

Gay Sebastian and Cheerful Charles: Homoeroticism in Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited"

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THERE IS A highly visible homosexual population in the novels of Evelyn Waugh, ranging from the "smooth young men of uncertain tastes" (2) in *Decline and Fall* (1928) to the hallucinatory visions and encounters in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957). Ambrose Silk of *Put Out More Flags* (1942) and Anthony Blanche of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) may be the most memorable and certainly are the most flamboyant members of this population. However, there are, in addition, Sir Ralph Brompton, Martin Gaythorne-Brodie (the Honorable Miles Malpractice in the American editions), Captain Edgar Grimes, David Lennox, and Corporal-Major Ludovic—seven men in total, ranging from an Oxford aesthete declaiming *The Waste Land* from a Christ Church window, through a capable diplomatic adviser, a society photographer, and an author of a bestselling novel to an accused Fascist who ultimately receives the Order of Merit.¹ Much disagreement results, however, when one attempts to add other Waugh characters to this group, as shown by the exchange between David Bittner and John Osborne, in the pages of the *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies* between 1987 and 1991, about whether or not *Brideshead Revisited*'s Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte are homosexual. In an early sally, Bittner maintains that "Waugh's basic intention, despite several contradictory inadvertences, was not to write *Brideshead Revisited* as a piece of 'gay' literature whose two main characters were homosexuals" ("Sebastian and Charles" 3). Despite the finality of Bittner's claim, I argue that it is impossible to regard Sebastian as other than gay; that Charles is so homoerotic he must at least be considered *cheerful*; and that Bittner's attempt—and others like

it—is a representative skirmish in a much larger and more important sexual war being fought as entrenched heterosexuality strives to maintain its hegemony over important twentieth-century works.

The conclusions reached in earlier Waugh criticism on the question of the characters' sexual orientation are mixed, ranging from truculent denial to moralistic condemnation, and are often fatally flawed in both logic, assumptions, and execution. One simply may ignore their sexuality, as does George McCartney, or hurry into illogical denial within parentheses, as does Harvey Curtis Webster: "Ryder's long journey to faith starts when he meets and falls in love (not homosexually) with . . . Sebastian" (85). Just how one man "falls in love" with another man without the act being homoerotic or homosexual is an interesting contortion of definitions. Others resort to coded signals whose language barely disguises underlying homophobia and mistakenly locates homosexuality within discourses of illness and freely willed action. William J. Cook notes that Sebastian "has become degenerate and dissipated" (194); Robert R. Garnett glances hastily at Charles's "youthful love for Sebastian" (190), "the beautiful, charming, and doomed young aristocrat" (148), who, "unable or unwilling to abandon childhood, retains his irresponsibility and his teddy bear" (149). Jacqueline McDonnell admits that Charles Ryder has "a romantic relationship with Lord Sebastian Flyte" (90), who later becomes "drunk and delinquent" (90), but finally situates Sebastian by concluding that he "is a major romantic creation, drawn from the heart of the Christian tradition: the hopeless sinner saved" (95). After suggesting that the picnic scene early in the novel may be "a homosexual idyll" (92), Calvin W. Lane points out that "Julia is really Sebastian's alter ego" (95), a point to which this essay will return. Finally, Gene D. Phillips writes that Sebastian "gradually . . . sinks into both dipsomania and homosexuality" (64). These comments evince what Elaine Showalter has called "homosexual panic": "the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self" (107). The homosexual and the homoerotic were present in *Brideshead Revisited* long before the 1981 British Broadcasting Corporation adaptation visualized Sebastian's and Charles's kiss, close

dancing, and gondola ride and equally long before today's gay liberation movement. In other words, we have here a clear attempt by critics to suppress, either by ignoring, trivializing, or ridiculing, a sophisticated text's sophisticated handling of a full range of human sexuality, including the homoerotic and the homosexual.

