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## Failed Attempt: The Foreign Country of Adolescence in *The Go-Between* by L.P. Hartley<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Featured in compulsory reading lists, L.P. Hartley's famous book *The Go-Between* (1953) seems a good novel for a discussion on relational teaching. The wide acclaim of both the novel and the film are proof of its timeless topicality. The present article offers an analysis of the literary rendition of the process of maturation and the meaning of interpersonal relations in adolescence. Due attention is paid to failed communication processes in private and public spheres.

**Keywords:** adolescence, process of maturation, symbolical thinking, morality, relational teaching

### Introduction

Published in 1953, *The Go-Between* is probably the most famous novel by L. P. Hartley. It immediately won the acclaim of the wider public and in 1971 the book was adapted for the screen by Harold Pinter and Joseph Losey, the screenplay author and the director, respectively. The film proved "[a] tremendous success" (Wright, 2001, p. 254) and it won

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "foreign country" is a quotation from the first sentence of the novel which has become proverbial: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" (Hartley, 2000, p. 5)

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the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival (Wright, 2001, p. 295). Staged as a musical and an opera, the novel was filmed again in 2015 for television. For many years, *The Go-Between* has featured in reading lists for school children in Great Britain (Abbey, 2016). A contributor to the *Guardian* claims that the novel still teases readers: "A combination of knowing and not-knowing is this novel's driving force" (Smith, 2011, par. 3).

Any discussion of the novel might focus on various issues: war and peace, since the Boer war serves as a background for the plot set in the summer of 1900; social considerations, because class tensions between the world of aristocracy and country people often fall into the spotlight; the image of Edwardian England just before it disintegrated in the aftermath of WWI; and, finally, a love triangle, or tragic love story, between an upper-class woman, Marian, and a tenant farmer, Ted Burgess, overshadowed by Marian's official engagement to Lord Trimmingham. This last issue is the starting point for the present paper as it indirectly involves the first-person protagonist, Leo (Leonard)<sup>2</sup> Colston. Leo, a twelve-year-old half-orphan, is invited by an upper-class friend, Marcus (Marian's brother), to a posh country house where he undergoes an abrupt process of maturation: an innocent child at the beginning of the memorable holiday, Leo suffers from a mental breakdown and amnesia by its end. His tender psyche is scarred for his lifetime: as a sixty-year-old man, Leonard admits to having been too afraid of life to live (Hartley, 1991, p. 245f). This statement seems to indicate a failed process of maturation.

### **Critical point: adolescence**

It is well known that children on the brink of adolescence remain an emotional puzzle even to their immediate family. In their attempts to explain the unceasing mood swings and account for the uncertainties felt

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<sup>2</sup> To avoid confusion, since both the boy, Leo, as well as the elderly man, Leonard, voice their thoughts in the novel, I will henceforth refer to the boy as Leo and to the adult as Leonard.

by young people, developmental psychologists have examined this life stage from various angles (Elkind, 1995, p. 145f, p. 188f; cf. Erikson, 1963, p. 277f; Roeser et al. 2008, p. 74f). Among the many sources of adolescent uncertainty, scholars indicate changes in thinking patterns. In childhood, such patterns are concrete owing to the basic referential function of language and cognition, whereas in adolescence they become more abstract and less tangible (Shelton, 1991, p. 6f). As Natov (2018, p. 2) puts it, “children tend to the black and white of things”, while the reality of a maturing adolescent calls for an addition of various shades of grey. Prone to frustration, the hypersensitive mind of a young person becomes barely comprehensible to his or her guardians.

In this paper I would like to explore the failure of Leo’s mental development represented in *The Go-Between*. My aim is to trace the course “of the speaker’s mind creating the work before us rather than narrating a finished story” (Weinbrot, 1990, p. 173). In *The Go-Between* the protagonist is just about to turn thirteen and I will therefore constantly refer to the complexities of adolescence. It is well known that the beginning of this stage is critical for later development. Moshman asserts (2005, p. XX):

Children undergo a variety of interrelated changes between ages 10 and 13. Physically, there are changes associated with puberty. Cognitively (...) there are fundamental changes in intellectual competence. Socially, there are a variety of changes associated with the transition to an increasingly peer-focused orientation. Educationally, there is the move from elementary to secondary education. Although developmental changes are gradual and occur at variable ages, it does seem that most children show sufficiently dramatic change between ages 10 and 13 (...).

