

He is Charlotte Simmons

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Tom Wolfe.

I Am Charlotte Simmons.

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The sexual revolution is perhaps the greatest social revolution in human history. Arising from the explosive encounter between the liberal idea that individuals should make their own choices and the technological innovation that produced a cheap and reliable birth control pill, it has dramatically transformed relations between men and women, family and friendship, popular culture and the workplace. Forty years down the road we have only begun to deal with its consequences, in part because the sexual revolution quickly came to be regarded as an expression of the natural order of things.

Evidence of the revolution, and of our forgetting of its radicalness, is preserved in the layers of our language. Although it is natural for young people to rebel against their parents, the term “generation gap” was coined for only one generation in our nation’s history. The 60s called the term forth, but not in the first place because of the civil rights movement or the Vietnam war. Parents and students could be found on both sides of both. A yawning gap opened because what divided parents on one side of the sexual revolution from their college age sons and daughters on the other was unlike anything middle class parents had ever witnessed, or for that matter unlike anything middle class young people had ever experienced. Suddenly sex without consequences, or more accurately sex without the production of a baby, the one consequence that on a large scale society could not ignore, was available to young adults. Thanks to the pill, middle class heterosexuals could enjoy what the very rich, and the very poor, and homosexuals had always known: sex free of responsibility for bringing a new human being into the world. Middle class young people could now indulge in sex, maintain their respectability, and keep all their options open. And within a generation, the term “generation gap” vanished from use. This was for the simple reason that those who were becoming parents increasingly found themselves standing with their college age children and youth culture more generally on the same side of the sexual revolution’s great divide.

The new sexual freedom was not absolute. It was encumbered by the ability to attract sexual partners, and the limits of one’s scruples and imagination. Which is to say that the new freedom did not promote democratic equality in all ways. Since attractive qualities are not evenly distributed, the new sexual freedom sustained some old hierarchies and introduced some new ones. Moreover, the new freedom has certainly not overwhelmed all inhibitions,

uprooted all customs and age-old practices, and undermined all venerable desires for the happiness of hearth and home. Forty years later men and women still seek love. Most still link love to monogamy. And somewhere down the line most are looking for a life partner and a union sanctified by law and society. But the pill helped make possible and, in alliance with the liberal ambition to make the individual his or her own sovereign authority, helped make respectable a new kind of sexual liaison that did not depend on love. To describe it, the generic and unlovely term “relationship” was called into service.

Almost everyone these days has relationships. Many young adults, especially if they graduate from upper-middle-class high schools and elite universities, have at least two or three sustained monogamous relationships — lasting from a few months to a few years — on the way to mature adulthood and marriage. Unlike what used to be called going steady or dating, relationships generally involve sex and often living together. But a relationship does not necessarily — for college students it almost necessarily does not — point toward marriage. And unlike marriage, although it involves intimacy and the interweaving of two lives, a relationship does not bring any special legal obligations.

The new sexual freedom and the relationships that developed to accommodate it have expanded choices about whom to be with, in what ways, and for how long; created opportunities for experiments in living; and, for women, on whom the burden of pregnancy unavoidably falls far more heavily, provided more equality. But what if men and women are different in ways that go beyond the structure of their sex organs, and so experience sexual relationships differently? And what if the exercise of the new freedom imparts lessons to both men and women about life, and develops habits of heart and mind, that interfere with the capacity to give oneself to and care for another, and so to build lasting, loving marriages? What if relationships teach how to withhold one's heart, to embrace another with one eye always fixed on the exit, to make long-term plans only for oneself though part of a couple? And what if such lessons, habits, and teachings are more easily acquired than discarded?

Here the deniers of the radicalness of the sexual revolution are prone to counter with a rhetorical trick: Would you prefer to live in an earlier time, the indignant defender of progress will ask, without dental hygienists, without central air conditioning, and without sexual freedom? Would you really like to return to an age in which women were confined to the kitchen, and kept barefoot and pregnant? Of course the resort to such non-sequiturs suggests that a nerve has been touched. After all, why should appreciation of any aspect of our world's undoubted blessings and genuine benefits compel one to close one's eyes to the disadvantages? Why should progress alone among human goods come at no cost?

