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## **Is Kindness Possible In Sex?**

### **Rapture and Ethics in American Life and Drama**

*By Len Bernstein*

Once it would never have occurred to me even to put the words sex and kindness in the same sentence. I did want to see myself as considerate; but when I was close to a woman I mainly wanted her to be in a rapture over me while the world disappeared; and I felt it was impossible for a man to touch a woman and be kind. Sex, I thought, was the kiss of death to friendship between a man and woman, bringing pain and resentment, and I didn't know why.

Men don't know how desperate they are to have genuine kindness. Eli Siegel, the American educator and founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism, defined kindness as "that in a self which wants other things to be rightly pleased." I have seen on the most intimate level that when a man is truly interested in having the woman he is close to care more for the world, be in a better relation to it, there come to be pride and pleasure that are unmatched; a man experiences the sweeping emotion he longs for—and with all I still have to learn, I count myself one of the luckiest men in America because I experience this in my marriage of over 35 years to Harriet Bernstein.

#### **I. What I Have Learned, Every Man Can**

The first time I met Harriet, I was smitten by her looks and calm, graceful manner. And I respected her very much for her field of study, the speech and hearing sciences. As we got to know each other, I saw the thoughtful way she listened to people, and then she could dance at a party with an abandon that thrilled me. She was a relation of body and intellect I found irresistible, and I also felt she had a gentleness I lacked. But I regret that from the beginning of our relationship I turned every instance of warmth and friendliness on her part, a touch on my arm, a kiss on the cheek, into an overture for sex, and was much more interested in Harriet's showing devotion to me than in wanting to know who she was or what she was most hoping for. This, Aesthetic Realism explains, is contempt, the "false importance or glory from the lessening of things not oneself" and it made me unkind. Then, when Harriet had the "nerve" to question my purposes with her, I pouted, whined, and accused her of being cold. I thought sex was sheer animal instinct that should not be denied, and like most men, I felt justified in any subterfuge to get it. Meanwhile, inwardly I despised myself for this attitude, even as I was driven to continue with it. I didn't know then what I have since learned, and when I read these sentences by Eli Siegel from his essay "What Opposes Love?" I felt enormous relief and hope:

Love is either a possibility of seeing the world differently because something different from ourselves is seen as needed and lovely; or it is an extension of our imperialistic approval of ourselves in such a way that we have a carnal satellite.

Men have had their imperialistic selfishness encouraged by the way sex is written of in the press. Take, for example, these representative sentences, from an article titled "You're Hot, She's Not," in *Men's Health* magazine (Jan. 1999):

In a new relationship, a man's testosterone is usually driving him to fulfill his sexual desires. So he'll find all sorts of ways—gifts, compliments, extra attention—to make a woman feel special enough to open herself to him sexually. In turn, she feels desired, loved, and trusting—all of which makes her more amenable to lovemaking.

This description is demeaning of both women and men. Men are portrayed as ethical wastelands who need to use fake kindness—"gifts, compliments, extra attention"—to get what they want from a woman. Women are seen as simpletons, unaware they are being duped. But no man in history, or in a singles bar tonight ever respected himself for this contemptuous way of seeing a woman.

I felt new pride learning that every man judges himself on whether he is ethical or not, kind or not. At the height of Sigmund Freud's hurtful influence, Eli Siegel, in his 1949 lecture *Mind and Kindness*, was courageously explaining:

Love should be attended by kindness, but it most often isn't....The idea is to put together the utmost in carnality, the utmost in fleshly ecstasy, with the utmost good will or kindness....Most often love goes along with a known or unknown cruelty; and then, the sex is bad.

Here is the comprehension that can end the centuries-old agony between men and women. Because of it, I no longer feel that sex is a private demon to be caged and dealt with, but a means of greater love for my wife and a like of the world she stands for, including in my work as a photographer.

## **II. What Does an American Play Say about Kindness and Sex?**

I discuss now scenes from the play *The Animal Kingdom*, by Philip Barry, a comedy in three acts, with dialogue that is witty, subtle, and deep. It was made into a fine film, starring Leslie Howard, Myrna Loy, and Anne Harding. Philip Barry, an important playwright, is also the author of *The Philadelphia Story*, and *Holiday*. And *The Animal Kingdom*, though written in 1932, is more honestly bold than many contemporary plays and films in showing human nature, without the clothes coming off, even once. I think the drama of this play is about whether the deepest desire of men and women is to be kind or to have sex; and can sex itself be kind?

