The Overlord's Burden: The Source of Sorrow in *Childhood's End*

Matthew Candelaria

In the novels of Arthur C. Clarke's most productive period, from *Earthlight* (1951) to *Imperial Earth* (1976), children appear as symbols of hope for the future. The image of the Star-Child at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (his collaboration with Stanley Kubrick) is imprinted on the cultural eye of humanity as we cross into the twenty-first century, and this image is emblematic of Clarke's use of children in this period. However, Clarke's most important contribution to the science-fiction genre is *Childhood's End* (1953), and it concludes with a very different image of children, children whose faces are "emptier than the faces of the dead," faces that contain no more feeling than that of "a snake or an insect" (*CE* 204). Indeed, this inverted image of children corresponds to the different mood of *Childhood's End*: in contrast to Clarke's other, optimistic novels, a subtle pessimism pervades this science fiction classic.

What is the source of this uncharacteristic sorrow? What shook the faith of this ardent proponent of space exploration, causing him to declare, "the stars are not for Man" (*CE* 136), even when he was chairman of the British Interplanetary Society? In assessing his reputation in the introduction to their seminal collection of essays on Clarke, Olander and Greenberg call him "a propagandist for space exploration [...] a brilliant "hard science fiction" extrapolator [...] a great mystic and modern myth-maker [...] a market-oriented, commercially motivated, and 'slick' fiction writer" (7). Looking at Clarke's work in this light, the tone of *Childhood's End* is inexplicable. However, what Olander and Greenberg do not note is that the myths that Clarke tells are colonial myths, and the relationship of Clarke's work to colonialism is essential to an understanding of *Childhood's End.*

John Hollow begins his book-length study of Clarke's work by stating, "An important thing to remember about the science-fiction of Arthur

C. Clarke [...] is that it was written by an Englishman" (1). Hollow uses Clarke's English identity primarily to stress the resonances between his writing and that of H. G. Wells. However, Hollow does not address the influence that the British colonial system had on Clarke's fiction. Nor do other commentators, except to note it in passing. In commenting on a relatively early novel by Clarke, *The Sands of Mars*, Bruce Beatie writes, "Clarke was at this point still subject to the prejudices of colonialism" (57), a statement that seems to sum up the view that most critics maintain of Clarke's work: if he were at one point "subject to the prejudices of colonialism," he grew out of them prior to writing his major works. In truth, Clarke's work is not merely subject to the prejudices of colonialism; colonialism is at the core of Clarke's novels. It is his chief concern, to which he returns again and again, not only to demonstrate the necessity and profitability of the colonial endeavour, but also to defend its ultimate morality.

Childhood's End is Clarke's most complete statement on British colonialism. Coming at the end of the colonial era, following the independence of India and amidst cries for independence from Britain's African dominions, it is a melancholy attempt to answer the lingering questions that plagued the conscience of Englishmen. According to a review of P. J. Griffiths' 1946 book, *The British in India*, these questions are as follows:

> What in fact is the British record in India? Have the conditions of future Indian progress been established? Has India advanced as rapidly under British rule as she would have done had she been independent? Have Indian interests been heartlessly sacrificed to British interests as is so forcibly maintained by many Indian nationalists? ("India When the British Leave" 123)

Griffiths himself boils these questions down to one: "Has the British power in India [...] given a square deal to the people of India?" (16). In *The British in India*, Griffiths concludes that, "In the course of their long association, Britain has done well by India" (221). Taking its cue from such a rationalization, *Childhood's End* is a colonial parable, deftly engineered to make the reader identify with the colonial

administrators, the Overlords, and their self-sacrificing mission to better humanity. Throughout the novel, the Overlords are portrayed as British colonial administrators, but they are idealized representations. The Overlords are wholly noble in a way that might put to rest English minds that worried whether "Indian interests have been heartlessly sacrificed to British interests," and whether India has "advanced as rapidly under British rule as she would have done had she been independent."

In *Childhood's End*, humanity's first faltering steps toward space exploration are overshadowed and halted by the appearance of the alien Overlords in their thirty-kilometre-wide spaceships, which appear simultaneously all around the world. In the novel's first section, "Earth and the Overlords," these aliens quickly assert their dominance over the Earth, forcing humanity to accept a unified world state and a ban on travel beyond Earth. Through the unified state, the Overlords, represented almost exclusively to one man, UN Secretary-General Stormgren, by a carefully veiled alien entity named Karellen, administer Earth, providing humanity with select technologies that bring about a "Golden Age" of peace and prosperity. Once humanity accepts the rule of the Overlords as being a normal part of their lives, the Overlords reveal their heretofore concealed form: they are ten-foot-tall creatures who resemble typical depictions of Satan. In the "Golden Age" that the Overlords initiate and oversee, humanity's latent psychic powers become manifest through its children. These children, born with tremendous telekinetic powers, are separated from the rest of humanity by the Overlords, who reveal that they were sent to Earth by an entity they call the Overmind to bring about this "Last Generation" of humankind. The children do not seem to age, but their powers grow, and they eventually destroy all life on the planet, then the planet itself, to help them grow and join the Overmind. Humanity dead and the Earth destroyed, the Overlords leave the solar system.

