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## **Fatherhood in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child***

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## **Introduction**

*The Fifth Child* is the story of David and Harriet Lovatt, a couple with traditional family values set during the 1960's. They believe in choosing marriage and a large family over successful careers and the sexual liberation which became a distinctive feature of that time. But their ideal family life is destroyed when Harriet becomes pregnant with their fifth child, Ben. Harriet believes that something is wrong with the baby she is carrying and goes through a stressful pregnancy with feelings of resentment and anger towards the foetus. When Ben is born it grows worse and neither Harriet nor anyone else in the family is able to bond with him. The story is told from the mother's point of view and the focus of the book is on the mother and Ben, and their relationship. It also thoroughly describes the mother's emotions and thoughts and the obstacles she encounters and the judgements she endures. The time in which the story takes place is a time when abnormal children were taboo and the mothers of these children became outcasts of society. Harriet describes how she feels mistreated by saying "I suppose in the old times, in primitive societies, this was how they treated a woman who'd given birth to a freak. As if it was her fault. But we are supposed to be civilized!" (74).

Since the story is narrated through the mother's point of view I will analyze the possible underlying feminist approach, since this is of great importance when it comes to understanding both the narrative form and the absence of the father's role. One consequence of the narration with the focus on the mother is that the father, David, is kept in the background and never really emerges. His relationship with Ben is non-functional, and instead of trying to improve their relationship he tries to provide for the rest of the children, both financially and emotionally, but succeeds in neither aspect. This leads to a sense of lost masculinity and identity, which further increases the division within the family.

I find it interesting how a novel that focuses on the woman not fitting into the norm of society does not leave any room for the man in the same situation. The novel only provides Harriet with an opportunity to express herself and to tell her story, but does not do the same for David. I will therefore discuss the possible reasons for this similarity between the way the father in the book is treated and the way mothers were treated by society at that time. The main focus of the essay will thus be on David and his role as a husband and a father. I want to examine how fatherhood is depicted and why there is no room for David and why he is not able to express himself. This leads to the question of point of view: to what extent does the narration through Harriet's eyes control the role of David?

There is a connection between David's role as a father and that as a husband since the strains on the relationship between him and Harriet affect the family causing greater division between them. Thus, analyzing the marriage and the decline of it will be relevant for the discussion of the change in David as a father.

I will further discuss how the loss of masculinity and the inability of providing for the family and keeping them together also affect and change David and his actions as a father.

### **The feminist approach**

As mentioned, major parts of the novel are narrated through the mother's point of view. Although a novel that focuses on the woman's perspective does not automatically make it a feminist novel, the representation of Harriet can be related to a feminist point of view. For example, by the narrator focusing on Harriet and her development throughout the book the reader learns about her background, her goals in life and her every thought and emotion. Writing some years prior to the publication of *The Fifth Child*, Holmquist explains that there is a "new feminist movement" which focuses on "social and psychological pressures experienced by women in the nuclear family", rather than "the legal aspect of marriage as [...] the old feminists" did (205). Evidently, this is exactly what the narrator does by narrating through Harriet's experiences. She faces social pressure by wanting the traditional family and not what her friends want, as will be discussed further on. And she faces psychological pressure during her pregnancy with Ben, when she is questioned by the people around her because she believes that there is something wrong with the baby.

The sense of a strong feminist voice permeates the whole novel, and it is not only the narrator that reflects the new feminist movement. Holmquist discusses the feminism of Doris Lessing, and uses Krouse to prove her point:

'The Feminism of Doris Lessing,' 1972, [...] discusses whether Doris Lessing can be considered feminist and if so what sort of feminism she represents. Krouse differentiates between 'explicit' and 'implicit' feminism and concludes that Lessing's contribution to literary feminism must be placed within the latter category. According to Krouse, Lessing shows little interest in the discrimination of women in work, education and politics, but she does give thorough analyses particularly of the destructive influence of the traditional marriage on the female psyche (24).

Using Krouse's conclusion as a foundation in analyzing the events in *The Fifth Child* it is clear that these events confirm her thesis. Although describing how the birth of Ben affects

the family on its whole, the novel strictly focuses on how Harriet experiences it. The reader sees the downfall of the family through her eyes, and gains knowledge only of how Harriet's psyche is affected throughout the story. Krouse's and Holmquist's words can be used in the interpretation that from a feminist point of view, it is the traditional marriage and being a part of a nuclear family that is to blame for Harriet's contempt towards Ben. This is because of the pressure she feels during her pregnancy with Ben, when the division of the family first can be detected. From an implicit feminism point of view, she transfers her discontent to Ben when it is in fact her traditional lifestyle that has a negative effect on her psyche. The feminist approach that is used is the foundation of the novel and is essential to have surveyed when continuing to analyze other parts of it.

