

Title Little Monsters: Austerity, Anxiety, and the Monstrous Child in Doris Lessing's
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Item Type	Article (Accepted Version)
UoW Affiliated Authors	Arnold, Lucy
Full Citation	Arnold, Lucy (2021) Little Monsters: Austerity, Anxiety, and the Monstrous Child in Doris Lessing's The Fifth Child. Contemporary Women's Writing. vpab038. ISSN Online 1754-1476
DOI/ISBN/ISSN	https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpab038
Journal/Publisher	Contemporary Women's Writing Oxford University Press
Rights/Publisher Set Statement	This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Contemporary Women's Writing following peer review. The version of record [citation above] is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpab038 or https://academic.oup.com/cww/article/15/3/364/6459043?login=true Made available following 12 month post-publication embargo as per https://academic.oup.com/pages/open-research/open-access/charges-li-cences-and-self-archiving/author-self-archiving-policy 'After embargo Authors may upload their AM to an institutional repository or other non-commercial repositories, and make it publicly available.'
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Little Monsters: Austerity, Anxiety and the Monstrous Child in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*

Abstract:

The popular imagination of the 1970s and 80s was a fertile breeding ground for monstrous children whose proliferation gathered pace against a political climate wherein austerity was becoming prevalent within Thatcherite thinking. Simultaneously, the family, and the child in particular, came to possess what Sarah Harwood terms “a stronghold in the public and political imagination” (25), as conversations about contraception and population growth shifted in scope and tone. In this article I argue that children become “monstrous” in Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* through their association with precisely the kinds of excess and insatiability which austerity politics condemns. I read these “little monsters” as articulations of the anxieties about lack and scarcity upon which austerity is based and which it subsequently generates.

Key Words:

austerity, monster, changeling, child, Thatcherism, nineteen-seventies, nineteen-eighties, Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child*

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The popular imagination of the 1970s and 80s was a fertile breeding ground for little monsters. Whether as the subjects of demonic possession or procreation, (William Blatty, *The Exorcist* [1971], Richard Donner, *The Omen*, [1976]), the servants of supernatural beings (Stephen King, *The Children of the Corn* [1976]), or revenant articulations of the horror of mortality and loss (Stephen King, *Pet Sematary* [1987]), these monstrous progeny constitute a key motif in late-twentieth-century culture. As Karen J. Renner observes, this multiplicity of evil children is a continuation of a cultural trend which emerged “in the second half of the twentieth-century, [when] such figures begin to possess the imaginations of writers and filmmakers alike” (79). It is into this proliferation of monstrous children that Doris Lessing introduces her own little literary monster: Ben, the protagonist of her 1988 novel *The Fifth Child* which tells the story of David and Harriet Lovatt, a middle-class couple who reject the liberal sexual mores of the 1960s 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, but this dream is destroyed by the arrival of Ben, the unplanned eponymous “fifth child”, whose “monstrosity” obliterates the family idyll. Ben is an ambivalent “monster” – the child of human parents who problematizes the binary of natural/supernatural – and demands equally complex and at times ambivalent readings. Furthermore, as Renner suggests, our interpretations of the monstrous child are “culturally determined and shift throughout time” (85).ⁱ As such, interpretations of Ben and his function in Lessing’s novel must necessarily be specifically socially and historically inflected.

The existing scholarship on Lessing's novel is extensive, however, a key trend has emerged since the turn of the century wherein New Historicist critiques read *The Fifth Child* within the wider context of Thatcherite politics, its mobilization of the ideology of the family, and "its conservative, reactionary stance to perceived threats to the nation" (Clarke 176).ⁱⁱ Emily Clarke identifies such readings as being primarily concerned with the familial and the maternal and sharing an understanding of Ben as an "'absolute' or 'ineffable' other" whose monstrosity "is fundamentally tied to specific racial and national horror stories being articulated in England in the 1980s." (177) Clarke reads counter to this position, shifting focus from 'mother stories' to mothering stories, stating that "[m]aternity writ large is not the 'problem' or horror here, rather it is the horror of mothering a very specific (kind of) child" (178) and understanding Ben's monstrosity through a critical disability studies framework.

In this article, I tread a new path between these two positions, opening a critical space in which the "horror story" which Ben is "fundamentally tied to" is not racial nor national but rather economic. Specifically it is the horror story of lack, scarcity and depletion upon which the narratives and policies of austerity and abstinence relied and to which they are positioned as a corrective. Such narratives and policies were becoming particularly prevalent in Britain in the 1970s and 80s as the family came to possess what Harwood terms "a stronghold in the public and political imagination" (25). Likewise, while taking up Clarke's invitation to read the "problem" of *The Fifth Child* as that of "mothering a very specific kind of child", I diverge from her assessment of the nature of Ben's specificity as constituted through disability or corporeal difference. Rather I understand that specificity as constituted by Ben's status as the *fifth* child, the child too far who tips David and Harriet Lovatt from being what Keith Joseph, Margaret

Thatcher's Secretary of State for Education and Science, termed "good parents to a small number of wanted children" into parents who "[have] more children than can possibly be managed" ('Family Policy Group Minutes'). In Lessing's novel the child becomes monstrous through its association with precisely the kinds of excess and insatiability which austerity politics condemns. Instead of reading Ben's function in this narrative as being "to interrogate the real" as Rubenstein suggests (62), I argue that his status as monster and his alignment with the realm of fantasy or the supernatural rather functions to make licit the *imagined* nature of the threats, and their attendant anxieties, which are mobilized to validate austerity as ideology and praxis.

