# Spiritual Growth in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*

Arthur C. Clarke'ın *Çocukluğun Sonu* Romanında Ruhsal Büyüme

**Seda Pekşen**
Ankara University, Turkey

**Abstract**

The relationships between all human and non-human characters in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* can be analysed as that of parents and their offspring, which, in return, will bring forth the contention that all these characters, including humanity in the broadest sense, can be considered children in a never-ending process of growth. Though such a contention stems from the similarities between the attitude of children and adults in the relationship of each with their own literal or figurative parents, contrastingly it is also enhanced by the differences of perspective between children and adults. The use of the words "children" and "adults" here should not be taken solely in their literal sense, but as referring to the characters' position in each particular relationship. In that sense, "children" would refer not only to actual human children in their relationship with their human parents, but also to the adult human characters in their relationship with God/the alien Overlords/the Overmind/the Universe. The aim here is to offer an in-depth analysis of these relationships between humans as children of the universe and the Overlords as their guides towards the path of spiritual growth, as well as to portray the current relevance of this science-fiction novel which was first published in 1953.

**Keywords**: Arthur C. Clarke, childhood, growth, spirituality, Buddhism

**Öz**

Arthur C. Clarke'ın *Çocukluğun Sonu* romanında insan ya da uzaylı tüm karakterler arasındaki ilişkileri bir ebeveyn-çocuk ilişkisi bağlamında ele almak mümkündür ve böyle bir bakış açısı tüm bu karakterlerin ve en geniş anlamıyla insanlığın hiç bitmeyen bir büyüme sürecindeki çocuklar olarak değerlendirilebilecekleri tartışmasını beraberinde getirecektir. Böylesi bir tartışmanın kaynağı hem çocukların hem de yetişkinlerin kendi gerçek ya da simgesel ebeveyn figürleriyle ilişkilerindeki tavırlarında gözlenen benzerlik olsa da çocuklarla yetişkinlerin bakış açılarındaki farklılıkların da bu tartışmaya katkısı olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Buradaki "çocuk" ve "yetişkin" ifadeleri yalnızca sözlük anlamlarıyla değil, bir karakterin belli bir ilişki içindeki konumu bağlamında anlaşılmalıdır. Bu bağlamda "çocuk" ifadesi yalnızca yetişkin bir insanın ebeveynlik ettiği çocuğu değil; Tanrı, uzaylı Efendiler, Üstbilinç ve evren ile ilişkileri içerisinde yetişkin insanları da kapsayacaktır. Burada amaç evrenin çocukları olarak insanlık ile onlara ruhsal büyümeleri esnasında kılavuzluk eden Efendiler arasındaki ilişkileri ayrıntılı olarak inceleyerek, ilk basımı 1953'de yapılmış olan bu bilim kurgu romanının insanlığın güncel durumu ile ilgisini gözler önüne sermektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arthur C. Clarke, çocukluk, büyüme, ruhsal büyüme, Budizm

*CUJHSS*, June 2021; 15/1: 107-121.
© Çankaya University ISSN 1309-6761 Printed in Ankara
Submitted: May 22, 2021; Accepted: June 2, 2021
ORCID#: 0000-0001-5612-3665; sedapeksen@gmail.com

In the literature classroom when the professor lectures on the *bildungsroman*, they always underline the *growth* of the protagonist.[1] The conclusion usually reached would be that the protagonist gains maturity and grows into adulthood at the end of a long series of life experiences which function as a means of highlighting the flaws of a given society or system. In this process of growing up the presence of both parents is considered essential, hence their frequent absence in the *bildungsroman*. In the absence of the birth parents usually surrogates are provided in the form of teachers, aunts and uncles, friends, partners, foster parents etc. One way or another, from such a perspective parental figures are an indispensable part of the process of growth; but do human beings *really* grow? Is it as simple as a mathematical equation – whereby the presence of some sort of parental figure would pave the way to growth – or is it as complex due to the requirement of many more variables? The answer is: neither. Growth is neither as simple nor as complex as one deems because the way we generally approach the concept of growth is troublesome to begin with. As Clarke portrays in *Childhood's End*, growth is not the final destination of a quest; as an on-going process it rather resembles a quest for the Holy Grail since the ultimate accomplishment of the task is forever delayed – much like the structure of the language we use to give meaning to life.[2] It is, therefore, the argument of this paper that what matters is not the final destination, that is the completion of growth, but establishing a solid basis for the whole process which in this context has resonances with the Buddhist perspective on the path to wisdom.