Neither Bittner nor Osborne seems to pay much attention to the quality of his own assertions and arguments. This homophobia—even in Osborne, who accepts that Sebastian is unmistakably gay—is evident in virtually every paragraph of their exchange in the *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter*. To Osborne, Sebastian is sunk "deep into human wickedness" ("Sebastian Flyte" 8), a rather extreme claim for an alcoholic who has had but two known affairs; to Bittner, "Charles is leaving behind . . . not a relationship involving gross sensual gratification but one of idealized spiritual love" ("Long-Awaited" 6). Both critics deliberately have confused such concepts as sexuality, masculinity, homosexuality as a state of being, and homosexuality as a behavioural action. Although Bittner's essays will never be among the "essential" articles on Waugh—and one must admit that Bittner is clearly aware of this—a close look at his claims and disclaimers, suggested in six statements from his essays, demonstrates clearly what can happen when a character such as Sebastian threatens the heterosexual critical hegemony exercised over a text.

If Sebastian is introduced as a homosexual character and remains a confirmed homosexual throughout the novel, then—in a story whose whole point is the 'boomerang' influence of Catholicism—wherein lies the point of his religious return? Would the thread that twitches a homosexual Sebastian back to the Church be valid if it stopped short of reforming his English habits? ("Long-Awaited" 5)

Several points are askew here. Like many people, Bittner apparently believes that homosexuality is an assumed behaviour that is selected or rejected at will and is not an inherent identity. Sebastian cannot control whether or not he is homosexual, but he can control whether or not he allows his homosexuality active sexual expression. His church does not condemn the homosexual, though it does condemn homosexual activity, and in the novel

we are given every reason to assume that after his infatuation with Charles and the death of Kurt, Sebastian has become a celibate homosexual, clearly "twitched" back to his church. Bittner has confused a noun of being with a noun of activity and has thus muddled a crucial distinction within the novel. Waugh's generation was clearly of two minds concerning homosexual identity. In *Our Age*, Noel Annan points out that "homosexuality became a way of jolting respectable opinion and mocking the Establishment" (113) and that his generation "made homosexuality a cult" (98); these comments suggest that homosexuality could be self-selected, merely a phase associated with the all-male worlds of the English public school and university. Such a conclusion is supported by Alan Pryce-Jones's comment that "it was *chic* to be queer, rather as it was *chic* to know something about the twelve-tone scale and about Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase'" (qtd. in Carpenter 81). On the other hand, the generation had no doubts that the sexual orientation of such individuals as Howard Sturgis, Brian Howard, Joe Ackerley, Christopher Isherwood, and others seemed fixed, a stand that Freudian analysis supported. Bittner's confusion is equally evident in such comments as "Sebastian could hardly be a homosexual without someone to 'tango' with" ("Long-Awaited" 5), even though the lives of hundreds of thousands of single homosexual men testify to the contrary. Substituting "Cordelia" or "Bridey" for "Sebastian," and "heterosexual" for "homosexual," lays bare the confusion in Bittner's rhetoric. Also, using "tango" trivializes crucial sexual identities in the novel.

Besides, if Waugh wanted to present Sebastian as a homosexual character, why doesn't he drawn [sic] him in the full lineaments of the role, as he does Anthony Blanche . . . whom Waugh intends in the tradition of the flamboyant, artistic homosexual.

("Sebastian and Charles" 1)

Obviously Waugh does not do this because Sebastian is neither "flamboyant" nor "artistic." Bittner seems to suggest that all homosexuals are of a type, a type represented by Anthony. Of course, Waugh knew better, as can be seen from the range of homosexuals he presents in his novels. Anthony Blanche and Ambrose Silk are exceptional figures, as unique, say,

as Quentin Crisp or Boy George; Sebastian is far closer to the norm of the ordinary, semi-closeted gay. Moreover, both Ambrose and Anthony seem to attract Waugh's censure more because of their modernist ideas and stances than because of their homosexuality.

Sebastian stands apart from Waugh's other homosexuals in that he has a much more dynamic role to play and because the tone in which he is presented is so distinctive. Ambrose and Anthony are critiqued; Grimes and Malpractice are ridiculed; Sebastian is romanticized. There are, I believe, several reasons for this, one of them involving autobiographical nostalgia. Sebastian may take some of his actions and features from Hugh Lygon, Alastair Graham, and others, but he also memorialized much of the 1920s Oxford Waugh. When John Betjeman said, "[e]veryone was queer at Oxford in those days" (qtd. in Annan 113), he certainly included Waugh, who had an affair with Richard Pares and perhaps others, since Waugh called Pares "my first homosexual love" (Waugh, *Letters* 435). Waugh, however, effectively silenced much from his undergraduate days through the destruction of the diaries (Stannard 68). In Sebastian we meet Waugh's nostalgia for his lost past and the orthodoxy of his Catholicism, which required him regretfully to condemn Sebastian.

