The Fifth Child Study Guide

The Fifth Child by Doris Lessing

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This short novel is the metaphor-rich story of a traditional family torn apart by the arrival of an angry, violent, destructive child. As parents Harriet and David struggle to hold together both the family and their own personal values, the narrative draws implied metaphorical parallels between that family's particular experience and the experiences of society in general, along the way also exploring the issues of idealism vs. practicality and the relationship between society and those society perceives as different.

The narrative begins with a description of how the similarly watchful Harriet and David meet at a rowdy office party, immediately realize that they are very much kindred spirits, and make plans to marry and have a large family. Those plans come to fruition sooner than they plan when, on the day they complete the purchase of the large home they want to fill with children, they make love and Harriet conceives their first child.

After convincing David's divorced parents and Harriet's widowed mother to support their plans, Harriet and David expand their family at a rapid rate, bring four children (Luke, Helen, Jane and Paul) into their home in quick succession and with relative ease. As the family grows, so too does the list of the family's guests during summer, Easter, and Christmas vacations. Harriet's fifth pregnancy, however, is much more difficult than the other four, and she finds herself in such near-constant pain that the large family celebrations have to be postponed. When the fifth child is finally born, his strength, anger, and capacity for violence, even when he's nursing, alienates everyone, including his mother. Nevertheless, he is named Ben and is offered as much love, support and time as his siblings. Ben's violent and destructive nature, however, makes him unable to accept those offers. Eventually, Harriet reluctantly allows him to be taken from her and placed in an institution. For a while the family is happy, but Harriet misses her son too much and, over David's objections, retrieves Ben from what she believes to be a life of inevitable, painful suffering and death.

It takes a while for Ben to readjust to life back home, and for his siblings to readjust to having him there. He eventually becomes as much a part of the family as he can be, learning to speak and to get along with his brothers and sisters. They, however, never fully adjust to having him around and, one by one, make arrangements to attend boarding school and/or live with their grandparents.

As Harriet's life becomes more and more defined by taking care of Ben, David's life becomes more and more independent of the life lived at home. Occasional attempts to recapture the closeness and intimacy he and Harriet once shared inevitably end in failure, recrimination and sadness. Ben, meanwhile, starts school and makes a couple of friends that, much to the relief of the family, take him away from the house for increasingly lengthy periods of time.

Years later, when Ben enters secondary school, the family's home life is virtually gone, with only Harriet being there regularly. Ben, meanwhile, becomes involved with a gang of teenaged boys who, like him, have difficulty functioning in school. Soon they are

spending more and more time on the streets, as well as more and more time sponging off Harriet. David, meanwhile, strives to convince Harriet to move out of the house and give up on the dream of a large extended family. Eventually she agrees, also coming to accept the inevitability of Ben being fully absorbed into his gang, finding a violent and self-sufficient home of sorts with them and others of their kind in other cities, or other parts of the world.

Part 1, p. 1 - 18

Part 1, p. 1 - 18 Summary

This short novel is the metaphor-rich story of a traditional family torn apart by the arrival of an angry, violent, destructive child. As parents Harriet and David struggle to hold together both the family and their own personal values, the narrative draws implied metaphorical parallels between that family's particular experience and the experiences of society in general, along the way also exploring the issues of idealism vs. practicality and the relationship between society and those society perceives as different.

In mid-1960's London, Harriet and David meet at an office Christmas party, where they see each other from across a room crowded with dancing, drinking people and recognize, as they study each other, that they are fundamentally quite similar (see "Quotes", p. 3), quiet and reserved people watching quietly as the sex-and-drugs Sixties spin and whirl around them. Narration describes David's past affair with a woman who, after their breakup, seemed to have sexual affairs with just about everyone (men and women both) in the firm where they worked, while Harriet was a virgin (see "Quotes", p. 5). At exactly the same moment, they make their way through the crowd, meet, and withdraw to a quiet room. There they talk until the party is over, go back to David's flat, lie on his bed and talk, occasionally kissing and agreeing to marry, and finally falling asleep. "They were made for each other."

Soon after meeting and marrying, Harriet and David begin to make their shared dream (of a large family in a large home outside of London) into a reality. Narration describes why this dream is so important to each of them - David, a child of a friendly divorce, and Harriet, one of three daughters of a now widowed mother and determined to maintain a life of safety and stability. They find a large, multi-story house that they believe is perfect for them and the five or six children they both want to have, realize that it's going to be a real financial hardship to afford it and keep it going, but buy it anyway. On the day the deal closes, they make love in the large customized bed that can't be removed from the house, and Harriet immediately becomes pregnant, disrupting their plan of waiting for two years. They enlist the help of David's parents - his father James, married to the wealthy Jessica, agrees to take on the house's mortgage, while his mother Molly, married to the bohemian Frederick, provides disapproval (see "Quotes", p. 12). Several months later, when Harriet is eight months pregnant, her mother Dorothy (sensitive and wise) visits. She tries to warn Harriet and David of the struggles they are about to face, but they don't take her insights entirely to heart. Shortly afterwards, around Christmas time, their first child Luke is born, in the big bed. "It was 1966."

Part 1, p. 1 - 18 Analysis

As discussed in "Style - Language and Meaning", there is a sense of fairy tale-ness about this first section, a "once upon a time" kind of gentle hurry, of almost brushing

over key events (i.e. David's and Harriet's courtship and marriage, the birth of their first child) so that the narrative can, as it were, get to "the good stuff". There is the sense here that this fairy-tale language echoes the fairy-tale ideals of the central characters, ideals which, as the narrative eventually reveals, bring them into conflict with the realities of society and, arguably, of the human race. Meanwhile, as the narrative introduces two of its three main characters (David and Harriet) and its important setting in time (see "Style - Setting"), it also introduces one of its key themes - the tension between idealism and reality (see "Themes").

Other important elements worth noting include the introduction of the sexual relationship between Harriet and David, which is portrayed at first as the way in which their personal intimacy is so lovingly expressed. Later, when their emotional and physical energies are consumed by caring for Ben, the couple's LACK of a sexual relationship becomes a key trigger for them, and the reader, to realize that the once-strong emotional connection that might have helped them overcome that lack (not to mention the revulsion they feel towards their son) has gone missing. Finally, there are the introductions of the many supporting characters on both sides of the small, young family, characters which later play important roles in the narrative and which are sketched in with vivid, telling brevity here and throughout the book.

