

## MARGARET MEAD

### Selection from *Coming of Age in Samoa* 1928

The most obvious function performed by social scientists in modern America has been a cognitive one: the advancement of knowledge about society. Another, more subtle function has been a moral one: the articulation and criticism of standards for conduct. The role of the public moralist had long been performed by the clergy and by men and women of letters, but in the twentieth century this role increasingly came to be filled by psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and other practitioners of social science. The anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–78) was perhaps the most influential single example of “the social scientist as public moralist.” Mead wrote thirty-four books on a multitude of topics, many of which were only remotely anthropological. She was a formidable presence in American intellectual life for half a century, beginning with her *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), from which the selection that follows is taken. Mead’s study of adolescent girls in Samoa was offered frankly as a means of fostering a critical perspective on the growing-up experiences of young people in Mead’s own society. In our excerpt she sums up the lessons she wishes readers to derive from her study. Mead was an inveterate enemy of American middle-class provincialism and invited her readers to develop a diverse culture in which individuals could choose between a great variety of ways of life. Although she expressed much sympathy for the homogeneous, easygoing culture she attributed to the people of Samoa, she defended the heterogeneous, complex culture of modern America and sought to foster the knowledge and attitudes that would better equip Americans to take advantage of their opportunities. A readable, popular biography is Jane Howard, *Margaret Mead: A Life* (New York, 1984). The quality of Mead’s fieldwork as an anthropologist has been a matter of dispute, especially in recent years. For a brief, judicious commentary on this controversy see the remarks of James Clifford in the *Times Literary Supplement*, May 13, 1983, 475–76. See also Roy Rappaport, “Desecrating the Holy Woman: Derek Freeman’s Attack on Margaret Mead,” *American Scholar*, Summer 1986, 313–47. For an analysis of the cultural-critical role played by Mead, Ruth Benedict, and other anthropologists of the school of Franz Boas, see Richard Handler, “Boasian Anthropology and the Critique of American Culture,” *American Quarterly* 42 (1990), 252–73. On Boas and the larger Boasian tradition, see George W. Stocking, Jr., *The Shaping of American Anthropology* (New York, 1974), esp. 1–20.

For many chapters we have followed the lives of Samoan girls, watched them change from babies to baby tenders, learn to make the oven and weave fine mats, forsake the life of the gang to become more active members of the household, defer marriage through as many years of casual love-making as possible, finally marry and settle down to rearing children who will repeat the same cycle. As far as our material permitted, an experiment has been conducted to discover what the process of development was like in a society very different from our own. Because the length of human life and the complexity of our society did not permit us to make our experiment here, to choose a group of baby girls and bring them to maturity under conditions created for the experiment, it was necessary to go instead to another country where history had set the stage for us. There we found girl children passing through the same process of physical development through which our girls go, cutting their first teeth and losing them, cutting their second teeth, growing tall and ungainly, reaching puberty with their first menstruation, gradually reaching physical maturity, and becoming ready to produce the next generation. It was possible to say: Here are the proper conditions for an experiment; the developing girl is a constant factor in America and in Samoa; the civilisation of America and the civilisation of Samoa are different. In the course of development, the process of growth by which the girl baby becomes a grown woman, are the sudden and conspicuous bodily changes which take place at puberty accompanied by a development which is spasmodic, emotionally charged, and accompanied by an awakened religious sense, a flowering of idealism, a great desire for assertion of self against authority—or not? Is adolescence a period of mental and emotional distress for the growing girl as inevitably as teething is a period of misery for the small baby? Can we think of adolescence as a time in the life history of every girl child which carries with it symptoms of conflict and stress as surely as it implies a change in the girl's body?

Following the Samoan girls through every aspect of their lives we have tried to answer this question, and we found throughout that we had to answer it in the negative. The adolescent girl in Samoa differed from her sister who had not reached puberty in one chief respect, that in the older girl certain bodily changes were present which were absent in the younger girl. There were no other great differences to set off the group passing through adolescence from the group which would become adolescent in two years or the group which had become adolescent two years before.