Social, Sexual and Political Contexts

In reading Ben as an expression of the anxieties which fuel austerity as policy and ideology, it is productive to attend to Dominic Lennard's observation that: "[i]t takes little imagination to believe that fictional definitions of the child intersect with and influence public attitudes to real children" (165). Such a statement prompts a mapping of how the period in which *The Fifth Child* was written and published was one whose dominant narratives and "mythologies", as Harwood terms them, "depended for their anchorage on the ideology of the family" (15).

Politically, this was an era that saw an oscillation between Labour and Conservative governments in Britain. However, the tenor of the conversation around both the economy and the family changed radically with the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. The family was placed at the heart of Thatcherite rhetoric, understood as the "building block" ('Speech to the Conservative Women's Conference') or "basic unit" of society (Speech at Conservative Party Conference. As Harwood puts it: "[w]hile the family is a material entity

meeting real people's needs, it also meets needs which are socially and culturally constructed" (15)

If the family was ideologically mobilized in Thatcherite rhetoric and social policy, Thatcherite economic policy was significantly shaped by the thinking of Friedrich Hayek whose philosophy was underpinned by an emphasis on austerity practiced not only on a governmental level but also by private individuals (Schui 143). The specific mechanisms of economic austerity policy are not neatly contained within governmental finance decisions but bleed out into attitudes towards consumption generally, finding their expression in an emphasis on "*abstinence* from consumption" (Schui 143). This abstinence was applied to personal as well as governmental decisions as to how resources of all kinds are consumed, and in doing so repositions reproductive decisions as economic decisions.

Regarding the position of economic controls such as austerity, within the broader sphere of human existence Hayek makes this striking statement: "[e]conomic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means for all of our ends" (qtd. in Schui 130). Read in the context of the present study Hayek's phrase "the means for all our ends" resonates clearly with the reproductive body as a manifestation of such "means". As such, Hayek's account of these "means", the importance and implications of their control and distribution, resonates with Harwood's contention that, during this period, "[t]he family thus operated at a social level to organize reproduction and resources, but also mythically, at a cultural level, to anneal social crisis" (25).

Nowhere is this more sharply drawn than in analyses of childbearing and population size. The notion that procreation is inextricably tied to economics and is implicated in austerity as idea and praxis, is long-standing, as children come to be understood as making claims on finite resources. Perhaps the most famous economist to propose such a connection between the reproductive body and economics was Robert Malthus whose thinking was being invoked in the 1970s and 80s by those anxious about population growth. In his *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) Malthus described a model of population growth in which

the unfettered sexual appetites of mankind would lead to a dramatic rise in population numbers. [. . .] No matter how much progress could be made in the production of food or other commodities, population growth would always be faster. The result was that the majority of mankind was doomed to live a precarious existence at subsistence level. (Schui 147)

The solution, according to Malthus, was a kind of sexual austerity, an abstinence from sexual activity which would allow resources to meet the needs of the existing population (ibid). Thus, the sexual body is inextricably tied to the body economic. Though Malthus' dire predictions did not come true, owing in significant part to the development of reliable and easily accessible contraceptives, his articulation of the powerful link between bodies and economics was being re-invoked in the 1970s and 80s as concerns about population growth and the so-called "Population Bomb" which threatened the world escalated (Cook 297).

These anxieties gave the promotion of birth control a different, crucially economic and resource-based emphasis, as the Malthusian fear of uncontrolled and unsupportable population growth

took hold (Cook 297). The changes in heterosexual behavior to which *The Fifth Child* alludes took place against a backdrop of declining birth rates, the lowest since 1931 (Cook 16), and a radical shifting of attitudes to heterosexual sex, reproduction and family size. Partly this was due to the introduction and widespread uptake of the contraceptive Pill from the 1960s onwards, with the British government legislating to provide free contraception regardless of age or relationship status, a new and overt involvement by the State in reproductive choices and behaviors (Cook 296).

These shifts are explicitly commented on in Lessing's text. In *The Fifth Child*, David and Harriet Lovatt eschew not only the newly widespread acceptability of pre-marital sex and multiple sexual partners (as the novel's narrator states in the opening pages, "[s]o what was it about these two that made them freaks and oddballs? It was their attitude to sex! This was the sixties!" (4)) but also the use of any contraception whatsoever. They have particular disdain for the Pill: "everything they had been, had stood for, in the past, [had] made it impossible for her to be on the Pill. They had felt it deeply wrong to tamper with the processes of Nature!" (92).