Part 2, p. 18 - 48

Part 2, p. 18 - 48 Summary

The following Easter, David and Harriet host the first of many family parties established to celebrate special occasions. They enjoy the house full of family, sisters and brothers-in-law and their children, all the while keeping a secret - that they are again pregnant. When they reveal the news after everyone has left, Dorothy offers to come and help out whenever she can. David and Harriet gratefully accept, and a few months later, Helen is born. The parties continue, albeit with occasional undercurrents of discontent - Harriet's sister Sarah is in an unhappy marriage. Meanwhile, David and Harriet's third child, Jane, is born in 1970, and even though it's a struggle in many ways, David and Harriet remain grateful for what their life has become (see "Quotes", p. 21).

Shortly after the birth of the fourth child, Paul (in 1973), Harriet's and David's extended family is gathered around the large dining room table. Harriet's sister Sarah is there, with her frequently estranged husband William and Amy, their newly born, Downs Syndrome daughter. With all the parents there as well as other extended family members, a complex discussion ensues about whether David and Harriet are doing the right thing, and about how they're going to pay for all their children, including their education. The discussion triggers no answers, and the family goes on a picnic.

A few months later, Harriet is pregnant yet again, going through even more discomfort than with her other difficult pregnancies. After Dorothy returns from a brief holiday, Harriet withdraws from family life, convincing David that this baby is more active earlier, and more aggressively, than her other children (see "Quotes", p. 35 - 36). She consults her doctor, who advises her to take it easy, which she does, much to the resentment and discomfort of the family when they all gather for the usual holiday festivities. Harriet, starts taking tranquillizers and exercising heavily in order to distract herself from the pain of this child (see "Quotes", p. 41).

One night, as the family gathers around the dinner table, a minor argument erupts over whether the household will have its usual family gatherings over the summer while Harriet is experiencing this difficult pregnancy. Harriet wants to, but David says it would be best not. Harriet says she'll be fine as long as the baby is early, and shortly afterwards goes to her doctor to ask for it to be induced. At first the doctor is reluctant, saying the baby is really no different from Harriet's other children. Harriet insists that this baby is, and imagines how she can get it out of her (see "Quotes", p. 48). A short while later, the baby makes it clear that it is ready to come. Harriet has a difficult time, ("...inside she must be one enormous black bruise - and no-one would ever know"), but in the end, the baby boy is born ("he came out fighting the whole world").

Part 2, p. 18 - 48 Analysis

The sense of fairy tale about the narrative continues in this section, although in the way of most fairy tales, the initial equilibrium and/or balance of the situation begins to change, fear begins to be felt, and there is the sense that a storm of some sort is brewing. Specific elements worth noting in this section include the introduction of Amy, who is simultaneously a parallel and a contrast to Ben and whose appearance here foreshadows an even more telling appearance later in the narrative (see Part 3), and the reference to Harriet's ways of coping with the stressful pregnancy - heavy drugs and heavy exercise. There is some question as to whether either had any impact on Ben's gestation, and therefore on his identity/nature when he is finally born, but it's important to note that both the drugs and the exercise come into Harriet's life AFTER she experiences the violence and intensity of this particular pregnancy. In other words, there is no clear evidence to unequivocally indicate that Ben's nature in the world has anything to do with his nature in the womb. That said, the comment that Harriet feels like she is heavily bruised internally can be seen as metaphoric foreshadowing of the inner emotional "bruising" she experiences several times later in the narrative as the result of the treatment she receives at the hands of both Ben and the world.

All that said, it's important to note that the end of this section marks the end, once and for all, of Harriet and David's idealized dream of a blissfully happy large family. It's also important to note that it takes them both a long time to realize just how over it really is, although David figures out the truth much sooner than the determinedly idealistic Harriet.

Part 3, p. 48 - 76

Part 3, p. 48 - 76 Summary

The new baby seems physically somewhat misshapen, his hair grows in awkward patterns, and there is no sense of recognition between mother and child. Harriet feels pity for him, "his mother disliking him so much". That dislike doesn't ease as the months pass, and Ben, as the baby is named, reveals himself to be emotionally and physically violent (at times deliberately so) and, in many ways, repulsive - the family finds it as difficult and as uncomfortable to hold him as they find it pleasurable to hold the sweet tempered and laughing Paul. The other children, Luke and Helen in particular, find it harder and harder to give affection to their new little brother, as does Harriet, who takes to shutting him away in the small nursery, which he doesn't seem to mind. Meanwhile, the visits of the extended family continue, but last for shorter periods because everyone is affected by the awkwardness that Ben has brought into the home. David and Harriet are particularly affected, their patterns of intimacy completely disrupted in part by Ben's presence, in part by their thoughts of him (see "Quotes", p. 58).

As Ben gets older, he becomes more emotionally demanding, physically stronger, and more repulsive - fewer and fewer people come to visit, and when they do, they stay for much shorter periods of time. Bars have to be put on the doors and window of his room to keep him from escaping; on two separate occasions, two pets are killed; at one point, Ben sprains Paul's arms; and the whole time Harriet, in spite of the doctor's assurances that Ben is physically normal, becomes more determined to love him into normalcy.

Dorothy convinces Harriet and David to take the rest of the family on a trip to France and leave her with Ben. The family goes, and Harriet rejoices in having her family back. When the family returns, they are surprised to see that Dorothy has been bruised, and are both surprised and hurt when she says unequivocally that Ben has to go into an institution. As they reflect on what to do, Harriet realizes that she has been increasingly neglecting her other children, and becomes determined to have a busy, happy, playful Christmas like the ones they used to have. And she almost does - Sarah and William bring Amy, whose happy affection inspires everyone to love her in the same way as Ben's surly anger and violence make everyone dislike him. Amy seems to sense the difference in Ben and is herself repelled by him, as is the dog brought to yet another family function ... the one at which the entire family is watching as Ben, who is now talking, approaches the dog with the clear intention of doing it harm.

In the aftermath of Ben's attack on the dog, everyone on both sides of the family (David's and Harriet's) try to convince Harriet that it's time to put Ben into an institution. James agrees to shoulder most of the financial burden, and Molly and Frederick agree to contribute. Harriet is eventually convinced, and Molly and Frederick make the arrangements, finding an institution that will take Ben within a couple of days. When Harriet protests the speed with which it's all happening, David says firmly that it's either Ben or the family. Meanwhile, Harriet is "silently taking in the fact ... that Ben was not

expected to live long in this institution ..." As Harriet and David`s conversation falls into silence, they become aware of Helen and Luke playing a noisy game outside. They watch as they erupt into a safe kind of violence, then hurry into the warmth of the house (see "Quotes", p. 75). The parents embrace their children ... and the next day, a van arrives to take Ben away.

