

**FEMALES
UNDER
TENSION**

Still, what women will do under pressure of circumstances is difficult to say. When radical, women are much more radical than men.

ARTHUR MACDONALD, „Abnormal Woman“

FEMALES UNDER TENSION

The Reader

Paula Muhr

In a scientific study of society it is the individual that is the unit; the importance of investigating him lies in the fact that he is a repetition or representative of many others. We are much more alike than we think; it is natural egotism that tends to exaggerate differences.

ARTHUR MACDONALD, „Abnormal Woman“

Chapter 1

Love

„We may call love a certain mental and physical state in which we are lost; thought, feeling, duty, the past, present, and future everything in us unites with the single idea of another being. Love may be said to be the most natural and normal passion... But, as a matter of experience, it is one of the most prolific causes of mental, physical, and emotional aberration. It, in fact, so often lacks what is properly called common sense, that it is hardly a misnomer to call it the insanity of love... love may not only be characterized by illusions and fetichism, but by mental and emotional aberrations...

... a close analogy exists between love and conscious obsessions.

Obsessions are accompanied by physical symptoms; the crisis is marked by anguish, special epigastric oppression and difficulty in breathing; sometimes there is headache, violent beatings of the heart, trembling, and these accompanied by a general uneasiness; there is low nutrition... So, in the physical symptoms of love, there is the painful state, the feeling of oppression; it is not anguish or desire; it is a sort of tumultuous inner feeling. The obsession in the mind of the patient acquires such importance that he is forced to action, giving rise to impulsive tendencies...

... The undeniable resemblances between love and certain nervous diseases is not only evident, but there is a functional trouble of mind which acts on one and the other.“

Arthur MacDonald, „Abnormal Woman“

In 1892, Arthur MacDonald assumed the duties of specialist in the United States Bureau of Education. Owing largely to his prolific publication of books and reports outside the Bureau, it soon became clear that he was advancing the study of anthropometrics in his projects.

Enthralled with the (in)famous Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, MacDonald shared his belief that complex human characteristics and emotional states can be quantified, objectively measured and compared. More to the point, he believed that based on the measurements of physical characteristics of individuals, one can deduce about their character, mental ability, nervousness etc. Like Lombroso, he was looking for physical signs of insanity, criminality and poverty.

As part of his all-encompassing anthropometrical project, MacDonald set himself the task of conducting „an original and scientific study of abnormal woman outside of institutions - that is, in society at large... The study of the abnormal is the most practical method of approach to the normal... The abnormal should be studied first, because, in their different forms, they give rise to most of the troubles in society.“

It is worth noting that MacDonald's understanding of the word „normal“ is in accordance with the conceptual shift which the term underwent in the second half of the 19th century.

Chapter 2

The normal

The normal person in this context is defined as the average person, whereas the abnormal is a „deviation from the normal... refers to crime, pauperism, drunkenness, etc; insanity, great talent and genius“.

Although MacDonald clearly denies any moral implication in his use of the term „abnormal“, it is obvious from his study that „the normal“, in the sense of the typical, is something we should all strive for. On the other hand, „the abnormal person conforms less to the customs of the community than the average or normal person“ and is, therefore, in the minority.

This quantitative view of normality is represented mathematically by the Gaussian curve, also known as bell-shaped curve.

The Gaussian distribution was developed in 1809 by German mathematician Karl Friedrich Gauss for analysis of the inevitable errors of measurements made in astronomical observation. It is an approximation used to describe random variables that tend to cluster around a central mean. The graph is a characteristic symmetric curve that quickly fall off towards plus/minus infinity.

Known at first as the law of errors, Gaussian law etc, it was named normal distribution by the end of 19th century, as this sort of distribution was seen as typical.

Adolph Quetelet, a Belgian astronomer, was among the first to apply Gaussian distribution to human and social measurement, founding what he called social physics. He advocated the idea that normal distribution represented a fundamental social law and collected data about variable human features (such as height, weight, etc.), searching for their underlying statistical regularities. In 1835 he published his theory of the „average man“ (l'homme moyen) whose characteristics were delineated as the mean values of the Gaussian distribution of the measured variables. The centre of the curve constituted the norm, whereas all the other human traits that deflected from this mean value were classified as errors. The use of statistics became coupled with an obsession with the abnormal.

