

Gender and Sexuality

H. G. Wells: A Case Study of Sex Addiction

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Abstract: In his time H. G. Wells was notorious for his frequent sexual affairs, but the problem that bothered him was difficulty in maintaining a stable long-term relationship with an ideal mate. This pattern can be explained as an avoidant attachment style developed in childhood. He was obsessed with things that might happen and impatient with present realities. This trait was expressed productively in his highly influential fiction and nonfiction and in his advocacy of progressive change.

Keywords: autobiography, avoidant-attachment, H. G. Wells, marital-communication, psychohistory, sex-addiction

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H. G. Wells (1866-1946), while remembered today for his classic science fiction novels, was important in his time as a literary novelist, historian, educator, futurist, and advocate for free love, socialism, women's rights, and a world state. He has been the subject of many well-researched biographical and critical works including his classic *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) and a posthumously published volume on his intimate relationships, *H. G. Wells in Love* (2008). These works provide a treasure trove of data for psychohistorical analysis. Yet none of them offer a convincing explanation of his notorious and troubled love life. This may be because they focus too much on his scandalous sex life and too little on his problems with emotional attachment and could not benefit from recent research on the psychodynamics of marital infidelity.

Writing at the age of 62, Wells observed that "young people today must get a very considerable help in their adjustments from the suggestions of modern psychological science," but when he and his wives were young "psychological science was still mainly a shallow and unserviceable intellectualism. We had to work out our common problem very largely by the light nature had given us" (*Wells in Love*, 35). Actually, Wells' problems continued in his mid and late life, but so far as any of his biographers have been able to discover, he never tried psychotherapy. He was intrigued by Carl Jung's writings, and developed a concept of the "lover-shadow" derived from Jung, but this did not seem to help him.

Wells was most notorious for his sexual promiscuity, including many brief *passades* as well as a series of more serious affairs. He was a brilliant and charming conversationalist and had no trouble finding willing partners once he became a celebrity in middle age. He fell in love often, but somehow none of the women proved satisfactory for the long term. He could be considered a "sex addict." Wells probably didn't have sex more often than happily married monogamous men typically have with their wives, and he did not view his affairs as a compulsion he wanted to give up. He thought the affairs provided relief from sexual tensions that otherwise could have distracted him from his highly productive writing career. He was troubled by his failure to find the "lover-shadow" of his dreams. His sex addiction was a palliative, enabling him to meet some of his needs without working on his fundamental problem.

His first wife was not the girl next door; she lived in the same rooming house. They had a long chaste courtship, then he became dissatisfied as soon as they married and began their sexual relationship. He found her a passive and unenthusiastic sexual partner. She also did not share his intellectual interests, although he certainly could have noticed this during their long courtship. When one of his students fell in love with him, she very soon became "the embodiment of all the understanding and quality I desired in life" (*Wells in Love*, 27). But when he divorced his wife and married the student she also proved to be an inadequate sexual partner because of her delicate nature and ill-defined health problems. Rather than seek counseling to improve their intimacy, he sought other partners. His second wife, Amy Catherine (who he called Jane, for no known reason), accepted and even welcomed his affairs, so long as she knew about them and could approve of the women.

Jane said it was not his fault her health was fragile and she couldn't meet his needs. Yet she had the strength to take long tramps in the Alps with him, and bore him two sons. One of her short stories suggests that she may have been more interested in women than in men, which might explain her openness to his bringing attractive young women to the house ("The Beautiful House," 1928, 68-100 in *The Book of Catherine Wells*. Available at <http://crab.rutgers.edu/~goertzel/>).

Jane was an exemplary friend and partner in many ways, managing his affairs and doing secretarial and editorial work. She took care of all the household and social obligations so he could

work intensively on weekends. Wells' wife, Rebecca Wells, was expected to help in any spare periods in his life with women.

Wells' affairs were a matter of his sex

almost born, and his bi-monthly performance in his life. Wells:

He was an attentive father to his sons and needed to get rid of his governesses

Wells' affairs were which meant outside of marriage quite controversy. Victoria (1900) man separately. It was known to be a practice of having a woman play in the *passades* to fill the room when he had dinner.

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work intensively for many hours and have lavish parties on the weekends. When she learned that he had gotten the young novelist Rebecca West pregnant, she expressed her sympathies and offered to help in any way she could. She also tolerated his spending long periods in his vacation home in the south of France with other women.

Wells' problems with attachment weren't limited to sexual matters. His son Anthony West reports that

almost as soon as his first son, George Philip, was born, on July 17, 1901 he took off into the blue on his bicycle. He was to be gone for just over two months, and for the first few weeks of his fuge-like performance Jane had no idea where he was or what he intended by his absence (Anthony West, *H.G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, 1984, 257-8).

He was an attentive father when he was home, inventing games for his sons and getting involved in their schools. However, he also needed to get away for extended periods while Jane, nurses, and governesses provided stability for the boys' lives.

Wells defended "free love" as it was defined in his day, which meant the right of consenting adults to have sex before or outside of marriage if they chose and to use birth control. This was quite controversial at the time, but it is not so today. His novel *Ann Victoria* (1909) featured a young woman in love with a married man separated from his wife, whom she set out to seduce and marry. It was especially controversial because the character was known to be modeled on one of his partners. He also defended the practice of having casual affairs without emotional attachment, arguing that they played the same role in his life as fishing or golf played in the lives of many men. He often scheduled these *pas-sades* to fill the awkward hour between five and seven in the afternoon when he was finished with work, but it was not yet time for dinner.

