

# IDEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR REJECTING BEN? THE EUGENIC LEAD IN DORIS LESSING'S THE FIFTH CHILD

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## Abstract

It is the wager of this essay that the behavior and perspective of the Lovatt family in Doris Lessing's The Fifth Child could reveal an ideological basis related to the now anachronistic discipline of Eugenics, which proposed the existence of higher and lower races and specimens of humanity, relying on physical and mental traits to differentiate the one from the other. This notion will be explored by delving into the text and analyzing the manner in which Ben Lovatt's relatives treat and refer to him, and how such instances connect with existing literature on the aforementioned (pseudo) science.

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**Keywords:** Eugenics, unfit, race, evil.

## Introduction

The first time I read Doris Lessing's novel The Fifth Child was a memorable one. For years afterwards I would think, from time to time, about the story of a clearly unwanted, presumably monstrous child accused of wrecking the lives of his family members. The disturbing visual images and the problematic mother-child relationship stayed with me. So did what I perceived as the double standards of the story with regard to evil, on the one hand, explicitly ascribed to Ben Lovatt, the family scourge, and, on the other, manifested by his relatives, eager to eradicate the misfit.

The "greater-good argument" used by the Lovatt family to justify its murderous impulses towards Ben, whom his relatives thought an evil member of another "kind" (112), also intrigued me. It betrayed the presence of strong ideological elements involving thoughts of racial superiority hidden behind the defense of family values, thoughts reminiscent of the pseudo-science of Eugenics.

This essay will attempt to trace and expose these controversial ideas.

## Analysis

In order to detect the eugenic ideas potentially guiding the Lovatts' attitudes and actions, it would first be advisable to go over some fundamental theoretical concepts which are crucially connected with the eugenic ideology<sup>1</sup>. These are the notions of *people*, *kind*, *race* and *species*.

While *a people* is a "group of human beings of common descent living together in some sort of association, however loosely structured" (Appiah, "Race" 274-75), the word *kind* seems to be a synonym for *people* (274). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the expression *a people* began to be identified, in the Western world, with the terms *nation*, namely, a group of human beings of common descent with the same language and culture, and *race*, meaning a group of individuals who share "certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other that they [do] not share with members of any other [group]" (276). The characteristics of a race were thought to be its *essence* (Ibid).

It would seem, then, that *a race* was considered *a subdivision of the human race* or *species* that shared the aforementioned traits. The 19<sup>th</sup> century interest in dividing humans into races with allegedly inherited physical, moral and intellectual peculiarities is known as *racialism* (Appiah, "Race" 276). Thus described, racialism qualifies as a type of Eugenics.

The definition of race given above, which gave way to racialism, is still common today at the popular level, although dated from a scientific viewpoint: "There is [at present] a fairly widespread consensus in the sciences of biology and anthropology that the word 'race,' at least as it is used in most unscientific discussions [in a eugenic manner, i.e. attributing social and personality traits, such as criminality or laziness, to certain races], refers to nothing science should recognize as real" (277). In spite of this, the fact remains that the word *is* used and the ideas *do* exist: "in this respect, races are like witches: however unreal witches are, *belief* in witches, like belief in races, has had—and in many communities continues to have—profound consequences for human social life" (Ibid).

The concept of *race*, together with the notions of *people*, *kind* and *species*—meaning a group of "related organisms that [...] are capable of interbreeding [...]" (Britannica Online)—are relevant for the analysis of the eugenic component in The Fifth Child, since Harriet Lovatt, Ben's mother, often relates his features and personality to those of a prehistoric stock. More

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<sup>1</sup> It should be remembered that an *ideology* is a type of social representation or belief shared by a group of individuals (Van Dijk 12) and manifested "in polarized thought, opinions, action or discourse," dividing people into "Us and Them" and promoting identification with a certain group (13-14).

than that, she thinks Ben is a member, not of a subdivision of the human species, but of a whole separate one: “Neanderthal baby” (48) (direct speech from Harriet) “‘Perhaps he thinks there’s more of his kind somewhere.’ / ‘Perhaps he does.’ / ‘Provided it’s not a female of the species!’” (105) (Harriet to her own mother). Consequently, when Harriet and the other relatives talk about the fifth child’s “kind,” “people,” or “race,” they would ultimately refer to a different *species*, making all the words interchangeable.

