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THE CONTRIBUTION OF ADOLESCENTS TO THE LITERATURE OF ESCAPE
by MILDRED GIGNOUX FINCKE

CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

COOPERATIVE SCHOOL FOR STUDENT TEACHERS
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THE CONTRIBUTION OF ADOLESCENTS TO THE LITERATURE OF ESCAPE

Wildred Gignoux Fincke has taught English at the Ethical Culture, the Walden and the Dalton Schools in New York City in the Junior and Senior High School groups. During the past two years she has had the twelve-year-old group at Nanumit School at Pawling, New York. In the following article, she presents the writing of adolescents in terms of the emotional release which it has afforded children. We regard this "English experience" as a provocative portrayal of one aspect of adolescence, one aspect of creative writing and one aspect of teaching. We hope to present another kind of "English experience" on the same age level in a future issue of 69 BANK STREET.

Editors' note.

Every cell on the inside of every honeycomb is the same shape as every other cell in every other honeycomb. And every cell is hexagonal because the pressures exerted on all sides are just equal. This shaping by pressure is efficient in beeswax. But in children it is a mournful spectacle. Keeping up with the Joneses fills the average childhood and adolescence with a thousand pressures, sometimes blatant and sometimes subtle.

Watch the new baby. What fantastic requirements we impose upon him! The things he must do are irrelevant to his wants, always difficult, frequently impossible of performance. It is surely more interesting to spit than not to spit. A wet diaper is more comforting than the remote technique of elimination decreed by the Olympians. A buttery spoon smoothed on the cheek is lovely. The adult approval earned by feeding yourself neatly is unreal. To say what you want to say stimulates; to say what some adult wants you to say dulls.

Knowing these things, parents seem helpless to mend their ways. These impositions on the little child do not cease with infancy. In more indirect ways they grind on, blocking the free spirit down every road with veiled threats and pressures. "They say," and "Mother wants," and "You mustn't," and "I never did," and "Other children do it," and "Surely you want to..."--and here comes a list of things that mother or father wanted to do and did not do; of the things the Joneses are doing; of the things that are "smart."

Our efforts to make every child like every other child meet much of the time with apparent success. But the cook knows the real person under the smooth exterior we are so carefully polishing up. And sometimes the
DIARY--PRIVATE KEEP OUT tells the story. And--this is what I want to talk about--the English teacher, too, has a glimpse of the boiling inside the "nice" child. The stored hatreds, the unadmitted fears, the ranging lewdness, the tender searching, the religious ecstasy of these full-fledged personalities come into the healthy light of day at last, through the written word. It is of course understood--how profoundly a good English teacher knows--that the author is writing "from his imagination," that he is an artist creating, not a reporter reporting.

The English teacher, though an amateur in mental hygiene, has endless opportunities and material to work with. First he must be appreciative. Remember that etymologically the word "appreciate" means to add value to. And then he must be as neutral, as lacking in any kind of censorship, as a physician gathering the history of a case. And last, perhaps first, I cannot tell, he must honor the integrity of each personality, so like a hundred others he has known, so entirely itself, standing alone. If a criticism is ever made on an ethical basis, the field is lost. You can ask yourself or the young author, "Is it true-seeming? Is it memorable? Is it lovely? Is it successful?" But never, never, "Is it right or wrong?" At that moment you will be shut out forever in the darkness where the enemy lives.

To any thoughtful person the discrepancy between what we want and what we get, between what we are capable of and what we actually do, between what we imagine might be and what we see, is so profound, so heart-breaking, that it is a wonder that any of us even approximates a good life.

This conflict is felt just as keenly by children, especially adolescents, as it is by more articulate adults.

How early begins the literature of escape!

