Devil, Hero or Sleeping Beauty?
The Making of Orphan Myths and Public Administration
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Annually, more than 400,000 children in the United States are deprived of parental care. This orphan status often means that, unlike the average child, these children are in direct contact with state and local administrations through the various policies, systems and institutions that attempt to care and act for them. Through parens patriae, the government is assigned the role of parent to the child, yet this substitution is not exact. The governing of these children is complicated by symbols associated with orphans, which deflect attention from the lived and collective experiences of children within the American child welfare system. By examining the representation of orphans in various areas of popular culture, I demonstrate three common orphan myths: the dangerous devil, the superhero and the sleeping beauty. These three archetypes shed light on how we think about orphans and ways in which these images have helped to construct the present interactions between children and the administration. By unmasking these images and their implications, public administration will be better equipped to address the needs of children based on their actual lived experiences.

Introduction

Though citizens in the formal sense, children are functionally deprived of the capacity to participate in the decisions that affect them most. “Judged to be incapable of citizenship in that they cannot make the rational and informed decisions that characterize self-governance” (Cohen, 2005, p. 221), children are dependent on adults to act for them and to make decisions in their best interest. Within families, governance is generally provided for children by one or two parents. For children temporarily or permanently without parents to govern them, this creates a considerable dilemma. Many of these children are not orphans in the traditional sense but nonetheless “have one, sometimes two, parents, who can’t or won’t care for them. Most are the victims of drug-abusing adults, poverty, and dysfunctional families” (Toth, 1998, p. 20). Whether through “the death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, or separation or
loss from, both parents” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.), these children are indeed orphans.

According to the doctrine of *parens patriae* (Latin for “parent of the nation”), the state has the power to step in when there is an absence of appropriate parental care. As a result, orphans—unlike most children in the United States—come into direct contact with state and local agencies assigned to care for orphaned children and act on their behalf. This puts orphans under the direct governance of public administrators. These frontline bureaucrats—social workers, police officers, counselors, teachers, and others—have a broad range of decision-making powers, from arranging medical check-ups to deciding which state a child will live in. They schedule dental appointments, fight for appropriate academic conditions, attend court hearings and teacher conferences, purchase clothing, assess adoptive parents, process adoption-related paperwork, and much more.

Unfortunately for these children, the *parens patriae* substitution for parental care is not exact. Instead, the governance of these children is complicated by symbols associated with orphans, which deflect attention from the lived and collective experiences of children within the American child welfare system. It is these archetypes that construct the interactions between children and the public administrators who act on their behalf.

In this paper, I examine archetypes of orphans expressed in the three genres of popular culture: superhero stories, romance novels and horror films. The portrayals of orphans in these genres, although entertaining, convey meaning to audiences about who orphans are, what they are capable of and how they should be treated. In doing so, this creates and perpetuates myths of orphans as devils, heroes and sleeping beauties.
Orphan Myths

Popular culture is awash with stories about orphans. Old and new, there is no shortage of orphans in American popular culture and therefore, no shortage of myths about orphans. In a way, “the American childhood story is almost always the story of an orphan,” as they often demonstrate an astonishing ability to change society or to adapt triumphantly to its demands, whether by manipulating human nature, making money, warming hearts, or upholding truth, justice, and the American way (Nelson, 2003, p. 4). Stories from Jane Eyre to Harry Potter\(^\text{1}\) offer narratives about orphans, about who they are and how they function in society. Each of these individual messages communicated to audiences about orphans contribute to common archetypes of orphans. These common images affect our deepest convictions in such a way that “we are not even aware of their power in our conscious lives” (Iaccino, 1994, p. 4). Thus, each fictional orphan contributes to or creates myths about the real lives of orphans. These myths demonstrate scenarios, which define and limit the ways in which individuals approach or respond to orphans (Slotkin, 2000).

In the following sections, I explore the orphan archetypes created in the broad culture categories of superheroes, romantic fairytales and horror films. These genres tell stories “united by their particular settings, characters, themes and narrative conflicts” (Worland, 2007, p. 15) and generate unique myths about who orphans are. Within the stories of superheroes, orphans are strong and successful. Conversely in romance novels, orphans are weak and unaware. In horror films, orphans are manipulative and evil.

\(^\text{1}\) Consider: Dorothy Consider in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1900), Tom in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Twain, 1881), Pip in Great Expectations (Dickens, 1861), Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights (Brontë, 1848) and the list could go on. More recent than these classic novels, popular movies tell stories about orphans, including James Bond, Harry Potter, Aladdin, and Good Will Hunting. Even popular television shows including storylines related to orphans: Modern Family, Brothers & Sisters, Private Practice, Bones, House and multiple soap opera
Superheroes

Superheroes have been widely popular since the 1930’s when they became available through single-hero comic books (Goulart, 1990). In addition to the comic book medium, superheroes have gained popularity through movies, television shows, and an obvious presence in American culture in general (Reynolds, 1994). With a resurgence in huge movie productions in the 2000’s, superheroes are now more popular than ever (Coogan, 2006, p. 2).

