The patterns of British family life today and at the beginning of this century are so different that one could easily regard them as belonging to two entirely different societies. To some extent the differences are attributable to the widespread changes in our material environment; but the most striking changes, those I am concerned with here, are to be seen in the improved status of women, and in the changed relationships of husbands to wives, and of parents to children.

Three striking changes have transformed the pattern of women’s domestic life: men and women now tend to marry earlier, to have much smaller families, and to complete their families in a much shorter space of time. At the same time, women have benefited even more than men from the general increase in the expectation of life. When Professor Titmuss summarized these changes in one of his *Essays on the Welfare State* he pointed out that at the beginning of this century a typical working-class mother devoted some fifteen years of her adult life to begetting and nursing her own children. She would expect to be preoccupied with raising her large family, and supervising her daughter’s childbearing, until she was nearing the end of her active life. Today, by the time a woman approaches forty, her youngest child is going to school; and at this age she can expect to live for another thirty-six years. She is ready to start a new career, and because of the increasing demand for female labour she has been able to do so. Industry, hitherto critical of the limitations of married women, has begun to accept these and adapt to them.

Confronted with these major changes in women’s life pattern, one wants to know what other changes they have entailed; one would certainly expect that men’s behaviour had also changed. Sociological studies have shown how widespread are the changes of which many of us have first-hand knowledge. Husbands are now beginning to lend a hand with domestic tasks which used to be solely the wife’s responsibility. Less obvious, but of particular importance for the student of culture and personality, are the changes which are taking place in the whole concept of the roles of men and women in our society, in their mutual relationships, and in the family settings in which their children will grow up.

Women have achieved greater social and political emancipation in Britain than in most European countries, but their sexual emancipation is less evident than, for example, in Denmark or Sweden. There is a good deal of confusion and uncertainty, among both men and women, over the new roles of the sexes in our social life. Even in the professions, in business, and in academic life where women have won acceptance on supposedly equal terms, one observes many instances of strain, of concealed embarrassment, and of self-consciousness. In contrast with the situation in America, our career women do not yet feel at home in their new roles nor are our men quite accustomed to working side by side with them.
It is worth stressing that, at the beginning of the century, ours was a frankly patriarchal society. Marriage was a very unequal partnership, in which all the social prestige went to the husband. This gave rise to a stereotype of the respective roles of men and women in which many tasks and interests were firmly labelled as manly or as feminine pursuits, and most people in our society believed, as most people do in every society, that these conventions were dictated by laws of nature, or of God. In fact, however, anthropologists have shown that different cultures have prescribed very different rules for what men and women may and may not do.

The formal structure of the family differs widely in different societies. The only universal characteristics are the formalizing of adult sex relationships and of the protection and support of the mother and her young children. The mother’s ties with her own infant are inevitably a basic feature, but her male support will take different forms in a household where one husband has several wives, in another where one wife is shared between several husbands, and in the quite numerous societies in which a woman looks to her brother and not to her husband for material and moral support.

**Overlap between the Sexes**

While sex and childbearing are biological facts which are too stubborn to be denied, many other differences between men and women are dictated by social expectations much more than by biological realities. An important contribution to Freudian teaching has been the revelation that men and women are capable of sharing some of each other’s psychological attributes. There is, in fact, a great deal of overlap between men and women in physical strength, aptitudes, temperament, and interests. Some societies recognize this. In these, men and women work side by side in the fields and at fishing; they share in the tasks of cooking and in the enjoyment of village feasts and dances. I found a lot of sharing of tasks among the Bhil tribe, with whom I lived for a time in India; many of their basic activities, such as cooking, herding cattle, gathering jungle produce, were performed by both sexes, and women sometimes took the initiative in the love affairs and elopements which were frequent occurrences among them.

