

If this be heresy ...

Is pornography harmful to children?

Albert Ellis, Ph.D.

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Now that sexually liberal literature, such as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, has been found to have redeeming literary value in some instances and therefore to be suitable reading material for adults, American puritans have begun to campaign against this kind of material on the ground that it is pernicious for children and therefore should be banned, or at least seriously restricted, from public sale. A New York priest has even gone on a supposed fast to the point of death in order to dramatically protest against the sale of pornography to children; and his activity has gained much popular support and put renewed pressure on public officials to censor sex literature.

The general assumption of most people seems to be that even if highly spiced stories and poems will not (as long as they are perfumed by the magic wand of literary merit) seriously harm adults, this same material will somehow wreak irreparable emotional and physical damage on youngsters. This assumption is pontifically reiterated on innumerable occasions, as if there were a body of scientific information to support it. Actually, there is no such information: for the simple reason that no studies of even a small group of children who have read considerable amounts of pornography and another control group which has not had any experience with such literature ever seem to have been done.

The direct results which, it is alleged, would undoubtedly result if young people did read highly salacious literature seem to be highly speculative. Indeed, in many respects these dismal predictions are clearly fictional, since it is known that literally millions of contemporary adults *did* have considerable contact with what would usually be called hard core pornography during their childhood or adolescence, and it is reasonably clear that not all of these poor unfortunates have ended up with sexual perversions, broken marriages, problems of impotence or frigidity, or serious neurosis or psychosis. Many, indeed, have actually managed to thrive very well on their wickedly lascivious childhood experiences.

The question must therefore be raised: *Is* pornography harmful to children? Granted that most of it is hardly the best literature ever written, does it really sear the souls of its young readers and render them forever after horren-

dously crippled? Let us—for a change—now give a little thought to this matter, to see what the likelihood is of real harm evolving from a child's surfeiting himself with the most prurient kind of written or graphically depicted sex material.

The youngster in our society who scans some amount of pornography is likely to experience the following reactions:

1. He may be led to begin to masturbate; or, if he has already started this practice, to engage in it more often than he would otherwise do. All right: what if he does? As I have shown in *Sex and the Single Man* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1963) and various other writings, masturbation is rarely a harmful or bad act, but is indeed one of the most beneficial and harmless modes of behavior ever invented by boy or man. Particularly if a youngster is not having other forms of sex relations, there is every reason to believe that he should be masturbating; and if his reading of salacious literature helps him to do so, good! Maybe it would be better if his parents got him a copy of *Fanny Hill* for his birthday, than getting him a pair of skis or a sled—with either of which he is likely to break his neck.

[Editor's note: The *New York Times* this month would not permit use even of the word "masturbation" in an ad for *Sex and the Single Man*. Nor would they accept the following quote from the book: "As long as you attempt to induce a girl to have sex relations with you in an aboveboard, honest manner, and as long as you try to help her to eradicate any of her guilty feelings which may possibly arise as a result of her being seduced, you are then doing your best to avoid needlessly and deliberately harming this girl and you are not, in any accurate sense of the term, immoral." *Sex and the Single Man* is available from the *Realist* for \$5.]

2. The child who comes in contact with highly lecherous prose or illustrations may be encouraged to have overt sex relations with members of the other sex, instead of confining himself to masturbation. Well, what if he is? If he learns to get to orgasm—as millions of young people seem to learn even without the help of pornography—he will be doing probably the most useful and best form of sex activity that he could

be doing at his age; and will, moreover, be helping himself (or herself) to achieve healthy and happy sex relations in later life.

If he actually engages in coitus, he will again tend to get exceptionally useful and beneficial experiences, and the only real harm that is likely to result is if he in the process acquires a venereal disease or makes his partner pregnant. Obviously, therefore, she should not so much be kept from reading salacious literature but should be taught prophylaxis or encouraged to pet to orgasm rather than to have full coitus. His pornography-impelled sex relations, if such relations actually do occur, are themselves harmless, as long as he is properly prepared to have them. Since he can also easily have them without any resort to lascivious reading and graphic material, he'd damned well better be properly prepared for overt sex activities by any sane adult who has some responsibility for his upbringing.

3. The young person who peruses pornographic literature may be encouraged to engage in various sex perversions, such as homosexuality, sadism, masochism, or noncoital heterosexual relations (e.g., oral-genital relations) leading to orgasm. Although this certainly is possible, there are several counter-arguments which are relevant: (a) Most of the highly salacious sex literature is exceptionally heterosexual and is likely to enhance rather than sabotage heterosexuality. (b) Sadism and/or masochism are indeed encouraged by some pornography (as they are also encouraged by much comic book literature which is far from being pornographic or even sexy); but most individuals who patronize this kind of literature appear to do so because they are *already* emotionally disturbed, and find that it caters to their disturbances, rather than because they *become* aberrated through viewing this kind of material. (c) Oral-genital relations and other kinds of noncoital sex activity are *not* true sex deviations, but are part of very normal heterosexual behavior; and the youngster who learns about these kinds of activities from salacious stories and pictures is getting a much better kind of sex education than the youth who is brought up to believe that all noncoital sex acts are abnormal and wicked.
4. Pornography may induce a child to become obsessed with sexual ideas and to ruminate about sex much of the time. This may be true for *some* children (especially those who tend, in general, to be obsessive-compulsive) but there is no reason to believe that it is true of most youngsters who view salacious material. On the contrary, children usually tend to become much more obsessed with the unknown than with the known; and the more they see of sexual representations, the less likely they are likely to ruminate

about the “mysteries” of sex.