While the details of many superheroes’ stories evolve over time, the resonance of the characters’ metaphors and themes remain stable (Coogan, 2006). As “the embodiment of the American myth of the lone, rugged individual who comes into society and cleans it up,” superheroes take on what humans want to do but do not know how (Muir, 1995, p. 3). Thus, the superhero genre gives readers the opportunity to “overcome our limitations, to soar and to unlock superpowers hidden within us” (Meyerson, 2010). These stories are embedded with tropes of strength, bravery and efficacy, which express the human need to feel control over our lives, no matter how bad the conditions around us get (Kaw, 2005).

Superheroes as Orphans

Many superheroes are orphans, including the big three: Superman, Batman and Spiderman. When Superman debuted in 1938, readers discovered that he was from “a distant planet [that] was destroyed by old age” (Goulart, 1990, p. 351). The following year, the newspaper devoted two weeks to a more in-depth tale of where he came from: Superman’s parents died when their planet, Krypton, exploded. In an effort to save him, they sent him hurtling toward Earth in a rocket, where he was taken as an orphan and adopted by Jonathan and
Martha Kent. Shortly after the arrival of Superman, Batman was introduced in May of 1939 and he quickly became the most popular superhero after Superman. Months after his debut, newspapers ran a two-page account of his background, which detailed the brutal murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents. As a result of witnessing the murders, Bruce Wayne developed his alter ego, Batman, and devoted himself to “warring on criminals” (Goulart, 1990, p. 23). When Spiderman was introduced in 1962, he was advertised as the type of hero anyone could become. He started as Peter Parker, an insecure high school student living with his Uncle Ben\(^2\) and Aunt May after the death of his parents (Goulart, 1990).

These three well-known characters are not alone as superhero orphans. In fact there are many popular superheroes who are separated from their parents\(^3\). This is no coincidence; creators of superheroes often established their characters as orphans in an attempt to make them relatable and likeable (Fingeroth, 2004). As Bob Kane, creator of Batman, expressed, "I suggested that maybe he should be an orphan because it would evoke sympathy for him. Then Bill and I discussed it and we figured there's nothing more traumatic than having your parents murdered before your eyes" (Daniels, 1995, p. 34). Other creators recognized that while it may be common for children to dream of being rid of their parents, actually experiencing it is “the stuff of nightmares” (Fingeroth, 2004, p. 63).

For many superheroes, their orphan status is the driving force of their character (McWilliams, 2009). As part of an evolving mythology, these characters are seen as loners, who because they are “cut loose from family responsibilities, [are] an inherent part of the romance of America, of the myth of eternal fresh starts” (Wirth-Nesher, 1986, p. 260). At the core of

\(^2\) Early in Spiderman’s storyline, his uncle is also murdered, subjecting him to a second orphaning.

\(^3\) Beyond these three, the following superheroes are orphans: Please email me for list.
superheroes, especially Superman, Batman and Spiderman, are the primary elements that make them extraordinary: mission, powers and identity⁴. These definitional characteristics lay the foundation for an emergent archetype of orphans as superheroes.

**Mission**

As superheroes, these characters share a mission to be a “champion of the oppressed” and to fight “evil and injustice” (*Detective Comics, Inc. v. Bruns Publications*, 1939). Without parents, Superman, Batman and Spiderman have the freedom “to act without consequences and the freedom from the restrictions of gravity, the law, families, and romantic relationships” (Coogan, 2006, p. 14). To some extent, these orphans are actually better off without family ties, because it both motivates and allows them to become superheroes. As a result, the orphan status is almost a thing of necessity for a superhero:

> *How can a hero, an iconic figure, be prey to the petty concerns of everyday life? Could Batman do his job if he were to get a call from his wife reminding him to bring home a quart of milk? How can Superman defend the solar system if he has to go to parent-teacher night and argue about why Kal-El Jr. only got a C on his English paper? More to the point, relating to his own parentage, can a superhero be expected to make time for his or her folks? Will Mom feel neglected if he has to divert a flooding river when he's promised to help her polish her silverware?”* (Fingeroth, 2004, p. 72)

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⁴ In 1939, DC Comics brought a copyright infringement lawsuit against Bruns (Fox) Publications over the creation of Wonder Man, whose character and adventures were similar to Superman’s. In the ruling, Judge Hand identified core superhero elements, which have helped shape the genre. (Coogan, 2006; *Detective Comics, Inc. v. Bruns Publications*, 1939)
As orphans, Superman, Batman and Spiderman are able to form a personal mission, which they are also free to pursue. In this way, the orphan status of a superhero becomes appealing; it is seen as an asset rather than a liability.5

