

Little Monsters: Anxiety, Austerity and the Monstrous Child in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*  
(Progressive Connexions Conference 2019)

**SLIDE 2 Introduction:**

- [CLOSE READING OF TABLE SCENE]

I wanted to start with an analysis of the appearance of a monster. In this passage the matriarch of Lovatt family, Harriet, is staring into the reflective surface of her dining table, reminiscing about the family life she had in decades passed. In contrast to her memories of her 'new babies' and 'laughing small children', the entrance of Ben, the novel's unplanned eponymous fifth child, brings with him not the unequivocal innocence and positivity conventionally associated with the figure of the child, but an obliterating monstrosity which wipes out images of plenty and familial sociality.

- [NOVEL SUMMARY]

*The Fifth Child*, published in 1988, tells the story of David and Harriet Lovatt, a middle-class couple who reject the liberal sexual and social mores of the nineteen-sixties in favour of a conservative, traditionalist approach to their family life. The couple are determined to have a large family, of at least six children, regardless of their own financial, physical and emotional resources, but this dream is destroyed by the arrival of Ben, the 'fifth child', whose 'monstrosity' annihilates the family idyll.

- [THESIS STATEMENT]

Through a reading of the novel which understands Ben as a monster who articulates the profound anxieties around lack and scarcity which drive and are perpetuated by ideas of austerity, both as a concept and a political and economic policy, this paper considers how, in moments when austerity characterises the political landscape and dominates the social imaginary, the figure of the child takes on an ambivalent quality, an ambivalence which when rendered in literary and cultural works finds its expression in monstrosity.

**Cultural and Political Contexts:**

- Before embarking on my close reading of Lessing's novel, it's necessary to map the political and cultural context it emerges from contributes to and critiques.

**SLIDE 3 Political and Economic Context**

- [THATCHERISM, HAYEK AND INDIVIDUAL RESTRAINT]

The period during which *The Fifth Child* was written, and is set, was an era that saw the tenor of the conversation around the economy change radically in the run up to and election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. Thatcherite economic

policy was significantly shaped by the thinking of Friedrich Hayek. Hayek's economic philosophy was underpinned by an emphasis on austerity. To quote Schui:

'Periods of austerity were central to Hayek's vision: in his view, a small state was always desirable, but in particular in times of crisis governments had to show restraint and abstain from additional consumption and investment.[. . .] Private individuals, too, needed to exercise restraint.'

Hayek crucially implicates the decisions of the private individual in the praxis of austerity, and before going further it is worth interrogating the term to fully.

#### **SLIDE 4 What is Austerity?**

- Austerity is both a government spending strategy and a broader moral, ethical and philosophical idea whose origins are centuries old **out**. From a broader conversation about the benefits of limiting consumption, austerity came to comprise an economic strategy, the mechanisms of which are not neatly contained within governmental finance decisions but bleed out into attitudes towards consumption generally. As Schui states: '[a]usterity policies have many facets but ultimately they are about abstinence from consumption.' This abstinence has been understood to apply to personal as well as governmental decisions as to how resources of all kinds are consumed

#### **SLIDE 5 Reproductive Behaviour**

- As such, reproductive behavior was implicated in the logic and remit of austerity as ideology and policy, and reproductive decisions are repositioned as economic decisions. The period with which Lessing's novel is concerned saw attitudes to reproduction and family size radically shift.

#### **SLIDE 6 The Pill**

- Partly this was due to the introduction and widespread take up of the Pill as a reliable method of contraception from the 1960s onwards, allowing for a radical decoupling of heterosexual sex and reproduction. As Hera Cook puts it: 'The availability of the Pill then precipitated a transformation in sexual mores. The public debate and legislative changes generated by women's demand for the new female-controlled methods and for abortion resulted in a huge increase in the availability and acceptability of all methods of birth control.'

#### **SLIDE 7 The rise of the Pill as represented in the Fifth Child**

- In Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, David and Harriet Lovatt are positioned in opposition to these changing trends in sexual and reproductive behavior. They eschew both the expansion of the acceptability of pre-marital sex, and multiple sexual partners and the use of any

contraceptive device or medication whatsoever, saving their particular disdain for the contraceptive du jour, the Pill.

### **SLIDE 8 Family Size**

- All of these changes in heterosexual behaviour took place against a backdrop of declining birth rates and crucially reductions in family size. At the same time anxieties about population growth in the West were reaching new heights with newspapers referring to a 'Population Bomb' which threatened the world.

### **SLIDE 9 Reproductive Behaviours as Economic Behaviours**

- Cook's assessment of the social attitude towards the use of birth control and the desirability of a reduced family size points us towards two conclusions with regards to the economic climate during the Thatcher era that produces Lessing's work:

- 1) Economics are inextricably tied to moral values and beliefs in all spheres of life,
- 2) austerity, periods of which underpin Hayek's economic vision, must be enacted by the individual *and* the State.