### **The traditional couple**

The 1960's in Western Europe brought with it a new mentality which quickly became popular. Szreter and Fisher claim that "the 1960s [was] when the [...] idea of 'liberation' was heralded as a break from the 'repression' of the past" (384). The repression referred to is a sexual one, which becomes clear as they explain that the changes made during the sixties were within the sexual experiences of the British people:

A study of the attitudes towards, and experiences of, sex in Britain between the 1920s and 1960s will inevitably draw upon assumptions about the nature of changes associated with the 1960s and after. Indeed, [...] the period under investigation here is popularly thought of as the period 'before' the sexual revolution (364).

What was then the period before the sexual revolution? Aldgate quotes Margaret Thatcher who stated that "the movements of the sixties destroyed the Victorian virtues of self-discipline and restraint, and were the causes of the near-ruin from which [I] rescued Great Britain" (xv). Although the Victorian era came to an end when Queen Victoria passed away in 1901, the qualities Thatcher describes as Victorian virtues, seem to have lived on through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The restraint that Thatcher perceives as a virtue can be synonymous with the repression Szreter and Fisher claimed people were experiencing.

Lessing describes this new society as one in which both men and women have a desperate need for attention which is evident by the way they dress and conduct themselves. This becomes clear at parties when the women dress to be seen and the dancing that occurs is not so much out of joy as it is a way to acknowledge their presence and to seek confirmation from

the other sex (7). That need for attention and approval of others could be explained with the self-fulfilment people were now looking for. Donnelly explains how “the sixties was the age when people were preoccupied with the self - self-fulfillment, the autonomous self, the contemplative self, integrity of the self, self-adulation” (29). Thus, the biggest difference between the new mentality and that which was considered the norm before was that it was now considered alright, or even preferable, to focus on your own person instead of striving for what had been focused on before, namely family. Popenoe describes how “as a widespread cultural ideal the modern nuclear family died during the 1960s and 1970s” (16), supporting Lessing’s portrayal of the social pressure David and Harriet experience from their families when they declare that they want to have a traditional nuclear family.

With the focus shifting from the family to the “self” the sexual liberation followed as a natural consequence. According to Lewis one major change during this period “was the widespread separation of sex and marriage. Sexual activity among the young increased dramatically during the 1960s, and the increasing use of the contraceptive pill from the beginning of the 1970s strengthened this trend” (2003, 267). Thus, pre-marital sex became accepted among the younger population growing up during the decade and the concept of saving yourself for marriage became something unusual. Consequently, David and Harriet are interpreted as exceptions of their time, being described as “conservative, old-fashioned, not to say obsolescent” (7), suggesting that they are considered deviating from society and being looked upon as odd. Harriet is a virgin and does not believe in sex before marriage and neither she nor David believes in contraceptives. Again, the difference between Harriet and David and the people in their environment is emphasized when it comes to Harriet’s choice of abstinence: “the enlightened girls of now [said] to each other, ‘It must be something in her childhood that’s made her like this. Poor thing’” (10). Only a decade earlier, the roles would have been reversed.

It is not only women who cannot understand Harriet’s choice; no man she has met has understood her and her values and how “she sometimes felt herself unfortunate or deficient in some way, because the men with whom she went out for a meal or to the cinema would take her refusal as much as evidence of a pathological outlook as an ungenerous one” (10). The exception is David: he understands her and accepts her choice, which creates a strong bond between them and makes them feel that it is the two of them against the rest of the world. This perception of themselves combined with the general feeling of isolation of society make them even more certain of their dreams in life and their want to succeed. They want to prove not only to the people around them, but also to themselves, that they are able to fulfil their dreams

against the odds that others predicted would be presented by society. In discussing the traditionalism of the couple Brock states that: “Despite the two-decade span of the novel, Lessing’s protagonists in many ways constitute the arch-Thatcherite couple, committed to the nuclear family and to the domestic space as its inviolable fortress, and [...] their rejection and denial of ‘society’” (12). This interpretation is very easy to agree with: Harriet and David have traditional values from the beginning, and although their family life falls apart they still keep their values throughout the story, for instance by refusing to even mention divorce. Further, they express a strong belief that society is against them and their family values, and are eager to prove the people around them wrong.