This orphan status also provides Superman, Batman and Spiderman the motivation to pursue their mission. In each character’s background is a loss so great that they are motivated by guilt and a need to avenge their loss. Both Superman and Batman are motivated to reconcile their loss of family and sense of home. Superman was separated not only from his parents, but also from his home planet of Krypton. To reconcile that loss, he attempts to restore social justice to Earth and make it more like Krypton. In addition to this separation, Superman is left with feelings of guilt because he survived while his parents perished on Krypton (Coogan, 2006). Thus, “he constantly lives in such a way as to set himself apart from society because he feels inadequate” (McWilliams, 2009, p. 14). Compared with Superman’s altruistic drive, Batman’s motivation has roots in anger. Scarred by witnessing the gruesome murder of his parents, Bruce Wayne created an alter ego in order to seek revenge on criminals across his city. For Spiderman, motivation emerges from his own failure. Shortly after receiving his spider-powers, Peter Parker’s Uncle Ben was killed by a thief. At the time of the murder, Peter (as Spiderman) was trying out his powers and hoping to secure an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show (Goulart, 1990). Because he was not there to prevent the crime and had failed to catch the murderer for his original theft, Spiderman blames himself. Although his uncle’s murder was random, Spiderman is motivated to seek revenge on himself (Fingeroth, 2004). Altogether, these three orphans develop individual missions, which are motivated by revenge: revenge against evil, revenge against crime, even revenge against the self.

5 As it glorifies the freedom associated with the orphan status of superheroes, this myth-narrative provides an escape
Power

Along with the freedom to do as they please and the motivation for revenge, these superheroes are blessed with power that is unparalleled by others. They use these powers to pursue their mission and to “enforce their own visions of right and wrong on others” (Coogan, 2006, p. 231). Superman, as the first true superhero, emerged with enough skills to make him very unique. Although he was presented as being able to do almost anything, as co-creator Joe Siegel explained, “we kept developing new powers for the character” (Daniels, 1995, p. 80). Thus, his powers expanded to include the abilities to: fly (instead of merely super-fast running), fend off any type of danger (atomic bomb included), push planets and throw buildings, and use x-vision to see through anything6.

Unlike Superman, Batman has no supernatural powers. Instead he “devoted years to preparing for his crime-fighting career, turning himself into both a master scientist and a top athlete” (Goulart, 1990, p. 23). These abilities, paired with the best devices money could buy, give Batman his superhero power. Similar to Batman, Peter Parker starts off with no supernatural powers; he is just an average teenager until a radioactive spider bites him, giving him “strength, agility, wall-crawling ability, and an intuition for danger” (Goulart, 1990, p. 347). In each of their stories, these powers elevate the superheroes above crooks and villains, allowing them to “effortlessly solve problems that the ordinary authorities cannot handle” (Coogan, 2006, p. 231), without causing any danger to themselves. As such, they project an effortless efficacy demonstrated by their ability to do anything they set out to do.

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6 In 1963, Lois Lane confirmed that Superman also had acquired the power of the “superkiss” (Daniels, 1995).
In addition to their physical and supernatural powers, superheroes are marked by unlimited possibilities. Although they endured the nightmarish experience of losing their parents, these characters are not destitute of options or choices. This is evident in the resources available to them and the power they have to choose between resources. For Batman, these resources are financial. As a millionaire, he has the “opportunity to outfit himself with all the high-tech tools that an underfunded, overstressed metro police force could not afford” (Muir, 1995, p. 71). His utility belt contains “an endless supply of lifesaving gadgets” (Goulart, 1990, p. 23). In addition to the belt, he has the Batmobile, Batboat, Batsub, Batgyro (helicopter) and Batplane. To house these tools of revenge, Bruce Wayne was able to expand the Batcave until it became “a bottomless pit with room for a garage, a hangar, a laboratory, a trophy room and even a gymnasium” (Daniels, 1995, p. 79).

Although not blessed with immense financial resources like Batman, Superman is privileged with increasing choices. He debuts as a hero, super in rank, with the ability to squash the common criminal. However, over time, his powers increase dramatically—instead of merely overruling criminals, but he can extinguish atomic bombs; rather than running across states with a super-human speed, he develops the power of flying. As these alternatives emerge for him, Superman is able to choose his causes and to alter his mission to fit his preference. At his beginning, Superman is a do-gooder, working as “a savior of the helpless and the oppressed” (Goulart, 1990, p. 351). He helps widows and orphans; he stops abuse to the vulnerable; he holds back drunk drivers and gamblers. With a concentration on domestic violence and government corruption, he relies on his social conscience to addresses the issues important to him. However, as he becomes invulnerable by the increase of his powers, Superman must make choices. Faced with protecting widows and orphans over ending truly heinous crimes, he has the opportunity to
choose between saving one person or saving the world. The ability to choose between good options as well as the resources and powers available to these superheroes ensure their success in each situation.

Identity

Lastly, superheroes are defined by the specification of their identity, including their name, costume and secret identity. As heroes of the utmost degree, these three superheroes have experiences and functions that separate them from others. Spiderman’s Uncle Ben warned him, “with great power, comes great responsibility” (Wise, 2009, p. 123). This responsibility and the nature of their power isolate the heroes, essentially making them other. When Lara, mother of Superman, saved her son by launching him towards Earth, she knew that he would never fit in. Her fear was that “he won't be one of them...he will be odd, different...isolated, alone” (Coogan, 2006, p. 8).