Part 3, p. 48 - 76 Analysis

The narrative's thematic exploration of the treatment received by those perceived as "different" at the hands of those perceived as "normal" kicks into high gear in this section, with the responses of the various members of Ben's family revealing an unwillingness to even try to accommodate who he is, an unwillingness rooted in revulsion, ignorance, or both. Only the still-idealistic Harriet strives to transcend her own sense of being repelled by her child, but here it's important to note that she does so not out of any sense of fierce, loyal maternal love, but out of a sense of justified devotion - out of necessity and propriety, rather than need and compassion. This sense of misguided idealism continues and intensifies in the next section, as her determination to do what she thinks is morally correct outweighs her love for her family, her experience of happiness, and her family's renewed contentment. The question the novel poses, of course, is whether she's wrong to do what she does - see "Topics for Discussion - Debate whether Harriet is right or wrong ..."

Other important points to note include the presence of Amy who, as previously discussed, provides and/or triggers an important and telling contrast to Ben and whose treatment, it must also be noted, prevents the novel from becoming a complete diatribe against society's treatment of the different. Does Amy's little story, however, make the suggestion that only those who are different and NICE get treated well? Then there is the irony of the hippy-ish, bohemian Molly and Frederick (whose ostensible social philosophy is anchored in a belief that everyone deserves to be treated with respect) taking the lead in arranging for Ben to be placed in the institution. Finally, there is the complete abdication by David of the dreams he once passionately, and unconditionally, shared with Harriet. There is the sense, in both this and the actions of Molly and Frederick, that the novel is suggesting that no matter what the idealistic veneer, self-interest, judgmental-ness and cruelty are only a short step or two away ... a step taken, again ironically, in the direction of behaviors exhibited by Ben. There is irony, therefore, in the final moments of this section, in which Luke and Helen are portrayed as entering, albeit briefly, the animal side of being human but shortly afterwards rejoining their parents, engaged as they are in the important pursuit of anchoring their lives in the human side of being animals.

Part 4, p. 76 - 96

Part 4, p. 76 - 96 Summary

For a while, the home of the Lovatt family is much happier and more peaceful than it has been since Ben was born (see "Quotes", p. 77). It isn't long, however, before Harriet becomes intensely curious about what the institution where Ben is is like. After a long drive north in cold, rainy weather, Harriet arrives at the institution (see "Objects/Places") and is eventually allowed inside. While the attendants are going off to prepare Ben, Harriet finds her way into a ward lined with beds, each of which is filled by "monsters" (see "Quotes", p. 81). Eventually, she tracks down the two attendants and Ben, and is shocked to see her son wrapped in a straitjacket, covered in excrement, and heavily drugged. After watching him being forced through a bath, Harriet announces her decision to take him home. The attendants advise her against it, but she insists, bundling him up and taking some sedative with her, which she has to use in the car when he wakes and starts thrashing and screaming. When she gets home, the rest of the family is upset to see that she has brought Ben with her, and becomes even more so when, over the next few days, she spends more time with him and less time with them. When she talks about how Ben was being killed in the institution, David accuses her of being blind (see "Quotes", p. 87), and moves out of their bedroom. Eventually, Harriet manages to retrain Ben in the ways of his home, and the other children gradually come to accept him. But he and David, narration comments, never trusted each other again.

Shortly afterwards, Harriet makes arrangements with a local boy named John (who does work in the family garden and whom Ben likes) to take care of him during the day. John takes Ben in the mornings and together they hang out with John's motor-biking friends, Harriet knowing that they treat him as a kind of jokey servant, but also that he's happier. Meanwhile, she and David take a week's vacation for themselves, reconnecting with the tenderness that they once had but, at the same time, becoming aware of just how much Harriet has hurt David and the family by bringing Ben home. When they return home, Harriet plans a summer holiday for the extended family that she tries desperately to make as much like the old holidays as possible, but she and David welcome only a few visitors. Harriet, however, manages to convince herself that things are close to normal. "In fact," narration comments, "those two years before Ben went to school were not too bad: afterwards [Harriet] looked back on them gratefully."

Part 4, p. 76 - 96 Analysis

The description of the conditions of the unnamed institution, and of its inhabitants, is notable for its vivid, uncompromising starkness. The miserable weather in which Harriet travels to and from the institution is evocative of the emotional misery she finds when she arrives, and is a foreshadowing of both her visit and her return home. After reading the description of Ben's new "home" the reader can be in little disagreement with

Harriet's spontaneous, in-the-moment reasons for doing what she does. Whether the reader agrees with the decision when the home life with Ben, both before and after his absence, is taken into account is another matter - again, see "Topics for Discussion - Debate whether Harriet is right or wrong ..."

Other important elements in this section include the introduction of John, whose treatment of Ben provides another variation on the book's thematic consideration of how the "different" are treated by the "normal" - as a kind of mascot, or constant joke. At least, as Harriet notes, Ben is relatively happy, both aspects of his life (the gang, his happiness) foreshadowing the similar situation in which he finds himself in the novel's final section. Then there are the deepening divides between Harriet and her husband, Harriet and her immediate family, and Harriet and her extended family. There is the sense here that on some level, the novel is suggesting that blind, stubborn adherence to idealism is alienating and ultimately not right, a statement which, if one goes back to the beginning of the novel (in which such adherence was, to a point, celebrated) can be seen as more than slightly ironic. Finally, there are the ominous warnings of the final lines of this section, foreshadowing of deepening trouble to come.

Part 5, p. 96 - 120

Part 5, p. 96 - 120 Summary

When Luke and Helen are thirteen and eleven respectively, they ask to go to boarding school because they don't like Ben (as Luke says). Harriet and David protest, because it goes against everything they want for their family, but since the fees are being paid by James and by Molly, the arrangements are made. Paul, meanwhile, is constantly fearful of Ben and in a state of needy upset - everyone knows, narration comments, that Harriet was too busy taking care of Ben to be a good mother to her other son. Meanwhile, Harriet takes Ben to the doctor, saying she wants confirmation that Ben is not entirely human - that he is some kind of throwback to something that existed before humans did. The doctor, of course, doesn't agree, and Harriet and Ben go home. Shortly afterwards, Ben is made to start school in spite of his angry resistance, and for a while gets along well. But one day he gets into a rage and breaks the arm of a girl. He is sent home, and only a threat from Harriet to send him back to the institution, and a firm talk from John, calms him down and convinces him, at least for a while, to behave.

