



BIOGRAPHY

L. P. Hartley (1895–1972) was a successful author of short stories and book reviews before he publishing his first novel, *The Shrimp and the Anemone* (1944), the first volume of the trilogy *Eustace and Hilda*, when he was nearly fifty. He spent much of his time from the early 1920s to the beginning of World War II in Venice, and it was there that he began writing *The Go-Between* in May 1952. He wrote swiftly, finishing the first draft that October. The book was published early the following year. In 1971 it was adapted into a screenplay by Harold Pinter and made into a celebrated film starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates. Hartley wrote numerous other story collections and novels, including *The Hireling* and *The Love-Adept*.

THE GO-BETWEEN

by L. P. Hartley

Introduction by Colm Tóibín

978-0-940322-99-8

“Its famous formulation about the past sets the tone: this is a strange and beautiful book. I first read it in my early teens, and its atmosphere of yearning for lost times and of childish innocence challenged has haunted me ever since.” —Ian McEwan

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Go-Between by L. P. Hartley is a majestic novel about an innocent young boy who gets caught in the middle of an illicit and ultimately tragic love affair.

The story is told by a now-aging Leo Colston, who recalls the events of the summer of 1900, more than fifty years ago, when he was twelve years old and visiting a school friend on a lavish English country estate. Young Leo is a dreamy, romantic child, highly sensitive to the way others perceive him and still painfully ignorant of the workings of the adult world. He falls under the spell of Marian Maudsley, the older sister of his school friend, who takes a special interest in him. Marian is being forced into a socially advantageous marriage to Lord Trimingham, who has been grossly disfigured in the Boer War. But even as the momentum toward her marriage builds, Marian is carrying on a forbidden affair with Ted Burgess, a hot-tempered tenant farmer of a lower class. Tricked into acting as a messenger for Marian and Ted during that oppressively hot summer, Leo’s youthful naiveté is destroyed as he becomes ensnared in a devastating scandal that will kill one man and scar Leo for the rest of his life.

Described by Ian McEwan as “a strange and beautiful book,” Hartley’s enduring masterpiece about class and sexuality and innocence, set in a vanished golden era, is a hauntingly beautiful, unforgettable work.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does Leo try so hard to present himself as a reliable narrator? Are children, aware that they are outsiders in the adult world, especially attuned to its details? How much do children think of themselves as outsiders? Has Leo left his child self behind? How accurate do you think Leo’s understanding of people and events at Brandham Hall was when he was a child, and now as a grown man?
2. Leo has a rich inner life and vivid imagination. Is his imagination responsible for his willing assumption of the role of “messenger of the gods” [p.110]? What other factors make Leo uniquely susceptible to ending up in the predicament he finds himself in? What makes Leo and Marcus so different? Are their differences due to class and experience, or more to do with temperament?
3. What is the code of schoolboys, as it pertains to secrecy and justice? How does this code inform Leo’s choices about what to do in his role in the situation with Marian and Ted?
4. The world that Leo describes is defined by class differences. Where does Leo fit in the social structure in relation to the Maudsleys, Ted Burgess, and Lord Trimingham? How do these class differences influence his relations with each of them?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Eustace and Hilda

L. P. Hartley
(introduction by Anita Brookner)

The Vet's Daughter

Barbara Comyns
(introduction by Kathryn Davis)

As a Man Grows Older

Italo Svevo
(introduction by James Lasdun)

A High Wind in Jamaica

Richard Hughes
(introduction by Francine Prose)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Michael Frayn, *Spies*

John Banville, *The Sea*

Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

The Go-Between, starring Alan Bates and Julie Christie, directed by Joseph Losey (film, England, 1970)

5. Leo describes the transfiguring power of heat: “Without knowing it, I was crossing the rainbow bridge from reality to dream...And the heat was a medium that made this change of outlook possible...In the heat the sense, the mind, the heart, the body, all told a different tale. One felt another person, one was another person” [p. 94]. Describe how the heat and the weather function symbolically in the novel.

6. How sympathetic do you find Marian? Ted? Hugh? Did any of them ever have true affection for Leo or did they merely use him? Do Leo’s adult analyses of each of them differ much from his childhood perceptions? Marian gave Leo a green suit and a green bicycle—what were her motives in giving these gifts to him?

7. In the introduction, Colm Tóibín writes that the novel “is a drama about Leo’s deeply sensuous nature moving blindly, in a world of rich detail and beautiful sentences, toward a destruction impelled by his own intensity of feeling...” [p. xiii]. Do you agree with this statement? Discuss it in relation to the heat, the bathing-place, and the Deadly Nightshade.

8. Several times throughout the book, Leo is “called upon to exchange the immunities of childhood for the responsibilities of the grown-up world” [pp. 173–174]. How responsible is Leo in the events that unfold? At what point does he become not just a mere messenger but an active force in shaping events?

9. In his introduction, Hartley notes that critics have found fault with the prologue and epilogue, which together “made a frame too heavy for the picture” [p. 11]. Do you agree with these critics? Do you think that the book would have been complete—and possibly stronger—without the prologue and epilogue? Why?

10. Do you find it believable that Leo’s life has been so drastically affected by his role in the events of the summer of 1900? Why? Are the events of that summer—and the magnitude of their impact on Leo—only understandable within the context of that era? How do the famous opening lines of the novel—“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”—establish the tone of the book, and help to offer a rationale for all that happens [p. 17]?