Providentially for these isolated superheroes, they each have an additional identity that eliminates their otherness and allows them to assimilate with other people. As Clark Kent, Superman was adopted into a caring and comfortable home with loving parents. As an adult, he is able to work as a reporter, functioning as an average guy and even developing a romantic connection with fellow-reporter Lois Lane. Under the identity of Clark Kent, Superman can be an average citizen. Unlike Clark, Bruce Wayne grew up on his own after the loss of his parents. After he takes on the identity of Batman, Bruce’s identity as a millionaire playboy, philanthropist and model citizen allows him to hide his trauma, anger and dedication. Under the guise of a

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7 The original source of this advice to Spiderman is not known; however it is commonly used to explain his
“handsome, resourceful and respected member of his community” (Muir, 1995, p. 71), Bruce is not alone, isolated or other. Similarly, Peter Parker’s non-superhero identity allows him to complete high school and attend college. Both Clark Kent and Peter Parker are able to pursue romantic connections, because their additional identity obscures their superhero status and ability. The ability to function under two identities allows these superheroes to appear as normal and hide the characteristics that make them complicated.

Orphan Myths in the Superhero Genre

The superhero-orphan archetype is made up of freedom, motivation, power, efficacy, choices, infallibility and resources. As superheroes, orphans are in a position of power, control and opportunity. They are free to do as they please because they have no family; they can channel their tragedy for good; they have special powers, which make them able to accomplish great things. As orphans, superheroes can do anything they set out to do and they have unlimited possibilities. Embracing these positive abilities, orphans can boldly confront a world that refuses to make sense (Reynolds, 1994).

The experiences of mythical orphans do not match up with those of orphans as they exist today. On the contrary, “the psychological and economic realities of being an orphan are extraordinarily difficult to overcome” (Fingeroth, 2004, p. 67); orphans do not have the luxury of an additional identity to help them hide their experiences or fit in with those who have not

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8 Although this is generally a benefit to them, the resulting conflict of having two separate identities plays a large part in each of these superheroes’ story and is especially apparent in later renditions of Superman’s story (Coogan, 2006).
experienced the tragedy of losing parents. Orphans have inevitably experienced enough pain and loss that it has affected their emotional health and perspective on life.

**Romance Novels**

In romance novels, the “main plot centers around two individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work” (Romance Writers of America, n.d.). The Love-er is the active character, initiating and pursuing the Love-ee, who plays a more passive role in the process of falling in love and developing a relationship\(^9\). In the well-known fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, the Love-ee, Briar Rose is lured into a curse that causes her to prick her finger on a spinning wheel and fall asleep. Sealed in a perpetual slumber, she lays powerless and waiting for true love’s kiss, while her fairy godmothers work to connect her with her true love, Prince Phillip. Prince Phillip, as her Love-er fights the wicked witch to save Briar Rose with his kiss. Once kissed, Briar Rose not only regains her life, but also reclaims her status as a princess; along with her Prince, she becomes next in line to the throne.

Orphans like Sleeping Beauty—who are powerless and waiting for a romantic love to save them—are often found in romance novels. Most well-known romance writers have at least one storyline

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\(^9\) These characters are generally referred to as the hero and the heroine. However, as this suggests, the heroine is not always a female character, nor the hero a male character (by definition, a hero is a man, while a heroine is a woman). Instead, these terms refer to the role the characters play in the evolution of their love and relationship. Because gender has historically been assigned to hero and heroine and they can thus become a complicating rather than clarifying terms, I will refer to these character roles as the Love-er and the Love-ee. Love-ers (or heroes) are the active character. These characters, whether man or woman, are the determined pursuer and initiator of love. They are clear in their affections and determined to win over their Love-ee. The Love-ees (or heroines) plays a more passive role in the process of falling in love and developing a relationship. They are typically the one to be swept off their feet; the one to wake up towards the end of the novel, suddenly surprised by their feelings.
that revolves around an orphan, although many authors have multiple such storylines\textsuperscript{10}. The ways in which orphan characters are depicted in tales of romance generate the sleeping-beauty-orphan archetype, which portrays orphans as primarily motivated by a desire to be saved by a romantic love. The qualities associated with this archetype are dependence, emotional ineptitude and powerlessness.

**Dependence**

Unlike the superhero genre, which displays the orphan as the ultimate hero, orphans in romance novels are most often the Love-ee, or passive character. Although usually the novel’s protagonist, this character is in a position to respond to the advances and efforts of the Love-er. In accordance with this role in the story, the orphan Love-ee is often at the mercy of the Love-er in order to maintain their livelihood, status or security. This reality is generally stated as the foundation of the story and often serves as the initial character conflict: will the Love-er save the Love-ee by offering love, acceptance and/or forgiveness?

In *A Kiss to Remember*, Laura Fairleigh grew up living at Arden Manor, even following the death of her parents. In order to remain in her home, she is faced with a crucial dilemma that requires that she marry before her twenty-first birthday in order to inherit the estate. With the date only weeks away, Laura is in desperate need of a man to marry. Fortunately, she discovers a handsome bachelor unconscious on the road. After being thrown from his horse, Sterling Harlow has no memory of who he is or where he was going prior to the accident. Thus, when Laura tells him that his name is Nicholas Radcliffe, and he is her fiancé, he believes her. In doing so, Laura

\textsuperscript{10} Consider: Nora Roberts; Linda Howard; Jude Deveraux; Judith McNaught; Susan Elizabeth Phillips; Julie
becomes dependent on “Nicholas” not only to marry her, but also to continue not remembering who he is or what mission he was on before the accident (Medeiros, 2002).