Shortly afterwards, Harriet takes Ben to see a specialist, having decided that she's fed up with dealing with Ben on her own (see "Quotes", p. 103) but coming away disappointed when she again demands confirmation of her belief that Ben is some kind of throwback and the doctor says the problem is that Harriet doesn't like her own child. As she leaves, however, Harriet sees the truth of the doctor's feelings in her face (see "Quotes", p. 107). Back at home, tensions between Paul and Ben get worse, with Ben at one point seeming to be trying to kill Paul and David taking on even more work to help pay for the psychiatric help he and Harriet decide to get for Paul. Meanwhile, the other children (Luke, Helen and Jane) spend more and more time at the homes of various grandparents, and Ben becomes violently despondent when John and his buddies leave town to take a training course. For their part, David and Harriet occasionally feel flashes of their former closeness (see "Quotes", p. 112), in spite of David's increasing corporate success and harder, more confident, exterior which, Harriet convinces herself, conceals and protects the loving side of him she continues to love.

After a weekend of separate visits to their absent children, Harriet and David come home to warnings from Dorothy (who had been taking care of Ben) that Ben was no longer the child they thought he was. Again, Harriet voices her belief that Ben is a throwback to some kind of ancient pre-human, and again her idea is dismissed. Meanwhile, tension between Ben and Paul continues, even when the rest of the family arrives for another summer holiday, and even when Harriet sees a glimpse of the animal side of Ben (when he climbs out of a window up onto the roof). At one point, Harriet confesses to David that she believes Ben came into their lives as a punishment for believing they could actually be happy. David angrily argues that it was purely a random happening, and sides with the other members of the family who suggest it's time to move to a smaller house. Harriet refuses, and David "knew that even now, though it was foolish, she could not finally give up her dreams of the old life coming back."

Part 5, p. 96 - 120 Analysis

In this section the author, through Harriet, introduces several ideas about the possibilities of Ben's origins that, at first glance, might seem somewhat fanciful or unlikely. These include the idea that he is a throwback to some kind of ancient ancestor, that he is some kind of mystical creature (a troll or a goblin), or that he is a kind of punishment for hubris (arrogance in the face of power). On one level, these can all be seen as Harriet's desperate attempts to justify and/or rationalize the nature of her son's existence, to find at least some kind of explanation for why he is who and what he is. On another level, it's possible to glimpse a grain of truth in at least some of these ideas - there is, for example, scientific proof that ancient, prehistoric genetic coding continues to exist and/or make itself felt in contemporary human DNA. And Harriet's belief that she and David are somehow being punished for self-righteousness, for blindness or for arrogance echoes beliefs shared by practitioners of religious beliefs almost from time immemorial - don't place yourself among the gods, these beliefs say, otherwise the gods will find a way to strike you down. Ultimately, what the book doesn't seem to suggest but which must at least be discussed is that sometimes, things just happen, good things and bad things alike, and that there is not always an explanation. The thing is, and this is what Harriet faces here, acceptance of life having randomly thrown a wrench into idealism and dreams often means the prospect of abandoning those dreams. Harriet has fought to maintain that idealism and pursue those dreams to a degree that some might describe as delusional and others might more charitably describe as valiant. In the next and final section, Harriet comes to a conclusion that the former might describe as long overdue and realistic, that the latter might describe as cowardly and irresponsible, and the parental might describe as inevitable and ultimately right - she decides to move on, and to let her son go.

Part 6, p. 120 - 133

Part 6, p. 120 - 133 Summary

In 1986, Ben begins secondary school, and finds himself not only in a group of students who exist and function outside the usual school activities (see "Quotes", p. 120) but a member of a gang of young men who, as time passes and as Harriet watches, become rougher and rougher. They spend a great deal of time at the house, taking advantage of the available television, the space around the large table, the food, and at one point, of the large number of bedrooms (although Harriet soon puts a stop to that). Soon Ben is spending less and less time at home, on occasion being away for days at a time, his visits often corresponding, Harriet realizes, with news of violence and/or robbery in another part of the country.

Meanwhile, David continues to pressure Harriet to sell the house. For a while Harriet holds out hope that their other children will want to come home, but David (who, Harriet realizes to her shock, has become old) insists, and eventually Harriet agrees. Meanwhile, Ben seems to be becoming something of a leader in his gang (see "Quotes", p. 122), with Harriet watching them, on the rare occasions they come back to the house, from her vantage point at the large kitchen table (see "Quotes", p. 129 - 1). She comes to realize that she too has become old (see "Quotes", p. 129 - 2) and, at the same time, becomes even more convinced that Ben is a descendant of ancient, violent, angry pre-humans. She wonders what will happen to him once she and David leave the house, aware that at some point he and his gang might very well be captured by the police ... or, on the other hand, escape the country and move to another, "join the underworld there, live off their wits" (see "Quotes", p, 131).

The novel concludes with Harriet wondering whether she will ever see Ben on television "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".

Part 6, p. 120 - 133 Analysis

Two important symbols, glimpsed only briefly throughout the rest of the narrative, take on additional layers of meaning and importance in this final section. The first is the television which, as discussed in "Objects/Places", is at first absent in David and Harriet's home but which, as Ben matures and becomes more violent, turn out to play a greater and greater role in both family life in general and his life in particular. Is there a connection? The novel clearly seems to suggest there is, with its frequent reiterations of how violence on the TV attracts the most attention not only from Ben and his gang but also from fragile Paul, who takes refuge in TV programming from his fear of Ben and his grief at the loss of closeness with Harriet. There is the sense, in fact, that the novel is interested in portraying television as a fundamental catalyst for societal deterioration and/or the manifestation of humanity's animal nature as metaphorically embodied in

Ben. This, in turn, underscores the profound irony of the novel's final lines, as Harriet contemplates the possibility of connecting with her son solely through his image on television.

The second important symbol which has its fuller meaning revealed here is the dining room table (again, see "Objects/Places"). Throughout the narrative, it has appeared at times of family gathering, occasions of crisis and occasions of celebration alike. Ultimately, though, it has remained constant and unchanging, a symbol of the dream of a large happy family kept fiercely alive by Harriet and with dwindling, candle-lit hope by David. Here, the table and all it represents is revealed to be first, something to be used and exploited by those who find no real value in the security and/or meaning of tradition, and second, something ultimately to be abandoned, as Harriet finally sees no choice but to abandon her long cherished dreams and ideals.