*The Go-Between* is a novel which exposes the danger of a violent interruption of the developmental process at the beginning of adolescence, a stage whose beginning is also difficult to determine (Shelton, 1991, p.2). The diverse indicators of change listed above become visible as one analyses the language spoken by Leo in addition to the reports of his actions.

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The narrative alternates between the perspectives of child and adult: in retrospect, the story is bound to be inaccurate and subjective, yet it prompts attentive readers to various hypotheses about the psychological problems of human development.

### **Psychological development and linguistic sensitivity**

The language of Leo's narrative reflects the rapid growth which takes place in his twelve-year-old mind. At the very beginning of his summer holiday, Leo is still a child: a shy boy who feels awkward in the company of adults, is often uncertain of his judgement and does not know how to answer their questions. One focus of his report is on his sensory experience of the external world: the excessive heat of the season, the coldness of water in the lake, the sensation of his fingers on his elegant diary in which he records his experiences. Attention is directed to his senses and the excessive heat of the scorching sun is recorded by exact temperatures in his diary. This sensitivity to sensations seems typical of children: "[the] sensory experience and impressionistic language (...) [represents] the almost pre-verbal thoughts of children as they begin to establish their identities in relation to objects and each other" (Parsons, 2000, p. VIII). However, the ironic remarks uttered by Marian and her company are a puzzle to Leo: he takes them literally, detecting no additional meaning as yet. This reveals the childish innocence of his mind: rhetorical ornaments of adult speech, such as irony or allusion, betoken the secretive world of adults. Still, in Leo's eyes, they acquire special importance: they transform the real world into something with secret meanings which he craves to discover.

As the days pass, new experiences challenge Leo's comprehension. In the description of the bathing party at the lake, which takes place after a week-long stay, one notices a certain shift in the child's sensitivity which is reflected in the language of the novel. Still dependent on his senses, Leo's mind is nevertheless opened to the non-literal meanings of the sentences uttered by the bathers. He becomes aware of some mystery connected

with (semi-) nakedness. On the one hand, Leo is childly responsive to the alluring pleasant coldness of shade and water; at the same time, however, he registers the beauty of the human body, both male and female. The language he uses does not yet show that he understands his feelings in this regard, but he is visibly stirred. He now notices that his vocabulary falls short of expressing his emotions. This moment seems a critical point: the boy's mental changes start to become visible to the readers.

The process of growing up now begins. The change in Leo's interests is reflected in a shift from literal to allusive meanings. He becomes aware that there is something significant in the secretive language that the adults around him use in their conversations. Indeed, he has now become a messenger – a 'go-between' – in the clandestine relationship between Marian, the upper-class lady, and Ted Burgess, the tenant farmer. Still a child psychologically, he does not see anything improper in the task of a go-between, the less so as Marian asks him to be a gentleman and return her a favour. Attentive readers will be aware of the way Marian manipulates the child by means of arousing a sense of obligation in him: Leo is innocent and Marian exploits it. In this way, language becomes a means of exerting power over the inexperienced mind of a child.

### **School environment and normative ethics**

In this regard, the key protagonist in the illicit love affair – the go-between – is not an immoral teenager. On the contrary, Leo's moral standards are based on a school discipline which he tries to apply to the new situation. Unfortunately, the Edwardian public school that Leo has attended proves no ideal preparation; leaving aside its elitism, it has various shortcomings in the standards that it offers. Certainly, it meets high educational expectations insofar as the curriculum is concerned, but it fails with regard to the successful moral formation of its pupils. As Kohlberg maintains: "there is a measure of congruence between [moral development] and psychological development" (Laurence, 1997, p. 464). Educational institutions are expected to form students not only in terms of

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academic instruction but also with regard to moral formation. The plot of *The Go-Between* reveals a poor realization of this proposition; the educational system implants in Leo a mistrust of his guardians in personal matters, the teachers in his school appear to be mere instruments of academic instruction and not effective moral custodians of their pupils. History knows cases of both excellent teachers who have become life-long mentors to their pupils, and incompetent teachers who have impeded their pupils' successful course to adulthood. To illustrate the former, one may mention Albert Camus' letter of gratitude to his schoolmaster, Louis Germain, which reads: "Without you (...) none of this would have happened"<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, in *The Go-Between* no teacher seems to be genuinely interested in the children in their care.

