



The Masculinist #21 - The Tragic Landscape of Modern Relationships

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Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly newsletter about the intersection of masculinity and Christianity. If you think this is an important topic today, then please forward this to other people you think might be interested, because I need your help to make this a success.

You can subscribe and read the archives here: <http://www.urbanophile.com/masculinist/the-masculinist-archives/>

Dean Abbot recently invited me onto his podcast to talk about the Masculinist. You can listen to our discussion [over on YouTube](#).

This is the third installment in my series on attraction. It focuses on the environment in which attraction and our pursuit of relationship plays out. If you haven't yet read the first two, you check out [Masc #17](#) (on what women find attractive in a man) and [Masc #18](#) (what men find attractive in women, and how the different drivers and male and female attraction change over time).

The Traditional Relationship Landscape

One way in which church teachings on the sexes and marriage have fallen short is that they do not fully grapple with the changes to the social landscape in which relationships and marriages are formed.

Historically in the West, men and women who were not in religious vocations married, and married for life. It was socially and economically difficult to be single, though of course some were. While certainly pre-marital sex was not a rarity, there was a focus on chastity in society in many eras. Also, sexually transmitted diseases were a serious danger.

Once married, it wasn't an easy task to get divorced. And doing so came with very high social cost. While it wasn't always "till death do us part," it was still a much more stable environment than today. Even just prior to the advent of no-fault divorce in 1969, divorce was not a slam dunk and carried social if not legal penalties.

Because of this, there was a lot of focus on making a good lifetime match. In [Masc #17](#) I drew the distinction between male Alpha characteristics (power and status, confidence and charisma, physical appearance, and resources/money) that drive attraction and Beta characteristics (godliness, commitment, conscientiousness, fidelity, reliability, etc.) that make for a good long term match. Families and communities, who had much more influence in the past than today, encouraged young women to marry men – or even arranged marriages to men - who exhibited good Beta characteristics, or at least good long term potential. They understood that the men with high Alpha characteristics would be more attractive in the short term, but without the requisite Beta characteristics, a marriage would be a disaster.

Also, they understood the attractiveness curve, and that women held most of the cards while young, but that reversed with time. They also had lower life expectancy, and also understood the strong relationship between youth and female fertility. So they encouraged an early, or certainly not too late, marriage both to avoid sin and to take advantage of their daughters' marketplace leverage.

Men themselves were encouraged to develop the Beta characteristics that marked them as good long-term marriage prospects, and then to marry and obtain the respectability that this status brought them. Men often couldn't marry until they established themselves and could prove they had the means to support a wife and family. So they had an incentive to get their act together and make things happen.

The result of all this was to make Beta characteristics important in marriage matchmaking, and thus encouraged men to develop those characteristics. And it also led to reasonably early marriage. (It is important to point out that the very

early marriage ages of the 1950s were themselves unusual. In the late 19th century, men married at age ~26.5 on average and women ~23.5, higher than in the 1950s. Today that has increased to around age 29 for men and 27 for women.)

The Neoliberalization of Sex

This obviously isn't a complete picture, and the traditional pattern was not universal, but certainly held to a far greater degree than it does now. Today, the situation has radically changed. Consider the following characteristics of our society and how things are different:

- The 1943 discovery of penicillin as a cure for syphilis led to a major increase in promiscuity.
- Thanks to the sexual revolution, premarital sex and non-marital cohabitation are socially accepted, so one need not marry to obtain socially acceptable sex. Technological change (e.g., Tinder) created a ready forum for obtaining sex.
- Reliable birth control and abortion on demand radically lowered the risk of unwanted pregnancy resulting from promiscuous sex.
- Divorce is now easy to obtain and socially acceptable, lessening the importance of making a good marital match.
- Women and men are under far less social constraint and pressure to marry. It's possible to retain a high quality status in society without marrying.
- Women have largely been emancipated from previous constraints that bound them to dependency on husbands and fathers. They are legally independent and financially self-sufficient. Where they do have financial problems, a panoply of public and private sector aid programs are there to assist them.
- Families, churches and other social actors are far less influential than before.

