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## **An Outsider Amongst Outsiders: Psychosocial Impact of The Devil's Backbone, The Orphanage, and Mama**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

An Outsider Amongst Outsiders:  
Psychosocial Impact of *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*

by

Abigail Cathcart

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
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of the Requirement for the Degree of  
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in the Department of Theatre

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## Abstract

The horror movie genre has a history of developing stories that use both empathy and fear to reflect upon timeless cultural concerns. Guillermo del Toro's works, *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*, are contemporary examples of this formula at work. In this project, I intend to examine the sociality of these films according to the psychological theories of Freud's "Uncanny" and Todorov's "Fantastic." Through these concepts, del Toro and his collaborators fashioned the issue of social isolation in a variety of ways to sculpt villains, victims, and families into entities that engender both our compassion and our disgust. By utilizing supernatural elements, they rivet the viewer's attention onto issues that, though not supernatural themselves, are every bit as disturbing because they force us to reconsider the world within which we live.

Key Words: Guillermo del Toro, *The Orphanage*, *The Devil's Backbone*, *Mama*, horror films, isolation, family unit, Freud, the Uncanny, Todorov, the Fantastic

## Dedication

Wendell Cathcart:

Thank you for fulfilling your big brother duties and terrifying me with ghost stories when we were kids. I would not be where I am today without your tireless efforts.

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## I. Introduction

Guillermo del Toro's movie *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) shocked and entranced me when I saw it for the first time in sixth grade. The creepy ambiance and fantasy that furnished the imagination of the protagonist – an isolated little girl – countered the grim reality and violence of the Spanish Civil War that surrounded her. This story sparked my fascination with the horror genre, and is what led me to other works of director and producer Guillermo Del Toro. Del Toro has been involved in films that follow similar themes of an empathetic villain, isolation, and a socially weak family unit. By investigating *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*, I intend to discuss what the social circumstances of the characters reveal about the world where we live, and how psychological tools are employed in the movies to make these stories potent to viewers.

These films are not all authored or directed by a common artist, but they do still follow the singular vision of Guillermo del Toro. *The Devil's Backbone* was written and directed by Guillermo del Toro in 2001. It takes place during the Spanish Civil War at a boys' orphanage, and follows Carlos, a new orphan, and his encounters with Carmen, the matriarch, Dr. Cásares, their physician, and Jacinto the handy man. This film focuses on the impact of the Civil War on Carlos and the other residents of the orphanage, as well as the effect that Carlos has on the hidden relationship between Carmen and Jacinto. Bitterness builds up from this relationship, which eventually tips Jacinto over the edge and provokes him to destroy the already precarious family model the orphanage represents. *The Devil's Backbone* was the only film of the three that del Toro directed, but as executive producer he was actively involved in the production of the other two.

*The Orphanage* was directed by J. A. Bayona and produced by del Toro in 2007. It centers on a woman, Laura, as she grapples with the disappearance of her sickly son, Simón. The story takes place at the orphanage where Laura resided as a child, and which, as an adult, she and her husband, Carlos, purchased and moved into in order to open a home for handicapped children. The trouble starts when Simón begins playing with “imaginary” friends in the home and discovers that he was adopted and is HIV positive. We later find out that these friends are the ghosts of Laura’s childhood classmates, who were brutally murdered by an embittered teacher. Simón then mysteriously disappears. Once their search for Simón runs dry and she has unexplainable experiences of her own, Laura turns to these supernatural “friends” in search of her son. From her unconventional methods and the grief that drives it, she effectively cuts herself off from her husband and the “rational world” of the living.

*Mama* was directed by Andres Muschietti and produced by del Toro in 2013. It follows a woman, Annabel, her boyfriend, Lucas, and Lucas’ two nieces Lilly and Victoria as the ghost of a mentally ill woman named Mama plagues them. At the beginning of the movie, Victoria and Lilly’s father Jeffery has a breakdown, kills his wife and coworkers, and then steals the girls and abandons them in a broken-down cabin in the woods. Five years later, Lucas (Jeff’s brother) and Annabel his girlfriend finally find and adopt the girls. During those five years, however, the way they were able to survive was through Mama, who was the only (seemingly human) presence in their lives. Lucas and Annabel commit to reacclimatizing the girls to society, but the situation turns deadly for this makeshift family when Mama’s jealousy and possessiveness of the girls threaten everyone’s lives.

Ghosts and elusive murderers like these seemingly saturate the horror genre, so I chose *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama* as contemporary examples to explore how they are impactful in their modern, cultural contexts. For example, in *The Devil's Backbone* a child-ghost – who in life was the victim of a flawed system – haunts young orphans at a failing orphanage. This premise is designed to unnerve us because we are aware and discomforted by how marginalized these members of society already are. This film is worthwhile culturally because it confronts how weak, family-less environments are seen as culturally insufficient (Creed, 34).

