An Awkward Age: Representing Childhood in 1950s Britain

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The Second World War was a period of massive disruption for family life in Britain. Almost half a million military personnel and civilians were killed, tearing apart families and communities. On the home front, basic foodstuffs and clothing were in short supply. Many urban areas were devastated by aerial bombardment, and over half of school-age children were evacuated to the countryside. Women stepped outside of their traditional domestic roles, moving away to join the armed forces or take on hard manual jobs in industry and agriculture.

After the turbulence of the war, the 1950s is often seen as a period of relative stability for British families. The emergence of the welfare state provided greater equality and security in health care and education, and guaranteed a basic standard of living. Women were encouraged back into the home, as child-care experts reasserted the value of the traditional nuclear family. As the decade progressed, hints of the counter-cultural movements that followed it began to emerge. But for children and families, this was a conservative period, a time of growing affluence, safety and security.

At least, this is the widely accepted story. In this essay, I want to question this account by exploring a diverse set of novels and films that offer more troubling accounts. Released during a five year period in the mid-1950s, they were all very popular in their time, and have mostly remained so. None of them was primarily produced for a child audience: rather, they contain representations of childhood created *by* and *for* adults. Yet they all use the figure of the child – and the *idea* of childhood – as a vehicle for much broader concerns. In different ways, they raise fundamental questions about the future of human society and civilization, yet they do so by focusing on the relationships between adults and children. Taken together, they may not accurately represent British childhood in the 1950s, but they do reflect some of the anxieties and fears that surrounded it.

1. *Mandy*

The film *Mandy*, directed by Alexander MacKendrick at Ealing Studios and released in 1952, is the most optimistic of the texts I will be looking at here. In its conclusion, it offers a moving vision of hope for the future, although it is one that emerges only through a process of struggle and dislocation within the family.

The film begins with a young couple, Harry and Christine Garland, gradually discovering that their two-year-old daughter Mandy is deaf and dumb. While Harry wants to keep Mandy with them at his parents' home in London and employ a private governess, Christine is determined that she will be educated at a special

school in Manchester. After several arguments, she eventually moves to Manchester, where Mandy (now aged five) is enrolled in the school, which is led by a committed headteacher, Dick Searle. Mandy is initially unhappy, but gradually learns to speak her first words. However, Harry is opposed to this arrangement, and Searle has an enemy on the school's governing body who is keen to discredit him: they gather information about a possible affair between Christine and Searle, and Harry travels to Manchester to confront them. Harry takes Mandy back to his parents' house, but he is eventually convinced of the success of Searle's approach when Mandy says her own name for the first time.

In some ways, *Mandy* is a strange hybrid, combining social realism with melodrama. The scenes in which the parents discover Mandy's disability, and then the sequences shot in the school, have the air of a public information film, which is heightened by the use of voice-over (spoken by the mother). The classroom scenes were shot in the real-life Manchester School for the Deaf, using untrained child actors; and the sequences demonstrating lip-reading and other teaching methods are so naturalistic, they might have come from a National Health Service documentary. In one key scene, Christine meets the semi-retired founder of the school, Miss Ellis, and discovers that she too is deaf, which convinces her that the school can help Mandy to live a normal life. In all these respects, the film has a strongly educational function.

Yet in other respects, it is also a powerful emotional drama. Mandy becomes the focus of intrigue, jealousy and suspicion among the adult characters. We 'know' that the special school is best for Mandy, but it is the outcomes of these misguided adult struggles – rather than her own needs – that will ultimately determine whether she can continue to attend. The narrative hinges on moments where misunderstandings between characters emerge, and are then resolved at the last minute. Especially in the scenes within the family home, the cinematography is highly expressionistic, with large close-ups, low-key lighting and some distorted camera angles. Faces are crossed with light and shadow, and there are frequent shots of the backs of heads, to connote that people cannot (or will not) listen. Along with some powerful but sparing use of music, these visual and narrative elements are reminiscent of Hollywood melodramas of the period. The critic Annette Kuhn has written eloquently of her own intense emotional response to the film, both as a child viewer and as an adult, and I share her feelings. This is a film that (for me at least) requires quite a few tissues, even on repeated viewing.

