

# Helene Stöcker, “Marriage as a Psychological Problem” (1929)

## Abstract

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In 1905, pacifist, women’s rights advocate, and sexual reformer Helene Stöcker (1869–1943) co-founded the *Bund für Mutterschutz und Sexualreform* [Association for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform], which sought to improve the legal and social position of unmarried mothers and their children. This article is taken from the magazine *Die Neue Generation* [*The New Generation*], which Stöcker published under that name starting in 1908. The magazine served as a platform for her “new ethics,” which emphasized a woman’s right to control her own body. Consequently, Stöcker advocated not only for the protection of mothers, but also for contraception and the legalization of abortion. In this text, she discusses the institution of marriage, the social and private meaning of which seemed to be declining in the face of shifting gender relations in the 1920s.

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### Marriage as a Psychological Problem

If one compares the present Congress for Sexual Reform with Sexual Reform work twenty or twenty-five years ago it is possible to note some progress. When twenty-five years ago we began the *Mutterschutz* movement, and when in 1911 we held the first Congress for Sexual Reform in Dresden, we had to have two separate congresses. One was concerned with sexual reform in the narrower sense, while birth control had to be dealt with separately.

Today it has at least become clear that these problems are intimately related. But most of the problems are still unsolved, and it requires all our energy and mental integrity, all our enthusiasm for the higher development of civilization, to solve them.

It is out of the question that the institutions that have arisen from the absolute sexual dominance of men in former times should continue to exist unchanged amid the changed political, cultural, and economic conditions of today. This being an age of transition, there are peculiar difficulties and conflicts, and proposals have been made to deal with these by new forms of marriage. Thus we have proposals for trial marriage; for companionate marriage; for three-party marriage; even four-party marriage. Another proposes marriage in youth, another marriage for a term. A seventh would like to embrace the whole world in love. The German-American Ruedebusch proposes erotic relations with unlimited numbers. But beyond all these reformers we have the groups who differ widely from one another but agree in regarding every divorce as the destruction of the true ideal of marriage.

I venture to ask a question that will no doubt be regarded as heretical in this assembly. Are not all these proposals for changes in the form of marriage, or for increasing facilities for divorce, no matter how instructive and valuable they may be—are not all these proposals, in the last analysis, *unimportant*?

The important question is: What is the nature of the human being who is to live in marriage? How does he try to play his part in marriage? Whatever reforms and changes we suggest we must always come to a point when the individual has to impose a limit on his own desires, either for his own sake or for the sake of another. And is it not better to do this before we have eliminated from life all profound ethical values and moral responsibility?

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No sort of marriage reform will ever comfort the broken heart or reconcile human beings who have real emotions to giving up the intimate contact, the feeling of unity with another person, which is a world in itself. Marriage for three is conceivable as an exceptional arrangement for exceptional people and ethically tolerable. Goethe's "Stella" is a picture of such an arrangement. But if marriage stands for love, for an intimate physical and spiritual contact, then it does not seem to me that there is much to be expected from this sort of reform in the way of an improvement of human life or an increase in happiness.

The demand for polygamy, as in the three-party marriage proposal, or in Ruedebusch's universal sexual love, is based on a recognition of the fact that sexual desire is promiscuous, but this is a long way from love in the real sense.

Georges Anquetil (a French author) is responsible for the three-party marriage proposal, but his book rests on an idea which is psychologically superficial. It is a grotesque fact that even in the Orient, in Russia, and in Turkey, polygamy is regarded as out of date; and now Western Europeans propose to introduce it again! What psychological and ethical differences there are between people living in the same country at the same time!

[...]

The progress towards a final understanding between man and woman is very slow because it is only in very recent times that women themselves have begun to take any part in the study of sex problems. Fortunately even the blindest can see today that a change is taking place in the distribution of power between the sexes. In literature and science we still find that many men cannot get rid of the limitations of sex in themselves although in politics and daily life these have already disappeared. But science has known for some time that male and female exist in all of us in varying degrees, and that in actual life there is no such thing as the theoretical types *man* and *woman*.

Thus from recent discoveries in biology and sociology, and with a more profound and objective psychology of sexual differences and with a clearer knowledge of the mind, we can build up a higher ethic for the creative transformation of our lives. Out of the fleeting temporary intoxication of the senses, out of passion, we can make an enduring relation between man and woman. We wish to get beyond mere nature. We wish to attain civilization, we wish to attain a permanent union, in which all human faculties, sensual, mental, and spiritual, will be united in a higher synthesis.