It is probably a mistake to conclude, if one thinks of characters other than Charles Ryder, that "filled with regret for time past, deeply elegiac, the early chapters are suffused with a Wordsworthian intimation that growing up inexorably alienates one from the lifegiving source" (Garnett, 149). It is a mistake because the moral schema Waugh endorses in the novel requires the reader to see Sebastian as a beautiful, seductive, irresistible tempter, more tempting in many ways than Celia Mulcaster and Julia Flyte Mottram, but, like them, situated carefully within a complex hierarchy of sexual corruptions. As Jeffrey Heath points out, "Waugh never says so explicitly, [but] he regards Charles's love for Sebastian as a gorgeous mistake and a *felix culpa*" (178).

When Sebastian complains that all his life people [actually, Sebastian refers only to his family] have been "taking things away" from him (27), it is tempting to conclude that, among other things, he is referring to a deprivation of his masculinity.

It is also true, of course, that men like Sebastian, who are of much above average appearance, frequently are characterized—or thought to be characterized—by same-sex preferences.

(“Sebastian and Charles” 1)

One scarcely knows how to correct the flimsy assumptions in this passage. Are there actually individuals so shallow as to believe that a handsome man—by the mere fact of his physical attractiveness—is probably homosexual? Further, “homosexuality” and “masculinity” are in no way mutually exclusive terms, despite the implications of Bittner’s sentence.

I cannot believe it would not have occurred to both surveillants [Mr Bell and Mr Samgrass] to keep their eyes peeled for evidence of pederasty as long as they were scrutinizing every other aspect of the boys’ behavior. (“Long-Awaited” 5)

At the time to which Bittner refers, Sebastian and Charles are 19 or 20 years old—scarcely boys—adult enough that their actions cannot be considered pederastic. Pederasty almost always refers to an adult having a sexual relation with a boy.²

It seems to me there is nothing really to “agree” upon as regards Charles’s calling Anthony Blanche a “pansy.” He just does. It is there in black and white. My point was that if such expressions found their way naturally to Charles’s lips, then one would expect him to describe Sebastian by means of the same term *if* Sebastian were a homosexual. The fact that Charles *doesn’t* I take as an indication that Sebastian must be intended as a heterosexual character.

(“Long-Awaited” 6)

Since Charles uses the term “pansy” but twice in the novel (and Waugh rarely uses it elsewhere), it is not a word that comes “naturally” to his lips; moreover, “pansy” always refers to dandified, affected, or noticeably effeminate men, traits Sebastian never demonstrates. Charles carefully chooses his words, much in the manner of the individual of the 1990s who understands the nuances separating “homosexual,” “gay,” and “queer.” Also, Charles’s affair with Sebastian has been over for 13 years. He discusses Sebastian only with Cordelia and then with Julia—contexts in which the term “pansy” would have been most inappropriate. Cordelia tells Charles that Sebastian is now “very religious” (302), apparently reconciled with his church, though apparently still alcoholic.

[I]t requires a greater leap of reason than I am prepared to make to assert that [Sebastian] could practice homosexuality without setting his family on edge about the fact. Lady Marchmain is nobody's fool; if Sebastian were a homosexual she would know it, and if she knew it, would have to disapprove because of her strict Catholic principles. I cannot believe that Waugh would introduce Sebastian as a homosexual character and then not deal with the issue, as, for instance, by having Lady Marchmain add this to "the sorrows she took with her daily to church." ("Sebastian and Charles" 1)

Lady Marchmain may be "nobody's fool," but she is certainly her own fool. She is an extraordinarily self-deluded woman who does not see, much less understand, what she is doing to her children, and she is quite isolated from the male world of Oxford. She lacks the worldliness of Cara. Indeed, Lady Marchmain seems tailored after the popular analysis of homosexuality in the 1920s and 1930s, which held that the male turned homosexual because of an ineffectual, often-absent father and a domineering, powerful mother, an idea now thoroughly discredited in psychoanalysis but one still holding remarkable popular appeal.³