Through their words and actions, the Overlords are quite clearly characterized as European, and, ultimately, British colonial administrators. Alan Howes notes that the Overlords "represent the reasoning side of man, extracted from his other parts, purified and magnified many times" (156). For example, when Karellan is addressing human

objections to Overlord rule, he explains, "We represent reason and science, and, however confident they may be in their beliefs, they fear that we will overthrow their gods" (*CE* 20-21). This sounds very much like a refiguration of Orientalism: "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" (Said, *Orientalism* 40). This is consistent with beliefs that Clarke has exhibited in his other works. Richard D. Erlich notes, in contrasting Clarke with Ursula Le Guin: "[Clarke] has presented worlds in which transcendence is possible and can lead to true superiority: a universe in which masters may justify their status as part of the Order of Things" (122). As this Orientalist novel proceeds, it becomes increasingly clear who are the "virtuous" and "mature" characters, and who are the fallen children.

The representation of the Overlords as not just European, but distinctly English, imperial masters, is established in the description of the very first words spoken by Karellan:

> Karellan, Supervisor for Earth, made himself known to the world in a broadcast that blanketed every radio frequency. He spoke in English so perfect that the controversy it began was to rage across the Atlantic for a generation. But the context of the speech was more staggering even than its delivery. By any standards, it was a work of superlative genius, showing a complete and absolute mastery of human affairs. (*CE* 15)

Karellan's "complete and absolute mastery of human affairs" is indubitably why the speech is delivered in English, rather than in a hundred different languages. While Clarke seems to think it very important that Karellan's broadcast "blanketed every radio frequency" so that it would reach everyone everywhere, it is apparently of less significance that the transmission be comprehensible to everyone. Instead, the Overlords decide on an administrative language and impose it on the world. Not coincidentally, this language happens to be English, and the use of the phrase "perfect," without any other qualifier to describe Karellan's English, seems a distinctly British touch. What constitutes "perfect" English? In the absence of any evidence, it must refer to

standard, Oxford English, and "the controversy" alluded to above is probably the reining in of the colonies to speaking the King's Good English, which is why the controversy only "rage[s] across the Atlantic," and not through all the nations whose languages are not represented. The issue of language comes up again later, when Stormgren is asked if there is anything Karellan does not know. The Finland-born Stormgren replies that Karellan's shortfalls are "trivial": "For instance, English is the only language he understands completely, though in the last two years he's picked up a good deal of Finnish just to tease me" (*CE* 23). English is the colonial tongue, but the various aboriginal languages, such as Stormgren's Finnish, are used for occasional amusement.

Another similarity between the Overlords and the British is their administrative technique. The Overlords rule Earth using the British system of indirect rule: "They had taken the United Nations Organization as they found it [...] and had issued their orders through the mouth of the Secretary-General" (*CE* 24). Indirect rule was a method approved by many administrators of the British Empire, considered, in fact, "the most valuable and successful of our Imperial experiments" (Stokes 233). The Overlords apparently believe that people respond best to being led by the structures of government with which they are familiar, but they are insufficiently concerned with the structures of that government to research whether it represents a reasonable one for all of humanity. Although "The Soviet delegate had quite correctly pointed out [...] that this was not in accordance with the Charter," "Karellan did not seem to worry" (*CE* 24), because Karellan knows that he has the power to make a body of cooperation and arbitration into the sovereign government of humanity, so he does not have to worry about the propriety of this arrangement.

The Overlords also manifest a paternalistic affection for their charges, similar to that claimed by administrators in the British colonial system. In *On Governing Colonies*, Walter Crocker proudly identifies this as a trait that distinguishes British administrators from those of other nations: "A characteristic of the average British officer is his instinctive sympathy for the African [...] he always has a genuine liking for his charges" (qtd. in "Britain and the Native African"). This "sympathy,"

or imperialistic paternalism, is manifest in the relationship between Stormgren and Karellan. As we have seen, Karellan teases Stormgren with Finnish, and he allows himself to be revealed, only briefly and only once, to the curious UN Secretary-General, despite orders that no human being is to witness his physical form. Meditating on this act, Stormgren thinks, "It was the final proof [...] of Karellan's affection for him. Though it might be the affection of a man for a devoted and intelligent dog, it was none the less sincere for that, and Stormgren's life had given him few greater satisfactions" (*CE* 60). Here, Clarke indulges in and exposes the fantasies of colonial administrators. Not only is the affection of the Overlords for Stormgren that of "a man for a devoted and intelligent dog," but Stormgren accepts this condescending affection as one of the greatest satisfactions of his life.