Moreover, the material in our society that is most likely to lead to obsessive sex thoughts on the part of children (and adults) is the semi-salacious material put out by Hollywood, the TV spectacles, the men's magazines, and other sources. For this kind of mass media portraiture hints and insinuates *without* giving any of the real details about sex, and it leaves much more to the imagination than does forthright pornography. The only effective way of discouraging a youngster from having obsessive sex thoughts is to help him have actual sex practice—particularly, as noted above, in petting to orgasm with members of the other sex. If we really want to stop teenagers from being sexually obsessed, why don't we advocate *that* practical plan?

5. Highly arousing sex literature may create unrealistically great expectations in the youngsters who view this literature that they are not going to be able to fulfill in actual practice, and may thereby lead to ultimate sex disillusionment. This is indeed true. As the Kronhausens have shown in their study of *Pornography and the Law* (New York: Ballantine, 1959), prurient novels almost always depict highly-sexed females who are ever-ready to rape almost any male who hovers into sight; and such females are, of course, amazingly rare in actual life.

But children's literature in general, especially the fairy tales and fables that are most popular, is quite unrealistic; and adult non-pornographic literature—especially, again, the popular stories of the women's magazines and the bestselling novels—is also full of romantic illusion. At least *part* of the pornographic material (that is, the down-to-earth sex part) tends to be realistic; and many of the novels which have most often been accused of being pornographic in our time—such as *Ulysses*, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, and *Tropic of Cancer*—are among the most realistic works ever produced. Almost all hard core pornography, in fact, is a hell of a lot more true to life than are such famous child classics as the Tom Swift, the Tarzan, and the Rover Boys books.

6. Hard core erotic literature may be poorly written and may be of dubious literary worth. True. But so may be, and actually is, most nonsexual literature that children imbibe by the cartload. The regular comic strips and comic books that seem to be perhaps the main reading fare of children these days are hardly works of artistic merit; and almost any child would be much better off, from the standpoint of his esthetic education, if he read John Cleland, the Marquis de Sade, James Joyce, and Henry Miller than if he kept to his usual diet of Dick Tracy and Superman.

It has to be admitted that most pornography is pretty awful stuff, esthetically speaking. But perhaps if we make this kind of writing more respectable, we can help raise its standards so that the esthetic sensitivities of young people will not be unduly offended by the hackwork level of composition that more often than not presently goes into it.

alike, a far lesser evil than would be that of suppressing freedom of speech and press in a futile effort to make all of us truly pure. I would much rather my own child be “sullied” by resort to bawdy literature than be a respectable, unsexed nincompoop.

It can be seen, by reviewing the foregoing objections to letting children have free access to pornography, that these cavils are not very well taken, and that to say the least the case against allowing them this kind of access is hardly proved. It should also be noted that there are at least a few valid reasons why youngsters should actually at times be encouraged to read this kind of material. Thus, by having some contact with pornography, they will fill in many salient details of their sex education; they will be particularly apprised of the fact that heterosexual coitus is a damned good act and should be eagerly sought throughout one’s life; they will be given many practical ideas of how to enjoy themselves in noncoital as well as coital ways; and they will sometimes become so satiated with viewing sex activities that they will realize that there are no real mysteries about sex and will go about the other aspects of their lives in a non-obsessed, healthy manner.

Another point that is often made in the psychological literature should be noted; and that is that an unusually repressive society such as our own, where considerable innuendo about sex activities is bruited about from every mass media (including even the pulpit, which often has *its* sexually inflammatory aspects), and where actual sex engagement on the part of young people is particularly prohibited and made difficult, the perusing of notably sexualized representations, or so-called pornography, by our youngsters may sometimes act as a safety valve, in that it gives them *some* kind of an outlet for their pent-up desires and feelings. Thus, the youth who can read about and imagine sadistic sex engagements may sometimes be better able to refrain from getting actively involved in such affairs, while if he had no outlets whatever of this toned-down nature, he might be more inclined to act out his bottled-up urges.

For a good many reasons, then, not only has it not been demonstrated that a child’s perusing pornographic material is indubitably going to harm him, but there is some reason to believe that in our present society he may easily derive more good than harm from such perusal. It is my belief that if we did have a saner kind of sexual mores, including much more permissiveness and actual overt activity from adolescence onward, practically all pornographic and semi-pornographic literature would lose its interest for us, and would die a natural death.

But since we don’t have civilized sexual morality, but are still deeply enmeshed in the barbarisms bequeathed to us by our Judeo-Christian forefathers, we do keep resorting to much meretricious pornography. This is too bad; but all things considered, it may well be, for children and adults