

# Deluded Perfection and the Realities of Motherhood:

Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*

MIKAELA KYLE

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In Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, a woman gives birth to a violent boy who strangles the family pet and tries to kill his siblings. But as Mikaela Kyle argues in "Deluded Perfection and the Realities of Motherhood," Ben is more than a monster. He awakens his parents from their dream, which is to raise a large and happy family while someone else does the housework and pays the bills. Ben disrupts this selfish and unsustainable fantasy by embodying everything that it excludes: violence, madness, anger, hunger, greed, scarcity, and fear. As Kyle argues, it is Ben's mother, Harriet, who has to bear the brunt of this disruption. Everyone else in the novel is able to distance him or herself from the monster, but Harriet cannot. Does she deserve praise or blame? Neither, argues Kyle. The lonely reality of motherhood is that Harriet cannot ignore the threat that her child embodies.

—Dr. Alice Brittan

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**D**oris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* presents perceptions of life through a lens of both fantasy and reality. There are the perceptions of individuals and societies who want to view themselves positively, using fabricated realities to blind themselves to their own flaws. In contrast, there is the perception of the mother, an individual who creates and, as a result, is incapable of rejecting reality. Lessing uses the image of reflection to expose these contrasting views of life; the physical

reflections of people's images in a pond and a reflective kitchen table, as well as a metaphorical reflection of reality through the child, Ben. The use of reflection presents individual and societal attempts to alter perceptions of the world; in doing so believe they are altering their reality. However, through Harriet's character, Lessing illustrates the way in which a mother is unable to alter her perceptions and her reality. As a mother she is unable to deny Ben's reality, which reflects her own truth; thus Harriet's character demonstrates the inescapability of truth at the crux of Lessing's novel.

Lessing's characters tend to skew their own perception of the world in order to view a reality that suits their way of life. Harriet and David Lovatt are a perfect example of this blinded view of reality. For the both the reader and the extended family, the Lovatts' desire for a large house and a large family is an unrealistic dream. To begin, the couple purchases a house whose "mortgage [...] would be beyond them. But they would manage somehow" (Lessing *Fifth Child* 14). They blind themselves to reality by taking on a task they know they cannot complete. In addition to the wish for a property that they realistically cannot afford, the Lovatts' desire to have a large family is unacceptable and unrealistic in the eyes of their extended family, representing the opinion of society at large. The Lovatts are told to "give it a rest" (34), because as Dorothy says, they "haven't thought it out" (23). Despite these realities, Harriet and David continue to believe that a large family "is what everyone wants, really, but [they]'ve just been brainwashed out of it" (35). They deny the truth of their

situation and retreat into this fabricated world where the large family is reasonable.

Despite the extended family's concern over Harriet and David's dream, they are drawn into the large house repeatedly, thus propagating this delusion by filling the house with a family. Harriet comes to realize that their home, which attracts people like the young girl Bridget who was "clinging fast to this miracle of a family" (40), was being used "for a good time, that's all" (70). Undoubtedly, these people use Harriet and David's home as a vehicle for their own enjoyment. Like Bridget, people come to the house to see themselves as part of the Lovatts' perfect fantasy. In this delusion they block out the realities and imperfections of life in order to create happiness. Harriet describes how "twenty people, thirty" people had come to the house "for feasts and enjoyment, for - family life," had crowded around her kitchen table "and been mirrored in it" (155). The reflection in the table emphasizes how the friends and extended family of the Lovatts use delusion to physically and metaphorically view themselves in a flawless reality. As Lessing says in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us - for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed" (Lessing "Nobel Prize" 11). It is through the story of this perfect family that Lessing's characters create a safe world for themselves and the people around them, even though this act involves self-deception.

When we consider how this family lives within a fantasy, we must examine the use of Ben as a child

portrayed as alien, foreign, and unnatural – an individual who appears as a fantasy himself. Emily Clark argues that when this novel is read in relation to family, “Ben is always-already understood as an object and a character who sits necessarily outside the ‘real,’” and is used to “‘break the frame’ of the cultural ideal of motherhood and the family” (Clark 177). I agree that Ben is a means for examining cultural ideals, inasmuch as his presence changes society’s view of Harriet. Nevertheless, I do not altogether agree that he is outside of reality. Ben may be described many times as a “hostile little troll” (Lessing *Fifth Child* 69), placing him in a position that seems alien. However, we must remember that this family is already outside of reality. Harriet, David, and the extended family live in an invented world they consider “their fortress, their kingdom” (30). Therefore, Ben is viewed as monstrous not because he is outside of what is real, but because he is reality imposing itself upon their fantasy. Ben is strange and unnatural because, as a representation of reality, he is the Other in a world of fabrications. Ben represents the harsh realities of Harriet and David’s dream as he reflects just what the couple have been avoiding: the excessiveness and imperfections of a lifestyle they cannot afford. Harriet even expresses the feeling that “we are being punished [...] for thinking we could be happy” (141). If this family is being punished, it is for their own blindness to reality. Fittingly, the Lovatts are punished with reality. Harriet is told that “the problem is not with Ben, but with you. You don’t like him very much” (124). Since the problem is established as lying within the

mother, it is clear that Ben is not himself flawed – rather, he displays for the family their own flaws. Harriet and the rest of the family dislike Ben because he brings this layer of reality to their fantasy. The reality he presents is far from the perfection the Lovatts have created; it is a reality full of violence, fear, and failure.

