

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Legacy of Hugh Hefner

Over 3,000 years ago, King Solomon wrote poignantly about his life and about the purpose and meaning of life in general “under the sun.” His observations could be an appropriate epitaph for Hugh Hefner, the founder of the Playboy empire:

¹ I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

. . . ¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. [Ecclesiastes 2:1-3, 10-11 (ESV)]

Perhaps as a metaphor for his pleasure-filled life, Hefner paid \$75,000 for a crypt next to Marilyn Monroe, where presumably he will be buried.

As one evaluates the legacy of Hugh Hefner, it is difficult to say anything positive about that legacy. Columnist Tim Morris observes that “Hefner didn’t love women [which he claimed]. He lusted for them. He loved only himself and a hedonistic life that was mostly an adolescent fantasy.” Jill Filipovic of *Time* argues, “What Hefner and *Playboy* never did was present women as human, or consider us anything like men. Hefner made female sex objects more relatable and accessible Brilliantly, Hefner attached himself to the sexual revolution and the feminist gains that precipitated it. From his vantage point, publishing a magazine full of naked women was just one part of the new culture of ‘free love.’” In short, he built an empire on male desire! *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat offers the most honest evaluation of Hugh Hefner’s legacy I have read. Permit me extensive quotation from his essay:

- “Hef was the grinning pimp of the sexual revolution, with Quaaludes for the ladies and Viagra for himself—a father of smut addictions and eating disorders, abortions and divorce and syphilis, a pretentious huckster who published Updike stories no one read while doing flesh procurement for celebrities, a revolutionary whose revolution chiefly benefitted men much like himself.”

- “Hef the vanquisher of puritanism, Hef the political progressive, Hef the great businessman and all the rest . . . What a lot of garbage . . . the things that were distinctly Hefnerian, that made him influential and important, were all rotten, and to the extent they were part of stories that people tend to celebrate, they showed the rot in larger things as well.”
- “The social liberalism he championed was the rotten and self-interested sort, a liberalism of male and upper-class privilege, in which the strong and beautiful and rich take their pleasure at the expense of the vulnerable and poor and not-yet-born.”
- “And his appreciation of male-female difference was rotten, too—the leering predatory sort of appreciation, the Cosby-Clinton-Trump sort, the sort that nicknames Quaaludes ‘thigh openers’ and expects the girls to laugh, the sort that prefers breast implants to female intellect and rents the charms of youth to escape the realities of age.”
- “But in every way that mattered he made those changes worse, our culture coarser and crueler and more sterile than liberalism or feminism or freedom of speech required. And in every way that mattered his life story proved that we were wrong to listen to him, because at the end of the long slide lay only a degraded, priapic senility, or the desperate gaiety of Prince Prospero’s court with the Red Death at the door.”
- “Conservatives should ask how their crusade for faith and family and community ended up so Hefnerian itself—with a conservative news network that seems to have been run on Playboy principles and a conservative party that just elected a playboy as our president.”

As many have observed, Hugh Hefner validated the objectification of women. But he did so by embracing and championing libertinism and materialism which hid the reality of philandering, licentiousness and exploitation--all in the name of freedom! Hefner viewed himself as a moral revolutionary, one who “opened up the floodgates” of sexual libertinism which *Playboy* encouraged, commercialized and symbolized. He thereby transformed American sexual morality by intentionally breaking down the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic that once defined American civilization.

Theologian Albert Mohler maintains that Hefner not only advocated a lifestyle of sexual libertinism but he also advocated a theology. In an interview, Hefner declared that he was a “spiritual person, but I don’t mean that I believe in the supernatural.” He believed in God as creator but not in “the God of the Bible.” He championed that “I urge one and all to live life as if there is no reward in the afterlife and to do it in a moral way that makes it better for you and those around you, and that leaves this world a little better place than when you found it.” Hefner’s moral philosophy and “theology” of libertinism and exploitation are now mainstreamed in American culture. That is his legacy.

Hefner was not a moral revolutionary but a peddler of smut in the name of freedom. His “freedom” produced bondage and enslavement to a sexual fantasy that has destroyed both men and women. He died a pathetic, debauched, degraded old man who personified decadence not liberation.

King Solomon concluded his sobering evaluation of life with this observation about death:

³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. [Ecclesiastes 9:3 (ESV)]

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. [Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (ESV)]

Hugh Hefner has now experienced the great equalizer—death. He also now realizes that there is a God, the God of the Bible, and he will need to give an account of the life he has lived. What a tragedy; what a waste!

See Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (1 October 2017); Jill Filipovic in www.time.com (30 September 2017); Tim Morris in www.nola.com (2 October 2017); and Albert Mohler in www.albertmohler.com (14 October 2015).