

Research on the Middle-class Anxiety in *The Fifth Child*

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Abstract. Doris Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child* reveals the prevalent phenomena of class anxiety in British middle-class families in the 1970s by creating the tragic figure of "Ben", a class changeling who is incompatible with his middle-class family. The root cause of Ben's tragedy lies in the class dislocation within his own family, his mother Harriet's humble family background and his father David's fragile economic strength jointly leading to this dislocation, with Ben as the externalization of this class dislocation and the class anxiety it triggers. Ben's tragedy is a microcosm of the class anxiety of the British middle class at that time. It not only reflects the common anxiety of the middle class against the historical background of economic stagflation and social structural changes, but also embodies Lessing's deep concern for class issues.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; *The Fifth Child*; Middle-class Anxiety.

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919–2013) is an influential writer in postwar Britain. Her novel *The Fifth Child* (1988) tells the story about a British middle-class family in the suburbs of London from the 1960s to the 1980s. It touches upon a familiar theme in British literature, i.e. "the creation of an earthly Eden in the form of an idyllic family life" [1]. In the novel, the British couple David Lovatt and Harriet Walker are dissatisfied with the anti-family and sexual liberation ethos of the Counter-Culture Movement in Britain in the 1960s, so they decide to pursue the traditional Victorian family happiness. They buy a large Victorian house in the suburbs of London and decide to have six children at least. Harriet gives birth to four children and the family lives there happily. However, the birth of a "monster" boy, their fifth child Ben, breaks the family Eden that David and Harriet work hard to build. Ben is incompatible with other family members, so his very birth leads to the disintegration of the family.

2. Literature Review

From the moment the novel came out, "What is Ben?" has become a mystery both inside and outside the book. In the novel, "No schoolteacher, or doctor, or specialist had been able to say, 'That is what he is': neither could any policeman, or police doctor, or social worker." [2] Owing to the fact that he looks so strange and he doesn't seem to fit in with other family members, the relatives suspect that "He must be a changeling" [1]. That is, the fairy takes the clever child away and leaves an ugly and stupid one behind.

In critical circle, the question also provoked diverse comments. Zhang Zhongzai proposed that the birth of the freak Ben was a punishment for neglecting birth control[3]; Wang Lili believed that Ben was an allegorical symbol of the post-modern situation of human beings[4]; Zhu Wang claimed that the novel reflected Lessing's worries about the return of traditional family values in Britain[5]. In addition, some scholars put forward the ideas that Ben was the product of distortion in family ethics[6], science ethics [7] and consumption ethics [8]. Some proposed that the novel was a tragedy of human nature caused by the absence of love [9], some claimed that the novel showed the predicaments of a woman who had to choose between her identity as a wife and her duty as a mother[10], some believed that *The Fifth Child*, together with Lessing's another novel *The Good Terrorist* (1985), explored the British national cultural crisis in the Thatcher era[11].

By now scholars have not yet explored the question "What is Ben" from the perspective of class in detail. In fact, Lessing was deeply influenced by Marxism and class was an important object of concern for her. From the perspective of class, *The Fifth Child* is a class tragedy and the protagonist Ben is a "class changeling". As Lessing proposed in an interview that Ben is just a misfit, and he will

be great if he lives in mountains or wildness, but he will be totally ruined when he is put into a middle-class family. [12] In a word, the misfortune of Ben lies in the fact that he is born into a middle-class family. Another clue which implies the close relationship between Ben and the lower class is the detail that “Ben was born in 1974, the same year as the miner’s strike in Britain that brought down Edward Heath’s conservative government” [13]. To analyze the novel from the perspective of class can help us to recognize the nature of Ben as a “class changeling”, expose the class dislocation of the family embodied by the tragedy of Ben, and illustrate Lessing’s deep concern for class in postwar British.