The focus on *race*, in Appiah’s sense of the word, shown by the Lovatts is typical of Eugenics, the pseudo-science founded by Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, in 1883 and originally aimed at fostering the multiplication of the “best races” or “blood strains,” so that these would prevail over “lesser ones” ([Britannica Online](#)). As Galton conceived it, Eugenics consisted in “breeding the best of humanity to constantly improve the quality of succeeding generations” (Carlson 9), fostering, in particular, “intelligence, cultural talents, and physical strength and dexterity” (Ibid). This type of Eugenics was later to be known as *positive Eugenics* and was popular among the upper-classes and British intellectuals of the time. Its goal was to promote the education of “the ablest and the brightest,” encouraging these to have a more numerous offspring than less promising specimens (Ibid). The manner in which the word *Eugenics* was coined may give further clues as to the initial spirit of the field:

That is, with questions bearing on what is termed in Greek *eugenes*, namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities. This, and the allied words, *eugeneia*, etc., are equally applicable to men, brutes, and plants. We greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving the stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had. The word *eugenics* would sufficiently express the idea; it is at least a neater word and a more generalized one than *viriculture*, which I once ventured to use. (Galton qtd. in Carlson 10)

Therefore, the main concern of this pseudo-science was to improve the quality of a race by fostering the procreation of its “best specimens.” This, however, does not seem to be the type of Eugenics influencing the fifth child’s family, since, at the point in the story in which Harriet and David (her

husband), two healthy Anglo-Saxon specimens<sup>2</sup>, already have four children, their relatives do not encourage them to go on having more, but rather urge them, at first, to “give it a rest” (22), and, then, when they realize the couple earnestly plans to enlarge their family, they appear to wish the pair would simply stop having children altogether.

The relatives reject the idea of Harriet and David having more children for various reasons. Firstly, they realize that, even though Harriet’s mother helps her with the house and the children, Harriet is already too tired and irritable to look after more offspring. Secondly, the young Lovatts have no money of their own to support such a large household and, as a consequence, rely heavily on David’s father for financial assistance. Thirdly, at the time period in which this part of the story is set, i.e. during the 1960s’ cultural revolution, many people were no longer in the habit of having large families.

So, if the relatives are not influenced by positive Eugenics, what kind are they influenced by? In view of their intention to eliminate the fifth child, it would seem that by *negative Eugenics*. Highly popular in the United States of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it consisted in “[preserving what was thought to be] the basic goodness of its people by trying to prevent those deemed unfit from breeding with each other or with essentially decent people” (Carlson 10). This was achieved by, for instance, sterilizing and even killing *the unfit*, i.e. persons believed to be weak, both mentally and physically, and regarded as “society’s failures”: “paupers, criminals, psychotics, the mentally retarded, vagrants, prostitutes, and beggars” (9).

The term *the unfit* was popularly used in the United States from the 1880s to the 1940s (Ibid). It was also used in Great Britain, as evinced by a 1908 recommendation of the Royal Commission “On the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded<sup>3</sup>,” in which it is advised that the mentally “inadequate”

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<sup>2</sup> David comes from an upper-class English family, is an attractive young man with “a round, candid face and soft brown hair” (2) and Harriet is described as a middle-class, “healthy young woman” (Ibid).

<sup>3</sup> Eugenics was often promoted by the government. In England, for instance, the “Feeble-Minded [Control] Bill [...] extended the principles of the old Lunacy Laws [...] to persons without a trace of lunacy” (Chesterton 17) and aimed at implementing “negative Eugenics” (19). Based on this Bill, supported by such prominent government figures like Winston Churchill, a person whom a doctor thought “feeble-minded” would have been institutionalized in an asylum. The main problem with this was that the Bill’s definition of “feeble-minded” was dubious and had the potential of being applied to a large and diverse portion of the population: “persons who though capable of earning their living under favorable circumstances [...] are nevertheless incapable of managing their affairs with proper prudence” (20). Due to the generality of the definition, “weak-mindedness” became a matter of (medical) opinion, and, needless to say, opinions may differ (39). Although the Feeble-Minded Control Bill was later withdrawn, as stated in Martin Gilbert’s article “Churchill and Eugenics,” it set the mood for the Mental Deficiency Bill, introduced on 10

be detained and the “unfit” sterilized (cf Martin Gilbert’s article “Churchill and Eugenics”).

