Many of the social changes which have occurred during this century must have influenced the physical and mental health, the moral values, the well-being of the people in this crowded island. I propose to begin at the beginning, by considering what has been happening to infants in their first years of life: and perhaps the most striking change is that babies born in the last two generations have had a much better chance of surviving into adult life, so much so that our population has increased by more than 50 per cent since this century began. The historian, Peter Laslett, pointed the contrast with present-day experience recently by reminding us that a small coffin on the kitchen table was an all too familiar sight in working-class homes early in this century. Among those who survived, many were stunted by chronic illness and under-nourishment. Nowadays when we talk of malnutrition we tend to think of the underdeveloped countries; yet as recently as 1937 more than half the inhabitants of these islands lived on a diet inadequate to maintain their health. In my schooldays it was common to see children, and adults, crippled by the deficiency disease called rickets.

Psychological Cripples
This type of cripple has almost disappeared from our midst; but there is another that is still with us, and in considerable numbers. I mean psychological cripples, people whose personalities have been warped at an early stage of their development, and who reveal this injury in the pattern of their adult lives. Do not think that I subscribe to the contemporary American habit of introducing psychiatric jargon into everyday life, so that instead of saying ‘I can’t stand that fellow’, one assumes a superior expression and says ‘He’s a very sick man’. Our species is so agreeably diverse that it is bound to include many who find each other’s personalities uncongenial. But have we not all known people who, even if they are clever and capable, are yet flawed by some persistent trait which prevents them from ever enjoying natural and easy relationships with their fellow-men? Sometimes these emotional cripples turn upon themselves, and are gnawed by dyspeptic pain or some other physical complaint; but all too often they make other people suffer as well, particularly their subordinates and their nearest kin. I do not know whether emotional cripples of this type are becoming commoner in our society; I think it is more likely that we are simply learning to recognize them more readily for what they are. When we do so, we become less exasperated by their behaviour, destructive though it is, and try to understand why their capacity for forming relationships with their fellows, perhaps the most important aspect of human personality, has remained so stunted and impoverished.

When does this mischief occur? To ask this is to raise the larger question: when do we acquire the characteristics of our adult personality? The Jesuits used to say that if you let them have a child for his first six years he would never lose the stamp of their
teaching; public schools make similar, if less sweeping, claims. Where does the process begin? Is it innate?

Certainly the potentiality for future personality development must be innate, and inherited factors probably influence the child’s temperament as they do his physique; but modern research in ethology (which is the new name for the study of animal behaviour) has taught us to view instinct, even in animals, in a new light. It now appears that instinctive behaviour is seldom inherited entire and ready-made. Chaffinches, for example, have to learn from other chaffinches in order to develop their song to the full; if they are reared alone they achieve only a rudimentary chaffinch vocabulary, whereas if they are reared with larks they do their best to produce a different set of calls. Similarly with other species: the ability to perform instinctive behaviour patterns is innate, but it is only fully developed through imitation and learning from others of their kind. Human beings surpass all other animals in their adaptability, in the large share which learning takes in their development: and this starts soon after their birth.

What happens to us in the first years of our life is of particular interest to psycho-analysts and cultural anthropologists. For the analyst, events and relationships experienced in infancy are believed powerfully to influence the structure of adult personality; for the anthropologist, childhood is the period in which we assimilate and build upon the inventions and discoveries of our forbears. As Margaret Mead has put it: ‘A child who does not participate in this great body of tradition, whether because of defect, neglect, injury or disease never becomes fully human’.

**Becoming ‘Fully Human’**

That is a striking concept, but a puzzling one: puzzling, because it implies the ability to recognize a point at which a child ceases to be deprived and becomes ‘fully human’. This is not easy. In a highly differentiated society such as ours, children participate in tradition to a very different extent according to the amount of education which they receive; and this in turn is determined largely by the intelligence, interests, and financial condition of their parents.

