

## THE SHRIMP AND THE ANEMONE

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L. P. Hartley's deep insights into human nature and his effective use of symbols to convey his themes have struck us as being the essential elements of his *Eustace and Hilda Trilogy*.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the focus of our study has been the psychological process undergone by the protagonist, out of which the central theme emerges: Eustace's development from a nine-year-old boy to a grown-up man, centering on the problems brought about by a lifetime repression which leads to frustrated incest in his relationship with his sister Hilda.

In his book *L. P. Hartley* the critic Peter Bien remarks:

*It's toward Hilda that Eustace's incestuous desires are chiefly directed. This is the aspect of his neurosis with which she is concerned, but neither she nor Eustace consciously knows it. Nor does the reader, unless he examines symbols and interprets dreams. (...)*

*Incest, or rather frustrated incest, is the basis of Eustace's difficulty. (...)*

*The real trouble is that Eustace unconsciously wants to be dominated, wants masochistically to satisfy his sexual needs in this way, and most strangely and perversely of all, feels guilty for anything his natural vitality may do to challenge Hilda's domination or to put himself out of its clutches.<sup>2</sup>*

What we propose to do in this essay is a study of the clusters of symbols used to convey Eustace's obsessive sexual

relationship and the repression of his desires which together lead him to a condition of frustrated incest.

The central symbolic double image of the book - the shrimp and the anemone - is also a prophecy and as such it constitutes the core of the prologue and epilogue of Eustace's trilogy. The recurrence of this image confers unity of theme to the works.

Incest as a destructive force is carried by other different images, all of which could be summed up in the main one.

At the very opening of the first book of the trilogy, *The Shrimp and the Anemone*, the Cherrington children are playing by the sea when Eustace finds a shrimp in the act of being sucked in by an anemone.

Eustace calls Hilda and puts the situation before her, "weighing the pros and cons. Which was to be sacrificed, the anemone or the shrimp?"<sup>3</sup>

In his enthusiasm Eustace forgets that the well-being of one depends on the misfortune of the other, which announces that there will be a destructive outcome to their relationship. Hilda, more objective than her brother, immediately enters into action. The result is as follows:

*The shrimp lay in the palm of Hilda's hand, a sad, disappointing sight. Its reprieve had come too late; its head was mangled and there was no vibration in its tail. The horrible appearance fascinated Eustace for a moment, then upset him so much that he turned away with trembling lips. But there was worst to come. As a result of Hilda's forcible interference with its meal the anemone had been partially disembowelled; it could not give up its prey without letting its digestive apparatus go too. Part of its base had come unstuck and was seeking feebly to attach itself to the rock again.(pp.10-11)*

The relation of the shrimp and the anemone reproduces symbolically the sexual relation between Eustace and Hilda: the shrimp being eaten by the anemone, the attempt to solve the situation by separating one from the other, and the disastrous ending - a dead shrimp and a disemboweled anemone.

The identification between Eustace - passive and physically weak - and the shrimp, and Hilda - lovely though dominating and destructive - and the "plumose" anemone is evident from the very first pages. Not only their physical traits but also the relation between the two "couples" are the same.

Eustace's self-immolation in relation to Hilda, his utter self-denial for her benefit is well expressed in his consideration that the anemone would be killed if he took the shrimp away. This is why he hesitates when he is about to decide which of the two is to be sacrificed, once it is clear that the well-being of one depends on the misfortune of the other.

This idea of Eustace's self-denial in relation to Hilda is developed as the action unfolds. A major image which carries the same idea is connected to the mythical pattern of the consort who is sacrificed for the benefit of the goddess.

Let us refer to the picnic on the Downs, where a small bush engages Hilda's attention: "She peered at it from under her drawn brows as though it was something quite extraordinary and an eagle might fly out of it " (p. 38).

As Robert Graves<sup>4</sup> points out, in many myths the spirit of the sacrificed consort is turned into an eagle after the flesh is consumed. This adds depth to the episode in the picnic when it gets dark and Eustace is startled by a cry he hears. Turning to Hilda he asks what it was and she answers: "Only an owl, you silly!" (p. 48).

The figure of the owl provides additional associations to the idea of ritual death. It's the owl which announces the sacrifice by

screaming.