Through this manifestation of paternalistic affection, *Childhood's End* begins to demonstrate its true nature. Clarke's parable, in which the Overlords come, apparently, only to serve the interests of their subjects and give them progress that would have been impossible to achieve had they not intervened, is a reinscription of the view of colonialism typified most succinctly, if somewhat ironically, by Kipling's "White Man's Burden":

> Take up the White Man's Burden—
> Send forth the best ye breed—
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need;
> To wait in heavy harness
> On fluttered folk and wild—
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child. (1-8)

This first stanza of Kipling's poem resonates throughout Clarke's novel. In particular, the line "Half devil and half child" seems to describe the novel as a whole, evoking images of the devil-shaped Overlords and the bedeviled children of humanity. Moreover, the Overlords indeed consider themselves bound into exile and are explicitly shown to be

the servants of their human captives. In fact, by the end of the novel, Clarke has given us a strikingly detailed realization of the literal sense of Kipling's poem.

Karellan tells Stormgren, "I'm only a civil servant trying to administer a colonial policy in whose shaping I had no hand" (*CE* 20). While we never learn how much influence Karellan has in the shaping of policy, we do learn that he is "a civil servant" of the interstellar intelligence, the Overmind, sent to Earth to safeguard humanity. Stormgren accepts this as a reasonable excuse. A dictator who exercises arbitrary power is a criminal, but a "civil servant" is allowed to wash his hands of any guilt associated with exercising the same power simply because the "policy" was written by someone else. It is only later that it occurs to Stormgren to confront Karellan with the issue of corruption, and the Overlord replies, "There's no danger of that happening to me. [...] The sooner I finish my work here, the sooner I can get back to where I belong, a good many light-years from here" (*CE* 22). Although we never find out where, exactly, Karellan belongs, it is clear that he considers himself "[bound ...] to exile." Karellan's status as a reluctant servant of policy is only one of many ways in which Clarke identifies the Overlords with European colonialists taking up the white man's burden. The Overlords are servants of the Overmind, and Clarke takes pains to demonstrate that their every action is calculated for the betterment of humanity, not for their own ends.

Just as apologists for British rule in India have argued that the "most important effect of [this rule] has been the creation of the idea of nationality and the conception of India as a whole" (Griffiths 212), the Overlords' first goal in *Childhood's End* is to give humans a single unified state, which will inaugurate the "Golden Age." Initially, of course, there is some ineffective resistance to the aliens' attempt at imposing a global state. One major power attempts to annihilate an alien craft with a thermonuclear missile, which proves embarrassingly impotent. It is such a futile action that Karellan ignores the offending people; it is the expected "blame of those ye better, / [...] hate of those ye guard" (Kipling 35-36). Even after the dominion of the Overlords has been largely accepted, protests continue. "Angry mobs" object to the

Overlords' scheme to unite the Earth under the UN. Although they do "not necessarily quarrel" with the idea of a united Earth, they protest that "it must come from within—not be superimposed from without. We must work out our own destiny" (13).

Ultimately, however, the narrative teaches us that human beings are essentially incapable of working out "our own destiny," and we are therefore better off under the rule of the Overlords. The Overlords have come to save humanity from itself. As Karellan explains: "the human race was drawing slowly nearer to the abyss—never even suspecting its existence" (*CE* 182). The Overlords have come to help humanity find the bridge across the abyss, for "Few races, unaided, have ever found it" (*CE* 182). The abyss is the incipience of psychic powers, and the reader is never intended to accept objections to Overlord rule or even to take them seriously. The instant the alien spacecraft are sighted, the narrator notes that a scientist who had worked on the space project for thirty years, "felt no regrets as the work of a lifetime was swept away" (*CE* 6). In fact, only one person, Jan Rodericks, seems to respond negatively to the Overlords' formulation that "The stars are not for Man," which in effect has made humans "prisoners in their own land" (Said *Culture* 214), although, as we shall see, it is Jan's conversion to the Overlords' viewpoint that firmly establishes the reader's sympathy for the colonial administrators. Clarke wants us to believe that, among reasoning and reasonable people, there exists no antipathy towards the benevolent Overlords. In attempting to portray this situation, he creates an imperium such as never existed historically, in which the subject people become not merely "supine or inert" (Said *Culture* xii), but come eventually to be almost wholly enthusiastic for the Overlords' superior and beneficent rule.

What initial, feeble resistance there is to the rule of the Overlords consistently evokes a colonial context and an imperialistic mind-set: "As pygmies may threaten a giant, so those angry fists were directed against the sky fifty kilometers above [...] against the gleaming silver cloud that was the flagship of the Overlord fleet" (*CE* 12). While Clarke here seems to be consciously thinking only of size and power, his reference to "pygmies" resonates with the "prejudices of colonialism." In other places,

Clarke discusses human resistance to the Overlords as an analogue to a British colonial situation:

> They felt, with good reason, much as a cultured Indian of the nineteenth century must have done as he contemplated the British Raj. The invaders had brought peace and prosperity to Earth, but who knew what the cost might be? History was not reassuring; even the most peaceable of contacts between races at very different cultural levels had often resulted in the obliteration of the more backward society. (*CE* 26)

The narrator's words reflect Clarke's belief in "true superiority," that social and scientific progress is essentially linear, with a single, discernible goal, and therefore he can speak about "different cultural levels" and "the more backward society" without hesitation. It is, however, quite troubling that Clarke's narrator equates the difference between the British Raj and the "cultured Indian" to the difference between twentieth-century humanity and aliens able to travel at ninety-nine percent the speed of light, who are essentially immortal, need no sleep, and can manipulate the fabric of time itself. Clarke's use of India as an example is timely and significant, as *Childhood's End* appeared in 1953, a mere four years after the release of India from the British Empire. Even as he wrote about Indian reluctance to accept British rule, the loss of India as a colony cannot have been far from his mind, nor from the mind of his readers, who might very well be asking themselves Griffiths' questions.

