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The Counterfeit Child

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I'LL BEGIN THE WAY MANY CONVERSATIONS begin nowadays—by telling you about my kids. First, there's Alice. She's very bright but has an overactive imagination. In this picture (figure 1, see over), she has been babysitting, but she dreams that the baby has turned into a pig—or, rather, it has turned *back into* a pig, since that is probably what it was to start with. (It had only been masquerading as a child.) It's just as well, muses Alice: "If it had grown up [...] it would have made a dreadfully ugly child: but it makes rather a handsome pig, I think" (Carroll 55–56). Then there's Ida. She too is very bright, and like Alice is given to babysitting. But sometimes she doesn't focus on her responsibilities. This was a problem one day when goblins came and stole her baby sister, replacing her with one made of ice (figure 2). Taking wonder horn in hand, Ida had to infiltrate the goblin wedding and extricate her baby sister from the Dionysian riot so that a "crooning and clapping" baby could be returned to mama from the counterfeit children's frenzied tempest (Sendak np). Then there's David, fresh from *The Midwich Cuckoos* and residing in *The Village of the Damned* (figure 3). Like the girls above, he too is preternaturally bright, and again this causes some consternation. As it turns out, David is not a human child

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Figure 1

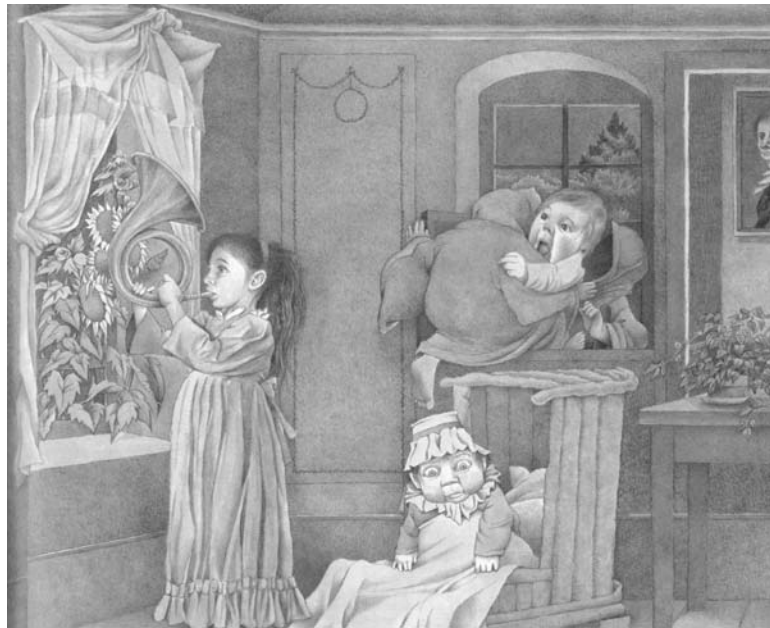


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

at all but is one of dozens of alien implants, each of whom has used his “mother”’s womb merely as an incubation nest. From human families used and discarded, these juvenile impersonators will gather in socially and politically dangerous pods, killing any humans who get in their way. Which leads me to my fourth child, Damien Thorn of *The Omen* (figure 4, see previous page). Here is the ultimate counterfeit child: the son of Satan born of a jackal and adopted into a powerful American family to live as “normal,” only until he can rise to the American presidency and, eventually, world domination.

From folk stories and the Golden Age of Children’s Literature through science fiction to the contemporary Gothic, we are plagued with “counterfeit” children. Such “counterfeit” is, in the first instance, a descriptor, the particular quality of a thing. As the *OED* reminds us, “counterfeit” appears as an adjective in the fifteenth century to mean something “made in imitation of something else, [...] not genuine, [...] spurious, sham.” This definition would clearly name the counterfeit children I have just enumerated: pigs, goblins, aliens, and demons all pretending to be children but who clearly aren’t. In this sense, though, “counterfeit” also functions as a verb and, paradoxically, as the *opposite* of the counterfeit. These children make visible the ease with which fraud is detected and sham exposed. (This opposite meaning, significantly, is buried in the term’s etymology, for “counterfeit” comes from the Latin *contra-facere*, meaning “to make in opposition or contrast” and thus to *oppose* the act of imitation.) At stake, then, is the ways in which numerous genres—whether *for* children or *about* them—inscribe the child as both the thing we wish the child to be and the thing that actively resists or undoes that wished-for thing, as both the quality of a child and that quality’s undoing.

