

Children In Relation to English Culture



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To form a relevant pattern, observations concerning a culture must emanate from a fixed standpoint whose general orientation is already known and against which the characteristics of the culture under examination can be seen. It has come my way to have a certain number of patients, both children and adults from the U.S.A., and I am proposing to draw attention to those aspects of the characteristics of children in English culture which I have noticed to be in contrast to the outlook and experience of my American friends and patients and which I have been most often asked to explain.

The first and perhaps central characteristic of children as seen by themselves or by English adults, the conception that underlies most of the phenomena we observe in English children is that there is an inherent positive value in childhood. Childhood, to the English is a state of being which is different from adult-hood, which is not just preliminary to adulthood but has quality of its own and values which are different from those of the adult world. This quality of difference from everything that goes on in the adult world is a precious possession of childhood, and of the culture and the enjoyment of it brings about certain changes in the child and the adult he will subsequently become, which are of permanent value.

To few English children does adult life seem attractive: adults, to them for the most part, seem a race apart: rather dull people who have lost the savour of life: people who do not any more want to get up at dawn and run in the dew, who have forgotten how good is the taste of ripe apples, for whom no magic lies in the colour of stones made wet by the sea, for whom no mysterious adventures wait hidden behind the unfamiliar bush, and who have even forgotten the joy of eating to repletion. Adults sit about inside rooms and talk and talk about the dullest things, when out of doors all sorts of things are stirring, they spend hours walking and standing in streets and shops, talking again and talking, and buying dull objects that no one could take an interest in. They bother about how things are said and what one person says about another; they are finding mysterious "wrongnesses" in things that you do; they never run, or shout, or seem to enjoy things; from a child's point of view they are dull indeed.

Being with one's own kind, on the other hand, being with the right sort of other children is satisfying, is fun. With them really important things can be got on with, exploring is important, and trying out new inventions, inventing new games and playing old ones, constructing things, and having competitions with the other children: pretending to be, in turn, all the

characters in the current myth, or playing out "fathers and mothers" or "shopping" or "school". Playing shopping is fun because you are all the characters yourself, the shopkeeper, the customer, the customer's baby, the man who delivers the goods; moreover you can alter the play as you like, shut the shop when the customers come if you are feeling like it, take back the goods, bully the customers, be sweet and horrid by turns, indeed play it out as you feel it would be fun to do, and whichever way you do it is right. Real shopping, on the other hand, has no variety in it, you are only the customer, you know nothing about the goods, you can control nothing, you have to behave, and it is no fun at all. The whole fun of play is that it is serious and not serious at the same time: that it gives scope to try yourself out, to measure yourself up against other children, to invent the loveliest ideas about things: to pretend that anything is anything and to make life over the way you would like it to be.

Thus, to the ordinary English child, childhood is satisfying: there so so much to do, so many new things to try and new things to experience: child companions are REAL in the way that members of a football team are real to one another, they are important because they are one's world and they furnish the possibilities in it.

Adults, on the other hand, seem shadowy, or else are too passionately felt to be comfortable and, with the rare exceptions of those who really know how to play and with whom secrets are safe, adults are too accountable to take liberties with or to feel intimate with as far as the ordinary flavours and interests of everyday are concerned. Adults belong more to festivals like Christmas and birthdays and travelling and people-coming-to-stay, or any time when the expected happens and you do not know what to do. Then they are a tower of strength and woe to the child whose parents do not know what to do, his is indeed an unhappy state. A second characteristic in which the life of children seems to differ in our culture concerns the grouping of ages. American children, I understand, tend to group into similar ages, and age by similar ease to go about together. English children play all together, all ages together in groups, which occur naturally. These may be the group of a family playing. With two other families in the road, or families who go away in the summer together, or just groups that happen to be in the same district and who are out of doors at the same time. Here all the members of the family are useful, the younger ones to fetch and carry, to act the subordinate parts in dramas, to be people to "lead", to be the organiser of, to vary the parts that can be acted. Thus the smaller members of a group can be "rescued", "put to bed" by the older ones, can run messages and provide occasions for protectiveness and tenderness in both girls and boys. The older ones are warmed by the adoration of the younger, the younger learn to do things by watching the older (and dearly do the older ones love to be watched by the younger), the whole adds to variety and to what can be undertaken by the group.

There are times, of course, where similar age groups go off together, but this occurs at specific ages, when a group of girls have "secrets" together, or when boys go off to do things they consider too tong for girls to share in,

climbing expeditions or boy kinds of adventures, or when something the adult is doing appears exciting to the children watching. But it is the adolescent who yearns to copy the adult and the child who wants to play untroubled by real life necessities.