Del Toro is not the first of his kind to broach subjects in this way; horror as a genre often communicates local cultural concerns through storytelling. Steffen Hantke offers this example:

The argument [of the social pertinence of horror movies] covers the 20th century by roughly aligning the political and social iconography of decades with a single film as its cultural expression. ... *The Thing from Another World* [1951], for example, stands representative of Cold War paranoia. (pp. 197-198)

An example from horror films of the 1970s appears in the influential critical piece *The Monstrous Feminine* by Barbara Creed, who offers the “moral and spiritual decline” of the “modern world” as a possible explanation for the possession of Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist* (34). This practice continued into contemporary horror, as the 2006 movie *Snakes on a Plane* capitalized on the fear of flight that terrorism had only recently engendered in the public. Del Toro's works can also be seen as culturally relevant because they take part in this rich tradition of horror of being *culturally relevant*.

We are accustomed to storylines where supernatural beings tamper with the world of the living. There are not only classic conventions in horror in terms of subject matter, but also the way in which it is presented may be formulaic and rooted in psychology. They frighten us because we know that there is something off about them, and that their presence does not fit in our understanding of the natural world. Sigmund Freud's theory of the "Uncanny Valley" and Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the "Fantastic" define the uneasy feelings that this formula inspires in us, which arises from something appearing one way but actually being entirely - and horrifyingly - different. Theories of the Uncanny and Fantastic relate to horror movies on a basic level; the ways in which these films affect us psychologically expose what it is that horror is accomplishing socially (Wexman).

Investigating the psycho-sociality of *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama* in particular is valuable because the issues of relative villainy, isolation, and strength of the family unit are timeless. Isolation is a foundational theme in each movie because many characters – both protagonists and antagonists – come from marginalized communities. These characters are seen as weak, and they live within family units that might not match up to cultural standards regarding the nuclear model and gender roles. Concurrently, the "villains" in each movie might not be as clear-cut as they at first seem; sometimes the real monsters dwell amongst the people or circumstances surrounding them.

As soon as we spot the Monster in most horror flicks, we can pretty safely assume that they are the bad guys, the ones who elicit screams and who kill with impunity, the impetus for all of the destruction that ensues. This certainly seems at first to be the case in

*The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*. Upon closer inspection, however, these villains eventually reveal themselves also to be *victims* in their own right. In these films del Toro counters the obvious Monster with humans that may have *monstrous* qualities of their own, which raises the concern that “the greatest evil is that which may be going on right next door” (Green, 21).

Another fascinating aspect of these movies is that they collectively approach isolation from a unique, cultural perspective. For instance, *The Devil's Backbone* is relevant to children who lack the social cohesion of a family. *The Orphanage* remarks on the psychological damage of mourning the loss of a child. *Mama* reflects on the mother-child-relationship amongst a marginalized community (i.e. the mentally ill). All three circumstances are very isolating, and though each example is different, they all actually end up having one thing in common: a separation from family.

In the case of a horror movie, compromising the integrity of a protagonist's family is often either a cause for or result of isolation. This is because disassociating a person from a typical familial model (nuclear, stable home) sets them apart, and might cause them to look weak and susceptible to evil events and horror (Creed). The identity of the family unit is compromised in each movie, as *The Devil's Backbone* takes place in an orphanage where the mother figure is not strong, *The Orphanage* surrounds distraught parents after their son disappears, and *Mama* grapples with how an unenthusiastic foster mother must defend her newly-adopted children against a ghost. These plot points link to the idea of family and isolation in a fundamental way, as one intertwines with the other.

## II. Literature Review

### Psychological Theories

The study of horror movies, within the framework of *how* and *why* they are scary, is defined by Freud's theory of the "Uncanny." Freud conveys that the Uncanny gives "a feeling of something not simply weird or mysterious but, more specifically, [...] something strangely familiar" (Martin, 61). For example, seeing a ghost instills an Uncanny sense of dread, as the human form is "familiar" but distinctly, morbidly changed (61). In "A Symposium on the Strange, the Weird, and the Uncanny," Adam Phillips summarizes that "in Freud's view an Uncanny experience was a memory - an encounter in which, unbeknown to ourselves, the present collapsed back into the past - in which the forbidden announced itself again" (20). Collapsing "back into the past," in one way or another, is a major element in the plots of *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*, since most characters experience the Uncanny while they are either plagued by ghosts from the past or tortured by past actions and decisions.

Some of what makes the Uncanny relevant to horror is its ability to instill doubt in us because we are unable to articulate why it affects us. Phillips further defines the Uncanny by pointing out that a truly Uncanny experience surpasses the ability to be defined by a simple word. According to Phillips and Andre Aciman, "As words they may be more like gasps or exclamations ... [because] the meaning [of the Uncanny] eludes me, not because the idea of the Uncanny defies language, but because the Uncanny resists thinking, defies thinking, dispels thinking" (20). In an endeavor to make sense out of strange occurrences in the world, this term defines the inherently undefinable.