Mintz explains that "human development is an ongoing process" and that "it was only in the eighteenth century that human development began to be understood in terms of a process of maturation" (2). This fact that human beings at some point began to redefine their concepts, letting go of absolute judgements and boundaries as they have been gaining new perspectives during their process of growth, in itself, is proof that it is an ongoing process. Another remark that complements this view is made by Arnett: "the transition to adulthood has become so prolonged that it constitutes a second period of the life course in developed countries, lasting about as long as adolescence" which he calls "emerging adulthood" (XV). It probably lasts that long because growth is a painful process whether it is physical, mental or spiritual; in fact, a total human growth encompassing all three planes of existence *requires* pain as taught by the Buddha in the form of the four noble truths. The Dalai Lama explains that achieving happiness and overcoming suffering "is our natural state of being, and our natural quest" as humans (35). What leads a person towards the path of fulfilling that quest is an understanding of the four noble truths: 1. suffering exists, 2. it has its origins in the relationship between causes

[1] In the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms,* Baldick defines the term as "a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity. … Many outstanding novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries follow this pattern of personal growth" (24).

[2] See Jacques Derrida's (1986) theories on the freeplay of signifiers according to which language is an endless chain of signifiers and the ultimate signified can never be reached.

and their effects, and a fundamental ignorance of this relationship which leads to afflictive emotions and thoughts, 3. cessation of suffering is possible, 4. there is a path that leads people to the cessation of suffering. As the Dalai Lama puts it, "the path that leads to cessation is the cause of cessation" (36). What Clarke presents us in his novel is the parental figures of the Overlords nudging the humans towards this very path as will be explained in the following pages.

It is no coincidence that Clarke's narrator highlights Buddhism as the only remaining religion in the World State despite Clarke's persistent emphasis on his own secularism and atheism: "Of the faiths that had existed before the coming of the Overlords, only a form of purified Buddhism – perhaps the most austere of all religions – still survived" (*Childhood's End* 80). In his foreword to *The Buddha's Teachings on Prosperity*, Clarke draws attention to the "incongruity" of a "lifelong secularist" introducing such a book. Though he refers to religions as "a form of mind virus," he also declares that "Buddhism stands apart in being tolerant, accommodating, and pragmatic" (ix). This is completely in line with the Dalai Lama's call to all those who are in search of the path to understanding the human condition. For those of other faiths he suggests that the path might be found through different means and "for those who are radical atheists, then the Buddhist way of explaining things may hold some attraction" (2) which resonates with Clarke's view of Buddhism not as a religion but as some sort of a path: "Though I sometimes call myself a crypto-Buddhist, Buddhism is not a religion" (*God, Science, and Delusion* 37). Of course, a full discussion of the teachings of the Buddha would be too broad a subject to be provided here but suffice it to say that it is the most painful experiences in life that help human beings gain a much broader perspective and thereby grow into true maturity.

It is the spiritual aspect of growth that is emphasized in this particular analysis of Clarke's novel since that aspect of the relationship between the Overlords, the Overmind and the humans has been undermined by critics over the years as "a myth of progress," "a transcendental vision" (Huntington 155) or as "sentimental mysticism" (Samuelson 8). Huntington claims that Clarke created a "myth of progress"; the progress of humans in a stage of "transcendent evolution," as well as a "technological progress" (155). According to Huntington it is the former kind of progress that distinguishes this particular novel from Clarke's other works making it "incomprehensible". In the face of the unknown that the whole world is experiencing at the time that this article is being written, it would be safe to assume that many people are reaching for a similar transcendental vision to make sense of life *per se*. I would argue that sixty-seven years after it was first published, Clarke's novel still offers us guidance. Just as Clarke's characters struggle to adapt to the new ways of life that progress entails, the humans of 2021 also painstakingly find themselves having to leave certain things behind and acquire new habits in order shake off the pandemic disease and move forward to a brighter future. Huntington regards the myth of progress as "part of the fictional reality" of the novel, objecting to it "as an interpretation of actual reality" (156). My aim, on the contrary, is to portray its similarities with actual reality. After all, Clarke

himself declares in an interview: "there is the possibility that humankind can outgrown [sic] its infantile tendencies, as I suggested in *Childhood's End*" (37). Edward Conze defines Buddhism as "a part of the common human heritage of wisdom" and suggests that "[i] t is easier to state by what means one gets to the spiritual realm than to say what it is in itself" (11). Clarke's novel is a portrayal of the whole process of encountering the means to get to the spiritual realm, human beings' various responses to this encounter, as well as their journey towards this realm. It might be interpreted as an attempt to push humanity towards uncovering their own common heritage of wisdom and putting it to good use. As Clarke points out over and again, the main reason he stands against any form of organized religion is because they all become tainted by material concerns in the end. Perhaps, despite Clarke's arguments against religion, his work resonates so well with certain religious doctrines especially because it also stems from an untainted common human heritage of wisdom.