How little the radicalness of the sexual revolution has been appreciated and how much questioning its consequences is deemed bad manners or worse has been amply demonstrated by the smugness with which many of the first wave of reviewers have ridiculed Tom Wolfe's

new novel. To hear the critics, speaking in the name of all that is hip and happening, tell it, I am Charlotte Simmons, though told with Wolfe's trademark gusto and, as the critics grudgingly acknowledge, a rollicking good read, is a pathetic exercise in voyeurism by an old man repelled by, but in reality hopelessly unable to come to grips with, the social and sexual life of today's college students. As if the stripping of eros and romance from sex, the most recent stage of which Wolfe chronicles in his big book, has not been a defining feature of campus life for four decades. As if Wolfe's critics, in or fast approaching middle age, have a better grasp of what is going on in campus bedrooms, dormitory common areas, frat-house parties and college formals, student newspapers, seminars and lecture halls, Saturday-afternoon tailgaters, big-time basketball team practices, and university-president offices than Wolfe, who has been leading the league in reporting on American culture for almost 50 years and who, in preparing to write his third novel, took the trouble to spend four years visiting campuses across the country and gathering information.

The governing theme of *I am Charlotte Simmons* is introduced by Wolfe in an entry from (the fictitious) *Dictionary of Nobel Laureates*, 3rd ed. that he places at the front of the novel. In 1983, 28-year-old Dupont University assistant professor of psychology Victor Ransome Starling removes the amygdala, which controls the emotions in higher mammals, from 30 cats. This causes the cats to enter a state of hypermanic sexual arousal. When Starling opens one of the cage doors to show an assistant the results of the experiment, the cat leaps out, immediately wraps its legs around the assistant's leg, and begins thrusting with its pelvis. But Starling is startled when the assistant points out that the desperate animal is actually one of the control cats whose amygdala has not been touched. Pondering the implications of the replication by the control cats of the amygdalized cats' hypermanic sexual arousal, Starling is led to the discovery for which he is awarded the Nobel Prize, namely, "that a strong social or 'cultural' atmosphere, even as abnormal as this one, could in time overwhelm the genetically determined responses of the perfectly normal, healthy animals."

This sets up the experiment that Wolfe's novel is meant to conduct: What happens if a talented, attractive and ambitious young person instilled with a conservative sensibility who wishes to pursue the cultivation of the mind is parachuted into a contemporary university? Indeed, Dupont University — a composite institution located like Swarthmore on the outskirts of suburban Philadelphia next to Chester; carrying the cache of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton; and like Duke or many major state universities boasting a national-caliber athletic program — initially overwhelms Charlotte Simmons of Sparta, North Carolina. The product of a poor family in a small town on the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the heart of Red America, Charlotte excelled in her studies, was taken under wing by a devoted, spinster high-school teacher who taught her to take pride in her intelligence and to love literature and learning, and won a scholarship to one of America's finest bastions of higher education. Encouraged by her hardworking and devout parents, Charlotte leaves them behind to pursue an education in the best that has been thought and said. Little does she understand, nor do

those who love her back home in Sparta, that Dupont sustains a cultural atmosphere at war with the beliefs and practices developed over millennia to guide normal, healthy young people in their transition to responsible adulthood.

Indeed, consistent with the discovery for which Professor Starling wins his Nobel prize, Charlotte's moral conservatism and hunger for knowledge prove no match for the larger lessons about sex and the soul that social and academic life at Dupont incessantly drum into students' heads. Right from the start, Beverly Amory, her wealthy, haughty, emaciated, sexually sophisticated Groton-educated roommate, causes Charlotte to feel clueless about how to speak and what to say, and embarrassed about what she wears and how little she has to spend. Striving to remember that she is, after all, Charlotte Simmons, committed to high ideals and expected by family and friends in Sparta to achieve great things, Charlotte finds herself yearning for a place of honor in the strict campus pecking order. To achieve that very human goal, she is resolved to excel in her studies. But the rigorous rules for social advancement require that she also have sex and find a boyfriend, in no particular order. And as a healthy and attractive young woman, Charlotte understandably feels some thrill at that message.

Standing out because of her accent, innocence, and intelligence, she finds an assortment of young men entering her life seeking to date her and mate with her. She is at first scornful of the hulking 6'10" basketball star Jojo Johanssen. She is attracted to and appalled by the handsome and charming but loutish fraternity stud Hoyt Thorpe. And she is intrigued by Adam Gellin, a brooding intellectual who, suffused with a sense of his own superiority, seethes with resentment at the exalted social rank and sexual access of the athletes and fraternity brothers, and burns with ambition to put them all in his shadow through the brilliance of his ideas — but whom Charlotte can't help thinking of as a dork. With ever greater urgency, Charlotte is confronted during her first semester with the question of to whom she will lose her virginity.