The three main characters are Tom Collier, owner of a small publishing house; Cecilia Henry, a glamorous "society" woman Tom marries; and Daisy Sage, a magazine illustrator and artist he had lived with for three years. Tom shows the debate men are in between wanting to have large respect for a woman's mind, her power of intellect, and wanting to have a woman soothe his ego and serve him, including in sex. Though he is intensely interested in fine books—both their content and beauty of appearance, in his relations with women he makes a common mistake of men—using a woman's pleasing appearance to dismiss her depths. And though he is sharply critical of the greed, the desire for acquisition, and lack of feeling in members of high society, Tom does not see where he is going after this himself.

Cecilia Henry, the woman he will marry, wants a "comfortable" life among the "right" people, and feels Tom, under her influence, can provide her with these things. She represents that desire in every person to see ourselves as the center of a universe that pales in comparison to us.

I think Daisy Sage is the hero of the play because even as she makes mistakes she has a large desire to be honest in her life and her work as a painter—and when she learns that Tom is going to marry another woman, though saddened, she tries to be kind.

The opening scene is in Tom's home where Cecilia is waiting for him so they can announce their engagement. Present is Tom's wealthy father Rufus, who disapproves of his son's desire to be ethical in business, feeling it is a liability; there is 'Red' Regan, the butler, a former boxer and Tom's friend of many years who, while they wait for Tom, brings in a telegram and leaves it on the table. Tom arrives late and rushes to embrace Cecilia, ignoring Red who tries telling him about the telegram.

The conversations between Tom and Cecilia are often teasing repartee that skims the surface, and has a "playfulness" that is really mean because their purpose is not to respect each other. Tom says to Cecilia, whom he likes to call "C":

*Tom:* I haven't been very good about marriage. I was exposed to a very bad case of it as a baby. We must make a grand go of it.

*Cecilia:* We shall, never you fear...

*Tom:* Just do everything I say, and it will be all right.

*Cecilia:* With pleasure. [He gazes at her.

*Tom:* C, what a marvelous object you are...

This seeming reverence and adulation—calling a woman "a marvelous object"—is not kindness; it is patronizing contempt, and I have done it. A man will praise a woman exorbitantly and expect the same from her, thinking she is unkind if she withholds it.

Crucial to my understanding of American drama and life is my study in professional classes taught by Ellen Reiss, Chairman of Aesthetic Realism. In a class discussion some

years ago, when I spoke, with some arrogance, about feeling I wasn't getting enough approval from my wife, I was fortunate to be asked by Ms. Reiss, if a woman were to do my bidding and approve of me unquestioningly, how would I see her? I said I wasn't sure. She asked, "If five women right now said 'How wonderful you are,' what would you think of them?" I knew right away. "I'd have contempt," I answered. "And do you think somewhere you'd have contempt for yourself?" "Yes," I said. I got a sight of new possibilities in myself when Ellen Reiss then said:

We do have to ask what we're really looking for....Do you think you can see respect as what it really is—the warmest thing in the world, and also the most romantic thing in the world?

I'm in the midst of seeing the meaning of this every day! My studies have made me kinder, and able to have greater passion and respect for my dear wife, Harriet. As I hold her in my arms, the whole world is closer to me; she stirs me and my perception is deeper about everything—from a conversation, to what I see through the viewfinder of my camera.

### **III. Do We Want to be Swept by the World or Have It Serve Us?**

In the play, Tom reads the telegram Red left on the table, and learns it's from Daisy who is returning from Europe after three months on a magazine assignment. Tom realizes she did not receive his letter telling about his engagement to Cecilia. As he talks about Daisy, Cecilia masks her displeasure:

*Tom:* C, Daisy has done more for me than anyone in this world. She's the best friend I've got. I believe she always will be. I'd hate terribly to lose her....

*Cecilia:* Is she attractive, Tom?

*Tom:* To me, she is. She's about so high, and made of platinum wire and sand.—You wouldn't like me half so well, if Daisy hadn't knocked some good sense into me.