In his attempt to define the average man, Quetelet, among other things, suggested classifying people's weight relative to an ideal weight for their height. This practice has survived almost unchanged to the present day and is used in medicine under the term body mass index (BMI) or Quetelet index.

Chapter 3

Womankind

„Dr MacDonald says that he first had some difficulty in deciding upon what method to pursue in this investigation, for the reason that woman, when subjected to any sort of a personal inquiry, is most likely to misrepresent herself, sometimes unconsciously, but more often than not with malice aforethought.“

New York Times, *A Study of Womankind*, July 4 1895

„The question arises as to how it is possible to find abnormal women in society. After some consideration, it occurred to the author that the most convenient and perhaps the best method would be through the „personal“ column of the newspaper... Considering the use to which the „personal“ column is generally put, the author did not think it wrong to make it serve as the means of sociological investigation.“

Arthur MacDonald

Gentleman of high social and university position desires correspondence (acquaintance not necessary) with young educated woman of high social and financial position.

No agents; no triflers; must give detailed account of life; references required.

Address lock box - .

The above advertisement appeared in principal newspapers in larger cities of the U.S. for about four months.

Another variation was inserted in several large newspapers:

Author desires correspondence on the sociological development of women with lady of highest intellectual and financial position; acquaintance not necessary. Address lock box -

The version inserted in European newspapers was described by MacDonald as less personal:

Gentleman (de l'education Europeene) desires to correspond in German, French, or English, with lady, (gebildete Dame oder Studentin.)

According to the article in The New York Times, he received around 2000 replies altogether. „In something over 200 cases he was enabled to meet his correspondents, some of whom were fair to look on, but most of whom were not, and he was allowed to make the complete measurements of their mental conditions by the use of the set of remarkable instruments in his laboratory in Washington. These results have been put in statistical form for publication at some future day... Dr. MacDonald thinks that in the results which he has obtained he has been enabled to make a more comprehensive study than ever before of woman out in society at large, where she has the most influence upon the world's morality.“

Chapter 4

Dear Arthur

I suppose you would like some description of me, but I am sure I can't describe myself, though I can give you some cold facts that you might turn into an algebraic equation if you are very, very clever.

A— weight 117 lbs.

B— height 5 ft. 5 in.

C — age 22 yrs.

$A \times B \times C = x$

Oh, I suppose that is all wrong, but never mind.

I never wrote to any one I did not know before, and it is like writing in the dark. If I had only seen you for about two minutes I would have something to base an opinion upon.

Case 2. — Miss C.

I like men very much, and I don't like women. Even when I was a child, I always rather looked down on girls, and much preferred playing with boys... Poor, poor women, I am indeed sorry for them. In a measure I pity myself, but not as I do the others, for I know no law but myself. I pity myself simply because I happen to be a woman. Oh, if I were only a man! Well, if I were, I suppose I'd be just like the most of them — animals, that is all. But delightful and charming animals for all that. I should have been a man. I'm quite sure of it. And it is a great injustice to me that I am not.

Case 3. — Miss D.

When you say, „Be free; be yourself!“ you make me laugh. For no one was ever any more herself than I am myself. Other people complain that I am too much myself... I am afraid of nothing in the world, nor the universe, either, and I always do exactly as I please. I had a dear friend — a fox terrier — whose advice I used to ask. (I don't ask any one's advice now.) After confiding my difficulties to him and begging him to speak, he would bark a little and look wise! Then I would go away and do just as I had intended to all along. He was the best adviser and confidante in the world. Man could do no more, and he had the advantage of never taking offence because I did not follow his advice to the letter.

Case 5.— Miss F.

You are not a success as a speculative thinker;
you had better stick to science.

Case 8.— Miss I.

Do not feel disappointed that I hesitate about making myself one of a herd — or an „experiment“. It is not pleasant to discuss one's self scientifically — to feel so like a machine pulled apart to be oiled into smoother running, or worse — to be cast aside when found of poor metal, not worth further inspection! Then so many hidden defects (even to one's self) crop out in the process of putting it into black and white. Student of nature as you are, you, of course, are well aware that, in telling of herself, a woman (always more emotional than scientific) will unintentionally let her heart peep out quite too often.

Case 62. — Lock Box

Please ask me specific, not general, questions.
I do not know what interests me most in women
collectively; each woman I meet, however,
interests me most of all in temperament. Women
are all different from each other, you know.