And if one girl past puberty is undersized while her cousin is tall and able to do heavier work, there will be a difference between them, due to their different physical endowment, which will be far greater than that which is due to puberty. The tall, husky girl will be isolated from her companions, forced to do longer, more adult tasks, rendered shy by a change of clothing, while her cousin, slower to attain her growth, will still be treated as a child and will have to solve only the slightly fewer problems of childhood. The precedent of educators here who recommend special tactics in the treatment of adolescent girls translated into Samoan terms would read: Tall girls are different from short girls of the same age, we must adopt a different method of educating them.

But when we have answered the question we set out to answer we have not finished with the problem. A further question presents itself. If it is proved that adoles-

cence is not necessarily a specially difficult period in a girl's life—and proved it is if we can find any society in which that is so—then what accounts for the presence of storm and stress in American adolescents? First, we may say quite simply, that there must be something in the two civilisations to account for the difference. If the same process takes a different form in two different environments, we cannot make any explanations in terms of the process, for that is the same in both cases. But the social environment is very different and it is to it that we must look for an explanation. What is there in Samoa which is absent in America, what is there in America which is absent in Samoa, which will account for this difference?

Such a question has enormous implications and any attempt to answer it will be subject to many possibilities of error. But if we narrow our question to the way in which aspects of Samoan life which irremediably affect the life of the adolescent girl differ from the forces which influence our growing girls, it is possible to try to answer it.

The background of these differences is a broad one, with two important components; one is due to characteristics which are Samoan, the other to characteristics which are primitive.

The Samoan background which makes growing up so easy, so simple a matter, is the general casualness of the whole society. For Samoa is a place where no one plays for very high stakes, no one pays very heavy prices, no one suffers for his convictions or fights to the death for special ends. Disagreements between parent and child are settled by the child's moving across the street, between a man and his village by the man's removal to the next village, between a husband and his wife's seducer by a few fine mats. Neither poverty nor great disasters threaten the people to make them hold their lives dearly and tremble for continued existence. No implacable gods, swift to anger and strong to punish, disturb the even tenor of their days. Wars and cannibalism are long since passed away and now the greatest cause for tears, short of death itself, is a journey of a relative to another island. No one is hurried along in life or punished harshly for slowness of development. Instead the gifted, the precocious, are held back, until the slowest among them have caught the pace. And in personal relations, caring is as slight. Love and hate, jealousy and revenge, sorrow and bereavement, are all matters of weeks. From the first months of its life, when the child is handed carelessly from one woman's hands to another's, the lesson is learned of not caring for one person greatly, not setting high hopes on any one relationship.

And just as we may feel that the Occident penalises those unfortunates who are born into Western civilisation with a taste for meditation and a complete distaste for activity, so we may say that Samoa is kind to those who have learned the lesson of not caring, and hard upon those few individuals who have failed to learn it. Lola and Mala and little Siva, Lola's sister, all were girls with a capacity for emotion greater than their fellows. And Lola and Mala, passionately desiring affection and too violently venting upon the community their disappointment over their lack of it, were both delinquent, unhappy misfits in a society which gave all the rewards to those who took defeat lightly and turned to some other goal with a smile.

In this casual attitude towards life, in this avoidance of conflict, of poignant situations, Samoa contrasts strongly not only with America but also with most primitive civilisations. And however much we may deplore such an attitude and feel that important personalities and great art are not born in so shallow a society, we must recognise that here is a strong factor in the painless development from childhood to womanhood.

For where no one feels very strongly, the adolescent will not be tortured by poignant situations. There are no such disastrous choices as those which confronted young people who felt that the service of God demanded forswearing the world forever, as in the Middle Ages, or cutting off one's finger as a religious offering, as among the Plains Indians. So, high up in our list of explanations we must place the lack of deep feeling which the Samoans have conventionalised until it is the very framework of all their attitudes toward life.