Tom's description of Daisy—as "made of platinum wire and sand"—is very surprising, but I think there's something very good in it that can be understood through this historic principle stated by Eli Siegel:

All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.

The qualities in Daisy that affect Tom stand for opposites: platinum, a precious metal, has a beautiful hardness and smoothness and seems to represent something unified; and sand, with its rough earthiness and softness, has tremendous, unending manyness—it is both timeless and everyday. And like the name Barry chose for her, Daisy Sage has brightness and wisdom. Aesthetic Realism explains that for a man to be kind, he has to see a woman

as having the structure of reality in her, a oneness of opposites that he wants to respect and is proud to be stirred by.

When Tom goes to see Daisy and tell her of his coming marriage, she is pained, not only at losing him, but because she knows something of Cecilia Henry's nature. She tries to be brave, and says she hopes that Cecilia will care for Tom as much as she does. As Daisy and Tom speak about how they see each other, he says he felt their relationship had cooled some time ago, when they weren't having sex with the same frequency as when they first met. Daisy says no: "I was....glad to find it was—other needs that held us together—Closely—without claims—not a claim—but so closely."

#### **IV. The Purpose of Sex: to Like the World or Kick It Out?**

I learned from Aesthetic Realism that long before a man and woman embrace, they have an attitude of either respect or contempt for the world itself that affects how they see each other. In the huge industry of "romantic hide-aways," romance and sex are synonymous with getting away from the world, kicking it out. But sometimes, you don't even have to leave home!

Early in our marriage, Harriet and I would spend a whole day not seeing or talking to anyone else. I'd take the phone off the hook, enjoying the cozy feeling that nothing besides the two of us existed. But later I would feel ill at ease, want to be by myself, or get into arguments with Harriet. In his 1964 lecture *The Furious Aesthetics of Marriage*, Mr. Siegel explains what makes for the doubt and mistrust that so often follow "successful" sex:

This situation has to be considered: Is it possible for a person to have a triumph of a biological kind, and still be further from the liking of reality? Is it possible to have a person complaisant, acting as one wishes (at least for a while), and still be further from one's deepest desire?

In the play, Cecilia deftly appears to be for Tom's friendships while working to sever them. But she and Tom, like many couples, have a cruel, unspoken pact to adore each other and dismiss everything else. Tom has, for weeks, been looking forward to going with Cecilia to the debut concert of his good friend Franc Schmidt, a violinist, but she suggests sending a congratulatory telegram instead. Then Cecilia tempts him to stay home by donning a negligee from a "romantic" vacation they spent together. In the international periodical *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, Editor Ellen Reiss writes:

Do we want to use our self to have another person be in a better relation to the whole, wide world? Or do we want to use sex to have contempt for the world—to feel that we're finally running the world, making it serve us; that we can forget about 99 percent of the world and make an ecstatic time apart with a person who will adore us above everything in existence, who—in a tizzy—will make it seem all reality is meaningless compared to us?

The kindness of these sentences is their clarity in describing the choice a person has between contempt and respect; and contempt, with all its seeming power, looks mean and small. It's what we see in this dialogue about Tom and Cecilia's romantic hide-away, where Philip Barry uses the winter frost and a roaring fire to symbolize a man and woman's seeming warmth to each other and coldness to the world.

*Cecilia:* —Darling place—Wasn't it cold that morning—Frost on the windows an inch thick—Remember?

*Tom:* We couldn't see out—

*Cecilia:* We didn't want to.

*Tom:* No one else could see in.

*Cecilia:* Breakfast before the fire—shivering—. Remember—?

*Tom:* I remember.

*Cecilia:* We didn't finish it—

*Tom:* No.

*Cecilia:* (with a little laugh) There was only one way to keep warm...[He moves toward her.

*Tom:* Oh C, Darling— [She retreats, up one step of the stairs.

*Cecilia:* No.—You'll make us late.

*Tom:* What of it?

The scene ends with Tom picking up the phone:

*Tom:* Western Union, please. (A moment.) Western Union? (The curtain begins to fall.) I want to send a telegram.

Tom associates sex with a separate, more exciting world, but also has a vague, uneasy feeling that through sex, he's lessened himself.