On one level, *Mandy* could be read as a film about the modern welfare state. It teaches us about the need for up-to-date, humanitarian teaching methods that will more effectively meet the needs of the disabled. In one key scene, we see Mandy being taught to press her lips against a balloon, as she gradually comes to understand what sound is. It is this that apparently convinces a somewhat disillusioned trainee teacher to remain at the school. The headteacher, Searle, is single-mindedly committed to his mission, to the extent that he is seen to have something of a chip on his shoulder, and his own marriage appears to have failed. He struggles to keep the school running against the objections of some of his governors, one of whom seems determined to bring him down.

However, as the critic Charles Barr observes, the film is not just about the education of the deaf: 'Mandy stands for all children, for the potential locked up inside the new

(English) generation, all of whom have, after all, to learn to communicate and relate to others.' As he points out, Mandy's struggle to communicate is paralleled by that of the adult characters, especially Harry and his parents. The film, Barr argues, 'takes up issues of communication and education (in the widest sense) that are crucial to the operation of the whole society'.

Thus, while *Mandy* is obviously a film about the child's entry into language, it is also about the child's entry into the social world – a process that every child has to undergo. Mandy does not only learn to speak, but to name herself and the world, and to communicate. In the process, she overcomes her isolation and becomes a social being.

Perhaps the most memorable images in the film are of the back garden of Harry's parents' house. The garden has crazy paving, as though it is dried up, an arid space; and it is bounded by a wall and parts of a wire fence, behind which Mandy is effectively imprisoned. Beyond the wall, we see children playing on what appears to be a bomb-site, a reminder of the continuing legacy of the War.

Early in the film, Mandy follows the family dog out of the garden and into the road, where she is almost run down by a passing lorry. Later, we see children taunting her because she doesn't want (or isn't allowed) to come outside. But in the final scene, she goes through the garden gate again, and returns their ball to the children. She is invited to play, and is able to say her own name. In the closing shot, filmed from a high angle that clearly shows the barriers between the garden and the wider world, we see her parents leave Mandy to run off on her own with her new friends. Mandy is released, but so too are her parents, now standing outside the confinement of the house and the garden.

These final shots might be interpreted as looking forwards with hope to the years of post-war reconstruction. They offer a sense of renewal and future possibility, in which the children playing can build a new order on the ruins of the old. Progress will involve a continuing struggle – not least within and against the family – but it will come. Yet for the contemporary observer, as the historian Mathew Thomson has argued, these post-war images of children at play in the city streets also remind us of a 'lost freedom', before anxieties about children's safety began to dominate public debate.

At the same time, the ending also reflects the child's liberation from the narrow confines of the family. After Mandy is diagnosed at the start of the film, Christine and Harry are in need of space: they are forced to abandon their light, modern flat, and move into Harry's parents' old Victorian house. The house is shot in an almost Gothic manner, and portrayed as a dark and stifling environment. In a sense, Harry's family represents a constraint on Mandy's growth: it is a repressive force, especially when contrasted with the open space of the school. When Harry takes Mandy back from Manchester to his parents' house, it appears that Christine has lost her struggle to help her daughter learn to speak, and that Mandy will be imprisoned once more. However, the breaking point comes when Harry's father, a silent and brooding presence for much of the film, finally looks up from his chess game to realize that Mandy is speaking; and it is this that prompts him to release her.

To some extent, Mandy's liberation is also Christine's. Christine risks her marriage and her reputation by moving north to Manchester so that Mandy can attend the school: she gets a job and lives in a rooming house, which the sounds of tinkling pianos clearly signify as lower class. Significantly, she avoids entering into an affair with Searle, although there is a hint that both of them might be tempted. As the critic Lisa Cartwright suggests, Christine becomes the guardian of a modern, post-war ethic of social care. This might be seen as a traditional maternal role, in line with some of the influential ideas about child-care and attachment that were being developed at the time by John Bowlby and others. Yet in doing so, Christine also has to take on an independent public role. It is she who diagnoses Mandy's deafness, and who champions Searle's modern teaching methods, against the wishes of her husband and his parents. It is also notable that it is she – at the start of the film and intermittently throughout – who narrates the film's voice-over.