Of course, no discrediting of either the overt or covert homophobia of critics demonstrates that Sebastian is indeed gay or that Charles is homoerotic. For this demonstration one needs to return to the text of *Brideshead Revisited*. There seems no doubt that the characters' tie is homosocial, that Charles is homoerotically attracted to Sebastian, and that their relationship is homosexual, though perhaps not sexually active. The evidence is more than "several contradictory inadvertences." During the picnic near Swindon, for instance, Charles's eyes linger long on Sebastian's "profile" (24), a purely erotic male gaze; later he recalls Sebastian as being "magically beautiful, with that epicene quality which in extreme youth sings aloud for love" (31). He even likes to wander into the bathroom while Sebastian is in the tub (125), and at Brideshead Castle has "no mind then for anything but Sebastian" (127). During the golden year of 1923, Charles tells us he and Sebastian "kept very much to our own company that term, each so much bound up in the other that we did not look elsewhere for friends" (107); indeed, Charles once climbs out of his college, only to be found by Mr Samgrass in Sebastian's rooms "after the gate was shut" (124). Considering

the early death of his mother and his father's cold disdain, Charles may well claim that he "was in search of love in those days" (31) and mean several very different things, but he also confesses that he participated in "naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins" (45) that summer and learned "that to know and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom" (45). Paraphrasing Goronwy Rees, Martin Green provides a general description of such Oxford affairs in the 1920s: "The Fall of Man happened only to Eve. She was expelled, and Adam was left to enjoy the garden alone with the serpent. Men remembered Oxford in a golden glow because only *after* it came their fall from grace into heterosexual relationships" (qtd. in Littlewood 126).

Virtually all of the other characters assume that Charles's and Sebastian's relationship is both homoerotic and homosexual. Despite all of the satiric thrusts directed at him, Anthony Blanche functions as one of the genuinely perceptive truth-tellers in the novel; he says, "I can see [Sebastian] has completely captivated you, my dear Charles" (51) and later tells Charles "you threw him over" (203), surely the language of an intensely homoerotic friendship, if not of more. The informed, aware, and worldly Cara takes in all in one glance and then tells Charles, "I know of these romantic friendships of the English and the Germans . . ." (101) and subtly warns him, "they are very good if they do not go on too long" (101). At Old Hundredth, "Death's Head" and "Sickly Child" dismiss Sebastian and Charles as "only fairies" (115) before picking them up, and Charles hints at Julia's opinion when he says that the arrest "had clearly raised us in Julia's estimation [because] we had been out with women" (122). Julia also recalls her early impression of Charles as "the pretty boy Sebastian brought home with him" (239), a hint that she may see more than does her mother. It is not at all surprising that Charles, in Venice, confesses "I was nineteen years old and completely ignorant of women" (100). Until the novel reached the page-proof state, it included a similar statement by Sebastian: "You know, Charles, I've never slept with a woman" (Davis 173).

Bittner would object to the preceding paragraphs, pointing out Charles's marriage to Celia Mulcaster and his affair with Julia Flyte Mottram, but sexual relations with women do not necessar-

ily prove that a man is heterosexual. Study of the married homosexual male was only tangential to early studies such as A. C. Kinsey's, W. B. Pomeroy's, and C. E. Martin's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and R. A. L. Humphreys's *Tearoom Trade* (1970), but since the research of H. L. Ross (1971) and M. T. Saghir and E. Robins (1973), we have become aware that perhaps as many as 20 per cent of homosexual men are or have been married (M. W. Ross 15-17). Ross could have been discussing Charles and Celia, because at one point he notes that "homosexuals who married often stated that the marriage was initiated by the wife" (16).

