Growing Plays

LILLIAN SMITH

the girl

THE GIRL WAS part of our lives on The Mountain ten years before we put her in a play. No one remembers her beginning and no one believes she will ever end. She is part of every little girl who spends a summer up on the mountain; she is every little girl. Into her have gone the struggles, the growing pains, the fears, the hates, the failures, the guilts, the understanding, the pleasure, and the love that each girl feels.

No one quite remembers just how but she began to seem real to us, long ago.

It happened like this:

The counselors have a daily discussion group in child guidance, where theories of psychoanalysis are discussed, special problems analyzed, play projects initiated, and opportunities given to air and evaluate the natural human conflicts that arise now and then between people living closely together. One day two campers came in to talk to the director.

“What do the counselors do at those meetings?” one asked bluntly.

The other said quickly, “Of course, don’t tell us if you’d rather not. But we would like to know.”

The director said, “They talk about you and themselves. They talk about growing up, the things that keep us from growing, the things that help us grow. They talk, sometimes, about such things as temper tantrums, ways to get attention; and hate, and love. Things like that. We call it ‘psychology.’”

“Well, gee,” said Katie, “if that’s what they talk about, seems to me they’re the wrong ones doing the talking. It ought to be us! Look at me! I’ve grown four inches this year. Mother says I’m a mess to live with, shooting out in every direction. You know how hard I find it to get along at home ... why don’t I have a chance to learn to grow! Those counselors are already grown, aren’t they? Or are they?” She grinned, pushed her bangs off her freckled face.

“You see,” the tactful one said softly, “some of us worry so. If we knew what made us feel the way we feel inside, maybe we’d know more what to do about it ...” She smiled to soften her words, always the girl who sandpapered the rough edges and made them smooth to the feelings.

Katie grinned again. “We aren’t vegetables. Not really. A carrot just grows, doesn’t it, if

It is not a general policy for Educational Leadership to publish material which has appeared in other journals, but when we find something as significant and apropos as "Growing Plays" we do not let precedent stand in the way. We are grateful to South Today for permission to reprint this article. Using the medium of a children’s play, Lillian Smith, author of the recent novel Strange Fruit and co-editor of South Today, helps us to see the sheer magnitude of the job of growing up. The costume sketches on these pages are by Carolyn Gerber.

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folks fix the ground and fertilize it and keep it moist? All that kind of thing. Folks grow vegetables. But counselors and parents can’t grow us. We do our own growing. I mean—I know I’m more than a beet or a carrot! Though I can’t prove it.”

So, led by the girls themselves, we began to have “psychology” hours at camp, just as we had hours for tennis, swimming, riding, sculpture. And no girl ever missed these hours. If she had to choose between horseback riding and her “psychology,” the horse would be left in the stables.

Their curiosity was, and is, a startling thing. They seem never to learn all they want to know about their bodies, their feelings, their problems and how to come to terms with them. With fresh, wiry minds, not too strongly trained to resist knowledge (as are most of our older minds) they take a grip on psychoanalytic theory as if it were a tennis racquet. They are not afraid of the right words for feelings, for situations. They accept with beautiful simplicity and honesty what grown-ups call the “ugly” facts of life, just as they accept the pleasing facts. They have not learned yet to shroud these facts in secrecy and fear. To them, they are as much a part of life as the house you live in, or the color of your eyes.

We began talking of ourselves as we were when we were babies. How we were born, how we felt, what we wanted, what we learned to love. Often these talks had to be suspended while each girl reminisced, telling the “cute” things about her babyhood; every other girl listening as long as she could, then breaking in with an account of the “cute” things she did and on and on. The hour would often end before we could move on from these beloved stories of ourselves.

But the talks did move on, slowly, with no sense of hurry, for we were not covering a textbook, or doing a unit of study or trying to pass an examination. They were talks that became in themselves creative experiences, as new insights were gained, as sudden expressions of pent-up feelings stirred our imaginations, our sense of the drama of growing. We talked about the plain, ordinary things: thumb-sucking, weaning, toilet habits, playing with our bodies; how these experiences affected us, kept us from growing or helped us grow. And we talked as simply as we talk at camp about form in riding, strokes in swimming. One was as honorable a part of our life as the other; all, the play, the sports, the emotional insight, the growing, being integral to our experiences in living together.

