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The Stranger's Child: Alan Hollinghurst's Subversive Englishness

Alan Hollinghurst has been both praised and criticised for the Englishness of his writing. In his latest novel, *The Stranger's Child* (2011), Hollinghurst has gone further than ever in creating an overwhelmingly English work, which has even been acclaimed "his best novel" by some critics.[1] The aim of this article is to redefine the term of Englishness by exploring the distinct features that sum up Hollinghurst's own interpretation of Englishness, notably adding a new layer to it, i.e. homosexuality.

There seem to be two ways of understanding Englishness. First, the Englishness of a novel is determined by the choice of its setting and themes, and the language it employs. The typically English novels are set in England, often in great houses with a historical background. The themes they tackle are: the English society with its class differentiation, English history, notably the Great War, colonial times and post-colonial heritage including muticulturalism and inter-racial relationships. As far as the language is concerned, Englishness is characterised by elegance of style and precision of expression, as well as a certain dose of irony and cynicism (Krishna 2011).

All these elements can be found in *The Strangers Child*. The story begins in the year 1913 with a young poet, Cecil Valance, visiting a friend, George Sawle, at his family estate called Two Acres. During his visit, Cecil meets young Daphne Sawle and writes her a poem which eulogises the house and its garden. It is entitled "Two Acres," and, after Cecil Valance's death in France in 1916, it is quoted by Churchill in an obituary of the poet that appears in the *Times*. As James Woods puts it: "(the poem) is quickly taken up and anthologized as the great English war poem, part bombast and part elegy for a lost pastoral innocence" (2011: 1).

The subject of class differences is present throughout the novel. Hubert Sawle, who also fought and perished in The Great War, died in relative obscurity, while Cecil became an iconic War-poet (although the poem in question had initially nothing to do with the War), and his aristocratic family built a sumptuous marble tomb for him in the chapel of their great family house, Corley Court. The second half of the novel introduces a character, Paul Bryant, who is a simple bank clerk and Cecil Valance's self-proclaimed biographer. His efforts to win his way into the high society of the Valances and the Sawles are an embarrassing series of misunderstandings.

The greater part of the story takes place in either Two Acres or at Corley Court. It is closely related to the "pastoral" genre, which has an established place in the history of English literature and "has become a signature mode for Hollinghurst" (Mukherjee 2011).[2] The Englishness of Hollinghurst's

1 See reviews by Andrew Anthony (2011) and Keith Lawrence (2012).

2 Hollinghurst distances himself from such generalisations; in an interview concerning *The Stranger's Child*, he states: "There are habits that I haven't shaken off. Whenever I go to any place, I go and look at the church, and it's an interest I put straight into my book. I probably do too much of it. There have been big Victorian country houses in my last three novels. I had to be careful this book wasn't marketed as a Downton Abbey-type thing, and I hope it doesn't trade in easy nostalgia and fantasy about the past; rather the opposite" (Moss 2011).

writing has even been criticised as provincialism, not merely because of the narrowness of its geographical reach, but for what critic Nakul Krishna calls "provincial sensibility": "The provincial sensibility comes from one's novels having little resonance beyond a narrow circle of one's fellows"; for Krishna, this sensibility is „insular, smug, and narcissistic" (2011). James Wood is also critical, saying that "the novel struggles to escape an old-fashioned, period feel (and) is randy for antique" (2011).

Much critical attention has been paid to the language of the novel. Matthew Todd is enthusiastic when he describes "Hollinghurst's slightly formal, very controlled, deeply English way of writing (which) is perfectly suited to the Edwardian era" (2011). Hollinghurst's writing has been praised for balance and precision; however, Wood criticises *The Stranger's Child*'s stylistic antiquarianism and Jamesian decorum (calling it "fossicking in fustian") as well as excessive use of repetitive patterns which aims at beauty and harmony, but results in "making everything sound like everything else" (Krishna). Wood also accuses *The Stranger's Child* of being duplicitous of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (2011), but what he considers to be the novel's weakness may, in fact, be the key to unravelling its greatest strength. *The Remains of the Day* "focuses on English characters residing on English soil" (Shaffer 1998: 4), and the question of English identity and of Englishness is one of the book's major concerns. Ishiguro himself, however, calls the book "more English than the English" and in an interview admits that the kind of England he creates in *The Remains of the Day* is "not an England that (he) believes ever existed" because in the novel he tries to "rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England" (Shaffer 88).