Looked at from the parent's point of view, from what I can gather of American life, American parents are apt to concern themselves with the events of children's lives more than the British parent. It is important to the British parent that his child should do well in his schoolwork because our school system is based upon this form of success, but whether they are popular with other children or not does not greatly concern them. It is only in certain well defined circles that manners or behaviour with other children will be thought to reflect upon parental upbringing. For the most part children's lives are thought by parents as they are thought by the children to belong to themselves. The relation of children's parents to each other is mostly direct, adult to adult and not via the children. All parents all over the world delight in the development of abilities in their small children, and to every parent his very small child is the most wonderful baby in the world and his development the most remarkable, so that parent will vie with parent over the respective abilities of their babies. But with the English child this is a characteristic of babyhood only when the child is completely cared for by his parent, and once an age is reached where a child's needs for his parent's solicitude are reduced to bodily care and feeding this personal feeling that the prowess of the child reflects the excellencies of the parents tends to cease, and children and parents become once more absorbed in their own concerns.

The attitude to clothes is, I think, also different. No boy likes washing or cares about being clean, but to the English child there is a difference between "play clothes" and, for example school clothes, and each are regarded differently. Play clothes "don't matter" they are just there to be worn to keep one warm and to have pockets in. But very many children, both boys and girls, enjoy looking neat in school clothes and take trouble over the care of them. Girls fall into two groups; there are the ones who are irritated by the care of clothes, prefer to wear the same as boys, and get their clothes torn and dirty. The other type from the beginning like to "look nice", take trouble over their appearance, keep' their things clean, are troubled over tears and stains and thoroughly enjoy pretty clothes and colours these are the children who love dressing up in their mothers clothes, in choosing and wearing cheap jewellery, in showing off a dress prettier than their neighbours, and in looking themselves in mirrors. Many boys, too, have a sense of enjoyment in well fitting clothes, enjoy choosing them with their parents and get pleasure out of colours and fabrics. Most schools now' prescribe a uniform for their scholar's, but this is of attractive colours and cut, easy to wear and practical. Many boys like to feel "well turned out" in these and are sensitive to things that are clumsy or ill cut.

The idea, too, of suitable clothes for individual situations goes very deep into English consciousness. There are regulation types of clothes for particular activities, and having the right kind of clothes for these seems sensible to the English child. There is no desire whatever to seem tough or to

feel that tidiness and good cut to ones clothes is in any way unmanly. Parents too expect from their children what might appear to the American a certain formality about appearance with grown-ups. Many a mother can be heard saying, "if you want to come with me to...(always supposing he does want to) then go and wash your hands and tidy your hair . . ." or some similar command, and no mother likes to be seen with a dishevelled and badly dressed child. It is only in later adolescence that grown-up standards begin to influence girls earlier these are felt by her contemporaries to be "silly" or affected. A child dressed like an adult is laughed at by her contemporaries, particularly in those Public Schools where the emphasis is on scholarship and prowess in games, and on the whole the feeling is why give up the freedom of childhood before one must?"

There is, too, a significant difference in the attitude of parents to what may be talked of in front of children. British parents, on the whole, wish to keep parts of life a child is aware of within the understanding of the child. Children in play act out the most extreme of violence, dolls are "killed" or chopped up or mutilated, objects are destroyed, stamped upon, cut to pieces, the actions of cowboy films imitated in shooting and killing. But these are play killings and mutilations, they have no adult reality, dolls come alive again, objects are restored, woundings are without pain and in the non-neurotic child in play of this sort remains within a pleasurable degree.

Happenings in the adult world, however, are real; adult humans, when killed, do not come alive again, woundings are with pain and suffering, and death is final. To the British parent and teacher therefore, it is clear that reports of violence and cruelty, of war and disaster, whether in newspaper or by Radio or T.V. are unsuitable for children's ears and eyes and those children should be protected from presentation of happenings of this kind until their understanding can compass them. The often-repeated statement that fairy tales contain horrors also, and many are to be found in the stories of Grimm, is really not applicable as these are stories from the land of 'fairies' and have no relation to real life. To children what is pictured as being suffered or done by grown-up people dressed in clothes of their everyday experience is really "real", and so may happen at any moment anywhere. Fear therefore invades the child's life, where no fear is due.

In sexual matters also, while we are all agreed that the facts of reproduction would be familiar to children, the passion which accompany perversions of sexual feeling and irregularity of sexual behaviour are outside the misunderstanding of children, and in our view should not be presented to them.

There is a difference, too, in the use of language. English parents pretend to act in the sense of Susanne Langer's "Philosophy In A New Key," although her work is unknown to them. They tend to treat language as symbolic, rather than literal. It is rare, for instance, to find a parent who speaks to a child of his body and particularly of his sexual organs in adult terms. The American use of grown-up language in relation to a child's sensual/sexual experience puzzles the Britisher who feels that onomatopoeic

terms are more suitable intermedia between a child's mind and his bodily experience. Adult language we tend to feel would match adult experience and be, something that is grown into in the passage from childhood to adolescence, not give to a child at the start.

To return therefore to where we started, it is this positive value given to childhood, which is perhaps the most characteristic quality of English culture as it affects children. The phrase "Time enough to do that when you are older" commonly heard on the lips of an adult to a child tentatively experimenting with an adult occupation implies also the complementary statement "your time of life has priceless treasures of its own, savour them well while they are with you, they have a keenness of edge which will not come again".

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