Karellen's human collaborator, Secretary-General Stormgren, gives full expression to the imperial rationale when he is kidnapped by people opposed to the Overlords, and he feels compelled to challenge his kidnappers: "I defy you to mention one act that, in the ultimate analysis, hasn't been beneficial" (*CE* 40). The kidnappers are unable to name one, and Stormgren presses his point about the beneficial aspects of the Overlords' regime by mentioning the Overlords' order against cruelty to animals: "You may kill one another if you wish and that is a matter between you and your laws. But if you slay, except for food or in self-defence, the beasts that share your world with you—then you may be answerable to me" (*CE* 41). From the beginning, the Overlords are

portrayed as defenders of the weak and guardians of justice. Their method of preventing cruelty to animals is demonstrated at a bullfight when a bull is wounded and all the participants and spectators suffer the same pain as the bull. The Overlords never inflict punishment; they simply make the perpetrators suffer the pain of their acts. When Karellan liberates Stormgren from his captors, he further demonstrates his nobility by simply using a temporary paralysis field on the kidnappers, and inflicting no other punishment upon them.

The Overlords bring "peace and prosperity," and they usher in a "Golden Age" in which "Ignorance, disease, poverty, and fear had virtually ceased to exist" (*CE* 70), thereby fulfilling Kipling's call to action: "Fill full the mouth of famine / And bid the sickness cease" (19-20). Through plenty and through peace, the Overlords guide humanity safely across the abyss as human beings realize their full potential as psychic beings. Even seemingly trivial decisions of the Overlords are shown to have important and valuable reasons behind them.

One of the few major objections brought against the "colonial policy" of the Overlords even by those, such as Stormgren, who are sympathetic to their cause, is that the masters refuse to show themselves. No matter what arguments are adduced, the Overlords refuse, deciding to reveal their form only fifty years after the inception of their rule, when it has become so entrenched and accepted as to make it impossible to reverse. When a man objects to this policy precisely on these grounds, saying that in fifty years, Earth's "independence" and "heritage" will be dead, Stormgren thinks: "Words, empty words [...]. The words for which men had fought and died, and for which they would never die or fight again. And the world would be better for it" (*CE* 53-4). This effect of the Overlords' rule is an ironic revision of the colonial endeavour, which was nothing if not nationalistic. Using this revision, Clarke shows that, even if the Overlords' policy of concealment were proven capricious and arbitrary, it is still superior to the arguments raised against it. But it does not prove to be arbitrary, for the Overlords' physical form matches that of the devil: "The leathery wings, the little horns, the barbed tail—all were there" (*CE* 67). When the Overlords eventually reveal themselves, Clarke makes sure we know that they have made the correct decision:

> It was a tribute to the Overlords' psychology [...] that only a few people fainted. Yet there could have been fewer still, anywhere in the world, who did not feel the ancient terror brush for one awful instant against their minds before reason banished it forever. (*CE* 67)

In light of this climate of universal terror, we must conclude that there would have ensued mass hysteria if the Overlords had revealed their Satanic form fifty years earlier. Although Karellan admits, "We have had our failures" (*CE* 58), alluding to an obviously much earlier, aborted attempt to bring enlightenment to humans, the Overlords do not fail in this, their final administration of the Earth. The Overlords rule with benevolence, rationality, and justice, and their rule results in tangible progress as humanity matures through the "Golden Age" to become fully developed psychic beings. The Overlords are everything the British would have liked to believe themselves to be in India and elsewhere, if only they had received the same kind of cooperation from their subjects. In this manner, Clarke may be suggesting that, while Britain's first attempts to impose order on the empire may have failed, they were not entirely misguided.

The metaphoric treatment of the Overlords as benevolent colonial administrators might otherwise be relatively benign were it not for the subtle racism that pervades the novel, clearly dividing the "dogs" from the humans. In *The View from Serendip*, Clarke refers his readers to *Childhood's End* for his views on racism. Ostensibly, Clarke seems to have egalitarian views, since the major characters are African, Finnish, Russian, German, or American, but a closer examination of the novel reveals that some characters are African not to show an Africa freed of colonialism, but rather to impose upon it a mark of eternal colonial power.