### **The marriage**

Harriet and David decide to get married not long after having met, partly because of their shared feeling of being different than what society encourages them to be like, and partly because of their firm belief in their dreams and that they are able to obtain them if they decide that it is possible. The traits of their view on marriage can be seen in a mentality that descends from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Popenoe explains: “[t]rue love’ was thought to be a divinely endowed gift, and it was considered to be [...] the basis of a good marriage” (16). This is truly mirroring the Lovatts’ expectations of their marriage. They believe that if they encounter obstacles, these are not to be seen as a reason to get divorced, but simply as things they need to overcome together. Popenoe further states that “[m]arriage, once thought of as first and foremost a utilitarian partnership, became warmer. The overall emotional temperature of the family rose” (16). In retrospective, these statements are wildly different from those describing the sixties, but indeed very easy to apply to Harriet and David’s view on marriage and family life. Included in their fantasy of the perfect life, other than their marriage, is the perfect house which will accommodate the many children they intend to have. In order to afford the house of their dreams they need to ask David’s father for financial support. For David, who never had a good relationship with his father, this meant swallowing his pride and asking for the money, but he told himself that: “what mattered was the house and the life that would be lived in it” (18) and not how asking for help would be a sign of inadequacy.

The dream of the ideal family that Harriet and David are striving for is a result of their childhoods. Although different, their upbringings had the same impact on the two of them when it comes to their opinions about marriage. Their different experiences came to represent the best respectively the worst possible in family life. Harriet had a wonderful upbringing

which she believes she owes to her parents, who were happily married. Their marriage became the fundament for her view of what a marriage should be like, and the idea that even though trouble will appear, it is to be considered as obstacles on the way to being truly happy. David on the other hand had a miserable and lonely childhood filled with resentment towards his parents, which still lingers on. The fact that his childhood was a failure to him and that Harriet's childhood was a great one combined with the fact that David's parents were divorced whereas Harriet's stayed married leads to the interpretation that both of them associate a happy childhood with a happy marriage and an unhappy childhood with separated parents. This is yet another factor which will affect their view on their own marriage and the struggles within it, since they both feel that the strains on their relationship is better and easier to live with than a divorce, which to them would mean a separation between not only husband and wife, but of the whole family, creating a vicious circle of feelings of resentment, neglect and unhappiness.

Marwick has surveyed the attitude towards divorce in Britain from the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. He concludes that "divorce had been practically out of the question for the vast majority, partly because of social pressures, more because of expense" (246). The social pressures one could endure could be society looking at divorce in a negative way, or as one's surroundings could apply pressure because they want to see you fail, as in the case of the Lovatts. Even if they would consider getting a divorce they would thereby prove everybody right in that they did not succeed in living their dream. Also, in terms of expense, Harriet and David did not have unlimited resources of money, and would therefore probably have to be dependent upon David's father, which, at least to David, would be the ultimate humiliation. Moreover, Lewis explains that divorce was not yet an established conception during the sixties. Instead, she presents figures over how "the divorce rate increased more than six fold", between 1960 and 1990, "from 2 per 1,000 to 13 per 1,000 of the married population" (2003, 267). Considering the very low divorce rate in the sixties it is hard to imagine that Harriet and David would ever consider being part of those statistics. If divorce was not an established conception among the new liberated society of the sixties, it would certainly be considered taboo by a couple with traditional values on marriage.

During the following seven years, their first four children are born and they both feel like they have achieved their dream: "[a]nd Harriet and David exulted that they, their obstinacy, what everyone had criticized and laughed at, had succeeded in this miracle" (26-27). They feel as if they have proven people around them wrong, and that their goals in life were not unattainable or odd in any way; they were happy and real.



However, the feelings of achievement and happiness do not last for long. Shortly after giving birth to their fourth child, Harriet discovers that she is pregnant yet again, this time without it being planned or particularly wanted. The pregnancy affects Harriet differently than the others did. She withdraws from her family, creating a distance between herself and the rest: “[a]t night, David heard her moan, or whimper, but now he did not offer comfort, for it seemed that these days she did not find his arms around her any help” (49). David starts to feel powerless during the pregnancy, not only because he cannot seem to sooth Harriet, but because he cannot relate to what she is going through: “[a]nd nothing he said seemed to reach Harriet, who, he felt, was possessed, had gone right away from him, in this battle with the foetus, which he could not share” (50). David’s inability to understand Harriet during the pregnancy is something new, since they were the only ones understanding each other before. Both feel disappointed, Harriet for not being understood and David for not being able to support Harriet. After Ben’s birth the division within the family increases; Harriet is the one taking care of Ben while David and Harriet’s mother take care of the rest of the children. By spending her time with Ben and not socializing to any great extent with anyone else David sees a change in Harriet: “it was this anger, this bitterness in her that he could not handle” (63). This as opposed to the person she was before, the loving and happy Harriet that David met and fell in love with.