The question, of course, is whether the reader is meant to feel happy, at least to some degree, that Ben has found himself a community where he not only belongs, but is welcome and, indeed, celebrated. It's ironic indeed that he has achieved this point in his life within the context of brutalization and violence, but ultimately, does the experience of belonging trump, or over-value, the experience of violence and amorality within which the experience of belonging takes place?

Characters

Harriet

Harriet is the novel's central character and protagonist. Her name is, perhaps, indicative of her apparent nature and identity as portrayed in the narration ... old fashioned, traditional, perhaps a little withdrawn or shy. Interestingly, however, and as the story unfolds, she is also portrayed as being profoundly passionate, unwaveringly determined to make her long-cherished dream of a full, busy family life come true. She pursues this dream in the face of several, increasingly daunting obstacles. These include a shortage of money, resistance from family members and, in the novel's later sections, the inability of Ben, the "fifth child" of the title, to accept the life and the love that she and her husband David have to offer. In this sense, she is what might be described as a typical, or traditional, protagonist, a central character pursuing a single goal through increasing obstacles to a point of either success or failure.

On another level, however, there is the arguable possibility that Harriet, like almost all of the novel's primary elements (idea, story, plot, character), is in fact a component of its exploration of larger thematic issues. Viewed from that perspective, Harriet and her experiences of motherhood can be seen as a primary manifestation of the work's thematic and/or metaphoric contemplation of the evolution of British society, and perhaps even of society as a whole, over the period of the mid-Sixties to the mid-Eighties. Specifically, her cherished traditional ideas of home and family (which are reflective of a traditional, conservative way of living and believing) are almost entirely destroyed by the arrival of the self-indulgent, violent, animalistic Ben (see below).

Ben

Ben is the fifth child of the book's title, and is the narrative's primary antagonist. Even as he is gestating in his mother's womb, his essential identity (violent, aggressive, strong) is plain, as is his metaphoric value and/or function - as a destroyer of the beliefs and value systems that gave him birth. In other words Ben, like Harriet, is as much a symbol as he is a character, his attitudes and actions serving as a distillation and/or manifestation of the self-indulgences and lack of perspective that surged through the twenty year period covered by the narrative.

David

David is Harriet's husband and Ben's father. He is portrayed at the beginning of the narrative as being as old-fashioned, as withdrawn, as idealistic and as willing to live off the good will of others as Harriet - they are, for the third half of the novel, truly kindred spirits. With the arrival of Ben, however, David, like Harriet, begins a process of becoming harder, less emotionally engaged, and more impatient with both his wife and his son. It could be argued that the portrayal is, in some ways, a portrayal of the

stereotypical corporate husband, and the argument is not invalid. It must be noted, however, that like Harriet, David continues to pursue his dream of a loving family life as best he can. For him, that means becoming a better provider and, at the same time, removing himself from the source of the conflict (i.e. Ben) that threatens the stability of that dream. It's also important to note that ultimately, he is as supportive and as loving of Harriet as his eventual defenses allow him to be.

Molly and James

Molly and James are David's parents, who divorced when David was very young - James was materialistic and determined to be wealthy, while Molly was something of a free spirit who resented society's emphasis on wealth. When he was growing up, David lived with his more bohemian mother and her like-minded husband (Frederick), only getting to know his father (and his high-society second wife, Jessica) when it became important for him to have access to his (James') money. Over the course of the narrative, both David's parents reveal themselves to be disapproving of the family-defined choices made by their son and daughter-in-law, Molly more so than James who, in spite of his feelings, provides almost constant financial support to his son's family. Molly and James can, like much of the novel, be seen as metaphorically representing aspects of British life and society contributing to the emergence of destructive agents of selfishness like Ben - see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways can the novel's other characters ..."

Dorothy

Dorothy is Harriet's mother, widowed when she was young with three daughters. She becomes almost a live-in nanny and/or housekeeper to Harriet and David when their first children are born, accepting the situation with only occasional deteriorations into judgment and negativity. Plain spoken and hard-working, at times Dorothy's self-restraint breaks down, and she reveals to her daughter and son-in-law just how she feels about the situation into which they've gotten themselves. Dorothy's reactions to, and comments about, Ben are among the clearest messages that David and Harriet get regarding the nature of their son and the emotional destruction he is causing.

Sarah and Angela, Deborah

Sarah and Angela are David's sisters, while Deborah is David's sister. Sarah is unhappily married to William, while Angela is happily and busily married with three healthy, happy children. Both Angela and Sarah express unhappiness about how much time Dorothy is spending on helping Harriet cope with her expanding family, but don't complain about Harriet and David's generosity when, in the pre-Ben days, they (the sisters) are welcomed to Harriet and David's home. For her part, Deborah is wealthy and sophisticated, has trouble sustaining relationships, and is as close to her father

(James) as David is to his mother (Molly). The three women are united in their dislike of Ben and their determination to see him put away in an institution.

Amy

Amy is the daughter of Sarah and William. Born with Downs Syndrome, she is in some ways as different a child as Ben is, with some significant differences - where Ben is violent, Amy is passive ... where Ben is angry, Amy is gentle and happy ... where Ben is hated and feared, Amy is loved. Harriet guiltily sees Amy, and how she is treated/viewed by the family, as a very telling contrast to how her son is perceived and reacted to.

Bridget

Bridget is a distant cousin of David's. Raised in a deeply unpleasant home, Bridget idealizes the lives of her cousin and his family ... until, that is, Ben comes into the picture. His violence and selfishness, coupled with Harriet's obsession with making Ben fit in, drive Bridget out of what is portrayed as the best home she has ever known.

Luke, Helen, Jane, Paul

These are David and Harriet's other four children. Luke is the eldest, Paul is the youngest. The first three are relatively well defined as independent individuals when Ben arrives, growing both resentful and fearful of him to the point that they ask to live with their grandparents rather than with their brother. Paul is, at first, the gentlest, most lovable, and loving of Harriet and David's children, but when Ben arrives and Harriet's attention is taken over by him, Paul becomes insecure and neurotic. He is eventually sent to a psychiatrist, whose family Paul essentially adopts as his own. In short, Ben's selfishness, anger and violence send his siblings out of their home and into other lives - here again, the novel's central thematic interest in the metaphoric relationship between family and society comes into play (see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways can the novel's other characters ...")

Alice

Alice is an elderly caregiver hired by David and Harriet to help take care of the children. Loving, but fussy and nervous, Alice is ultimately driven out of the house by the violent, selfish Ben.