Like *The Remains of the Day*, Hollinghurst's novel brilliantly shows how the essence of Englishness is an imaginary England, idealized, and anachronistic. This brings us to the second understanding of Englishness as a state of mind characterised by nostalgia, inherently tainted with a feeling of decline and irreparable loss, as well as a struggle to reconcile tradition with modernity. Todd comments on *The Stranger's Child*: "From the garden parties, to the boarding schools, Hollinghurst evokes an almost clichéd England [...]. Perhaps I'm just projecting my ideal image of 'England,' but there is something here that really draws you in." Hollinghurst consciously paints a very specific image of England, which is appealing and at the same time reveals its own falsity. One can say that distance and irony, the stylistic tokens of Englishness, are here applied to lampoon Englishness itself. This Englishness is epitomized by Cecil Valance, whose poetic talent is "as nostalgic and overblown as the turreted Victorian pile he stands to inherit" and whose poems "would hardly have triumphed over the depredations of time" (Shulman 2011). Indeed, several characters in the novel openly admit they do not make much of Cecil's poems. The mere trick of Hollinghurst's choice of a minor poet as an epitome of Englishness shows the author's irony.

Hollinghurst's pastiche is very subtle, and it may be hard to tell if the author is serious in his enchantment with the English pastoral which he describes. However, one can identify passages showing how Hollinghurst distances himself from the clichéd eulogy of English landscapes. As counterweight to the pastoral depictions of pre-war English estates, he gives the following description of a walk in the countryside: "A steady increase in the mud in the lane, and round a right-angled bend was the entrance to the farmyard, a concrete platform for the milk-churns at the gate, and beyond it a glistening quagmire of cow-shit stretching away to the open doors of a corrugated-iron barn" (487).

If *The Stranger's Child* does not trade in easy nostalgia, it definitely explores the theme of deterioration and decline. Both houses central to the story have been lost by their families: Corley Court

has become a school, and Two Acres is neglected and abandoned. This fact, along with the appropriation of their history and heritage by Paul Bryant, "a minor literary schemer, relentless, intrusive, and duplicitous" (Wood 2011), is a metaphor of the diminishing greatness of Great Britain over the course of the twentieth century. During his quest to retrace Cecil's history, Bryant manages to find Two Acres. He tramps around the grounds of the empty house, at once sleuth and vandal, and even pisses in its garden. The decline is also apparent when Paul discovers the house where Daphne, who grew up in Two Acres, lives in her late eighties. The place is "a decrepit-looking bungalow" with a "neglected garden, the grass tall and green in the roof-gutters, the dead climbing rose left swaying over the porch, an old Renault 12 with a rusty dent in the offside wing and green moss growing along the rubber sills of the windows" (470). Inside, Paul is shocked to find Daphne sitting in a depressing, shabby room filled with the smell of burnt dust and an extreme chaos of junk. This image is contrasted with an elegant, retouched photograph of Daphne put on the cover of her autobiography which Paul examines on the way to her house. By juxtaposing these two representations of Daphne, not only does Hollinghurst give evidence of the decline of the upper classes but also, in more general terms, denounces a futile effort to keep up appearances and to reconcile a romantic vision anchored in the past with the blunt reality of the present.

The inadequacy of anachronistic representations of Englishness is the key concern for all those who wish to reconcile a coherent notion of English national identity with modernity. In his study on Englishness, David Gervais notes: "'Englishness' is only an interesting subject if we still […] have trouble in pinning it down. […] 'England' is too large and too various to be a fixed concept. It has changed so fast in our time that it is hard to be sure, at any given moment, which England is in question, its present or its past" (1993: 274-5). The struggle – and potential failure – to renew the concept of Englishness could also be observed in Britain's recent political life.[3] A persistent difficulty to combine modernity and a nostalgic attachment to tokens of the past may therefore constitute a key feature of modern Englishness. Christopher Lane sums up this melancholia by saying "Britain's repetition of commemorative nostalgia signifies conservative blockage, not cultural process" (1995: 232).