The children are both afraid of Ben and resent him since he is the reason for their mother’s absence, but they also resent Harriet for letting Ben destroy their lives and possibility for happiness. As a result, the three eldest children decide to go live with their grandparents and barely visit their parents. Meanwhile, the forth child needs excessive therapy, so David starts working two jobs to be able to afford his treatment and is barely at home while Harriet spends her days looking after Ben. This is an evident failure of their attempt at happiness and ideal family. Popenoe describes how “[i]n the very forces that created the modern nuclear family lay some of the roots of its decline: the over-reliance on romantic love [...] [and] the removal of fathers from many day-to-day family activities” (16). Indeed, the first explanation for the decline of the nuclear family can be applied to *The Fifth Child*. As mentioned, Harriet and David believe that since they married out of true love their problems will somehow resolve. The second point can obviously also be applied, since David resorts to his work place instead of spending time in the house with the children that are left. Soon the inhabitants of the household do not have any emotional relationship to one another.

## **Fatherhood and masculinity**

As stated before, this essay will focus on David and his role as a father. What has been discussed in the previous section will be further analyzed when discussing David's behavior as a father and the reasons behind his actions.

In the beginning of their marriage, and after the birth of their first child, David is described as a loving and caring father and husband: “[w]hen he bent to kiss her goodbye, and stroked Luke's head, it was with a fierce possessiveness that Harriet liked and understood, for it was not herself being possessed, or the baby, but happiness. His and hers” (24). Although Harriet and David are traditionalists and the roles of breadwinner versus stay-at-home mother in a sense are applied by them they both want to participate in the caring of their children. David does not want to become a man who only focuses on his career and thereby neglects his family: His dream is to raise his children the best way he can, by being there for them emotionally, supporting them in life and hopefully by being able to fund their education.

As mentioned earlier, Harriet's fifth pregnancy is not planned and she soon discovers that something is out of the ordinary. Unlike her previous pregnancies this one makes her temperamental and irritable, and the pain from the movements of the baby causes her to believe that it is an unusual baby she is carrying. She soon starts to think of the foetus like a monster or non-human. The only thing helping her to cope with her day without being paralyzed by the pain in her stomach are painkillers. She feels ashamed of the quantity she feels is necessary to use to sooth the foetus and does not want to tell David about it. Though they are both eager to preserve the ideal marriage, for Harriet keeping this a secret is vital because she does not want David to condemn her for not being able to handle her pregnancy when it is to be seen as a blessing contributing to their dream.

One of the most essential aspects of the story is that there is no real relationship between David and Ben, other than the fact that they live in the same house. An interesting fact to keep in mind is the behavior of Harriet during her pregnancy and how this can affect David. As mentioned, she sees the baby as a monster and often speaks of her worries with David, explaining how she will not be able to endure nine months in the same condition. By transferring her concerns to him, without him being able to relate to her feelings, it is possible that he feels intimidated and does not know how to act. This is supported by the fact that “[h]e had stopped putting his hand on her stomach, in the old companionable way, for what he felt there was beyond what he could manage with” (49).

Also, “[Harriet] became silent, morose, suspicious of them all and their thoughts about her” (51), and as a result she parts from the family early on, wanting to be left alone. This is a further sign of how Harriet does not want to share her thoughts and feelings with David, because she knows that he does not understand her, and instead it is David who in a sense is being pushed away. Therefore, David does not have a bond to the baby even before the birth; he is both afraid of and in a sense not allowed to create a relationship with the baby during the pregnancy since this would contradict Harriet’s perception of the baby and possibly question her perception.

When Ben is born, Harriet’s use of epithets such as “monster” and “troll” continue, and she often complains about his strength and how he cannot possibly be a normal child. Both during the pregnancy and shortly after the birth of Ben, David has not had a chance to decide for himself what he thinks of this baby, but has instead been influenced by Harriet’s experience and opinion. Therefore, no connection was ever made between David and Ben. Already during the pregnancy, it is clear that David does not feel an emotional bond with Ben, as he had done with the previous children. When discussing the relationship between fathers and their children, Jeleniewski-Seidler describes how “once the emotional distances had been created they would be very difficult to undo” (220). Applying this to the fact that David was influenced by Harriet’s negative feelings towards Ben and that she did not let him come close during the pregnancy he became emotionally distant from the start. This distance between them never disappeared, proving that what Jeleniewski-Seidler believes can indeed be applied in this situation.