There is Marjorie, for instance. She is physically mature, uncontrolled, hungry, almost alarmingly imaginative, and perpetually desperate at her mother's absolute unwillingness to recognize her need for independence. Large, buxom and strong, although only eleven, she would sometimes fall into the pattern which her mother wanted for her, and in a piping voice squeak, "I'm only a 'ittle baby. I can't do anything. You must lift me." Her schoolmates treated this mood with the harsh ridicule it invited. It would be followed shortly by such an advanced case of "opposititis" and general flouting of authority that Marjorie became an upsetting problem to the other children. I quote without alteration from a fantasy by Marjorie:

"My spring is the waking consciousness of when I shall be a man, an independent man.

To carry my own burden upon my own shoulders, to start out in the big, wide world, or rather the sinful, savage world.

To travel over the dusty plains and see those cruel sights."
To be homeless, hated all over the world for no fault
of mine the fault of her who gave me life. I am a foul
creature. And I know it. I love myself, I adore myself,
I idolize and cherish myself every moment of the day. As
I sit here by the window I think of the tragedies, sorrows,
sad cruel sights of the world."

But then the happy side:

"Wandering around over the green plains footsore yet
happy am I.

To pick some fair, young maiden for my wife.

To lie down of the soft, green grass and cling to the
earth's brown breast, to hug her tightly, for now, my mother.

For her to give me some small offsprings; for them to
sit upon my knee in after days and tell me of my happy, in-
dependent manhood..."

Marjorie's mother once told me with a shudder that her child knew
nothing of physiology. Yet Marjorie wrote vivid, even sanguine descriptions
of childbirth and violent death in the trenches. Morbid? Perhaps. But it
was a festering spot in her emotions better given the sunlight of expression
than the infection of concealment.

A quite different set-up was Robert's. His ten-year-old body lived in
a world of subways, gasoline exhausts, din and the unending ugliness of a
great city. But he escaped as completely as if he had had far-flying wings.
One day he sat staring out of the window at gray walls, seeing no walls,
but "the land of fairies, where the golden salmon leap over crystal water-
falls, where the golden phoenix birds fly over diamond trees, where blue
and violet peacocks stride the ground and show their beautiful tails, eating
red cherries and emerald pegs. In the dusk diamond fireflies flit. You can
see in the moonlight how the turquoise trees glitter, like stars on a winter
night." And never did this sixth grader, singing the Lord's song in a
strange land, for he had recently come from Lithuania, make an error in
spelling or punctuation.

A self-possessed little girl, also in the sixth grade, who surely had
both feet firmly on the ground, revealed her moments of nostalgie de l'espace:

"Have you ever felt that you have lost something? Some-
thing you know not what, that is indispensible to you? Some-
times when I am seemingly enough engrossed in some game or
study, I am unconsciously groping in space for something I
have lost and cannot find.

"Sometimes when I am reading what I call an 'awfully good
book' I awake with a start, to find my thoughts wandering
miles away searching for something--that lost something..."
She was so embarrassed when she saw me reading her paper that she tried to withdraw it and substitute something, in her words, "decent."

The beauty and despair and color and hunger of life are felt so sharply by Ruth, aged eleven, that nothing will stem the flood of her writing. Her average is one a day. No subject is taboo: Suicide (interesting, along with other macabre matters, to adolescents) nightmare, love, fantasies, war, old age, maternity, ghosts, death. In the eighth grade we quail at nothing, and thoughts beyond the reaches of the soul haunt us.

A suicide is imminent:

"Elsbeth rushed to the rail and leaned over. Nothing showed but the huge waves on the sullen water below. Someone was singing a beautiful sad song, and as if in a dream she listened.

'Come down, come down and you will find peace. Great sea-fans away here, sea-horses play here. It is cool and green, and cold worlds are lost here. Come down, come down..."

She nerved herself for the fall and rush of air and the bubbles, and she sprang out into the fog."

Irked by the inevitable drabness of the mechanized life about her, Ruth escapes as utterly as a bird into the sunset:

"Down where the gulls sweep back the wind, And the icy caverns of eternity begin, There the lights of other worlds flash and spin, And the dark of space is closing down. Through eternity it has come, And the gulls, white in the darkness, Sweep it back. There lives death, the icy-shadowed, Here where wolves howl across the snow, And the worlds spin by in the darkness."