Ultimately, *Mandy* uses the figure of the child as a means to express broader hopes and fears about social progress; and it has this in common with the other texts I will be considering. As Annette Kuhn argues, 'its connotations… reach outwards to embrace issues concerning what it is to be a child, not only at a particular moment in history, but in general'. Yet in its concluding optimism, it makes a striking contrast with the other films and books of the same period that I will go on to discuss.

2. *The Go-Between*

If *Mandy* looks to the future, L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, published the following year, looks very much to the past. Written in the shadow of the Second World War, amid large-scale national disasters and the international tensions of the Korean War and the atomic bomb, the book is set in an aristocratic country estate in the hot summer of the year 1900. However, *The Go-Between* is not merely nostalgic: it is also *about* the difficult relationships between past and present, and about memory. Here again, the figure of the child brings into focus some of the underlying tensions of the period in which the book was written.

The story is told by Leo Colston, an elderly man who discovers a diary he has written in 1900, the year of his thirteenth birthday. He slowly pieces together his memories, looking back to a summer that he spent with the family of an upper-class school friend Marcus Maudsley at their luxurious country home, Brandham Hall. When Marcus falls ill, Leo is left largely to his own devices. He develops a crush on Marcus's older sister Marian, and becomes a 'go-between', conveying secret letters between her and a tenant farmer, Ted Burgess, with whom she is having an illicit affair. Because of their class differences, the lovers can never marry; and Marian is about to become engaged to Hugh, Viscount Trimingham, the descendant of the noble family who formerly lived in Brandham Hall. Leo gradually begins to comprehend the romantic nature of the relationship between Marian and Ted. Eventually, Marian's mother becomes suspicious, and forces Leo to accompany her to the farm, where Marian and Ted are making love. Ted eventually commits suicide, while Marian marries Trimingham. In the epilogue of the book, we learn that these experiences have had a traumatic effect on the adult Leo: he suffers from a 'brain fever, an amnesia', which means that he has buried the past and become emotionally 'dried up'. When he revisits Brandham, his emotions unlocked by reading the diary,

he meets an elderly Marian, who urges him to assure her grandson that she really loved Ted.

In a sense, *The Go-Between* might be seen as a 'coming of age' story: Leo's thirteenth birthday, which he celebrates at Brandham, is clearly signaled as a point of transition to adulthood. Yet the book presents childhood as seen from the perspective of late adulthood: the narrator is the older Leo (just as Hartley himself was in his late fifties when the book was published). Leo pieces events together through the mists and arbitrariness of memory, attempting to construct his childhood perceptions retrospectively. However, the younger Leo's diary is often seen as less than reliable, and its concluding entries are apparently written in a code that the older Leo can only partly decipher. Events are therefore seen through the eyes of both the child and the adult: the younger Leo clearly fails to understand much of what he describes, even if the (adult) reader is expected to do so.

This dual perspective generates a level of irony, for instance when Trimingham and Mr. Maudsley make suggestive insinuations about Ted that Leo cannot interpret. However, it is also somewhat muddied by the book's pretentious use of symbolism. The child Leo is seen to be infatuated with the zodiac and magic spells, and there are also repeated references to ancient mythology and the natural elements. On one level, this provides a more elevated level of access for the literary-minded reader (it appears to excite many critics); but it also seems to imply that the telling of the story is somehow insufficiently profound in itself. Yet on another level, Leo's own use of these symbols is seen to mislead and confuse him, again causing the reader to doubt his reliability.

We might say that *The Go-Between* is about a loss of innocence, although again it is not quite as simple as that. Even when he witnesses Ted and Marion *in flagrante*, it isn't quite clear that Leo understands what he has seen. He is somehow both knowing and ignorant. He pesters Ted to explain to him about 'spooning' (that is, sex), but Ted refuses. His innocence is not so much corrupted as betrayed by the adults around him – although things start to become clearer when he reads one of the letters, against the express instructions of Ted and Marian. What Leo learns is not so much the 'facts of life', but the art of deception. Although he comes to understand about Ted and Marion's relationship, he instinctively conceals what he knows right from the outset. His knowledge gives him power over them, but he doesn't entirely realize the extent of that power, and is therefore unable to use it. The events are seen to precipitate a kind of 'breakdown', but Leo can only repress the memory: he cannot make the transition to adulthood.

