



Hartley, L. P. (1895-1972)

by Linda Rapp

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L. P. Hartley, whose writing has been compared to that of Henry James, authored both novels and short stories. The latter include psychologically subtle horror fiction. A recurrent theme in his writings is the danger of abandoning oneself to physical love. In his fiction those who do often pay with their lives.

Leslie Poles Hartley was born in the town of Whittlesea in the fen country of Cambridgeshire on December 30, 1895. His family soon moved to an estate near Peterborough, where his father at first practiced law but then became the chairman of a very lucrative brickworks company.

Hartley enrolled in Harrow School in 1910. Upon his graduation in 1915 he went to Balliol College at Oxford but suspended his education to join the army in 1916. Appointed a second lieutenant, he remained in Britain until he was granted a medical discharge in 1918.

Hartley viewed World War I, with its horrific loss of life, as a watershed moment in history, after which society lost its connection with a better past and began to deteriorate. His longing for a happier time is reflected in the famous opening line of *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

After leaving the military Hartley returned to the university, earning a degree in modern history in 1921.

The same year Hartley proposed marriage to a woman named Joan Mews, but the engagement was soon broken off. Biographer Adrian Wright believes that Hartley's contemplation of marriage was motivated primarily by the desire to conform to the norms of society. He further states that "Hartley almost certainly questioned his ability to achieve a satisfactory heterosexual relationship, or indeed to maintain any sexual relationship whatever its nature, with all the demands it would make on him." In any event, Hartley had some sort of nervous breakdown in early 1922, probably due to the stress of the situation.

The following summer Hartley, at the suggestion of his college friend Clifford Kitchin, who was openly gay, went to Venice. Hartley fell in love with the city and returned to it regularly except during the years of World War II. He was fascinated by the strong and handsome *gondolieri*, and both they and the city itself would figure in his later writings.

Hartley began his career as a reviewer of modern fiction in 1923, writing first for *The Spectator* but soon for other publications as well. His work drew widespread praise because of his insightfulness and integrity. Hartley continued writing reviews throughout his life.

Hartley's own first work of fiction, *Night Fears and Other Stories*, was published in 1924. It introduced themes that would recur in later books: the past is seen as a simpler and nobler time; love is fraught with danger and may indeed be lethal; and the ordinary may suddenly turn into the stuff of horror. Although the collection received some favorable comment, it was not a financial success.

The following year Hartley published the novella *Simonetta Perkins*. The central character, Lavinia Johnstone--Simonetta Perkins is an invented friend on whose behalf she pretends to seek advice--is a prim and proper wealthy Bostonian who, on a visit to Venice, becomes strongly attracted to a virile gondolier. Although Hartley cast the tale as one of heterosexual desire, commentators see a gay subtext with Hartley himself as Lavinia. Just as she is unable to defy convention and declare her love for a partner seen as unsuitable--in her case because of his economic status--so was Hartley reluctant to risk society's censure for failing to comply with its strictures in matters of the heart. Lavinia invented Simonetta to shield herself from criticism, and Hartley invented Lavinia.

If Lavinia saw the object of her affections as ultimately unobtainable, Hartley for a while cherished greater hopes. One of his closest friends was Lord David Cecil, whom he had met at Oxford and who would become a distinguished critic, biographer, and Professor of English at Oxford. They became boon companions, and Cecil joined him in Venice on a number of occasions. After one such holiday in 1932, however, Cecil wrote to Hartley announcing his engagement.

Although Hartley regarded Cecil's marriage as a betrayal, the two remained lifelong friends. Hartley served as best man at Cecil's wedding and as godfather to his son. He spent holidays with the Cecils and even occasionally shared houses with them. In his later years Hartley confided to a friend that Cecil had been the love of his life, but it seems that the love was unrequited.

After another collection of horror stories, *The Killing Bottle* (1932), Hartley published no more fiction until 1944, when the first volume of his acclaimed trilogy, *The Shrimp and the Anemone*, appeared. The subsequent portions, *Sixth Heaven* and *Eustace and Hilda*, were published in 1946 and 1947, respectively. The three novels follow the lives of siblings Eustace and Hilda Cherrington, characters loosely based on Hartley and his sister Enid.