As the years went by the Girl began to seem real to us. SHE, from the day she was born, had to climb step by step, toward emotional maturity, as we did. And we climbed with her through our own experiences. We began giving nicknames to our experiences; making our own special little jokes about growing difficulties. “Babyish” became an adjective that even the youngest of us no longer wanted to be labeled with. “Mature” was a cherished word in everyone’s vocabulary. To be cited at Council Fire for having shown emotional maturity in some difficult situation was as high an honor as any one could receive on the Mountain. It rated with recognition for expert riding, for expert swimming, a fine piece of sculpture, a beautifully wrought ring.

We found out who the Girl’s “enemies” are, as we discovered our own. The hate feelings which had accumulated in our lives, had accumulated in hers; she had to find ways of using them up, so as not to use them on people, as did we. When we discovered that a good, hard-sweating tennis game was a wonderful way for us to get rid of our resentments, we knew the Girl had found it too. When we made a piece of sculpture and found ourselves in a loving, sympathetic mood towards folks, we knew the Girl felt the same way.

We decided that guilt tired us out more than an overnight trip; that failure was like having your feet chained together. We finally decided that hate, fear, guilt, failure are our mortal enemies and the biggest job in life is to find ways of outwitting them. Growing up emotionally, maturing, became an adventure to us. It was not easy, but it was good fun. We all decided one day that you are the center of attention only once in your life, and that is the day you are born. That day is your day. You are First, a little queen, for one day only. After that, you, if you grow, have got to get out of that center and go places.

Each summer at camp we grow a play out of our experiences together. Usually it develops out of something we have talked
about, done together, or something in the outside world that we are trying to understand. One summer we grew a play about the 300 years the Negro has spent in America; another year, it was concerned with the war and peace; one summer we grew a play about America. We called it I am America, believing America is no better than each of us in it. It was concerned with the way our country grew, its conflicts, its little towns, its people, its fun, its gay, busy frightening cities, its greed, its shining good deeds and dreams, its churches, factories, unions, poverty and wealth.

One summer, the campers decided the play should be about themselves. It would be, they said, a kind of modern pilgrim's progress. Its drama would be the drama of growing up. At first they tried to find a name for it. No name pleased us all. But as the play grew, we began to speak of it as The Girl, and at last we knew we had its title.

The girls built her story. She must come out of an egg: a beautiful pink wonderful egg, large enough for her to step through the opening.

"Of course that is not science; that's poetry," one said hesitantly.

"I should say it isn't science," another said briskly, "Dr. de Schweinitz says in Growing Up that the egg you came from is no bigger than the point the sharpest pencil can make—"

"Oh well, Dr. de Schweinitz wasn't making a play. How could you have a tiny—"

"Yes, but art to be art must be true—"

After a little work-out on that ancient controversy, we all agreed that a play was better with more poetry than science in it, though it must be essentially true. Everyone agreed that the Egg was true.

So they built the Egg. Such an egg you have never seen. Large pale pink, lighted from within, the opening covered by layers of pink chiffon. Girls would come in after a hard tennis game or from the stables or the rifle range, and work a little while on the Egg. It was fun to go inside it and suddenly come forth into the World. Everyone had to try it to see how it felt. . . . Yes, it really was poetry.

Then what? The children pondered. Well, the Girl had a lot of fun when she was little, lying down all the time, rolling around, playing with her toes, cooing, sucking—

"The little egotist!
"Seems to me," another youngster said, "she really did play practically all the time just with herself."

"Sounds awfully silly," an 8-year-old snickered.

"It was silly but it must have been fun. We all did it."

"I bet I didn't," a stolid, browned tennis player snorted. "I bet I never stirred until they put a ball in my hand."

"Born, weren't you," scorn dripping, "with the world's tennis championship pinned to your chest!"

"Go ahead, let her have her pleasures!"

We did. Five of the smallest girls decided to be Little Pleasures. When the Girl came from the Egg, the Little Pleasures were to run out of the Egg with her and play with her and they were to make her have so much fun that she would hate to leave them and move on toward more mature levels.

"Now what happens?" one 10-year-old said, looking up from the piece of clay she was modeling—into a Little Pleasure.