On the face of it, *The Go-Between* might be accused of harking back to an imaginary 'Golden Age'. However, its portrait of the turn-of-the-century social world is far from idyllic. Hartley is implicitly critical of the class tensions and snobbery that make it necessary for Marian and Ted to continue their relationship in secret. Meanwhile, her fiancée Hugh is permanently disfigured by injuries sustained during the Boer War. The tensions between the worlds of the village and the Hall are very apparent in the climactic scenes featuring a cricket match and the party that follows it. In this respect, the book is oddly reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: Hugh resembles Clifford Chatterley, who is also injured by war; while Ted plays the part of Lawrence's gamekeeper Mellors, the embodiment of working-class

masculinity, and Marian (like Connie Chatterley) is torn between respectability and desire.

Nevertheless, Hartley's other writings suggest that his own political and moral views were firmly conservative. As the critic Daniel Williams describes, he distrusted the modern 'collectivist age', and saw the welfare state as a symptom of moral deterioration and a devaluation of individual responsibility. Coming from an upper-middle-class background, he played no part in the more rebellious literary movements of the later 1950s and 1960s. Despite the tensions it identifies, *The Go-Between* also seems to buy into a view of the twentieth century as a period of cultural decline, in which the nation lost its 'moral conscience'. It is by no means a coincidence that the book is set in the summer of 1900, at another point of transition: it evokes what Hartley describes in the introduction to a later edition of the book as 'the long stretch of fine weather, and also the confidence in life, the sense that all's well with the world, which everyone enjoyed or seemed to enjoy before the First World War'. Nostalgia is used here as the basis for a critique of the present, but it also represents a turning away from contemporary realities towards a more secure and comfortable past.

The Go-Between clearly touched a nerve at the time of its publication, but it has also sustained a long after-life in a range of media. The most well-known adaptation is the 1971 feature film, although recent years have also seen a BBC radio play (2012), a television version (2015) and even a West End musical (2016).

The film, directed by Joseph Losey from a screenplay by Harold Pinter, won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and has attracted a great deal of critical attention – perhaps even more than the book – yet it makes for rather uneasy viewing. Inevitably, a great deal is 'missing' from the novel, and Pinter's famously economical dramatic style could not be further from Hartley's rather overblown prose. The sense of discomfort and foreboding that is apparent in the novel is conveyed as much through music, disorienting editing and (strangely static) camerawork as through the action and dialogue. It is not always clear whether shots are presenting a particular character's point of view, or a more 'objective' one. At times there appears to be a tension between the film's underlying social critique of this upper-class world (which feels stronger than that of the novel) and the picturesque, chocolate-box settings.

However, the most unsettling aspect of the film is its handling of time. The film retains the book's famous opening epigraph: 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. This line is delivered at the very start in a voice-over, yet it is unclear who is speaking. The same voice intrudes briefly at a couple of points later on, yet it is not until quite late in the film that we come forward to the present, and see the adult Leo. Again, some of the 'flash-forwards' here are initially hard to decipher; and some incidents (most notably Ted's suicide, and the final resolution, in which Leo may or may not confront his past) are shown very briefly. The sense of the film as a recollection of the past remains obscure.

Some critics have seen this as a kind of 'alienation effect', distancing us from the drama in order to encourage a more rational reflection; while others have argued that the shifting between objective and subjective points of view, and the 'non-

linearity' of the narrative, are modernist devices. Personally, I find the chronology of the film confusing, and the ending quite garbled.
There is some evidence that this may have resulted from disagreements between Pinter and Losey: one wonders how much ended up on the cutting-room floor. However, the film's awkward handling of time may also reflect some of the genuine awkwardness of the original source: the relationship between past and present (and between adult and child) is by no means straightforward for Hartley either.

Reassuringly or not, much of this difficulty appears to have been ironed out in the 2015 BBC adaptation. Here, *The Go-Between* is presented as 'a nostalgic tale of lost innocence', a 'timeless love story' in which 'a young heart [is] corrupted by an adult world'. The screening was appropriately scheduled to compete with ITV's historical costume drama *Downton Abbey* – a massively popular programme whose sentimental view of the past somehow epitomises contemporary Conservatism. For all its difficulty and discomfort, *The Go-Between* is more than this.