There are some societies in which women do the heaviest work, while men conserve their energies for diplomacy, public eloquence, or trading; and others in which women are confined to a strictly limited role. From the woman’s point of view, it is not necessarily an advantage to be pampered. As an instance only, a colleague who has carried out numerous medical surveys in this country tells me that he has observed a suggestive correlation: in those few households which still maintain a retinue of servants, there is a strong tendency for the lady of the house to become an alcoholic. Every stable society imposes rules of behaviour which inhibit the realization of some individual potentialities. This is compensated as a rule by the gratifications which only life in that society can provide. In times of social change, however, this equilibrium tends to become upset, and when this happens conformity to social norms can be maintained only by subjecting some individuals to considerable stress, and causing many of them to break down. At such times, the study of those who fall sick can contribute to a better understanding of these points of social stress.
Crying Fits among the Zulus
Professor Lee, a psychologist, encountered just such a situation a few years ago when he set out to study a curious epidemic of prolonged crying fits which developed among the Zulu women in South Africa at the end of last century, and which now affects nearly half the women of the tribe. At first he was told that the cause was obvious: this was a people in which many of the men went away to work in the gold mines, so presumably it was their wives who responded to the disruption of their lives in this dramatic fashion, but he soon found that screaming fits occurred just as often in the wives of men who did not leave home. In the end he found that the fits were associated with resentment against their role of servitude in a male-dominated society on the part of women who had only recently been introduced to new roles and customs which were at variance with the old tribal traditions. The interesting thing was that the women who had fits of screaming had not yet reached the stage of consciously recognizing this resentment, although it found expression in their dreams and in their responses to personality tests to a significantly greater degree than in those of their more adaptable sisters.

Nearer home, we have had a number of similar, if less dramatic, indications of conflict between women’s domestic and their social roles; nor is it only the women who complain.

Reference is often made to the constantly mounting figures for divorce as a sign of social disorganization: but this is to take an over-simplified view. Divorce is admittedly a confession of failure, but it is not necessarily an unrelieved disaster. Many primitive peoples invoke supernatural sanctions against adultery, but most societies make formal provision for divorce and re-marriage. In our own society until the present century the Church made divorce very difficult indeed; and as a result the victims of failed marriages lived embittered and loveless lives. We have to remember that never before in the history of our race have the words ‘till death us do part’ carried the implication of so many years of married life as they do now.

Doctors have long been aware of the frequency of neurotic ill-health among young and middle-aged married women, who attend their surgeries and hospital out-patient departments with many vague complaints: if they have anything in common, it is that they feel tired and are unhappy. More than twenty years ago Lord Taylor gave this syndrome the name of ‘suburban neurosis’. He pointed out that it was most prevalent among active women whose children were growing up, and whose household duties were no longer demanding. It was, in fact, a reaction on their part to the feeling of uselessness. Lord Taylor noticed that when an emergency arose in their homes, when their husband or child fell ill, their symptoms were forgotten in the satisfaction of finding that they were needed by someone.

The coming of old age does something to redress the balance. Then, it is the husband who finds himself idle and useless, while his wife’s role continues and may be enhanced when a reduced income puts her thrift and domestic efficiency at a premium. Statistical evidence confirms that elderly married women are less prone than women who are single or widowed to suffer from depression; on the other hand, of all groups in the community it is elderly men, whether married or single, who contribute most to the annual total of suicides.
‘Suburban Neurosis’
In our society, surveys of neurotic illness have consistently shown that women are more prone to these complaints than men; and yet this is surprising because, in general, women are the tougher sex, better able to endure pain, and certainly outliving men by several years. It seems reasonable to associate their apparent susceptibility to emotional disorders with the internal conflicts which they experience in their day-to-day existence.

The so-called ‘suburban neurosis’ is due to society’s having failed to provide a constructive role for these mothers. Their sense of uselessness, of having no worthwhile contribution to make, was the precipitating factor in their illness, but the fact that they fell ill with symptoms of depression and hypochondriasis could be attributed to their own personalities which left them vulnerable to this kind of collapse. Other young wives, in the same circumstances, find that their Achilles heel lies in a tendency to be overwhelmed by unreasoning fear: such women often find themselves giving way to sudden attacks of panic while travelling in a bus, or being in a crowded shop. In many cases this leads them to restrict their activities more and more until they become completely housebound. Their distress is aggravated by the fact that they themselves regard these fears as irrational and unwarranted, and yet they cannot overcome them; often they begin to fear that they are going out of their minds.

These patients, no less than the crying Zulu wives, are in the grip of emotional forces of which they are not consciously aware. In order to help them, it is not sufficient (nor even always necessary) to unravel the infantile origins of their neurosis—after all, until this illness they may have been functioning reasonably well as wives and mothers. It is essential, however, to help them to recognize the real factors which upset their emotional balance, so that they can take steps to relieve their situation.