Clarke's narrator tells us that it is in South Africa that the Overlords take their only "direct action against a recalcitrant government" (*CE* 17), and he sets the scene in what seems to be a very reasonable fashion:

> For more than a hundred years the Republic of South Africa had been the centre of racial strife. Men of good will on both

> sides had tried to build a bridge, but in vain—fears and prejudices were too deeply ingrained to permit any cooperation. Successive governments had differed only in the degree of their intolerance. (*CE* 17)

This describes the historical circumstances of apartheid in South Africa very well, placing the blame where it belongs, squarely on the government, which resisted many "good will" overtures from both sides. However, we learn that, after the Overlords put on an impressive display of power, "the next day the government of South Africa announced that full civil rights would be restored to the white minority" (*CE* 17). Howes describes this inversion of our expectations as "one of Clarke's most effective stylistic devices—the matter-of-fact statement of a startling fact or truth about the future which is the opposite of what the reader would have supposed from his knowledge of the present" (170). However, this inversion is more than a stylistic device. It does not really challenge or startle most of Clarke's readers in the 1950s, because, although it describes a situation different from the historical one, it represents a common assumption that was made about the future and used to justify continued white rule: if the African majority in South Africa gained power, it would inflict cruelty and injustice upon the "white minority." Further, it means that the only "recalcitrant" government is an African one, not a European one; only an African government has the insolence to maintain its structure in the face of the Overlord's command.

Howes' discussion of inversion calls to mind one of Clarke's short stories written between *Childhood's End* and *The View from Serendip*: "Reunion." In "Reunion," humanity is reunited with its cosmic relatives, the original settlers of Earth, most of whom fled when they were afflicted by "A disease that did no physical harm—but merely disfigured" ("Reunion" 70). At the end of the story, we learn the nature of the disease, "If any of you are still white, we can cure you" ("Reunion" 71). Although ostensibly a critique of notions of whiteness, the reversal reinforces those notions by taking, as a default position, the assumed belief that blackness is a disfiguration.

This demonstrates the problem with Howes' entire argument: that *Childhood's End* is important because it surprises our expectations by having us identify with the Overlords rather than with humanity. In truth, *Childhood's End* is a novel that fulfills the expectations of Clarke's audience, a primarily white audience, mostly in Britain, Canada, and the United States—it just fulfills them in a different way. We are supposed to identify with the roles that people play, not with their physical description. We identify with the Overlords, who represent the colonial administration, and not with humanity, which represents the "subject race." The Overlords are aliens, but they are distinctly "English" aliens, so we identify with them. In another way, Clarke fulfills our expectations about race through the character of Jan Rodericks, who is of African descent, as Clarke takes pains to establish:

> A century before, his colour would have been a tremendous, perhaps overwhelming, handicap. Today, it meant nothing. The inevitable reaction that had given early twenty-first-century Negroes a slight sense of superiority had already passed away. The convenient word "nigger" was no longer taboo in polite society but was used without embarrassment by everyone. (*CE* 89)

In the utopia produced by the Overlords' intervention, "colour" is no longer a "handicap." This seems good, but some of the ancillary description that Clarke adds is somewhat troubling. For example, why would "twenty-first century Negroes" have "a slight sense of superiority"? It seems to be another manifestation of African insolence, similar in its effect to the South African "inversion."

Jan Rodericks' racial background is of further importance because he is the "insolent" human being who objects to the ban on the stars and stows himself away on a ship that travels to the Overlords' home world. When Jan is discovered by the Overlords, he is taken on a tour of their massive city and is confronted with this world's grandeur, its sheer scale. He is described as feeling "like a pygmy," a description which not only categorizes him in size relative to the ten-foot-tall Overlords, but also emphasizes his racial background. Here it is important that Jan is

African, being taken on a tour of the city of the English Overlords, because when he "[finds] himself on the verge of unreasoning terror" (*CE* 195), it is not a challenge to the expectations of Clarke's British and American audience, but a repetition of a familiar scene, that of a primitive African marvelling at, and failing to comprehend, the wonders of Western technology.

Jan's voyage to the Overlord's homeworld is merely one instance of a common trope in Clarke's fiction. Inherently, a belief in "true superiority" produces in Clarke's fiction a dichotomy between the advanced, cultured centre—the colonial metropolis—and the primitive, naive periphery, a dichotomy that is emphasized by the journey from the periphery to the centre, and, ultimately, a recognition of some transcendental, superior, and, most importantly, beneficent power.

The novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* provides the most famous example of this kind of journey in Clarke's work. In this novel, David Bowman travels through a "star gate," to "a Grand Central Station of the galaxy" (199) where he is rerouted to his final destination. As Bowman travels, he passes massive artifacts beyond the dreams of human technology, but derelict, abandoned by beings who have moved beyond building in mere metal to manipulating stars themselves. As Bowman approaches the red giant around which this artifact orbits, he notices more strange phenomena, upon which the narrator comments: "He was moving through a new order of creation, of which few men had ever dreamed. Beyond the realms of sea and land and air and space lay the realms of fire, which he alone had been privileged to glimpse" (207). The location of the colonial centre on the surface of a star is symbolic: not only is the star the centre about which the periphery orbits, but culture, like energy, radiates outward. These passages describing the alien technology make Bowman's journey very much like that of Jan Rodericks: a trip to the centre of the vast empire, characterized by technology and sophistication beyond the imagining of the peoples of the periphery.