3. *Lord of the Flies*

If *The Go-Between* uses the child as a means of access to an adult world, William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, published the following year, portrays a world where adults are entirely absent. Yet paradoxically, the figure of the child is used here not to show us anything about the realities of children's lives, but primarily as a means to make much broader metaphorical points about human society and civilization as a whole.

Lord of the Flies has enjoyed wide critical acclaim. It features regularly on lists of '100 best novels', and its author William Golding was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It has been adapted several times for the stage and radio, and there no fewer than three film versions, including a disappointing 1963 feature by the celebrated theatre director Peter Brook.

The novel tells the story of a group of British public schoolboys who find themselves marooned on an uninhabited tropical island after their plane has crashed. At first they enjoy the freedom the new situation offers them. They start organizing by holding democratic elections and blowing a conch shell to summon assemblies. Ralph is elected as leader, and Piggy, an overweight, short-sighted boy, who is constantly mocked by the others, becomes his main adviser. The boys begin by building shelters, and Ralph urges them to keep a fire burning, in the hope that it will attract attention from potential rescuers. Jack, an older boy who was defeated in the leadership election, increasingly resists Ralph's authority. He becomes the leader of a group of hunters whom he incites to chase and kill wild pigs. This group comes to believe that there is a fearful beast living in the jungle, and some of them claim to have seen it, although in fact this is only the corpse of a parachutist and his floating parachute. Simon, a rather shy and disturbed boy, also sees the 'beast', but he implies that the real beast is 'us', something within. He gradually drifts towards insanity, and is brutally murdered by the hunters who mistake him for a wild pig. The conflict between Ralph and Jack escalates. Jack's followers steal Piggy's spectacles to use for lighting a fire, and when Ralph and Piggy go to ask for them back, they throw a boulder on Piggy, sending him hurtling off the cliff and killing him. Ralph escapes,

fearing for his life, and Jack's followers set fire to the jungle to smoke him out. Just as Ralph is about to be caught, the boys are rescued by a British navy officer.

Lord of the Flies traces the boys' descent into what it calls 'savagery' in an almost schematic fashion. At the start, it seems that the 'old life' – the 'rules' and 'taboos' they have learned at home and school – still constrain the boys' behaviour. When some boys start to throw stones at one of their number, they deliberately miss their target: 'round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law'. However, these constraints are soon abandoned. Ralph and Piggy gradually lose faith in the value of meetings and orderly debate, as Jack and his followers begin to assume control. The boys are by no means 'noble savages', returning to some essential, natural childhood. Their savagery is characterized by a fear of the beast – the supernatural evil monster – that can only be overcome through the blood-lust of hunting and sacrificial rituals. Piggy's belief in logical debate and his idea that 'life's scientific' – and his faith in 'grown-ups' who 'meet and have tea and discuss' – are powerless to resist the slide into chaos.

As Jack's followers move from hunting wild pigs to bullying the other children, they are described as a 'tribe': they put on war-paint, which offers them 'liberation into savagery'; and they dance wildly as they shout blood-curdling chants. Jack comes to be seen as their 'idol' and 'chief'. On his orders, they impale a pig's head on a stake in the jungle as an offering to the beast, and when Simon finds it, decomposing and buzzing with flies, he is effectively driven mad (Beelzebub, the devil, is the literal translation of 'the lord of the flies'). The scene is very reminiscent of that in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where Kurtz confronts 'the horror'.

Lord of the Flies was written under the shadow of war and the threat of atomic destruction. The book makes little reference to the world beyond the island, yet a global conflict is clearly being waged in the skies overhead. Golding rather glosses over the reasons why the plane has crashed (or been shot down?) in the first place, although the boys suspect there has been a nuclear explosion. Meanwhile, the parachutist who drops onto the island – 'a sign… from the world of grown-ups' – has been part of an airborne battle fought ten miles above them. The navy officer who appears in the nick of time at the very end has come to their rescue, yet he will be taking the boys back to a world in which armed conflict is still continuing. Having effectively abandoned civilization in their time on the island, there is a bitter irony in the fact that they will be returning to a civilization that is described as being 'in ruins'.