One fourteen-year-old boy, a junior in high school, is honestly aware of his need to break the shackles of Here and Now. For the first part of the year he wrote only "stories," usually anecdotes that he had heard at the dinner table and had elaborated. Then one day this appeared:

"Far away from wherever you happen to be is a small country. The fields are golden, the grass is dry, the wheat is ripe. In the garden patches the cabbages are big, and the carrots and the beets are already pulled. The red apples hang by little gray twigs among the green leaves..."

Subjects I do not assign. But sometimes when pressed I compromise by giving one word which I hope will suggest something else. Compare the responses of three thirteen-year-olds to the word "adults."
One of them writes:

"When anyone says the words 'grown-up people' to me... I think of ladies in the foolish forties who carry dogs around with them and talk baby talk to the animals that look like small muffs or skinned frankfurters. I think this last is the worst kind of grown-up. I often wonder—what were they like when they were children?

I think that as long as Doctors are inoculating people against all kinds of sicknesses, they should inoculate them against grown-upness."

Another writes:

"Grown-ups are people that think they know it all. The majority surmise that they are always right, and most of the time they are, much to my displeasure. They have a superior air which annoys me. Their worries are much more important than my worries, and while my ideas and plans are trifles to them, theirs are extremely important.

I am very envious of grown-ups. They can do so many more things than I am able to do. I am waiting anxiously for the time when I will be called a grown-up. For then I will be so much higher in the world. All in all grown-ups are not so bad."

It is interesting to notice that in the last sentence, this boy, a sophomore in high school, already had begun, by an effort of his imagination, to identify himself with the enemy.

The third response came from a girl who wears her high heels right to the school door, and then drearily dons the mother-dictated rubber-soled oxfords. Although her sentence sense is usually sound, she begins to sputter:

"People with privileges, they can do just what they want. What a grand feeling. They don't have to go out in the air. Is it possible that when people are grown-up the air is not as good for them as for people that are growing? And dates, you have three dates for one day but the grown-ups of your family say that it is too much. Why? Just because they get tired easily certainly doesn't mean that you do too although they seem to think that. Do they want to make up for all the things that they couldn't do when they were young? I know that I won't change when I am grown-up, although fresh air may be good for you. Do they forget the things that they wanted to do when they were young? It seems as if so many people were just born grown-up."
A mournful and rather lovely looking girl who takes great pride in doing impeccable work, yet always seems to be remote, is the youngest sister of a large fashionable family:

"I have often gone into a room carefree and joyful at the prospect of an afternoon of fun with my friends, when to my alarm, I would find a gathering of my mother's friends quietly sitting around a table. Cards scattered at odd ends of the table, rings of smoke. They talked about bonds and stocks; numbers were casually called out in monotone voices at every alternate half minute. It finally was more than I could possibly stand. Closing the book I was trying to read, I tiptoed out of this agonizing place...How strangely these people called grown-ups affect me. Whether they are playing cards, at a dinner or an informal luncheon they have the power to subdue my joyful or excitable moods in such a curious way that I have never yet found out my real feelings for grown-ups."

A thirteen-year-old boy, shy, a little driven by nameless fears, jumpy when he heard his name unexpectedly, said:

"A grown-up is a person who is always busy about not very much, and she usually has two children, a colored maid, and headaches. No matter how lovely her children really are, she tells all her friends what a trial and nuisance they are..."

From expression comes release. Sometimes the expressions of children's wants and fears, reachings or guilts, inner conflicts or delights seem to be just stories or descriptions. But the face value of such writing is sometimes not the intrinsic value at all. Symbolism, which at this age is usually unconscious, is a frequent vehicle from the secret inside to the known outside, and release, even though it comes by a devious path, is one of the deepest values "English written work" has. What strange and often touching shapes the ego assumes! Gypsy maidens, little children by the sea, Dorothy, a popular college girl, Cedric, a feudal lord, a wanderer, a wounded soldier, a fawn, young poets, dream voices, Pierrot, the captain of the team, a dying consumptive, he, she, they. Once it was a

"Maiden with pale, untainted hands,
Purer than the white cross on the grave of an infant,
Or the fragrant blossoms of the white hawthorne."