Nowhere is this more sharply drawn than in analyses of child bearing and population size as children come to be understood as making claims on finite resources; the sexual body is inextricably tied to the body economic.

### **SLIDE 10 Reproductive Behaviours as Economic Behaviours in *The Fifth Child***

- From the opening moments of the *The Fifth Child*, economics and the reproductive body are repeatedly tied together. Rather than ask about the practical or emotional consequences of a child Harriet's first question following their sexual encounter in their new house is 'how are we going to pay for it all if I am pregnant?' (p. 11). Lessing continues to emphasize this connection between bodies and resources through her language choices when discussing David and Harriet's financial situation.
- She speaks of the 'slenderness of their resources' (p. 11), 'their own frailty' (p. 11), and state that, following the discovery of Harriet's pregnancy, 'Harriet and David seemed to themselves meagre and inadequate.' These formulations muddle the corporeal and the financial, self and capital, as confirmed by Harriet's mother, Dorothy's, assessment of the couple's position: 'She knew the cost, in every way, of a family life, even a small one' (p. 15)
- So we have a political and social context in which reproductive decisions as economic decisions are repositioned as economic decisions and as such austerity, as policy and ideology, 'play[s] precisely upon the boundaries that seem to neatly delineate family from class, personal from economic, sexual from political.'

### **SLIDE 11 Cultural Context:**

- Moretti's statement regarding troubling of boundaries between family and class, personal and economic and sexual and political, quoted above refers not in the first instance to austerity policy but to the monster as phenomenon.
- This brings us to a second contextual element to be aware of: that the proliferation of monstrous children forms a key trend in late twentieth-century culture. As Karen J. Renner points out:

'in the second half of the twentieth-century, such [of monstrous children]begin to possess the imaginations of writers and film makers alike.'

Manifestations of this motif rapidly gathered pace from the 1950s onwards and reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **SLIDE 12 Examples of Monstrous Children in Culture**

- A quick glance at the cultural landscape in this period demonstrates that the popular imagination of the 1970s and 80s was a fertile breeding ground for little monsters of various kinds.

### **SLIDE 13 Lennard Quotation**

- As Lennard points out: '[c]onceptualizations of the child as innocent circulate so powerfully and without critique as to be rendered "natural."' Lennard articulates how 'the meanings that are projected onto children, and which they seem to physically evidence, are inevitably exposed to horrifying and sensational contradiction' by the figure of the monstrous or evil child. This contradiction becomes particularly powerful when it is orchestrated in the context of shifting ideological investments in children of the kind which were taking place in Britain in the 1970s and 80s

### **Summary of Context:**

- Lessing's novel is written and set in a period where the monstrous child is a key cultural motif in film and literature, and where the status of the child, particularly the child in a large family, was being contested by interlocking discourses around the need to reduce consumption (personal and governmental) which underpins austerity economics, *and* around reproductive behaviours and technologies which had the potential to facilitate the declining birth rates and smaller families desired by a political class haunted by the threat of the 'Population Bomb'
- Here, Ben emerges as a monstrous inscription of the qualities of the child which run counter to austerity's logic: demand, greed, insatiability. To that end I want to explore precisely how Lessing constructs Ben's monstrosity and the impact it has on his large family.

### **Ben as Monster**

#### **SLIDE 14 Throwbacks and Changelings: Monstrosity and Language**

- [REAL BABIES vs MONSTER BABIES] The classification of Ben as a monster occurs primarily linguistically. Harriet refers to her fourth son, Paul, as 'a real baby, a real little child' (p. 50) while David understands Ben as distinct from his first four 'real' children. (p. 90)
- This sustained refusal of Ben's status as human is continued in the words which are deemed meaningful to describe him. Ben is not only referred to, and to a degree understood as a changeling, but also repeatedly spoken of as a 'Neanderthal' (p. 53), a 'creature' (p. 58), 'a dwarf' (p. 56), 'inhuman', a 'savage thing' (p. 42), a 'phantom' (p. 41), a 'chimera' (p. 42), 'the enemy' (p. 41) a 'troll or a goblin'. (p. 49).

#### **SLIDE 15 Naming and Monstrosity**

- Moreover, the use of Ben's name in the novel is used in opposition to the wealth of monstrous definitions of him, is a way of insisting, not on Ben's status as human, but upon his conforming to human standards of behaviour and conduct. Nowhere is this complex act of naming-as-humanising more striking than in an instance in the latter part of the novel. Here, Harriet is searching for her son and finds him in the attic of the house. Clearly, Ben's status as monster is in part conjectured and confirmed through a play with language. Ben's 'monstrosity' is not merely a linguistic imposition but also inscribed through his body and behaviour.