History and literature form so large a part of our traditions that one could almost say that only those who have had a sound education can become full participants in our society: but at the beginning of the century the great majority of our children could not hope to receive this amount of schooling, and thus the gulf between the educated and uneducated classes was widened. But it is not only a matter of education in the formal sense. Our early upbringing also influences the pattern of our feelings. This is why although a stranger can, with application, learn another people’s language and customs very well indeed, yet full assimilation to that people will continue to elude him because he has been acquiring only the knowledge and skills which belong to later childhood and adolescence. He has not shared in the simple experiences of infancy which have already left their mark on that people’s outlook and behaviour. To master the facts about a people and its folklore is easier than to share their feelings, because these have been acquired at a much earlier, pre-conscious stage of learning. This holds not only for the remote tribes which anthropologists study, but also for the several ‘sub-cultures’ which constitute a complex society like our own. The barrier between the middle class and the working class is not simply the result of differences
in education; the barrier is due to an inability to share certain feelings rather than to a failure to understand what the other is saying.

**Results of Maternal Deprivation**

Various experiences may be detrimental to this earliest learning; the gravest disruption of all occurs when an infant’s relationship with its mother is broken by her absence, or her death. In recent years, the eloquent if sometimes controversial arguments of an English research worker, John Bowlby, have suggested the possibility that a child experiencing maternal deprivation in infancy may become peculiarly susceptible to psychiatric disorders in later life. In some cases this leads to the development of the so-called ‘affectionless character’, an extreme example of the type of psychological cripple to whom I have already referred. Later studies, by Hilda Lewis and by Bowlby’s own group of research workers, have tended to modify the supposition that separation invariably results in lasting damage to the child’s personality, but they have confirmed that this happens in a considerable number of cases. In recent years Bowlby’s argument has received fresh support from statistical studies carried out in America, which have shown that among patients admitted to mental hospital the incidence of loss of a parent before the age of five is significantly higher than in others of like age in the general population; the difference was most marked for the early loss of the mother.

It is only now that we have learned how serious and how long-delayed the consequences of such a loss may be. This complete disruption of mother-child relationships by death or serious illness is much less common now than it was fifty or even thirty years ago; but what of the quality of that relationship when it is not interrupted? Bowlby claims that maternal deprivation occurs when mother and child fail to establish a ‘warm, intimate and continuous relationship in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment’.

It is difficult to believe that maternal care of this quality was very common in the slums of our large cities either in the early years of the century or during the depression of the nineteen-thirties, or even today. Close family ties can exist in spite of overcrowding and poverty, in the Gorbals of Glasgow they used to say ‘the clartier the cosier’ but on the whole the younger children of a large slum family are unlikely to enjoy relationships with their harassed mothers ‘in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment’. One suspects that this standard may prove too high to serve as the norm even for more privileged sections of the community. Many autobiographies of upper-class men and women, that of the Duke of Windsor is only one example, describe how severe maternal deprivation can occur when custom or the weight of other duties keeps a mother at a distance from her child. The real challenge, to which a good deal of research is now being directed, is to identify the crucial events of the first two or three years of life, when that almost inseparable unit, the mother and her baby, interact to form the nucleus of a new personality. Analysis of this process directs attention to topics which prudishness formerly excluded from discussion—to things such as the small child’s sexual feelings, his lively interest in his own excretory functions, the fear and hatred which he sometimes feels towards one or other parent. All this may seem at first both distasteful and curiously limited; but this is the stuff of infancy. In the study of human personality we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that crude physical experiences contribute to our psychic as well as to our bodily
development. Evolutionary biologists have taught us to regard ourselves as mammals with an upright posture and with unusually dextrous fore-paws, differing from most mammals in that we have no breeding season and in that our offspring are born peculiarly ill-equipped to fend for themselves. Human babies have to be protected during an exceptionally long period of dependence, and it is precisely during this prolonged state of helplessness that the characteristically human attributes of learning and imagination are developed. It is during these first years that, in response to the promptings, for the most part implicit and involuntary, of those persons who loom largest in his immediate surrounds the baby learns certain first lessons in how to handle his feelings. This is indeed the crucial fact: that whereas so many other aspects of our personality take years to develop, we are born with the capacity to experience feelings, feelings of pain, hunger, discomfort, to which babies give such wholehearted expression, and feelings of well-being and satiation which, in the newborn, tend to induce sleep.