"Well," somebody suggested, "she has to learn the rules, you know."

"Golly," one breathed, "I say the gal had better!"

"Aw—poor little ole thing. Let's let her skip 'em."

"Skip 'em? And do what? Be baby all her life? She has to learn 'em!"

We settled down for another long discussion.

"Let's let her hate something," a tall, rangy girl said and laughed, then turned a hand-spring, landing as lightly as a cat; turned another, to make it even.

"Don't worry, she will—if she learns all the rules I learned."

"Shucks—you had such a hard life, didn't you, darling," another purred. "Poor itsy bitsy—"

Time out while itsy bitsy fixed up the purrer.

The Girl learned the rules, but not easily. No, again and again, she would run back to her baby ways and refuse to grow a bit. . . .

"The point is," somebody suggested, "she's likely to have a lot more fun growing up than growing in reverse, unless her path is blocked. What's going to block it?"

"Hating other people, getting jealous of May 1945
your sister or brother—that kind of thing—"
"Keeping things on your conscience too much—"
"Feeling guilty after you're big about little baby things you once did, like—"
"Believing you're no good. Can't do noth-
in."
"Being afraid—afraid to love folks—"
"Shutting yourself off so you can't believe
the truth even when it's told to you—"
"Oh dear," somebody else wailed, "how is
she going to learn the truth?"
We were silent.
"Maybe you don't ever learn all of it." A
big awkward girl, who seldom spoke in the
discussions, now said softly.
"Yeah, maybe we don't. But she's just got
to understand. Poetry—not science, you
know." Everybody grinned. "She's got to
know how important it is to love people!
She's got to."
We decided that we must have a Speaker
in the balcony, who would symbolize under-
standing and truth and love; who would sym-
bolize our parents' help and sympathy and
all the grown folks who had encouraged us
to grow, and all the knowledge we gain about
ourselves.
There would be two voices for the Girl;
one her little baby voice and one her voice
when she was older. There would also be the
Girl herself, a dancer.
There would be much dancing, much mu-
sic, and not a great many words. We must
therefore have groups; a group called the
Loves who would try to lure her up the steps
toward maturity and who would win her
away from the Hates and Fears and Guilt
and Failures who must try to keep her from
growing up. Now we had our focus of con-
flicts and our characters. The girls chose
their roles, helped create their costumes, and
all the Hates, Fears, Guilt, Failures, made big
hideous masks to wear, for we decided that
these feelings were not really "human," but
destroy human feeling. The Loves showed
their own sweet, shining faces, and how those
faces beam out on the audience!
The play was almost ready. We used a sim-
ple grey cyclorama for all the scenes. There
were no curtains; only dimming or blacking
out of lights. There was a ramp up which the
Loves persuaded the Girl to go on her path
toward maturity; the Egg was on a level be-
low the stage; the various levels of the stages
symbolized progress and regression, as the
Girl pushed on or turned back in her grow-
ing. We used a background of music which
the children chose from the large repertoire
of music they love: Cesar Franck's first move-
ment of the Symphony in D Minor was the
theme music of Life itself. The Egg music
was taken from the Sea Mood of Schehera-
zade by Rimsky-Korsakov. We used a sinister
little thing by Villa-Lobos (bassoons only)
for one of the regression dances; the "demon"
music from Stravinsky's Fire Bird for the big
struggle when the Hates and Fears and Fail-
ures tried to destroy the Girl. The wonderful
music from Scriabin for the triumph of the
Loves.
The play was ready. We all lived through
it to its triumphant end and there was no girl,
big or little, on The Mountain who did not
feel that this was her "biography," that she
was the one who had triumphed, that the
successes were hers, and that her strength
had increased from living through and pro-
jecting in a beautiful and thrilling form her
own feelings and dreams.
I speak of Life! 
Not of the dead but of the living.
Not of the silent
but of that which whispers and shouts and laughs
and sings and sobs,
bending sound,
twisting and bending and shaping sound to its image.

I speak of Life! ... 
Of the bend of trees, the beating of boughs,
of buds swelling and snapping twigs under running feet,
of a silence crushed in the fist by laughter and words
... and tears
Of stamping hooves upon the ground
and the rush of wings
the great rush of wings through the air,
the mighty rush of wings through the air,
strong wings
through the bright air,
shining through the air,
beating against the brightness.