*The Go-Between* makes clear what happens if relational teaching, which aims at establishing a personal relation between teacher and student, is abandoned. Leo's conduct outside school still abides by school norms. He is faithful to the code of behaviour of the school environment: not to 'sneak' on others, to be secretive and to pass over confidential matters in silence. Such an attitude is encapsulated in the words: "we were all sworn to secrecy" (Hartley, 1997, p. 76). Having never disclosed his confidences with schoolfellows to school authorities, Leo also keeps quiet about the letters he helps to pass between Marian and Ted. Thus, he transfers the values governing the institutional role of a school student to the more humanly complex world of an adolescent's entry into real life. The adolescent Leo is certain he behaves morally as a go-between, the more so because he is still in the dark about the sexual nature of the affair. Marian assures him that the letters cover some business matters and the boy willingly accepts this cover-up, not as an excuse but as a fact. This slip-page between knowing and guessing characterizes the whole narrative. Such patterns of behaviour also comply with the findings of psychology. As Shelton claims (1991, p. 3), "on a conscious level, moral rules are known [to the adolescent], but on an experiential level, uncertainties, fears, and

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Francisco Esteban Bara, PhD, University of Barcelona, for this inspiration.

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insecurities blend (...). Since Leo's system of values is based on weak foundations, he is unable to distinguish the rightness from the wrongness of the actions he is expected to perform.

Leo's behaviour is based on maintaining the unbridgeable communicative abyss separating the world of children and the world of their guardians, which mainly involves remaining loyal to one's friends without question. Psychologists define this phenomenon as the "tyranny of the peer group" (Shelton, 1991, p. 9). While at school, the two worlds remain separated by the artificial institutional roles of teacher and student. The teaching of non-institutional moral relations is not promoted in the school. With such a formative background, Leo is hardly aware of other possible ways of successful child-adult communication. *The Go-Between* highlights the lack of wise adult guidance in such matters as the source of the final catastrophe in the novel. Leo's accelerated process of maturing never becomes an object of serious consideration or concern to those charged with his care. The child is abandoned to his uncertainties in solitude. The sole exception is arguably the attempt of Ted to have a serious talk with him. However, this seems undermined by a lack of proper preparation.

### **Role models: symbolical thinking**

Lost in confusion, bored and uncared for by his hosts, Leo is in search for a role model for his new experiences. As Shelton (1991, p. 11) observes: "With the shedding of simplistic childhood notions, the adolescent often begins a critical examination of adults." Since his progress to adult maturity has only entered its initial phase, Leo's criticism of his hosts is not harsh. On the contrary, Leo idealistically attributes moral characteristics to his new acquaintances. This trio – Marian, Ted and Hugh (Lord Trimingham) – temporarily occupy the empty place of his absent parent as role models. This projection conforms to the findings of psychologists: "Adult role models become alternative ego-ideal objects (...)" (Shelton 1991, p. 58), which the boy hopes to resemble one day. Other scholars extend the range of potential sources of such influence. They assert that

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the search for an idealized role model may take a spiritual turn. Roeser et al. define "*spiritual ideals*" as follows: "subjective conceptions of that which is divine, sacred, or of ultimate purpose and value in life" (2008, p. 81). In their endorsement of William James' findings (1902), the scholars argue that such spiritual ideals may "motivate individuals to realize a more satisfying experience" (p. 81). Unfortunately, this is not the case in *The Go-Between*.

According to Shelton, this personal need for morally ideal adult exemplars is further reinforced by adolescent inclination to symbolical thinking:

Adolescence can be a time of psychic stress and investment in thought or symbolic or representational imagery (...) can provide a sort of safe attachment, a shield from deeply felt emotional needs. (Shelton, 1991, p. 8)