In *The Stranger's Child*, Hollinghurst introduces the theme of conflict between modernity and the past by means of a metaphor. The Victorian edifice of Corley Hall represents everything that progressive Englishmen would like to get rid of, and conservative or nostalgic Englishmen cherish and wish to preserve. Already in the 1920s, Dudley Valance, the brother of late Cecil, wishes to redecorate the house while his mother and Daphne (now his wife) oppose these ideas. Dudley states firmly that the place is gloomy and that "a lot of the best people nowadays are getting rid of these Victorian absurdities" (128), such as the fireplace, "designed like a castle, with battlements instead of a mantelpiece and turrets on either side, each of which had a tiny window, with shutters that opened and closed" (113). This element of décor is subject of sarcastic criticism from the designer set to refurbish the hall, nevertheless young Daphne admits to herself, "it was indeed hard to defend, except

3 After the 1997 general election victory of New Labour, the Department of National Heritage was renamed the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, "a symbol that we mean to look forward, not back," in the words of Tony Blair (Worpole 2001: 235). However, Ken Worpole notices how Labour's election cultural manifesto "managed to squeeze every technocratic buzzword into the title, but inside was prefaced by a very old-fashioned morally improving epigram by (John) Ruskin" (242).

by saying foolishly that one loved it" (113). Daphne nurses similar feelings towards a massive oak table standing right in the middle of the same room: "functionless, unwieldy, an obstacle to anyone who crossed the room, the table had a firm place in Daphne's happiness, from which she feared it was about to be prised by force" (113). Such conflicts – combining matters of rationality, taste, and emotions – seem irresolvable and prevailing.

Through the history of Corley Hall, Hollinghurst shows how the past is embedded in the present, and sometimes even haunts the present. In the third part of the book, which takes place in the late 1960s, Paul Bryant is shown around Corley Hall converted now into a boarding-school, and finds there has been a flood due to a bath overflowing. The water soaked through the floor, accumulated above the suspended 1920s ceiling, and finally crashed down in a mass of plaster into the room below. The accident reveals parts of the original Victorian ceiling which is annoying for the Headmaster and fascinating for Peter Rowe (Paul's companion and a music teacher in Corley Hall). While Peter wishes to admire the ceiling, the Headmaster is only concerned about "getting the thing patched up by Saturday (because) when Sir Dudley Valance covered it up he knew exactly what he was doing" (344-45). Then, Peter and Paul climb on a scaffold to find an unexpected richly decorated attic which to Peter seemed like "a ruined pleasure palace, or burial chamber long since pillaged" (345). Hollinghurst's suggestive use of vocabulary hints at ideas of past greatness, loss and death as well as debauchery and artifice. Although hidden under a neat, white layer of plaster, the 19th century heritage has not lost its ambiguous lure; exciting to some, horrific to others.

Efforts to revise the traditional understanding of Englishness may come to different ends and for several writers redefining Englishness becomes a subversive, empowering and democratising act. In *The Revisions of Englishness*, John McLeod notes that "the questioning of received representations for the purposes of dissent and change (does) not constitute a demolition of tradition. Revision […] is not concerned with fully dismantling, dispatching or discarding Englishness" (2004: 9). One of the social transformations which, according to McLeod, impacted upon domestic notions of Englishness, was the sexual revolution of the 1960s and "the beginning of an end to the social stigmatisation of gay, lesbian and bisexual people" (4). *The Stranger's Child* is an important contribution to the redefinition of Englishness from the non-heterosexual perspective.

Alan Hollinghurst has always been interested in writing about an England in the times before gay culture became possible.[4] *The Stranger's Child* is the opus magnum of his research. It retraces one hundred years of evolution of gay expression and the place and status of homosexuality in English society. The major thread of *The Stranger's Child* is "the gay subject being something completely concealed and then emerging, through time" (Ramaswamy 2011). Both Part 1 and 2 of the book take place in the first quarter of the 20th century and depict a secret furtive relationship between George and Cecil, which would be "unmentionable in polite society" (Lawrence 2012). Part 3 talks about an affair between Paul Bryant and Peter Rowe, which happens in the late 1960s, a period marked by two major events for gay culture in England. Firstly, 1967 saw the passage of the Sexual Offences Act which revoked the previous law criminalising homosexuality. The Act was an aftermath of the 1957 Wolfenden report which recommended that "homosexual behaviour be-

4 Hollinghurst's début novel *The Swimming-Pool Library* confronted the sexual freedom of the late 1980s with the unspeakable homoerotic experiences of the early twentieth century; the author's Oxford MLitt dissertation dealt with three gay novelists born in the 19th century (L.P. Hartley, E. M. Forster, and Ronald Firbank).

tween consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence." The second important event was the publication of Michael Holroyd's book on the life of Lytton Strachey, which was, in Hollinghurst's own words: "the first biography which really wrote fully and openly about the private life of a gay writer, again, just in that crucial year of 1967, the book which somehow sensed the way things were going to go" (Champion 2011). The fifth and final part of Hollinghurst's novel closes with a scene of Peter Rowe's memorial service, where Peter's former partner is one of the speakers, and where Paul Bryant also arrives with his partner, Bobby, their same-sex relationship being officially recognised by a civil union.