The protagonists vary with the imagination and complexity of the author, but the technique is the same.

A lonely, fragile, rather profound little person in the seventh grade was, for reasons I could only guess, almost an outcast in the group. Tears stood often in her eyes, large and dreamy; and she loved all things beautiful with an intensity that was almost painful to watch.
One day, when she should have been in Math, I found her absorbed in writing this:

"The cave with its glassy watery icicles was drear. How barren the distance was. The gray lead sky seemed numb, with one little white cloud frozen into place. The few scrubby little bushes lay limp on the hillside. The steel sun was arrayed with a watery gaze; a gray, piercing stare."

I am sure that she had not the remotest idea how sharply she had etched the whole picture of herself frozen into place in a barrenness.

This twelve-year-old boy, I think, believed that he was writing about New York on a foggy day. And of course, in a sense, he was. But that was not all he was writing about. Anybody who knew the dreamy and remote quality of his approach to life, his difficulty in focussing clearly on any problem, would understand the allegory:

"Mist, mist, nothing but a wall of impenetrable damp dense vapor which envelops me. I put out my hand in front of me. It is nothing but a shadow...Now they are a fantastic nightmare, these palaces, unlit torches straining so far to reach the sky. Blurred lights light my palaces. I walk slowly and unsteadily, my thoughts carried away with mist."

Occasionally you find a young person with the courage to speak out so directly that for once no more is meant than meets the ear. Such a universal experience as the following is not easy to describe even at sixteen. This particular student is characterized with extraordinary frankness and freedom from substitutes:

"Then, if you are very lucky, that certain he whose voice makes your digestive organs stop working, whose eyes make you feel like an insipid cow, and whose handshake sends needles up your veins, asks to walk home with you. If he does not see fit to escort you home, the rest of the day becomes a mechanical passing of minutes."

Confession continues to be good for the soul. It is often more revealing than accurate. Says a girl who is a problem because of her constant dependence upon teachers:

"I have a very bad temper and an ugly disposition. I hate being dependent on other people, and very rarely am. I dislike all domestic things such as sewing and cooking, and I have an intense dislike for things of Education."

And a little sunny, gentle, mild fellow:

"Most of anything in the world I love power. It is something I crave. I want to manage because I am then
the center, superior and powerful. I want to rule myself, too. My greatest fear in life is unpopularity. I like to be noticed. I hope to please, for through pleasing I rule."

There is still another kind of symbolism, one nearer than conscious level. I have often noticed in the art work of children, that when they make portraits, the first one is a self portrait; and the type is likely to be always autobiographical. The child who wrote this has described herself in this "story" more perfectly than I could hope to do. She also stated clearly her problem:

"...in one of the corners of the large schoolroom sat a girl, with straight blond hair, dreamy hazel eyes, a small nose, and medium sized pale lips. The other girls in the room avoided her, because she didn't wear patent leather pumps the way they did; she didn't wear lipstick or powder the way they did. She wasn't rich like the other girls. The teachers thought that she was a quiet, delicate little thing without a friend, and they treated her with respect. Sibly did not turn up her nose at the other girls. She tried to be friendly, but didn't succeed, and she never spoke to them, but looked at them with a half pitying, half loving air. When she did speak, it was with a silvery note in her voice."

The end of the story is that Sibly is taken away by the angels, and never returns to the rigors of competition with such things as lipstick and patent leather.

Each day brings new symptoms, new revelations, new releases, and if the English teacher is an expert in his job, new cures. He is called upon to be successively a doctor, a parent, an artist, a judge, a friend. And the greatest of these is a friend. He is an appreciator, a value-adder, and in the process he can also be, in a hundred subtle ways, a healer.

It is his duty and his delight to drink with the dry, mourn with the bereaved and pray with the pious.
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