It is of these that I speak....
It is of you that I speak
of your life and my life ... and the girl's life.

Out of the darkness,
out of the soft warm darkness....
out of a shell left empty,
comes life!

Out of the egg,
smooth and round
smooth and round and floating floating and smooth and
round round curving and round,
out of all that is round and smooth,
floating between death and life
out of the egg
out of all that is warm and soft and round, we come.
And the girl will come—when it is time.

When it is time to break the stillness,
to push through the warmth and the darkness and
the roundness into light and sound and the
rushing of wings.

And she will not know that hate is waiting,
That fear is waiting,
that failure and guilt are waiting to pull her back
to silence and stillness,
back to old moss and stone and tombs and darkness,
back to death.
She will not know.  
She will not know that love is waiting,  
she will not know that love and truth are waiting,  
that all that is wise and beautiful is waiting  
to lead her to life,  
to make of her the living, the bright living,  
to fill her with the bend of trees, and the beating  
of boughs, and the rush of great wings through  
the air, the bright air.

She does not know. She does not know.

(The Little Pleasures play with the girl, romping and teasing, they roll, and tumble through  
the dance. The stage is gradually lighted, area by area, and the light goes out in the Egg.)

(After the Girl has played too long.)

The Speaker:  
Aren't you ashamed!  
You mustn't do that! Don't you know, don't you know!  
You must grow, you must grow!  
You can't stay and play with the little pleasures  
I say you can't stay there and play day after  
day after day so carefree and gay kicking up your  
heels in play you can't stay there and play little  
girl all day!

(said rather rapidly in one tone)

Come, you must learn your way  
through the city,  
the big city,  
the tall city,  
the busy hurried tall big city  
that mankind built.  
You must learn how to cross the streets—

The Girl's baby  
voice:  
No!

The Speaker:  
when to stop,  
when to go—

The Girl's baby  
voice:  
No!

The Speaker:  
You must learn directions.  
You must know  
when to stop and when to go;  
when to go fast,  
when to go slow.  
You must know your way through the big city streets—

The Girl's baby  
voice:  
No no no no!

(Music from Petrouchka . . . soft and quiet and comforting as voice speaks.)

The Speaker:  
You must go until you find the tallest place  
where you can look down and all around  
seeing all that eyes can see.  
Where you can look in every face and say  
"It cannot injure me."
Where you can say, "I am not afraid of anything that man has made."
Where you can feel strong and tall as the tallest tree as the tallest tree.
Where you can say, "I have faith in me."
Love will give you strength.
Don't be afraid to say,
"I have the strength that love gives, I have that. I have love for my own. It is good to be grown."

The Girl's baby voice:

No!

The Speaker:

But the girl turned toward the city, the big tall busy city which mankind built; turned away from the meadows, from pleasures—play, play so gay all day—turned away from the soft warm darkness—soft and dark and still and round round floating floating and round—to find her direction through the big city streets the long streets, twisting and busy and full of sound, full of sound and movement, so furious, so swift; the big tall busy city that beats and pounds and shapes those who build it. that beats and pounds and shapes the direction of all who walk in it. And she could hear Love speaking, "Come my dear, this way." And she could hear Understanding say, "Beyond you lies all that is beautiful and wise." But the Girl was afraid. Afraid of the streets, the twisting turning busy streets; afraid she could not remember when to stop and when to go, when to go fast, when to go slow, afraid of streets that come to a dead end, dead end, dead end... afraid of streets that do not bend, but bend you to their end, to their end. All she could remember was a meadow where she could play play all day gay gay All she could remember was smooth and round and soft and dark... floating floating...

Voices of Teachers of the Rules:

Stop! Go! Go slow! Go fast! Go slow! Stop! Go! Stop! Go! Stop—Go—Stop—Go— Stop go stop go stop go stop!

The Little Girl's voice:

I am going back... I am going back... I will not stay here... I do not know when to stop and when to go... I shall go back and play in the meadow and play... I shall go back where all is smooth and round and soft and dark and floating... floating... floating...