Case 67.

Don't be cross, Monsieur, but you must own that to advertise for a French or German correspondent and then to correspond only in English does seem funny, and your letters hitherto (you promised not to take offence at anything I said) strike one as if you typed off several that would suit various correspondents, just adding a few lines in your own handwriting that may bear a little reference to what each in particular wrote about.

There! Has the masculine brow grown very black and has the masculine moustache been fiercely twirled (though I forgot — Americans are clean shaven, aren't they?) as, after reading the above, you mutter, „Confound it! What does the woman mean by hitting the right nail on the head in this fashion!!“

Case 68. — England

Chapter 5

Precision

As MacDonald stated in another publication, „a thorough study of any human being cannot be made without instruments of precision. Such an investigation of living man is one of the most recent tendencies of science. It is paradoxical that man is the last object to be thoroughly studied by man... An instrumental method of inquiry is a more exact way of ascertaining the effects of mental, moral and physical forces on the body, of many of which we are unconscious. The facts thus obtained bear the closest relations to new questions in the development and education of man.“

Accordingly, in the measurements he conducted on his female correspondents „the main object was to decide as accurately as possible the acuteness of the nerves to heat, pain, and locality, and to compare the results with the acuteness of women in general; to see whether their nervous condition may be one of the causes of their answering a „personal“, or whether it is due more to their surroundings and circumstances in life. The latter is probable; yet an abnormal nervous state would be one of the factors.“

„Miss D. is a tall young lady, twenty years old,
and of good appearance.

Anthropological measurements of Miss D. are:
Height 163 cm; sitting height 83 cm; arm reach
163 cm; weight 121 lbs. Least sensibility to pain,
r. hand 2.75 kilos; l. hand 2.25 kilos. Least
sensibility to heat, r. wrist 3.50; l. wrist 2. Least
sensibility to locality, r. wrist 9 mm; l. wrist 9 mm.
Strength of r. hand grasp 23 kilos; l. h. 20 kilos.
Hair light, short and curly; eyes blue; skin light.

These measurements indicate a normal condition.“

„Miss I. seems to have a somewhat nervous temperament. Her psycho-neural measurements are: Least sensibility to heat: r. wrist 5; l. wrist 7. Least sensibility to pain: r. hand 2,75 kilos; l. hand 2,5 kilos. Least electrical hypnotic sensibility: r. hand 2,75 kilos; l. hand, 2,5 kilos... Cephalic index 81. Miss I. is comparatively obtuse to sense of heat (left wrist especially), and comparatively acute to sense of pain; she is rather long-headed... Her strength of hand-grasp is above the average. As for electrical hypnotic sensibility, the instrument to measure pain by pressure in the hands was used. It was suggested that the instrument gave electrical feeling by pressure, which was not the case, of course. Miss I. felt the suggested electrical current, showing a certain tendency to hypnotism.“

In one of his later studies aimed at finding a direct link between physical appearance on the one hand and criminality, insanity, and poverty on the other, MacDonald made measurements on women studying at universities in the eastern states, and came to the following conclusions:

„Women students who have had infectious diseases are superior in weight, height, strength, and lung capacity to those having had hereditary diseases.

Those with poor nutrition, when compared with others, are inferior in weight, sitting height, mid strength; in distance between orbits... in short, they are physically inferior in general.

Comparing the blondes with the brunettes, the blondes are inferior in all measurements except in the distance of crown to chin and distance between zygomatic arches. The blondes are less sensitive to pain.“

Chapter 6

Pain

In subsequent years, MacDonalds applied his anthropometrical principles to the examination of children in public schools. In his 315-page long report „Experimental Study od Children“, which was included in the 1897 - 98 Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Dr. Macdonald published the data he had obtained by measuring 1000 school children in Washington. He created over 70 tables and graphs comparing his subjects according to race, gender and social status. In the concluding chapter, he described with great detail 91 different „psycho-physical and anthropometrical instruments of precision“ used in the Laboratory of the U.S. Bureau of Education, which he had accumulated, and some even designed himself.

„Pain is caused by applying to a sensory nerve a greater stimulation than is normal. The stimulation may be mechanical, electrical, thermal, etc. The measurement of pain can only be approximated, and here there is often difficulty.