But a still larger sense of the counterfeit is also in operation here. It’s the sense that comes to us from Jean Baudrillard, who sees the invention of the counterfeit as endemic to the invention of modernity, and, I will argue, to the invention of childhood as an ontological category. For Baudrillard, the European Renaissance is the “age of the counterfeit” in that signs of prestige once belonging to the feudal lord and having value *in themselves* (the gold coin, the tract of land, the offspring) came to be democratized across a middle class who used these signs to *signify* their prestige, that is, to deploy these signifiers as referents *of themselves*, rather than as guarantors of their own value (50). This “first-order simulation” of the sign, says Baudrillard, allowed the burgeoning middle class access to a symbolic system where paper money, promissory notes, and other such baseless signifiers would counterfeit a status that they could not ensure. One other

such signifier, it appears, was the child. According to child historian F.R.H. du Bolay, the surplus of money in the seventeenth-century British middle class made it possible not only to have more children and to see them as creatures available for purposes other than labour but also “*to use children as objects of conspicuous consumption*” (quoted in Postman 44; emphasis Postman’s). The child was one symbol of many that could wrest the ownership of value from the feudal aristocracy and proliferate it through the middle class as a sign of democratized prestige. In this sense, the child is its own counterfeit further imbricated in the world of counterfeits. It is always a signifier, a stand-in for something it isn’t, pointing to “the disenchanting world of the signified” (Baudrillard 50) but never able to embody it.

That the European Renaissance, which gave us the counterfeit, also gave us the concept of “the child” is not news. The work of Philippe Ariès on early modernity’s invention of childhood is groundbreaking in this regard. But where the invention of the counterfeit and the invention of the child come together for me is in the way they are both “empty” at the same time that they are chock full of ideological significance. For James Kincaid, the child in modernity functions primarily in its vacancy, as a series of “eviction notices” (10): the child is that which *does not have* original sin, which *does not know* corruption, which *does not feel* sexual drive, which *does not aggress* unprovoked. Like any counterfeit sign, the child is empty in such a way that we can make it answer to any ideological need we have. Thus my critical question in this essay: What happens when we combine the empty signifier of the “counterfeit” with the equally empty signifier of “the child”? What happens in narratives that render “childhood” as a counterfeit sign placed squarely against the “real” or “legitimate” child and its “authentic” history? More simply put, why are we captivated by figures of counterfeit children and into what service do we press them?

Test Case #1: *Peter Pan*

To begin to answer this question, let’s return to Golden Age of Children’s Literature for a child who is even more invested than Alice with cultural significance (if that’s possible), Peter Pan. The self-proclaimed embodiment of “joy” and “youth,” Peter Pan *is* for modernity the boy who will never grow up, the spirit of innocence and play. But we have constructed this image rather tellingly around a remarkable act of forgetting, a cultural disavowal of the moment in J.M. Barrie’s novel when we overhear Peter telling Wendy and the Lost Boys why he had lost his “sublime faith in a mother’s love”: “‘Long ago,’ he said, ‘I thought like you that my mother would always keep the window open for me, so I stayed away for moons

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and moons and moons, and then flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed” (*Peter Pan* 130). That “other little boy sleeping in my bed” is a long way from the pigs and goblins we met a few moments ago, but not for Peter. For Peter, this child is a counterfeit in that sense that he is a changeling, an imposter who is counterfeiting Peter’s role in the mother’s affections and who has no business being there.¹ By these lights, Peter’s investments in childhood seem to be mere symptoms of a maternal rejection, a reaction formation produced not only out of his sense of alienation from a mother who has forgotten him but also from the presence of another child, one who has been substituted symbolically in the mother’s affections. Youthfulness and joy are strategies of regression—a rage directed against a mother’s love for a counterfeit other—and not some unfettered embodiment of spirit and imagination. They are, in fact, as counterfeit as the changeling imposter in Peter’s bed. Little wonder, then, that we should see the troubling speech excised from the public performance since the 1950s, most obviously in Disney’s 1953 cartoon—public performances that identified “children” as their audience, an identification quite foreign to Barrie’s early project.²

That Peter’s supposedly “authentic childhood” is defined by—or more importantly *against*—the presence of a counterfeit or changeling child, one posing as or replacing Peter, aligns him with at least one modernist configuration of the child. In “Family Romances,” Freud presents us with the “too many occasions on which a child is slighted, or at least *feels* he has been slighted, on which he is not receiving the whole of his parents’ love.” From this, says Freud, he forms the conviction that he is “a step-child or an adopted child” (237–38). Thus, the feeling of being dislodged from the family’s supposedly “natural” bonds of affection, the feeling of being dispossessed by the very unit that possesses you, is extremely common in the explosive psychic terrain we call childhood. For Freud, to identify another as the counterfeit pretender to one’s own entitlements—the entitlement to monopoly on the mother’s love, for example—is simultaneously to define *oneself* as the counterfeit; it is to remove or distance oneself from the fam-

1 This scene also appears in the genetic text that introduced us to Peter, *The Little White Bird*, first published in 1902. It appears in the stage play of 1904 and in act 4 of the revised version of the authorized 1928 script. This version of the script was modified over time from the original 1904 UK performance.