An important consequence of the attitudes towards sexuality which dominated British life in late Victorian times, and which still has a lingering influence, was the remarkable frequency of frigidity in married women. Popular views about the physical aspect of sex relationships, as handed down from mother to daughter, tended to emphasize that only men and beasts really enjoyed intercourse, whereas women had to learn to endure it. This teaching, coupled with dire warnings about the hardships of pregnancy and childbirth, effectively prevented many women from experiencing a satisfactory sex life; and often its baleful influence was reinforced by narrow religious dogmatism. Our churches have lent themselves all too readily, in the past, to denigrating sensual, and especially sexual, enjoyment; and yet the basic Christian emphasis upon respect for the individual personality of every man and woman provides the best possible starting point for the new, and more equal, relationship between man and wife which our society is now trying to develop.

Women have not been the only casualties of Victorian middle-class attitudes towards sex. There have also been some men whose sexual development remained incomplete or deviant because of terrifying fantasies engendered by the secrecy and shame with which these matters were surrounded in so many respectable British families.

More extreme disruptions of normal behaviour are found in the psychoses. For a few unfortunate women, childbirth precipitates severe mental illness. In trying to understand these illnesses (as in the case of severe depression occurring after the
(change of life) we have to consider the role of changes in the balance of sex hormones circulating in the blood; but we should be very short-sighted if we failed to recognize the emotional significance of child-bearing and of the end of child-bearing respectively for these women. In a psychotic illness the sensible, rational self is temporarily in abeyance; bizarre and at times horrible fantasies enter into consciousness and may be acted out—the distracted mother may even have to be restrained from killing her own child. A puerperal psychosis can be a nightmare experience; and yet this nightmare only reveals fantasies which all of us may harbour, although safely repressed in our unconscious minds. Sometimes it is the father who becomes carried away by psychotic fantasies which are the obverse of his normal feelings; there are occasional tragic cases, unintelligible and shocking merely to read of in the newspapers, where a man may kill his wife and children before taking his own life.

My point in drawing attention to these cases of acute failure and distress is to show that though our society has taken steps to ensure that psychotic parents both receive treatment and are protected from the consequences of their acts, we have remained relatively incurious about the emotional forces which underlie these illnesses. It is not sufficient to say that these unfortunates have gone mad. The real challenge is to explain why they should go mad in just this way. Here Freudian psychology is not so helpful; its concern has been with the remote origins, rather than the immediate precipitants of mental breakdown. Instead we must turn to social psychology, to seek more light on the interactions, and the mutual expectations of man and wife in the testing crises of their married life.

I have found that certain of Jung’s concepts make these sudden catastrophes more readily intelligible. Like Freud, he believed that most mental illnesses are due to a disintegration of consciousness caused by the irresistible invasion of unconscious contents; but Jung maintained that while we all exhibit a public personality (our persona, or mask) we also carry within us not only our private conscious self but also a sinister aspect of our own nature which he called the ‘shadow’. As in the story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the shadow contains all the fierce, immoral urges which are the obverse of our waking aspirations; it is these elements which break out when the cohesion of the normal personality is temporarily lost.

Jung believed that every person’s unconscious mind contained elements contrary, yet complementary, to his conscious make-up; he thought that people who are emotionally close to one another, such as a child and his parents, or man and wife, often perceive and respond to the other’s unconscious rather than to his conscious self. Serious troubles can arise when this symmetrical arrangement of conscious and unconscious personality traits breaks down and, for example, a mother’s normal life becomes subject to promptings from her unconscious. To some extent, this happens to us all—we are seldom quite as reasonable as we would like to believe—but a few people become so much affected by these impulses that one cannot help noticing glaring discrepancies between what they intend and what they actually do.

The child of such a parent finds himself repeatedly caught in a ‘double bind’, that is in a situation in which he is given simultaneous but mutually contradictory cues, so that whatever he does will be wrong. It has been plausibly argued that children brought up by such a parent become predisposed to schizophrenic break- down; but this
hypothesis cannot be verified until methods have been devised to demonstrate this ‘double bind’ in action and to measure the frequency of its occurrence in normal families, and in families in which a child is becoming schizophrenic. Psychotic illness represents the complete breakdown of social functioning. It occurs when biological, social, and emotional events combine to make it impossible for an individual to maintain the coherence of his personality (and this happens to some people in every society). Neurotic illness is a more sensitive indicator of the new stresses which occur in a period of rapid social change. During recent years, in which our society has been trying to work out new roles for men and women, certain psychological gains and losses have begun to make themselves apparent.