Matthew Todd notices, "Hollinghurst manages to remind us just how far the gay rights movement has brought us in just under one hundred years." Hollinghurst achieves his aim in a specific way: his book is not a historical account of social changes but the above mentioned issues pop up, as if by chance, in disobliging conversations the characters have, and many things are hinted at but not thoroughly discussed. The pretext to this venture is a biography of Cecil Valance, on which Paul Bryant is working in Part 4 of *The Stranger's Child*, taking place in 1980. John Wood states that:

> The real subject of Paul's biography, as is the real subject of Hollinghurst's novel, is the hidden homosexuality of this now idealized literary representative. […] Hollinghurst's own project in this novel is a similar kind of outing—the retrieval of a buried erotic life. Hollinghurst's best, most delicate writing in this book circles around repressed and suppressed gay experience. Behind Valance's official literary renown is another, much more fugitive existence, and both Hollinghurst and Bryant, in their different ways, want to track it down. In this sense, *The Stranger's Child* offers, really, an unofficial history of twentieth-century gay life. (2011)

One can find an example of such delicate but revealing writing in the passage when George meditates over Cecil's statue in Corley Court's chapel. George remembers Cecil's hands, "the heat of Cecil, the hair-raising beauty of his skin, of his warm waist under his shirt, and the trail of rough curls leading down from his waist" (155). He imagines what would happen if they could meet one day in the future; however, he is fully aware of the constraints of their epoch which would make their reunion impossible: "Had Cecil lived, he would have married, inherited, sired children. It would have been strange, in some middle-aged drawing room, to have stood on the hearthrug with Sir Cecil, in blank disavowal of their mad sodomitical past" (155). The reader learns what George's contemporaries were never to discover: that the praised love poem was written not for his sister Daphne but for himself. George is amused that the poem has its secret but is "sadly reassured by the fact that it could never be told. There were parts of it unpublished, unpublishable, that Cecil had read to him – now lost forever, probably. The English idyll had its secret paragraphs, priapic figures in the trees and bushes" (159). By introducing the homosexual theme, *The Stranger's Child* gives voice to the unspoken and enlarges the scope of understanding Englishness. Hollinghurst had done this before, for example in his other novel *The Folding Star* in which one character recalls his childhood in classic elegiac form: "a memory of 'summer dusks, funny old anecdotes, old embarrassments that still made me burn, boys' cocks and kisses under the elms that had died with my boyhood's end'" (1994: 138). James Wood appreciates what he calls "Hollinghurst's gentle daring,"

the softened syntax and phrasing which make it "shamelessly English" and could be mistaken for Edwardian poetry, if it weren't for the "'boy's cocks' in the middle of this elegy – boy's cocks, as it were, inserted into the pastoral bed" (2004: 64).

Hollinghurst is very consistent in his "re-gaying" of 20th-century history and the question might arise whether this is not an artificial exaggeration.[5] Nevertheless it is important to emphasize that Hollinghurst too is very critical about attaching the "gay label" to historical or literary characters. *The Stranger's Child* is not classified by critics as "an obviously gay novel" and the author admits that it is quite a relief since he has been "a bit fed up of that boxing-in tendency"; he explains: "I wanted to write more about the vagaries of sexual experience rather than sexual categories. Perhaps it was a way of getting out of the categorised idea of gay fiction to write about much more uncertain margins of sexual feeling" (Ramaswamy 2011). Hollinghurst's writing about sexual orientations is more in line with the queer theory understanding of human sexuality, which is rather fluid and cannot be pinpointed or forced into rigid frames of "0 – 1" categories. In an interview given to Stephen Moss, Hollinghurst explains, "There's a lot in *The Stranger's Child* which is rather liminal. There's quite a lot of bisexuality. One of the ideas of the book is about the unknowability or uncategorisability of human behaviour, and I was rather tempted into those ambiguous sexual areas" (2011). On the other hand, Paul Bryant's quest to prove to the world that Cecil and Dudley Valance were gay receives harsh criticism in the book. The character is denounced at the end of the novel as a rather repellent figure with an ambiguous past, a minor man of letters who gains little respect for his scandalizing writing and his excessive nosiness. This seems to be Hollinghurst's warning against too fervent a gay activism which may consist in building an artificial "gay heritage" of European history, on the basis of claims that this or that writer, painter, king or politician were gay. As Moss notes, Hollinghurst's early novels were to some extent conscious efforts to bring gay writing and gay life into the mainstream, but with *The Stranger's Child*, that phase is definitely over.