When Adelia Cunnane is orphaned in *Irish Thoroughbred*\(^{11}\), she flies from Ireland to America where her only living relative, Uncle Paddy, lives and works on a horse ranch. When the ranch’s owner, Travis Grant, meets her and suggests he may not approve of her being there, Adelia must prove her worth and convince him to let her stay:

“Mr. Grant,” she began, swallowing pride to plead. “Please, give me a chance — a fortnight, no more.” She took a deep breath and moistened her lips. “If you don’t want me after that, just tell me, and I’ll abide by your decision. I’ll tell Uncle Paddy I’m not happy with the job, that I want to be doing something else” (Roberts, 2007, p. 28).

Travis agrees to a two-week trial period, during which Adelia strives to win his approval and secure a roof over her head.

The situations in each of these stories set up the premise by establishing a power differential between the Love-er and Love-ee. The Love-ee’s dependence on the Love-er for their security establishes helplessness in the orphan character, which determines their behavior and defines who they are.

**Emotionally Inept**

In addition to their physical indebtedness to the Love-er, orphans are depicted as emotionally inept. Unlike superheroes who can channel their experience of loss into a mission, orphans in the

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Garwood; Kristin Hannah; and many more.

\(^{11}\) This was Nora Roberts’ first romance novel, published in 1981.
romance genre are often portrayed as unable to recognize, process or act on their feelings. As a result, orphan characters are resistant to the good things that happen in their lives; they are often made of aware their own feelings and what is best for them by other characters. This deficiency places them in debt of their Love-er, and creates a situation where they need to be saved from their foolishness.

In *Desperate Measures*, Pete Sorenson spent his childhood shuttling from foster home to foster home. As an adult in law school, he meets Annie Gabriel who proves to be his best friend over the years. She even stands by him when he meets Maddie and is drawn into a tumultuous relationship with her. However, as events progress, it becomes obvious to everyone, including Maddie, that Pete is in love with Annie. Annie of course loves him and is patiently waiting for Pete to recognize what everyone else already knows. When the realization of his love for Annie catches up with Pete, he admits, “I guess I always loved you. I was just too stupid to know it” (Michaels, 2010, p. 380).

*Less of a Stranger’s*, Megan Miller cannot believe that Davis Katcherton could truly love her. As she focuses on helping her grandfather maintain the family amusement park and keeping up with her artwork on the side, she convinces herself that “Katch” is only interested in buying the amusement park out from under them. Even as he consistently pursues her, Megan maintains a stance of anger and suspicion toward him. She insists that what she truly wants is “for him to go away and leave us alone” (Roberts, 2003, p. 102). Fortunately for Megan, Katch is determined to convince her of his love and he enlists the help of multiple people around her just to win her over. After it occurs to everyone else, Megan realizes that, while Katch was interested in the amusement park, his primary interest was in her.
Similarly, in *Irish Thoroughbred*, Adelia remains utterly unaware of her connection with Travis. Even when her uncle falls ill and Travis suggests they get married in an attempt to nurse her uncle back to health, Adelia is blind to his true wishes. Instead, she mindlessly defers to him, “I’ll do whatever you think has to be done” (Roberts, 2007, p. 135). Although she agrees to marry him, she believes they are doing so for the sake of her uncle’s health. Once married and still convinced that he cannot or does not love her, Adelia is constantly running away from Travis. She even flees the marriage after their most intimate encounter. Adelia cannot believe that Travis could truly love her and therefore must continuously be convinced by Travis that he loves her and wants to be married to her.

Each of these characters—Pete, Megan and Adelia—acts out of an emotional debt to their Love-er. They are unaware, not only of how their Love-er feels, but also of their own feelings for their Love-er. This indebtedness is made possible by the orphan status, which seemingly defines the character as unable to recognize their emotions, accept their attractiveness and receive the love of another person.

**Powerless**

In the romance genre, orphans are characterized as powerless, even with the people who love them. While this can be a result of their physical and emotional indebtedness to their Love-er, the orphan character is often portrayed as merely being unable to act on their own behalf. In *Shades of Twilight*, Roanna Davenport is defenseless once she becomes an orphan at the age of seven. Although she continues to live with family, they do not understand her and are not always nice to her. Aside from Webb Tallant, everyone in her life disregards her and downplays her abilities.
She selflessly loves Webb; “she knew his moods, how he looked when he was tired, how he liked his laundry done. She knew his favorite foods, his favorite colors, which professional sports teams he liked, what made him laugh, what made him frown” (Howard, 1997, p. 50). This love is in vain, however, as Webb is destined to marry Roanna’s cousin, Jessie. When Jessie is murdered three years into their marriage, Webb leaves the family’s close-knit circle and Roanna effectively stops living. She is powerless to stop him from leaving; she is powerless to keep herself alive. Even ten years later, she has not been able to resurrect her life in the absence of her love. She floats through life with a “blank doll face” which registers no passion, feeling or personality. When Webb finally does return, Roanna remains powerless around him, explaining, “It’s never been a secret how I feel about you. All you had to do at any time was snap your fingers and I’d have come running and let you do anything you wanted to me” (1997, p. 163).