To summarize, during the period *The Fifth Child* is set, and was written and published, a linkage between developments in sexual behavior and reproductive medicine on the one hand, and economic and social policy on the other was being registered in political discourse. However, this understanding of reproductive behavior as economic behavior was also finding complex articulation and critique culturally, as Lessing's novel demonstrates. From the opening moments of *The Fifth Child*, economics and the reproductive body are repeatedly tied together. Harriet's first question following a sexual encounter with David in the couple's new house is an economic one: "how are we going to pay for it all if I am pregnant?" (11). Lessing continues to emphasize

this connection between bodies and resources when discussing David and Harriet's financial situation. She speaks of the "slenderness of their resources" (11), "their own frailty" (11), and states that, following the discovery of Harriet's pregnancy, "Harriet and David seemed to themselves meagre and inadequate" (11). These formulations muddle the corporeal and the financial, self and capital, as confirmed by Harriet's mother's assessment of the couple's position: "She knew the cost, in every way, of a family life, even a small one" (15). However, it is not pure economics which inflects this reading of Ben as monster. The notion that reproductive behaviors are also, significantly, classed behaviors is also powerfully at work.

Malthus saw the middle classes specifically as ideally placed to be 'responsible' with their resources, whether financial or biological, and to act as the responsible abstaining class (Schui 148). Such a class-based view was powerfully present in Thatcherite politics as "'proper families' were encouraged, and expensive, ideologically unsound 'non-families' were discouraged through the mechanism of familial ideology" (Harwood 25) This is a position which is explicitly articulated in Lessing's novel, when Harriet's mother Dorothy states that "people like us, in the middle, have to be careful about the children we have so we can look after them" (15).ⁱⁱⁱ Harriet and Daniel, whose decisions on family size early on in the novel are described as "defiant" (8), are indeed flouting classed expectations of their reproductive behavior that filter through Malthus, through Hayek and into the 1970s-80s political milieu. If "appropriate" reproductive behavior is determined by classed signifiers and, as Lessing's narrator points out, Harriet and David are mismatched when it comes to class – "on the powerful, if nowhere registered, yardstick, the English class system, Harriet scaled rather lower than David" (18) - then this renders the economics of the Lovatts' household complex. Harriet's working-class mother does the majority

of the domestic work and childcare for the couple, while David's upper-class father pays for the mortgage on the Lovatts' house, school fees for many of the Lovatt children and various other expenses. This outsourcing destabilizes the Lovatts' domestic sphere from the outset, established as it is on borrowed resources, and positions them as failing to adhere to the Thatcherite tenets of "self-[reliance], [. . .] of owning one's own property, of paying one's way" (Samuel 11) even as they privilege the family unit, risking becoming the "expensive, ideologically unsound 'non-family'" described by Harwood.

"horror of debt" (Thatcher qtd. in Samuel 14): The Monsters of Capitalism

Austerity, then, with its emphasis on abstinence and "appropriate" consumption, and its implication in both political and personal decision making, "play[s] precisely upon the boundaries that seem to neatly delineate family from class, personal from economic, sexual from political" (Moretti qtd. in Halberstam 30). Such a troubling of boundaries generates two related issues for the present reading. The nature of the first issue, indicated by the fact that Moretti's statement quoted here refers not, in the first instance, to austerity policy but to the monster as phenomenon, is the relationship between monsters and the economic. This is a relationship that has been consistently forged within the Gothic mode (home to some of the most infamous literary monsters) since its emergence. As Judith Halberstam states: "the ability of the Gothic story to take the imprint of any number of interpretations makes it a hideous offspring of capitalism itself. The Gothic novel of the nineteenth century and the Gothic horror film of the twentieth century are both obsessed with multiple modes of consumption and production, with dangerous consumption and excessive productivity, and with economies of meaning" (3). In the case of the Lovatt family, this "dangerous consumption" is registered in their use of both financial

and personal resources (and their borrowing of these resources from others), while their “excessive productivity” is inscribed in their five children. The last of these offspring comes to destabilize the received economies of meaning through which the Lovatts order their home, bringing with him the repeated demand “what is he?”

This linkage between economics, capitalism and Gothic continues into the present. In his book *Monsters in the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*, David McNally speaks at length about the panicked relationship between capitalist economics and the body, specifically the monstrous body or the body acted upon monstrously: “[t]hrowing light on the troubled relations between human bodies and the operations of the capitalist economy, such panics underline the profound experiential basis for a capitalist monsterology, a study of the monstrous forms of everyday life in the capitalist world system” (2). Certainly these relations are articulated in Lessing’s novel where the arrival of Ben into the Lovatts’ lives sets in train the permanent economic depletion of the family: subsequent to Ben’s birth, David Lovatt is forced to take on a teaching job alongside his role as an architect, and the large family home is eventually sold as the other Lovatt children are driven away by their monstrous sibling (Lessing 119).

If the economic and political landscape of the late 1970s and 1980s was defined by an emphasis on austerity, by contrast, the monster as concept is defined by excess. Barbara Almond observes that “implicit in the concept of monstrosity is the idea of too much, of behaviors and feelings that are unmodified and uncontrolled, unsublimated” (85). This idea of excess as being characteristic of the monster is repeated throughout theoretical writing on the phenomenon. Margaret Shildrick asserts that the monster “remains excessive of any category” (15) while Holly-Lynne Baumgartner and Roger Davis state of the monster that “its true terror is its ability to

exceed the frame, to spill out of its confines. [. . .] It cannot be contained or controlled by conceptualization” (2).