Compared with *The Midwich Cuckoos*, to be considered in the following section, *Lord of the Flies* contains very little overt philosophical speculation. Yet the story is laden with such heavy-handed symbolism that it is hard to read it as much more than a schematic moral parable. While there are some elements of realism in the book's portrayal of English 1950s schoolboys (Golding was a teacher at the time he wrote it), this is over-ridden by the self-conscious allegory. Thus, Ralph is the good democratic politician, who is worthy but rather dull. Occasionally indecisive and unconfident (he sometimes forgets why it is necessary to keep the fire alight), he needs the rational brain of Piggy to support him. The conch, which he uses to call assemblies and to regulate who is allowed to speak, is symbolically shattered by Jack's followers as they assume control; and they later steal and smash Piggy's

glasses, which symbolize wisdom (and also help to light the fire). Jack, meanwhile, is impatient with 'talk'. He represents brute physical power, and eventually becomes a quasi-fascist dictator: 'power lay in the brown swell of his forearms; authority sat on his shoulder and chattered in his ear like an ape'. His followers leave the fire (symbolizing the hope of survival and a return to civilization) to extinguish itself; although as light gives way to darkness, they later set fire to the jungle, causing uncontrollable destruction.

The ideas of childhood and adulthood are also invoked here. Piggy frequently voices the perspective of 'grown-ups' against what he calls the 'crowd of kids'. What would grown-ups do in such a situation, he asks; what would grown-ups think of them? Grown-ups, he argues, would carry on, while kids simply give up. Yet it is Simon who expresses the ultimate 'lesson' of this parable: the beast, he argues, is within us. Human beings, Golding implies, are essentially and innately 'savages'. At the very end of the book, Ralph weeps 'for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy'. Golding appears to have seen his story in almost fundamentalist, religious terms. As he wrote in a later reflection on the book:

> *Man is a fallen being. He is gripped by original sin. His nature is sinful and his state perilous… I looked round me for some convenient form in which this thesis might be worked out, and found it in the play of children.*

Perhaps the most obvious literary precedent for *Lord of the Flies* is R.M Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, a children's classic first published in 1858. The book is mentioned a couple of times in Golding's novel, and in some ways *Lord of the Flies* can be seen as a sardonic, dystopian version of *Coral Island*, or even a parodic inversion of it. The naval officer who appears at the very end says he is disturbed by the fact that the children have not behaved in a very 'British' way: it has not been a 'jolly good show, like the Coral Island'. Where Ballantyne's children follow the Victorian moral code, and create a rational social order, Golding's manifestly fail. While *Lord of the Flies* reaffirms the need for rationality and the rule of law, it ultimately despairs of humanity's ability to withstand savagery.

The fact that *Lord of the Flies* lends itself so easily so this kind of literary explication might well account for its lasting popularity in educational settings. The book is routinely assigned as a required text in secondary schools, and at one point became known as 'The Lord of the Campus' in US universities. There are countless study guides available, and the internet is chock-full of student essays and video presentations dutifully explicating the symbolism, outlining the narrative structure, and sketching the characters. The book also seems to provide excellent material for intense moralistic debates about the inherent evil of humanity. Children learn that civilization is precarious, that evil is inherent, and that achieving goodness is a struggle. (Is the beast within? Discuss.)

Perhaps ironically in light of this, the book has also been banned from some schools. In some instances, the objections appear to be political: the book has been condemned as racist (Jack's followers are described at one point as 'painted Indians' and 'niggers') and accused of reflecting contempt for indigenous peoples (through its portrayal of 'savages'). More implausibly, it has also been accused of misogyny, in that

it has no female characters; and of 'ableism' in its portrayal of Piggy. However, most objections appear to come from Christian teachers who are concerned about the violence, 'inappropriate' language (the word 'bollocks' appears once) and the book 'sending the wrong message' through its unpalatable view of human sinfulness. In turn, these arguments provide further fodder for improving educational tasks: there are numerous student essays and videos online debating whether or not the book should be banned.

Even so, it is debatable whether *Lord of the Flies* really speaks to children, or whether its author was even interested in doing so. It might provide an accessible means of teaching basic literary analysis, and even a platform for some rather fatuous moral debates. It is possible that younger readers might 'identify' with Ralph or Piggy, perhaps. Yet ultimately, children provide merely a 'convenient form' for Golding's broader philosophical concerns: the fact that all the characters in the book are children hardly seems to matter.