In *Childhood's End*, the only thing that Jan recognizes on the Overlords' world is just such a characteristic marker of the imperial metropolis' sophistication: a museum. He marvels, "Here was the loot of planets, the achievements of more civilizations than Jan could

guess" (*CE* 196), all uprooted and brought to the colonial centre of the Overlords' vast administration. Looking at the exhibit from Earth, Jan sees "art treasures from a dozen centuries grouped incongruously together," "modern calculating machines and paleolithic axes," "television receivers and Hero of Alexandra's steam turbine" (*CE* 197), all juxtaposed in a fashion that seems strange to the human's eye. This moment of estrangement inspires in Jan's mind the incipience of sympathy for the Overlords, as he wonders whether they, "for all their superb mental gifts, could really grasp the complete pattern of human culture" (*CE* 197). Indeed, the idea of an incomplete, or fragmentary, comprehension is reinforced in the artifacts from other worlds, such as the "single giant eye" (*CE* 198) almost one hundred meters across. This disembodied eye is reminiscent of the contents of many European museums, whose collectors have assembled various bits and fragments of statues—disembodied hands, limbless decapitated torsos, half-busts—which are revered for their iconic value. The giant eye reveals the terms under which Clarke wants the reader to feel sympathy for the Overlords: "There seemed no limit to what Nature could do if she was pressed, and Jan felt an irrational pleasure at discovering something which the Overlords would not attempt" (*CE* 198).

However, when Jan returns to Earth to witness the final apotheosis of humanity and the resulting melancholic retreat of the Overlords, his "irrational pleasure" is transformed into a full-blown sympathy, a sympathy that Clarke manoeuvres his readers into feeling as well. With the apotheosis of humanity, Clarke performs yet another "inversion" of our expectations: that humanity will grow out of childhood into a mature adulthood under the guidance of the Overlords. When people object to the uniting of Earth as an historic impossibility, Stormgren points out the childishness of such an argument: "When I was a boy, the Federation of Europe was a dream—but when I grew to manhood it had become reality" (*CE* 13). As this statement implies, the title of the novel alludes to the possibility that we will see an end to the childhood of humanity, see human beings progress from their primitive state to a more advanced one. Further, Stormgren's phrasing recalls the famous Biblical passage: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought

like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (*NIV* I Cor XIII:11). On one level, this is what happens in the novel. Human beings find the bridge across the abyss with the aid of the Overlords, then sublimate to join with the Overmind. However, what we actually see is humanity progressing from adults into children. The means by which this is accomplished are somewhat complex. The human characters in the novel at the beginning are adults. There is hardly any mention of children, but halfway through the novel, human children suddenly become the focus of the narrative, for it is through its children that humanity will achieve apotheosis. The children have access to psychic powers, and the awakening of these powers leads to the end of the old humanity and the birth of a new, collective entity whose nature is rather akin to that of the Star-Child at the end of *2001*. This ironic reversal of the title puts distance between the reader and the children at the end of the novel.

This distance is accentuated by Clarke's descriptions of the children. In keeping with the Orientalist paradigm, the colonial subjects in the novel are capricious, depraved children, while the Overlords become more and more explicitly adults whose mission is to care for these children. When Jan Rodericks looks at the children, his first thought is that humanity has regressed: "[The children] might have been savages, engaged in some complex ritual dance. They were naked and filthy, with matted hair obscuring their eyes" (*CE* 204). The subject race is savage, primitive, unsanitary, and inscrutable. Upon closer examination, Jan is struck with horror:

> Then Jan saw their faces. He swallowed hard, and forced himself not to turn away. They were emptier than the faces of the dead, for even a corpse has some record carved by time's chisel upon its features, to speak when the lips themselves are dumb. There was no more emotion or feeling here than in the face of a snake or an insect. The Overlords themselves were more human than this. (*CE* 204)

Here we see an explicit comparison that makes the Overlords less alien, more sympathetic than these hideous children who are more horrific than "the faces of the dead."

In addition to describing their disturbing physical appearance, Clarke makes these children fallen and depraved. In one instant, the children destroy "all the trees and grass, all the living creatures" (*CE* 206) on Earth. The only explanation offered for this capricious act of juvenile sadism is that "Perhaps the presence of other minds disturbed them" (*CE* 206). Further, even their "complex ritual dance" is revealed to be a true product of primitivism: "We've analyzed [the] pattern [of the dance] endlessly, but it means nothing" (*CE* 205). Nor do the children gain in understanding and sympathy as they grow in power. Soon the Overlords are forced to withdraw in fear: "It is no longer safe for us to stay. They may ignore us still, but we cannot take the risk" (*CE* 213). The Overlords are afraid of the possibilities that a capricious intelligence entails. The children have not spared the Overlords thus far out of sympathy; they have simply ignored them, and who knows what the future holds. Clearly, these irrational, Oriental children, the descendants of humanity, are "devilishly" incapable of moral actions or moral formulations. Their initial murders leave them unmoved, and they may kill again at any time.