Carrying the mythical allusion even further, one of the most symbolical passages in *The Sixth Heaven* is when Eustace imagines himself climbing with great difficulty to get to Highcross Hill, at the top of the mountain where Hilda lives.

The mountain is connected to the idea of meditation, spiritual elevation, communion with the saints; its peak therefore acquires mystical significance. It is said to be the linking point between earth and sky, the center through which the axis of the world passes.

Highcross Hill with Hilda living at its top, can also be related to the Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece and the fabled abode of the greater deities of the ancient pantheon.

In his imagination Eustace is not able to climb the mountain. He has already determined places for his rest during the ascent, on account of his weak heart, but even so he has to stop between two of the established points.

This is already an indication of the gradual loss of his vital energy:

*Eustace had been told to take hills easily. Highcross Hill could not be taken easily, but he had established certain rest stations at which he called, somewhat in the spirit of a railway train (...). He could be a fast or a stopping train, according to how fit he felt (...). Unexpectedly for he had been doing so well, Eustace felt a little out of breath, but to stop now would be against the rules (...). He was undoubtedly panting: supposing he just stopped for once, here, where he was, without paying any attention to his self-imposed traffic signals? It was no disgrace for a train to stop between stations. He stopped, but his heart went on thumping. "What shall I do?" he wondered panic rising in him. Seeing*

*the pine tree's withered branch, the youth  
decided to retrace his steps. There was no  
point in going on to die on a mountain top:  
nobody would be better for it.<sup>6</sup>*

Eustace tries to find justification for not being able to pursue without stopping, claiming that mountain tops were for highly spiritual people. Hilda could live at such an altitude but he'd better stop. His conscience greets him in the voices of a peasant and a maiden: "Bravo, Eustace, you've done the right thing after all. None of us wanted you to go on. It would have been certain destruction " (pp.87-88).

The images fit the same pattern to be later developed in *The Sixth Heaven* through the nuptial flight. Hilda is a goddess and as such she could live on mountain - tops or rise to the skies. Eustace is nothing more than a poor human being whose function is to keep distance from his goddess - sister and simply worship her.

Another image that adds to the symbolic stratum of the work is the pine tree. A recurring symbol in literature, the pine tree stands for immortality and its fruit for fertility. It recalls the tree of life, an association which is reinforced by Eustace's fear of it: "Sure enough overhead there was a pine tree, and it had a withered branch. Exactly why the branch was dangerous Eustace had never understood " (p. 87).

These ideas are given direct visual expression in *The Sixth Heaven*. In that novel Hilda is presented as a goddess flying to the empyrean. When Lady Nelly asks Eustace if he feels the flight was for Hilda's best, he just says: "I suddenly felt that the air was her element " (p. 167).

As a goddess Hilda surely had to be the leading partner in her relation to Eustace. This position is emphasized by Eustace's hesitation and Hilda's immediate interference in separating the

shrimp from the anemone by force, which at once qualifies their relation as a sado-masochistic one. Her fulfillment depends on his being inferior, submissive clinging to her; her satisfaction always implies his suffering and though he chafes against her domination it is necessary to him.

According to Jung, "incest in itself symbolizes the longing for union with the essence of one's own self."<sup>8</sup> The recurrence of incest among the gods of antiquity and the idea of Hilda as a goddess living on a mountain top add to the mythic overtones of the text. On breaking their link both Eustace and Hilda are destroyed, for a fragmented self cannot survive.

Eustace's death at the end of the third book of the trilogy, *Eustace and Hilda*, throws light on the consequences of the devouring-woman's attitudes: the utter destruction of one of them is the only way of keeping the other going. But Hilda's fulfillment is not complete. Hilda, the devouring woman, is at the same time Hilda lover-mother who feels attached to Eustace in a complex manner and would like him to be happy. That's why she remains as the anemone disenbowed. Hilda is crippled for life.

The fact of the anemone being deprived of its digestive apparatus strongly suggests that something "below the waist" has been damaged crucially. This idea is emphasized in the third book of the trilogy when Hilda suffers from emotional paralysis for a time, after her breaking-off with Dick Staveley. It is the sexual appetite that has been atrophied. Hilda will go on living but will never manage to find her mate. She is condemned to live in imaginary symbiosis with the shrimp:

*The shrimp will die while the anemone though suffering will survive. This is just what happens at the end of the book: Eustace - shrimp perishes while Hilda has to sublimate*

*her sexual feelings by dominating the clinic.*<sup>9</sup>

One more element should be mentioned in relation to the episode of the anemone and the shrimp. It is also on the beach that Eustace meets Nancy Steptoe to whom he is physically attracted and goes to play with her. During the dialogue which follows this scene, the incestuous trait in brother and sister's relationship is made evident through Hilda's jealous words about Nancy.