From a eugenic perspective, Ben would qualify as "an unfit" because he is a reportedly unattractive, unintelligent child whom the family pronounces *essentially* evil. However, by disowning Ben, the relatives evade any responsibility for the "defective" specimen, which belongs, surely, to another “kind,” “people,” “race,” or “species.” Of course, this is a fantastic explanation of Ben’s birth, since, from a rational standpoint, the fifth child is Harriet and David’s biological son.

The Lovatts’ attempt to eliminate the family’s violent “unfit” by sending him to a certain death at an Institution for unwanted children echoes the efforts of those involved with negative Eugenics, who tried to protect the different races they belonged to (most notoriously, races deriving from the Germanic stock) from the allegedly noxious presence of “weaker” specimens and blood strains. The methods chosen to achieve this were confinement, sterilization and, sometimes, death.

In the novel, the relatives appear to see their attempt to murder Ben as an act of self-defense, somewhat like US eugenicists must have regarded the sterilization of the “feeble-minded” and the neglect of “defective” babies, who would die from being purposely unattended<sup>4</sup>. Their deaths, like Ben’s, were desirable, in order to protect society from “defective” specimens.

Following this mentality, and in the words of Cesare Lombroso, the notorious Italian doctor quoted in the American Heritage article "Race Cleansing in America," Ben would be just another member of "the group of criminals, born for evil, against whom all social cures break as against a rock—a fact which compels us to eliminate them completely, even by death." From this viewpoint, the fifth child’s annihilation would benefit both the Lovatts and the entire English nation.

June of that same year. This Bill, also supported by Churchill, was passed in 1913. It failed to include the sterilization of mentally “defective” individuals, but authorized their confinement. This type of Eugenics-based legislation was in force until 1959, when the Mental Health Act put an end to it.

<sup>4</sup> According to the article “Race Cleansing in America,” from American Heritage, in 1915, Harry Haiselden, a surgeon from Chicago, admitted he did not treat “defective” newborns on purpose, to have them die. He argued theirs were “lives of no value” and added that the country “[had] been invaded” and “[the] streets [had been] infested with an Army of the Unfit—a dangerous, vicious army of death and dread.” He appears to have seen himself as somewhat of a public servant, doing society a duty and a favor by getting rid of the “horrid semi-humans” of the future while they were still in the cradle.

Yet Ben is not the only "unfit" in the family whose elimination would be, eugenically-speaking, "beneficial" for society. The other "weak link" in the Lovatt circle is Amy, Ben's cousin. However, she is not condemned to death at the Institution, as Ben is. This striking difference between the fates of these two "defectives" needs further analysis.

A Down-syndrome child, the narrator explains that "everyone adored [Amy]" (60). But how much truth is in this statement? Isn't she also rejected and patronized? Is she loved, or is she simply pitied? The following passage may provide an answer to these questions:

Amy [...] was the center of everything. Her head was too big, her body too squat, but she was full of love and kisses and everyone adored her. Helen, who had longed to make a pet of Ben, was now able to love Amy. Ben watched all this, silent, and Harriet could not read the look in those cold yellow-green eyes [...]. Amy, who expected everyone to love her, would go up to Ben, chuckling, laughing, her arms out. Twice his age, but apparently half his age, this afflicted infant, who was radiant with affection, suddenly became silent; her face was woeful, and she backed away, staring at him. Just like Mr. McGregor, the poor cat. Then she began to cry whenever she saw him. Ben's eyes were never off her, this other afflicted one, adored by everyone (60)

After reading this fragment carefully, the façade of love starts to peel off. Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of the passage is that the child appears to be viewed in terms of an animal—a cat or a dog. She seems to be liked as "a pet" (60) would be. Moreover, there is a hint at the fact that her physical appearance causes rejection, but the amount of love she gives to the relatives compensates for this off-putting characteristic: "Her head was too big, her body too squat, *but* she was full of love and kisses and everyone adored her" (60) (emphasis added). Finally, her intellect is clearly undermined, although there is no mention of a doctor having established her level of intelligence, which would mean any comments on that point represent Harriet's assessment of the child, given that hers is the predominant perspective in the story.