On the positive side, the abandonment of the old, rather rigid definitions of male and female roles has made it possible for us to recognize and give expression to the feminine aspects of man’s nature and the masculine element in woman. There have always been some men so constituted, or so biased by their early experiences, that they can only feel strongly in a homosexual relationship. We have no reason to believe that the number of homosexuals is any greater in our society today than it was in 1895, when Oscar Wilde was tried; but there is no doubt that public opinion is less alarmed, less vengeful, now than it was then.

Women are now being asked to play roles which are as yet, in our society, in conflict. Society has not yet abandoned the Victorian ideal of the fully domesticated mother and wife, destined to find her satisfactions only through service for others. Because of this lingering conception, remorselessly perpetuated by all women’s magazines, women are made still to feel guilty if they seek for themselves satisfactions which come from the fulfilment of their own peculiar talents and potentialities. Because society still does not accept them on equal terms with men, such women are forced to manifest an aggressiveness which is not an inherent prerequisite of the job they perform but only of the social situation in which they find themselves. Conscious often themselves that this assertiveness is not the best foundation for their relationship with husband and children, they are at the same time made to feel profoundly guilty by a society which categorizes them as rejecting mothers. At the same time, men, who have begun to accept the equality of men and women as a fact of life in our community today, show a readiness to turnover some of the less congenial of their traditional parental duties: women are being asked to shoulder new responsibilities (such as control of the family budget, disciplining of the children) at the same time as they are being helped with the traditionally feminine household tasks of washing up, child minding, and so on.

Resentful of the stresses imposed by their new liberty; resentful and frustrated by the restriction placed on this liberty by the years of child-bearing; anxious and guilty at this resentment, uncertain even of the division of parental responsibilities, such women begin to doubt whether femininity is indeed compatible with all the variety of roles they must play.

Perhaps the greatest strain which present-day marriages have to undergo is the acceptance by husbands of their wives’ new problems, and the need for them to help their wives to lead more active and more satisfying lives. This may be at the cost of some inconvenience, and may require men to make a further sacrifice of their feeling of importance; its reward will come in the happier relationships which may prevail.
when wives are no longer so harassed and irritable. The first step, however, is to recognize their present plight. Already a hundred years ago, Florence Nightingale put this very well when she wrote: ‘Men are irritated with women for not being happy. They take it as a personal offence’.

American women, to whom equality with men in education and in work is a greater reality than it is here, are ahead of us in resolving these difficulties. Because they are freely accepted as colleagues in all areas of activity, American women do not need to doubt that they can be feminine and share in these roles. But because their career expectations are greater, they suffer more from the enforced inactivity, seclusion, and frustrations of the childbearing period. Irritability and depression are prominent features of their complaints—a syndrome which New York physicians have christened ‘Mrs Hillside’ after a prosperous dormitory suburb.

As the new concept of marriage takes shape, in which young people look forward to married life as a mutually satisfying physical and personal relationship, women are becoming dissatisfied when these expectations are not fulfilled. Women, nearly twice as often as men, are brought to hospital after attempting suicide. Many of these incidents can be regarded as a dramatic protest against a painful situation, rather than as a serious attempt to end their lives: Among the numerous personal reasons which provoke such incidents the commonest is marital disharmony. Sometimes this is the sign of a breaking marriage; but sometimes the dramatic gesture of distress has the desired effect of stimulating a more intense and considerate relationship.

Men have usually been quick to complain if the physical side of their marriage proved unsatisfactory, no doubt because sexual potency is the criterion of manhood. Now, however, women also are beginning to recognize their marriage as incomplete if it does not give them physical as well as emotional satisfaction. For some men this in turn presents a frightening challenge; many of them find themselves obscurely impelled to prove their virility by exposing themselves to strangers or to little girls. Indecent exposure has become one of the commonest sexual offences in our cities; the men who do this often claim to be happily married but almost invariably they are found to be weak and insecure in their capacity as husbands.

This is a time when women are taking the lead in re-exploring and re-discovering their own nature, and, in so doing, modifying our concept of man’s nature also. They have compelled us to think carefully whether we really mean it when we men claim to regard them as different but equal: no less human, no less an individual, and no less important than ourselves. Our society has never yet embodied this assumption in its institutions, but during the present century we have taken several steps in this direction, and this has led to a series of personal readjustments in which probably every family in this island is to some extent involved.