Most people today see all or most of these as positive developments. But as one would expect, these changes had a profound impact on the marriage market. One key effect was to disaggregate the marriage market into the multiple relationship markets that exist today: the sexual market, the dating market, and the marriage market. Men and women today can engage in relationship free sex (i.e., hooking up) that used to only be readily available via prostitution. They can date, casually or long term. And they can get married. People are free to move from one marketplace to another at any time, though once married it is still difficult to freely engage in outside sex (the rise of polyamory means this is increasingly no barrier either, however).

These and other changes have created a relationship landscape far different from the traditional one (and also at odds with the assumptions of the church). For example, in the novels of Jane Austen, the focus is on finding the right match for marriage. After the wedding, the story is over. Today, making it to the altar changes little. Everyone remains as exposed to the relationship marketplaces as much as they were at the moment they were married. No matter how committed to a marriage you might be personally, there's absolutely nothing you can do if your spouse decides to walk away from it. Churches frequently teach that marriage is more than a contract (that it's instead a "covenant.") But marriage today is less than a contract. After all, you can enforce a contract whereas a marriage is simply a contingent commitment for now that neither party has rights in which can be terminated for convenience at any time. People today can never have the reflexive security in their marriages that my grandparents' generation did.

But that's the least of it. The net result of all of these changes has been the neoliberalization sex and relationships. My use of the term "marketplace" above was deliberate, because that's what it is. Today, sex and relationships are commodities. Just because we don't personally think of them that way and don't want them to be that way doesn't change the reality of the marketplace, anymore than our opinion of the globalized neoliberal economy changes the reality of finding a job. If your partner becomes unsatisfied with the "product" you are providing, you are out of luck. People can switch sexual, dating, or marital partners like switching apartments. As with changing apartments, it may not be frictionless, but is straightforward to do.

The person who has best revealed the hellscape that is the modern relationship marketplaces is French novelist Michel Houellebecq. In his bleak 1994 debut novel *Whatever*, he notes that "sexuality is a system of social hierarchy." And in the book's central and most famous passage his protagonist observes:

I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effects of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as 'the law of the market'. In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every

person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their bed mate. In a totally liberal economic system certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society.

(The literal translation of the book's French title is "Extension of the Domain of the Struggle.")

It should come as no surprise that researchers as diverse as Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, and Brad Wilcox have pointed out that success in relationships increasingly overlaps with economic success. The upper middle class by and large is still able to get and stay married. In this, as in many other things such as buying organic food or "ethically sourced" goods, they are prone to congratulating themselves for being enlightened when in fact a big chunk of their lives are simply a product of having won in the marketplace, effects rather than causes.

A large number of other people are not so lucky. This includes the less educated or working classes, who have unstable marriages if they marry at all. For them life is more likely to be a sequence of failed romantic attachments, often with out of wedlock births and/or multi-partner fertility. (Robert Putnam illustrates the contrast well with personal stories in his book *Our Kids*).

Others deliberately attempt to exploit the market, or otherwise react against what they perceive as the injustice of it. Pick-up artists simultaneously revile and revel in the degeneracy of modern culture. Men's rights activists rail against the injustices of the system. A group known as MGTOW (mig-tao, or "Men Going Their Own Way") seek to convince men to opt out of the system and forgo romantic attachments. MGTOW are essentially a photographic negative of Brad Wilcox, who advocates the benefits of marriage, and have [tussled with him](#) in the past. This [video](#) by a person who calls himself "Turd-Flinging Monkey" should give you a feel for them. Another group are the self-identified "incels" – "involuntary celibate" men like the Toronto van attack perpetrator who feel denied the sex and companionship with women. (The ever prescient Houellebecq included an involuntarily celibate character in *Whatever*, one whom the protagonist fantasizes about radicalizing into a killer).