Although the latter passage clearly reveals Amy is perceived as "inadequate," much like Ben, the feeling that Amy is rejected by the family starts building up long before that, from the first time she is mentioned in the novel: "The cloud on family happiness that was Sarah and William's discord disappeared, for it was absorbed in worse. Sarah's new baby was Down's syndrome [...]." (18). Amy is, therefore, from the first, a "bigger cloud" in her relatives' happiness than her parents' troubled marriage is. Her grandmother Dorothy, on her part, considers Amy's birth to be a cause of suffering for Sarah, "who was [now] afflicted" (Ibid).

Sarah herself believes Amy is a token of her "bad luck." Harriet shares the feeling that the little child is decidedly a misfortune but, also, a sort of punishment to her parents: "Harriet said to David, privately, that she did not believe it was bad luck [Sarah had had]: Sarah and William's unhappiness, their quarreling, had probably attracted the mongol child<sup>5</sup> – yes, yes, of course she knew one shouldn't call them mongol. But the little girl did look a bit like Genghis Khan, didn't she? A baby Genghis Khan with her squashed little face and her slitty eyes?" (18). Besides Harriet's "fatalism" (Ibid) and superstition, which bothers David and surfaces once again after Ben's birth ("We are being punished [with Ben], that's all" (108)), the latter fragment suggests a dislike of other *races*, in the eugenic sense of the word, i.e. of other groups of human beings with different and presumably inherited mental, attitudinal and physical characteristics. The passage also highlights the importance of physical appearance in perceiving other races as Other—a point Kwame Anthony Appiah makes in his essay "Race" (274)—and prefigures Harriet's negative reaction towards Ben, who is physically different from her; so dissimilar, in fact, that she conjectures he belongs to another "kind," "people," "race," "species."

But if both Amy and Ben are rejected by the relatives, why send Ben to die but tolerate Amy? A possible explanation may relate to the fifth child's strength. Even though Ben and Amy are each regarded as "a bad hand" (59) (conversation between Sarah, Harriet's sister, and Harriet) and an "afflicted one" (60) (Harriet through the narrator), Amy is perceived as loving and essentially harmless; Ben, however, is unfriendly and incredibly strong, which makes the relatives fear him, since they believe he may pose a threat to their safety.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the Lovatts cannot label Ben, they do not know what he is—*What was he?* (60) (Harriet through the narrator). Conversely, they already know what Amy is: she is a Down-syndrome child. The plethora of names the family applies to Ben—*dwarf, troll, goblin, hobgoblin, Neanderthal baby, changeling*, etc.—betrays their cluelessness as to the fifth child's identity. Thus, the relatives' fear seems to be a fear of the unknown.

But there are other reasons why the family dislikes Ben, and these also account for their negative concept of Amy, since they relate to the figure of the "unfit." This label implied more than being a criminal prone to evil: the term also comprehended persons lacking in beauty and intelligence.

Thus, Ben's ugliness would have made him undesirable to a eugenicist, because lack of beauty was thought to be a trait of the "inferior" stocks. In

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<sup>5</sup> The source of the punishment is unclear. Fate? The gods? God? Except for very few ambiguous references like this one, there is no suggestion as to the Lovatts being religious.

fact, beauty was so dear to eugenists that, according to the previously-quoted American Heritage article, “‘beautiful baby’ contests [were] held at state fairs and amusement parks [in the United States]”—the type of contest baby Ben, who “was not a pretty baby” (Lessing 43) (Harriet through the narrator), would never have won.

As regards intelligence, it was an attribute particularly appreciated by Francis Galton, the father of the pseudo-science (Carlson 9). Ben’s lack of intelligence would, therefore, be another mark of “unfitness” from the eugenic standpoint. Significantly, in the novel, Ben’s limited intelligence is frequently emphasized: Harriet claims “he [cannot] learn” (89); Mrs. Graves, his headmistress, explains his teacher “has to put more effort into him than all the rest put together” (92), but also remarks that he is, according to the teacher, “a rewarding little boy because he does try” (Ibid); finally, Dr. Gilly, one of Ben’s pediatricians, mentions “He is not very good at school” (96) and implicitly labels him as *slow* with her comment that “often slow children catch up later” (Ibid).