As the concept itself is innately difficult to comprehend, it stands to reason that investigating horror movies using the Uncanny might then seem to be problematic. It is important to note, though, that this concept is multi-faceted and, though it “defies” the logic applied in understanding it, more examples of Uncanny-like experiences can only serve to benefit the associated body of knowledge (Phillips).

In “The Beyond of the Subject - Mourning, Desire, and the Uncanny,” author David Kennedy uses examples from elegy-literature to connect the Uncanny to storytelling and from there more fully grasp its impact. He firstly applies the Uncanny to morbid storytelling when he quotes Freud: “to many people the acme of the Uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts” with the outcome that “the Uncanny is too mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it” (581-82). Kennedy asserts that the Uncanny is present when elegy-writers mourn and desire for the dead because it is right in the middle of the mourner’s internal battle between reality (the reality of death) and what they wish reality would allow to be true (ghosts, power of choice in determining fate, etc.) He explains this further:

The Uncanny is the reawakening of what Freud calls the ‘animistic’ phase ... [that] is characterized by ‘unbounded narcissism’ which seeks ‘to defend itself against the unmistakable sanctions of reality’ with a vast repertoire of ‘inventions’ ... [including] belief in the existence of human spirits; the attribution of magical powers to alien people and things; a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts; and ‘the overrating of one’s own mental processes.’ (584)

David Kennedy applies psychological processes to the experience of fear and the morbidity of loss in elegies, but this approach is equally apposite to the storytelling of

horror movies. He offers a solid framework from which to approach *The Devil's Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*, which could help elucidate the role the Uncanny plays in the protagonists' struggles against death and estrangement.

Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the Fantastic also makes use of Freud's "Uncanny," but, as Virginia Wright Wexman articulates, he goes a step further by mapping out the disagreement between the world of reality and the world of fantasy:

The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses ... and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place ... but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (Todorov, 25)

Todorov connects the psychological Uncanny to the kind of internal turmoil that makes characters in horror movies both gripping and painful to watch. As the characters in this analysis will display, this turmoil often elicits isolation and compromises the relationships of those closest in the characters' lives: their family.

A similar conflict is witnessed by Wexman who, in "The Trauma of Infancy in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*," points out how the theory of the Fantastic is one of the main conflicts for the title character, Rosemary. On the one hand, her husband and neighbors lead her to believe she is crazy for thinking a satanic cult wants to take her baby (Wexman, 33). On the other hand, the reality is that her husband and neighbors summoned the devil to impregnate her, and so what she thought she knew and could trust in the world drastically changes. The Fantastic conflict in *Rosemary's Baby* is an effective reference in this analysis because it reflects how the Fantastic impacts characters and their relationships with each other and world.



### **Uncanny and Fantastic in Film:**

Applying psychological theories to this analysis is not a black-or-white pursuit. There are some critical opinions that are unintentionally relevant to the Uncanny or "Fantastic," though they might merely be about the genre as a whole. An article by Jody Keisner, entitled "Do You Want to Watch? A Study of the Visual Rhetoric of the Postmodern Horror Film," presents a perspective that is valuable as an analytical tool, since critics' opinions about horror movies may reflect views of social groups at large. She looks specifically at the phenomenon of horror movies and their anti-rationality.

The horror genre is unique in that movies tend to both tantalize our thirst for darkness and horrify us with their often-shocking displays of violence. The Uncanny embraces the dichotomy of "strange familiarity" in a similar way to this simultaneous draw and repulsion (Martin, 61). Horror movies are also oftentimes anti-rational, and dwell in "supernatural surroundings" (Keisner, 412). Striving for rationality in a world that might be surprisingly anti-rational is, for instance, Rosemary's trouble in *Rosemary's Baby*.

Guillermo del Toro, likewise, plays with this duality in his collaborations by constantly presenting social dilemmas that are intertwined with supernatural elements. A film review by "London City Lights" indirectly refers to the Uncanny nature of *Mama* when they point out that "this environment is so obviously spooky that, in a perverse way it all seems oddly familiar" (2013). This reviewer remarks on the way the filming, as well as multiple "nods to classic horror" through imagery augmented this "familiarity" and investment in the environment. He describes the feelings of "walking us into places we don't want the characters or ourselves to go" and how "this puts us in the action as much

as the characters, with the monster popping up to scare us as much as the characters in the film” (2013).

The Fantastic is explored in another way in “Feminist Uses of the Fantastic in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*,” where Murdoch uses it as a tool for her strong, female protagonist. The author, Katherine Weese, clarifies this when she writes, “*The Sea, the Sea* is a novel in which instances of the unreal highlight the author's social and historical concerns, particularly the construction of gender roles” (article body). She looks at the ways in which Iris Murdoch, known as “a writer who happens to be a woman rather than a woman writer,” is pertinent and unique to investigations into the setup of stories with female protagonists because she employs the Fantastic in how she approaches them (article body).

