REFLECTIONS

On gods and (woe)men

Jennifer Graham
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
graham.jennifer901@gmail.com

The test of a good religion is whether or not it can laugh at itself. (G. K. Chesterton)

Contrary to the beliefs of even the most religious of atheists, there exists today, as there did a thousand years before no doubt, a plethora of gods at whose altars humankind worships. Eros being, of course, a Deity amongst deities, a glorious wonder, a tremendous folly, a seller of products. I will limit the meaning of Eros to two things herein; “Being in love” (of the kind that two lovers are “in”) and “sexual desire”, two states between which a great deal of overlap occurs. Furthermore, the latter state – as most of us can attest to, either through personal experience or for those more chaste (and romantic) individuals, through simple observation – operates equally as effectively within or without the presence of the former. I hold neither state in higher regard than the other, as each contains within it the potential for great harm or great good or at least some harm and some good. All of us owe our existence to some measure of desire after all.

Regarding “sexual desire”, for the sake of further clarification, I mean the carnal or sexual element within Eros. This aspect of Eros, in the absence of love, wants “it”, the “thing in itself”, and in the presence of love, Lewis (1960) tells us, wants the full package, the person and the “it”, or in more romantic terms, “the Beloved” (p. 87); this “thing in itself” being a sensory pleasure; “an event occurring within one’s own body” (Lewis, 1960, p. 87). We are mistaken to presume, asserts Lewis (1960), that a person prowling the streets for sexual gratification of some or other kind desires another person. Strictly speaking, another person is just what he or she does not desire. What it is that they do desire is pleasure for which another person “happens to be the necessary piece of apparatus” (p. 87).

Lewis (1960) penned these thoughts sometime before the advent of the world wide web of course, which has subsequently made available to almost every man,
woman and curious child with access to its marvels and with thanks to the most ubiquitous of pimps, the camera lens, a smorgasbord of pornographic images and film, catering to every conceivable (and inconceivable) taste. Finding the “thing in itself” no longer requires prowling the streets for another person, not in the literal sense anyway. Mr or Ms Suburbia can now conveniently procure a cybermister and or mistress, or indeed an orgy full of cybermisters and or mistresses, at the click of a button (or the tap of a screen), their sexual tensions and secret bents auto-relieved within the same space of time it takes them to microwave their dinners.

The last two decades have witnessed something of an erotic explosion; online and off-line, in images and in words, on top shelves and bottom shelves, moving or still, soft core or hard, with a storyline (albeit it a weak one) or without (for those who like to get to the point). Sex, in all its shapes and forms (and sizes), is after all big business. “In a society whose most pressing need is to create wants and desires”, wrote Mugeridge (1966), “the commercial possibilities of so overwhelming and omnipresent an obsession have naturally not been overlooked” (p. 47). Author E. L. James (2012), who in exchange for Fifty shades of grey, has accumulated (and continues to do so) enormous sums of the somewhat less than 50 shades of greenback, bares testimony to the almost infinite demand for sexually explicit material, not only by men, but by the so-called fairer sex too. Women, to the gleeful discovery of those in the business of peddling flesh for profit, constitute a largely untapped but rapidly growing section of the porn-consuming market, fuelled no less, by the relatively new phenomenon and also rapidly growing popularity of the sex therapist.

These neo-custodians of our sexual health and well-being, other than sending beleaguered couples on a quest for the Holy Grail, the G-spot (which has turned out to be something of an elusive creature, similar to the Loch Ness monster, the myth of which is kept alive by rare and questionable sightings), have enthusiastically endorsed the use of pornography to spice up our (in their professional opinions) flailing sex lives. What these progressive “experts” failed to realise, however (which the producers and sellers of porn happily did and do), is that the “eye is never satisfied with seeing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8, New American Standard Version). Curiosity, especially of the testosterone kind, and ease of access have ensnared many an unsuspecting pleasure seeker, for whom pornography is to their brains as crack-cocaine is to the body. Exposure to one image becomes the foundation upon which they will add another and another until, having constructed for themselves a writhing, heaving, humping and bumping, vibrating, gyrating Babel that reaches for the heavens, they collapse in an exhausted heap of impotence, from which no image or gadget, however depraved or ingenious, will raise them. Meaninglessness comes not from growing weary of pain, warned Chesterton (2008a), but from growing weary of pleasure.

