

**REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MONSTROUS CHILD IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE PHD THESIS

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# **1 Research Questions**

I put forward three key arguments.

1. The emergence of childhood as the new monstrous in twentieth-century narratives of the gothic mode is argued to be historically situated rather than a revival of medieval puritanism and its belief in childhood sinfulness; it is part of a larger socio-scientific discourse regarding criminality, human and natural evil, and modern scientific discoveries.
2. A plurality of negative representations of childhoods is mapped across texts and dissected along the three axes of evil, crime, and the monstrous. The childhood in these texts are corrupted, profane, and specious; they are transgressions against three orders – the divine/religious, social and natural.
3. The narratives, it is argued, builds themselves within an ideological framework that advances a moralistic, degenerationist and retributive stance towards childhood ‘perversity’. A key narrative strategy is the othering of the child as anti-human or even, inhuman in order to create a narrative situation in which violence against the child is justified and ethical. The cautionary discourse within these narratives demands the purging of the monstrous (which may or may not succeed) from the sacred terrain of childhood.

# **2 Research Methodology**

The thesis has strictly referred to the Western discourse on childhood, and has focused non-comparatively, on Western representations. The knowledge/power circularity of discursive ideas in and around representation formed the key point of focus. The primary interest of the thesis lay in discovering the ways in which the narrative constructs childhoods that are monstrous, and how this discursive trend is historical, linked to shifting conceptions of childhood, criminality, humanity, and the future. The broader philosophical, historico-political context in which such representations are possible and become meaningful has been the target of this study.

The primary sources for research included British and American literary works and films: novels, novellas, short stories, feature films, and TV series. The texts were taken

as representative of the paradigm. The interpretational approach has been structuralist and constructivist, combining both semiotic and discursive approaches to representation. Close reading of the texts was followed paying attention to plot patterns, diction, character delineation, and particularly for filmic narratives, the mise-en-scene. Metatextual sources such as interviews, reviews, biographies, and news reports have also been consulted wherever required.

The study is interdisciplinary, interlinking the disciplines of childhood studies, film studies, fiction studies, moral philosophy, sociology, and legal studies. A magpie approach to theory has been adopted, making use of a critical framework that incorporates Foucault, Agamben, Václav Havel, Mary Douglas, and René Girard. Ideologically, the thesis is positioned against the effects of the power of popular scientific discourses, being critical of the metanarrative of ideal childhood. In reading the texts, an inductive, reverse hierarchical strategy has been adopted, by focusing on the perspective of the child character who is positioned as antagonist or the other. The thesis is structured conceptually, rather than in the form of a chronological survey: the mode of organisation is fundamentally based on the Foucauldian definition of the monstrous as a transgression of human, divine/religious and natural laws and the chapters adhere to this conceptual differentiation.

### **3 Key Findings and Conclusion**

**Chapter 1** In the introduction, I have provided an overview into the history of childhood and the gothic genre of the twentieth century with respect to the representation of childhood deviance. I have argued that the presence of the child has become a staple ingredient in the gothic mode. While earlier children had a limited repertoire of roles as the juvenile victim, orphan, or martyr, towards the mid-twentieth century, they have ubiquitously become capable of metamorphosing into the incurable delinquent, villain, and murderer. Along the course of the century, childhood has been a source of concern first, and towards the latter half, it has become a source of anxiety and moral panic. The very allusion to childhood and its associations (toys, dolls, portraits, children's paintings, giggles and chuckles) are now capable of triggering a sense of dread and anxiety.

**Chapter 2** The concept and history of childhood, particularly with regard to the twentieth century, has been examined in ‘Chapter 2: Concept, History and Genre’, attempting to put together a nature of childhood as it may be dominantly understood. I have argued that there are three formulations of the child-adult combination that determine cultural representations. Of these, the third formulation, the child with agency but without reason, has been found to be the usual monstrous manifestation of the child. I have also defended the view that representations and their reality are mutually constitutive. The chapter further established the vantage point of the thesis, precisely, the exception to the paradigm of ideal childhood, the morally deviant child.

**Chapter 3** In ‘Chapter 3: The Axis of Evil’, I have focused on the central problem of sacred turned profane with respect to horror/thriller narratives. Texts that call upon the discourses of puritan morality, religious dogma or superstition, and scientific-cum-supernatural belief systems have been examined. The idea of evil espoused by the narratives is monistic and negative. Rather than the privation theory of evil, the notion of grand and pure evil appears to be more common across the genre. The child who commits evil acts is represented as a two-dimensional figure, opaque and incomprehensible. This has been found to be necessary in order to attribute evil to the child. Ultimately, however, I argue that the juxtaposition of evil and child is anathema for the narrative, and therefore, the narrative simply unveils the mask of the child to reveal the non-child underneath, exonerating childhood from evil.