This is exactly what happened to Charles. In New York, waiting to sail to England, Charles remembers Celia "had married me six years ago" (231), an odd phrasing, but one that would pass unnoticed except for their cabin conversation, in which Celia says, "Darling, it was the night you popped the question" and Charles responds "As I remember, you popped" (241). Also, Charles's response to his wife's adultery is rather atypical—no rage, no wounded ego, just relief and triumph: "I heard her unmoved, and suddenly realized that she was powerless to hurt me any more; I was a free man; she had given me my manumission in that brief, sly lapse of hers; my cuckold's horns made me lord of the forest" (268).⁴ Celia Mulcaster recognized an up-and-coming artist, annexed him, forwarded his career through her social connections and skills, and then turned to an affair, perhaps to find the sexual satisfaction missing from her marriage. In contrast, Charles's affair with Julia appears to be passionately heterosexual, but Julia's first attraction to Charles came precisely because of her close physical similarities to Sebastian: "On my side the interest was keener, for there was always the physical likeness between brother and sister, which, caught repeatedly in different poses, under different lights, each time pierced me anew" (178-79). This is a similarity Charles noticed the very first time he met Julia (75). He does not find her to be Anthony's "passionless, acquisitive, intriguing, ruthless *killer*" (54), but he does feel "a sense of liberation and peace" (78) when she leaves him alone with Sebastian at Brideshead Castle. Aboard the ship, Julia initiates their love-making (261); later, she proposes to Charles (279).

About Sebastian's sexual preferences there can be little doubt. He initiates two very different affairs, and he seems to enjoy his power over his "chums," a reflection of the English tendency for men like Sebastian to take lovers from lower classes. He "courts" Charles with a "room full of flowers" (30) as an apology, with an idyllic picnic, and with brilliant luncheons, holds his arm while they walk in Oxford (34), and at just the right psychological moment dazzles Charles with Brideshead Castle. Charles writes him daily from Ravenna. Worldly Anthony observes, "I can see he has completely captivated you" (51) and cynically suggests that Sebastian probably even flirted with priests through the confessional's grill when he was younger. After leaving England, Sebastian stays with Anthony Blanche in Marseilles, where Anthony attempts to do something about Sebastian's alcoholism or to introduce him to drugs more potent than alcohol (203),⁵ before they go on to Tangier, where Sebastian acquires a "new friend . . . a great clod of a German who'd been in the Foreign Legion" (204). Sebastian is content with the relationship and tells Charles "it's rather a pleasant change . . . to have someone to look after yourself" (215). Although he and Kurt do not share a bed (216), they do share six years together (307), and his attempts to rescue Kurt from the German nightmare, especially his lingering in Germany for "nearly a year" (307), speak of more than "chumminess."

Jacqueline McDonnell sees clearly the relationship between the incremental repetitions of character types and sexual acts: she writes that Charles "spends most of the novel being seduced" (97). Indeed, Charles is seduced three times physically and once spiritually, and his partners are "forerunners" of the later spiritual love he will develop for God. His erotic and sexual relationships with Sebastian, Celia, and Julia are central to Waugh's "attempt to trace the worship of the divine purpose in a pagan world, in the lives of an English Catholic family, half paganised themselves" (Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage* 236). Waugh presents Charles moving through three corrupted states of human sexuality and passion. Bittner should have conceded the battle to win the war: Waugh has not written a novel gay liberationists will eagerly embrace. Charles's and Sebastian's

mutual love is enticingly seductive, but thematically appears the most corrupted and the most distant from Waugh's God. Critics often note that Waugh's rhetoric insists on Sebastian's child-like, if indeed not childish, attitude and behaviour. His inadequacies are almost too evident. Nanny Hawkins calls Sebastian and Charles "a pair of children" (80); Cara says "'Sebastian is in love with his own childhood'" (103); even Charles images Sebastian as "happy and harmless as a Polynesian" (127).⁶ Thus Waugh moves his reader and his protagonist through a homosexual affair he condemns; a loveless, almost mercenary marriage; and a passionate affair between two desperate souls that is condemned by the other characters. Finally there comes the moment in the chapel when Charles is seduced into a very different kind of love.

Sebastian and Charles, Julia and Rex, Cara and Alex—these and other partners in *Brideshead Revisited* force a reader to confront the complex range of human sexuality. The binary opposition of homosexuality and heterosexuality that informs so much Western thought about male sexuality is clearly too simplistic a paradigm for the world Waugh depicts. It is reward enough to teach the novel's conflict between materialism and spiritualism, between free will and fate, but first its characters' sexual identities must be won back from frightened criticism.