At the same time, she is riveted by Professor Starling's dazzling lectures on the physiological basis of human behavior. These lectures also discomfit her because their message challenges her sense of self and her religious upbringing, as the professor blithely elaborates: Character is biology and freedom is an illusion; our choices are in every last respect a result of chemical processes; the soul, or the ghost in the machine, is dead and modern science has killed it. Thus the campus curriculum reinforces the message of campus social life: The old principles are without foundation. Submit to your animal impulses. Seek immediate gratification. Strive to be envied by your peers. For you have nothing to lose and a social world to gain. And so Charlotte takes her leap of faithlessness.

But Charlotte is not a comic heroine like Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse, who stumble and fall, learn how to love, and find soul mates to marry. Nor is she a tragic heroine like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina, whose yearnings overrun their loveless marriages and prove disastrous to themselves and those around them. Charlotte is neither elevated nor

broken by the vulgar deflowering and the crises, academic and personal, that it provokes. Instead, as March Madness approaches and Dupont's basketball team peaks for the ncaa championships, she overcomes the disabling depression into which she had fallen and recovers her health. But she is no longer quite the same person, having learned in Wolfe's wonderfully ambiguous final pages to quiet her conscience and tame her pride, to use her brains and her body to get along and get ahead, and to find a boyfriend she likes, who brings her high status, and enables her to join in with the crowd, but whom she never could love. In short, despite her upbringing and gifts, Charlotte proves herself to be an excellent student of the university's unofficial but central teaching: the old restraints are antiquated and high ideals only interfere with the attainment of the authentic goods civilized life has to offer.

Part of the novel's wonderful ambiguity comes from the author's relation to his heroine and the experiment that he conducts with her. After all, Wolfe himself is a prodigiously talented child of the conservative south who rose early to, and has remained long at, the apex of New York literary life. To confirm the scope of the book's experiment, the dust jacket features Wolfe's initials as Dupont University mauve and gold varsity letters over which is inscribed Charlotte's recurring affirmation of identity, which serves as the book's title. This convergence — of the biographies of author and heroine and the overlapping on the cover of names and title — suggests that in bringing to life what is lost and what is gained when a product of the old ways conquers the world of the hip and the happening, Wolfe is also submitting his own path to examination.

Although Wolfe's book is an extraordinary performance, with his trademark intensely researched set pieces and marvelous reproduction of the rhythms and coinages of contemporary conversation, the opening round of reviews of *I am Charlotte Simmons* has harped on the negative. This is not hard to do. Of all literary genres the novel, which aims to create a world, is the most ambitious, the least capable of approaching perfection, and the most vulnerable to those who wish to find fault. *I am Charlotte Simmons* is no exception. Yet the criticism has cast more darkness than light, beginning with the oft-repeated charge that Wolfe has drawn a caricature of campus life and then poured scorn on the debauchery he invents, or at least wildly exaggerates. But like his Professor Starling, Wolfe is more than anything else fascinated by his subject. Which makes you wonder whether it is the critics who have lost their ability to stand back and look directly at the world they have helped bring into existence, and which their children are in the process of inheriting, if they have not already done so.

In addition, the critics mock Wolfe for bad writing about sex, as if the depiction of sex on campus as a routinely joyless and mechanical pursuit of physical release weren't his point. They also carp that not everybody at college is fornicating with abandon. But that's Wolfe's point, too, and he is ruthless in portraying the winners and losers in the campus sexual sweepstakes, along with the widespread acceptance on campus of the terms of the

sweepstakes. The conquests of the athletes and frat boys, and of the glamorous girls on campus who have learned not only to compete with each other but also with the boys for total number of conquests, Wolfe suggests, are setting the standards for the other students. The dorky intellectuals and homely women who nightly are “sexiled” from their dorm rooms ache for what the beautiful people among their fellow students are getting.

The critics also complain that instead of creating characters who take on lives of their own, Wolfe traffics in types who remain trapped within their molds. Although less so than in *Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full*, it is still true that in *I am Charlotte Simmons* Wolfe strains to fit into his world ordinary human decency and the reality of individuals, not heroic but also not pathetic or contemptible, but just muddling through. In fact some superstar jocks are intelligent; some dashing frat boys have a conscience; some college couples fall in love and marry; some student intellectuals believe in ideas as something more than an instrument of their overweening ambition; and some smart country girls come to campus and prove resourceful in defending themselves, socially and academically, however much they may remain inarticulate about their real predicament and the ambiguities of the freedom that the university bestows on them. To be sure, a novel is not a public hearing, and Wolfe is under no obligation, moral or aesthetic, to give all characters and sides equal time. But to achieve his famously professed goal for the novel, to show us who we are and to illuminate the world we actually inhabit, he must comply with the novel’s aesthetic imperative and recreate the complexity of the moral life.