The title of the first novel derives from the story's opening scene: young Eustace sees a shrimp being eaten by an anemone but cannot decide whether or not to try to save it, thus depriving the anemone of food. His sister does not hesitate to do so, but her well-intentioned efforts leave both animals dying. In Hartley's fiction good outcomes do not necessarily result from noble motives; on the contrary, someone usually suffers.

In the course of the story Eustace inherits a fortune and begins to socialize with the elite. Hartley himself, from his university days on, moved in circles that included the titled as well as literary luminaries, but he always retained a sense of being an outsider because his family's money came from "trade," namely the brickworks. Such class consciousness and feelings of being different and marginal haunt many of his characters.

Eustace is also on the margins--or possibly beyond them--where heterosexual love is concerned, ultimately declining to pursue romantic possibilities. He does, however, introduce Hilda to a dashing aviator, a man whose physicality Eustace also admires.

The subsequent love affair ends badly, plunging Hilda into a physical and emotional paralysis, from which she is only saved by her brother's self-sacrifice. In Hartley's world of fiction love always carries the potential for disaster.

So it is in Hartley's best-known novel, *The Go-Between* (1953). Elderly bachelor Leo Colston recalls his thirteenth summer, when he was to enjoy the special treat of a visit to the country home of a wealthy classmate. Young Leo soon becomes infatuated with his friend's beautiful older sister, who in turn is enamored of a handsome tenant farmer. The lovers arrange for Leo to carry messages between them, but he does not realize their import. When he happens upon the couple in the middle of a tryst, he is horrified and emotionally scarred for life. The farmer commits suicide, another casualty of love.

A film version of *The Go-Between*, directed by Joseph Losey and with a screenplay by Harold Pinter, was highly praised and won the Grand Prize at the 1971 Cannes Film Festival.

Hartley authored seventeen novels, among them *My Fellow Devils* (1951), which hints at a same-sex relationship between the protagonist's former fiancée and the man she eventually marries, as well as *The Brickfield* (1964) and its sequel, *The Betrayal* (1966), in which a writer seeks the affection of his younger employee. Of the latter pair of books Hartley wrote to a friend, "As for Richard's relationship with Denys, I agree that it would have been more convincing if I had made it declaredly homosexual. But reading between the lines I think one can see that it was; to have made the relationship plainer would have turned the book into a 'homosexual novel', which I didn't want to do."

Hartley did not write his "homosexual novel" until near the end of his career. He worried that the book might upset his friends or "injure my private image." He considered using a pseudonym or directing that the novel be published posthumously, as was E. M. Forster's *Maurice*.

The Harness Room was, however, published under Hartley's own name in 1971. In the story a colonel enlists his strapping chauffeur as a physical trainer for his teen-aged son to prepare the latter for entry into the Sandhurst military academy. The chauffeur becomes the young man's teacher not only in athletics but also in the ways of love.

Predictably, their happiness does not last. To impress the colonel and his young bride, the two men put on a boxing match. In a freak accident, the son stumbles just as his lover delivers a punch that proves fatal.

At the beginning of *The Shrimp and the Anemone* Hartley had put a quotation from Emily Brontë: "I've known a hundred kinds of love, / All made the loved one rue." This pessimistic sentiment is borne out across the spectrum of his writing.

Hartley enjoyed professional accolades, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1948 and the Heinemann Award in 1954. He was named Commander in the Order of the British Empire in 1956 and Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature in 1972.

Hartley died of heart failure on December 13, 1972 in London. Lord David Cecil gave the eulogy at his memorial service.

The John Rylands University Library of Manchester houses a Hartley collection that includes manuscripts, letters, and other documents. Many of his personal papers, however, went to his younger sister Norah. When she died in 1994, all documents pertaining to the family were, in accordance with her instruction, burned.

Bibliography

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