Nancy is digging herself a castle and Hilda snatching Eustace's hands and whirling him away says authoritatively: "Come along(...) you know you don't really want to talk to Nancy. She's stuck-up as they all are. Now we'll see what's happened to the pond (...)" (p. 12).

And catching a glimpse of Nancy's sandcastle she remarks:

*She'll never get that done: They're always the same. They try to make everything bigger than anybody else, and they leave it half done and look silly. (pp. 12-13)*

As Hilda vehemently refuses to let Eustace go and play with Nancy, he just walks away, throwing in her face the terrible accusation that she was a murderer. She has killed the shrimp and the anemone.

Though proud, superior and rational on the surface, Hilda is hurt by Eustace's desertion. Their interdependence is thus foregrounded. She needs his love as much as he needs her though for dependence in her case rather than dependence.

Nancy Steptoe reappears in the last book of the trilogy, *Eustace and Hilda*.

Venice is chosen as background of the story with Eustace as Lady Nelly's guest together with the Morecambes.

As he meets Nancy there Eustace is asked about his sister. On his saying she hasn't married, Nancy is sharp: "Too fond of you?"

Though also an adolescent at that time of Anchorstone, Nancy was perfectly aware of the unusual kind of relationship between Eustace and Hilda.

Hilda's protestations of endearment never end. After the shock which caused her temporary paralysis and her eventual recovery, she confesses to Eustace how important he is to her.

*"Oh, Eustace, you must be careful, you are so precious to me; I don't believe you realise how precious you are."*

*"And you to me, Hilda darling."*

*"No, not in the same way - not in the same way. You had Miss Fothergill, and now your friend Lady Nelly, and I don't know how many more. You collected friends like you do paper-weights. But I only have you. I feel jealous sometimes."*

*"But, Hilda —"*

*"Don't argue, it is so. And if anything happened to you, I don't know what would become of me. You must look after yourself."<sup>10</sup>*

After this comes the climatic event in their relationship where Hilda teaches Eustace how to kiss properly, perhaps the strongest overt symbol of the incestuous trait of their relationship:

*Eustace kissed her on the cheek.*

*"That's not the way we do it," said Hilda.*

*"He's a lot to learn, hasn't he, Minney? THIS is the way." And she gave him a long embrace on the lips.*

*Eustace, though a little breathless, was grateful to her. The gesture crowned the evening with a panache he couldn't have given it — nor could Hilda, a few months ago. (p. 298)*

As a preparation for the last appearance of the shrimp and the anemone, we have Lord Morecambe talking to his wife. He makes an



ironic comment about shrimps and anemones, to which Lady Morecambe replies, referring to Eustace:

*"Of course, I don't know how he'd put it, but he sees those boatmen in their cute pink shirts and big straw hats ... and the darling little crabs that the poor people eat, and those swell sea-anemones -*

*"He couldn't possibly see a sea-anemone from here," objected Lord Morecambe, almost sneezing over the words. "Besides, they've all died from the drains. You'll be saying he can see a shrimp next." (pp.117-18)*

Without knowing, Lord Morecambe is making a premonition, and the episode also has a symbolic level.

Shrimps, which cannot be seen, will no longer exist by the end of the book with Eustace's death.

As for the anemones, they'll be hardly visible. Pollution is going to kill them. Hilda, who has already retired on account of her paralysis, will probably be hardly visible after Eustace's death.

Before the last appearance of the shrimp and the anemone Hartley builds up the background by means of a flashback.