Elizabeth Anne Hull addresses the problematic criticism towards the novel in her article entitled "Fire and Ice: The Ironic Imagery of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*": "Repeatedly Samuelson interprets *Childhood's End* as making a religious statement about 'man's perfectibility' (8). It is not. It is, however, about the certainty of change and about our possible improvability" (20). Hull also draws attention to the novel's emphasis on the necessity of growth: "a central idea of the book is that living things must change; they must grow or they stagnate and die. The growth is not always in the directions which we might wish, either; nevertheless, growth is an intrinsic quality of life in the universe" (18). Within the context of change, Hull argues that the arrival of the Overlords signals at the inevitable metamorphosis of the human race which might turn out to be either good or bad, however one thing is certain: "the process will be a painful one of growing up" (24). The painfulness of the process of growing up stems from the losses and the proximity to death that it entails. As the Dalai Lama puts it, "the very cause that led a thing to arise is also the cause of its destruction … the birth of things comes together with the seed or potential for their dissolution" (55-56). In that sense, the instant a human being is born, they begin to move towards death, hence the fundamental causes of suffering are "birth, sickness, ageing and death" (The Dalai Lama 50). Growth, in that sense, precludes grief at the loss of youth and health, and suffering along the path towards the end. The hardest seems to be the loss of childhood during adolescence as explained by Arnett: "One of G. Stanley Hall's ideas that is still debated today among scholars is his claim that adolescence is inevitably a time of storm and stress. According to Hall, it is normal for adolescence to be a time of considerable upheaval and disruption" (12). Arnett himself calls the period between ages 18-25 "emerging adulthood," adolescence taking place between ages 10-18. He defines it as "*the age of instability*" (10, emphasis original), "a transitional phase of life, on the way to adulthood but not there yet" (11) in which he agrees with Bond et al. and Petersen et al. that a "depressed mood is more common … than it is in childhood and adulthood" (13). In *Childhood's End* this is especially obvious in the relationship of the adult characters with the Overlords and the whole

narrative, which covers a century of humanity's journey under the guidance of their *foster parents,* can be seen as a road map towards an acceptance of the process of growth with all the depression, pain, and suffering it entails. While Clarke criticizes organized religion for hijacking what is really needed, that is morality (*God, Science, and Delusion* 36), Edward Conze defines Buddhist Scriptures – which are grouped under the headings of "*Morality, Contemplation* and *Wisdom*" (13, emphasis original) - as "advice on how to act, statements about modes of behaviour, and the experiences connected with them" (16). In that sense, one might argue that the Overlords function in a similar way as Buddhist teachers guiding humanity towards such morality and wisdom in their journey of growth.

The title of Clarke's short story published in 1950, which forms the basis of the first section for *Childhood's End*, is indicative of the relationship that will be established between the characters of the novel: "Guardian Angel" (Clarke v). Hull comments on the relationship between the humans and the Overlords as follows: "[I]n the narrative authorial voice Clarke describes the Overlords as "shepherding" ("Fire and Ice" 2) us; midwives or babysitters are also appropriate images consistent with the title of the book - but their mission is to preserve the natives of Earth until homo sapiens reaches maturity" (26). The novel begins with the presentation of two opposing views in the face of the dominion of the Overlords: Stormgren, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, regards the Overlords as wiser and more mature than humanity, admiring and appreciating the "security, peace and prosperity" they have gifted the world with, whereas the members of the Freedom League see it as a "superimposition" and an "interference in human affairs" which cost them their freewill and liberty (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 9). The way Karellen, the Overlord Supervisor for Earth, disciplines humanity when they refuse to act as they have been told is through punishment as when he takes away the heat and the light of the sun from South Africa in order to make them end discrimination (13-14). In that sense, the Overlords would fall under the category of "authoritarian parents" as described by Arnett:

> Authoritarian parents are high in demandingness but low in responsiveness. They require obedience from their children, and they punish disobedience without compromise. None of the verbal give-and-take common with authoritative parents is allowed by authoritarian parents. They expect their commands to be followed without dispute or dissent. Also, they show little in the way of love or warmth toward their children. Their demandingness takes place without responsiveness, in a way that shows little emotional attachment and may even be hostile. (182)

Such an authority might be considered as a requisite of the guidance towards morality and wisdom which, despite the punishment that is exerted, from Stormgren's perspective nevertheless conveys compassion. Stormgren, who is the only human being allowed direct communication with Karellen via an empty screen, thinks that behind the screen "lay power and wisdom, an

immense and tolerant understanding of mankind – and, most unexpected of all, a humerous [sic.] affection for the little creatures crawling on the planet beneath" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 15). From the viewpoint of others, the omnipotence of Karellen is nothing but a threat against the liberty of humanity, hence a cause for rebellion, whereas Stormgren, who has real interaction with the Overlord, chooses to act like an obedient child looking up to the experience and wisdom of these guiding parental figures. The former projects denial and anger, while the latter is already at a stage of acceptance which is explained through his wider perspective and maturity compared to the other characters in the novel. When Hull refers to the immaturity of certain adult characters in the novel, i.e., George Greggson and Rupert Boyce, she makes the observation that "[h]uman beings, even the best of them, seem still to be in their childhood emotionally" ("Fire and Ice" 27) which gets in the way of their spiritual growth.