Coping with painful feelings is, then, the first task of psychological development, just as on the physical side coping with hunger, thirst, and cold is the first imperative need if we are to survive. It is not too much to say that the way a mother handles her child and his feeling will significantly influence that child's future perceptions of the world and of his fellow-men. This seems a bold statement, for which one is entitled to demand supporting evidence. Psychoanalysts claim that their published case material substantiates it; but to the critical reader, their work usually lacks the elements necessary for a rigorous test of their working hypotheses—their findings are plausibly explained in terms of their theory, but the validity of the hypotheses themselves is not unequivocally demonstrated.

There have, however, been some confirmatory studies. For example, some years ago a psychologist, Dr Goldman Eisler, carried out an experiment to test the Freudian theory that babies who are generously indulged at their mother’s breast will acquire an habitual attitude of hopeful expectancy; whereas those who are less fortunate at this stage will grow up with a tendency to feel insecure and doubtful in their personal relationships. Her experiment verified this hypothesis: adults who in their infancy had been weaned early showed a significant bias towards a pessimistic outlook on the world, as compared with those who had been weaned late. In this century, we have seen several changes in what has been advocated as the best way to bring up babies. For a number of years paediatricians seemed preoccupied with schedules and formulae; now they have rediscovered the fact that suckling is an emotional experience for the child and not merely a taking-in of food.

Shortly after the second war, a survey was carried out of all babies born in England and Wales during one particular week some 14,000 in all. At only eight weeks after their birth nearly half of these babies were found already to be exclusively bottle-fed. What consequences result from this first experience? In the light of Dr Goldman Eisler’s findings we could expect these children to grow up with a definite bias towards pessimism— and this indeed is the impression which we tend to give to visitors from other more exuberant societies.

Another basic experience in infancy is toilet training. Different societies, and different communities within our own society, vary widely in the degree of concern which attends this aspect of baby care. Some societies, including our own, seem to place an
exaggerated emphasis upon the baby’s being clean and dry as soon as possible. I say exaggerated emphasis, because most infants are not physiologically capable of this degree of control until they are well over a year old. If the mother fusses over it, the whole business of ‘being clean’ assumes an undue importance. Where this has happened, the child may grow up to be cautious, meticulous, over-conscientious, strict with himself and with those under his authority, perhaps parsimonious; in extreme degree, this can result in an obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

A majority of mothers in Britain still believe that toilet training should begin in the first months and should be completed within the first year. They are doomed to disappointment, of course. In practice they find themselves fighting a losing battle with so-called ‘naughty’ children who are unable to conform to their expectations. An interesting corollary to this is the finding that in Britain there appears to be little belief in the inherent goodness of children. Instead, parents attribute all sorts of malign and unruly tendencies to their growing infants; and they are prompted to do this, I believe, by their own unconscious conflicts. Their own early surrender to discipline has left unsatisfied a good many unruly impulses which find indirect expression in this anticipation of rebelliousness in their own children. It has other disadvantages also. We in Britain often congratulate ourselves on our patience and self-control, as exemplified in the orderly queues which we are so accustomed to join, but this docility may be won at the cost of surrendering a good deal of spontaneity and drive.

These basic features of child-rearing can be observed in any society, and have been incorporated in many culture-and-personality studies, including my own. When I lived for over two years in villages in the Aravli hills, in India, I became familiar with patterns of child care quite different from our own. Indian parents show none of our anxious concern for babies to be clean and dry as early as possible: that part of a child’s training is attended to without fuss, and allowed to take its time. According to Freudian theory, this should be associated with an easy-going disregard for punctuality or precision over matters of detail, and that is what I found. My Hindu friends were aware of this difference between their ways and mine; at times they reproached themselves for their unreliability, at other times they teased me for my typically British habit of living by the clock.

Hindu babies have always enjoyed demand feeding. They are seldom far from their mother’s side, and whenever they begin to fret their mother nurses them. It was only after my return to live in a block of flats in London that I realized how infrequently one hears a baby crying in India, how frequently in Britain.