Steffen Hantke dives headfirst into the German horror movie *Anatomies*, and exposes how the movie is full of Uncanny experiences and images. In “Horror Film and the Historical Uncanny: The New Germany in Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Anatomies...*,” Hantke discusses the Uncanny in relation to the isolation of the protagonist. The most obvious example is in the perversity of a bunch of medical students and professors who belong to a secret cult that performs unethical experiments on human subjects (Hantke). At first this medical institution is revered, but once the protagonist discovers the sadistic cult, any inkling of trust from the viewer dissolves completely.

This horror movie is a prime example for the Uncanny because it takes something very stable and familiar in society and turns it into something perverse and alien (Martin). Hantke refers to the group as “represent[ing] a secret history of medicine, a dark double of the Enlightenment” (117). This idea also effectively represents the Uncanny in that the

“secret history” and “dark double” described are the odd constructs that make something recognizable into something ugly (Phillips). Later, an Uncanny experience happens one final time when an acquaintance of the protagonist is killed and shows up as a specimen on the group’s lab table (Hantke). Hantke articulates the many ways that Uncanny experiences and images occur in *Anatomies*, which indicates that this could be effective at providing examples for the Uncanny in *The Devil’s Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*.

### **III. Methodology**

Within my research, I will conduct a thorough, organized analysis of each movie, with specific definitions and parameters of the concepts applied. The unit of analysis will be scenes in any of the movies containing specific moments that reveal the themes of isolation, strength of the family, and/or relative villainy. After this, I plan on marking down occurrences of Freud’s Uncanny and Todorov’s “Fantastic,” and then categorizing them based on how they relate to each other and to the genre. From here I will determine the circumstances within which the frightening events happened by uncovering the backgrounds and social standings of the characters involved.

The objects of my study will be *The Devil’s Backbone*, *The Orphanage*, and *Mama*. I chose these films because they are contemporary, were either directed or produced by Guillermo del Toro, and contain similar content, though they vary in style. In summary, this study will be of a sample of horror movies that are very much entrenched in cultural concerns, and reveal these concerns through the use of the

Uncanny and the "Fantastic." I will first pick out how they relate to society, and pay attention to how these psycho-analytical terms impact that.

#### **IV. Dynamics of the Villain**

Guillermo del Toro's villains are nothing if not dynamic, as he "provokes your screams and shudders, but he also earns your tears" (Scott, 2001). There may have been a possibility to develop his monsters within an *evil incarnate*-kind of vein, with bad entities that do bad things for the enjoyment of being bad. Instead, though, we witness the way del Toro's villains are also victims of social institutions that failed and ostracized them. This is a classic construct in developing the identity of the villain, as "many such stories feature villains who are identified as social outsiders" (Wexman, 31). Del Toro and his collaborators repeatedly challenge us to be at first repulsed by the monsters' current states of unrest and then lament the tragic circumstances from which they devolved into what we see before us.

It appears to be a sort of formula; well-intentioned individuals become maltreated and ostracized in one way or another, and then in their effort to reassert and reestablish themselves they turn into something monstrous. As a film review of *Mama* from *London City Lights* (LCL) so aptly articulates:

To add a pleasant bit of complexity, [Mama] is a maternal monster motivated by love and loss rather than pure hatred and evil, which muddies the waters a bit, the film encouraging us to sympathize with the darkness lurking in the shadows.

(article body)

However, the reviewer also cringes away from Mama as “she flops and staggers awkwardly, but suddenly it’s as if she finds a rhythm and can move terrifyingly fast” (2013). The oxymoron “maternal monster” encapsulates how *Mama* toys with antitheses of repulsion and empathy, fear and tenderness. An example of this is the scene that, according to *London City Lights*, “seamlessly fills in much of the backstory” and really solidifies Mama as almost as much of a victim as she is a villain (article body). In this scene, Annabel has fallen asleep and Mama communicates to Annabel through a dream. The dream, which is presented from a first person perspective, “gives us an intensely claustrophobic sequence,” details the way Mama died, and seems at first like more of a cry for help than anything sinister (LCL, 2013).

The dream opens with Mama as a patient in a mental hospital, where she goes on a rampage when her newborn is taken away from her. After killing attendants, stealing the baby, and escaping to the woods, Mama is chased by a group of dogs and men until finally we see her, cornered, at the edge of a cliff. It is obvious that she must decide what to do; she can live without her baby or die with him. She chooses the latter, but after jumping she hits a tree branch on the way down, which snags the baby’s swaddling and separates them. As soon as Mama hits the water in the dream, Annabel wakes up. Then, Victoria enters the room and sees how, while Annabel slept, Momma had been trying to rip and chew and claw her way into Annabel’s neck from under the bed. This image, paired with the impressive bruise on the back of Annabel’s neck seen moments later, reminds us how tenuous our empathy is in relation to Mama’s character.