Having established how Gothic as a mode and the monsters it plays host to are united in their characterization by excess, and that the bodies which are implicated in expressions of monstrosity are paralleled by those bodies through and upon whom capitalist economics act, particularly in terms of reproductive behavior and the children it produces, a further question arises. That is the question of precisely how the children in these texts are rendered monstrous and the ways in which their monstrosity is an expression of the perverse body economic produced by austerity and its attendant anxieties.

Bad Seeds: The Child who is also a Monster

In her discussion of Gothic monster narratives, Halberstam makes reference to “[t]he entanglement of capital, nation and the body [which are present] in the fictions of otherness sanctified and popularized by any given culture” (20). This notion of an intertwining of “capital, nation and the body” also provides a potential description of the way that the child is conceptualized, particularly following the economic and social upheavals taking place in the late 1970s and 1980s. This being the case, it becomes possible to ask how the figure of the child and the monster might interact with and inform each other. As Lennard points out: “[c]onceptualizations of the child as innocent circulate so powerfully and without critique as to be rendered ‘natural’” (11). As such, the monstrous child’s “paradoxically constituted otherness – her mélange of familiarity and strangeness, victim and victimizer, innocence and threatening indecipherability – becomes a threat to formerly secure adult identities and ideologies”

(Balanzategui 61). This threat is played out in *The Fifth Child* in the breakdown of Harriet and David's marriage and their apparently "perfect" family. 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 (Lennard 2). This contradiction becomes particularly powerful when it is orchestrated in the context of shifting ideological investments in children. Precisely these kinds of shifts were taking place in the 1970s and 1980s when the change of the child's status from economic advantage to economic burden, which had crystalized centuries earlier following the movement from agrarian societies into industrialized ones (Schui 149), was again being underscored by "soaring inflation and a rising cost of living" (Lennard 14). As the economic status of the child shifted, rapid demographic changes simultaneously undermined the taken for granted status of the heterosexual husband and wife pair as the center of the nuclear family. In their place "the child becomes invested with a particularly important yet threatening power, figured as the thread that sutures the family together but which could also at any moment unravel it completely" (Balanzategui 41).^{iv}

Though Lennard's assessment of the "shock" of the monstrous child emerges from an ideological investment in the child as epitome of purity and innocence (largely removed from the reality of children and childhood), this "shock" is undercut by the notion that the child always already harbors associations with the savage, the uncivil and the not-yet-human. As Lennard, paraphrasing Wood, states: "children are Othered in horror because they are a reminder of 'childish' impulses that we must energetically repress to become socially validated members of society: they evoke for us a stage in which the infantile urges and complexes discussed by Freud

remained troublingly unresolved” (11). This is articulated in Lessing’s text through the positioning of the Lovatts’ back garden as an anti-Eden which has specific importance to the children of the household, but which provokes in the adults feelings of anxiety and discomfort. The couple never “get to grips” with the garden; it “continue[s] neglected, there [is] never time for it” (30). Rather than an Eden, the garden becomes a place associated with a pre-civil and socialized existence. As a very young baby, Ben is depicted staring out into the garden (62) and this association between Ben and a “wild” exterior space extends to the other Lovatt children, as this passage detailing the return of Luke and Helen from playing in the garden demonstrates:

there they were, two slight, elegant little creatures, with flaring red, frost-burned cheeks and eyes full of excitement of *the dark wilderness they had just been a part of*. They stood breathing heavily, their eyes slowly adjusting to reality, the warm, lit family room and their parents sitting there looking at them. For a moment it was the meeting of two alien forms of life: *the children had been part of some old savagery, and their blood still pounded with it; but now they had to let their wild selves go away while they rejoined their family*. Harriet and David shared this with them, were with them in imagination and in memory, from their own childhoods: they could see themselves clearly, *two adults, sitting there, tame, domestic, even pitiable in their distance from wildness and freedom*. (5 my italics)

Luke and Helen’s return from play is very explicitly positioned as a return to the civil and the social from the wild outside. Suddenly the “real” Lovatt children are spoken of in the same terms which have previously only been applied to Ben: they are “creatures”, “alien”. Together this passage and Ben’s preoccupation with the garden demonstrate the forging of a connection

between children and a pre-social/pre-civil state within the novel. However, they also point to the way in which children can be depicted as monsters when their negotiation of that borderline between their “wild selves” and their “family” is flawed or absent. This places Ben in the position of refusing or being unable to conform to or participate in human society, a position which resonates with Asma’s assessment that “[t]he monster is that unpredictable, uncontrollable force that cannot be reasoned with or persuaded. It is an incarnation of Nature itself, upsetting our optimistic project to tame and use her” (126).

Throwbacks and Changelings: Articulating Monstrosity

If the child as category possesses an association with the wild and the “uncivil”, then the question arises of what differentiates the “real” children in this narrative from their monstrous counterparts. What is it that makes Ben monstrous? An idea which dominates Lessing’s novel is that the monstrous child is monstrous because it is not a “real” child. In *The Fifth Child* Harriet refers to her fourth son, Paul, as “a real baby, a real little child” (50) while David understands Ben as distinct from his first four “real” children. (90) The apparently clear distinction between the monster baby and the “real” child which David makes is, however, a profoundly vexed one. The “real” child in this text is always only moments away from disintegrating into their monstrous counterpart, behaviorally and linguistically if not always physically.