The writer (Arthur MacDonald) has designed a new instrument, which may be called a temporal or temple algometer. It measures the sensibility to painful or disagreeable impressions caused by pressure, and is generally applied to the temporal muscles. The instrument consist of a brass cylinder, with a steel rod running through one of its ends; this rod is attached to a spring, with a marker on the scale, measuring pressure from 0 to 4000 gram...

The whole instrument is 30 cm in length...

... In making experiments upon both sexes, the author has found women to be more acute in sensitiveness of disagreeableness of pain from pressure than men...

The young women of the wealthy classes are, according to the measurements, very much more sensitive to pain than any other classes.

The university women are more sensitive to pain than the washerwomen. The businesswomen are, however, more sensitive than the university women. As is well known, the majority of university students, both men and women, are not wealthy, but simply in moderate circumstances. It seems that the sociological condition is one of the main factors to affect sensibility to pain.“

„A dynamometrical aesthesiometer “measures different degrees of sensibility to pain by pressure of two points on the skin...

Another algometer is that by Dr. Cheron. Its purpose is not only to measure how much pressure of the point on the skin is necessary to produce pain, but also how much the point penetrates the skin... (it) measures the amount of the sinking of the point into the skin as soon as the pain is felt. Maker, Verdin, Paris.“

„Hypnotic instruments are used as aids to the operator in producing hypnotism or suggestion. The hypnotic ball has been used at the Hospital Salpetriere in Paris. It consists of a curved flat piece of metal, holding a lead wire, on which is fastened a nickel ball 15 millimeters in diameter, which can be changed from one position to another by bending the wire. The ball is so placed as to strain the attention, the muscles of the eyes are fatigued. After concentrating the eyes upon the ball for a while the operator can suggest heaviness of eyelids, sleepiness, and the like. There is an imitation of nature here, as when we feel sleepy our eyelids are heavy and we can hardly keep them open.“

Chapter 7

Personal

„Personal“ is a comedy hit produced in 1904 by Biograph Company. It tells the story of a Frenchman who places an advertisement in the New York Herald's personal column in the hope of finding a prospective American bride. Besieged by a large crowd of women, he panics and runs away. What ensues is one of the first chase scenes in the history of film. The women pursue him down the street, across the field, over a fence, etc. In each scene the pursuers chase the pursued towards the camera, and the scene lasts until the last character has left the frame. At the end, the Frenchman is hiding in the bushes, but is caught by one of the women who pulls a gun on him.

„Personal“ was so immensely popular that it was remade two times that very same year. The Edison Company's plagiarised version was directed by Edwin S. Porter and entitled „How a French Nobleman Got a Wife through the New York Herald ‚Personal‘ Column“.

In their promotional material, the company claimed that the film was based on an actual event and that the following advertisement had really appeared in the New York Herald:

Young French Nobleman, recently arrived, desires to meet wealthy American girl; object matrimony; will be at Grant's Tomb at 10 this morning, wearing boutonniere of violets.

The film opens with the text of the advertisement.

In the Porter's version, the slightly overweight woman, who is always the last to enter and leave the frame, is the one who gets the dandy in the end. She is the only one of the pursuers who without hesitation dashes into the pond into which the Frenchman has escaped in panic. The other women remain on the shore.

In early November 1904, Siegmund Lubin made another remake of the Biograph hit, this time shot on locations in Philadelphia. In „Meet Me at the Fountain“ the „woman“ who wins the Frenchman is an old made played by a well-known female impersonator Gilbert Saroni.

In the final scene, in a closer shot, (s)he smothers the Frenchman with kisses, while he wipes his mouth with a handkerchief.

Epilogue

In 1902 Arthur Macdonald submitted a bill to the House of Representatives for establishing a separate organisation with a laboratory to study „the criminal, pauper, and defective classes“ in hospitals, schools and other insitutions.

Based on his anthropometrical measuments, he proposed to reorient education from its traditional emphasis upon development towards what he considered as prevention of crime and poverty.

That very same year MacDonald was fired from the U.S. Bureau of Education for the examinations he had conducted on pupil of public schools.

„We shall only be able to know what women are when we no longer dictate to them what they should be“, wrote Rosa Mayreder, an Austrian feminist, in her influential book „Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit“ (The Critique of Femininity), which was published in 1905 in German. The book was translated into English in 1912 under the title „A Survey of the Woman Problem“.