4. *The Midwich Cuckoos*

The fictional world of John Wyndham's novel *The Midwich Cuckoos*, published in 1957, is a very long way from that of *Lord of the Flies*. But, like Golding, Wyndham is primarily concerned with fundamental questions about the future of the human race – questions for which the figure of the child provides a useful and challenging focus.

The action begins when all the inhabitants of the small English village of Midwich suddenly fall unconscious. When they come round several hours later, they seem unaffected, but gradually all women of child-bearing age in the village are discovered to be pregnant. They all give birth on the same day; and their children share an unusual appearance, including glowing golden eyes, pale skin and platinum blond hair. The children develop unnaturally quickly, and they can communicate telepathically with each other: as one learns something, so do the others. Eventually, they abandon the homes of their adoptive parents for a school run by the Ministry of Defence, where they are taught by a local man, Professor Gordon Zellaby. For the most part, the children remain silent about their motivations. However, there is a series of increasingly violent encounters with the villagers, in which the children telepathically force their attackers to turn their weapons on themselves. Meanwhile, Zellaby learns from the Ministry about the existence of other villages with similar groups of children. While most have died, the Soviet Union has destroyed its own brood when it became apparent that the children's powers were too much for it to control. Ultimately, Zellaby decides he must do the same: he hides a bomb in his projection equipment, and detonates it while showing the children an educational film, killing himself and all of the children.

On the basis of this summary, *The Midwich Cuckoos* might sound like an action-packed sci-fi yarn: sinister, mind-controlling aliens attack a peaceful English village, and engage in a violent struggle for survival. In fact, it is something rather different. Much of the action takes place 'offstage', and is reported by the characters at second hand, almost in the manner of a Greek tragedy: for much of the time, the reader learns about what is happening indirectly, rather than actually 'witnessing' events. As the novel proceeds, increasing amounts of the narrative are taken up with lengthy

speculative dialogues between Zellaby and the other characters, not so much about *why* these strange events are occurring, but about their wider significance for the future of the human race. At first, Zellaby is portrayed as academically pompous and impractical, and his interpretations are challenged, but his voice ultimately becomes the dominant one. John Wyndham himself described the book as a 'logical fantasy' – a kind of 'what would happen if…' story that he perceived to derive from the work of H.G. Welles. It is very much a novel of ideas rather than of realistic characters or emotions.

Wyndham was famously (and dismissively) described by the science fiction writer Brian Aldiss as 'the master of the cosy catastrophe'. However, this is to understate the dystopian, even apocalyptic elements of his writing. As in *Lord of the Flies*, it is the prospect of the destruction of the human race – through the atomic bomb, or (in this case) in a struggle for dominance with a more powerful species – that motivates the story. And, like Golding's novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos* seems to have little faith in the value of liberal democracy as a means of resisting such a fate.

Politically, Wyndham is probably best described as an old-fashioned liberal, but his ideas were particularly informed by a version of Darwinism that is apparent throughout the novel, and indeed in his other works such as *The Crysalids* and *Day of the Triffids*. Nature, Zellaby informs us, is no cosy matter: 'each species must strive to survive, and that it will do, by every means in its power, however foul'. The cuckoo-children have a shared consciousness, a form of 'collective-individualism' that makes them more efficient and powerful than humans. Ultimately, they cannot be brought under the control of human laws, and so they have to be exterminated. Zellaby perceives himself to be involved in a 'primaeval' struggle for the preservation of the species; and in this context, liberal scruples are merely a handicap.

Thus, after it emerges that the Russians have destroyed their own group of children (along with the inhabitants of the remote town in which they were living), one of the Midwich children explains to him why this will prove more difficult for the British:

> *In Russia, the individual exists to serve the State; if he puts self above State, he is a traitor, and it is the duty of the community to protect itself from traitors whether they are individuals, or groups. In this case, then, biological duty and political duty coincided…*
> *But for you, the issue is less clear. Not only has your will to survive been much more deeply submerged by convention, but you have the inconvenience here of the idea that the State exists to serve the individuals who compose it. Therefore your consciences will be troubled by the thought that we have "rights".*

Another child goes on to explain how governments, whether of Left or Right, will be constrained by political expediency and the need to appeal to conflicting groups of voters, and will ultimately be unable to destroy them in the way the Russians have done. Zellaby defines this as a 'moral dilemma': it is humans' duty to exterminate the children, because they represent a threat to the species; yet human culture presents 'scruples about the ruthless liquidation of unarmed minorities'; and moving the children elsewhere would be a form of 'evasive procrastination which lacks any moral courage at all.' Liberal democracy, it seems, is ill-equipped to cope with such a challenge; and Zellaby's ultimate choice, while on one level an act of heroism, also

accords with the children's Darwinian logic. (Again, there are notable parallels here with *Lord of the Flies*.)