Similar to Roanna’s compliant personality, Heather and Velvet’s Prudence prefers to immerse herself in a library of books and not interact with the people around her. In fact, most of the people around her turn a blind eye to her existence because she has so long desired to be left alone. This does not necessarily change when she becomes involved with Sebastian. Instead, Prudence continues to lack authority in her own life and thus, allows him to take advantage of her. Without ever voicing her feelings or the proposal she is considering, she allows herself to be kidnapped and then, forcibly married to Sebastian. Throughout the story, she remains passive in their dealings, never imparting the information she has about their relationship or acting on the behalf of either of them (Medeiros, 2011).

When Katch shows up and introduces himself to her, Less of a Stranger’s Megan is powerless against his intrusion on her life. He shows up unannounced; he befriends her grandfather; he sets a price and purchases her art without any input from her. Although she is
convinced the amusement park should stay in her family, she lacks the authority, strength and resources to keep Katch’s interest at bay. Additionally, she yields to his romantic interest in her, deciding, “It was better…to follow his lead” (Roberts, 2003, p. 64). Although she “hates him,” Megan finds herself spending time and out on dates with him. She is unable to say no to his advances and he takes advantage of this by whisking her around on secret plans. Megan is even helpless around her grandfather. Much like her interaction with Katch, Megan’s grandfather directs her behavior and decisions. He suggests what she should cook and what she should wear; in the end, he informs her of the connection she has with Katch and she quickly recognizes defeat.

In each of these tales of romance, the powerless orphans are moved through the story as pawns, completely helpless to their own development or outcomes. They are unable to impact the behavior of those around them; in many cases, they do not even contribute their opinion.

**Orphan Myths in Romance Novels**

Like Briar Rose, the archetypal sleeping-beauty-orphan is in a perpetual state of slumber. Powerless to save themselves or to contribute to their own rescue, these orphans are forced to wait for their Love-er to save them. In their dependence, ignorance and powerlessness, they are taken advantage of—even by those who love them—and are denied the opportunity to participate in their own lives.

A crucial element of this archetype is the happy ending that all the characters find. Laura and Sterling make up; Travis convinces Adelia of his love; Sebastian returns for Prudence; Annie happily receives Pete’s love. While this image of orphans grants a happy ending, a romantic
relationship alone cannot offer real life orphans a happily-ever-after ending. In relationships, these real life orphans must endure the on-going struggle to foster a love relationship and adapt with natural conflict.

**Horror**

While superheroes and romantic fairytales draw on hopes and dreams, stories within the horror genre capitalize on fears and anxieties. By definition, horror films aim to scare audiences by exploring natural fears that emerge in the contemporary world and identifying appropriate sources of fear. These stories rely on narratives of “social alienation, the collapse of spiritual and moral order, a deep crisis of evolutionary identity, [and] the overt articulation of humankind’s inner-most imperatives” (Wells, 2000, p. 7) to force us to face the possibility of “a particularly violent and uncanny disruption of our unremarkable, everyday experiences” (Worland, 2007, p. 2).

In order to pose the dangers of such a disruption, horror films typically employ a monster or devil. This devil then represents “a projection of particular threats, fears and contradictions that refuse coexistence with the prevailing paradigms and consensual orthodoxies of everyday life. The devil may also be perceived as a direct and unfettered expression of the horrors that surround us” (Wells, 2000, p. 9). While horror films have often included orphans as characters, recent films have featured an orphaned child as the devil who is evil, scary, and irreparable.

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12 Orphans have long held major roles in horror films. Consider: *Psycho* (1960), *The Innocents* (1961), and *The Shining* (1980). *The Omen* (1976) is generally thought to be the first horror film that featured an orphan child as the devil, rather than a common character.
Evil

In the opening minutes of *Whisper*, a black screen displays 2 Corinthians 11:14, “And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” Although young David appears to be a sweet and normal 8 year old, it quickly becomes apparent that something is askew. His adoptive mother, Catherine, is so desperate to get rid of David that she arranges for his kidnapping, offering only to pay the ransom if the kidnappers will kill her son. Confronted about her desire to have David killed, Catherine replies to the kidnappers, “Have a four bad days with David, Max? Try eight years.” Catherine is crushed that the kidnappers will not kill her son; she expresses her desperation to be free from David and commits suicide. True to her assessment, David makes it clear that he is “casting for souls” and killing anyone in his way. After causing the brutal murders of five people, David explains to his remaining captor, “I come to them when they are weak. When their lives are hopeless. When those they love reject them. I come to them, whisper in their ear, and I can be very convincing” (Hendler, 2007).