John

As Ben gets older, he develops a friendship with a local boy named John, who comes to help the Lovatt family with their garden. Harriet eventually strikes a deal with John that sees him taking Ben out of the house for large portions of the day, introducing him to his

gang of like-minded friends (see "Objects/Places - John's Motorcycle"). When John and his buddies depart for technical college, Ben is heartbroken, and for a while is more violent than ever.

Ben's Gang

Almost as soon as he starts high school, Ben finds his way into a gang of fellow students who, like him, aren't good at school and who don't want to be there. The gang takes more and more absences from school, spends more and more time in front of the television at the Lovatt's, becomes more involved in violent crime, and, in Harriet's mind, eventually becomes a group of nomadic, wandering street thugs. That, in the apparent perspective of both Harriet and the narrative, is where he belongs and will ultimately be happy.

Objects/Places

England

This is the country in which the narrative is set, a country which, historically, went through extensive and profound social, political, and economic transformations over the period of time over which the story takes place (see "Style - Setting").

London

England's capital city is the setting for the novel's early scenes, in which Harriet and David meet, court, and marry. It is portrayed as someplace that they, at least, want to escape from - its busyness, crowdedness, violence, and noise.

David and Harriet's House

When they begin planning their lives together, David and Harriet envision having a large family in a house big enough to accommodate not only their children but friends and relatives coming to visit. They find such a house a relatively short distance from London, and for a while use it as the basis for building their dream. When that dream, as the result of Ben's appearance and influence, falls apart, David and Harriet decide to sell the house and move away.

The Garden

Behind the house, there is an expanse of yard and garden. David and Harriet never have time to tend it because of the size and demands of their family. In the later years of the narrative, after Ben has come into the family, the wildness of the garden becomes the place where Ben is most comfortable.

Money

For much of the narrative, David and Harriet pursue their dream of a large family living in a big house without paying too much attention to its financial aspects, comfortably relying on the wealth of David's father to support them. Eventually, however, that source of funds becomes limited, and David has to take on extra jobs (which take him away from home) in order to fund all that needs to be paid for.

The Dining Room Table

This large table is one of Harriet and David's earliest purchases, part of their dream of having a large home with plenty of room for visiting family. It is the setting for many important gatherings and conversations (see "Quotes", p. 129 - 1) and is also an important symbol / manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the deterioration of society (see "Topics for Discussion - In what way do the various gatherings at the dining room table ...") becomes an important focal point and/or symbol of Harriet and David's dream.

The Institution

At one point relatively early in Ben's life, the family insists that he be put in an institution where he can be taken care of. At first Harriet refuses, but eventually agrees. When she sees how he and the other children there are treated (in this unnamed building which is described in dark, bleak terms and which Harriet sees only in bad weather) Harriet is appalled, and brings Ben home.

The Television

Early in the narrative, Harriet and David are described as priding themselves on not having a television in the house. As their family expands, however, and in particular over the course of Ben's lifetime, the television becomes more and more of a dominating factor in the lives of the children. This too is a symbol and/or manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the deterioration of society.

John's Motorcycle

Ben's friend John takes him riding on his motorcycle. Ben's joy at being on the bicycle is, for Harriet, the first true joy she sees in him.

Ben's Schools

At both Ben's schools, he is viewed as essentially normal, if somewhat low on the scale of educational success. The reactions of Ben's teachers, their apparent inability to see how strange he is, are important contributors to Harriet's intensifying frustration with him, and with her life with him.

Themes

Idealism vs. Practicality

A driving, desperate desire to develop, live, and maintain an ideal life is the primary intention behind the attitudes and actions of Harriet and David, who design that life according to what they believe to be their fundamental natures and needs. They act on that desire in two ways - by doing what they can and/or need to, and by self-righteously insisting that their families support them both financially and morally. In other words, their idealism blinds them to the practicalities of their world and their life together. Some might say, in fact, that Harriet and David actually bully their families into doing what they want, making them responsible for the practicalities of their (Harriet and David's) idealism. At the very least Harriet and David are passive-aggressive, taking little or no action to fulfill the responsibilities associated with the life they have chosen while, at the same time, acting in complete faith that their families, in particular their children's grandparents, will take action to ensure the lives of the young people are lived relatively well.

This theme also manifests later in the novel, as Harriet's idealistic and unrealistic belief that she can change Ben's life, either making it livable or him more reasonable, continues to manifest in spite of growing evidence that she is, at the same time, destroying the rest of her family. She is, by whole-heartedly pursuing the ideal of her relationship with Ben, ignoring the reality around her - in short, she is behaving entirely in character, determinedly and unrealistically insisting that the way she wants to do things, the way she believes things have to be, is the only way that things CAN be. There is no room at all for reality and/or practicality in her idealized world, particularly as she pursues each new ideal with increasing desperation.

The Treatment of the Different

This theme manifests in a couple of important ways. Perhaps the most obvious is the treatment of Ben. He is essentially looked down upon and rejected by everyone in his family except Harriet (who, even though she tries to love and accept him in ways the others don't, nevertheless finds herself repulsed by his aggressive, recalcitrant outsider-ness). He is patronized and used by those whom he regards as friends (i.e. John), and shut away and abused in an institution ostensibly dedicated to caring for those who are unable to care for themselves, or who have no-one else prepared to take care of them. There is also the way Ben is treated when he is part of a gang of those who, like him, are essentially isolated and rejected by "normal" society. That society, the narrative contends, has no place for such people and ultimately reduces them to an animalistic, pack-like state, foraging for food, shelter, companionship and power/status wherever and however it can be obtained.

It's important to note, however, that society's views of those who are "different" are also explored in a different way early in the narrative - specifically, in its portrayal of Harriet's and David's differences from the society in which they find themselves (i.e. the London of the mid-Sixties). For them, difference is a point of pride, of status, of independence and self-righteousness. It is also a point of choice, a clear contrast to the difference experienced by Ben, which is not a choice at all - that is, until he chooses to celebrate, or at least embrace, that difference with his high school gang.