3. Victorian House: Middle-class Family Eden Created by Ben’s Parents

In the novel, the family that Ben is born into is a middle-class family Eden which his parents work so hard to keep against the anti-family and sexual liberation trend of the 1960s. In British history, the yearning for family Eden was the strongest in the Victorian era. Home was the sacred object worshiped by the middle class at that time [14]. Queen Victoria respected the middle-class lifestyle and tried to create a happy family herself. After World War Two, there were mainly two opposite opinions concerning families in Britain. On the one hand, from “the Angry Young Men” in the 1950s to the Counter-Culture youths in the 1960s, many young people attacked the family life of the middle class. On the other hand, cultural critics began to lament the decline of traditional family culture and miss the middle-class family life in Victorian age [14]. The very beginning of *The Fifth Child* shows the conflicts between the two forces. The Counter-Culture youths follow the anti-family and sexual liberation ethos, while David and Harriet are conservative and crave for the traditional family happiness, i.e., the Victorian middle-class family life.

At that time, the typical signs of middle-class family in Britain include a big house and a big family. In order to pursue such happiness, the couple buy a large Victorian house in the suburbs of London and decide to have at least six children. However, “the values they cherish so much are based on the lifestyles they do not really understand” [15]. As Dorothy, Harriet’s mother, says, “You haven’t any sort of a home really, so you value it.” [2] As products of the 1960s, what David and Harriet experience more are broken, fragmented family life rather than traditional family happiness. Most of Harriet’s classmates have divorced parents and have been living without parental love since childhood. David’s parents also get divorced when he is seven years old. On the surface, he is surrounded by family warmth all the time because he has two pairs of parents and two families. However, although he has rooms in both homes, he has never felt at home, so he hopes that the family life promised by the big house can make up for the regret that he grows up without a home. The Lovatts’ desire for a family Eden reflects the return of traditional Victorian family values in postwar Britain, and shows the longings of the British middle class for the lost family paradise.

Before Ben is born, perfect middle-class family myth is staged in the large house. “Happiness. A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family. It was what they had chosen and what they deserved.” [2] In the house, Harriet gives birth to four children in a row just as they had expected before marriage. Their holiday banquets are so successful that guests are attracted there from all over the world to witness the miracles of family and experience the old-fashioned family happiness. Among the guests is a girl named Bridget from a divorced family. “She had an unhappy, or at least complicated, family background, and she had taken to spending her holidays here, her parents pleased she was having a taste of real family life.” [2] For Bridget, the “real family life” is something sacred and precious, so she always observes everything around her with reverential and awed look, clinging fast to the miracle of this family, “as if she feared to miss some revelation of goodness or grace the moment she allowed her attention to lapse” [2]. David and Harriet see themselves in Bridget, because Bridget, who is full of awesome for traditional Victorian family life, is just like David and Harriet.

4. The Misfortune of Ben: Being Born into a Middle-class Family by Mistake

In an interview, Lessing recalled the feelings of writing *The Fifth Child*, mentioning that “I hated writing it[...]. It was an upsetting thing to write — obviously, it goes very deep into me somewhere.”[16] According to Lessing, the process of writing *The Fifth Child* is unbearable because it is a distressing story and Ben is a heartbreaking character. The reason lies in the fact that, in the novel, Ben is designed to be born into a middle-class family, and the class dislocation results in his tragic life.

The birth of Ben marks the end of their middle-class family dream. Just as the family doctor Dr. Brett says, Ben is a little wrestler who “came out fighting the whole world.”[2] Being strong and powerful, Ben kills a dog and an old cat secretly by himself when he is only two years old. In order to prevent Ben from hurting others, he is locked in his room all day long, and his angry roar reverberates in the big house day and night. The guests who come for holidays leave early one after another, including Bridget. Now her good expectation for family life has turned into a nightmare. The family begins to fall apart, with Ben’s siblings choosing to live with different relatives. By then, the middle-class family Eden that David and Harriet cherish so much had been shattered.

Why could the birth of Ben destroy a happy middle-class family? The reason is like his brother Luke explains, “They are sending Ben away because he isn’t really one of us.”[2] In other words, Ben can’t find a place in the big house because he doesn’t belong to this middle-class family.