The novel revises the notion of Englishness by giving voice to homosexuality, which was present, though muffled, throughout the twentieth century. However, it can also be argued that due to its specific conditions (Victorian heritage, code of manners, tradition of all-male schools, class division, colonialism), there are features of "English" homoerotic experience which distinguish it from – for instance – French or Italian, and which the novel emphasises. While the Napoleonic Code, adopted by several European countries, decriminalised homosexuality at the beginning of the 19th century, England criminalised all sexual relations, no matter how private or quiet, between consenting adult males in 1885. This fact had several consequences. Some homosexuals fled the UK, and those who stayed had to lead a secret, underground life and run the risk of prison, public disgrace and stigmatization. As a result, homosexuals developed a certain bitterness and disappointment towards their country. This attitude can be traced in literature, for example in E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, when after a failed therapy, Maurice is advised by his doctor Lasker Jones to relocate to another country. He wonders if homosexuality will ever be acceptable in England, to which Jones replies, "I doubt it. England has always been disinclined to accept human nature" (1971:

5 Critic Sam Leith notes: "more or less every male character in the book is presented as either openly, or covertly, or thwartedly homo-sexual. You'd think, in a century-long story of two sprawling families, chance alone would supply the odd stray hetero, but you struggle to find one"; Leith concludes by saying that Hollinghurst's agenda "participates in the novel's presiding tone of arch humour" and "is nothing so earnest as a corrective" (2011).

188). Another example could be David Leavitt's novel *While England Sleeps*, set in the 1930s. The American writer claims that his novel is "among other things [...] about the hypocrisy of English attitudes toward homosexuality. [...] I became increasingly aware of the extent to which a strain of brutality, even barbarism, underlay the factitious veneer of English 'gentility', particularly where homosexuality was concerned" (Lane 1995: 231). A specific, English approach to homosexuality would therefore be characterised by decorous repression and systematic silencing of the truth.

The Stranger's Child provides several examples of such practices. In the second part of the book, we learn that Freda Sawle, mother of Daphne and George, concealed letters that Cecil had sent to her children. It is clear that the letters addressed to George contained explicit homoerotic content, yet the reader never fully seizes this fact. Hollinghurst adopts the manner of speaking about homosexuality which never dares to use the word, finding instead circumscribing expressions, such as "the unimagined yet vaguely dreaded thing" (187). Cecil talks about himself in a similar way: "I have a horrible habit, anathema to polite society, which can only decently be pursued out of doors, under cover of darkness" (26). Such linguistic practices can be compared to the typically English ironic style of expression, intellectual and polite, precise yet never outspoken. There are certain subjects which are simply not to be discussed, although, paradoxically, everybody knows about them and feels free to allude to them, provided his or her language stays vague enough.

Another example of such unspoken truths may be the homosexual atmosphere of traditional English all-male boarding-schools and universities. In his article "The Rupert Trunk," Christopher Tayler analyses Hollinghurst's allusions to that phenomenon: "George is attached to Cecil 'in the Cambridge way', someone notes. When the pair sneak off to the woods for sex, the poet calls their grapplings 'a bit of Oxford style'" (2011:9). There are several other passages in *The Stranger's Child* which hint at gay sex at schools as part of the unspoken but ever-present phenomenon. In the third part of the novel, Paul Bryant and Peter Rowe visit the school at Corley Court. As they enter its gate, "they seemed to slip the noose of the world, they entered a peculiar secret […] There was a magical mood, made out of privilege and play-acting" (341). In the darkening evening of what is described as "the near-stasis of an ideal English summer," Paul vaguely sees two boys in slippers and dressing gowns left open, running across the roof of the school, in "the inky shadow that might harbour many of them" (363). Earlier that day, Paul and Peter have sex in the woods belonging to the school but forbidden to the boys, and they joke about the opportunity to spank the boys on their bottoms if they ever found one penetrating the area. Several years later, when Paul is visiting Balliol College in Oxford, he imagines Peter there, feeling "entirely at home in the university, […] calling on a friend, some earlier lover – that was what his unselfconscious evenings had been like" (438). Paul's fantasies naturally incline towards homosexual adventures during university years.[6]

Hollinghurst employs yet another interesting technique to convey the style of conversations which silences the homosexual theme. When Paul Bryant interviews an old servant from the Sawle's house about Cecil's visit, he records the conversation on tape. Later, it turns out that parts of the interview are inaudible and, ironically, these are the parts that may have included explicit content.