In contrast to these savage inhuman children, Clarke presents the Overlords, who, in addition to being "civilized," are consciously characterized as adults watching over these children. This role is foreshadowed when the Overlords first reveal their Satanic shape to humanity. Karellan calls out, before stepping into the light, "There are some children by the foot of the gangway. I would like two of them to come up and meet me" (*CE* 66). A boy and a girl rush up the gangway, into the darkness, and the first glimpse humanity and the reader have of an Overlord is of Karellan carrying two children, one in each arm, a strange inversion of Christ, who said "Let little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (*NIV* Matt XIX:14). Here we see the opportunity Clarke had to give a different picture of colonialism, to meld the Overlords as "devil" and humans as "child" into two halves of a single people. However, instead,

he chooses to remove the demonic qualities of the Overlords through their benevolent actions and this parallel with Christ, while making humanity both more childish and more devilish.

Clarke re-emphasizes the relationship between the adult Overlords and the childish humans when one Overlord describes his people "as midwives attending a difficult birth" (*CE* 176), the birth of the new generation of human children. Karellan later elaborates on his role: "My task and my duty is to protect those I have been sent here to guard. Despite their waking powers, they could be destroyed by the multitudes around them—yes, even by their parents. [...] I must take them away and isolate them, for their protection, and for yours" (*CE* 185). The Overlords are mature, rational, English adults charged with the care of these new children. In the end, even Clarke's title is an echo of Kipling: "Take up the White Man's burden— / Have done with childish days" (49-50), but it is to the Overlords that it refers and not to a colonized humanity.

It is possible that Clarke intended this as an inversion of our normal assumptions about adulthood and childhood, savagery and progress, just as the Overlords' appearance with children is an inversion of Christian imagery. However, this does not seem to be the case: "For many, many readers given a choice between the fate of the Overlords and the fate of humankind, the Overlords and their future seem preferable" (Goldman 205). It is not accidental that readers choose the Overlords' fate, because the narrative itself chooses to identify with them. As Robert Waugh writes, "The midwives are the main protagonists of the novel, to whom the narrative returns with increasing frequency, culminating with Karellan" (52). The novel begins with the arrival of the Overlords, viewed from Earth, but it ends with Karellan watching the departure of the new humanity from the Overlords' orbiting craft. The children are always viewed from without, and we see their horrific faces, their unkempt persons, and their strange, incomprehensible behaviour, as something to be feared and perhaps held in awe, but never as something to be admired.

While the children are portrayed as capricious monsters with growing power, the Overlords are given the dignity and sympathy of martyrdom.

It is perhaps fitting that Jan Rodericks, after his trip to the Overlords' home world and his conversion to their mission, should express the full tragedy of the Overlords' situation:

> They were trapped [...] in a cul-de-sac from which they could never escape. Their minds were ten—perhaps a hundred—times as powerful as men's. It made no difference in the final reckoning. They were equally helpless, equally overwhelmed by the unimaginable complexity of a galaxy of a hundred thousand million suns, and a cosmos of a hundred thousand million galaxies. (*CE* 207)

All of the Overlords' achievements, all their vast endeavours—their mighty ships, their indescribable intellect—all this is as nothing before the immensity of the universe. The Overlords are not, however, pathetic, for they are noble. Jan muses on them further: "He understood their purpose now, what they had done with man and why they still lingered upon Earth. Towards them he felt a great humility as well as admiration for the inflexible patience that had kept them waiting here so long" (*CE* 207). Although the Overlords are trapped, they continue "In patience to abide" (Kipling 10), not just working with "man," but for "man," so that in the end we feel "admiration" for the Overlords, and fear of the children of humanity.

We must turn again to Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in order to understand fully the conclusion of *Childhood's End.* In both novels, humanity is raised to a transcendent state by nurturing aliens. However, there is an important difference between them. In *2001*, Bowman is remade in the image of the colonial power, but in *Childhood's End*, humanity becomes fundamentally unlike the Overlords. The different ending of *Childhood's End* makes it a more sympathetic and human portrayal of the nobility of colonialism, for it allows the Overlords to avoid being subject to the mimicry/mockery slippage noted by Homi Bhabha (361). The different ending also emphasizes Kipling's formulation. The Overlords are not really masters, but, rather, servants of the Overmind. When humanity becomes part of the Overmind, they are demonstrating that the Overlords were in fact in service to their subjects, in

service, indeed, to a much higher, incomprehensible even to them, cultural destiny.