#### **SLIDE 16 'Difference made flesh': Monstrous Corporeality**

- Ben's physicality is presented in the novel, almost from conception onwards, as insistently non-normative. Throughout Harriet's pregnancy Ben is experienced as growing too fast and being too strong to be an ordinary child. She feels that the foetus 'is poisoning her' (p. 32) and experiences the pregnancy in such a way that she fears the baby will destroy her body. The emphasis on Ben's physical otherness continues after his birth and is inflected in such a way as to refute any ambivalence regarding Ben's non-human status. As a new born, the narrator states '[h]e did not look like a baby at all.' (p. 49) This is particularly striking in the depiction of him as a newborn where Lessing's description of Ben's eyes which contradict a number of biological facts. Ben's eyes, in the moments after his birth, are described as 'focused greeny-yellow eyes, like lumps of soapstone.' (p. 49) New born babies cannot focus instantly as their vision is still blurry and can only make out light and shapes. Likewise, the eyes of Caucasian new-born babies are always dark blue, settling into their final colour over the first months. Within the realist framework of the book this breaks with biological precedent, preventing Ben's status as monster being positioned wholly as the product of paranoid parental fantasy or ableist discrimination.

#### **SLIDE 17 Monstrous Acts**

- The label of 'monster' is still affixed to humans who have committed the most serious, violent crimes. From an extremely young age Ben displays destructive, violent and at times murderous impulses. He strangles a visitor's dog and the Lovatt's cat, and attempts to kill garden birds and other visiting pets. When only an infant he badly sprains his brother, Paul's wrist and indeed later in the novel tries to strangle him.

### SLIDE 18 Monsters and Emotional Excess

- Barbara Almond contends that 'our real fear of monsters has to do with their emotional excesses— their out-of-control, driven behaviors that make us feel they have no concern for or connection to other human beings.' Certainly in the case of Lessing's novel, what pushes Ben's behaviour into the realm of the monstrous is that Ben is described to do these things deliberately and maliciously, and experiences no remorse.
- When a very small baby he is described biting Harriet. Having toppled an older school fellow to the ground, bitten her and deliberately snapped her arm, Ben is observed by his headmistress not to 'seem remorseful in anyway.' (p. 101) Certainly Harriet's sense of Ben's monstrosity, and by extension the reader's, is underpinned by her inability to understand Ben's range of emotions which are dominated by rage and malice, and after his time in a psychiatric institution, fear. One of the most striking elements of Ben's construction is his apparent inability to feel empathy, indeed his parroting of 'Poor Ben' which he has heard said about him reinforces this, in its hollow, affectless repetition of the initial empathetic utterance.
- Having established *how* Ben is understood as monstrous it becomes possible to assess what *function* his presence in the narrative performs. If, as Halberstam suggests, 'the return of monsters is always economic', then what 'economic' function is this monstrous child performing within the cultural milieu of the 1970s and 80s?

### SLIDE 19 Monstrous Appetites and Threats to Plenty

- Above I outlined how the 1970s and 80s in the Britain and elsewhere was characterised by an emphasis on austerity as ideology and policy, and a lauding of abstinence, both personal and governmental. As Samuel puts it, Thatcher's policies emerged from an apparent desire to re-capture 'a lost Eden [one] in which resources were scarce and careful husbandry was needed to ensure survival.' This emphasis was accompanied by a growing sense of certain children as a resource-hungry product, born of impulses which could, now that contraception was reliably and readily available, have been controlled. Ben is constructed in such a way as to exaggerate the insatiability associated with infants, exploiting the anxieties around scarcity and lack with which austerity engages and giving them monstrous form.

### SLIDE 20 Ben's Appetites

- Ben's own monstrously insatiable appetites register even before his birth, in Harriet's appetite during her pregnancy which frightens and shames her while As a newborn, Ben

eats voraciously, hurting his mother in the process, at points deliberately and even his first words are in the service of gaining food. It is not only the Ben's *hunger* for conventional food which possesses a monstrous insatiability. His *eating habits* transgress normal boundaries of acceptability, for example when Harriet finds him eating a raw chicken:

### **SLIDE 21 Ben's Hunger Curbing Other's Consumption**

- However, if Ben's appetites are insatiable and socially unacceptable, he also acts paradoxically to curb the Lovatt's own consumption, as expressed in their excessive hospitality and their insistence on having a large family despite the inability of their financial and personal resources to support that family. I want to explore this final aspect of Ben's monstrous functioning through a juxtaposition of Lessing's novel and Robert Malthus' (perhaps the most famous theorist of a relationship between reproduction and economics) 'The Myth of the Feast'

### **SLIDE 22 Introducing the Myth of the Feast**

- Robert Malthus' 'myth of the feast' is an arresting paragraph in the 1803 edition of 'An Essay on the Principle of Population' in which he uses a hospitality metaphor - specifically the image of a plentiful feast - to argue for why population control is vital.