In desperation similar to Catherine’s, Lilith’s parents in *Case 39* try to escape her evil ways by killing her. When they are caught stuffing her into an oven with the gas turned on, they are arrested and she is placed in foster care. There she turns her evil onto her unsuspecting social worker Emily, who bends the rules to take her in. Following the bizarre deaths of Emily’s closest friends, she begins to see that her “sweet and intuitive” foster daughter is also a callous and calculating psychopath. She seeks out Lilith’s father who explains that Lilith intends “to know what your idea of hell is... and make you live there.” Not able to comprehend such evil in a child, Emily asks what Lilith is and her father responds, “They say when you're born you're given your eternal soul. The part of you that lives on, lives again. Whatever evil she is, didn't come from us.
It was already there. From the moment she came into being, she brought something with her. Something older, destructive. Soul of a demon” (Alvart, 2011).

In *Orphan*, Kate and John are initially drawn to Esther over the other orphans because she appears quiet and perceptive. However, while she is kind and engaging initially, she does not assimilate well once they bring her home to join their family. After a few suspicious events, they consult Sister Abigail, who admits that, “trouble does have a way of finding her.” Although it quickly becomes clear that Esther is no innocent victim as she deliberately harms those around her: she brutally kills Sister Abigail with a hammer, bashes in the head of a bird with a rock, pushes a little girl off a playground structure and physically threatens both of her new siblings. Esther’s villainy escalates as she almost kills her brother, succeeds in brutally murdering her father and desperately attempts to kill her mother (Collet-Serra, 2009).

In each of these stories, orphans are portrayed as having supernatural powers that enable their evil. However in *Hurt*, young Sarah Parsons’ malevolence stems from witnessing the tragic death of her parents and an intense desire to get revenge on those she believes are responsible for her pain. Even without additional powers to spur her violence, Sarah’s extreme grief provokes her to kill, or almost kill, all the people she encounters (Stepansky, 2009). Whether by extraordinary means or merely by the experience of tragedy, these orphans are manipulative, powerful and ruthless.

**Scary**

In other horror films, evil is not as clearly linked to the orphans, yet still draw on a fear of the unknown that is associated with orphans. These films build on the lack of information about an
orphan’s background to portray the details around them and the spaces they inhibit as scary. In *The Orphanage*, Laura brings her family back to the orphanage where she grew up, hoping to reopen it as a home for disabled children. The house is large and ominous; the rooms scary and dark. Once they have settled in, Laura’s adopted son Simon begins to talk about his new friends, who she assumes merely exist in his imagination. However when Simon disappears, Laura is certain there are ghosts of past orphans who have taken Simon away. As the story unfolds, Laura begs the orphanage to return her son, at times actually calling out to the house, which she believes to be haunted by the ghosts of orphans (Bayona, 2008). In a similar story, when Anna arrives at the orphanage in *House of Voices*, she begins to sense a supernatural presence and hears mysterious voices (Laugier, 2005). Similar to Laura’s experience in *The Orphanage*, the orphanage itself seems to rise up as a character, making noises and slamming doors. In effect, these orphanages seem to be embodied by the orphans who once lived there, almost as if they are sending messages through the orphanage. Thus, the films rely on the place of orphans and a perceived unpredictable nature of orphans in order to create a frightening tale.

In taking advantage of the lack of information about an orphan’s background, some horror films grant orphan characters seemingly innocent abilities, which are used to generate fear around the power and intent of the character. *Orphan’s* Esther impresses John and Kate with her ability to draw. She presents herself as a sensitive and intuitive child when she explains that her drawings tells stories, one specifically about a mother lion looking for her cubs. When Esther begins to masterfully play the piano—instead of needing lessons from Kate as she had agreed to—the effect is chilling. Her abilities to draw and play the piano contribute to fear around what unknown power she may have. In *Whisper*, David also has a gift of drawing, which he uses to create vivid pictures that suggest his evil nature. They are detailed and true to life; they quickly
begin to depict his evil actions. In both films, the orphans’ drawings provide a visual product of the evil that resides within the character. As the story unfolds, Esther’s drawings on her bedroom walls display horrific crimes and truly gruesome scenes. Similarly, David’s drawings become increasingly sinister and depraved, as he visually depicts his killings. In these stories, orphans are portrayed as inherently unknown and thus, scary. By drawing on a fear of the unknown, orphans become worthy of fear.

**Irreparable**

In these stories, characters volunteer to help the orphans even though they are in vulnerable situations. The main parent-characters in both *Orphan* and *Hurt are struggling with great loss, yet open their homes to an orphan out of the goodness of their hearts. Kate feels that she has love to give, even after the stillborn birth of her third child. In addition to that loss, she is working to maintain her marriage following her husband’s affair and to recover from her own alcoholism. However, Kate is eager to love and support Esther as a part of her family (Collet-Serra, 2009). Helen and her teenage children, Lenore and Conrad, are struggling to deal with the loss of husband and father, Robert. His sudden death brings their privileged lifestyle to an end and they find themselves seeking refuge in the strange home of Robert’s brother. Amidst the pain and new surroundings, the family takes in Sarah, an orphan Robert intended to take in before his death (Stepansky, 2009). Ignoring the pain around them, as well as taking advantage of it, Esther and Sarah refuse to be helped by these supportive families. Instead they viciously prey on the very people who have offered to care for them, despite their less than ideal conditions. Resistant to support and love, these orphans appear irreparable.
In many stories, it is only the death of the orphan at the hand of the parent-character that can end their destruction. Here, the orphans beg their parent to save them and forgive them their evil. Esther calls out to Kate, “Don’t let me die, Mommy!” (Collet-Serra, 2009). Lilith similarly begs Emily, “Please…don’t let me die, Mommy” (Alvart, 2011). Making an emotional plea, the orphans request that their new parent love them as they might their own child and give them a second chance, forgiving their evil behavior. In other situations where orphans face defeat by those who set out to help them, they taunt the opposing character. Sarah highlights her own corruption as a result of her trauma by challenging her sister, “You can't hurt me, you don't know how” (Stepansky, 2009). David also highlights this by telling Max, “You couldn't kill me, you don't have it in you” (Hendler, 2007).