In this context, the figure of the child becomes a vehicle – even a cipher – for these wider concerns. These are, self-evidently, not normal children, a fact that is signaled in the novel by the use of the capital letter: they are the Children. They appear attentive to adults, but they cannot be controlled by adult discipline, and they develop alarmingly quickly (although it should be noted that their appearance is also disturbingly Aryan, especially in the film version). As they mature, the children display fewer and fewer child-like characteristics, aside from a continuing taste for candy, which Zellaby gives them just before he detonates his bomb: in doing so, he reminds himself that 'they are still children – with a small "c" – too'.

Along with the critic Miles Link, one might see these fictional Children as a manifestation of parental fears of the power of a new, post-War generation – a generation that has not known war, that is better educated and healthier than their parents. In this account, *The Midwich Cuckoos* is a kind of early warning of the generational conflicts of the decade to come. Alternatively, like Steven Bruhm, we might regard them as examples of the 'possessed' (or 'self-possessed') children that frequently recur in gothic science fiction and horror genres (*The Omen*, *The Exorcist*, *Poltergeist*): they might be seen to represent a kind of adult terror of children's power, and even a form of child-hatred. Ultimately, however, I would argue that their status as 'children' hardly matters. As Zellaby observes, they are not invading Martians (as in Welles), nor indeed are they menacing alien 'pod-people' (as in the contemporaneous *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*); but they are similarly understood as representatives of a superior alien species.

The Midwich Cuckoos was filmed as *Village of the Damned* (directed by Wolf Rilla, released in 1960). The film generated a sequel, *Children of the Damned* (1964), which bears little relation to the novel, and an American remake, directed by John Carpenter in 1995. The 1960 film was due to be produced by MGM in Hollywood, until religious groups objected to the portrayal of the virgin births; it was eventually made in the UK. Compared with the book, the narration of the film is much more conventional. Details are obviously missing, but the viewer is shown events directly as they occur rather than being told about them retrospectively or at second hand. As a result, the story is much more taut and economical: the film is a mere 74 minutes long. Zellaby, played with characteristic British stiff-upper-lip by George Sanders, does engage in debate with other characters, but Wyndham's philosophical speculations are almost wholly absent. Here, Zellaby becomes a much more familiar science-fiction stereotype, the voice of 'science': he wants to study the children on the grounds that this will advance scientific knowledge, and potentially solve the world's problems.

The film was also marketed as conventional science fiction. 'Beware the stare that threatens all mankind', booms the American voice on the trailer. The children are 'demon forces of another world': 'could any force on earth stop their supernatural fury?' Apparently the UK censors removed the 'glowing eyes' effect superimposed on the children at key moments, although it was retained in the US version; and it appears in the final shot of the film, as pairs of eyes float away from the burning school, presumably flying off to generate mayhem elsewhere…

5. Conclusion

The novels and films considered in this essay have been fairly disparate, covering a range of media genres. All of them centre on representations of children – although with the exception of *Mandy*, they seem to tell us fairly little about the realities of children's lives in the period in which they were made. In all of them, the figure of the child is used primarily as a cipher for broader hopes and fears about social change, and even about the future of the human race itself. If the optimism of *Mandy* has to be earned through a process of struggle, the others are much more profoundly pessimistic.

And yet in different ways, each of these texts reflects some of the underlying tensions of the period – a period that is often represented as stable and secure. The shadow of the Second World War hangs over *Mandy*, while the threat of nuclear destruction lies just off-stage in *Lord of the Flies* and the *Midwich Cuckoos*. And even though it is mostly set in another historical period, *The Go-Between* seems to be informed by its author's nostalgic critique of the present, twentieth century world. In these respects, the figure of the child is a kind of metaphor for concerns that are quite particular to their time. How this cultural use of the child both recurs and evolves will be considered in subsequent essays on *Growing Up Modern.*

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