What is also tenuous, and what may put Mama’s villainy into perspective, is our judgment of Victoria and Lilly’s father, Jeffery, who initiated the film’s chain of events.

Just as Mama killed Victoria's therapist and Jeffery, and then tried to kill Lucas and Annabel, Jeffery killed two of his business associates and his wife, and then tried to kill Victoria, Lilly, and himself. *Unlike* Mama, though, Jeffery did not come from a marginalized community – where he was seen as an outcast with relatively few options – but from what appears to be upper middle class suburbia. His motive for murder was unclear, whereas Mama often killed out of self-protection or for the sake of the girls.

The first scene of the movie takes place during the financial crisis of 2008, which implies that Jeffery's killing spree was triggered by a failed business venture. Jeffery might have suffered financially, but because he had a high-power position and made the independent decision to kill the people in his family, we are not encouraged to empathize with him. Mama, on the other hand, reveals how much she suffered by losing her child and the intense love she has for the two girls. In this sense, it seems like Mama's vulnerability and Jeffery's abuse of power make it easy to distinguish whom the real monster is.

Horror traditionally does more to sway us for or against villains than simply rack up a death toll or pick apart the motives behind murder. Part of the reason Jeffery and Mama swing back and forth between appearing monstrous and empathetic is due to their identities and how they are portrayed. We are conditioned to view Mama as more monstrous than Jeffery because of her physical appearance, but also because Jeffery is familiar to us and in a position of power. Alfred Hitchcock communicated this power dynamic in a similar way in his films:

Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman (evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking). True perversion is

barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness – the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong. Hitchcock's skillful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position.

(Mulvey, 120-121)

Jeffery is portrayed as a polished – if harried – businessman who never actually commits any of his violent acts *onscreen*; they are only referenced. All we see is the tender way he picks up Victoria and Lilly to put them in the car, and later the internal struggle he has in pulling the trigger while their backs are turned. Mama, on the other hand, is literally a monstrous female, whose atrocities are displayed in gory detail.

*The Devil's Backbone* and *The Orphanage*, congruently, contain complicated characters that provide an internal struggle for us regarding whether we can – or should – root for them. These monsters are different, though, because once their motives are mapped out there is less ambiguity about their relative villainy. The aforementioned formula becomes complicated with various adjustments, like relating truly *monstrous* humans to *humanized* monsters.

In *The Devil's Backbone*, we are inclined to assume that Santi's ghastly appearance and Jacinto's chiseled, leading man-type look would be reflective of their roles in the action, but we eventually find that, in this instance, looks are misleading. It seems we are lead intentionally into this ambiguity by the grim atmosphere that surrounds Santi:

The nighttime sequences in which Carlos pursues Santi's footsteps down empty hallways and into a cavernous subterranean chamber are certainly frightening. Mr.

del Toro takes an almost sensuous delight in weaving aural and visual textures of fear; water droplets and heartbeats echo in the stillness, and the camera replicates that primal childhood state of being poised between curiosity and dread. (Scott, 2001)

This differs from the overt way that Jacinto's aggression is presented. It is also not consistent with his actions; we are painstakingly directed to Santi's creepiness while he never actually *does* anything sinister or wrong. Jacinto, on the other hand, maintains his roguish good looks and perfect hair while he kills multiple people and destroys the whole orphanage.

We are also led astray by the creepiness of the ghost-child, Tomás, compared to his frail, bespectacled mother, Benigna, in *The Orphanage*. Scott summarizes our reactions to the universally scary nature of dead children: "the sudden apparition of a child at the end of that hall — especially a child in a weird, anachronistic costume — is likely to make you jump a little in your seat." Simón always refers to Tomás as his friend, though, and later we see how Tomás' visage, while unsettling, is virtually harmless. The image of Tomás' *seemingly* harmless mother then juxtaposes Tomás once we find that she apparently poisoned the orphans in revenge, since their games accidentally led to his death.

This disturbing image of revenge is augmented in the scene when Laura tries to communicate with the dead children in the house through a medium. Once the medium is put into a trance, she wanders around the upstairs floor, muttering "Puedo huir algo" (I can hear something) over and over again until she reaches the room where — when the house was an orphanage — the orphans used to sleep. Then, all we are able to distinguish



is the unmistakable screams and wretches of poisoned children, and the look of horror on the medium's face as she moves throughout the room, fruitlessly trying to comfort the pitiful *fantasmas*. With our imaginations at work connecting the dots between what we hear and cannot see, it is likely the tragic image in our minds eye is enough to challenge our empathy for the aggrieved Benigna.