On the one hand, judged by his appearance, Ben is out of place in the middle-class family. He is squat and powerful, with extremely broad and heavy shoulders, which makes him in sharp contrast with his pale, weak, slim siblings. However, when he went to the mine area, living among the workers, he doesn’t even attract any attention because “the place was full of strong bulky men”[17]. For this reason, when Ben is faced with the danger of being forced to be the experimental subject of biomedical research, the men who come to rescue him decide that it will be safe to take Ben to the mine area, “with the miners and engineers and other workers for the mines”. Sure enough, at the entrance of the airport in the mine area, “The official did give Ben another look, but waved through this big bulky man who in this crowd did not seem so remarkable.”[17]

On the other hand, seen from the perspective of culture, Ben can’t adapt to middle-class family life, either. Harriet tries to teach Ben to read, to sing and to build blocks like the other middle-class children do, but Ben isn’t interested in these. What he likes most is to strike the iron plate with stones. “Ben again banged the tray with his stone, in a frenzy of exulting accomplishment. It looked as if he believed he was hammering metal, forging something: one could easily imagine him, in the mines deep under the earth, with his kind.”[2] In order to be accepted by the middle-class family, Ben tries to imitate other children at home. He watches his siblings all the time, trying to copy how they move, how they sit down and how they have dinners. “He ate, watching them. When they went to sit and watch television, he did, too, copying them for safety, and looked at the screen because they did.”[2]

When the children watched television, he squatted near them and looked from the screen to their faces, for he needed to know what reactions were appropriate. If they laughed, then, a moment later, he contributed a loud, hard, unnatural-sounding laugh[...] When they became silent and still with attention, because of some exciting moment, then he tensed his muscles, like them, and seemed absorbed in the screen—but really he kept his eyes on them.[2]

However, no matter how hard he tries, he just can’t fit into the middle-class family. All through his life, he remains a stranger to his family, and the “domestic terrorism” [18] of the big house.

Ben’s predicaments in the middle-class family reminds us of Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis’ novel *Lucky Jim* (1963) which is regarded as a representative work of “the Angry Young Men” in postwar Britain. Like Ben, Jim Dixon, a lecturer of humble origin in a provincial university in Britain, also doesn’t know how to deal with the social life and high culture of the middle class. In the novel, Dixon is also in “over-evident contrast” in appearance with Professor Welch who is from middle class.

“Welch tall and weedy, with limp whitening hair, Dixon on the short side fair and round-faced, with an unusual breadth of shoulder.”[19] Dixon knows that in order to keep his teaching post, he must try to please Welch because “this man had decisive power over his future at any rate”[19]. They both major in history, so for many times, Dixon wishes that “He and Welch might well be talking about history and in the way history might be talked about in Oxford and Cambridge quadrangles”[19]. However, Professor Welch never talks about history with him. Like many other middle-class members at the time, Welch is active in “Committee for the Promotion of Music and Art” in postwar Britain and is keen on holding family concerts in order to show off his knowledge about music. Dixon knows that an important way to please Welch is to be present and conscious while Welch talks about concerts, but Dixon, who comes from lower class, knows nothing about music. When Welch talks about flute, recorder, oboe, piano and clarinet, etc., and praises other “versatile lads” who can play instruments in the concert, Dixon is quite uneasy. When Welch talks about “the silly mistakes” in the concert, Dixon doesn’t know what’s so funny about it, so he has to “flail his features into some sort of response to humour”[19]. To some extent, the “class changeling” Ben is similar to Dixon, a representative of “the Angry Young Men”. They are not qualified for middle-class life for their coarse appearance and unrefined manners, just as “the gentleman writer” W. Somerset Maugham(1874—1965) remarked.

However, when living among the lower class, Ben is able to cope with life. When he is a preschool child, suffering from the rejections from other family members at home, Ben feels very close to John, an unemployed young man hired temporarily by Harriet to trim the plants in her garden. Ben looks forward to John’s coming every day, and later he also becomes a member of the “motorbike gang” [17], which is composed of a group of unemployed youths, with John among them. In the gang of youths, Ben is teased and roughed up, but he is accepted as one of them, so he is happy there. Since he was born, he has always been an outsider in his own family. Now he finally comes to know the feelings of safeness and enjoyment so he feels at home in the gang of youths.