2 See Jacqueline Rose’s *Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* for the ways in which Barrie’s novel may speak about children but never speaks to them. For Rose, *Peter Pan* is not—or is only reluctantly—a children’s story.

ily on the grounds that one cannot possibly imagine belonging to such a feeble lot as one's own relatives. Arguably, this is what Peter does. Having identified the presence of another boy in his bed, he then counterfeits himself into roles and identities other than the "unwanted child," roles we call the products of "imagination." Peter takes over the Neverbird's bed and displaces her eggs (Barrie, *Peter Pan* 113); he becomes the same Captain Hook he had killed moments earlier (181); he plays half-heartedly at being the Lost Boys' father and then adamantly denies he is doing this (122). Such counterfeiting, moreover, is contagious. Peter's encounter with the changeling child inaugurates a series of changelings *en abyme*, in that the rest of the novel is dedicated to presenting them. Wendy may return from Neverland to find her window open and her mother waiting, but by novel's end her childhood will have been replaced by daughter Jane's, whose childhood will then be replaced by daughter Margaret's, "and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless" (207). If "gay innocence" makes *Peter Pan* a testament to the spirit of youth and joy, a certain "heartlessness" also renders it a novel of the child's utter insignificance. It makes of childhood something infinitely replaceable or substitutable; it gives us momentary simulations of children until they are replaced by their own counterfeit avatars. And in so doing, it brings into high relief the degree to which substitution—a replaceability based upon counterfeit value—constitutes the familiar structure of modernity. The child is a fetishized thing, but its *thingness*, its status as fetish (always a substitute, according to Freud³) makes of it a commodity to be produced and reproduced, an object cherished and disposable at the same time.

This phenomenon is not merely the fallout of a rich and ambiguous "story for children"; it is an *idée fixe* in J.M. Barrie's creative oeuvre. Let's consider the role that Peter—the counterfeit child—may be playing in Barrie's more personal economies. Along with the list I enumerated a moment ago, Peter is a counterfeit child to the degree that his wrenching fantasy of dispossession is a rather obvious expression of J.M. Barrie's own feelings of abjection from *his* mother. Much of the first chapter of his memoir of his mother, *Margaret Ogilvy*, is taken up with Barrie's description of her inconsolable grief upon the death of James's older brother David, the child James always understood to be his mother's favourite. Rendered helpless by the magnitude of her sorrow, the young Barrie observed:

3 See Freud's famous and notorious declaration in the 1927 essay, "Fetishism," that "the fetish is a substitute for the penis, [...] a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost" (152).

My mother lay in bed with the christening robe beside her, and I peeped in many times at the door and then went to the stair and sat on it and sobbed.[...] [M]y sister, the daughter my mother loved the best; yes, *more I am sure even than she loved me*, [...] came to me with a very anxious face and wringing her hands, and she told me to go ben to my mother and say to her that she still had another boy. I went ben excitedly, but the room was dark, and when I heard the door shut and no sound come from the bed I was afraid, and I stood still. I suppose I was breathing hard, or perhaps I was crying, for after a time I heard the listless voice, that had never been listless before say, “Is that you?” I think the tone hurt me, for I made no answer, and then the voice said more anxiously “Is that you?” again. *I thought it was the dead boy she was speaking to*, and I said in a little lonely voice, “No, it’s no him, it’s just me.” Then I heard a cry, and my mother turned in bed, and though it was dark I knew that she was holding out her arms. (11–13, emphasis added)

In this all-too-common family romance, David is an affective threat because David is the allegedly privileged child (an honour he seems to share with the solicitous sister, “the daughter my mother loved the best, [...] even [more] than she loved me”). To make matters worse, David is privileged because David is *dead*: his phantasm of ideality and perfection stands in where David used to be and usurps the love that young James might otherwise have enjoyed (or so Barrie’s logic goes). If this is Freudian family romance, Barrie’s situation does Freud one better, for not only does the invading, usurping, changeling child need to be killed off, but that counterfeit child is *already dead*. And according to *Peter Pan*, the one thing that all children (except Peter) cannot forget besides rejection by the mother is the first act of unfairness (Barrie 107). For what’s more unfair than competing with a “child” who can never show a flaw? In this sense, Barrie faces a problem that has been at the core of psychoanalysis since its inception, and to which we will return at length momentarily: How do you kill what is already dead?

Peter’s strategy for dealing with the changeling in his bed is by turns regression (to “youth” and “joy”) and forgetting: remember that, with the one crucial exception of the mother’s “unfair” emotional preferences, Peter is famous for his ability to forget. Barrie’s strategy for killing off the dead child in his bed—what he calls “my crafty way of playing physician” to his mother’s melancholic desiring of someone other than him—is rather more complex than Peter’s, and certainly no less suggestive or perverse.

