, sexual desire and its consequent behaviors continue to be both legitimized and condemned, depending on specific socially defined situations and subgroup beliefs.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of Interest** DLR declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

**Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent** This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

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Part II of this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11930-016-0079-9.