



Schnitzler's Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815-1914

By Peter Gay

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An audacious work, *Schnitzler's Century* reassesses nineteenth-century history and traces the dramatic rise of the middle class. We have always believed that corseted Queen Victoria defined the mores of the nineteenth century. Yet Peter Gay asserts in this provocative, seminal work that it is the sexually emboldened Viennese playwright, Arthur Schnitzler, who provides a better symbol for the age. Challenging many sacrosanct notions about middle-class prudery and hypocrisy, he shows that in important ways, the Victorians were *not* Victorians. Gay chronicles the rise of modernity in countries as diverse as Germany and Italy, England and the United States, and in doing so presents a century filled with science and superstition, revolutionaries and reactionaries, eros and anxiety—in short, an age of contradiction rendered remarkably clear by one of our most eloquent historians. Not since Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* has a century been brought alive as dramatically. *Schnitzler's Century* is nothing less than a tour de force, a work that tells us with remarkable lucidity how we came to be the way we are. 13 b/w illustrations.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Prolific author Peter Gay describes the rise of the middle class in the 19th century through an unexpected lens: the life of Viennese playwright Arthur Schnitzler. Yet Gay's themes are much larger than the somewhat obscure Schnitzler: "If we may call [my book] a biography at all, it is one of a class," he writes. *Schnitzler's Century* necessarily focuses on the Victorians--a term often applied only to the British, but here extended to all of Europe and the United States--and Gay seeks to portray them in their complexity and diversity. "There are many people who think they have grasped the Victorian mentality when they have smiled at gushy keepsakes, maudlin poems, shy euphemisms, silences about matters that matter," he writes. In fact, "they lived with their eyes open." Gay has written a history of habits, with close attention paid to sexual ones. It is the sort of provocative book that the stereotypical Victorian would want to see removed from the storefront window--but also would want to peek at when nobody else was looking. --*John Miller*

From Publishers Weekly

Though distinguished historian Gay declares in the preface that his new work is not "merely a Reader's Digest condensation of the bulky texts that preceded it," readers of his five-volume study, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, will find most of the material decidedly familiar. As in the series' first book, *Education of the Senses*, he argues here that the Victorian middle classes were much less inhibited about sex than modern stereotypes suggest. As in the last, *Pleasure Wars*, he finds that bourgeois philistinism has been vastly overstated and that there were plenty of respectable patrons for avant-garde art and music. Indeed, as Gay admits, some of the actual examples here are drawn from his former work. So what's new? Interweaving incidents from the life of Austrian playwright and novelist Arthur Schnitzler, "sometimes briefly as an impetus to broader investigations, sometimes as a participant," Gay begins his main text with Schnitzler's father breaking into the 16-year-old's locked desk to find, and vehemently reproach Arthur for, a diary indiscreetly recording the boy's erotic exploits; he closes with the diary's August 5, 1914, entry about the "dreadful and monstrous news" of WWI's outbreak. In between, the incident with Schnitzler's diary turns up several more times: as a demonstration of conflicted bourgeois notions about privacy, as an illustration of more lenient treatment of children (Dr. Schnitzler lectured his son, but didn't beat him). As is always the case with Gay, the prose is graceful, the insights solid, the specific examples vivid and illuminating. Fellow historians and longtime readers will feel (correctly) that the author really isn't saying anything he hasn't said before; for those who lack the stamina for *The Bourgeois Experience*, this is an agreeable one-volume summary with some additional nuance. Illus.

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From Library Journal

The author of *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, and many other works, Gay takes a fresh look at the 19th century and challenges long-held assumptions about the Victorian age. In this sweeping and provocative survey, Gay uses Viennese playwright Arthur Schnitzler as his guide to exploring the erotic and unconventional currents of bourgeois life in Europe and the United States. He weaves together strands of philosophy, psychology, literature, science, religion, and domestic practices, and the narrative frequently spins off into unexpected territory. For example, Gay offers a delightful discourse on Victorian anxiety, its causes, and its cures. The book can be seen as a distillation of and companion to Gay's five-volume series, "*The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*," but it clearly stands alone as a vital

contribution to modern history. Recommended for academic libraries.

- *Thomas A. Karel, Franklin & Marshall Coll. Lib, Lancaster, PA*

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Users Review

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Cecilia Moore:

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