Having been thrust by his sister into the role of talking-cure therapist for his mother, a role that made him “eager to begin” to administer her treatment, James proceeds thus:

At first, they say, I was often jealous, stopping her fond memories with the cry, “Do you mind nothing about me?” but that did not last; its place was taken by an intense desire (again, I think, my sister must have breathed it into life) to become so like [David] that even my mother should not see the difference, and many and artful were the questions I put to that end. Then I practised in secret, but after a whole week had passed I was still rather like myself. He had such a cheery way of whistling, and when he whistled he stood with his legs apart, and his hands in the pockets of his knickerbockers. I decided to trust to this, so one day after I had learned his whistle (every boy of enterprise invents a whistle of his own⁴) from boys who had been his comrades, I secretly put on a suit of his clothes [...] and thus disguised I slipped, unknown to the others, into my mother’s room. Quaking, I doubt not, yet so pleased, I stood still until she saw me, and then—how it must have hurt her! “Listen!” I cried in a glow of triumph and I stretched my legs wide apart and plunged my hands into the pockets of my knickerbockers, and began to whistle. (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 15–17)

The psychological moves between authenticity and counterfeit here are dizzying. James desires to have the mother love him rather than the dead David. To meet this desire, James must kill off a David who is already dead. To do that, James attempts to become the dead David—an impossible task to be sure: “I was still rather like myself,” he says. To rectify this, James *kills himself off* in order to be David, to identify with and thus to embody the dead child. And all of this merely produces a counterproductive paradox for James, for in counterfeiting what is already a ghost, he can do nothing but invoke the ghost more strongly. “How it must have hurt” Margaret Ogilvy not only to see one son already dead but to see the other son die to remind her of her first loss.

If we see J.M. Barrie’s poignant attempt at ghost whispering to be trenching on the Gothic, that’s because it ties into a long generic and

4 One of the interesting boys who invents a whistle of his own is, of course, Peter Pan; his whistle is his, and it drives Captain Hook mad with desire/anger. J.M. Barrie’s whistle, conversely, is an imitation, a counterfeit. It is borrowed unsuccessfully from David or, rather, from “the boys who had been his comrades.”

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historical convention of Gothic tropology. For Jerrold Hogle, the degree to which the “authenticity” of the past haunts us through counterfeit signifiers is crucial not just to the tradition of Gothic fiction but to modernity itself. Hogle suggests that “there is really no major work in the Gothic tradition since Walpole that is not in some way ‘grounded’ in the counterfeiting of aging artifacts or bodies and [what is more important for him] of the present conflicts that often hide behind them” (105). “The past” comes to us, he says, through demonstrably artificial or counterfeit symbols (relics, suits of armor, body parts, family legacies), which produce ghosts that then haunt the present with a spurious nostalgia. Those “ghosts” Hogle calls “ghosts of the counterfeit,” since they denote the afterlife of something that never really existed with any real legitimacy in the first place. We see in Barrie’s oeuvre such a “ghost of the counterfeit,” as Hogle calls it, in the sense of David’s spirit, which James believes to have replaced him in Margaret Ogilvy’s affections. Barrie’s response to this ghost, his deployment of it, is to present his mother with the counterfeit of the ghost. James imitates a dead child who exists in a false but irreproachable authenticity. Just as the abjected Peter Pan will take up the position of carefree youth that only the counterfeit child can enjoy—that is, just as Peter will identify as the phantasm of unfettered, ideal joy that he can no longer honestly sustain—so will James imitate the most loved child, the child who is already dead and can only exist as a ghost.

What Barrie’s work enacts, then, is a story that, Serge Leclair tells us, is as common as the Freudian Family Romance: “There is for everyone, always, a child to kill” (3), and it is precisely the identity of the child (or its metonymic affiliations) that is at stake in Barrie’s work. In *A Child is Being Killed: Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, Leclair argues that this “child” is in the first instance the phantasm of the infant as it existed in a state of primary narcissism and which, as “primary narcissistic representative,” holds a privileged place in the adult unconscious. In this primary narcissistic state the child understands no separation from its pleasures; it registers no desire for the other (let alone a desire *of or belonging to* the other): no worldly knowledge of death can press upon its preconscious commitment to satisfying need. This child is the one for whom the mother will always keep the window open or to whom she will always hold out her arms. However, this “child to be glorified, the all-powerful, terrifying child” is also the child, says Leclair, who must “*be killed*.” As “*the representation of the primary narcissistic representative*” (10), this phantasm of His Majesty the Baby is “tyrannical” in that it freezes the subject in its pre-subjectival state: “I begin” only at that moment [when the first child

is killed off], so that the subject can be launched toward ‘the inexorable second death—the other, about which nothing can be said’” (Leclaire 4). With this bald assertion Leclaire identifies the work of psychoanalysis as what I think we can productively find in the archive of child-centred literature:

Psychoanalytic practice is based upon bringing to the fore *the constant work of a power of death—the death of the wonderful (or terrifying) child who, from generation to generation, bears witness to parents’ dreams and desires. There can be no life without killing that strange, original image in which everyone’s birth is inscribed.* (2)

“Accursed and universally shared, it is part of everyone’s inheritance: the object of a murder as imperative as it is impossible” (Leclaire 10). For this reason “A child’s death is unbearable” precisely and disturbingly because “it fulfills our most secret and profound wishes” (Leclaire 2). For Peter Pan, “to die will be an awfully big adventure” (Barrie, *Peter Pan* 111) but to kill is an even more ineluctable one—for Peter, like James, needs to kill more than the counterfeit child usurping his mother’s affections; he must also, and continually, kill that pre-Oedipal infant he understands himself no longer to be.