## **V. Isolation**

*The Orphanage* is in part a story about the isolation of children. Simón and Tomás ironically find communion in the isolation thrust upon them. Simón was adopted and is HIV-positive, and Tomás was horribly disfigured in life. Just as we never see Simón play with any *living* children his own age, we learn that Tomás was kept out of sight in the days when the house was an orphanage. Although they state in the film that the orphans did not mean anything vicious by the trick that unintentionally resulted in Tomás' death, they would not have felt the need to play the trick if the deformed boy had not been an outsider.

Isolation is a concept that can be influenced by the Uncanny and Fantastic, and, for instance, in Deborah Martin's work this is done by looking through the lens of the child protagonist in a horror movie. Though the film is shot from Laura's adult perspective, so much of the content is focused on her child, the orphans, and her history at the orphanage from when she was a child. Wexman identifies how the Uncanny may be related to the way these protagonists – sickly or ghostly children and a difficult female – “are themselves ‘others’ [which] arouses complex reactions that mix sympathy with xenophobic contempt for people who do not conform to accepted social standards” (31).

With the two boys' individual handicaps, even among the orphans (outsiders in their own right) the two children are isolated; they are outsiders amongst outsiders.

Some critics focus on how films 'reveal what it might be like to experience and feel the world as it is apparently lived by' their child subjects (2010, Lury p. 285)" (Martin, 60). In one sense children are isolated in movies when they are seen as symbols instead of people. In another sense the viewer has zeroed-in on the unique experience of the child. The unique experience of Simón is that he finds out right before he disappears that he is not only very ill, but was adopted. His world, as he knows it, drastically shifts. A review of the movie by Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* describes the isolating effect of being adopted and the way in which Simón symbolizes that:

Adoption itself is a powerful metaphor for our fear of children's unknowability: adopters might wonder if they know who their children really are, and the adoptees might wonder about themselves, once they are in possession of the facts, and old enough to appreciate what they mean. (2008)

It is interesting to note that Laura, too, was adopted. Bradshaw surmises that Laura actually buys the old orphanage to turn it into a home for disabled children because she was "driven by a need for closure." Perhaps the difference between Laura and Simón's stories was that Simón represented another way that for her to come to terms with it, yet Simón himself had little but the ghost orphans as a source of solidarity (Bradshaw).

*The Orphanage* is also a story about the isolating effect of love and loss. As a review by A. O. Scott in *The New York Times* puts it, "though there are plenty of sudden jolts and eerie atmospherics, "The Orphanage" is ultimately concerned with grief, remorse and maternal longing." Laura also differs from Simón in that her eventual

isolation is self-prescribed. Laura rejects the ever-present support that her husband, Carlos, offers her. She is so distraught over her son's disappearance that she allows their family to fall apart because of it, with little concern for Carlos' feelings. Laura is seen as justified in her debilitating grief, while her husband is more connected to the world, in-tune with confronting his emotions, and proactive about moving on (Dancus, 74).

The only time he presents a challenge for her is when he cannot accept Laura's belief that something supernatural could have happened to Simón. What Tzvetan Todorov posited with the Uncanny and the Fantastic applies because most of the fear in this horror movie does not derive solely from Laura simply being crazy, as in an expressions of the Uncanny, or living in a world where her son is a ghost, as in an expression of the Fantastic, but from the uncertainty of which it is that she believes to be true (Wexman). It is not until the final scenes in the film when she actually sees the ghosts of her old friends from the orphanage that she knows for certain.

Perhaps, though, the most powerful image of isolation of the three movies is in *The Devil's Backbone* with "nobody's children" which, according to Dr. Cásares, mirrors the orphans' situation. As Cásares explained, the devil's backbone (nobody's children) refers to the exposed spine of stillborn fetuses that were not able to develop adequately due to malnourishment. He says that people condemn these babies for being unworthy of being born and being tainted.

There is a parallel between "nobody's children" and the orphans. These babies form the devils' backbones because their social structures failed them and yet they are rejected by society for being "evil." In the same way, orphans are totally powerless to their circumstances and yet are treated with a level of disdain and disregard by others.

They lose their primary caregivers when they are the most vulnerable and need them the most, and yet once they do, in the case of *The Devil's Backbone*, they are cast off to a failing orphanage in the middle of nowhere.

Following this image comes the grown-up orphan, Jacinto, whose “sadistic, deceitful nature seems to spring from the hurts he suffered as a child” (Scott). Jacinto acts as an example of what this orphanage produces: dysfunctional, isolated, and harmful men. It shows that this system or family model is so flawed that it is broken. It becomes clear over time that the real person Jacinto is against or who injured him the most is Carmen, the matriarch of the orphanage, because she ruined their bond (in the mother-son family model), gave him the power to be a man with her, and then kept him out of her life and in his “place.”