Education is another way to show class division. When it is time for Ben to enter secondary school, unlike other middle-class children who usually go to grammar schools, Ben is sent to a local secondary modern school because it is the only one which accepts him. It is mainly for lower class, promising no great future, but it is perfect for Ben. Most of the students in that school are from lower class so it is easy for Ben to adjust to it. “As everyone knows, all these schools have a layer, like a sediment, of the uneducable, the unassimilable, the hopeless, who move up the school from class to class, waiting for the happy moment when they can leave.”[2] Feeling at home in that school, Ben soon becomes the leader of the children there. “He finds his friends and followers, the members of his tribe.”[1] Not long after Ben enters the secondary modern school, Harriet is surprised to discover that “‘Ben Lovatt’s gang’ was the most envied in the school, and a lot of boys, not only the truants and drop-outs, wanted to be part of it.”[2] Just as Harriet’s mother Dorothy says, “He may be normal for what he is. But he is not normal for what we are.” [2] That is, Ben is normal in lower class, but he is unfit for middle-class life.

In a word, seen from the perspectives of appearance and culture, Ben doesn’t belong to the middle class of postwar Britain. Rather, he is a “class changeling” born into a middle-class family by mistake.

5. The Root of Ben’s Misfortune: Class Dislocation of the Family

As for the reasons for the birth of Ben, his parents speculate that “He’s probably just dropped in from Mars”[2] or “It was a chance gene”[2], i.e. the atavism caused by recessive genes. They had been close to success with their perfect middle-class family Eden appealing to everyone, but the birth of Ben ruins everything. Therefore, the parents believe that Ben is the cause of the family tragedy, the source of evils.

However, to some extent, Ben is not the cause of the family tragedy, but the result and a victim of it. The middle class tends to suffer from status panic. “They can be replaced easily like screws in a machine, so they often feel insecure about life.”[20] The status panic is evident in David and Harriet.

Although they have got a happy family as they had expected before marriage, they are always afraid of losing everything they possess. Even at the peak of their happiness, they still “felt agreeably guilty”[2] because they are not entitled to enjoy middle-class family life. Ben, the “class changeling”, is the product of the class dislocation of the family, and the externalization of the family’s class panic.

On the one hand, in this seemingly perfectly matched marriage, Harriet’s “Achilles’ heels” lie in her humble origin. At that time, an important rule of marriage for the middle class in Britain was to marry someone of one’s own class. However, according to the criteria of British class system, Harriet is much inferior to David in class, which is a curse for this marriage, considering the stress British middle-class people lay on class when getting married.

Connoisseurs of the English scene will by now have realised that on that powerful, if nowhere registered, yardstick, the English class system, Harriet scaled rather lower than David. Within five seconds of any of the Lovatts or the Burkes meeting any of the Walkers, the fact had been noted but not commented on—verbally, at least.[2]

In the novel, Harriet’s father was an engineer and had a small apartment when he was alive. His salary was barely enough to support the family. In contrast, David’s family is much better. David’s mother Molly and his stepfather Frederick Burke are scholars in Oxford University, and they have a big house there. David’s father James and his stepmother Jessica are pretty rich because they are engaged in yachts trade. The class differences between David and Harriet are obvious in education. David and his sister Deborah attend expensive private schools, and their parents register for them as soon as they are born, while Harriet and her sisters belong to “the deprived”, all attending ordinary schools. Even their names suggest the class gap between them. Walker, Harriet’s family name, was originated from an occupation, “from the practice of fulling cloth by beating or walking on it in troughs of water”[21]. The name “Walker” is closely related to manual labor force, symbolizing Harriet’s low class status. “David, meanwhile, bears the name of a great king of Israel and, closer to home, two kings of Scotland and the patron saint of Wales.” [22] The name of David contains something noble in it, which implies the higher class status of David in the marriage.