Revising the Oedipal doctrine to kill the father with the more heretical suggestion that we each kill our inner child, Leclaire presents us with the problem I’ve located in J.M. Barrie and Peter Pan: “How do you kill the dead?” (11). For, as he suggests, “Through [the child] shines the royal figure of our wishes, memories, hopes, and dreams—a fragile and hieratic figure *representing*, in the secret theatre where destiny is played out, the first- or third-person position from which the unconscious speaks” (Leclaire 3). The point here is not simply the banal futurity that the child is made toxically to signify in our “hopes and dreams” of the future: *that* particular banality Lee Edelman has already identified and deconstructed in his monumental *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. And that particular child, moreover, is represented and heartlessly disposed of as J.M. Barrie’s child Wendy gives way to her child Jane, who gives way to her child Margaret, and so on, each child dying and being forgotten to a future that cares nothing about its past. Rather, the problem here, as Leclaire sees it, is that the narcissistic child—that figure which structures the imaginary and pulls us along the furrows of desire—is by definition already dead, dead and apotheosized in the unconscious to be our guiding star to Neverland. It is, in Leclaire’s words, not ourselves in primary

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narcissism (where no bounded self can as yet exist) but rather “*the representation of the primary narcissistic representative.*” A *representative* of primary narcissism because primary narcissism cannot be inhabited by a self, only by a counterfeit representative of a selfless state; and a *representation of a representative* because, in the act of deploying the overdetermined signifier “child,” we further counterfeit—or perhaps *ghost* the counterfeit of—the child before it can have acquired all the meanings that we insist it must possess. That is why the murderous representation of the child to which Leclair refers figures the “first- or third-person position from which the unconscious speaks” (3). It is the first person in that it is the signifier for—the embodiment of—“me” in my primal state; it is that which preceded the rupturing of the shattering into “ego” and into the social self. But at the same time (and temporality *is* the problem here, as it is in any discussion of childhood) “me” can only be re-presented, signified by a language that kills off exactly the thing it would designate. Thus, the other boy in my bed is not just the David whom I always fight, but also “myself” prior to the point when such a fight was necessary. Like David, like the other boy, the “self” can now only be “the representation of a representative.” The subject in language—narrated to us in *Peter Pan* as “children’s literature” or in *Margaret Ogilvy* as autobiography—is always that of a first person displaced into the alienating machinery of the third person. The first-person child is always the counterfeit created in language by the adult who then ghosts it: the mute, dead David, the child sleeping in Peter’s bed—both are substitutes, ghosts of the speaker’s own childhood and ghosts who are impossible to kill.

My thesis, then, in case it is not yet clear: The child must be killed, as Leclair would have it, but, in order to do so, a counterfeit child must be put in its place. The answer to the question, “How do you kill the dead?” is to invoke a counterfeit that will replace or supplant it. It is against that *counterfeit* child that we can then safely direct our murderous impulses. Alice can turn her child into a pig, and then turn it loose; Ida can turn her sister into an ice goblin and have it melt before turning her “real” sister back over to her mother. J.M. Barrie can segue from the “other” child, the competitor in the Family Romance of his mother’s desire, to the *self* as that (pre)object of narcissistic bliss. He can render himself an object that is not himself in the hopes that his mother will love him. Such rendering, repeated and successive in *Peter Pan*, is the will to *regress* to the status of the counterfeit, which Peter and Co. do repeatedly: there is, of course, the turn that most of the children take at being “dead”; there’s Peter in the nest of the Neverbird to become yet another unhatched egg (112–14); there’s

Michael claiming pride of place in the Neverland baby basket even though he had already outgrown it back in Bloomsbury (119); or my favorite sham-financial metaphor from Tootles: “‘All I remember about my mother,’ Tootles told [the Lost Boys], ‘is that she often said to my father, ‘Oh, how I wish I had a cheque-book of my own.’ I don’t know what a cheque-book is, but I should just love to give my mother one’” (65). Here we have the perfect example of Freud’s thesis that the (male) child wants to provide for his mother what it is that she lacks, what will make her happy. We also have the dynamics of counterfeit where it takes a false-value third party object to bring to the maternal-child relationship that which it knows it lacks without the status of the counterfeit. Tootles may not want to “be” a cheque-book, but he wants to be a one-who-holds-a-cheque-book—that is, the one who holds the object that will produce a piece of paper that will be exchanged for the object that will name and fulfill his mother’s desire. No wonder he wants to go to Neverland!⁵