Samuelson contents that "[t]he technological power of the Overlords may be totalitarian, but their dictatorship is benevolent and discreet" (6). Karellen, resenting to be regarded as a dictator by some, defines himself as "a civil servant trying to adminster [sic.] a colonial policy in whose shaping [he] had no hand" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 16). There is a higher power that he too serves. The relationship between Karellen and the humans resonates with their relationship with God, in which context Stormgren might be considered as representing a prophet, since Karellen communicates only with him and never reveals himself to any human. He sends messages from his vessel in the sky through the mediation of Stormgren, messages the purpose of which are to dispel "abuses, follies and evils" (22). The rebellious ones are those who refuse to believe, obey, and follow a *so-called* presence that they cannot actually see with their own eyes. Although Stormgren explains this reaction as caused by a lack of understanding resulting in annoyance, Karellen thinks it is based simply on fear; with their representation of reason and science they pose a threat to humanity's pre-existing belief systems. Karellen explains this as people's fear that the Overlords "will overthrow their gods," however, there is a possibility to look at this outside of religious concerns and, instead, consider it in a larger context as a fear of change. Growth requires transformation, "the transformation evidently being the mature form of our species after metamorphosis" as Hull puts it ("Fire and Ice" 18), letting go of the old beliefs and a willingness to accept new ones in order to keep up with the changes that the world itself inevitably goes through.

As parental figures the Overlords nudge humanity towards change and growth, but as any such guiding figure would do, they do not reveal the whole truth at once. Karellen patiently waits until human beings begin to take the presence of the Overlords and the peace they have brought to the world for granted. Perhaps due to his close interaction with Karellen, Stormgren is the first human to easily accept the change believing that the plans of the Overlords are beyond human understanding, therefore his gradual identification with the Overlords (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 23) might be interpreted as his growth in morality and contemplation moving fast towards wisdom. Soon many others join Stormgren in his belief, yet the narrator refers to the rule of the Overlords

as "the greatest challenge Man had ever faced" (25). Defining what is, after all, an alien invasion as "a challenge" to be faced by humans again recalls growth; it is not mere blind faith in the Overlords or a desperate surrender, but is substantially based on an understanding of and trust in their use of reason and science as well as an admiration for the peace and prosperity they have provided to Earth. Through the guidance of the Overlords into morality, contemplation and wisdom, humankind learns to prioritize reason and science with the sole purpose of eliminating discrimination, corruption, oppression, and injustice. As they learn to share and respect, they stop fighting and competing; thus, they begin to fulfil their potential as human beings growing into mature adults not just physically but mentally and spiritually as well. As soon as the arrival of the Overlords one thing humanity can clearly understand about them is their "hatred of cruelty," especially to animals, and "their passion for justice and order" (42). This alone convinces Stormgren on the benevolence of the Overlords and makes him see them as spiritual guides working for the welfare of all humanity. Stormgren believes that what the Overlords did was merely speeding up the process of human growth, hastening the end of the sovereign state and the establishment of the World State (44). In the context of human growth, all this suggests a widespread unity, solidarity and cooperation based on love, kindness, compassion and mercy. Since human beings take a long time to get there, a divine intervention in the form of the Overlords is needed.

The mystery surrounding the Overlords, the main barrier against humans' total surrender to their guidance, according to Karellen's explanation is due to the fact that "most of the world is still uneducated by any reasonable standards, and is riddled with prejudices and superstitions" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 55). Therefore, the Overlords, or apparently their superior(s), have decided to wait fifty years before they make themselves visible to humanity; only then would humanity be mature enough to look at them without prejudice. As revealed later in the novel, the reason behind the mystery is due to thousands of years old misconceptions based on human prejudice of which the Overlords are aware. They are the embodiment of the Devil as portrayed in an abundance of human lore, which suggests a previous encounter between the Overlords and the humans dating back to the dawn of human history, that is, the earliest stages of their growth. Clarke's choice of the Devil as the outer appearance of the benevolent Overlords might be considered a subversion of the doctrines of organized religion inviting the reader to reconsider everything they'd been taught from a non-religious viewpoint focusing solely on the morality and wisdom behind it. Now that humanity is closer to the final stages of development, the Overlords take cautious steps towards a revelation. As Karellen explains, "the change will be so imperceptible that few will notice it" after which "there will be a period of slow consolidation while [the human] race becomes prepared for" them (62). Though Karellen never openly admits a previous encounter, when he reveals the plan to Stormgren the implications are obvious: "the men of that age [fifty years into the future] will be more stable than their grandfathers" (63). When viewed as a child-parent