As the story develops, the relationship between David and Ben disintegrates further, and as Harriet becomes the one taking care of Ben while David starts working more to be able to support the family and also focuses on the other children when he is home there is barely any communication or interaction between David and Ben. In Lupton and Barclay’s study on fatherhood they interviewed fathers and came to the conclusion that the one thing fathers find most important and rewarding is the fact that their child recognizes their face and voice and starts to smile when he or she sees or hears them (137). Ben recognizes David, but not as his father, but simply as a man who lives in the same house, and from the very beginning he is completely indifferent towards David’s existence. Thus, by applying Lupton and Barclay’s conclusion to the relationship between David and Ben, this may provide a possible answer as to why David is never able to establish a relationship with his son. It is possible that by Ben not recognizing David as his father or showing any joy towards him David starts to believe

Harriet's interpretation of Ben during the pregnancy; that something is wrong with him. Consequently, David focuses his love and devotion on his other children.

The major turning point of events concerning David's role as a father is when Harriet decides to bring back Ben from the institution he has been sent to. For David this is a tremendous betrayal, since the choice was made by Harriet without consulting him. David understands that nothing good will come from Ben's return and starts to work even more, as an escape from home. So what causes this strong reaction in David? Not only is he concerned about the children's reactions and eventually their future, but considering his traditional values one possible explanation is the fact that by Harriet bringing back Ben, and not sticking to David's decision to send him away, she defies his authority. Holmquist discusses authority in the relationship between man and woman from a feminist point of view, and states that

When the male sex role is confronted with the female in the interaction between the sexes a form of parent-child relationship is established. [...] This interaction which may at first sight seem complementary involves a hierarchy in that the male sex role behaviour implies control of the woman, whereas her function signifies adjustment to and support of the man. [...] [T]he man [...] dominates while the woman is subservient (66).

Based on Holmquist's assumption that the woman's role is to support the man and be submissive to him, this supports the conclusion that Harriet is defying David's authority by contradicting him in a decision he has made as the head of the family. Consequently, by making the decision on her own without consulting David she increases her own authority by undermining his as a man and a father. This would in its turn lead to David feeling as less of a man, hence making him feel emasculated.

Although it is easy to interpret David as a bad father for sending Ben away to be institutionalized, this action could be interpreted in another way. David does not feel that he is Ben's father, as he himself states by saying "he certainly isn't mine" (90), but he still feels a strong love towards his other children, and an urge to protect them. Nelson discusses different aspects of what is described as the Victorian father, and brings up Craik's view on the connection between fatherhood and masculinity:

Craik was still more specific: Man has nothing corresponding to woman's "abstract mother-instinct," as his love for children is limited to his own offspring. But, she noted, this very lack is an important part of masculinity: 'His very selfishness, or, call it selfism, his hardness and

masterfulness, are, in one sense, a necessity, else he would never be able to fight his way and protect those whom he is bound to protect (60).

This aspect of the traditional Victorian father confirms the interpretation of David as being a protective, masculine father instead of a monster by sending Ben away. Since David does not see Ben as his own child he, according to Craik and Nelson, is not able to feel love towards him. However, since he feels such love for those he considers to be his real children, he also feels the need to protect them from Ben, since he is the one threatening their happiness. Thus, by being the masculine, authoritative, nurturing father that he is he decides to protect the ones he loves in his family. On the contrary, although Harriet does not feel love towards Ben either, she does have something that can be linked to what Craik calls an abstract mother-instinct, since she still feels that it is wrong to send Ben away and goes out of her way to bring him back.

As pointed out, once Ben returns, the other children leave to live with their grandparents, except one who needs excessive therapy. Having him in the house together with the abnormal child and the wife who abandoned their dream of happiness for the last-mentioned makes David feel as if he has failed and does not see any use for himself in the house and spends his time at work, leading him to feel that “[h]e was now the sort of man he had once decided never to be” (135).

### **Providing for the family**

When it comes to the Lovatts’ economic situation, a clear change can be seen in the character of David. He soon realizes that he is unable to afford the house of his and Harriet’s dreams, and even though he does not want to he understands that he needs to ask his father for money in order to implement the dream life he wants with Harriet. However, receiving money to be able to buy their house is not enough in order for the two of them to live the dream. On several occasions, David needs to ask his father for financial support, and it is here the change can be seen. Just having given birth to their second child, it is revealed that they are planning on having four more, to the shock of the rest of the families. David’s father responds by saying, “[w]ell, it’s just as well I make so much money” (35), and in return “David [...] flushed and would not look at anyone” (35). This particular interaction between the two of them is of great interest when speaking in terms of authority, since it implies a deeply rooted father-son relationship. Holmquist explains how there are two different aspects of the male sex role: one being the authoritative parent and the other the child subdued by both social and

private demands (66). Thus, although David does not feel that there is a significant relationship between him and his father there is indeed one in terms of authority. It is clear that his father possesses the authoritative parental role by believing he is the one supporting the family's livelihood and speaking openly about it. Just as clear is David's role as the submissive son by his bashful reaction. Therefore, it is plausible that he feels the private demands from his father above all, but also the rest of the families, to provide for his own family himself, as an authoritative father figure would. Further, the possible social demands David feels would be similar to the private ones, given his and Harriet's decision about only having one of them working, applying pressure on him as he has the male breadwinner role.