In London he seldom lacked for willing partners, but when traveling he sometimes visited prostitutes as a convenient alternative. In his posthumous memoir he described visiting a prostitute during a trip to Washington DC. He established a ready rapport with the young woman and reports that "we who had not known of each other's existence at three o'clock parted like lovers at half-past six... nothing could better illustrate how closely and far and swiftly

tendrils of interest spread from bodily sensuality and imaginative excitement, out into the rest of the individuality" (*Wells in Love*, 64). This attachment was, perhaps, especially enjoyable because there was no risk of it leading to ongoing demands for intimacy.

His arrangement with Jane would seem to have offered Wells the best of both worlds, complete freedom to enjoy sexual explorations and a wife devoted exclusively to his needs. However, he was not satisfied with this arrangement and continued for all his life to seek his "lover-shadow." He repeatedly fell in love with likely candidates, only to become disillusioned over time. He intellectualized about his problems and was aware of "my own unreasonable monstrous demands for a Lover-Shadow, based on the exacting enormity of the *persona* I have devised for myself. I am, I know, trying to be something too big for my powers. I am an insufficient and often irritable 'great man' with an infantile craving for help" (*Wells in Love*, 197).

A simpler explanation for his angst may be found in a remark he made to one of his partners after Jane had died: "I am afraid as a child of being lonely" (Michael Sherborne, *H.G. Wells: Another Kind of Life*, 2010, 309). This could have been simply a reaction to the death of his wife, but why would a man who fears loneliness abandon his wife and newborn baby to go off alone on a bicycle tour? Living with a wife and small children has its challenges, but loneliness is not one of them. He reported that his children "do not go deeply into the living structure of my self. Sons and daughters nowadays are still an intimate part of one's pride, a projected part of one's *persona*, but no more part of one's Lover-Shadow" (*Wells in Love*, 114).

Wells certainly never lacked for companionship. His *pas-sades* were not sterile, emotionless affairs, nor was he a sexual harasser. His partners were enthusiastic participants, many of whom approached him. He appealed to women not for his looks or his sexual prowess but as a stimulating conversationalist who was intensely interested in their thoughts and feelings. Margaret Sanger, one of his occasional partners, reported that:

he has not only brains but a capacity for loving both individuals and humanity at the same time. He can be amusing, witty, sarcastic, brilliant, flirtatious, and yet profound at once. He is quick, sensitive, alert to the slightest meaning, or intonation, or

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So why did a man with these skills have so much difficulty establishing a satisfying and lasting relationship with a mate? The literature on adult attachment styles as related to marital communication provides a plausible explanation of Wells' difficulties that fits the biographical data. (A good summary of this research can be found in the 2018 volume *The Dynamics of Infidelity: Applying Relationship Science to Psychotherapy Practice* by Lawrence Josephs.)

This literature was not available in Wells' time, and has not been referenced by any of his biographers. It postulates that attachment styles established in infancy and early childhood persist into adult life. Three attachment styles have been observed in studies of infant behavior: *secure*, *avoidant*, and *anxious*. These attachment styles carry over into adult relationships with a romantic partner. Wells fits the "avoidant" style as measured by the following questionnaire item: "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others. I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being" (Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver, "Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1987, 52: 3, 515).

This attachment style is thought to develop in infancy when the child is unable to rely on the constant presence of the mothering person and develops a kind of shell so as to avoid being vulnerable. Biographies provide some data relevant to this theory, although the data on early childhood is limited. His son, Anthony, described Wells as "the late and unwanted child of a pair of upper servants turned shopkeepers" (Anthony West, *H.G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, 132). He had two older brothers and a sister, who was his mother's delight. However, his sister died of appendicitis before he was born. Wells tells us that "It is my conviction that deep down in my mother's heart something was broken when my sister died two years and more before I was born" (*Experiment in Autobiography*, 43). His parents' crockery shop was not profitable, they could not afford servants, and his mother was burdened with running both the shop and household with little help from his father. It is under-

standable that she might not have been able to give her youngest child as much attention as he needed, even if she had not been depressed over her daughter's death. Wells recalls:

How continually vexed she was, how constantly tired and worried to the limits of endurance, during that dismal half-lifetime of disillusionment.... Every night and morning and sometimes during the day she prayed to Our Father and Our Saviour for a little money, for a little leisure, for a little kindness, to make Joe [Wells's father] better and less negligent—for now he was getting very neglectful of her (H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 45).

As a youth, Wells had to fight to keep his independence from his well-intentioned but intellectually limited mother. His sister had eagerly accepted their mother's religiosity; H. G. decided quite early that he didn't believe in God. H. G. became a heavy reader during a period of convalescence from a broken leg when he was seven years old, then continued despite his parents feeling that too much reading wasn't good for a child. He rebelled against his mother's placing him as an apprentice in a draper's shop, failing at the work, then threatening suicide to get his mother to agree to his abandoning the apprenticeship. He pursued a career as a school teacher and then as a writer against his mother's desire that he pursue a more secure and conventional career path. His emotional bond with his mother remained strong throughout his lifetime, and he supported her and his father in old age, but he was always adamant about following his own lights.

Of course, there were psychoanalysts in London in Wells' time, and he occasionally mentioned them in his novels. Exploring his feelings about his early childhood with an analyst might have helped him, although a modern therapist might focus more on marital communication. It is impossible to say whether resolving his emotional conflicts might have cut into his creative drive. He was, after all, tremendously productive, producing over 100 books, many of which had a significant impact on the modern world. He observed that "I am extravagantly obsessed by the thing that might be, and impatient with the present" (*Wells in Love*, 36). That quote applies to his utopian novels, his futurist works, and his political activities as well as to his love life.

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