This proneness of the twelve-year-old Leo to symbolical representation begins to dominate his outlook. To be sure, the trigger for symbolically magical thinking appears to be the moment at which Lord Trimmingham playfully calls the boy 'Mercury' (Hartley, 1997, p. 83). The result is that the boy accepts his role of god-like messenger and thereby interprets this role as special and virtuous. This idealization is mercilessly exploited by Marian who, in Leo's eyes, becomes a virtuous lady in distress. She is idealised as the Virgo of the Zodiac: ironically, as a chaste beauty<sup>4</sup> whose demeanour bestows a positive connotation on the task to be performed. Her secret farmer lover, Ted, behaves far more decently since he is less willing to delude Leo and tries to treat him as an "almost adult" helper – which the boy considers flattering. Leo is overcome by confusion as to whom he should remain loyal to: the hosts, Marian's

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<sup>4</sup> According to a dictionary of symbols, the Virgo of the Zodiac is usually visualized as a beautiful young woman associated with the earth (and harvest). Her planet is Mercury and her counter-element is water. The novel follows this symbolism: the former is the messenger, Leo, the latter is the Sagittarius, Ted (Kopaliński, 2006, p. 76).



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mother and father, or her fiancé, Lord Trimmingham – or perhaps the colluding couple, Marian and Ted. However, symbolism triumphs over realism. The vicious circle of symbol, myth and allusion entraps the child. In hindsight, the elderly Leonard admits:

(...) in the realm of imagination I was not [tough]. Marian inhabited the realm, she was indeed its chiefest ornament, the virgin of the Zodiac (...); she was as real to my contemplation as she was to my experience – more real. (Hartley, 1997, p. 155)

In this way, symbols encoded in language reign supreme: in Leo's eyes they transform reality and the boy behaves in accordance with these falsely idealised expectations. In Leo's eyes, the adults involved in this symbolic encoding undergo a transformation: they are hardly real people any more, and Marian in particular becomes an idol inspiring near-religious worship. Leo is obedient to her wishes even at the price of deceiving her parents. In case such idolization seems difficult to account for, psychology furnishes some explanation in the form of "compartmentalizing" theory (Spitzer, Barnow, Freyberger, Grabe, 2006). According to this theory, adolescents are able to perform divergent roleplays when interacting with peers, parents or role models due to their lack of established self-identity: an incomplete mental picture of one's self leaves much space for imaginative experimentation (Shelton, 1991, 10f; Fowler, Keen, 1978, p. 61) or safeguarding against potential psychological trauma (Putnam, 1997, p. 71; Weingartner, Putnam, George, Ragan, 1995). While Leo's adoration of Marian reminds one of a goddess and her worshipper, the same boy remains a boy in his games with his friend, Marcus, or a well-behaved child with Mrs. Maudsley, Marian's mother.

### **Hindsight: dissociation**

It is only when analyzing the events from the perspective of a 60-year-old that Leonard remonstrates himself: "You wouldn't admit

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that they [Marian and Ted] had injured you, you wouldn't think of them as enemies. You insisted on thinking of them as angels even if they were fallen angels" (Hartley, 1997, p. 17). Putnam (1997, p. 71) calls this adolescent or other difficulty of passing a harsh judgement on one's friends or family, a defensive function of dissociation (Spitzer et al., 2006): a person refuses to accept the hard facts about his life in order to protect himself, at least in his self-evaluation. This mechanism is well exposed in *The Go-Between*: the young Leo's refusal to face reality is called deception by his later and older self. With hindsight, the elderly Leonard locates the source of his juvenile illusions in a misplaced symbolism that governed his language and imagination during his early adolescence. He admits that a misplaced moral paradigm, whose roots were deeply symbolical and mythical, was the cause of his later troubles. This is clearly stated in the Epilogue of the novel:

It did not occur to me that they [Marian and Ted] had treated me badly. I did not know how to draw up an indictment against a grown-up person. (...) I saw myself entering Ted's life, an unknown small boy, a visitant from afar (...) the supernatural powers I had invoked had punished my presumption (...) I had tried to set the Zodiac against itself. In my eyes the actors in my drama [Marian, Ted and Hugh, Lord Trimmingham] had been immortals, inheritors of the summer and the coming glory of the twentieth century. (Hartley, 1997, p. 246)

