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Madonna–whore complex

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In **psychoanalysis**, a **Madonna–whore complex** (also called a **Madonna–mistress complex**) is the inability to maintain sexual arousal within a committed and loving relationship.^[1] First identified by **Sigmund Freud**, who called it **psychic impotence**,^[2] it is a **psychological complex** that is said to develop in men who see women as either saintly **Madonnas** or debased **whores**. Men with this complex desire a sexual partner who has been degraded (whore) while they cannot desire the respected partner (Madonna).^[3] Freud wrote, "Where such men love they have no desire, and where they desire they cannot love."^[4] **Clinical psychologist** Uwe Hartmann wrote in 2009 that the complex "is still highly prevalent in today's patients".^[3]

In psychoanalysis

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Freud argued that the Madonna–whore complex was caused by a split between the affectionate and the sexual currents in male desire.^[5] **Oedipal** and **castration anxiety** fears prohibit the affection felt for past incestuous objects from being attached to women who are sensually desired: "The whole sphere of love in such persons remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (or animal) love".^[5] In order to minimize anxiety, the man categorizes women into two groups: women he can admire and women he finds sexually attractive. Whereas the man loves women in the former category, he despises and devalues the latter group.^[6] Psychoanalyst Richard Tuch suggests that Freud offered at least one alternative explanation for the Madonna–whore complex:

This earlier theory is based not on oedipal-based castration anxiety but on man's primary **hatred of women**, stimulated by the child's sense that he had been made to experience intolerable frustration and/or narcissistic injury at the hands of his **mother**. According to this theory, in adulthood the boy-turned-man seeks to avenge these mistreatments through **sadistic** attacks on women who are stand-ins for mother.^[6]

It is possible that such a split may be exacerbated when the sufferer is raised by a cold but overprotective mother,^[7] with the lack of emotional nurturing paradoxically strengthening an incestuous tie.^[8] Such a man will often court someone with maternal qualities, hoping to fulfill a need for maternal intimacy unmet in childhood, only for a return of the repressed feelings surrounding the earlier relationship to prevent sexual satisfaction in the new.^[5]

Another theory claims that the Madonna–whore complex derives from the alleged representations of women as either madonnas or whores in **mythology** and Abrahamic **theology** rather than developmental disabilities of individual men.^[9]

Feminist interpretations

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Feminist theory asserts that the male-written culture (MWC) perpetuates patriarchal norms by controlling women's sexual autonomy through shaming, reinforcing gender stereotypes, and allowing men to maintain power.^[10] Sexual script theory, as discussed by sociologists **William Simon** and **John Gagnon**, suggests that these scripts are primarily authored by heterosexual males, portraying men as sexual pursuers favoring casual sex and women as gatekeepers favoring relational sex.^[11] This limits women's sexual autonomy as assertiveness risks slut-shaming and being seen as unfit partners. Additionally, researchers Emily Kane and **Mimi Schippers** [d] argue that assertive female sexuality threatens male social dominance, as men may fear manipulation, reducing female autonomy to preserve their power.

Cultural representations

[edit]

Titian's ***Sacred and Profane Love*** (1514; the **sacred-profane** title is from 1693) has several interpretations. The clothed woman has said to be dressed as a bride^[12]^[13] and as a courtesan.^[12]^[14] The nude woman seems at first sight to be an allegory of profane love, but 20th-century assessments notice the incense on her hand and the church beyond her.

James Joyce widely utilized the Madonna–whore polarity in his novel ***A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***.^[15] His protagonist, **Stephen Daedalus**, sees girls who he admires as **ivory towers**, and the repression of his sexual feelings for them eventually leads him to solicit a prostitute. This mortal sin drives Stephen's inner conflict and eventual transformation towards the end of the novel.

In film, **Alfred Hitchcock** used the Madonna–whore complex as an important mode of representing women.^[16] In his film ***Vertigo***, **Kim Novak** portrays two women that the hero cannot reconcile: a blonde, virtuous, sophisticated, repressed "Madonna" and a dark-haired, single, sensual "fallen woman".^[17]

The **Martin Scorsese** films ***Taxi Driver*** and ***Raging Bull*** featured sexually obsessed protagonists, both played by **Robert De Niro**, who exhibit the Madonna–whore complex.^[18]^[19]

The **David Cronenberg** film ***Spider*** focuses on the complex.^[20]

The complex is also pictured in the series ***Sex and the City***, season 3 (ep.16, "Frenemies", directed by Michael Spiller), as Charlotte (**Kristin Davis**) struggles to make her husband Trey (**Kyle McLachlan**) see her in a sexual way.

The Madonna-whore complex has also been used as advice for male **heirs apparent** for the choice of a spouse, due to the social standing and reputation of their wives as queens consort. **Lord Mountbatten**, for instance, advised his great-nephew **Charles III**, then Prince of Wales, to "sow his wild oats and have as many affairs as he can before settling down", but, for a wife, he "should choose a suitable, attractive, and sweet-charactered girl before she has met anyone else she might fall for ... It is disturbing for women to have experiences if they have to remain on a pedestal after marriage".^[21]

See also

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- Ambivalence**
- Coolidge effect**
- Dichotomy**
- Female Chauvinist Pigs***
- Fraysexuality**
- Friend zone**
- Gender norms in abstinence-only sex education**
- Love and hate (psychoanalysis)**
- Love–hate relationship**
- Machismo**
- Marianismo**
- Misogyny**
- Ni Putes Ni Soumises**
- Neo-Freudianism**
- Sexism**
- Splitting (psychology)**

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External links

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