## **VI. The Family**

The notion and delicate identity of the family is at the root of the conflict in *The Devil's Backbone*. *The New York Times* attributes the weak family structure in *The Devil's Backbone* to the ravages of the Spanish Civil War, focusing on the parent figures, Carmen and Dr. Cásares, as well as Jacinto: “Dr. Cásares's chronic impotence and Carmen's wooden leg suggest the weakness of the republic, and like that noble, self-divided government, they are unable to defend themselves against the treachery in their midst” (Scott, 2001). This metaphor reflects the sociality of this film, with the family dynamic at its center. Although Carmen and Dr. Cásares are the leaders of this orphanage, which once held Jacinto, they are virtually powerless against the destruction he wreaks. Associating the image of this family unit to the politics of the Spanish Civil War is reminiscent of propaganda from Francoist Spain:

The image of familial bliss was also used as a symbol for the entire country. General Franco liked to present himself as the father of the nation and a family man, and in this way, he introduced a military, and therefore coercive, connotation that left little room for any alternative social structure to defy the model. (Vivancos, 878)

A family that violates this “model” would therefore be seen as culturally insufficient. Furthermore, children are significant in film on a symbolic level because they are “symbols of the nation, reflecting the changes and embodying the uneven and troubled development of their homelands,” so the corruption of Jacinto, who was raised by Carmen and Cásares, indicates this situation is flawed (Martin, 59).

Although this may be a political metaphor, on a more specific, character-based level we realize eventually that Carmen is one of the biggest reasons this family does not fit the model. Barbara Creed’s concept of the “betrayal of mother by child” in *The Exorcist* can be applied to Carmen and Jacinto’s relationship; they had a mother-son type dynamic when they became sexually involved, since Jacinto was 17 at the time and still under her care at the orphanage (34). Taking advantage of Jacinto in this way makes Carmen seem like one of this film’s antagonists, but her character represents more than just that. While talking about *The Exorcist*, Creed points out that a movie like this “permits the spectator to wallow vicariously in normally taboo forms of behavior before restoring order” (37). Carmen’s role in *The Devil’s Backbone* falls into this category. Abject things are put onscreen for the purpose of titillating and satisfying hidden desires amongst the audience, but this also impacts the relative strength of the family (37).

Carmen crossed a boundary with Jacinto, and as Creed observes, “the family

home, bastion of all the right virtues and laudable moral values, is built on a foundation of repressed sexual desires” (35). Then, the movie draws a connection between their sexuality and Carmen’s amputated leg. Just as Carmen’s amputated leg may be a political metaphor, the way it is sexualized is also reflective of perversity in their home. Following this concept, Creed articulates, “One of the most interesting aspects of *The Exorcist* is the way in which it uses woman’s body to represent this conflict. The rebellion is presented as monstrous yet immensely appealing” (37). It is a source of arousal for Jacinto, and possibly has been for a long time. These concepts make Carmen’s role in *The Devil’s Backbone* more than just abject, but really impactful as her abjection shapes the main villain into the man that he is.

Although this movie is supposedly a horror film about a ghost who torments a little boy, in many ways that seems “secondary to the film’s exploration of female monstrousness and the inability of the male order to control the woman whose perversity is expressed through her rebellious body” (34). Because neither her former husband nor Dr. Cásares was able to satisfy her, Carmen sought sexual satisfaction from one of her charges, and then shamed herself so much that Jacinto grew up to feel both empowered and like an embarrassment, both virile and inferior. It is unclear whether he would have turned out badly no matter what, but a strong point of Jacinto’s anger and unrest arises from Carmen using him sexually and then dismissing him from her life and wealth.

Creed poses the question: “What better ground for the forces of evil to take root than the household of a family in which the father is absent and where the mother continually utters profanities, particularly in relation to her husband” (34). Carmen is not profane towards Dr. Cásares, but she emasculates him every time she sleeps with Jacinto.

I am particularly interested in the how Dr. Cásares' lack of virility and father-figure role changed the family dynamic. He had a more personal relationship with the children in the orphanage than Carmen, and seemed to play the nurturing role typically reserved for the woman in nuclear families. Did he take this role because, since he did not consummate their relationship, he was weaker or less of a man? Was it because Carmen was technically his boss, in a position of power over him that crossed over into their personal lives as well? Or did his role in everything stem from a different place?

In *A Father's Body, A Nation's Heart: Caregiving Fathers in Contemporary Norwegian Film*, author Adriana Margareta Dancus discusses the progressive stance Norway has on the role of men as fathers in film. This includes deciding to take over the role of Caregiver to support their counterparts' desire to follow their career. Essentially, for Norwegian fathers, there is simply the expectation for a more involved father figure in day-to-day family life. Immediately, though, she postulates that it is not due to being "concerned about gender equality, but because they are desperate to earn social recognition and cure their insecurity and weakness" (71).