Since Leo admired Marian and her lover, Ted, as well as Marian's fiancé, Lord Trimmingham, they all became symbolic figures of the Zodiac – though the real people fell short of their ideal selves. Half a century after the events, Leo still wonders at this symbolical reading; symbolism becomes the pivot of the plot and its central significance is indicated from the first mention of the Zodiac in the Prologue to the story (Hartley, 1991, p. 7). The Epilogue is full of disillusionment: the innocent child, forced to betray the way to the lovers' hiding place and to witness their embraces in the outhouse, suffers a nervous breakdown followed by temporary

amnesia. The aftermath of this drama is painful: Leonard admits, "This time I had failed: it was I who was vanquished, and for ever" (Hartley, 1997, p. 246). Leonard also lays the blame on himself: nobody can rescue him because "a persistent picture of him [Ted] cleaning his gun" (Hartley 1997, p. 246) to shoot himself continues to haunt the boy into adulthood. Leo has changed forever: the course of maturation, violently subverted, ends abruptly with a failure to mature as he should. The last sentence of the elderly Leonard's reflections reads: "I shrank into myself" (Hartley 1997, p. 246). The damage appears quite irreversible.

### **Failed communication**

Hypothetically, it may be wondered whether the tragedy could have been averted. The novel offers a hint that it might have been so if the child had had an open relationship with his mother or some other responsible adult. In short, a lack of communication seems to be the major cause of the educational failure described in *The Go-Between*. As Shelton (1997, p. 9) suggests: "A basic rule of thumb is that the more important the issue is to the adolescent's life, the more apt he or she is to seek guidance of parents or other trusted adults." This "trusted adult" would need to have been a wise guardian or a teacher. From this viewpoint, the novel constitutes a literary exploration of the need for such a relation of trust for sound mental and moral development. Unfortunately, in this case, the confused adolescent had nobody to advise him, not even his own mother. Just before the final catastrophe, having come to suspect the immoral nature of the relationship between Marian and Ted, Leo writes a desperate letter to his mother as a last resort. In the letter he asks her to bring him back to her and shorten his stay at Brandham Hall. This might have worked if communication between the parent and child had been open and sincere. Unfortunately, afraid of a negative reaction from his mother, Leo communicates half-truths, which are misunderstood and, in consequence, to no avail. The mother judges the son harshly and thinks that Leo simply wants to avoid obligation and gratitude to the hosts. Neither

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mother nor son manages to voice their opinions openly. The outcome of this failed communication proves disastrous and tragic.

### Conclusions

*The Go-Between* is not a recent novel. One might therefore ask the point of bringing a literary treatment of fictional events of the Edwardian era to the notice of the contemporary youth or into modern discussions of child development. Following Hillis Miller, however, I would argue that a close reading of past fiction can offer much insight into enduring problems of the human psychological and moral condition. Hillis Miller (2012, p. XI f.) focused on problems other than adolescent development, but his explorations of the value of George Eliot's novels for contemporary issues and problems provides much encouragement for examining other works of fiction in this way:

Though it is a fictional construct, however, the story is still validated by its truth of correspondence to historical, social, and human reality. This reality is assumed to exist outside language. (Hillis Miller, 2012, p. 12)

In my opinion, *The Go-Between* is such a story; though set in past times and depicting past events it nevertheless addresses universal issues of enduring human significance. While some of the social or historical circumstances of the narrative are now outdated, the central concern of the novel of negotiating a safe course to adult maturity is still of concern to contemporary teenagers, to their parents and teachers, as well as to professional scholars. As Leo's story shows, the implications of a traumatic interruption of this process may extend well into adult life.

The novel's strength seems to lie in its focus on the significance of human communication within the family and in the educational process. This suggestion is at one with the findings of educational theorists who have placed much value on the relational, personal and moral dimensions

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of teaching, including higher education (Esteban Bara, 2014). If such relationships are crucial for the proper formation of higher education or university students (Esteban Bara, 2014, p. 748), it must be even more so for children or adolescents. Even though it was published half a century ago, Hartley's novel shows that open and trustful communication is vital for sound mental development at any stage of development; whereas a child focuses on literal aspects of the world and language, the adolescent needs to grasp the more elusive and allusive meanings and pragmatics of adult discourse. The teenager is in need of wise adult assistance to develop properly and safely. Since the child or teenager also spends much time in school, the assistance of involved teachers is also indispensable. Wise guidance is needed to lead the inexperienced mind in the right maturational direction so that it may learn to cope in the more morally dubious circumstances beyond school. To paraphrase Camus (in Bara, 2014, p. 747), without "the hand of affection (...) held out to the (...) child" in distress, few may succeed.

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