## **V. Good Will Is What We Desire Most**

The idea that a man would do anything for a woman without sex being the motivating force, was once foreign to me. I saw something central about what it means to be a man, when I learned that our most primal need is for good will. Mr. Siegel writes:

Good will or kindness is the biggest thing looked for by everyone; for good will, putting aside gush and insincere Thanksgiving feeling, is the subtle and mighty oneness of love and criticism in how we see another person and how we see the whole world...

There is a moving scene in the play that powerfully illustrates the meaning of good will. It has been a year since Tom and Daisy last spoke. In that time, encouraged by Cecilia, he's lowered the standards he was so proud of, and published some tawdry romance novels that sell very well. The life has slowly been draining from Tom. He is still well mannered, but increasingly dull and cynical. Then he goes to see Daisy's first exhibition of paintings, and he feels he has to see her. Daisy's work, having received very poor reviews, her friends Franc and Joe Fisk, a writer, water down their criticism, thinking it is the kind thing to do, but she says: "If only someone I love and trust would be honest with me." It is then, that Tom arrives and he comes to life as he is thoughtful and direct in his criticism, which includes what he cared for in her work. There's a brisk, spirited exchange between them, Daisy not just agreeing with him.

And then, Barry's stage directions read: "Suddenly the fight goes out of her." Tom, feeling he's been too severe, says "Ah, darling—", to which Daisy quickly responds: "No!—Don't soften on me. Stay tough!" Tom continues to encourage her, and while there's playfulness, it is so different from the insincere playfulness between Tom and Cecilia.

*Tom:* Daisy—darling—

*Daisy:* You're cruel, inhuman. You're a brute.

*Tom:* Oh Daisy—

*Daisy:* Thanks for being.

*Tom:* If you mean it—

*Daisy:* From my heart—

This is so beautiful as it shows just how much men and women want genuine kindness from each other—a oneness of criticism and encouragement; toughness and sweetness.

In the final scene of the play Cecilia arranges an intimate dinner to celebrate two events: one is Tom's birthday, for which his father sent a very large check, possibly his trust fund; and the other is the impending sale, engineered by Cecilia, of a controlling interest in his beloved publishing firm to a wholesale printer of cheap books. Tom tells Cecilia that his father's check is not an act of kindness, but an attempt to own him, and she replies angrily, "How you can be so hard, I don't know."

*Tom:* Hard?—I'm not hard enough. All my life I've been trying to harden. I was born soft, that's the trouble with me. [And he continues]...brought up to refuse to face any truth that was an unpleasant truth, in myself or anyone else—always be

the little gentleman, Tommy—charming and agreeable at all costs—give no pain, Tommy.

*Cecilia:* You seem to have outgrown it nicely.

*Tom:* Not yet, I haven't. No, not by a long shot. The inclination's still there, all right. Still going strong.

Tom is courageous, self-critical of insincere kindness, and acknowledging, with disdain and some fear, the appeal of a shallow, "easy" life. It is clearly something to respect him for but Cecilia grows angry and says: "There's something you call your damned integrity—" Tom (suddenly, sharply): "That's the word!" Her pleasing facade is slipping, and when she goes so far as to insult Daisy, Tom finally begins to see through the "illusion" he has helped create, and in not being a critic of Cecilia, he has cruelly perpetuated.

*Tom:* —And suddenly I'm beginning to see with an awful clearness—

*Cecilia:* (Smiling) What? How stupid you've been—And what I am to you?

*Tom:* (after a moment) Yes.

This dialogue is a tour-de-force of sameness and difference. When Tom says "Yes," Cecilia mistakenly thinks he is going to accept the check and go through with the sale of his business out of love for her, but Tom is finally clear about what they each want. As Cecilia exits seductively to await him in the bedroom, Tom endorses his father's check, and leaves it on the mantle for her. He then leaves the house with his friend 'Red' Regan, saying, "I'm going back to my wife, Red" and by this he means, he's going back to the person who has good will for him—Daisy Sage.

The study of Aesthetic Realism makes it possible for every man to say with deep conviction, "Yes, kindness is possible in sex, and it makes for passionate romance and self-respect that grows larger with the passing days and years!"