A sustained linguistic refusal to categorize the Ben as human is present in *The Fifth Child*. He is not only referred to and to a degree understood as, a changeling, but also repeatedly spoken of as a “Neanderthal” (53), a “creature” (58), “inhuman”, a “savage thing” (42), a “phantom” (41), a “chimera” (42), “the enemy” (41) a “troll or a goblin” (49). This constellation of monstrous

terminology, exhibiting monstrous excess in its proliferation throughout the novel, serves to position Ben as outside the realm of the human even before his physicality and behavioral traits are analyzed. This linguistic exclusion from the status of humanity shared by Ben's wider family is also present in Harriet and David's choice of name for him, and the way that name is used.

Ben's name, and its use in the novel, contains multiple significances. Christine de Vinne points out that "[i]n the Middle Ages, babies whose mothers died in childbirth were often called Benjamin" (18). While Harriet physically survives Ben's birth, his coming into the world sets in train the destruction of the Lovatt family, ultimately rendering her "dead" to her husband and her first four children who withdraw from her entirely. Ben's name is used in opposition to the wealth of monstrous definitions of him, as a way, not of acknowledging Ben's status as human, but of insisting upon his conforming to human standards of behavior and conduct. When attempting to curb Ben's destructive impulses, Harriet's warning use of his name, frequently given in emphatic italics, is used as a shorthand for this insistence. Nowhere is this complex act of naming-as-claiming more striking than in an episode in the latter part of the novel in which Harriet is searching for her son and finds him in the attic of the house: "'Ben,' she said softly, though her voice shook. 'Ben . . . ' *putting into the word her human claim on him*, and on this wild dangerous attic where he had gone back into a far-away past that did not know human beings." (116 my italics) The Lovatts enact the exclusion of their "monster" child from the middle-class domestic milieu, and from humanity itself, in part through a play with language. However, Ben's "monstrosity" is not merely a linguistic imposition but also inscribed through his bodies and behavior.

"Difference made flesh" (Cohen 8): Monstrous Corporeality

Halberstam observes that “Gothic novels [. . .] thematize the monstrous aspects of both production and consumption” (12) and it is important to acknowledge that this thematization is frequently expressed through the corporeal body of the monster and the narrative of that body’s construction or engendering. Lessing clearly engages with the idea of physical as well as linguistic or behavioral signifiers of monstrosity. Throughout Harriet’s pregnancy Ben is experienced as growing too fast and being too strong to be an ordinary child. Harriet feels that the fetus “is poisoning her” (32) and experiences the pregnancy in such a way that she fears the baby will destroy her body, a precursor to his destruction of the family unit: “she could not sleep or rest because of the energy of the fetus, which seemed to be trying to tear its way out of her stomach” (38). The emphasis on Ben’s physical otherness continues after his birth. As a newborn, the narrator explains that “[h]e did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered, hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyebrows to his crown. [. . .] His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms” (48-9).

Corporeally and linguistically then, Ben is represented and received as a monster, however, his monstrous status within the narrative has a further, behavioral element. As Asma points out, “we still employ the term and concept [of monster] to apply to inhuman creatures of every stripe, even if they come from our own species. The concept of the monster has evolved to become a moral term” (18) Ben’s status as “monster” is perhaps most pervasively, communicated through his behavior. From an extremely young age Ben displays violent, at times murderous, impulses. He strangles a visiting family member’s dog and the Lovatts’ family cat, attempting to kill garden birds and other visiting pets. When only an infant he badly sprains his brother Paul’s wrist and later in the novel tries to strangle him: “Once, Harriet found Paul in a corner of the kitchen,

stretched up on tiptoes, trying to evade Ben's hands, which were reaching up to his throat. [. . .] if Ben wanted to he could kill Paul. [. . .] Ben grinned vindictively, full of triumph" (109).

Almond contends that "[a]lthough we often worry about grotesque physical attributes and differences, 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" (47). Asma goes on to question whether a lack of empathy can be used to define the monstrous, asking "[d]oes having less empathy mean being less human? [. . .] Does the inability to feel someone else's suffering make one less of a human and more like a machine or a monster?" (183-4). In the case of Lessing's novel what pushes his behavior into the realm of the monstrous is that Ben is described as doing these things maliciously and experiences no remorse. When seen trying to throttle a visiting dog Ben is stopped by Harriet who sees "[his] cold eyes turn towards her, caught in a gleam of pure malice" (71). When he breaks the arm of a schoolmate, his head teacher remarks that Ben demonstrates no remorse at all for his actions. Possibly one of the most striking elements of the construction of Ben's inhumanity is this 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 constructed as monstrous, the question remains of what function his presence as a monster in the narrative performs. If, as Halberstam suggests, "the return of monsters is always economic" (188), then what "economic" function is Ben performing within the cultural milieu of the 1970s and 80s?