Because of Ben’s limited intelligence, a eugenic mind would place him within the “feeble-minded” category, thus branding him as inadequate for procreation (Chesterton 20-21) and, even, for life. Consequently, eugenically-speaking, having him die at the Institution would be “the right thing to do” for the family and society.

However, this “logic” disregards Ben’s actual capacity to learn: “he did know a lot of things that made him into a part-social being. He knew facts. ‘Traffic lights green – go. Traffic lights red – stop.’ [...]. He would singsong these truths, imparted to him presumably by John [his grownup friend], looking at Harriet for confirmation” (89). Ironically, it is the narrator who, focalizing this part of the narrative through Harriet, makes the latter concession about Ben in the very same paragraph in which readers are told “She had given up trying to read to him, play with him, teach him anything [because] he could not learn” (Ibid). Naturally, a eugenic interpretation of the previous fragments would argue that whatever knowledge Ben may appear to have would be, in reality, parrot-like repetition by a “slow” individual. Therefore, a person may “know” facts and still be “feeble-minded.” Harriet’s assessment of Ben’s intelligence appears to be along these lines.

Harriet dismisses the fact that there *are* people who manage to teach him things, like John and Ben’s teachers (even though teaching Ben is, admittedly, a difficult task). He *can* learn; he just needs a lot of attention and patience to help him along. But Harriet has made up her mind that he *cannot*: “She had given up trying to read to him, play with him, teach him anything: he could not learn” (89). It may be that part of Ben’s “problem” is, actually, a lack of stimulation from his mother and family circle, or, in Dr. Gilly’s

words: "The problem is not with Ben, but with you [Harriet]. You don't like him very much" (95).

Harriet's idea that Ben cannot improve his mind appears to mirror the eugenic belief that undesirable hereditary characteristics could not be "corrected," the eugenists' motto being, in Franz Boas's words, "Nature not nurture" (472). However, this eugenic notion was soon critiqued. Those against it argued that traits which may seem hereditary could be, in truth, partly or entirely due to environmental and social factors (such would be the case with lack of intelligence and criminality), as both G.K. Chesterton and Franz Boas pointed out, respectively, in their works Eugenics and Other Evils and "Eugenics."

Following this last theory, if Harriet had treated Ben better or taken greater pains with his education, his capacity to learn would perhaps have been greater and his personality gentler. Instead, she quickly labels Ben as "naturally and incorrigibly stupid," predisposing herself to give up on him too soon. She thinks Ben hopeless.

The rest of Ben's family also appears to regard him as a hopeless case. Perceiving his limited intelligence and other undesirable traits like his alleged ugliness and criminal tendencies, they encourage David and Harriet to commit him to an Institution for unwanted children, where he is to die. His institutionalization is arranged by David's mother and stepfather, who belong to the English intellectual and upper classes. This detail also warrants reading their negative attitude towards Ben as possibly influenced by Eugenics, considering the pseudo-science was particularly popular, in Great Britain, within these classes.

Ludicrous though it may seem from a non-eugenic vantage point, for eugenists, sending Ben to his death "would be the 'honorable' thing to do" (Chesterton 7), because they would be saving future generations from a "defective" specimen. This mode of thought may account for the Lovatts' sense of relief at Ben disappearing from their lives and their despondency at his return, for which Harriet is blamed (she rescues him from the Institution, out of remorse).

Be that as it may, from a non-eugenic viewpoint, the family's attempted murder of Ben *is* a criminal act, which is paradoxical, since early eugenists thought crime to be hereditary. But a eugenicist would not believe that Ben inherited *his* own evil and criminality from the family, because he or she would not deem the relatives' conduct as criminal. Therefore, the family's claim that Ben is not actually related to them would be sustained by his "criminal tendencies" and the relatives' "honorable decision" to send him to his death.