NOTES

- ¹ In addition to these seven, there are other minor figures: the Archbishop of Canterbury who confesses to a homosexual act with a former prime minister in *Vile Bodies* (1930), Tom and Kurt in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Lieutenant Padfield and Susie, a Royal Air Force sergeant, in *End of the Battle* (1961). There are also two identifiable lesbians: Pamela Popham of *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* and Mrs. Panrast of *Vile Bodies*. Paul A. Doyle's *A Reader's Companion to the Novels and Short Stories of Evelyn Waugh* is an invaluable aid in conducting a census of sexual orientation among Waugh's characters, and its entries indirectly foreground the importance and prevalence of fornication and adultery in Waugh's novels. It may also be of interest to note that the major homosexual figures in Waugh's novels are based on individuals who have been clearly identified among Waugh's acquaintances, especially at Oxford.
- ² Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick notes the binaries forced on any pederastic relationship: Rather, this plot of [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] seems to replicate the discursive eclipse in this period of the Classically based, *pederastic* assumption that male-male bonds of any duration must be structured around some diacritical difference—old/young, for example, or active/passive—whose binarizing cultural power would be at least comparable to that of gender. (160)

- ³ In *The Homosexual Matrix*, C. A. Tripp lays bare the underlying problems of this theory by showing the contradictory readings it has been used to support. He writes,

it is still widely believed that a boy turns out to be homosexual when he identifies with his mother and becomes effeminate. Or, if he identifies with her without becoming effeminate, then he must be trying to take her place with the father. . . . Or, by identifying with his mother, he later wants to repeat the joys he experienced with her by choosing boys whom he can treat as his mother treated him . . . (72-73)

and so on through five other "or" clauses before ending in an exhausted ellipsis. The most recent gay "handbook," *The New Joy of Gay Sex* by Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano, dismisses the theory quite curtly:

A second folk theory based upon modeling holds that boys grow up to be gay if their fathers are weak and ineffectual. Such a theory equates homosexuality with inadequacy, a dubious identification. Moreover, it ignores the fact that more than half of marriages end in divorce and a substantial number of children grow up without a father in the house. There is not a shred of evidence that sexual orientation is influenced either by divorce (no matter how bitter) or by the absence of the father. (126; see also 127)

- ⁴ One of the first bits of crucial information Charles gives the reader is knowledge of his failed marriage: "I . . . felt as a husband might feel, who, in the fourth year of his marriage, suddenly knew that he had no longer any desire or tenderness, or esteem, for a once-beloved wife. . . . I knew it all, the whole drab compass of marital disillusion" (5-6).

- ⁵ In the relevant passage, Anthony tells Charles:

"I said to him again and again, 'Why drink? If you want to be intoxicated there are so many much more delicious things.' I took him to quite the best man; well, you know him as well as I do, Nada Alopov; and Jean Luxmore and *everyone we know* has been to him for years—he's always in the Regina Bar—and then we had trouble over that because Sebastian gave him a bad cheque—a *s-s-stumer*, my dear—and a whole lot of very menacing men came round to the flat—*thugs*, my dear—and Sebastian was making no sense at the time and it was all most unpleasant." (203-04)

Doyle and Osborne ("Sebastian Flyte" 8) suggest that Alopov is a male prostitute. Given Anthony's wording, "to be intoxicated there are so many much more delicious things," it is likely that Alopov and Luxmore may be drug dealers. The passage may obliquely allude to Brian Howard, who died from a drug overdose.

- ⁶ The reference to Polynesia is probably an indirect reference to the writings of Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead, whose *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) and *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) did much to advance the view of the uncomplicated sexual life of the Pacific islanders. In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Marianna Torgovnick observes:

Mead pinpoints, rather precisely, what the postmodern West seems to want most from the primitive: a model of alternative social organization in which psychological integrity is a birthright, rooted in one's body and sexuality, and in which a full range of ambivalences and doubts can be confronted and defused through the culture's rituals, customs, and play. (240)

Sebastian's culture, of course, offers none of these options.

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