One point, which in my opinion is of very great importance in relation to happiness in marriage, is often ignored. Every age has its marriage problem. Discussions of marriage during recent decades usually give the impression that it is only young people who are concerned in the solution of sexual problems. All problems are problems of puberty. It is a welcome and important step in the direction of human maturity that at last the young people are being allowed what is necessary for their healthy sexual development. The young people will certainly not allow the enlightenment they have won to be taken from them again. But, in addition to the other revolutions which we have witnessed in recent years—the revolt of women, the revolt of youth, the revolt of the workers—there is another revolution which is essential for the increase in human happiness and achievement. This is revolution of the middle-aged. A revolt is necessary against the deplorable convention that imposes a premature sexual death on human beings. At present human beings unfortunately accept this with the same patience as they do the penalty of death inflicted undeservedly and foolishly by war. We must fight against the convention, which is part of the double standard of morality, that human beings, especially if they are women, are regarded as dead, as no longer fit for life and love, when they are only at the middle of their lives. Has anyone ever tried to calculate how much vital energy, how much joy of life, is destroyed or injured or made impossible in this way? How much creative power is wasted? How many voluntary deaths, how much of the premature senility of admirable human beings is to be credited to this barbaric superstition?

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The marriage problem for young people is comparatively simple. Young people have already, by actual practice, and with the support of modern sexologists such as Judge Lindsey, Alexandra Kollontai and others of our movement, created, so to speak, a system of companionate marriage.

Life is still before the young people. If a love union or marriage is broken up, this is naturally much easier to bear than it is in cases where there is nothing before the individual but a slow progress towards the grave. The advice of the French philosopher not to waste the years of love is fortunately usually followed. But we must learn to accept without prejudice the epoch-making discovery of psychoanalysis which is fundamentally a platitude: namely, that the need for love and the capacity for love—which indeed are a part of the instinct for life itself—accompany us from the cradle to the grave and require fulfillment if the character is to be adequately adjusted.

As we try to be fair to young people we must also try and be fair towards those who are no longer young. Many desirable changes have already taken place. Not only has the span of life been increased but also the span of love. This change must go further in proportion as care of her body, satisfaction in a vocation which she has chosen for herself, and increase in mental and economic independence make woman into a personality centered in herself. Such a woman can spread pleasure and attraction around her like a man of creative capacity. This development will depend also on the extent to which men learn to love the whole personality of women and not merely their sex.

[...]

We find around us today marriages and permanent love relationships between men and women in which, in spite of suffering, disappointments and temporary difficulties, such as are always likely to occur, love is in no way diminished by age; certainly not by middle-age. The sexual embrace is only *one* expression of love.

Wherever the spirit remains alive, where the soul is in love, where the character is still developing, then there is no reason why love should come to an end. There may be changes in externals; there may be changes in degree but not in kind. In the later years there may be a gradual decline in the intense passion. But tenderness and spiritual unity grow. Wherever we have genuine and great love, only death can separate the lovers.

An important part of our great work of Sexual Reform on a Scientific Basis consists in bringing home to the consciousness of men that love is omnipresent. It is as essential to life as breathing. It is intimately bound up in the whole of lives from the cradle to the grave. Anyone who helps in any way to do this is with us and we welcome him as a co-worker. It is perhaps even more necessary to see this fact given practical recognition in the lives of women than in the lives of men. For the dominant position that man has had hitherto, and the victorious sense of his capacity and readiness for love, have already given it to him.

Many men, even today, still accept the idea that only youth is worthy of love. This idea belongs to a more primitive conception of sexuality and is responsible for the destruction of happiness in marriage. It causes many a hell of loneliness. "Many married women are cloistered nuns," said [Gerhart] Hauptmann.

Much bitterness, despair and unhappiness would be avoided and the joy of life would be increased if the purely sexual idea of love were replaced by a more developed conception. This higher conception of love seeks to increase man's capacity for love and make love an ever more complete expression of the whole personality. "Die and grow" is true for both sexes. But when growing means self-development, as it does for all intelligent human beings, then we have perpetual youth, which, as Schleiermacher taught us, is always capable of love and always worthy of being loved.

Since the outbreak of the war many of us have had to face the terrible problem: How is it possible for

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peoples who are supposed to be civilized to waste so much human life and happiness and to inflict such misery on each other? It seems to us that one of our great tasks is to stamp out this shameful thing.

I have not time now to go into the connection between repressed sexuality and cruelty. But I may say this much: If we devote our energies to suppressing war, and to movements for sexual reform, if we go on as we have for the last twenty-five years, then we shall realize what our great teacher, Nietzsche, once expressed so beautifully:

“Since men have existed men have had too little joy. That, O my brothers, is the original sin. Let us learn better how to be joyous and then we will best unlearn how to cause pain.”

It is our task, it is the task of sexual reform of sexual science, to teach people how best to enjoy life.

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