And next there is the most striking way in which all isolated primitive civilisation and many modern ones differ from our own, in the number of choices which are permitted to each individual. Our children grow up to find a world of choices dazzling their unaccustomed eyes. In religion they may be Catholics, Protestants, Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Agnostics, Atheists, or even pay no attention at all to religion. This is an unthinkable situation in any primitive society not exposed to foreign influence. There is one set of gods, one accepted religious practice, and if a man does not believe, his only recourse is to believe less than his fellows; he may scoff but there is no new faith to which he may turn. Present-day Manu'a approximates this condition; all are Christians of the same sect. There is no conflict in matters of belief although there is a difference in practice between Church-members and non-Church-members. And it was remarked that in the case of several of the growing girls the need for choice between these two practices may some day produce a conflict. But at present the Church makes too slight a bid for young unmarried members to force the adolescent to make any decision.

Similarly, our children are faced with half a dozen standards of morality: a double sex standard for men and women, a single standard for men and women, and groups which advocate that the single standard should be freedom while others argue that the single standard should be absolute monogamy. Trial marriage, companionate marriage, contract marriage—all these possible solutions of a social impasse are paraded before the growing children while the actual conditions in their own communities and the moving pictures and magazines inform them of mass violations of every code, violations which march under no banners of social reform.

The Samoan child faces no such dilemma. Sex is a natural, pleasurable thing; the freedom with which it may be indulged in is limited by just one consideration, social status. Chiefs' daughters and chiefs' wives should indulge in no extra-marital experiments. Responsible adults, heads of households and mothers of families should have too many important matters on hand to leave them much time for casual amorous adventures. Every one in the community agrees about the matter, the only dissenters are the missionaries who dissent so vainly that their protests are unimportant. But as soon as a sufficient sentiment gathers about the missionary attitude with its European standard of sex behaviour, the need for choice, the forerunner of conflict, will enter into Samoan society.

Our young people are faced by a series of different groups which believe different things and advocate different practices, and to each of which some trusted friend or relative may belong. So a girl's father may be a Presbyterian, an imperialist, a vegetarian, a teetotaler, with a strong literary preference for Edmund Burke, a believer in the open shop and a high tariff, who believes that woman's place is in the home, that young girls should wear corsets, not roll their stockings, not smoke, nor go riding with young men in the evening. But her mother's father may be a Low Episcopalian, a believer in high living, a strong advocate of States' Rights and the Monroe Doctrine,

who reads Rabelais, likes to go to musical shows and horse races. Her aunt is an agnostic, an ardent advocate of woman's rights, an internationalist who rests all her hopes on Esperanto, is devoted to Bernard Shaw, and spends her spare time in campaigns of anti-vivisection. Her elder brother, whom she admires exceedingly, has just spent two years at Oxford. He is an Anglo-Catholic, an enthusiast concerning all things mediæval, writes mystical poetry, reads Chesterton, and means to devote his life to seeking for the lost secret of mediæval stained glass. Her mother's younger brother is an engineer, a strict materialist, who never recovered from reading Haeckel in his youth; he scorns art, believes that science will save the world, scoffs at everything that was said and thought before the nineteenth century, and ruins his health by experiments in the scientific elimination of sleep. Her mother is of a quietistic frame of mind, very much interested in Indian philosophy, a pacifist, a strict non-participator in life, who in spite of her daughter's devotion to her will not make any move to enlist her enthusiasms. And this may be within the girl's own household. Add to it the groups represented, defended, advocated by her friends, her teachers, and the books which she reads by accident, and the list of possible enthusiasms, of suggested allegiances, incompatible with one another, becomes appalling.

The Samoan girl's choices are far otherwise. Her father is a member of the Church and so is her uncle. Her father lives in a village where there is good fishing, her uncle in a village where there are plenty of cocoanut crabs. Her father is a good fisherman and in his house there is plenty to eat; her uncle is a talking chief and his frequent presents of bark cloth provide excellent dance dresses. Her paternal grandmother, who lives with her uncle, can teach her many secrets of healing; her maternal grandmother, who lives with her mother, is an expert weaver of fans. The boys in her uncle's village are admitted younger into the *Aumaga* and are not much fun when they come to call; but there are three boys in her own village whom she likes very much. And her great dilemma is whether to live with her father or her uncle, a frank, straightforward problem which introduces no ethical perplexities, no question of impersonal logic. Nor will her choice be taken as a personal matter, as the American girl's allegiance to the views of one relative might be interpreted by her other relatives. The Samoans will be sure she chose one residence rather than the other for perfectly good reasons, the food was better, she had a lover in one village, or she had quarrelled with a lover in the other village. In each case she was making concrete choices within one recognised pattern of behaviour. She was never called upon to make choices involving an actual rejection of the standards of her social group, such as the daughter of Puritan parents, who permits indiscriminate caresses, must make in our society.