(The girl resumes her baby ways, turns, plays with the Little Pleasures. Moves toward the Egg while her baby voice speaks from the balcony.)
The Little Girl's voice: Everybody's bad. I hate them! Yes I do . . . I hate everybody. Wish they would go away . . . never come back . . . wish they'd all go away and never come back . . . they'll be sorry . . . they'll be sorry they're so mean to me . . . I'll die . . . yes, I'll die and then they'll be sorry! They'll be so sorry . . . they'll cry and cry and wish they'd been nice to me . . .

(Now the girl dreams a beautiful princess fantasy.)

I'm a princess . . . I'm a beautiful princess and I'll wave my wand . . . Down on your knees! My unworthy subjects. Down on your knees! (she laughs a little) (she sighs) I hate them! Hate everybody . . . wish they'd die . . . wish they'd all die and leave me alone. Everybody's mean to me . . . everybody's doing things to me . . .(cries a little) I feel so bad . . . maybe I'm going to be sick . . . maybe I'm going to die . . . they'll be sorry . . .

(The Little Pleasures are softly pulling the Girl back toward the Egg. She goes with them, step by step, slowly)

The Girl's baby voice: (Laughs) Love to suck my thumb . . . Hey, little toe! Hey . . . (sighs) hmmm . . . feels so good . . . like to be little . . . like to be a baby . . . and not drown up . . . don't want to drown up . . . want to be itsy bitsy baby . . . (talks baby talk now)

The Speaker: Stop! You cannot go that way! You cannot play and play the live-long day. You must learn directions . . . You must know when to stop and when to go . . .

(And as the Speaker speaks, the Loves come on the stage, move down toward the Girl, block her way back to the Egg, gently lead her on toward maturity. But as she moves on to another level, little Fears creep out, Failures grow big as she stares at them, Guilts slip around her, crowd the Loves back. And for a moment the Girl hesitates. Then suddenly she laughs at them all, at all the stern business of growing, forgets everything now but joy in being young and having fun. Sees her reflection in the big mirror, feels good, wants only to be gay for life is suddenly like going to a party!)

The Speaker: But even guilt and fear, even guilt and fear and failure even dread can bow its head to one who is young. And the Girl, the Girl laughed, "I don't care! whoof! I feel light as air, I feel good! I am young. I feel young. I Am Young. What do I care? I feel so free! I am in love with ME."

And through her there was a rushing of wings through the air, the bright air.

(Now follows the mirror dance. The Girl dances, admiring her own image, suddenly carefree and full of herself.)

The Young Girl's voice: "I am in love with me, so beautiful . . . I am in love with all who love me,"
so beautiful. Pretty. . . pretty. . .

Listen, you hear? You are lovely, my dear.
My dear, myself, so lovely you are,
lovelier than anyone else, by far.
I make a lovely light. . . and all the world is
beneath my feet. I'm sweet. . . you hear, dear?
And all the world is far away. I go my way!
I go my own way! This is my day. I can play and
play. . . What do I care? Whoof! I feel light as
air!

(The Loves come and try to lead the Girl away
from her mirror but the Guilt and Fears over-
power the Loves and during this struggle, the
Little Pleasures come once more upon the stage
and try to induce her to play with them. She
starts slowly down the steps toward the Egg.
Then suddenly as she begins to play with the
Little Pleasures who look as babyish and "cute
and winsome" as she did when she was a baby
herself suddenly they whisk out masks, put them
on, and she sees what once was babyish and cute
turned before her eyes into something obscene
and ugly and regressive. This frightens her. She
hesitates, looks up toward the Loves, who now
have been pushed almost out of her sight.)

Stop! You cannot go that way! That is an empty shell,
the dead-end way.
That is a page on which no word is written;
music which has no sound.
That is stillness and darkness and stone and death.
The music here is that of eight bassoons, a strange little piece by Villa-Lobos; suddenly it changes into more primitive sounds and rhythms. The Girl is deeply troubled by she knows not what. And as she hesitates, she hears within her, her own fear, failure, rage, guilt whispering to her, and she turns away from the path to maturity to listen to them.