Notably, Dr. Brett, Ben's original pediatrician, is never consulted about the idea of institutionalizing the fifth child, because he would not

allow it (he does not consider Ben abnormal). In fact, neither Dr. Brett, nor, later on in the story, Dr. Gilly, pronounce Ben in any way inadequate; on the contrary, they declare him, respectively, “physically normal” (57) and “within the range of normality,” although “not very good at school” (96). The absence of a negative medical diagnosis of Ben clearly separates him from the figure of “the unfit,” given that this was a label officially bestowed by doctors, who were among the staunchest supporters of Eugenics.

Another aspect separating Ben from the prototype of the “inferior” specimen is his strength, a quality which the founder of Eugenics considered desirable (Carlson 9). In the story, Ben’s strength is greatly feared and, paradoxically, Harriet uses a eugenic explanation to account for its origin. She regards it as a characteristic he must have inherited from “his own kind” (122): “Ben again banged the tray with his stone, in a frenzy of exulting accomplishment. It looked as if he believed he was hammering metal, forging something: one could easily imagine him, in the mines deep under the earth, with his kind...” (63) (the narrator, from Harriet’s perspective).

In that particular fragment, the fifth child’s mother seems to be conjuring up a popular notion of *dwarves*, derived from the Germanic mythical figure taken up, for example, by J.R.R. Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings: “diminutive [beings], bearded, stout of stature, miners of ores and gems,” living out of human sight, under the earth, “especially in mines and caves,” where they smith and forge metal skillfully (Drout 134). Ben’s shortness and strength (“short powerful Ben” (Lessing 100)) effectively remind his mother of a dwarf: “How do we know what kinds of people – races, I mean – creatures different from us, have lived on this planet? How do we know that dwarves or goblins or hobgoblins, that kind of thing, didn’t really live here?” (97) (Harriet to Dr. Gilly).

Harriet’s portrayals of Ben and his “people” (120) may also derive from motion pictures like One Million Years B.C. (1966) and Planet of the Apes (1968)<sup>6</sup>. In this type of movies, prehistoric humans are shown crouching round fires, in caves, or outdoors, hunting or fighting animals, activities Harriet believes Ben’s “kind” (105) could have engaged in: “Did Ben’s people live in caves underground while the ice age ground overhead, eating fish from dark subterranean rivers, or sneaking up into the bitter snow to snare a bear, or a bird?” (120); “Harriet [...] tried to imagine him among a group of his own kind, squatting in the mouth of a cave around roaring

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<sup>6</sup> It must be said that what Harriet seems to be taking from this type of movies is the prehistoric settings and situations. As regards the appearance of “primitive” peoples, Harriet probably believes them to have been ugly, as Ben is reported to be, whereas in many cavemen pictures the actors and actresses playing prehistoric individuals are good-looking for box-office purposes.

flames. Or a settlement of huts in a thick forest?" (112). Yet when Ben's mother talks about "primitive peoples," she does not really mean "early human beings," but rather "prehistoric humanoids," species resembling humans who probably co-existed with her own human "forebears" (120).

Ironically, Harriet first entertains the idea that her fifth child is from a different species while he is still in her womb. In a great amount of pain from her pregnancy, she compares the fetus with a monster resulting from the combination of different dog breeds or animal species:

Her time [of pregnancy] was endurance, containing pain. Phantoms and Chimeras inhabited her brain. When scientists make experiments, welding two kinds of animal together, of different sizes, then I suppose this is what the poor mother feels. She imagined pathetic botched creatures, horribly real to her, the products of a Great Dane or a borzoi with a little spaniel; a lion and a dog; a great cart horse and a little donkey; a tiger and a goat. (37)

This graphic description of Harriet's "chimeras" seems to betray a eugenic disgust at the mixing of stocks. The same aversion may be detected in her conjecture that "Ben's people" could have raped "the females of humanity's forebears [...]. Thus making new races, which had flourished and departed, but perhaps had left their seeds in the human matrix, here and there, to appear again, as Ben had" (120). The latter fragment not only reflects a eugenic concern with inheritance; it also helps Harriet disengage herself from the fifth child, whom she disowns with this Eugenics-inspired pseudo-explanation.