relationship, one might suggest that it is first the physical absence of the Overlords, the mystery surrounding their appearance that creates a sense of distrust in humans. They are "shadowy figures" as Larson and Richards define the fathers of adolescents (qtd. in Arnett 179). When Karellen walks out into the daylight, what is revealed is the earliest insecure attachment that the humans as children of the universe had made with their foster parents, having coded them in their collective unconscious as Devils. In the context of human growth, then, the grandfathers represent babyhood, whereas their grandchildren are potential candidates for true maturity and complete growth. A waiting period of fifty years suggests that Stormgren's peers are yet at the stage of puberty which, as has been suggested earlier, is implicated in the rebellious attitude of the Freedom League and its supporters. In that sense the Overlords act like kind and loving parents patiently waiting for their offspring to reach a stage where they can be set free out into the world as independent individuals: "We will always have been part of their lives, and when they meet us we will not seem so – strange – as we would do to you," says Karellen to Stormgren (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 63). Stormgren interprets the task of the Overlords as "tidying up our world and civilizing the human race" (63) not knowing to what end. What he knows for sure is that they had failed once before and that the echoes of that first failure continue "to roll down all the ages, to haunt the childhood of every race of man" (66). Therefore, the adolescent phase of denial and anger lingers on before human beings are ready to move on to the next phase, that of *contemplation* in the Buddhist context, which Karellen refers to as "a period of slow consolidation". The transition from childhood into adulthood becomes possible only through surrendering to a higher authority accepting the part humans play in the complex, intricate and vast structure of the universe.

The second part of the novel, entitled "The Golden Age," begins on the day of the great revelation of the leathery-winged, barbed-tailed, and horned Karellen shielded from "the ancient terror" of the human crowd by a "boy sitting on his left arm" and a "girl on his right" (73). It is this new generation of children that the final part of Karellen's plan is based on; ironically, it will be children who bring the end of humanity's childhood. As Karellen explains to Stormgren, the tools and their application had been inefficient in the hands of humanity; the Overlords, on the other hand, with "the correct application of power" were able to socially engineer the whole world in fifty years, so that "the shock of revulsion" does not last too long (75-76). In fifty years, the Overlords had helped humanity obliterate war, crime, slavish work, "ignorance, disease, poverty and fear" (78). Thus, the *morality* part of their spiritual growth is complete, and it is time for *contemplation* on the path to *wisdom.* A more conscious approach to education is emphasized where people choose to go back to college after broadening their minds with "travel and experience," therefore, in the absence of psychological and/or material concerns, human beings find the opportunity to focus on their mental and spiritual growth which they had neglected for so long either because they did not want to "face the challenge" or simply just ignored the need for it (79). The narrator refers to

this development which "had given rise to many social changes" as an "extension of human apprenticeship so far past the beginning of physical maturity" (79). As a result of such realization, education turns into a much longer process: "At twenty-seven, Jan still had several years of college life ahead of him before he needed to think seriously about his career" (103). In proportion to the centuries-long growth of humanity in the larger sense, a-thirty-odd-year-long education of an individual only makes sense. When power and possession become causes for discontent rather than a life goal whereby the rush to leave the nest and start in life fades away, human beings manage to grasp how long it actually takes for an individual to mature. Thus, instead of rushing into a career, they take their time to make more educated decisions. Clarke refers to this utopian state as the true "age of reason," which had been "prematurely welcomed by the leaders of the French Revolution" (126); they had needed to learn more and grow more, leave their childhood with all its unreasonable desires behind. Thanks to such an extended education, the people of Clarke's World State manage to overcome the boredom caused by too much leisure and "for the first time everyone was given the fullest opportunity of using what brains they had" (127).

The reformed approach to education is achieved thanks to the Overlords who guide people in the right direction and take punitive measures if necessary, until people learned their lessons. In that sense, they act very much like parents educating their children on life by making *them* experience both the positive and negative consequences of their actions, instead of simply solving all the problems on their behalf like a *deus ex machina.* Thus, they teach humanity to open themselves up to a new perspective rather than committing to their long-established ways of the world, with seeing the Overlords as devils, fearing them, hence conflicting with them. Therefore, by the end of this fifty-year-long educational process, humanity finally becomes ready to move on to a stage of contemplation, leaving behind all the old conflicts and dead-ends that had been circulating viciously throughout human history. Humans finally become mature enough to put an end to their childhood and to take the final step towards independence from their guardians, which in terms of family relationships would correspond to leaving the nest. However, leaving the nest requires full maturity to which only the last generation will reach. That is why, they are yet forbidden to explore the space. This ban on space flight is a constant means of tension and curiosity in the novel, however, at one point it is explained in terms that resonate quite well with the argument of this paper:

> [I] have always felt frustrated because we've never been allowed to go to the other planets … If they had never intervened, we might have reached Mars and Venus by now. I admit that it is equally probable that we would have destroyed ourselves with cobalt bombs and the other global weapons the twentieth century was developing. Yet sometimes I wish we could have had a chance of standing on our own feet. Probably the Overlords have their reasons for keeping us in the nursery, and probably they are excellent reasons. (141)

Here Clarke underscores the destructive tendencies of humankind, drawing an explicit analogy with children under the care of their parents. After all, one does not hand their little children tools that might be destructive for them or for their environment, knowing that the child would not be able to consider the consequences. This is how Clarke portrays humankind: little kids playing with fire until their (foster) parents arrive and set certain rules. When Karellen explains the reason for the ban to newspaper reporters, he emphasizes the lethal potential of technology in the hands of the unprepared making, in his words, "a slightly unflattering analogy" with a man from the Stone Age encountering a modern city (156). As he further explains it, their intervention is meant to educate human beings to a point of wise maturity where they would be able to run the Earth without assistance. After all, as Huntington points out, "man's potential for self-destruction should be the mark of his potential for transcendence" (160). The Overlords protect the people not only from themselves – keeping them through their prohibitions from turning the Earth into "a radioactive wilderness" - but also "from the powers and forces that lie among the stars" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 157). In that sense, the Overlords are to be taken as role models for tolerance and altruism for the greater good:

> They must preserve us from war to insure that we do not destroy ourselves before our rebirth. Because they do not know where the breakthrough will come from, all humans must be nurtured. So the Overlords must promote racial tolerance, distribution of health care, universal education, and access to the creature comforts modern technology can provide without prejudice to all humanity. This allows Clarke to make a plea by analogy for the benefits of tolerance here and now. (Hull, "Fire and Ice" 22)

Once again, human beings are portrayed as children in need of protection, education, and parental guidance until they are wise enough to walk on their own, and their obedience to the Overlords is rewarded by a lifetime of inconceivable happiness which creates a lot of room for contemplation in the Golden Age of humanity.

However, the Wheel of Fortune dictates that once one reaches the top, a downfall is inevitable; hence the title of the final part of the novel – "The Last Generation". Thus, the falling action begins when the humans of the World State grow into a state of acceptance without knowing what it was they had accepted, having trusted the wisdom of their parental figures. There are exceptions of course, those who refuse to let go off their old ways, but they are given the freedom to continue living their lives as they wish on an island they call New Athens and their biggest complaint about the new way of the world is that there is no struggle anymore but only leisure and entertainment as a result of which culture and creativity dies away: "people are becoming passive sponges – absorbing but never creating" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 164). Together with the old and familiar way of things with all the pain, the struggle, the chaos, they have lost the creativity and the arts as a consequence. In a way,

this means the loss of life as they knew it, the loss of their world. The final straw is the loss of their children which leads some of them from depression to suicide. The mass suicide that takes place in "this elite community, the cream of humanity" is not only because they lost their horizons, but also due to their "despair when their children take the next evolutionary step without their parents" (Hull, "On His Shoulders" 109). This final setting of the novel is significant not only because it is the last domain of resistance, but also because it is here that the Greggson family resides with their two children who are the keys to the Overlords' plans for the final destination of humanity. The human parents are inadvertently headed towards practicing the Buddhist doctrines of not-self and non-attachment as they will have to let go off their children and off the world. Thus, Clarke offers a pragmatic portrayal of the Western philosophical theories of transcending the ego. As Conze explains,

> the belief in a 'self' which makes us make statements such as 'I am' or 'I have' is the cause of suffering and it is the kind of belief that are transferred into our children ironically through the strong attachment that is installed: the idea of belonging and owning, and consequently establishing the 'self' as a sum total of these. (18)

Under the guidance of the Overlords, the humans of the World State are obligated to put the theoretical negation of the ego into practice by letting go off everything they assumed they had.

George and Jean Greggson are parents trying to raise their children responsibly and with the least possible damage. Yet these children are the last generation, so they gradually change the dynamics of the relationship by beginning to control the parents and their environment. In this matter, the human parents do not follow the example of the Overlords, but instead keep struggling to exert their own authority over the children as well as the events. The Overlords, on the other hand, though they are in a rather superior position, choose not to interfere in any way: "in these matters our curiosity is of no importance. It is no more important, even, than the happiness of mankind" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 198). In the face of what may be described as supernatural, the parents react with anxiety and fear, whereas the children, Jeff and Jennifer, after the initial shock and fear of the novelty and the strangeness of the incidents, quickly adapt to their new evolved state of being, as in the case of Jeff Greggson: "Now he went alone and fearless into the universe that was opening up before him" (198). This last generation of humans as represented by children in fact experience the final awakening of humanity; an awakening that necessitates the courage and open-mindedness to move forward as well as to let go – of their parents, of materiality, of the past, of the past habits. With this last generation it is no longer a matter of rebellion versus obedience; there is only experience and acceptance at this final stage of transformation. Until reaching this final phase, what the Overlords have been trying to do with the humans was exactly the same thing: to have them let go of their toys of possession, power, war etc. In the end these same humans give birth to a new generation that is ready to take the final step, however, just like the last