In my reading of *Peter Pan* alongside *Margaret Ogilvy*, the sentimental child in fiction gains its sense of self and being through a continual struggle with death, the murderous impulses directed against a counterfeit child. If this antagonism renders child-centred literature as Gothic as it is sentimental, this is perhaps to be expected. James Kincaid has argued that where children are concerned, we only have two genres available to us—the sentimental and the Gothic—and what’s more important, those two genres are much the same thing (Kincaid 13). For wherever there is a child to be adored or nurtured, there is also a child to be threatened,

5 Similarly, what reads like an unproblematic description of a childhood memory in *Margaret Ogilvy* has already been undermined by the text’s fantastical and financial preoccupations in the childhood world it purports to describe. Indeed, the biography begins thus:

On the day I was born we bought six hair-bottomed chairs, and in our little house it was an event, the first great victory in a woman’s long campaign; how they had been laboured for, the pound-note and the thirty threepenny-bits they cost, what anxiety there was about the purchase, the show they made in possession of the west room, my father’s unnatural coolness when he brought them in (but his face was white)—I so often heard the tale afterwards, and shared as boy and man in so many similar triumphs, that the coming of the chairs seems to be something I remember, as if I had jumped out of bed and run ben to see how they looked. (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 1–2)

Added to the series of encounters with an invented child, a counterfeit child, or a number of counterfeit children in Barrie’s corpus is the inanimate object. In *Margaret Ogilvy* the autobiographical “I am born” is supplanted by the “things are bought.” The delivery is not of a child but of a chair (or six).

violated, and killed. Furthermore, there is always a counterfeit child to do the violating and the killing, to do the killing *for us*, and who will eventually be killed *by us*. If Lee Edelman is right to say that we constantly announce the Future through the impossible phantasmatic ideal of the Child, so too may Derrida be right when he says that “the future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality, and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity” (Derrida 5). But which sort of monstrosity? Pigs or goblins? David Barrie or David of Midwich? To see more clearly the way monstrosity plays out—the way it graphically performs on the theatre of our cultural consciousness, to paraphrase Leclair—let’s turn to another narrative of an orphan, a counterfeit child, in the family romance: Esther from the 2009 American film, *Orphan*.

Test Case #2: *Orphan*

Jaume Collet-Serra’s film *Orphan* tells the story of Kate and John, a young American couple with two children, and whose third child, Jessica, died at birth. After grieving for what they consider to be the appropriate amount of time, they decide to adopt an older child and thus to take “the love we felt for Jessica and give it to somebody who really needs it” (*Orphan*). That someone is Esther, a nine-year-old Russian girl they adopt from a local orphanage. In many ways, Esther is the perfect child: extremely intelligent (is there ever a child who isn’t, nowadays?), meticulously neat, and artistically accomplished.⁶ Unsurprisingly, Esther quickly wins the hearts of Kate and John, as well as their hearing-impaired daughter Maxine. Their son Daniel is something of a holdout, ostensibly because of family-romance-style jealousy, but we soon learn that Daniel’s instincts are correct and that more is up than the parents first recognize. As the film’s tag line tells us, “There is Something Wrong With Esther.” There sure is, and more than one thing. We watch her embark on a series of escalating crimes, from killing a pigeon and breaking the leg of a schoolyard bully to murdering the nun who brokered her adoption and to hospitalizing brother Daniel lest he produce the evidence of her heinous behaviour. By the film’s end she has killed her adoptive father John by repeatedly stabbing him in the chest, and she then turns her murderous impulses on Max and Kate. For the “real” truth is out: Esther is not an authentic child, but a thirty-three-year-old psychopath named Leena Klammer who has serially killed her adoptive families after she has been unable to seduce the fathers in these

⁶ Esther has some ancestors in this regard. See her not-so-distant predecessor Rhoda Penmark of William Marsh’s *The Bad Seed*.

families. Her counterfeit appearance as “child” is the result of hypopituitarism, a rare hormonal disorder that makes her look like a child despite her chronological age. Thus, when Kate delivers the fatal kick to the head that kills this Gothic child-whose-body-will-never-grow-up, she also delivers a line that could as well be spoken by Alice or Ida, Margaret Ogilvy, or Mrs Pan: “I’m not your fucking mommy!”