This concept is interesting in conjunction with the plot of the movie. Carmen is not in the position to protect or be the nurturer and so Dr. Cásares takes up that role. He does so by caring for the children's wounds, being present when they have conflict, and helping them find solutions to personal problems. For instance, when Carlos asks about whether there is a ghost at the orphanage, the doctor responds with a metaphor that compares a little boy who believes in ghosts to the ignorant people who drink the cure-all tonic Dr. Cásares sells them. He reasons that the tonic becomes significant when people *place* significance on its purported "benefits," but in reality there never were any benefits

at all. He says that if Carlos is going to believe in ghosts, then he might as well start drinking that tonic because they are both irrational. Carlos says no, out of disgust, because the “tonic” is in a tank with a “devil’s backbone” fetus inside. Once Carlos leaves the room, though, Dr. Cásares drinks a glass of the tonic in one quick gulp. This image recognizes how obviously and ironically the doctor buys into his self-professed “nonsense.” What makes this moment poignant and frustrating is that he is willing to buy into it for his own reasons but is unwilling to do so for Carlos.

Dr. Cásares’ actions as caregiver, therefore, might be reflective of some internal fear. Up to the point when he takes that gulp, we mostly see the strength in his character and his role at the orphanage. In this scene, though, I got a sense that he was drinking the tonic because he felt like he too needed to be cured of something (impotence) that was completely out of his control. In contrast, Dancus refers to gender theorists to supply an explanation that might not be consistent with it. Two explanations she offers indicate that the origin of this issue is both biological and social. Instead of being emasculating, “child-rearing becomes the badge and guarantee of heterosexual masculinity” because “the caregiving father is neither desexualized nor feminized” (73). He is merely fulfilling his role as “biological contributor” (73). Then, Dancus shifts to an area where she says “Although the mother remains a key figure for the child, it has become common to blame her for refusing to allow the biological father to see his children after separation,” thus displaying “the mother as the problem and the father as the victim” (74). With this, she acknowledges that there are also negative consequences that are being revealed as well as positives with this idea of biological responsibility and accountability.



With films as well as socially, it seems that the attention has shifted more toward the experience of the father figure: "... the point of identification is always the child, usually a son. In films of the last decade, the identification has shifted away from the children toward the fathers, who are presented as heterosexual men in crisis" (74). This is relevant to Dr. Cásares in *The Devil's Backbone* because he is the "father, who is often presented as a victim" because he is essentially cuckolded by Carmen and left to be the sole protector of their charges (74). This could connect to Cásares' character because, although he does not do everything for the sole purpose of proving himself to Carmen, he does have reason to want to prove himself as a man. Could Dr. Cásares as Father be an example of, as Dancus puts it, "caregiving fatherhood becom[ing] a vehicle for reconnecting with their inner selves and for curing their insecurities, as well as a way to reassure others of their virtuousness and/or reproductive prowess" (74)? In terms of reassuring others, he reassures the audience of his good intentions by juxtaposing them with Carmen and Jacinto's weaknesses. Although "reproductive prowess" is out of the equation for Cásares, he still compensates for it; his virility is a recurring conflict for him.

When considering how these constructs are fundamentally focused on social identity, the ideas of style, context, and specific location are important. This argument is relevant to, and dependent on, the social milieu where the father-caregiving is taking place, and therefore something taking place in 21<sup>st</sup> century Norway might not really translate over to Spanish Civil War-era Spain. There is also the assumption that while Dancus boasts that "Norway ranks highest in gender equality," Spain has the reputation of being at times patriarchal and sexist (72). In addition to this, and not even considering the setting of this particular film, we do not know precisely from where Del Toro's

personal style and vision originations; whether it is more in line with this Norwegian movement from the past ten years, or if it is a more of a manifestation of Hollywood. Dancus differentiates fathers in Norwegian film from those in Hollywood by saying that Hollywood is “where fathers are often de-sexualized and de-eroticized and where fatherly bodies are seldom on display unless they become a marker of the father’s and/or the family’s dysfunctionality” (75). That description may fit with Cásares, since his sexuality is taken away from him because he is too old to “perform.” His failing in this way, or perhaps his age may be the “father body” they describe that reflects the “dysfunctionality” of their family unit.

Whether Cásares’ characterization falls distinctly into the Norwegian or Hollywood-style of fatherhood is unknown. What can more certainly be surmised, though, is his role and impact within this fractured family unit at the orphanage. His lack of power as a man and Carmen’s lack of maternal prudence suggest they do not fit into their assigned gender roles, which then augments their family’s apparent social weakness as a whole. Congruently, Wexman recognizes the way in which Roman Polanski handles stereotypes “by tearing them out of their expected context and turn[ing] them against his audience” (31). In *The Devil’s Backbone*, del Toro similarly tampers with the gender roles in this family and thereby also the “structures of power underlying” them (31). Such an environment that subsists without a firm familial structure may be especially vulnerable to the isolated and embittered villain in its midst (Creed).

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