And not only are our developing children faced by a series of groups advocating different and mutually exclusive standards, but a more perplexing problem presents itself to them. Because our civilisation is woven of so many diverse strands, the ideas which any one group accepts will be found to contain numerous contradictions. So if the girl has given her allegiance whole-heartedly to some one group and has accepted in good faith their asseverations that they alone are right and all other philosophies of life are Antichrist and anathema, her troubles are still not over. While the less thoughtful receives her worst blows in the discovery that what father thinks is good, grandfather thinks is bad, and that things which are permitted at home are banned at school, the more thoughtful child has subtler difficulties in store for her. If she has philosophically accepted the fact that there are several standards among which she must choose, she may still preserve a childlike faith in the coherence of her chosen philosophy.

Beyond the immediate choice which was so puzzling and hard to make, which perhaps involved hurting her parents or alienating her friends, she expects peace. But she has not reckoned with the fact that each of the philosophies with which she is confronted is itself but the half-ripened fruit of compromise. If she accept Christianity, she is immediately confused between the Gospel teachings concerning peace and the value of human life and the Church's whole-hearted acceptance of war. The compromise made seventeen centuries ago between the Roman philosophy of war and domination, and the early Church doctrine of peace and humility, is still present to confuse the modern child. If she accepts the philosophic premises upon which the Declaration of Independence of the United States was founded, she finds herself faced with the necessity of reconciling the belief in the equality of man and our institutional pledges of equality and opportunity with our treatment of the Negro and the Oriental. The diversity of standards in present-day society is so striking that the dullest, the most incurious, cannot fail to notice it. And this diversity is so old, so embodied in semi-solutions, in those compromises between different philosophies which we call Christianity, or democracy, or humanitarianism, that it baffles the most intelligent, the most curious, the most analytical.

So for the explanation of the lack of poignancy in the choices of growing girls in Samoa, we must look to the temperament of the Samoan civilisation which discounts strong feeling. But for the explanation of the lack of conflict we must look principally to the difference between a simple, homogenous primitive civilisation, a civilisation which changes so slowly that to each generation it appears static, and a motley, diverse, heterogeneous modern civilisation. . . .

We have been comparing point for point, our civilisation and the simpler civilisation of Samoa, in order to illuminate our own methods of education. If now we turn from the Samoan picture and take away only the main lesson which we learned there, that adolescence is not necessarily a time of stress and strain, but that cultural conditions make it so, can we draw any conclusions which might bear fruit in the training of our adolescents?

At first blush the answer seems simple enough. If adolescents are only plunged into difficulties and distress because of conditions in their social environment, then by all means let us so modify that environment as to reduce this stress and eliminate this strain and anguish of adjustment. But, unfortunately, the conditions which vex our adolescents are the flesh and bone of our society, no more subject to straightforward manipulation upon our part than is the language which we speak. We can alter a syllable here, a construction there; but the great and far-reaching changes in linguistic structure (as in all parts of culture) are the work of time, a work in which each individual plays an unconscious and inconsiderable part. The principal causes of our adolescents' difficulty are the presence of conflicting standards and the belief that every individual should make his or her own choices, coupled with a feeling that choice is an important matter. Given these cultural attitudes, adolescence, regarded now not as a period of physiological change, for we know that physiological puberty need not produce conflict, but as the beginning of mental and emotional maturity, is bound to be filled with conflicts and difficulties. A society which is clamouring for choice, which is filled with many articulate groups, each urging its own brand of salvation, its own variety of economic philosophy, will give each new generation no peace until all have chosen or gone under, unable to bear the conditions of choice. The stress is in our



civilisation, not in the physical changes through which our children pass, but it is none the less real nor the less inevitable in twentieth-century America. . . .