In films that draw on the fear associated with orphans, it is the main character, rather than the orphan, who must die to satisfy the calling of the orphans. The back-stories of both The Orphanage and House of Voices involve a group of orphans who were mercilessly killed, leaving their spirits to haunt the orphanages. As a result, when Laura and Anna arrive at the orphanages, they are troubled by the calls of these children. After battling the force of these voices and discovering that her son had died, Laura commits suicide. Anna also battles the haunting orphans, following the voices deep into the recesses of the old orphanage, where she goes into labor and dies in childbirth. Both films conclude with the departed character caring for their own child, as well as the lost orphans. These orphans who are resistant to help, whether from adoptive families or from individuals attempting to locate the crimes that took their lives, represent irrevocable damage. They are impossible to save and thus their stories can end only in death.
Orphan Myths in Horror Films

Horror films remain popular because “societies are constantly having to address the things which threaten the maintenance of life and its defining practices” (Wells, 2000, p. 10). As the focus of these films, orphans are posed as a potential threat. Thus, the stories focus not on the pain and experience of the orphans, but on their power and determination to harm those who intend to help them. The archetype of the devil-orphan can be summed up in Esther’s suggestion that “it must be hard to love an adopted child as much as your own” (Collet-Serra, 2009). This comment shows Esther’s knowledge that she is evil, scary and beyond repair, but also suggests that other orphans are the same way.

Although much of the horror film genre assumes “the underlying irrationality of its scenarios” (Worland, 2007, p. 12), the depiction of orphans as evil, scary and irreparable preys on the lack of information about the background and experiences of orphans. The telling of these stories offers no confidence that the way orphans are depicted is not real, and perhaps even suggests that some real life orphans are as damaged as they are in the movies. Unlike other tales, which might provide “an allegorical cushion allowing us to contemplate, both intellectually and emotionally, the implications of a variety of threatening, painful, and finally individually and socially important conflicts” (ibid) spinning orphans like this creates damning myths about orphans.

Orphan Myths

The popular myth narratives of superheroes, romance novels and horror films contribute to myths about orphans. These myths exist to process the uncertainty around the pain, suffering and
experiences of a child separated from his or her parents. In an attempt to fill these blank spaces, orphans are framed as superheroes, who are all powerful; sleeping beauties, who are completely helpless; or as devils, who are pure evil.

The use of orphans in these myth narratives is meant to make the characters relatable, in that we feel sorry for them. The orphans in horror films are that much more vulnerable and desperate because of their orphan status. The orphan superheroes are that much more normal and successful having experienced the extreme losses of their parents. The romance characters are just that much more lonely and in need because they are alone in the world. In painting orphans in these ways, we are not meant to truly relate to these characters, in that we see our selves in them. We are meant to feel for compassion and wonderment for these characters because they are worse off they we are and they have experienced what we have not.

As a result, these narratives contribute to the notion that orphans are other. They are not like us—they are either more powerful or less powerful than us. They are not our equals—they are either more capable, or much less capable than us. They are not the same as us—the loss or separation from their parents makes them wholly different. Orphans are not of us, and thus, they are other. They are an isolated group, separated from the “normal” lives that we live.

In real life, orphans are children “bereft of protection, advantages, benefits or happiness, previously enjoyed” (Peters, 2000, p. 1). They are children who have undergone extraordinary heartache over the separation from or the loss of their parents and they deal daily with the reality that their parents cannot or will not care for them. As a result, “the details of their lives are more gripping and more revealing than any psychological studies or welfare statistics” (Toth, 1998, p. 17). The details of their lives are not as adventurous as a superhero’s. They do not aspire to end the world or to steal souls. They are guaranteed no happy endings. Instead these children need
“psychological as well as physical nourishment to survive the profound trauma of separation from family” (1998, p. 23).

**Conclusion**

Without parents to intercede for them, children who are permanently or temporarily separated from their parents are subject to the care decisions of public administrators. As they come into direct contact with state and local administrations through the various policies, systems and institutions that attempt to care and act for them, orphans are parented by their interaction with the government. Although they become an object of care and concern, orphans are also a source of anxiety. The myths of orphans as superheroes, sleeping beauties and devils reveal a fear of the unknown around orphans and shed light on how we frame our understanding of them. How we think about orphans—specifically how public administrators think about orphans—affects the interactions between children and the administration, which is intended to care for them. By unmasking these images and their implications, we can free administrators from mythical views of orphans and become better equipped to address the needs of children based on their actual lived experiences.
References