For all of its sexual intrigue and Gothic excess, *Orphan* goes to the heart of the issues I have been raising regarding counterfeit children and their place in modern familial economies. Like the work of Serge Leclair and the oeuvre of J.M. Barrie, *Orphan* is plagued by the fundamental question: How do you kill the dead child? From the film’s opening dream sequence we see that Baby Jessica is dead but also that she will not go quietly. Kate is having nightmares about the birth, in which the nurse announces that the child has died in utero, but the dreaming Kate can still feel Jessica moving and kicking inside her. Indeed, the nightmare ends with the presentation of a child that appears still to be alive. These uncanny feelings, we later learn, are actually a replay of Kate’s experience of “phantom fetal movement,” in which the dead/absent fetus counterfeited itself in Kate’s imagination as a living, moving thing for sixteen days after the stillbirth. Moreover, Kate’s therapist helps her to see that the nightmares may also be a product of Kate and John’s recent decision to “look at kids” the next weekend, to find the child to adopt and upon whom to transfer their Jessica-love. But Jessica lives on not only in Gothic terrorism. There is a sentimental side to her afterlife as well, as she is immortalized in a shrine of living roses and a poem in the family’s conservatory, a poem that concludes, “I never knew you, but I loved you,” and the only bedtime story Max will entertain—and insists on having it repeatedly—is one that reads in total, “I waited all night to meet my new baby sister. But when mommy and daddy came home, they told me that my little sister went to heaven.” Like the figure of David in the Ogilvy-Barrie household or the memory of the counterfeit boy in Peter Pan’s bed, Jessica is the child who cannot be killed and whose magnified, coercive presence defines and dominates the family bonds.

Into this scenario comes Esther. At one level, Esther is a counterfeit child who authorizes the murderous impulses of a mother who, we are assured, will do anything to protect her (natural, biological) children from harm. Like so many mothers of the Gothic ilk, Kate will suffer bullet holes and stab wounds but keep on fighting to protect her brood.⁷ This makes

⁷ When John and Kate first meet Esther in the orphanage, she is painting a picture of a mother lion who has lost her cubs and who is dreaming that she will find

the film normative business as usual for the Hollywood movie industry. But at another level, Esther as counterfeit plays out a cultural hatred of childhood and familial unity that hides behind our formulaic sentimentality. As the adopted child turned nightmare, Esther figures the film's central indecision about *why* Kate is being punished for fulfilling the cultural imperative that she be a mother. Is Kate being tortured because she's a failed or not-good-enough mommy? After all, she has a history of drinking, which helped cost her her job as music professor at Yale, which almost cost her her marriage, and which almost resulted in Max's accidental drowning in a nearby pond. Or, is Kate being punished because she's *too good* a mother, needing to channel the unexpended love for the stillborn Jessica onto yet another child, rather than her two remaining ones (or onto her music, to which she seems to want to return)? Is the film directing its suspicions onto a mother for repeatedly indulging or hovering over her children, trying to ensure that they live the life of the American Dream with all ideals intact? Or perhaps the simplest question: Is Kate being punished (by herself, by the film) for wanting to replace the dead child, full stop? We can't know for sure. As I've suggested elsewhere, Gothic fiction and film in the last forty years seems to figure our cultural ambivalence in the wake of second-wave feminism toward the place of mothering and childbearing.⁸ To my mind the cultural prestige accorded to mothering is currently at a peak it hasn't enjoyed since the 1950s, but that same prestige must always be disavowed or rendered suspect in some way. To invoke Lee Edelman once again, sexual reproduction currently figures as the *sine qua non* of political and emotional maturity (4), yet such an imperative remains haunted by the feminist and queer insistence that women's (and men's) lives can be otherwise. The murderous psychopath counterfeiting as a child allows the film to do two things: first, it can punish Kate for acceding to the very imperative toward "family" that American culture relentlessly endorses, and, second, it can elevate Kate to sainthood for protecting that imperative to the last. If Esther gets killed off at the end—and she has to be killed, given this film's conservative agenda⁹—it's not before figuring for Kate and for us the ambivalences toward the parental/maternal.

them. The image of the mother lion as the figure who will fight to the death for her brood is rather too portentous here, but that the image should be the product of Esther's representational skills is deliciously ironic.

8 See my "Nightmare on Sesame Street; or The Self-Possessed Child."

9 The narrative demand that Esther be killed is not airtight: the DVD version of the film also contains a second ending, one not released in the theatre, in which

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Esther does still more, though. In the psychoanalytic and transhistorical terms I've been considering in this essay, Esther takes up a position similar to that of J. M. Barrie with his mother and David, in that she makes visible the impossibility of killing off the dead child. With an equal mix of familial candour and manipulative cruelty, Esther delivers a number of lines to her parents that call them on the impossibility of their own project in regard to using a counterfeit child to stanch the wounds of the original dead child. Esther says to John, "It must be hard to love an adopted child as much as your own," forcing John into asserting that Esther is "just as much a part of this family as Danny and Max," even though everyone knows she's not, because she's so, well, weird. Esther turns up the voltage on this sentiment when Kate finds her playing Tchaikovsky flawlessly on the piano after Esther only pretended to learn simple keyboarding from Kate earlier in the film. Esther claims she kept her musical abilities a secret because Kate clearly got such pleasure in teaching her how to play. "It must be frustrating for someone who loves music as much as you," she tells Kate, "to have a son who isn't interested and a daughter who can't even hear." These are family-romance gunshots to be sure, but they also name the reality that the counterfeit child is enlisted to show: that children can constantly be forced to inhabit an ideal that can only belong to the phantasmatic, an imaginary whose ground zero is death. To make the point sufficiently—that is, Gothically—clear, Esther maliciously performs this problem in one of the film's most powerful and troubling scenes: in response to her manipulative statement that "Mommy doesn't like me very much," John tells Esther to do something "very special for mommy that will show her how much you love her." Esther fulfills this wish (remember Tootles giving his mother the cheque-book?) by presenting Kate with a bouquet of beautiful roses—the very roses that constituted the shrine of Jessica, the very roses whose life signified that "a part of Jessica will be alive always." Beyond this Gothic mean-spiritedness is something more profoundly raw. In defacing the symbol of Jessica and her continued life in death, Esther is actually fulfilling what it was she was hired—or rather adopted—to do in the first place: kill off the melancholic pain that the parent felt for the dead child and be the alterative object for that parent's cathexis. Symbolically, the most *loving* thing that Esther could do would be to kill off Jessica and to heal the breach in her "mother" Kate's desire,