For their part, various feminist groups simultaneously argue against traditional structures, while likewise complaining about the fallout from the neoliberalization of sex, such as men failing to develop the Beta characteristics (education, career, etc.) that would make them better candidates for marriage. Today Alpha characteristics rule the roost. That's great for when women are in the fun phase, but not so great when they are looking to settle down. Few people, not even in the church, have any sympathy for men who cannot find women, but fail to realize that the women who can't find men are the flip side of the same phenomenon. Every man exiled from relationships and marriage means a woman likewise exiled. Rebecca Solnit correctly [makes the link](#) between capitalism's market ethic and sexual exploitation, but fails to see that her own vision is simply another version of the same thing.

How to Live in This World

How to respond to this is a very difficult question, and one I don't see that the church has seriously grappled with. I will share a few thoughts and principles though by no means consider this complete.

1. Christians must personally practice chastity. Chastity is a broad concept but at a minimum means abstaining from the sexual marketplace prior to marriage, remaining faithful afterwards, and staying married to the extent that it depends on you. Not only is participating in the sexual marketplace far more personally damaging than people tend to recognize, especially over the long term, it actively perpetuates the system that produces all these negative outcomes. If you are playing that game, you are a functional accomplice to the pick-up artist and woman-hating incel.

2. Marriage is normative for Christians and the vast majority of Christians are not called or suited for a celibate life. Among other things, the consequences of being single, particularly into and beyond middle age, are severe. The church is by and large not leveling with people about this. Single people literally die younger than married ones, along with other negative life effects. Go look at any Brad Wilcox piece on the benefits of marriage, and simply look at the other side of the ledger.

What's more, the "fun times" of youth, especially when the opposite sex is involved, rapidly fade and even disappear – and it happens faster than you think. Again Houellebecq, this time from *The Elementary Particles*:

[W]omen who turned twenty in the late sixties found themselves in a difficult position when they hit forty. Most of them were divorced and could no longer count on the conjugal bond—whether warm or abject—whose decline they had served to hasten. As members of a generation who—more than any before—had proclaimed the superiority of youth over age, they could hardly claim to be surprised when they, in turn, were despised by succeeding generations. As their flesh began to age, the cult of the body, which they had done so much to promote, simply filled them with an intensifying disgust for their own bodies—a disgust they could see mirrored in the gaze of others. The men of their generation found themselves in much the same position, yet this common destiny fostered no solidarity. At forty, they continued to pursue young women—with a measure of success, at least for those who, having skillfully slipped into the social game, had attained a certain position, whether intellectual, financial or social. For women, their mature years brought only failure.

In short, unless you are a man who happens to be either wealthy or a celebrity of some sort, life after 40 is not good when it comes to relationships. If you think you'll find solace in your career, this is also the time when most people hit their career ceiling. Sometime in people's 40s is when they generally discover to their chagrin that they are now expendable in the office too.

People need to be aware of this when thinking about what it would mean to be single for the long term. And it should go without saying that the longer you are single, the more likely you are to be tempted into the sexual marketplace.

3. Play "Moneyball for Marriage." Because marriage is intrinsically fragile today, it's critically important to select a partner with an eye towards permanence. As I noted in [Masc #11](#), women initiate around 70% of all divorces, a stat I've never seen mentioned in the Christian marriage books I've read. Let's assume you are working to be the kind of man who won't give a woman cause to want to divorce you. Nevertheless, it's critical that you assess the divorce risk of any woman you are contemplating marriage to and pay attention to what it tells you.

Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane used statistical methods to select players that were superior to traditional methods based on intuition, a technique describe in the Michael Lewis book *Moneyball*. Similarly, there are many and well-documented factors that [statistically correlate with divorce](#). You should make it your business to know what they are and understand them. (I will probably do a future installment on them). It's eminently possible to marry a woman with a low (less than 10%) risk of divorce, statistically speaking. There are basic divorce risk calculators online, though none I would confidently recommend.

Women need to do the same thing. Since I'm not a woman, I'm not sure what their moneyball formula would look like. Divorce risk may not loom as large for them as it does for men. Perhaps they have other major considerations. But without a doubt trying to take an objective look at the person she is marrying with an eye towards the long term is critical for women as well.