Monstrous Appetites and Threats to Plenty

Above I outlined how the 1970s and 80s in Britain and elsewhere were characterized by an emphasis on austerity as both 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 recapture "a lost Eden" one "in which resources were scarce and careful husbandry was needed to ensure survival" (19). This emphasis was accompanied by a growing sense of certain children as resource-hungry products, born of impulses which, now that contraception was reliably and readily available, could 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. Speaking of her clinical work with mothers who experienced their children as monstrous, Almond states "I realized that maternal aggression is frequently handled by being experienced as residing in a demanding and insatiable child, often described as a monster" (47). With regards to her patients, Almond asks:

[w]hy does this word [monster] come up again and again? I think it's because children's needs and demands do exhaust parents and provoke feelings of intense anxiety in them. Around these anxieties – which are about the extremity of children's needs and feelings - images of monstrosity proliferate. (47)

As Almond points out, children are needy: they embody demand on resources and they are frequently experienced as insatiable. However, I argue that this quality, which frequently in a clinical setting leads to the child being understood as "monstrous" in the maternal or familial context, in fact speaks to wider social anxieties about lack and scarcity, about demand outstripping what is actually available, a situation which was heightened during this period by

Conservative social and economic policies which had created “a gap between public need and government expenditure” (Harwood 25).

Ben’s own monstrously insatiable appetites register even before his birth, in Harriet’s appetite during her pregnancy which frightens and shames her: “Her appetite was enormous, insatiable – so bad she was ashamed and raided the fridge when no one could see her. She would interrupt her nocturnal peregrinations to stuff into herself anything she could find to eat” (43). Likewise, as a newborn, Ben eats voraciously:

Her breasts were painful. Making more milk than they ever had to do, her chest swelled into two bursting globes long before the next feed was due. But Ben was already roaring for it, and she fed him, and he drained every drop in two or three minutes. She felt the milk being dragged in streams from her. (52)

It is not only 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:

Harriet had come down one morning [. . .] to see Ben squatting on the big table, with an uncooked chicken he had taken from the refrigerator, which stood open, its contents spilled all over the floor. Ben had raided it in some savage fit he could not control. Grunting with satisfaction, he tore the raw chicken apart with teeth and hands, pulsing with barbaric strength. He had looked up over the partly shredded and dismembered carcass at Harriet, at his siblings, and snarled. (97)

The enormous and socially unacceptable appetites exhibited in infancy and toddlerhood are continued in the behavior of the adolescent, but at this point Ben they are mirrored by his equally outcast schoolmates who “fed themselves from the refrigerator” (121). It is significant that these rejected figures are initially depicted eating only cold, ready-made food. Likewise, their consumption appears unstoppable: “[m]ore than once, dissatisfied with the food they found in the refrigerator, they brought in feasts of food, and ate all evening” (122). The monster child is the child who threatens to eat us out of house and home, not only familiarly but socially.

Hosting the Monster or The Ghost of Malthus at the Lovatts’ Feast

The relationship between the home and the monster is one which puts pressure on the notion of hospitality, as Halberstam points out: “[t]he monster [. . .] will find you in the intimacy of your home, indeed it will make your home its home (or you its home) and alter forever the comfort of domestic privacy” (15). The Lovatts’ “hospitality” cannot account for Ben, cannot accommodate his insatiable demands. The hosting of Ben is also paralleled in the “hosting” of Ben’s gang of older high school friends who take over the house, denude it of resources, leave it messy, and, crucially, sneak in and populate the bedrooms fantasized by Harriet and Daniel at the outset of the novel to be filled with their children: “Soon she found six of them at breakfast: she had heard them, very late, creep upstairs and find beds for themselves.” (124) The gang symbolically displace the “real” Lovatt children, long since pushed out by Ben’s intolerably demanding presence, moving in with grandparents or choosing to attend boarding schools.

The motif of hospitality as precarious and always subject to subversion and overthrow (not for nothing does hospitality have “nestled in its roots, the terms hostile and hostage” (Baumgartner and Davis 2)) is one which can also be found in Thomas Malthus’ writing on population growth

and control. There are numerous moments when Lessing's novel which, as has been established, is on a number of levels interested in population and ideas of plenty and scarcity, begins to resonate with Thomas Malthus' "myth of the feast", an arresting paragraph in the 1803 edition of "An Essay on the Principle of Population." In this key passage Malthus uses a hospitality metaphor - specifically the image of a plentiful feast - to argue for why population control is vital.

He begins "[t]he report of a provision for all that come, fills the hall with numerous claimants" (697). This image, of the feast open to all, is present in Lessing's initial construction of the Lovatts' domestic life. The home the Lovatts create is capable of welcoming numerous guests, with their 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" (15) being powerfully symbolic of the Lovatt's fetishization of abundance, both of people and the resources they require. Likewise, the feasting that the Lovatts facilitate is described in detail: "a vast, hotel-sized freezer, bought second hand was stocked with summer fruit and vegetables. Dorothy and Sarah and Angela bottled fruit and jam and chutneys. They baked bread and the whole house smelled of new bread" (20).

The "numerous claimants" that Malthus anticipates in his essay materialize as the Lovatts' family gatherings continue to grow in size and duration. By the Lovatts' second Christmas: "The house was full. [. . .] A cousin of Harriet's with three children came too, for she had heard of the wonderful Easter party that had gone on for a week. A colleague of David's came with his wife. This Christmas was ten days long and one feast followed another" (19). In *An Essay*, Malthus describes how the excessive guests who come to demand a part of this hospitality (hospitality which in Lessing's novel is typified by similes of literally fruitful abundance: David's father asserts that "it's like being in the middle of some bloody great fruit pudding, this house" [57]) ultimately

exhaust it: "The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall and by the clamorous importunity of those, who are justly enraged at not finding the provision which they had been taught to expect" (698).