**Chapter 4** In ‘Chapter 4: The Axis of Crime’, I have examined how the degeneration discourse of the nineteenth century perseveres in twentieth-century understanding of crime. Apparently outdated and infamous scientific theories like eugenics, Lamarckian evolution, and criminal atavism implicitly determine representations in popular culture. I have focused on how the child in these texts has been perceived and judged by the narrative through a medical, pseudo-scientific lens, and has fit into contemporary epistemes regarding psychopathy and evolution. Counter to the narrational perspective, I have argued that a power struggle between child and adult is at the heart of the plot; adult envy of the child, suppression of child rebellion and the fear of political disorganisation lie behind the intolerance and violence meted out to the child. The self-justified conclusions of the texts have been discovered to flounder in the light of this reading.

**Chapter 5** The main chapter of this thesis, ‘Chapter 5: The Monstrous’ is built upon the conclusions of the previous two chapters on evil and crime, respectively. I have argued that the deviant child offends the law at multiple levels—the divine/moral, the socio-legal, and the natural/biological. The child monster, I argue, is a liminal being, transgressing haloed borders, an example for forbidden intermixing. The active construction of the monster as unequivocally monstrous through the text’s point-of-view, choice of vocabulary and film syntax has been dealt with in some detail. The narrative style is argued to be cautionary, encouraging in the spectator/reader a spirit of vigilantism and diagnosis of deviance. I have then examined the specific nature of death or exclusion imposed on the child monster. Sacrifice, extra-judicial death penalty, and euthanasiac release were found to be the dominant modes of death. I have argued that the characteristic bloodlessness of the deaths serve to emphasise the child’s monstrosity and the guardian killer’s virtue. The child’s expulsion from life is treated by narratives as a form of child-saving, of involuntary euthanasia in the best interests of the child and childhood.

**Chapter 6** The monstrous child, offending a Judeo-Christian moral order, evolutionary progress and human ‘nature’, is indubitably required to be annihilated. However, the biopolitical aims of Western society allows it to kill only in the name of life. Therefore, I have argued, the child as Other is demonised and actively constructed as the monster who can then be killed without impunity.

The set of characteristics that constitute the representative formula of the monstrous child are found to be the following:

1. The centrality of the child figure in the narrative
2. The establishment of the child’s innately ‘monstrous’ nature
3. The monstrosity arising from category violation, the intermixing of what must remain separate
4. The denial of hope of correction or ideal futurity
5. The necessity of exterminating the child or/and ending childhood

6. The child's expulsion as sacrifice to restore a divine/natural order, as punishment for crimes, or simply, as eugenic mercy-killing for public safety

## **4 Suggestions and Recommendations**

The selection of primary sources in this thesis has been largely based on the work's popularity, availability and commercial success. Various other narrative forms such as plays, book series, animated film, comics, anime, advertisements, news stories, web series and digital narratives have been excluded from the scope of this study. The thesis has engaged in close reading of the texts while necessarily excluding various contextual and background possibilities of study including production history, publication history, conditions of industry, author/director biography, para/epitextual elements, like advertising, blurbs, studio policy, publishing house, promotions, reviews, etc.

The focus of my study has been strictly on childhood as represented in fictional narratives. Future research may look into the representation of mothers and maternal figures, particularly, with regard to the theme of sacrifice. Of equal interest is the relative absence or ineffectuality of father figures in most of these texts. Another area of study is the traditional possession narrative in which an adult occupies the body of a child, usually that of a girl. Related to this is the importance given to confession and atonement as correctives. The religious, psychological, and sexual significance of this premise appears to be a promising. Further research may also deal with a comparative study of adaptations of narratives across cultures and historical time. The impact of exported childhood constructs on non-Western cultures with respect to cultural artefacts may also be studied. Moreover, it would be illuminating for social science disciplines to study the impact and influence of the narrative representation of criminal childhoods on public policy, schooling, and scientifico-legal discourse.

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In the conclusion, I list out the set of characteristics I have found to constitute the narrative formula of the representations of the monstrous child:

1. The centrality of the child figure in the narrative
2. The establishment of the child's innately 'monstrous' nature
3. The monstrosity arising from category violation, the intermixing of what must remain separate
4. The denial of hope of correction or ideal futurity
5. The necessity of exterminating the child or/and ending childhood
6. The child's expulsion as sacrifice to restore a divine/natural order, as punishment for crimes, or simply, as eugenic mercy-killing for public safety

I conclude that the monstrous child, offending a Judeo-Christian moral order, evolutionary progress and human 'nature', is required to be annihilated so as to restore social order. However, the biopolitical aims of Western society allows it to kill only in the name of life. Therefore, I have argued, the child as Other is demonised and actively constructed as the monster who can then be killed without impunity.

Keywords: *monster, childhood, crime, deviance, evil, gothic, eugenics, euthanasia, sacrifice, punishment*



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