6 In her book *History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939*, Florence Tamagne provides extensive analysis of what she calls 'the cult of homosexuality' fostered in English public schools in the pre-war era. See Chapter Three: "An Inversion of Values: The Cult of Homosexuality," part "Seduced in the Public Schools," (105-115).

Hollinghurst engages in a game with his readers, dropping parts of sentences where anything connected with sex might have appeared, but which also could have been rather innocent: "Did George Sawle (*inaudible*)?," "So was Cecil himself at all (*inaudible*: *fortunate?*)," "You must have done something (*inaudible*) for him? […] what did he ask you to do? (*inaudible*)... anything like that," "Did you know Daphne was (*inaudible*) with Cecil?" and so on (408-412).

Finally, an important aspect of what Hollinghurst calls "the honoured quaintness of being English" is the unique position that the upper-classes held, and to an extent still hold, in British society (Tayler 2011). When Hollinghurst comments on Cecil's "willingness" and "eagerness to sleep with anyone" (both men and women), "something that confuses the biographical picture" and "cannot be talked about at the time," he immediately adds that "Cecil is upper-class and has that extraordinary sense of entitlement to virtually everything, including sex. He has unhesitating belief in his own power and charm" (Rintoul 2011). The fact of belonging to the privileged class has great impact on one's sexual behaviours, and class relations play a significant role in homosexual relationships. George Sawle's social status was lower than Cecil's and it also shaped their relationship, leaving to Cecil most of the initiative. The homosexual desire plays an ambiguous role in blurring, yet sustaining, the status difference between members of different social groups. There are numerous literary works exploring the subject of gay relationships between members of different social classes, such as the aforementioned *Maurice by* E.M. Forster and D. Levitt's *While England Sleeps*. In the 2011 film adaptation of C. Isherwood's 1976 auto-biography *Christopher and his Kind,* the inexperienced protagonist comes to Berlin in search of pleasures which are forbidden in the 1930s England, and quickly learns from one of the characters that "one can never be able to relax sexually with a member of their own class, that an affair with one's social and intellectual equal is impossible" after which he hears that he is "in the right city, quite the place to let his hair down with some eager young prol" (0:14:30). The subject of inequality also concerns skin colour, and Britain's post-colonial heritage. Homoerotic desire seems to transgress the borders separating characters of African and English origin, nevertheless these borders stay apparent outside the bed. *The Stranger's Child* does not trade much in interracial relationships, it is only at the end of the book that the reader learns that Peter Rowe has been in a long-term relationship with a black man, Desmond. He is the only black speaker at Peter's memorial service in 2008, and his audience is generally sympathetic and supportive, although some people seem flustered or must make an effort in order not to look startled.[7]

Englishness is a troublesome term and its meaning has been shifting along with social, cultural and political changes which have occurred in Britain over the last one hundred years. *The Stranger's Child* gives account of these changes and contributes to redefining Englishness from the contemporary perspective. This involves ironic distancing from the stereotypes of the past glory of the British Empire, revealing aspects of English history and lifestyles which had not been included in official accounts, giving voice to racial and sexual minorities which now constitute the body of the English nation, and finally, attempting to negotiate the tensions between concurrent visions of England, one

7 This theme is more developed in other Hollinghurst's novels; in an analysis of *The Swimming Pool Library* David Alderson notes that the aristocratic main characters' love affairs with black men reflect "the kind of desire which dominates much of the novel – that is, a flight from respectable Englishness in search of exotic pleasures" (2000: 32).

anchored in traditions, and the other, soaring to modernity. Last but not least, the novel provides material for analysis of interdependences between specific conditioning of the English context and evolution of homosexual identities.

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Celem artykułu jest pokazanie, jak tradycyjne pojęcie angielskości ulega przedefiniowaniu w powieści Alana Hollinghursta *Obce dziecko*. Jej styl i zakres tematyczny nawiązują do typowo angielskiego kanonu powieściowego, wobec którego autor zachowuje jednak ironiczny dystans. Hollinghurst pokazuje także, że doświadczenie homoseksualne jest nieodłącznym składnikiem angielskiej kultury XX wieku, a specyficzność angielskich przekonań i postaw wobec homoseksualizmu wynika z lokalnych uwarunkowań społeczno-historycznych.