Family as a Metaphor for Society

Meanwhile, the portrayal of how Ben is treated by his family can be seen as a metaphoric representation of how those who are perceived as different are treated by society in general, a metaphor which, in turn, can be extended into a portrayal of society as a whole. The Lovatts can be seen as representing a societal ideal - a loving, supportive family unit, ensuring and enabling the continuation of both the human race and the positive values that are, for the most part, held to make the ongoing existence of that race bearable, and even pleasant - love, respect, patience, tolerance, and unity. Ben's sudden, violent, tearing entrance into that idyllic, idealistic existence, can be seen as representing any one of the many forces that human idealism, and the striving to make it a reality, struggle desperately, daily, to keep at bay. In Freudian terms, Ben is pure id, pure need, pure desire, pure feeling. He is animalistic and irrational, uncontrolled and selfish, driven and insensitive ... all aspects of human history and contemporary experience, of fundamental human individual and societal identity, that are viewed as negative and/or destructive, and have been viewed as such for millennia. In other words, Ben represents all that is destructive to both the individual and the societal, all that functional society (let alone "decent" society) strives desperately to keep at bay. The gradual and irreversible abandonment of his family, even Harriet, can therefore be seen as a metaphoric manifestation of what society in general intends, and arguably needs, to do in order to survive - banish the violence in the hopes that it will devolve into harmlessness, or that the harm it DOES cause will, at least, be somehow limited.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person omniscient point of view, meaning that the objective narrator describes situations and events from the inner and outer perspective of all the characters ... that is, at least in the work's early stages. For about the first third, the work divides its narrative attention almost equally between Harriet and David, becoming more and more focused on Harriet, and eventually Ben, as the family's experience and/or identity both become more DEFINED by the attitudes and experiences of the two characters. In other words, style reflects substance, context reflects content, and what's going on between the characters is reflective of certain of the work's technical elements. It's important to note, however, what while the narrative offers glimpses into the mind and spirit of all the other characters, at least to some degree, there are no such insights offered into the mind and spirit of antagonist Ben. His inner workings and ways become as much of a mystery to the reader as they do to his parents - their reactions to his perceived difference, in essence, become the reader's.

In terms of the book's thematic point of view, the sense here is that at the core of all three of its central thematic explorations (see "Themes" above), as well as its narrative premises is a collection of warnings - against blind idealism, against selfishness, and against violence, partly physical but also, it seems, emotional. Here it's important to note that the physical violence of Ben is no less destructive than the emotional violence Harriet does to her other children (albeit unwittingly) or that Harriet and David, at times, do to each other.

Setting

Of the novel's setting in time and place, there is the sense that the former is more thematically and narratively relevant - where, it seems, is less important than when. The narrative makes a particular point of indicating when events are taking place, and making pointed, relevant comments about each particular time and/or era. This is particularly true in the early stages of the narrative, when the swinging, sexy atmosphere of the mid-1960's (a time of widespread experimentation with a number of different freedoms, including sexual, emotional, and experiential, i.e. drug use) becomes an effectively contrasting backdrop for the more conservative, traditional values of David and Harriet. The attitudes of the time, in fact, are one of the main contributing factors to their relationship - specifically, their uniting against the influences of the era. Then, as the narrative unfolds over twenty years, it seems that the uncertainties and turmoil of the late Sixties and the Seventies are kept at bay first by Harriet and David's dedication to the ideals of creating the perfect family (see "Quotes", p. 21 - 22), and later by Harriet's dedication to the ideal of bringing Ben into the so-called "normal" world. The narrative's final section, in which Ben's entrance into secondary school coincides with his entrance into a gang of like-minded, similarly troubled and similarly rebellious

teenagers, is set in the 1980's. Historically, this was a time in which the needy and disadvantaged all over the Western World were simultaneously indulged (in their rebelliousness) and abandoned (by the self-indulgence and greed of the adults around them). Here, at last, it becomes important to note the narrative's setting in place - Great Britain. At that time, Britain was following the political, social and cultural leadership of then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who led a government that was particularly ruthless in terms of abandoning, and at times deliberately devaluing, the contributions and perhaps even the very existence of those who did not conform to the pervading capitalist/conservative mindset of the day. In other words, what happens to Ben in the England of the mid-1980's was what happened to the disadvantaged, the different, the left wing, and the vulnerable all over the country during that time.

Language and Meaning

There are several intriguing elements to the novel's use of language. First, there is almost a sense of fairy tale about the author's writing style - one almost feels, upon starting the book, that it really should have begun with the classic phrase "once upon a time". There is a sense of the innocently seductive about the language, that the minimal number of words is being chosen but utilized for maximum impact in, at first, creating a sense of an ideal world (i.e. David and Harriet's almost fairy-tale marriage and early family years) and then later opening the door to the horrors beneath that idealism. Another interesting point about language is the fact that important events, particularly in the narrative's early stages, are portrayed with what might best be described as stark economy. Moments like the courtship, marriage, consummation, and first pregnancies of David and Harriet are portrayed with what seems like a minimum of words and images, just enough to get the images across so that the narrative can get to what it seems to think is really important - Harriet's pregnancy with Ben, and everything that happens to her after that. Once Ben appears on the scene, even in utero, the amount of detail the narrative employs to portray his presence and his effect on Harriet and the family increases substantially. Here again, there is the sense that style manifests substance - the narrative's use of language reflects what's going on in the plot ... the most important element of the characters' lives gets the most attention.

Structure

The first point to note about the book's structure is that there are no chapters. The story is told in one long stream of narrative that flows from event to event and situation to situation without stopping. This draws the reader fully and almost inextricably into the story, carried along with the waves of feeling and experience undergone by the main characters as THEY undergo them. The second structural point to note relates to points made in terms of language and point of view. This is the fact that the first third of the narrative (which focuses on Harriet and David and the beginnings of their family life) goes by quite quickly. The author gets the set-up out of the way so that the work's primary narrative and thematic explorations can begin (i.e. with the conception of Ben and the narrative of Harriet's pregnancy with him). Here structure echoes both point of

view and language, in that all three reinforce the narrative's thematically relevant contention that the interruption of idealism by reality is inevitable.

At this point, it's also worth noting the book's ending, which is quite open-ended and indeterminate. The narrative leaves its central characters at a point of uncertainty - Harriet doesn't know what's going to happen to either her or her troubling son, both of them facing profound changes but neither knowing what that change is going to mean. The narrative does imply a sense of impending danger, perhaps even suffering, but again makes no clear statement of what is next for the characters. In other words, and in spite of its fairy tale beginning, the novel it is in many ways as far from "happily ever after" as an ending can be ... as, indeed, are the lives it portrays.