4. Recognize that after age 21 the number of high quality marriage prospects continuously declines, and your risk of personally becoming a poor marriage prospect continually increases. I say age 21, because earlier marriage is associated with various risks and it's [a threshold age](#) policy researchers cite for when you should start looking for marriage if you want to avoid poverty. But after that the odds of someone's marriageability level increasing is much lower than of it decreasing. For example, I noted in [Masc #7](#) that sexual partner count is heavily correlated with divorce. Over time people's partner count can only go up, never down. That applies not just to anyone you might want to marry, but to yourself as well. Also, people get married, which permanently removes them from the pool of high quality potential spouses. Generally speaking educated professionals who follow the traditional path of having fun in their 20s, then getting serious about marriage around 30 do seem to find someone, but a material number of them don't.

I did not personally marry young, so will not argue that you should. I feel like was very fortunate, however, and got bailed out by grace. That doesn't happen for everybody, so you need to understand the dynamics of life in making decisions about how to live it.

In short: Stay chaste; get married (or least give serious consideration to what a lifetime of singleness means), to someone with a low divorce risk; understand the likely runway you have to land the plane to marriage. Again, these four principles aren't the entirety of a response. They are only a start. And they don't address the system at all, merely how to live within it.

How Should the Church Respond in This World

What then about the church? My general impression of church teachings is that pastors still think it's the 1950s, only

with an explicitly or functionally egalitarian view of sex roles. But things like [encouraging men to be more chivalrous](#) is ridiculous in light of the radical changes in society since the eras in which those previous behavioral norms hold sway. When well-known pastors write entire books about marriage that are replete with statistics but never once mention that women initiate the vast majority of divorces, they are doing a serious disservice to their readers.

In short, the church needs to think a lot more seriously about what it means to live in the world we are in today.

But beyond just advice that doesn't take seriously with the realities of today's world, the church itself has become a partial enabler of its dysfunction. I wrote in [Masc #11](#) that the church has become an inadvertent facilitator of divorce. I also see that the church is supportive of long-term singleness, which, as I noted, often leads to a bleak place after 40 for those who fail to land the plane to marriage. For example, there are [courses on singleness](#), articles on how you [shouldn't make an idol out of family](#), teachings that Christianity affirms the value of singleness, etc. And there are pushes for even more. A number of vocal singles with platforms have called for the church [to change even more](#) to accommodate the rising number of singles.

I take the opposite view. The church should be making its singles less comfortable. Yes, Paul considers singleness a superior state. Historically that meant celibate vocations, something few singles are interested in signing up for that today. But even for the Protestant, the explicit biblical value in singleness is that it allows someone to focus on serving God, as Paul himself did. So by all means let's support and honor the people who stay single to serve the church at a higher level than the average member, but it's not clear why we should do that for those who are just pursuing career and a yuppie lifestyle of avocado toast brunches and the like. Paul himself even told widows under 60 that they should remarry. There ought to at least be a tradeoff here: much more support for you as a single in return for you reciprocating to the church.

The church should also be looking at the life priorities and decisions of these singles, particularly in elite coastal cities. Even in the secular world places like New York are known as shark infested waters for dating. People don't come these places to get married. They come for career and lifestyle reasons. Urban church people love to quote Jeremiah 29:7 that says, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile..." Gimme a break. Nobody was exiled to Boston. It might have felt that way to Tim Keller in 1989 when he moved to NYC with three young children when the city was still a war zone. But that doesn't apply to 99% of Christians there now. People with college degrees are in DC, San Francisco, etc. because they want to be there, not because they were forced to be. They didn't come to seek the welfare of the city either. They came to chase a personal dream.

If these singles don't want to give that up in order to make marriage their top priority that's their right. It's a free country as I always say. But the church is under no obligation to underwrite their decisions either, especially if they have no intention of repenting (i.e., changing their minds, their priorities, and their behaviors to try harder for marriage - something I've never read one of the "do more for singles" advocates say that they are doing). I've written before multiple times about the long odds Christians face in finding a spouse in global cities as they get older. There are plenty of urban churches full of young singles who are never being told about these negative future trajectories. The urban church needs a lot less theology of singleness and faith and work seminars, and a lot more realtalk on marriage. There are quite a few singles in churches that if they don't start treating finding a spouse like a 911 emergency, which might involve some major life changes, are at severe risk of spending a very long time alone. Think it's painful to be 40 and single? How do you think it will feel at 50, 60, 70, and 80? At age 40 your life is less than half over.