Such "spectacle[s] of misery" and "clamorous importunity" as Malthus warns of in his essay begin to dominate the Lovatts' domestic idyll as soon as Ben is conceived. 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: "the two older women made remarks about getting the house ready, Harriet said, 'They can't come. They can't possibly come.' 'They'll expect it,' said Dorothy. 'We can manage' said Alice." (40). However, the visible evidence of Harriet's suffering under the demands of her unborn child transforms the "plenty that before reigned" into "scarcity": "[h]er strained, abstracted face as she sat there at her table, stiffly upright [. . .] stopped conversation, spoiled the fun, the good times" (40).

While the growing number of guests at their gatherings is putting invisible strain on the Lovatts who are forced to borrow increasing amounts of money from David's father and have to "make economies", ultimately it is Ben's conception and arrival into the Lovatt family which brings a decisive end to the feast. Not only does Ben have frighteningly unappeasable appetites, constituting the ultimate threat to the plenty Malthus mourns the loss of, he also serves to exclude 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 consume so much but don't contribute enough while simultaneously embodying such a

demanding presence himself: "He could silence a room full of people just by being there, or disperse them. They went off making excuses" (61). It is remarked in the approach to Ben's first Christmas that: "[t]here were fewer guests: some had written or rung to say they couldn't afford the train fare or the petrol. 'Any excuse is better than none,' remarked Dorothy. 'But people are hard up,' said David. 'They weren't so hard up before that they couldn't afford to come and live here for weeks at a time at your expense'" (61).

Ben doesn't only repel existing guests. He also prevents the Lovatts' planned future children from arriving. Following his return to the family home it is observed that "[t]he baby's room was empty", while Harriet's suggestion to David that they might have another baby following her rescue of Ben is roundly rejected, the "mortal wound" (93) that Ben's return to the home is understood to constitute negating any possibility of a potentially reparative sixth child. If we consider Halberstam's statement that "the returns of monsters are always economic" (188), Harriet's decision to return Ben to the family home, removing him from an institution where he was being badly neglected and would eventually have died, becomes comprehensible not only as a moral imperative on Harriet's part, but an enactment of austerity on a familial level. Once Ben has returned, not only are further children ruled out by the couple, the rest of the Lovatts' children begin to leave the family home, in favor of the homes of relatives and boarding schools, reducing the household to a perverse approximation of the acceptably small "proper" family.

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" (23). Ben's presence warns against unlimited hospitality and consumption, both in the sense of the feasting the Lovatts' guest's

partake in but also in the sense of consumption being implicated in reproductive behavior. However, he also functions in line with the idea of the monster as “[a] kind of herdsman [who] delimits the social space through which cultural bodies may move” (Cohen 14), 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” (129) that had once accommodated them.

A close reading of the Lovatt’s dining table reveals an extended metaphor for the dream of abundance and plenty which disintegrates into anxiety about scarcity under the pressure of a monstrous guest. The origin of the table as “a discarded butcher’s table” is significant: “When first bought [. . .] it had had a rough, much-cut-about surface, but it had been planed down, and at that stage of its life had shown the creamy white of the new layer of wood.” (130) The table the Lovatts’ eat around was originally the surface upon which meat, a resource of a highly symbolic kind, associated with blood and with sacrifice, was prepared. Harriet and David’s attempted erasure of the bloody history of the table initially appears to be successful. Harriet uses this table as a surface upon which to project her memories of her dream of fecundity and abundance: “Leaning back where she could not see her blurry image, she imagined how, once, this table had been set for feasts and enjoyment, for – family life. She re-created the scenes of twenty, fifteen, twelve, ten years ago, the stages of the Lovatt board [. . .] new babies . . . twenty people, thirty, had crowded round this gleaming surface and been mirrored in it” (130). The texture of the table, physically imbued with the presence of the crowd the Lovatts’ have accommodated, attests to the initial period of plenty the family experience: “Since then, thousands of fingers, sleeves, the bare forearms of summer, the cheeks of children who had fallen forward asleep sitting on adult’s laps, the plump feet of toddlers held up to walk there,

everyone applauding: all this, the smoothings and caressings of twenty years, had given the wide board [. . .] a gleaming silken surface, so smooth fingers skated over it" (130). However, though the narrator suggests that the dream 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 Lovatts' unsullied dream, the table rather stands for the impossibility of that dream, it's always already flawed quality. The narrator goes on to point out how this skin of the table, far from being perfect "has been scarred": "There was a curving, black weal, but Harriet could not remember what had made it. If you looked at the table from a certain angle, it had areas of tiny dimples or dents, where trivets had been set up to keep the heat off the precious surface" (130).

Looked at from specific angles, the table metaphorically speaks to how the Lovatts' life, with all of its protective mechanisms, far from being perfect, was undercut from the very beginning, having its origins in the filleting and parceling out of resources, and the bloody consequences of that process. This is foreshadowed by Ben's rudimentary tearing to pieces of the raw chicken and confirmed by the fact that it is Ben's image that eventually comes to dominate the table, blotting out all other comers: "she heard the laughter of small children, their voices, and then the wide shine of the table seemed to darken, and there was Ben, the alien, the destroyer" (130).