But the conclusion of *Childhood's End*, in fact, more closely resembles Clarke's short story, "Superiority," published in 1951. The story is often seen as a parable of the perils of technology, since it tells of an army defeated by its desire to research newer and better weapons that prove to be difficult to implement. However, there is also a cultural bias built into "Superiority," for the enemy's decision to stick to older weapons is never described in any positive fashion, but only as "stubborn conservatism" and "a complete lack of imagination" (90). Thus, when the narrator describes the defeat of his army, he declares: "We were defeated by one thing only—by the inferior science of our enemies" ("Superiority" 83). The implication is not that they were defeated by the superior application of inferior technology by their enemy, but by their own superiority. Similarly, Rodericks' catalogue of the Overlords' characteristics seems a statement on their superiority, the very superiority that has placed them in a "cul-de-sac," a situation that Clarke portrays as analogous to that of Britain at the end of the colonial era.

The ending of the novel is what sets *Childhood's End* apart from most of Clarke's work. Generally, Clarke's novels end with a promise for the future, a promise of progress and life to come. Waugh identifies the Overlords' role in establishing the overall mood of the novel's conclusion: "In them, despite the novel's often bland manner, indeed through it, a fear of undistinguished, undramatic, passionless failure is revealed" (52). The Overlords face that which Kipling promised to those who "Take up the White Man's Burden": "Come[s] now, to search your manhood / Through all the thankless years, / Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom" (53-55). Clarke attempts to imbue the final scene of the novel with a kind of pathetic poignancy, as the Overlords decide to "await without despair whatever destiny was theirs" (*CE* 219), and they, the masters that nobody wanted, that nobody invited, thrown off by the growing power of their charges, turn their backs on our star and head home to resume their interrupted and (presumably) important intellectual work. As a result, the final image in Clarke's reader's mind is not transcendent humanity, but the sacrifice of colonial administrators.

When we look back at the questions that the *Times Literary Supplement* claimed were on the minds of all Englishman, we see that Clarke has responded to every one of them. Not only have "the conditions of future [human] progress" been established, but humanity has transcended its former state to join with the galactic Overmind. Moreover, not only "has [humanity] advanced as rapidly under [Overlord] rule as [it] would have had [it] been independent," but the Overlords have saved humanity from the perils of progress that faced them. Further, we know that human "interests [have not] been heartlessly sacrificed to [Overlord] interests," for the Overlords never wished to come, and have made tremendous sacrifices of time and effort while receiving no personal gains. Ultimately, then, by analogy, we are forced to conclude that "The British record in India," and elsewhere is one of courage, patience, and selfless sacrifice for which praise, not scorn, is due. But Clarke was trying to do more than exonerate the colonial system of the past: he was trying, through *Childhood's End* and other works, to extrapolate a colonial future, to give hope for future glory to a people whose past had trapped them in a cul-de-sac of history.

Works Cited

Beatie, Bruce A. "Clarke and the Alien Encounter: The Background of *Childhood's End*." *Extrapolation* 30.1 (1989): 53-69.

Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Modern Literary Theory*. Eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. 3rd. Ed. New York: Arnold, 1996. 360-7.

"Britain and the Native African." Rev. of *On Governing Colonies* by Walter Russell Crocker. *Times Literary Supplement* 17 April 1947: 166.

Clarke, Arthur C. *Childhood's End*. New York: Harcourt, 1953.

——. "Reunion." 1964. *The Wind from the Sun*. New York: Signet, 1973.

——. "Superiority." 1951. *Expedition to Earth*. New York: Ballantine, 1953.

——. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. New York: NAL, 1968.

——. *The View from Serendip*. New York: Random, 1977.

Ehrlich, Richard D. "Ursula K. Le Guin and Arthur C. Clarke." *Extrapolation* 28.2 (1987): 105-29.

Goldman, Stephen H. "Immortal Man and Mortal Overlord: The Case for Intertextuality." *Death and the Serpent: Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Eds. Carl B. Yoke and Donald M. Hassler. Westport: Greenwood, 1985. 193-208.

Griffiths, P. J. *The British in India*. London: Robert Hale, 1946.
Hollow, John. Against the Night, the Stars: The Science Fiction of Arthur C. Clarke. San Diego: Harcourt, 1983.
Howes, Alan B. "Expectation and Surprise in *Childhood's End*." *Arthur C. Clarke*. Eds. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg. New York: Taplinger, 1977. 149-71.
Huntington, John. "From Man to Overmind: Arthur C. Clarke's Myth of Progress." *Arthur C. Clarke*. Eds Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg. New York: Taplinger, 1977. 211-22.
"India When the British Leave." Rev. of *The British in India* by P. J. Griffiths. *Times Literary Supplement* 22 March 1947: 123.
Kipling, Rudyard. "The White Man's Burden." *The Portable Kipling*. Ed. Irving Howe. New York: Penguin, 1982. 602-3.
Olander, Joseph D. and Martin Harry Greenberg. Introduction. Arthur C. Clarke. Eds. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg. New York: Taplinger, 1977. 7-14.
Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
——. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
Stokes, Robert. "New Dangers to Our Colonial Empire." *The National Review* 130 (1948): 225-36.
Waugh, Robert H. "The Lament of the Midwives." *Extrapolation* 31.1 (1990):