I have already suggested that the early weaning of our babies may be responsible for the slight bias towards pessimism which colours our outlook. Among the Hindus whose personalities I studied, the opposite bias prevailed; they seemed to live in constant expectation of a stroke of good fortune. Each new acquaintance was scanned hopefully as if he might be the agent of their material and spiritual salvation; and in spite of many disappointments, these hopes would rise again.

In primitive societies, pattern of child rearing are slow to change. Each aspect of tribal custom is regarded as the only proper way to behave; often the wrath of the gods is believed to be incurred if traditional habits are broken. To some extent, the same is true of childrearing in our own society. This has always been the domain of mothers.
and grandmothers, who have tended to cling to old familiar ways because until recent years they had relatively little education or experience of the wider world certainly less than their daughters of the war and post-war years. It is, I believe, because of this time-lag in the modification of child-rearing practices that our emotional attitudes are sometimes anachronistic and ill-adapted to the changing realities of our society.

There undoubtedly exists a great discrepancy between what the developmental psychologist defines as optimal human relationships and the actual experience of most children in this country today. Granted that this is the case, is it of any significance? Does it have a bearing, for example, on the incidence of mental illness which, together with cancer and cardio-vascular disease, presents one of the important unsolved problems of medicine today? Patients with mental disorders occupy nearly half the hospital beds of the National Health Service, but there are many more who experience minor nervous or emotional illnesses—in fact, at least one in every ten patients who consult their general practitioner is suffering from psychological rather than physical distress.

I believe that in the major forms of mental breakdown, such as schizophrenia and manic-depressive psychosis, our most important advances in knowledge are likely to come not from psychological but from biochemical research; social and psychological factors can certainly contribute to the onset of these diseases and to their course, but their influence is probably secondary to crucial biological factors. The reverse is the case in the neuroses and psychosomatic disorders, which are so common as to enter into everyone’s experience; here social and interpersonal factors are of primary importance. These illnesses are precipitated by stresses encountered by the adult patient, but as I have said their origin is often found in attributes of his own personality, attributes acquired during his earliest years.

The suffering of a neurotic patient may take forms which conceal its emotional origin. Often he complains of pain and physical exhaustion rather than of psychological symptoms such as anxiety or depression; but invariably one finds that these complaints occur in particular social contexts: certain quite ordinary experiences have a special meaning for him. The immediate stress is aggravated because it re-activates painful experiences which occurred during those first years of emotional dependency.

I should like to emphasize that there is no such thing as a completely untraumatic upbringing—and this is not only because parents are fallible, but also because the infant’s desires are sometimes so imperious that they must be disappointed. For all of us, frustrations alternate with gratifications, and in this our experiences differ from those of the neurotic only in degree. In a personal psychoanalysis, one comes to recognize neurotic traits in oneself; even without a personal analysis it is not difficult to recognize them in others.

A modicum of neurosis, then, is part of the normal human personality; it can even provide the stimuli for creative activity; it is only an excess which brings distress and incapacity. I believe that our present-day society has produced, and is still producing, a mass of avoidable neurotic suffering. This happens not deliberately, but out of ignorance—just as, until quite recently, unnecessary hardship was imposed on sick children by insisting on separating them from their mothers. It is impossible to
legislate for love and affection; but at least we can help parents to recognise their children’s emotional as well as their physical needs.

I have said that the origin of adult neurosis can be traced to the events of infancy. Paradoxically, this is not always true for the emotional disturbances of adolescence, which can often be better understood in terms of their current relationships. This is another way of saying that teenagers can be rebellious without being neurotically disturbed. Whereas an adult neurotic suffers because he is re-living painful relationships in his early life, for the adolescent and his parents the battle is still raging, and may be newly joined.

Earlier, I mentioned the traditions which still largely govern the way mothers handle their babies, and which are slow to change. In the world of adolescents, however, and in their relationships with their parents, changes have been dramatic. I believe this adolescent world deserves attention not only as a source of trouble, of public concern; but also because adolescents are themselves among the most active, as they are the most vociferous, agents of social change.