



Alan Turing: A retrospective - Audio

Alan Turing reflections on his personal life

Introduction:

Mathematician and code breaker Alan Turing has been described as the father of computer science but his personal life was fraught with tragedy. On the centenary of Alan Turing's birth Professor Timothy Chappell from The Open University reflects on Turing's personal life within the context of the society in which he lived.

Timothy Chappell

Alan Turing was born in what was then British India on June the 23rd 1912, he had a fairly ordinary upbringing first in India and then in Britain at Sherborne school. He was an undergraduate at Cambridge at King's College. He went to Princeton on a prize fellowship before the war. During the Second World War he worked as a civil servant, after the war he was employed by the University of Manchester, and he died in Manchester in 1954

That Alan Turing was not quite your average Englishman or your average public schoolboy was already evident from an early age. He was the kind of person who was interested by mechanical problems, by logical problems, by mathematical problems. He wasn't at all interested in what was then the dominant part of the public school syllabus which was about Latin and Greek and about the appreciation of ancient poetry and indeed the writing of ancient poetry. He fell in love with another schoolboy called Christopher Morcom and this was Turing's first love, like all his other loves during his life it was a love for someone of his own sex and this of course was not at all the way that people were supposed to behave at the time. It was something that Turing was secretive about, it was also something that caused him grave emotional distress because Christopher Morcom died suddenly of an infection contracted from infected milk and Alan Turing found himself bereft for the first time of somebody that he loved. The episode had an enduring influence on his life, it meant that Turing was no longer able to take seriously the ideas which pervaded the public school environment around him, the ideas of religion and of spirituality and of another life beyond this life another world beyond this world.

Turing went from Sherborne school to King's College Cambridge an environment in many ways perfectly designed to receive him. King's College Cambridge at the time in the late 1930's was the world's centre for a certain kind of outlook, the kind of outlook which is visible in what we know call the Bloomsbury Group in writers like Virginia Woolf and E.M Forster and in thinkers like Bertrand Russell G.E. Moore. Cutting away from all the frills and the gothic

impertinences of the Victorian past, the Bloomsbury approach was to go direct to the heart of the problem and to treat it with sincerity and authenticity and without looking backwards. So Turing found himself in an environment where the simple ability to look straight and clearly at a problem, to reduce it to its simplest elements and to answer it in the simplest possible terms was a virtue which was prized above all else. And that undoubtedly was Turing's greatest gift, he was someone who could cut to the heart of the matter, he was someone who could give an apparently naive answer to a complex question and show how that problem yielded to the simple approach. Turing embraced King's College and King's College embraced Turing.

Turing became engaged during his time at Bletchley Park, engaged to be married but something made him resist. He was open to his fiancé about his own homosexuality she was unfazed about this, Turing was not so unfazed that he thought he could go on with it, Turing withdrew from the relationship.

In employment after the war in the new computing department at the University of Manchester, Turing sought new ways to deal with the enigma of his own personality. He became someone who was quite prepared to look up and down Oxford road in Manchester for quick liaisons with members of his own sex, and there was a sense in which Turing in doing this was doing no more or no less than many other people have done before or since. There was also a sense in which what he was doing displayed what the government at the time might well have viewed as a dangerous naivety. 'Wars breed permissiveness in morals' as the writer T.H White once remarked. This certainly happened during the Second World War in society at large, perhaps though it's hard to tell it happened it Turing's life to. Whatever the truth about that may be, it's equally certain that after the war there was something of a moral backlash.

Britain in 1950 was a society in recoil from the permissiveness of the Second World War. It was a society in the grip of the Cold War, the new war against an unknown foe and it was a society closely associated with what was going on in America at the time which was of course McCarthyism. Senator Joe McCarthy and his followers were keen to stamp out all un-American activities British intelligence was now closely linked with American intelligence and it remained the case that Alan Turing had in his head crucial classified information about how Britain had fought and won the Second World War. Information that could hardly fail to be relevant in the new struggle against the new threat from the east; Stalin's Soviet Russia. Churchill's civil service headed by Sir Stewart Menzies was keen to ensure not exactly that un-American activities should be stamped out but at any rate the Britain's security should not be compromised by communists and homosexuals, homosexual activity was at the time a criminal offence. What Turing was engaging in was a kind of activity which would probably be viewed as a security risk even today. In 1951 Alan Turing was having a fling with a young man aged 19 called Arnold Murray, Arnold Murray had friends who were inclined to a little

burglary. It seems that Murray tipped them off that Turing's house in Winslow was something of a soft target. Turing found his house burgled, reported the burglary to the police and told the police about his suspicions about who might have done it having himself apparently some reason to doubt Arnold Murray. The police inquired further, how did Turing know Arnold Murray, Turing with a kind of self destructive naivety was completely frank about how he knew Arnold Murray and about what the nature of his relationship was. To Turing's astonishment the police started investigating him, he became the subject of their inquiries rather than the burglary to his house which had happened. Turing was prosecuted for homosexual offences and found guilty. In letters and conversation Turing seems to have made light of his conviction and of the rather grim options that he was confronted with by the judge which were estrogen treatment, what is sometimes called chemical castration or else prison. Turing opted for the Estrogen treatment.

It's hard not to believe that wasn't greatly disturbed by all this, for the remainder of his life he was undergoing the estrogen treatment, the chemical castration and the rest of his life was not that long. Turing had lost his security clearance he was now officially regarded as a security risk by MI5 and this changed the nature of his work.

Turing's acquaintance the famous Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein liked to relax by going to the cinema in Cambridge and watching western movies. Alan Turing himself was rather fond of the movies of Disney, in particular he was fond of the famous 1930's movie 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves'. He would recite with glee the famous scene from that film where Snow White's evil enemy, the wicked queen douses the apple in poison which she intends Snow White to find and to eat from. On the 7th of June 1954 Alan Turing was found dead in his bed, in Manchester with next to his bed, a bite removed from it – an apple which had been doused in cyanide. It's possible that as it's sometimes said today he had been driven to despair by the way that he had been persecuted for his own homosexual lifestyle. It's possible also that the treatment with estrogen, had led him as estrogen hormone treatment sometimes does into violent mood swings and that in one of those violent mood swings he had gone so far as to take his own life. What is certain is that that's how he died and that thus the life of one of the most brilliant mathematicians in the world in the 20th Century came to an end.