In Eustace's dream Hilda and he are children again, alone together on the sands of Anchorstone:

*Eustace knew that it was the visit he had been denying himself for so long, and he knew also that never in actuality or in memory had the pang of pleasure been as keen as this. For his sense of union with Hilda was absolute; he tasted the pure essence of the experience, and as they began to dig, every association the sands possessed seemed to run up his spade and tingle through his body. Inexhaustible, the confluent streams descended from the pools above; unbreakable, the thick retaining walls*

*received their offering; unruffled, the rock-girt pond gave back the cloudless sky.*(p. 309)

Eustace's communion with Hilda is total, and then everything is perfect, this perfection mirrored in an unbreakable pond giving back a cloudless sky:

*They did not speak, for they knew each other's thoughts and wishes; they did not hurry, for time had ceased to count; they did not look at each other, for each had an assurance of the other's presence beyond the power of sight to amplify. Indeed, they must not look or speak, it was a law, for fear of each other.*

*How long this went on for Eustace could not tell, but suddenly he forgot, and spoke to Hilda. She did not answer. He looked up, but she was not there; he was alone on the sands. (p. 309)*

But this is Eustace's last dream. Before the image of the shrimp and the anemone there comes the image of death, symbolized by the dark air and cliffs extremely high and dangerous to climb:

*"She must have gone home," he thought, and at once he knew that it was very late and the air was darkening round him. So he set off towards the cliffs, which now seemed extraordinarily high and dangerous, too high to climb, too dangerous to approach. He stopped and called "Hilda!" — and this time he thought she answered him in the cry of a sea-mew, and he followed in the direction of the cry. "Where are you?" he called, and the answer came back. "Here!" But when he looked he only saw a sea-weed-coated rock standing in a pool. But he recognized the rock, and knew what he should find there. (p. 309)*

And then comes the final symbolic image of the shrimp and the anemone as a close-up to the book:

*The white plumose anemone was stroking the water with its feelers.*

*The same anemone as before, without a doubt, but there was no shrimp in its mouth. 'It will die of hunger, thought Eustace. 'I must find it something to eat,' and he bent down and scanned the pool.*

*Shrimps were disporting themselves in shallows; but they slipped out of his cupped hands, and fled away into the dark recesses under the caves of the rock, where the crabs lurked.*

*Then he knew what he must do. Taking off his shoes and socks, he waded into the water. The water was bitterly cold; but colder still were the lips of the anemone as they closed around his fingers. "I shall wake up now," thought Eustace, who had wakened from many dreams. But the cold crept onwards and he did not wake. (pp. 309-10)*

The same plumose anemone of the first book appears, but now the episode has a different ending. It will surely die but not disembowelled as in the first book. It will die of hunger for the shrimp no longer exists.

The dream acts as a premonition. Hilda - anemone with the death of Eustace - shrimp will also probably die.

We thus see that, in no way trying to evade the incestuous trait of the relationship with Hilda, Eustace can't come to terms with himself. He can't nurture strength from a standardized society. His annihilation isn't enough to allow him to reach his own self. Death is required, it becomes a ritual. Only through it will he be able to feed Hilda, to make her fit to cope with life.

The natural law takes place once again: the consort is sacrificed for the benefit of the goddess. Ironically, this ritual death does not have the desired effect.

Hilda makes attempts into another ways of life, either through the tempestuous relation with Dick Staveley or the creation of a private world in the clinic for crippled children. But the efforts will also be frustrated: she will attain no happiness, no peace.

In Jung's words,

*It does become each time clearer that it is not hunger, nor microbes, nor cancer, but man himself the greatest danger for mankind, for he does not have adequate immunization against psychic epidemics, infinitely more devastating in their effects than the biggest natural catastrophes.*<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Eustace and Hilda Trilogy* is composed of the following books:

*The Shrimp and the Anemone* (1944)

*The Sixth Heaven* (1946)

*Eustace and Hilda* (1947).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Bien, *L.P. Hartley* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963). pp. 84-5.

<sup>3</sup> L.P. Hartley, *The Shrimp and the Anemone* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1969) p. 10. All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969). All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *Diccionario de Simbolos* (Barcelona: Editorial Labors S.A., 1978), pp. 86-87.

<sup>6</sup> L.P. Hartley, *The Sixth Heaven* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1974), pp. 86-87. All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>7</sup> Cirlot, p. 364.

<sup>8</sup> Cirlot, p. 250.

<sup>9</sup> Cirlot, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> L.P. Hartley, *Eustace and Hilda* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975), p. 296. All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>11</sup> C.G. Jung, "*L'Homme a la Decouverte de Son Ame - Structure et Fonctionnement de l'inconscient* - (Genève: Editions Mont-Blanc, 1948). Translation mine.