Ben's adolescent presence, and that of his friends, resonates with a growing anxiety that the fabric of society was, if not breaking down in the Thatcher era, then becoming troublingly frayed.^v These anxieties are also articulated in the changing nature of the Lovatts' neighborhood: "The little town they lived in had changed in the five years they had been there. Brutal incidents and crimes, once shocking everyone, were now commonplace. Gangs of youths hung around certain

cafés and street-ends and owed respect to no one” (22). Such anxieties are also registered through the composition of Ben’s gang of delinquents and drop-outs who explicitly engage in acts of violent crime (robberies, beatings and, Harriet speculates, rapes) and are seen in the television coverage of riots in London (126). It is telling that Harriet and David never meaningfully confront the youths that comprise Ben’s gang, confirming Baumgartner and Davis’ warning that “if we face the monster, we risk immediate personal safety, but the grave danger is the risk of unravelling the social order itself” (1).

Conclusion

The interaction between the overtly “monstrous” child in Lessing’s novel and the more mundanely disruptive figure of the delinquent 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 characterizes Ben is ultimately revealed to be the cultural end point of an understanding of children that the profound anxieties around scarcity and lack generated by austerity bring about, and that austerity policy capitalizes upon to justify cuts to public spending on, among other things, children’s services. 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. 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). The moment we can identify the child as one of ‘those children,’ we can, at least in some sense, rest easy: his or her nature was inevitable. We can find easy pardon by saying to ourselves, and saying to the child, that we tried” (18). This is articulated

by Ben's incarceration in a psychiatric institution more accurately described by Harriet as "one of those places that exist to in order to take on children families want to get rid of" (73).

The scope of this reading has not made it possible to consider where the monstrous child born of David Cameron's austerity policies might be lurking within culture and what the consequences of several decades of austerity policy have been for large groups of children across the nation. However, what Lessing's little monster indicates to us is that the monstrous child inscribes a strategic social othering of certain kinds of children, an othering which, I argue, was and continues to be understood in certain political quarters as economically and ideologically prudent. However, Lessing, in her construction of this monstrous child, puts pressure on the myths of family being mobilized to mask or ameliorate growing societal discord and to justify political and economic decision making in the 1970s and 80s. Ben reveals the truth of Harwood's position that "[w]hen politicians pointed to a 'crisis in the family', it was rather to an anxiety over the family's continuing power to obscure social tension" (25). The closing lines of *The Fifth Child* see Harriet imagining that she glimpses her son in the televised coverage of a riot somewhere, scanning the crowd for a fellow "monster":

Perhaps quite soon [. . .] she would be looking at the box, and there, in a shot on the News of Berlin, Madrid, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, she would see Ben, standing rather apart from the crowd, staring at the camera with his goblin eyes, or searching the faces in the crowd for another of his own kind. (133)

It is an image which serves as a warning that the "monsters" created through the functioning of politico-economic policies inevitably affect monstrous economic returns of their own.

ⁱ Renner goes on to state that '[e]ven when the dominant type of evil children during a particular epoch cannot easily be labelled "evil", this fact alone tells us much about the predominant ideologies that prevent a more straightforward type of evil child forming in the cultural imagination', a particularly useful formulation for considering the monstrous child in Lessing's fiction.

ⁱⁱ Key examples of such readings include Louise Yellin, *From the Margins of Empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), Susan Watkins, 'Writing in a minor key', *Doris Lessing Studies*, 25:2(2006) 6–1, and Richard Brock "'No such thing as society": Thatcherism and Derridean hospitality in *The Fifth Child*', *Doris Lessing Studies*, 28:1(200), 7–1.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the contemporary moment having a large family is asserted to have become an upper-class status symbol according to some commentators. A *Telegraph* article published in 2011 put the number of children required to make such a statement at four, whereas, according to the *Guardian*, by 2019 a five-child family is seen as the claim to a large family ('Is having five children really a middle-class status symbol?', *Guardian*, 8th January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2019/jan/08/five-kids-club-status-symbol-celebrity-sophie-ellis-bextor>, accessed 02/07/2019), while during this period the average number of children per family in the UK has fallen from 2.4 to 1.8. In much of the newspaper commentary on this issue there is a significant link between family size and class. Geraldine Bedell, in the same *Telegraph* article says of the Beckhams, as an example of a large, upper-class family, that they 'are reproducing in a way that, were they members of the underclass, would be regarded as not quite responsible.' Geraldine Bedell, 'Is the Fourth Child a Status Symbol?', *Telegraph*, 11th January 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/8251076/Is-the-fourth-child-a-status-symbol.html>, accessed 02/07/2019.

^{iv} Balanzategui productively maps here how divorce, growing numbers of LGBT families and greater economic independence for women resulted in significant demographic shifts.

^v Speaking of the need to regulate and reify the family unit, Margaret Thatcher made the dire prediction that: 'unless we do so, we will be faced with heart-rending social problems which no Government could possibly cure – or even hope to cope with.' Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to the Conservative Women's Conference', 25 May 1988, <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107248>> [accessed 05/05/2020]

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