As the story progresses, David's dislike in having to ask for money and proving himself vulnerable changes into indifference, with the mentality that the money they received were not something the initial owner would miss: "[h]e said: 'James and Jessica have so much money they wouldn't have missed three times as much. Anyway they adored doing it'" (142). Interestingly enough, it is when David can cope as a father emotionally but not financially that he feels ashamed to ask for money, but once the family has separated and his fathering, or nurturing, does not fill a function anymore he does not stay embarrassed or even grateful for his father's contributions. One possible explanation is the fact that David starts to feel the resentment he felt as a child against his father and his money, because it did not make him happy in his childhood and now it did not succeed in making his own children happy. Another explanation could be that David knows that his father does not share his view on what it means to be father. Initially, David wants to be there for his children emotionally, as a nurturer, whereas his father focuses on being there financially, as a provider. Atkinson and Blackwelder give an overview of the difference between fatherhood during the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

During the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fathers were expected to provide for their children and perhaps to bridge the gap between the home and larger society. Fathers are now expected to participate in their children's lives by providing day-to-day care, both physical and emotional. The professional literature suggests that the social definitions of the fathering role have changed from that of provider to nurturer (Debbert, 1979; Ehrenreich, 1983; Rossi, 1984) (976).

Using this information to analyze David and his father's views on fatherhood, it is possible to see a clear connection between the two and the changes that was made during the century. Although it is not stated in the story, David's father presumably grew up in that first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, given that *The Fifth Child* takes place in the sixties. He obviously manifests a

kinship with the opinion of fathers as providers, and his way of bridging the gap between the home and society was by providing his children with a good education. David, on the other hand, although working and being away from the family large parts of the day, still views fatherhood as something more than just money. At one point he states that while his mother believes that “you can only value something if you’ve experienced it, [he] is the living proof that isn’t so” (37), meaning that he values his family and the love in their home, although that was something he did not experience growing up. He further states that his room was his home growing up, and not the two houses he lived in during that time (37), implying that he took care of himself, except from a provider’s point of view. Thus, David is described as someone who strongly feels that to be a father means to be a nurturer.

However, once he feels that he is losing the family he valued so highly, his role as a father shifts dramatically, turning him into a provider rather than a nurturer. Once Ben returns home from the institution and the children leave, David decides to focus on providing for the one child he feels he has left; namely Paul, who needs expensive therapy which David is determined to pay for. He starts working two jobs to be able to pay for both therapy and education. It is possible that David feels that Paul is his last chance to make things right and if he is able to provide for him on his own, things might turn around for the better. Ironically, by being able to pay for Paul’s therapy and education but not being there for him emotionally, David starts to resemble the role of his own father, as he states that the only thing he accepted from his father was a paid education.

As time goes by, the fact that the two oldest children are not present but that Ben is serves as a constant reminder for David of the dreams he was trying to achieve, but did not succeed in fulfilling. Instead, he in a sense lost the children he believed were his own, and had to live in a house with a child he did not feel he was the father of. Losing that sense of being a father, as well as a husband, which in its turn made him feel like a man made him look for that fulfilment somewhere elsewhere. Thus, the two jobs become that much needed escape for him. Jeleniewski-Seidler states that

Many men still pay lip service to the family, but their attention and focus is often elsewhere, for it is mainly at work that men can prove themselves and show their individual success and achievements, which remain critical if you are to ‘make it as a man’ and not feel that you have somehow failed as a man (214).

Using this information in analyzing the reason as to why David chooses to devote his time in his work place instead of in his home once things start to fall apart leads to the conclusion that he is striving for something that will replace his confirmation as a man. Previously, he strongly connected his role as a husband and father to being a man, but by failing as a father when his children move away and failing as a husband in losing his loving bond with Harriet his work becomes the one thing that can give him ratification. Although he continues to live in the same home as Harriet and Ben he does indeed only pay lip service, since he is described to be there, but is hardly ever seen. Thus, in order not to give up and feel as if he has failed as a man completely his work place is his last hope.