Before I put the subject of our carnality to bed, so to speak, there is one last thing on which I wish to comment, that being the meeting up of two gods, Eros and
Narcissus. Signs of their mischievous collaborations evident throughout the animal and human kingdom in the most dazzling displays of puffing and pronking and preening, the likes of which is largely to do with, well, largeness itself. Big is in, big is beautiful and big, like sex, is big business. Big lips, big breasts, big buttocks, big hips, big burgers, big screens, big cars, big houses, all of which are, should we peer through a Freudian lens, really just an underlying desire for and outer manifestation of the same thing and ultimate prize, a big penis. Thanks to the wonders of modern (and traditional) medicine, none need suffer the indignity of a small appendage or appendages any longer, provided of course, you have access to a big bank balance. And, who would have thought that, in a great (or small) twist of irony, after decades of objecting to their objectification, many women themselves (perhaps oblivious to all the “objecting” that has gone on) would become the primary proliferators of the female as sex object? The ever burgeoning variety (or monotony) of glossy magazines, adorned with seductive eyes, flawless skin, pouting lips and artificially swollen orbs, curves and mounds (not to mention the obligatory promise of at least ten “new” ways to blow his mind), point to the possibility that the women who purchase these modern artifacts, dream not only of climbing the corporate ladder, or of breaking through the glass ceiling (if indeed they ever did), but also of having lips like Angelina, hair like Jennifer, breasts like Pamela and an arse like Kim.

Scrambling, somewhat sullied, from the gutter now, I move onward and upward to nobler things. Humans are after all, Lewis (1960) assures us, “composite creatures, rational animals”, akin not only to tom-cats on the one side, but to angels on the other (p. 93). On love itself, a truly rare beast, I have not much to say, other than the fact that it is indeed a rarity. One may catch glimpses of it, at family get-togethers for example, between aunts and uncles, grandparents and even parents. It is notoriously difficult to spot though, as it often disguises itself as a rather complex form of hate. Marriage is, after all, Chesterton (2008b) reminds us, an honourable duel to the death, a great adventure, like war. A far more popular and easily detectable form of love, however, is that peculiar state of “being in love” with “being in love”. The popularity of this manner of love being particularly evident on social networking sites in the form of “those sentimental posts” shared and re-shared ad nauseam, or at its best (and worst), in the genre of movie known as the chick flick – in which the male actor, incidentally, is but incidental, something of a swooning prop to the leading lady. Another incidental is the male actor playing the role of “gay best friend”, although his purpose is more akin to that of fashion accessory than prop, similar to the purpose of a designer handbag perhaps; there to dress the leading lady up a bit, showing her to be not only pretty but pretty progressive too.

I wrap things up with the wedding, being the grand finale, or that which usually signals the end of both the chick flick and the state of “being in love” with “being in love”. In another great (or small) twist of irony, as the investment in marriage has dropped, the investment in these elaborate affairs has sky rocketed. An example
of “image over substance”, Foley (2010) calls it – “planning not for the reality of a life but for the symbolism of a day” (p. 191). A contemporary wedding, says Foley (2010), is like the Olympic Games, a spectacle of stupendous complexity and ruinous expense” (p. 191). And when it is all over, “when the audience is gone and the costumes returned to their boxes (never again to be taken out)”, two ordinary people look at each other and think to themselves: “Is this all it is?” (Foley, 2010, p. 191).

To conclude, “it is in the grandeur of Eros” warns Lewis, “that the seeds of danger are concealed” (1960, p. 99). For when Eros is most divine, be it in love or in sex, “it extenuates, almost sanctions, almost sanctifies, any actions it leads to” (Lewis, 1960, p. 103). To take Eros not as the divine joke (made at our expense and to our benefit) that it is, to pursue it too ardently, too seriously, to leave it unchastened, undisciplined, renders it both enslaving demon and elusive imp, promising that which it can never deliver, but keeping one captivated by the promise nonetheless.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jennifer Graham is currently completing a Master’s in Psychology (Research Consultation) and is a postgraduate student assistant in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. Her interests include all things qualitative; including autoethnography as a research method, blending social science research with art and creative writing, aesthetics in literature and social constructionism as a research paradigm.

REFERENCES