We must return to the description of Harriet’s kitchen table, in which the growing family is reflected. This table, where there are “always smiling faces, for this dream could not accommodate criticism or discord” (155), reinforces the idea that this family is protecting itself from a harsh reality by invoking a story created by their own desires. As a result of this reliance on perfect fantasy, people distance themselves from Harriet and David when “the wide shine of the table seemed to darken, and there was Ben, the alien, the destroyer” (155). It is when Ben is also reflected in the table’s surface –and the reality he brings upsets this delusion – that people no longer want to be associated with this perception of the world. The extended family runs from reflections of their reality in the same way that the girl in the fairy tale David tells to his children runs away from the reflection of the “strange girl” in the pond (56). Reflections of one’s self are important, and it is especially the reflections of imperfections that cause people to fear reality. Like the girl in the pond, reality might “reach up out of the water and pull [them] down into it” (56), dragging them out of their deluded world of perfection.

Although Lessing says in her Nobel Prize speech that “the storyteller is deep inside every one of us” (Lessing

“Nobel Prize” 11), it becomes evident in the novel that, when the fantasy that is communally built fails, the blame does not fall on all those who helped build it. Instead, in *Fifth Child*, blame is placed on mothers. Multiple times Harriet claims that people looked at her “as if [she] were a criminal! [...] even David, she believed, condemned her” (Lessing *Fifth Child* 74). Harriet struggles to understand why no one else feels any shame for bringing the force of reality into their fantasy. I argue that this shame has to do with her inability to escape motherhood. She is unable to refute her involvement in the maternal creation of Ben and the imposition of reality he represents. By disassociation, the extended family is able to escape the realities Ben presents in a way Harriet cannot. Even David is able to escape from these realities by adding more work to “his already heavy load of work, and [by] hardly ever [being] at home” (130). In addition to physically distancing himself from Ben, David is able to deny his connection to the child by claiming that Ben “certainly isn’t mine” (90). As a man, David has less evidence that he is in fact the parent of Ben, and can therefore more easily refute any involvement in the creation of the destructive force. Harriet is forced to take the blame for Ben’s effects on the family because she cannot deny her involvement in his creation. Harriet’s motherhood makes her a target of blame: she is the “horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben” (128).

As a result of Harriet’s inability to escape, I agree with Clark that Harriet’s “narrative of [Ben’s] difference, which is essential to her narrative of her own motherhood, is

understood by other characters to be indicative of Harriet's difference rather than his" (182). The blame for the invasion of reality is placed on Harriet because her motherhood creates a visible difference between her and everyone else. While the family agrees on the need to institutionalize Ben, Harriet feels the need to rescue him from the institution, because she "[can't] stand it" when she sees that "they [are] killing him" (Lessing *Fifth Child* 105, 104). David, on the other hand, like the rest of the extended family, is "careful *not* to see" what is happening to the child (105); as a result, they are able to abandon Ben and to abandon reality. In this novel, I argue that this blindness creates the "moment when the faces you are looking at are blank. Your listeners cannot hear what you are saying, there are no images in their minds to match what you are telling them" (Lessing "Nobel Prize" 2). This moment of incomprehension relates to the novel's society being unable to understand Harriet's desire to save Ben. It is because society does not have the eyes of a mother that no one but Harriet is able to confirm and express Ben's differences. Instead, everyone other than Harriet claims Ben to be "within the range of normality" (125). The others are only able to see the mother's reproductive role in the creation of her child, allowing them to blame her for his destructive presence. On the other hand, Harriet's family is unable to see why she cannot blind herself to his truth when given the opportunity. Even we as readers feel this way at times, unable to understand Harriet's protectiveness over a son who is constantly in a power struggle with her. At times, it may even seem as if Harriet

is living in a fantasy where she believes she is able to protect all of her children. The readers' confusion only emphasises the importance of Harriet's motherhood. Her motherhood does not place her in a delusion; rather, it forces her to accept the reality that Ben presents.

The idea of motherhood can inspire dreams, as it originally does for Harriet and David - the desire to create children and to raise a family. However, as this fantasy takes over and blinds the family, motherhood provides an avenue for reality to impose itself on such a delusion. Ben's imposition upon the family exposes how reality cannot be completely pushed aside. While society might be able to deny reality, the reflective properties of motherhood cause Harriet to be incapable of escaping reality. Hence, she is the individual who sits alone "beside the quiet soft shine of the pool that was the table" (158). The novel suggests that a child can become a reflection of a parent, and that a mother cannot deny a child as her own. It is the combination of these two factors that creates an imprisonment within the reality that Ben represents. Through this sense of entrapment, Lessing presents motherhood as the only source of true reflection and true acceptance of reality. However, by limiting truth to the mothers of the world they are made - like Harriet - into targets of misunderstanding and alienation.



Works Cited

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