Chorus of Destructive Feelings:

Fear: You are afraid. You are afraid.
Failure: You can't do it, you hear!
Fear: You're filled with fear.
Rage: Hate them! Hurt them! They hurt you—you hurt them!
Guilt: Everything you do is wrong... wrong... wrong...
Don't you wish you were dead!
Failure: Your heart is lead.

(Now the Failures come out on the stage, approach the Girl where she is sitting on the steps between the Egg and her own age level. With little struggle on her part, they take the cords from around themselves and tie her arms close to her and bind her feet, and leave her there, helpless. A dialogue follows now between the Speaker, who symbolizes love and understanding, and the Girl's own destructive impulses. While this battle of words goes on, the Guilt, Hates, Fears, Failures are struggling to keep the Loves away from the Girl, quietly pushing them farther and farther away from her.)

Her Destructive Feelings:

Rage: Hate you! Hate them! Hate all of them! I'll hurt them! Yes, I will. I don't care. I'll hurt them!

The Speaker: Your hate will destroy all that you prize and love—
Rage: I don't care! I want to destroy. I do not love. I hate them all—you hear!

The Speaker: Yes, dear.
Rage: Then save your breath!

The Speaker: To destroy what one loves is a way to death.
Fear: I don't care. I'd just as soon die.

The Speaker: I think perhaps you lie.
Rage: No! No! I hate them, I want them to die—
Guilt: I mean, I want to die! You hear?

The Speaker: Yes, dear. Listen, don't you hear the rush of wings through the air, the bright air? Strong wings shining and beating... Don't you see right before your eyes so much that is beautiful and wise?
Don't you hear sound, so lovely, so lovely and clear,
don't you hear? don't you feel—

**Rage:**
Always telling you to grow! Telling you
to stop and go.
Always telling you—

**Fear:**
I'm afraid . . . you hear? I'm afraid!

**The Speaker:**
You have strength for the living. You must go
until you find the tallest place where you can
look down, seeing all that eyes can see,
where you can look in every face and say,
"It cannot injure me."

**Fear:**
I'm afraid . . . afraid—

**The Speaker:**
Fear leads to a dead end, dead end. And it will
bend, bend, bend you to its end!

**Failure:**
I have no strength. I cannot go. I cannot go.

**The Speaker:**
You can try.

**Failure:**
No, no, I'd only die!

**The Speaker:**
I am here, dear. Listen, love is here. Love
will give you strength. Just say, "I have the
strength that love gives. I have that. I have
love for my own."

**Failure:**
I'll only die.

**The Speaker:**
You lie! You hear, you lie! You want to destroy all that is good
and wise. Your heart is full of lies! You turn away from the
light . . . the bright living . . . the wonderful rushing of wings
through the air—

**The Girl's Voice (sobs):**
They are all against me now.

**The Speaker:**
You turn to the blackness . . . to old moss and stillness,
to stone and tombs—and death.
Listen, dear, I am here.
Love is here: this way. Beyond you lies all that is
beautiful and wise. All that is light, all that is
of the living. You have the strength!

**The Girl's Voice:**
I've tried.
I've tried and always I fail. I've tried!

**The Speaker:**
There are two ways. You must decide.

(With tremendous energy, the Loves push through to the Girl; untie her, give her the ropes
with which she has been tied. Slowly she smiles. She understands. She knots the ropes into a
whip, and in sudden freedom she drives the destructive impulses off of the stage and out of
her life. Music becomes strong, triumphant, powerful.)

**The Speaker:**
And she could hear Love speaking,
"Come my dear, this way."
And she could hear Understanding say.
"Beyond you lies
all that is beautiful and wise."

(The Girl turns, a Love on either side of her, and walks steadily, steadily, steadily up that stage ramp—toward maturity, while every girl in the play and every girl watching from the wings, in her own heart marched steadily with her . . .)

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Helping Children Understand Democracy


A number of teacher committees, now being appointed throughout the country, will prepare outlines which will be used as the basis for scripts. It is planned that the outlines would include statements of desired attitudes and fairly detailed suggestions concerning content.

Thirteen situations which lend themselves best to immediate production will be selected and prepared for broadcast next fall. Outlines not used for this series will be made available to teachers in radio workshops who are interested in script writing. Scripts written from this material by workshop groups may be submitted to the Radio Project Committee for possible use later either by radio stations or in schools.