generation of children letting go of all these things, the parents would have to let go of their offspring for that to happen as Rashavek explains to George: "Enjoy them [your children] while you may … They will not be yours for long" (207). Only those who reach the required wisdom are able to do that and the last generation of children are already at that stage.

With the new awareness that the children begin to acquire, their senses become superfluous: "She [Jennifer] was aware of the world that surrounded her: indeed, she was aware of much more than that" (203). The uttermost difference between the new generation and their predecessors is that they have "so much less to unlearn" (204) which clearly indicates the wisdom they already have. In all kinds of development – mental, psychological, physical – the concept of unlearning is the key to success; that is how old habits are broken and new perspectives are gained. Clarke refers to what happens to this new generation of children as "Total Breakthrough" which might as well be read as a psychological term referring to the development of the whole of humankind[3] (204). It is a huge leap forward for the human race. The Overlord Rashevak likens this to a difficult birth in which they themselves play the part of midwives: "We are helping to bring something new and wonderful into the world" (206). However, parents become afraid of their own children due to the supernatural powers the children begin to manifest, and it is described as a "metamorphosis for all kids around the world" (210). The word "metamorphosis" *per se* reminds one of Kafka's renown novella, thereby charging the word with a myriad negative connotation while at the same time underlining the estrangement of the parents from their offspring, which is rather more unsettling than a mere generation gap. Their perception of the human condition in its totality becomes so different due to the completed state of the children's transformation as the last generation of the human race that, for the parents understanding is not even one of the options; they either accept this thing they don't have the wisdom to understand or they become destitute in the face of change.

Above the Overlords is the *Overmind* which has sent the Overlords to Earth "to prepare [humans] for the transformation that is now at hand" (215). The bit of information about the Overmind that is significant to this paper is that although the Overlords do not know much about it, it is something that is "trying to grow, to extend its powers and its awareness of the universe" (215). Therefore, the process of growth continues infinitely for all, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. It is a growth of consciousness and when the growth of the human race will be complete, "the last generation of *Homo sapiens*" (215) will go extinct and the new generation will rise and join the Overmind, only to continue growing with it which Samuelson likens to "the mystical return of the soul to God" (6). Physical transformations such as aging might mislead human beings into thinking that their growth is completed, however Clarke's

[3] The American Psychological Association defines breakthrough as "a significant, sometimes sudden, forward step in therapy, especially after an unproductive plateau" (dictionary.apa.org).

symbolism suggests that it is a never-ending process. The explanation Karellen gives to the parents is also noteworthy in terms of its relevance to the central idea of this paper: "For what you have brought into the world may be utterly alien, it may share none of your desires or hopes, it may look upon your greatest achievements as childish toys – yet it is something wonderful, and you will have created it" (216-17). Such an explanation not only reverses the parent-children roles, but it also creates a deconstruction by means of the paradox that the parents' own creation outgrows them. Although in appearance they are still children, "these who were leaving were no longer children, whatever they might be" (219). They represent what humanity has grown into and the fact that they are yet children themselves is indicative of this being a new beginning, rather than an end. When Jan Rodricks is about to return to Earth from the planet of the Overlords, he has understood why human beings had been forbidden to reach for the stars: "Humanity still had very far to go before it could play any part in the civilization he had glimpsed" (222-223). When Jan sees how the children live on their own private island, he is disturbed by the empty look on their faces, their indifference to anything around them, and the apparent lack of emotion or feeling. However, Karellen's explanation reveals that there is a greater purpose to the children's lack of individual identity: "linked together, they are something much greater than you" (238). Physically they are still children, but their united consciousness has grown so much that they begin to destroy everything else around them. From the perspective of the above arguments, I would read this destruction of the physical world as a metaphor which functions to foreground what goes on behind the destruction: the unity of the children almost like a Nietzschean *Overman* on a higher plane of existence. What is destroyed, therefore, is not humanity *per se* or its home, but the old way of things, the old ways of thinking and being, the lack of awareness, the lack of wisdom.