Granting that society presents too many problems to her adolescents, demands too many momentous decisions on a few months' notice, what is to be done about it? One panacea suggested would be to postpone at least some of the decisions, keep the child economically dependent, or segregate her from all contact with the other sex, present her with only one set of religious ideas until she is older, more poised, better able to deal critically with the problems which will confront her. In a less articulate fashion, such an idea is back of various schemes for the prolongation of youth, through raising the working age, raising the school age, shielding school children from a knowledge of controversies like evolution versus fundamentalism, or any knowledge of sex hygiene or birth control. Even if such measures, specially initiated and legislatively enforced, could accomplish the end which they seek and postpone the period of choice, it is doubtful whether such a development would be desirable. It is unfair that very young children should be the battleground for conflicting standards, that their development should be hampered by propagandist attempts to enlist and condition them too young. It is probably equally unfair to culturally defer the decisions too late. Loss of one's fundamental religious faith is more of a wrench at thirty than at fifteen simply in terms of the number of years of acceptance which have accompanied the belief. A sudden knowledge of hitherto unsuspected aspects of sex, or a shattering of all the old conventions concerning sex behaviour, is more difficult just in terms of the strength of the old attitudes. Furthermore, in practical terms, such schemes would be as they are now, merely local, one state legislating against evolution, another against birth control, or one religious group segregating its unmarried girls. And these special local movements would simply unfit groups of young people for competing happily with children who had been permitted to make their choices earlier. Such an educational scheme, in addition to being almost impossible of execution, would be a step backward and would only beg the question.

Instead, we must turn all of our educational efforts to training our children for the choices which will confront them. Education, in the home even more than at school, instead of being a special pleading for one régime, a desperate attempt to form one particular habit of mind which will withstand all outside influences, must be a preparation for those very influences. Such an education must give far more attention to mental and physical hygiene than it has given hitherto. The child who is to choose wisely must be healthy in mind and body, handicapped in no preventable fashion. And even more importantly, this child of the future must have an open mind. The home must cease to plead an ethical cause or a religious belief with smiles or frowns, caresses or threats. The children must be taught how to think, not what to think. And because old errors die slowly, they must be taught tolerance, just as to-day they are taught intolerance. They must be taught that many ways are open to them, no one sanctioned above its alternative, and that upon them and upon them alone lies the burden of choice. Unhampered by prejudices, unvexed by too early conditioning to any one standard, they must come clear-eyed to the choices which lie before them.

For it must be realised by any student of civilisation that we pay heavily for our heterogeneous, rapidly changing civilisation; we pay in high proportions of crime and delinquency, we pay in the conflicts of youth, we pay in an ever-increasing number of neuroses, we pay in the lack of a coherent tradition without which the development of art is sadly handicapped. In such a list of prices, we must count our gains carefully,

not to be discouraged. And chief among our gains must be reckoned this possibility of choice, the recognition of many possible ways of life, where other civilisations have recognised only one. Where other civilisations give a satisfactory outlet to only one temperamental type, be he mystic or soldier, business man or artist, a civilisation in which there are many standards offers a possibility of satisfactory adjustment to individuals of many different temperamental types, of diverse gifts and varying interests.

At the present time we live in a period of transition. We have many standards but we still believe that only one standard can be the right one. We present to our children the picture of a battle-field where each group is fully armoured in a conviction of the righteousness of its cause. And each of these groups make forays among the next generation. But it is unthinkable that a final recognition of the great number of ways in which man, during the course of history and at the present time, is solving the problems of life, should not bring with it in turn the downfall of our belief in a single standard. And when no one group claims ethical sanction for its customs, and each group welcomes to its midst only those who are temperamentally fitted for membership, then we shall have realised the high point of individual choice and universal toleration which a heterogeneous culture and a heterogeneous culture alone can attain. Samoa knows but one way of life and teaches it to her children. Will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our children free to choose among them?