The holiday banquets Harriet holds temporarily erase the class gap between the two families, but the birth of Ben reminds people of the gap again. In the view of the Lovatts, Ben, the “class changeling” who breaks into this middle-class family by his own will, is Harriet’s child, rather than David’s. Owing to the birth of Ben, they all sympathize with David while hate Harriet at the same time. As David’s story implies that Harriet is “materialised”[2], with Ben as the externalization of the low class status that Harriet tries to cover up in this marriage. According to David, the word “materialised” refers to the situation “when something that wasn’t there suddenly is there”[2]. But in this marriage, in fact, the class gap has always been there and foreshadows the misfortune entailed in it. Now the ruins brought by Ben highlight the class difference and bring it to everyone’s notice. Indeed, the bulky Ben reminds us of Dorothy, Harriet’s mother. Dorothy is also not well educated, and she is also very strong so she is responsible for all the heavy works in the big house, such as cooking and purchasing. Ben symbolizes the lower class status of the Walkers, especially the class dislocation of Harriet in marriage.

In the face of Ben, “the class invader”, David’s mother Molly and his stepfather Frederick, who represent “the essence of convention”[2], insist that Ben must be sent to an institution so as to maintain the normal operation of this middle-class family. This almost means that Ben is sentenced to death, but they show no sense of guilty, and the look of contentment on their face seems to suggest that they have just swallowed Ben and are digesting him. On seeing this, Harriet’s sister Angela can’t help exclaiming that this is “typical upper-class ruthlessness”[2] and points out that “when I’m with you, I understand everything about this country”[2], which means that from the way the Lovatts deal with Ben, she gets a deeper understanding of the rigid class system in Britain.

On the other hand, David also shows class dislocation in this marriage because he doesn’t possess enough economic strength to keep the big middle-class family. From the moment they decide to build

a middle-class family Eden, they have been beset by a tough economic problem, i.e. the contradictions between the middle-class family life symbolized by the big house and the large sums of money needed to maintain it. Before getting married, Harriet planned to keep working so as to help pay the mortgage. However, traditional family values prevent them from taking contraceptives, so Harriet soon gets pregnant and gives birth to four children in six years. With so many children to look after, Harriet has never gone to work after marriage and David's salary is far from enough so they are always short of money. To save money, they buy a large second-hand refrigerator to store fruits and vegetables which are cheap in summer, and they also manage to make jam and bread by themselves. David takes part-time jobs one after another and rarely stays at home which he loves so much.

And David, working as he did, had lost the self that was the family man. His efforts had made him successful in his firm, then gained him a much better job in another. But that now was where his centre was: events have their own logic. He was now the sort of man he had once decided never to be. [2]

Before the birth of Ben, it seems that David and Harriet had successfully created a middle-class family Eden, which was confirmed by the influx of guests on holidays. As David recalls, "We could easily have succeeded. We could have had just what we planned. Eight children in this house and everyone happy." [2] But Harriet points out the crux of the problem soberly: "And who paid for it?" [2] To keep the operation of the big house, they have to rely on James' "generous checks" and Dorothy's free work year after year. On the surface, it is Ben who destroys the middle-class family myth. In the deep sense, however, David's fragile economic strength is the root of the tragedy, making him ineligible to enjoy middle-class family life.

6. Conclusion

Due to the figure of Ben, a "monster" in *The Fifth Child*, the novel is often regarded as a science-fiction, being compared to *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley (1797–1851). However, Doris Lessing has always focused on reality. "Ben" actually reflects the prevalent class anxiety in British middle-class families in the 1970s. "Ben" does not emerge out of thin air. Instead, he stems from the class dislocation within the family caused by Harriet's humble family origin and David's fragile economic strength, and he is the manifestation of the family's class anxiety. From a socio-historical perspective, the tragedy of "Ben" reflects the deep-seated contradictions during the social transformation period in the UK in the 1970s. The class anxiety of the middle class in the novel is not only the result of economic factors such as the economic stagflation in the UK at that time, the increased tax burden on the middle class, and the instability of the job market, but also closely related to social problems such as social structural changes, the reduction of social welfare, and the intensification of educational competition. It reflects the complex class landscape of the UK at that time on the whole and embodies Lessing's deep concern for class issues.

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