I had to go through this myself. Finding myself older and single, a result entirely of my sin and personal life choices, I made a major change in direction. I realized that I myself was not marriageable, and had to set about changing that to the extent I could. Once I thought I was in a place where I could be married, I made it a top priority and fortunately it worked out. Thankfully I didn't have to leave New York to make it happen, but I may yet need to do so in order to put family first. Marriage doesn't guarantee a great future by any means. It comes with its own risks as I laid out above. But I'm willing to take that risk rather than doubling down on the status quo ante.

The church is ready to help people pick up the pieces when their lives are shipwrecked. That's absolutely something it should be doing. But wouldn't it be even better if the church could help people avoid running into the reefs in the first place? [Be the lighthouse](#) to help people reach the harbor, not just the repair yards when they don't.

Regarding Michel Houellebecq

I'll end with a word about Michel Houellebecq. He's an amazing writer and an extremely important diagnostician of our culture. However, his novels can be very sexually explicit. You should be aware of that before reading them. I touted

Submission before (see [a review here](#)). It has a ton to say about Christianity in the West, and has only a couple of explicit sex scenes that can easily be skipped. *The Map and the Territory* (which won the Prix Goncourt, France's top literary prize) is also relatively tame. *Whatever* has limited actual sex scenes but strong sexual themes. *The Elementary Particles* considered by many his masterpiece, is a devastating indictment of our modern world, but also extremely graphic, as are his other novels I believe. (Rod Dreher is also [a fan](#) of *The Elementary Particles*.) These books will not be considered appropriate to read by everyone.

Noteworthy

I talked in Masc #17 about how the church is giving out bad information about attraction to men, and laid out a much more accurate take. As another example of what I'm talking about, on Mother's Day the Gospel Coalition [tweeted](#) a quote from Don Carson saying, "The greatest aphrodisiac in marriage is kindness." This is not accurate. Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit. It's something every man should be seeking to cultivate in his relationships with everyone around him, including his wife. But the word "aphrodisiac" specifically refers to something that will generate sexual desire. Kindness does not generate sexual attraction. Don Carson is President of the Gospel Coalition and so is the kind of person people will treat as an authoritative Christian teacher. So these kinds of errors are serious coming from him. (Click through to [Masc #17](#) for further explanation).

Alastair Roberts: [Some Reflections on the Billy Graham Rule](#)

NY Post: [Boy Scouts to get new name after 108 years as girls join group](#)

Chicago Sun-Times: [With mayor's blessing, women-only social club heading to Chicago](#)

Politico: [Why young Americans are having less sex](#)

Lyman Stone [created a chart](#) showing the percentages of young people who are not having sex:

Share of Population By Sex Who Are: Unmarried, 22-35 Years Old, Report Having No Sex in Prior Year



Ross Douthat: [The Redistribution of Sex](#)

London Review of Books: [Does anyone have a right to sex?](#)

The Telegraph (UK): [Rise of women backing out of divorces as court settlements shrink](#)

Women are backing out of divorce cases because settlements are becoming less generous, experts have said. Fewer wives are being awarded income for life and they are increasingly having their divorce settlement limited to a few years. This is making some of them back off from going through with a split, law firms say.

Coda

Why has the Swedish model of social democracy never triumphed over liberalism? Why has it never been applied to sexual satisfaction? Because the metaphysical mutation brought about by modern science leads to individuation, vanity, malice and desire. Any philosopher, not just Buddhist or Christian, but any philosopher worthy of the name, knows that, in itself, desire—unlike pleasure—is a source of suffering, pain and hatred. The utopian solution—from Plato to Huxley by way of Fourier—is to do away with desire and the suffering it causes by satisfying it immediately. The opposite is true of the sex-and-advertising society we live in, where desire is marshaled and blown up out of all proportion, while satisfaction is maintained in the private sphere. For society to function, for competition to continue, people have to want more and more, until desire fills their lives and finally devours them.

- Michelle Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*

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