From such a perspective, Clarke's narrative gives the reader hope. As Jan begins to understand it, after having a glimpse of the immense universe, the real growth of the children brings about the end of homo sapiens with its "human hopes or fears" and its material concerns (240). The children who complete their growth are about to become part of the Overmind and Jan sees it as "not tragedy but fulfilment" (241). In the end the human race transforms into a different entity getting ready to unite with the Overmind. Although it is the end of homo sapiens, Clarke's tone is not a pessimist one: "It was all so peaceful. It might have been thus at Man's birth as it was now at his ending" (250). Bringing together the beginning and end of humanity as such again resonates with the Buddhist understanding of life as a constant cycle of death and rebirth – constant until a transition takes place from the Form Realm into the Formless Realm which again is quite similar to the transformation of humanity as described in the novel:

> Buddhism talks about the infinite process of the universe, coming into being and going through a process of dissolution before again coming into being. This process has to be understood in relation to the Three Realms of existence … it is from the Third Level of the Form Realm

> downwards that the world is subject to the continuous process of arising and dissolution. From the Fourth Level of the Form Realm upwards, which includes the Formless Realm, the world is beyond this process which we could call the evolution of the physical universe. (The Dalai Lama 46)

The last generation of humans in the novel thus complete the evolution and move towards the Formless Realm of the Overmind. It is not a tragedy because the destruction of the physical world is in fact a metaphorical destruction of worldly concerns and the illusory achievements, a means of letting go so that childhood may come to an end. As Huntington also agrees "the novel as a whole does not preach despair…. The Overmind is both a mysterious transcendence and an expression of qualities potential in mankind" (159). The childhood in the title, therefore, refers to human beings in general; *they* were the children and it is *their childhood's* end. Jan, witnessing the end of the world and the end of homo sapiens, is not grieving but is in a state of pure acceptance: "It wasn't joy or sorrow; it was a sense of fulfilment, achievement" (Clarke, *Childhood's End* 254). That is because, it is not the end of *humanity*; rather, it is a new beginning in a transformed state of existence – a rebirth. Growth is inevitable and as Karellen says "no one of intelligence resents the inevitable" (242). Thus, the novel becomes a road map for the reader towards real spiritual growth, pointing out the futility of many human concerns and acting as a reminder of the smallness of human beings in the face of the infinite universe, thereby highlighting the extreme significance of unity and a sense of oneness. In these times when we are all forced to reconsider the ways in which we run our lives and the world, Clarke's novel proves to be more relevant than ever. The global pandemic is our Overlord, showing us that it is time to let go, to accept change, and grow up. 2021 may well be our childhood's end and the beginning of our true growth.

## Works Cited

Arnett, Jeffrey. *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*. Pearson, 2012.

Baldick, Chris. Bildungsroman. In *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms.* Oxford University Press, 1990.

"Breakthrough." *The American Psychological Association.* dictionary.apa.org/break-through. Accessed 03 Dec. 2020.

Bond, Lyndal, et al. "Individual, Family, School, and Community Risk and Protective Factors for Depressive Symptoms in Adolescents: A Comparison of Risk Profiles for Substance Use and Depressive Symptoms." *Prevention Science*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2005, pp. 73-88.

Clarke, Arthur. C. *Childhood's End.* Pan Macmillan, 1990.

---. Interview by Free Inquiry. *God, Science, and Delusion: A Chat with Arthur C. Clarke*, Spring 1999, https://secularhumanism.org/1999/04/god-science-and-delusion Accessed 23 Dec. 2020.

---. Foreword. *The Buddha's Teachings on Prosperity*, by Bhikkhu Basnagoda Rahula. Wisdom Publications, 2008, pp. viii-x.

Conze, Edward. *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development.* Harper Torchbooks, 1965.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Critical Theory Since 1965,* edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Florida State University Press, 1986, pp. 83-94.

Hull, Elizabeth Anne. "Fire and Ice: The Ironic Imagery in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*." *Extrapolation,* vol. 24, no. 1, 1983, pp. 13-32.

---. "On His Shoulders: Shaw's Influence on Clarke's *Childhood's End*." *Shaw,* vol. 17, 1997, pp. 107-17.

Huntington, John. "The Unity of *Childhood's End*." *Science-Fiction Studies,* vol. 1, no. 3, 1974, pp. 154-64.

Larson, Reed and Maryse H. Richards. *Divergent Realities: The Emotional Lives of Mothers, Fathers, and Adolescents.* Basic Books, 1994.

Mintz, Steven. *The Prime of Life: A History of Modern Adulthood*. The Belknap Press, 2015.

Petersen, A. C., et al. "Depression in Adolescence." *American Psychologist*, vol. 48, 1993, pp. 155-68.

Samuelson, David N. "*Childhood's End:* A Median Stage of Adolescence." *Science-Fiction Studies,* vol. 1, no. 1, 1973, pp. 4-17.

The Dalai Lama. *The Four Noble Truths: Fundamentals of the Buddhist Teachings.* Translated by Geshe. Thupten Jinpa, edited by Dominique Side. Thorsons, 1997.