To avoid the evident reminder of him failing as a father he focuses on work where he can still advance and feel useful. For David it is probably a question of not giving up on the entire role as a father, but to still look after the children he can financially. Cornwall explains, “[i]f certain ways of being a man are culturally valued, then asking men to abandon these identities altogether without anything of value to hold on to is clearly unreasonable” (11). David strongly identifies with the role as a father and to give up on that role entirely would contradict everything he believes in. Therefore, by giving up the hope that he would be able to care for his children emotionally henceforth he still has the value of providing for his family financially to hold on to and does not have to abandon the father role completely. Lewis describes how

In Britain, which has historically adhered to a strong male breadwinner model in terms of its social policies, more emphasis has been put on the obligation of fathers to maintain. Care has been secondary in the debate, although there has been considerable concern about the effects of father-absence on children [...]. [P]olicies affecting fathers have been concerned mainly about their role as breadwinners and about their role as carers only insofar as it can help secure their obligation to maintain (2002, 125).

All three aspects described above can be seen in the story: the fact that fathers are supposed to provide first and foremost, which is society’s view on fatherhood of that time; the fact that father-absence has an effect on children, proved by the older children leaving home to live with their grandparents and also by the fourth child needing therapy for being neglected; and thirdly, the fact that Lessing experiments in this story, describing the male character as a carer rather than a provider in the beginning.

As described above, the ability for David to support the family financially is the only thing he is left with in the end, when looking at his fathering. This becomes clear in his change of



attitude towards Harriet and their relationship when he refers to himself as a nursemaid when not being able to go to work. Yet again, the absence from work would probably give him a sense of emasculation since that is where he in the end was able to be a man.

## **Point of view**

Determining what kind of narrator is telling the story is of great importance since this will provide answers as to why David's personal thoughts and his own point of view will never emerge. However, the interpretation of the narrator will alter as the story develops. Raschke describes how *The Fifth Child* is a novel that from the beginning seems to have an "omniscient narrator who accurately records the events surrounding the Lovatt household", but how "this seemingly heterodiegetic narrative [...] is [...] destabilized by the focalization, which is subtly situated primarily in Harriet's observations and feelings" (15). Consequently, the interpretation made in the beginning that the narrator is a third-person omniscient narrator results in a narrator who is in fact a limited, subjective one. Despite posing as all-knowing, by only narrating through Harriet's experience and not the other characters the narrator in fact possesses limited information since he/she does not know the true feelings and emotions of anyone except Harriet.

Although Harriet is not the narrator, by narrating the story mostly from her point of view, this obviously makes the actual narrator into an unreliable one. Keen explains that the "plausible reasons for a narrator's unreliability include the following: psychological states, such as grief or denial; [...] simple obtuseness or limited information; dishonesty or some other kind of motivation to spin a story in a misleading way" (43). Two of these factors are possible to detect in *The Fifth Child*. Given that the narrator is anonymous, an analysis of the psychological state of the person in question is hard, if not impossible, to accomplish. However, that the narrator possesses limited information has been stated previously. Furthermore, it is possible to detect a motivation behind the narrative. By focusing on Harriet's emotions the narrator, like the author, can be described as an implicit feminist since he/she is only depicting the female personal experience of the marriage and the family, and not the male's. Thus, by narrating a larger part of the story completely through Harriet the reader can easily sympathize with her since the reader knows exactly how Harriet feels and what she goes through throughout the story. Consequently, a possible motivation behind the narration is to gain the sympathy and understanding of the reader, instead of the reader interpreting Harriet as a monster because she is incapable of loving her own child.

As explained before, implicit feminism concentrates on depicting the impact of traditional marriage and traditional family life on women, and that is exactly what the narrator does in *The Fifth Child*. If the narrator would not be subjective to Harriet's emotions, it is possible that the reader's interpretation of Harriet and her actions would be entirely different because of the expectations society has on mothers and mothers-to-be. Meyers explains:

Selflessness remains the pregnant woman's legal status. Moreover, the stereotype of feminine selflessness still thrives in the popular imagination. Any [...] mother who is not unstintingly devoted to her children is likely to be perceived as selfish and face severe social censure.

If selflessness is synonymous with pregnancy then the natural interpretation of Harriet would be that she is a selfish woman since she puts herself first when she uses sedatives to keep Ben from moving inside her, thus jeopardizing her child. Furthermore, Harriet is not devoted to Ben like she is to her other children. The one thing that she devotes is her time, but not her love, since she cannot seem to find any for him. Despite this, it is difficult to interpret Harriet as selfish. This is because the story is being narrated from her point of view, providing the reader with knowledge of the unlimited love she feels for her other children and also the abnormal difficulties she believes she is experiencing during her pregnancy with Ben. Therefore, the reader sympathizes with Harriet and instead becomes skeptical towards Ben.