Harriet shows the same horror at the mixing of stocks and prejudice at "inferior" peoples when, in a conversation with her mother, Dorothy, she insinuates that, if adolescent Ben had sexual relations with a "normal" teenage girl, these would not be consensual:

- Presumably those people of his had something like an adolescence?
- How do we know? Perhaps they weren't as sexual as we are. Someone said we're oversexed— who? Yes, it was Bernard Shaw<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In George Bernard Shaw's Man and Superman, a play which discusses and parodies subject matters such as the nature of romantic interactions between men and women, capitalism and Nietzsche's concept of the *superman* or *higher man*, a character remarks that "Vitality is as common as humanity; but, like humanity, it sometimes rises to genius; and Ann is one of the vital geniuses. Not at all, if you please, an oversexed person: that is a vital defect, not a true excess. She is a perfectly respectable, perfectly self-controlled woman, and looks it; though her pose is fashionably frank and impulsive." It is to this quote that Dorothy seems to be referring, albeit possibly inadvertently, in this fragment of The Fifth Child.

- *All the same, the thought of Ben sexual scares me.*
- *He hasn't hurt anyone for a long time.* (104) (emphasis added)

Dorothy and Harriet's concern that Ben may soon become sexually active could also be connected with the possibility of him fathering an offspring, either with a human girl or with "a female of [his] species" (105). This preoccupation would echo the eugenic concern with the multiplication of "the unfit," who had to be prevented from "breeding with each other or with essentially decent people" (Carlson 10).

The apprehensiveness Harriet and Dorothy show at the prospect of Ben having a sexual partner and, presumably, descendants, Harriet's belief that he is an ugly child who is unable to learn, as well as the whole family's rejection of the fifth child for his alleged criminal tendencies, appear to point to Eugenics as a major ideological influence affecting the family's notion and treatment of the fifth child.

Even though Ben is not the only member of the family who would be regarded as "defective" from a eugenic standpoint, because his strength makes him a potential threat to the family's safety, he is sent to die at an Institution for unwanted children, while his cousin Amy, a Down-syndrome child, is spared this somber fate, perhaps because the relatives consider her harmless and have, therefore, taken her for "a pet" (60).

In spite of treating them differently, the relatives seem to view both Amy and Ben as "inferior" specimens, a sentiment which brings to mind the eugenic division of human beings into "inferior" and "superior" stocks. For Ben, this has dire consequences: commitment to an Institution in which he is expected to die. The family has taken the eugenicist's "higher road": it has condemned evil Ben to a just death.

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Nietzsche's ideal of the *superman* or *higher man*, one of the notions Shaw's play parodies, involves a person who does not follow traditional morality, particularly Christian morality, is solitary, reverences him or herself, pursues a life-project which guides and unifies his or her existence, welcomes suffering as a means to achieve profundity of vision and artistic greatness, appreciates the life he or she leads, disappointments and all, and would live it again if that were possible (further information on this concept may be found in [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), on the University's Web site). This "higher man" notion has been taken up and vulgarized by various ideologies, such as Eugenics. In England, academics like Oscar Levy used the Nietzschean disdain towards "lesser" human beings as philosophical justification for this pseudo-science (Stone 14).

It is striking that, of all of Shaw's works, it is [Man and Superman](#) that is quoted in [The Fifth Child](#). Given that the contention of this essay is that, in Mrs. Lessing's story, the view Ben's relatives have of him is influenced by Eugenics, it would be interesting to explore the possible significance of the reference. This task, however, will not be undertaken at this time due to length limitations. Nevertheless, it should make a fertile subject for future research.

## Conclusion

Doris Lessing's horror story The Fifth Child has inspired manifold interpretations ever since its publication in 1988, as Mrs. Lessing herself complainingly remarked in the New York Times interview "The Painful Nurturing of Doris Lessing's Fifth Child": "God knows how many things they've said this book is really supposed to be about. There are lists of them, each one laid down with total authority."

Let it be noted that it is not the intention of this essay to claim an ultimate or irrefutable interpretation of the story, but merely to offer an alternative reading, which could explain the reaction of the Lovatt family to the infamous fifth child.

Instrumental to this reading have been the various discriminatory references and innuendos put forward by the relatives, which are found plainly throughout the narrative. They seem to signal a common frame of mind that can be easily associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century (pseudo) science of Eugenics, whose advocates were intent on ridding humankind of "unwanted specimens," individuals much like the character of Ben Lovatt.

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