Esther survives the final fight with her counterfeit mother and eerily descends the staircase to greet amazed police officers after the massacre. As this false ending shows, the counterfeit child has an unassailable afterlife. How do you kill the dead? You can't.

but doing so (by literalizing the gesture through the roses) *can only be read* as cruelty given the psycho-logic by which the dead child must remain forever within our psychic strata. Esther's act is cruel not because (or not just because) the malice of a psychopath motivates it but because it visibly performs what we would have our children do to the phantasm of the wonderful, majestic child who is always alive in its death.

Remember that for Serge Leclair, the inaugural, foundational child is always a *representative* of an unrepresentable child, a ghost who is always present and must be continually exorcised. That exorcism, I have been suggesting, can only be attempted through a counterfeit child who must *make visual and theatrical* our investments in something that we, as subjects, need continually to disavow. And that is why she is Gothic: Esther makes visible our investments in childhood as thoroughly saturated with sexuality (our own and that of others), with all the violent ego shattering that sexuality entails.¹⁰ She performs the Gothic underbelly of American familial sentimentality, which is Gothic *precisely because* it is sentimental. In doing so, she divests childhood of its empty innocence and figures the child—the counterfeit child—as the performance of sexual knowingness. In an early scene when all is still well in the Freudian household, Maxine and Esther decide to stage a sentimental tableau by climbing into bed with the parents, even though John is still sporting a full erection from the blow job Kate had been giving him. Later, the film stages a literal primal scene: coitus a tergo which Esther witnesses and which she understands simply (and fully) as “fucking.” That kids know something about sex is no secret in the film. We have already seen Daniel and his friends gather in the tree house to look at pornographic magazines and to fantasize about one another's mothers. Rather, what is important is the ideology that Esther is made to perform and to deny at the same time. We recall that Esther entered into this family as, presumably, the empty vessel requiring love, but instead she has repeatedly figured Kate's and John's desire for each other and their desire that Esther desire them. And that she should do so with Freud's copy of Oedipus and Jung's of Electra implicitly tucked under her arm simply underlines what we have already known: this counterfeit child performs children's sexual knowledge and desire, a knowledge we suspect children have but which would kill them *as children* if they were indeed to have it. In a strange way, it is irrelevant that the nine-year-old Esther who knows all this is really the thirty-three-year-old Leena, because we in

10 For the classic consideration of sexuality and self-shattering in children, see Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body* 62–64.

the audience *don't know* her real age when we are seeing her perform her sexual and violent knowledges. For us, Esther performs *as* a child and it is *as a child* that she invokes and demolishes our phantasm of childhood. That she is “really” an adult is a sop thrown to us at the film’s end to rescue “real” children for innocence, but the game has already been played. The primary narcissistic representative has already been counterfeited and thus destroyed.

With that destruction comes a number of counterfeit deaths. Here is Leclaire, one last time, on the child as primary narcissistic representative: “It brings into play, without ever making a show of it, the strangely familiar representation that makes us up—the *infans* in us. It puts to the test the constancy of the power of death that keeps us open to the voice of desire” (5). If Esther does make a show of the power of death, it is perversely to correct Kate for the narcissistic insularity of her own investments in motherhood. As Esther searingly tells her, “You took your family for granted.” In the Gothic scenario that is *Orphan*, Esther becomes the show of child death that reopens Kate to the voice of desire—the desire of and for the other members of her family, the desire for ownership of her life that she may have allowed her family to take away. But on a larger (less sentimental, less normalizing) stage, Esther and her counterfeit siblings—David Barrie, the boy in Peter’s bed, the goblin in Ida’s sister, the Midwich Cuckoos—remain dead and thus unkillable. They are symptomatic reminders to us that to celebrate the ideal of childhood is to consign adulthood and childhood to the status of the dead. It is to freeze each of us into a subject where no subject can be and to proliferate, under the banner of “love,” a system of counterfeit signs taken for childhood wonders.

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