The end result of the fact that the narrator possesses limited information and that there is a motivation behind the subjective narrative is a story that in a sense becomes misleading, since the actions of the other characters described may not be accurate, but simply interpretations of Harriet's mind. This leads to the question of how much of what is depicted accurately represents David and his feelings, as opposed to being Harriet's interpretation of his thoughts by merely observing him, and in some cases, simply by guessing. The following quote demonstrates the unreliability of the narrator by first stating (implying to be omniscient) that David believes that Harriet is exhausted, and then by saying (implying to be limited) that Harriet is suspicious of everyone's thoughts about her:

They all – David too – judged that she was simply exhausted because this baby was coming too soon. [...] Alone in her ordeal – and she had to be, she knew that, and did not blame her family for not accepting what she was being slowly forced to accept – she became silent, morose, suspicious of them all and their thoughts about her (51).

It is hard to tell whether or not this is an attempt of an actual neutral observation by the narrator or simply a case of Harriet's 'paranoia' presented by the narrator. But, keeping in mind that the narrator is an unreliable one, everything that he/she describes about the other characters' actions and thoughts has to be critically observed since this may not be their true feelings, even if it indeed is a neutral observation.

When discussing point of view, Keen gives an interesting example from *The Fifth Child* which explains how the narrative form is of great importance when it comes to the interpretation of the story and the enhancement of the cracks between Harriet and David:

Variable perspectives can be especially interesting, as when Doris Lessing almost imperceptibly withdraws the male perspective from what begins as a plural reflector, 'David and Harriet', in her novella *The Fifth Child* (1988). This manipulation of narrative situation enhances the effect of David's alienation and Harriet's isolation, even before Ben, their fifth child, enters the tale (45).

The subjective narrative does indeed have a tremendous impact on what the reader perceives about the relationship between Harriet and David, but also on how the reader interprets David as an individual. David is also isolated, but there is simply no room for his perspective in the narrative. When keeping in mind that both Lessing and the narrator are truly representatives of implicit feminism it is clear that the story is a way for Harriet, the *female*, to express her feelings and the consequences of this traditional life she has chosen, since it is the woman that has been oppressed in society through time, and not the man. In this novel the roles are reversed as all focus is taken away from the male.

In conclusion, the fact that the story is told from Harriet's perspective supports the ideas previously discussed in the essay concerning subjectivity.

## **Conclusion**

The development of David's character as both a husband and a father is clear to follow: he starts out as the loving one who although he does not have the money to afford the life he and Harriet dream of is willing to swallow his pride in order to secure their future, but he ends up as a man who has abandoned many of his beliefs and becomes what he previously resented. Because of his traditional view on life he wants to provide all of his children with a happy childhood and is determined to make sure that this becomes reality. Then Ben, the fifth child, comes in to the picture and things rapidly turn for the worse. Harriet both backs away from David and in a sense pushes him away from her, creating a distance that has never been there

before. Harriet's bad temper, combined with the fact that she worries about the health of herself and what there is wrong with the baby while calling it non-human also make David back away further. He does not seem to be able to understand or relate to Harriet's condition and concerns.

A relationship between David and Ben is never established, and neither of them seems to believe that they are related to each other. Instead of trying to create a bond with Ben, David focuses on his other children while Harriet assumes all responsibility for Ben until the divisions within the family become so great that Ben has to be sent away. It is when Harriet defies David's wish and brings back Ben that things escalate for the worse. Not only does David feel betrayed, but his authority has also been questioned and thereby a piece of his masculinity. This becomes an essential key word because the emasculation drives David to seek ratification at work; because being able to provide for the family financially gives a sense of masculinity and authority, which may help to identify him as a person. However, although David can support the family to a certain extent along the way he loses three of his children to their grandparents and one of them to his psychiatrist. Now work becomes an excuse for not being in the same house as Harriet and Ben, and the divisions keep on growing.

The narrative is also crucial for the development of David's character. From the beginning it seems that we gain knowledge about him through an omniscient narrator, but as the story progresses it is understood that it is in fact a limited narration through Harriet that tells the story. The further the story progresses the less is seen of David, and the harder it is to analyze his character. The most plausible reason for this is Lessing's way of turning the tables between man and woman in the novel, as opposed to their roles in society.

Eventually, the vicious circle which David did not want to get caught in, because of his miserable childhood, is a fact and he is trapped inside of it together with feelings of guilt and resentment, but first and foremost inability and failure.

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