Quotes

"Harriet and David met each other at an office party neither had particularly wanted to go to, and both knew at once that this was what they had been waiting for. Someone conservative, old-fashioned, not to say obsolescent; timid, hard to please: this is what other people called them, but there was no end to the unaffectionate adjectives they earned." p. 3

"She had not thought of herself as a virgin, if this meant a physiological condition to be defended, but rather as something like a present wrapped up in layers of deliciously pretty paper, to be given, with discretion, to the right person." p. 5

"Aiming, like all their kind, at an appearance of unconformity, they were in fact the essence of convention, and disliked any manifestation of the spirit of exaggeration, of excess." p. 12

"It had been hard preserving their belief in themselves when the spirit of the times, the greedy and selfish sixties, had been so ready to condemn them, to isolate, to diminish their best selves. And look, they had been right to insist on guarding that stubborn individuality of theirs, which had chosen, and so obstinately, the best - this." p. 21

"Outside this fortunate place, their family, beat and battered the storms of the world. The easy good times had utterly gone ... the little town they had lived in had changed in the five years they had been here. Brutal incidents and crimes, once shocking everyone, were now commonplace." p. 21 - 22

"The young Lovatts made themselves read the papers, and watch the News on television, though their instinct was to do neither. At least they ought to know what went on outside their fortress, their kingdom, in which three precious children were nurtured, and where so many people came to immerse themselves in safety, comfort, kindness." p. 22

"She had waited four times for the first little flutters, easily mistaken but then certain; the sensation that was as if a fish mouthed out a bubble; the small responses to her movements, her touch, and even - she was convinced - her thoughts." p. 35 - 36

"Time passed. It did pass, though she was held in an order of time different from those around her - and not the pregnant woman's time either, which is slow, a calendar of the growth of the hidden being. Her time was endurance, containing pain ... she would think, when the scientists make experiments, welding two kinds of animal together, of different sizes, then I suppose this is what the poor mother feels." p. 41

"She spoke in a way new to her, as if listening to what she said and afraid of what she might say. Harriet recognized it, for this was how she felt saying anything at all. So do people speak whose thoughts are running along secretly in channels they would rather other people did not know about." p. 52

"...they both felt - secretly, they were ashamed of the thoughts they had about Ben - that he had willed himself to be born, had invaded their ordinariness, which had no defenses against him or anything like him. But not making love was not only a strain for them both, it was a barrier, because they had to be reminded continually of what threatened them - so they felt." p. 58

"'He may be normal for what he is. But he is not normal for what we are.'" p. 65 - Dorothy.

"Ben's eyes were never off her, this other afflicted one, adored by everyone in the house. But did he know himself afflicted? Was he, in fact? What was he?" p. 67

"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." p. 75

"In the days that followed, the family expanded like paper flowers in water. Harriet understood what a burden Ben had been, how he had oppressed them all, how much the children had suffered ... but now Ben was gone their eyes shone, they were full of high spirits ... and David took days off from work to be with them all - to be with her ... as if I were ill, she decided rebelliously." p. 77

"...she was able to see that every bed or cot held an infant or small child in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern, sometimes horribly, sometimes slightly ... rows of freaks, nearly all asleep, and all silent. They were literally drugged out of their minds." p. 81

"'I was careful NOT to see ... What did you suppose was going to happen? That they were going to turn him into some well-adjusted member of society and then everything would be lovely?' He was jeering at her, but it was because his throat was stiff with tears." p. 87

"What was he thinking as he stood there, watching them sleep? Did he want to hurt them? Was he experiencing a misery she could not begin to imagine, because he was forever shut out from the ordinariness of this house and its people? Did he want to put his arms around her, like the other children, but not know how?" p. 96

"What she wanted, she decided, was that AT LAST someone would use the right words, share the burden. No, she did not expect to be rescued, or even that anything much could change. She wanted to be acknowledged, her predicament given its value." p. 103

"On the doctor's face she saw what she expected: a dark fixed stare that reflected what the woman was feeling, which was horror at the alien, rejection by the normal for what was outside the human limit. Horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben." p. 106

"They sometimes made love, but she felt, and knew he did, that the ghosts of young Harriet and young David entwined and kissed." p. 112

"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. And, more often than not, they are truants, to the relief of their teachers. Ben had at once become one of these." p. 120

"Harriet watched Ben with his followers and tried to imagine him among a group of his own kind, squatting in the mouth of a cave around roaring flames. Or a settlement of huts in a thick forest? No, Ben's people were at home under the earth, she was sure, deep underground in black caverns lit by torches - that was more like it. Probably those peculiar eyes of his were adapted for quite different conditions of light." p. 122

"The expanse of the table soothed her. When first bought ... it had had a rough, much-cut-about surface, but it had been planed down ... since then, thousands of hands, fingers, sleeves, the bare forearms of summer, the cheeks of children who had fallen forward asleep sitting on adults' 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 - it was all of a piece, cut long ago from some gigantic oak - a gleaming silken surface, so smooth fingers skated over it." p. 129 (1)

"She looked like David: old. No one would say she was forty five. But it was not the ordinary aging of grey hair, tired skin: invisible substance had been leached from her; she had been drained of some ingredient that everyone took for granted, which was like a layer of fat but was not material." p. 129 (2).

"And what would happen to Ben now? He already knew about the half-derelict buildings, the caves and caverns and shelters of the big cities where people lived who could not find a place in ordinary homes and houses: he must go, for where else could he have been during the periods of days, or weeks, when he was gone from home?" p. 131

Topics for Discussion

In what ways do the various gatherings at the dining room table represent and/or manifest the novel's thematic commentary on the nature/deterioration of British society?

In what ways can the novel's other characters be seen as reflecting the novel's central thematic preoccupation with the deterioration of society? Your considerations should touch on, but not be limited to, Molly, James, Dorothy, Paul, John, and Ben's gang.

What is your experience of "difference" within your peer group? How are people perceived as "different" treated - are their differences respected? Or ridiculed? How do you feel about that treatment?

What is your experience of feeling / being "different"? Do you, like Harriet and David, celebrate that difference? Are you, like Ben, humiliated as the result of being perceived and treated as "different"?

Is there such a thing as "normal"? Or are human beings simply too unique and too complicated for there to BE such a thing? Explain your answer.

How do you balance the demands of idealism with the needs of practicality? How necessary is it to find a balance? To maintain a balance? Which do you think is more valuable? How do you view people / situations that value one over the other?

Debate whether Harriet is right or wrong to do what she does for Ben - that is, rescue him from the institution. Is it right for her to sacrifice both her family's happiness and the fulfillment of her long cherished dream to do what she thinks is the right thing for her deeply troubled son? Or should she have sacrificed what she believed to be that son's happiness in the name of preserving her family's dream and her own happiness?