### **SLIDE 23 'provision for all – numerous claimants'**

- He begins '[t]he report of a provision for all that come, fills the hall with numerous claimants.' This opening image is present in Lessing's construction of the Lovatt's domestic life. The home the Lovatt's create is capable of welcoming numerous guests, with the description of the enormous kitchen table which can seat up to twenty people and the chairs that stand against the wall 'waiting for guests and still unborn people' (p. 15) being powerfully symbolic of the Lovatt's fetishisation of abundance and plenty, both of people and the resources they require.

### **SLIDE 24 'spectacles of misery' and 'clamorous importunity'**

- The 'numerous claimants' that Malthus anticipates materialise as the Lovatt's family gatherings continue to grow in size and duration. Malthus goes on to describe how the excessive guests who come to demand a part of this hospitality ultimately exhaust it.
- As Easter approaches both Dorothy and her helper, Alice, begin to prepare for the large group of guests despite Harriet's physical and emotional resources clearly being depleted by her difficult pregnancy: Such 'spectacle[s] of misery' and 'clamorous importunity' as Malthus warns of in his essay begin to dominate the Lovatt's domestic idyll as soon as Ben is conceived.

### **SLIDE 25**

- Ultimately it is Ben's conception and arrival into the Lovatt family which brings a decisive end to the feast. Ben excludes the friends and extended family who had come to be such a burden to the Lovatt household economy. He literally frightens away the party, dispersing the excessive guests who stay so long but don't contribute enough while simultaneously embodying such a demanding presence himself.

### **SLIDE 26 Monster as Warning/Monster as Herdsman**

- In one sense then, Ben functions according to the understanding of the monster as a warning. As Asma puts it '[m]onster derives from the Latin word monstrum, which in turn derives from the root monere (to warn). To be a monster is to be an omen.' Ben's presence warns against unlimited hospitality, against unlimited consumption, both in the sense of the feasting the Lovatt's guests partake in but also in the sense of consumption being always already implicated in reproductive behaviour. However, he also functions in line with the idea of the monster as '[a] kind of herdsman' which 'delimits the social space through which cultural bodies may move' ensuring consumption stays within acceptable limits by ushering the Lovatt's friends and family, even their other children, away from 'the expanse of the table' (p. 129) that had once accommodated them.

### **SLIDE 27 Return to Dining Table Scene**

I want to close by returning to the Lovatt's dining table, a close reading of which reveals it as an extended metaphor for the dream of abundance and plenty which disintegrates into anxiety about scarcity and lack.

- The origin of the table as 'a discarded butcher's table' is significant: The table the Lovatt's eat around was originally the surface upon which meat, a resource of a highly symbolic kind, parceling out what is available, was prepared. The Lovatt's try to erase the bloody history of the table and initially in this passage it appears successful: Harriet uses this table as a surface upon which to project her memories of her and David's dream of fecundity and abundance.
- The texture of the table, physically imbued with the presence of the crowd the Lovatt's have accommodated, attests to the initial period of plenty the family experience: However, though the narrator suggests that the dream of abundant family life which Harriet sees in the table 'could accommodate no criticism or discord', its ungraspable, slippery surface, over which both fingers, and Harriet's gaze 'skate', suggests that, rather than being a receptacle of the Lovatt's initial and unsullied dream, the table rather stands for the impossibility of that dream.
- Looked at from specific angles, the table metaphorically speak to how the Lovatt's life, with all of its protective mechanisms, was undercut from the very beginning, having its origins in the filleting and parceling out of resources, and the bloody consequences of that process.



## SLIDE 28 Conclusion

- To conclude I want to examine Dominic Lennard's observation that: 'It takes little imagination to believe that fictional definitions of the child intersect with and influence public attitudes to real children.' If we take Lennard's observations seriously the implications of the overtly 'monstrous' child in Lessing's novel points us towards an understanding of the consequences of austerity for the place of the child in the popular and political imaginary. The monstrosity that characterises Ben is ultimately revealed to be the cultural end point of an othering of children and adolescents that the profound anxieties around scarcity and lack generated by austerity bring about, and that austerity policy capitalises upon to justify cuts to public spending on children's services. As Lennard puts it '[t]he employment of the vocabulary of monstrosity marks a transition into what Joe Kincheloe refers to as "childbased xenophobia" (164). Lennard attests that the monstrous child is an indication of a strategic social othering of certain kinds of children, an othering which, I argue, was understood in the 1970s and 1980s as economically prudent. However, the closing lines of *The Fifth Child*, which sees Harriet imagine seeing her son in the televised coverage of a riot somewhere, scanning the crowd for one of his own kind serves as a warning that those monsters created through the functioning of politico-economic policies, inevitably affect monstrous economic returns of their own.