That said, one of the striking features of *I am Charlotte Simmons* is just how many characters do surprise, starting with Charlotte, whose fate at the end of the novel, and certainly beyond, is by no means foreordained. Others who surprise include Delores, the dumpy student manager of the Dupont basketball team who, in a showdown with Buster Roth, the million-dollar-a-year coach and Jojo Johanssen over who will wipe Jojo’s spit off the shiny surface of the Buster Bowl’s basketball court, compels both big men to back down; Camille Deng, the Asian lesbian student journalist who cusses with passion, has read too much Foucault, and who, in contrast to fellow student journalist Adam Gellin, really does speak truth to power; and Jojo Johanssen, who, though no intellectual, is inspired by a pretty girl to discover the pleasures of learning and, over the vehement objections of his coach and therefore at considerable risk to his nba career, insists on obtaining an education from Dupont. As for those in the novel who do not surprise, alas, the university, like the larger world, is full of people who perform true to type. Wolfe’s depiction of them is masterly.

The critics particularly miss the critique of the university at the heart of the novel. The idea of the university is paradoxical, at once conservative and radical. It is conservative because the university’s mission is to transmit the learning of the past and to teach the discipline of systematic and rigorous inquiry. To accomplish this, though, the university must also be radical, opening students’ minds by loosening the grips on them of conventional opinions and popular ideas. American universities today fail in their conservative mission in part because they are not radical enough. Instead of challenging conventional wisdom and

received opinion the university has become a megaphone for them. Wolfe brings this out not least in his portrayal of those who lead our universities and so have authority over the megaphone. Here he also traffics in types. Here, too, although it needs to be said that some professors and university administrators are devoted to the idea of a liberal education that opens, furnishes, and refines the mind, Wolfe's types are all too vivid and all too devastatingly recognizable: the university president focused on raising money and quelling controversy who has little time or energy for articulating and defending the university's intellectual mission; middle-aged progressive professors whose guiding principles are political and partisan, not scholarly and intellectual; and classrooms presided over by proselytizers for the belief in the death of the soul. Meanwhile, students are perceptive. They grasp the university's meaning, made all the more potent by the gap between it and the ideal to which the university still pays perfunctory homage.

Of course the critique of intellectuals for corrupting the young is an old, old story, and a recurring theme of the philosophers. In ancient Athens, before the invention of the university, Plato's Socrates warned against the baleful influence of the professors of his day, the sophists, whom he defined as those who take money to teach and who specialize in the arts of persuasion while ignoring or denying the nature of moral and political virtue. In seventeenth-century England, Hobbes decried the university dogmatists and pedants for filling students' heads with desiccated ancient doctrines. In eighteenth-century France, Rousseau exposed the refined manners and elegant conversations of city sophisticates that divided the soul against itself and fanned the flames of pride, envy, and hypocrisy. In nineteenth-century Germany, Nietzsche railed against a university education that transformed philosophy, an inquiry into the right way to live, into an exercise in logic-chopping and fact-collecting.

In early twenty-first-century America, with the eyes and ears of a master journalist and employing the art of the popular novelist, Tom Wolfe has added another chapter to this large and long-running story. In its dramatization of how our universities miseducate the best fed, the finest clothed, and freest generation the world has ever seen, *I am Charlotte Simmons* captures an alarming dimension of the spirit of our times. Perhaps in finding on campus too few appearances of tenderness, generosity, or nobility and in tending to reduce those he does find to some lower motive, particularly resentment, Wolfe's novel betrays too much captivity to our times. For despite university miseducation, the soul is not dead, principles still make a difference, and human hearts still long for lasting love and can prove resourceful in cultivating attachments that sustain it. As Wolfe's own characters reveal, the ghost in the machine has not been driven out or destroyed. Though here flattened, there induced to forget its nature, and in special cases haunted about its right to exist, the ghost has proved tenacious, sometimes manifesting human freedom most dramatically in the intrepid examination of its own condition. All in all, it would be remarkable to come across soon again a new book that entertains as thoroughly while illuminating so sharply the temper of these revolutionary times.

