



The Fifth Child

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Harriet and David Lovatt are a conventional couple in 1960's England. Their only oddity seems to be their desire for a large family, and when they produce four children in quick succession, they seem to be building the happy family they want. The Christian connotations of the names of the male children, Paul and Luke, are unmistakable, and this layer of meaning is reinforced by the way the entire family regularly assembles from far and wide to celebrate the great festivals of the religious year.

When Harriet next becomes pregnant, however, a sense of fear envelops her. She feels the unborn baby to be a savage thing, and baby Ben emerges like a beast of the Apocalypse, an anti-Christ. Over the next few years his violent behavior produces some horrifying incidents, and his parents are forced to the realization that they have produced an alien creature, a goblin or troll.

The dominant theme of the first part of the book--unity and harmony--now becomes drastically reversed, as the alien presence shatters the family cohesiveness. It is as if two vast forces in existence have met in collision; the thrust toward the fully human and the lurch back to the elemental and the nonhuman; the civilized soul versus the prehistoric animal.

Lessing's gripping novel leaves the reader pondering some intriguing questions. Is it an act of hubris to reach happiness? Does the desire itself in some mysterious way attract its opposite? How far back does the genetic chain extend? Does it include the nonhuman, mythical creatures that at some point inhabited the earth-- are we and they still linked? Like all good horror stories, THE FIFTH CHILD invites the contemplation of the impossible and unthinkable.

Sources for Further Study

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