

Article

'Danger: Children at Play': Uncanny Play in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*

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Abstract: Representations of play abound in Stephen King's 1983 novel *Pet Sematary* and its 1989 and 2019 subsequent film adaptations. However, play in *Pet Sematary* is not representative of the innocent actions designed to create functioning adults who meaningfully contribute to society. In the 1989 film, for example, "play" for a newly resurrected Gage is a version of hide-and-go-seek resulting in the death of neighbour Jud. Meanwhile, the 2019 adaptation sees a newly resurrected Ellie "playing" in her dirt-stained white funereal dress. These dirt stains become markers of lost innocence and transform her dance into an uncanny performance. Since Gage and Ellie are both somewhat monstrous child figures, their play, like their bodies, is transformed into something unsettling and ventures into the realm of the uncanny. However, play itself is also performed differently between the adaptations because the central child figure also changes. In the 1989 film, it is a male toddler, and in the 2019 film, it is a pre-pubescent female. Both adaptations focus on ideal, socially acceptable forms of play according to the time in which the film was made as well as how children diverge from these behaviours. Play is often rendered dangerous when not performed properly according to the paradigms of age and gender, resulting in what I call 'uncanny play'. When children engage with 'uncanny play', the adults in the narrative are permitted to execute the children for the sake of preserving the memory of them as innocent beings, or what I call the 'Save the Child' discourse. Linda Hutcheon argues that 'when we adapt [...] we actualize or concretize ideas', so that the socially acceptable play put forth in King's novel becomes more realised and thus more at risk to transgression in each successive filmic adaptation.

Keywords: Stephen King; *Pet Sematary*; child; children; childhood; play; gender; uncanny; uncanny play; Save the Child



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1. Playing with Dead Things

Driving along Route 15 just outside Ludlow, Maine, USA, one may encounter variations of a large yellow street sign stating, 'Caution Children at Play', or 'Watch Out for Kids', or 'Slow Children Playing'. By 1971, the rise of vehicle-related deaths involving children throughout the United States resulted in the design and implementation of 'Child-at-Play' signs to help reduce the number of accidents. According to the [National Center for Statistics and Analysis \(2009\)](#), the leading cause of death for children between ages three and fourteen is vehicle related—both as passengers and as pedestrians. Interestingly, what many of the Child-at-Play signs have in common, though, is not merely highlighting the potential presence of children in the street, but the presence of children playing in the street. These signs suggest that play in and along the street is culturally acceptable, which places children in increasingly dangerous positions, and it is this anxiety that sits at the heart of Stephen King's 1983 ([King 1983b](#)) novel *Pet Sematary* and its filmic adaptations. From tire swings to kite flying to hide-and-go-seek, *Pet Sematary* is fraught with uncanny representations of children at play in and along the street. While *Pet Sematary* has been discussed in terms of its family dynamics ([Alegre 2001](#); [Dymond 2013](#); [Sears 2013](#)), coping with death ([Bruhm 2014](#); [Nash 1997](#)), and Indigenous land rights ([Mackenthun 1997](#)), the

representation of play as an uncanny signifier of childhood remains underexplored, so this article seeks to fill this gap.

In the 1989 film adaptation of King's novel, a resurrected Gage (Miko Hughes) sneaks into Jud's (Fred Gwynne) farmhouse under the cover of darkness. After Gage kills both Jud and his own mother Rachel (Denise Crosby), Louis (Dale Midkiff), the father, finds himself beckoned to play an uncanny version of hide-and-go-seek when Gage states, 'First I played with Jud, then mommy came, and I played with mommy [...] now, I want to play with you' (Lambert 1989, 1:28:01—1:28:19). In a similar uncanny representation of play, the 2019 cinematic remake depicts a resurrected Ellie (Jeté Laurence) dancing to the Nutcracker Suite whilst wearing her dirt-stained white funereal dress (Kölsch and Widmyser 2019, 1:14:55—1:15:24). While living Ellie often danced for her family, the post-mortem signifiers, such as Ellie's decaying face and the dirt stains on the dress, are markers of lost innocence that transform her dance into an uncanny performance. Although there are significant changes between the filmic adaptations, both—like the novel from which they are borne—become increasingly concerned with representations of ideal and socially acceptable forms of play and how children diverge from these behaviours. This article addresses a few of the many representations of play in both the 1989 and 2019 filmic adaptations of King's *Pet Sematary* to argue that play is often rendered dangerous when not performed properly, resulting in what I call 'uncanny play'. Properly performed play must be socially acceptable according to American standards of age and gender performativity for each successive generation, or else it results in violence, death, and the destruction of the ideal white, middle-class American family.

2. Some Assembly Required: The Creation of the Child and How It Plays

The children in King's literature, such as Danny Torrance in *The Shining* (King 1977), Charlene McGee in *Firestarter* (King 1980), and the 'Loser's Club' in *It* (King 1986), play especially intriguing and agential roles. These children are not the innocent beings in need of protection that are typical in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; they possess knowledge and abilities that generally allow them to function in their respective narratives without the constant surveillance and protection of adults. However, to better understand how King positions his literary children and how they are atypical representations, we must first understand the child, which was culturally constructed as separate from the adult in the seventeenth century and has been reinvented many times in successive cultural movements (Airés 1996, p. 341). It is important to note that the 'child' refers not to any real historical child that existed or exists, but to a cultural concept that we have created and shaped as a model to which a real child should be compared.

The Romantic child of the eighteenth century, for example, was constructed, according to James R. Kincaid (2000), as an 'inversion of Enlightenment virtues and was thus strangely hollow right from the start: uncorrupted, unsophisticated, unenlightened' (p. 32). The Romantic child was/is, therefore, 'a location where we can dump all manner of lies, displacements, longings, hatreds, hypocrisies, and denials' (Kincaid 2000, p. 30). Thus, the child becomes a scapegoat for the adult to be able to state that none of these displacements exist in themselves. In a way, using the child as a scapegoat already identifies it as potentially monstrous in a way that evokes Jack Halberstam's (2006) description of the monstrous body as 'a kind of trash heap for the discarded scraps of abject humanity' (p. 143). Halberstam's use of 'trash heap' and Kincaid's 'location where we can dump all manner of' displacements both posit the child as a receptacle in which to deposit everything that the adult does not desire to see in themselves, thereby positioning the child as Other.

In contrast, the 'modern child', which emerged in 1968, was a result of the American 'baby boomers', who were reproducing and becoming increasingly preoccupied with the protection of children (Jenkins 2006, p. 18). Sarah Martin Alegre (2001) argues that King's obsession with representing the child, especially the sacrificial child, 'reflects an evident anxiety about parenthood on the side of baby boomers, especially white men like King himself' (p. 105). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a series of mandates and agencies were

created by the baby-boomer generation, including the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Children's Defense Fund, the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, and the Society for Young Victims (Jenkins 2006, p. 13). While each mandate and agency had separate political agendas, they all drew on the child as a cultural concept to bolster their platforms, such as limiting access to abortion, limiting the rights of homosexuals, and furthering the 'war' on drugs, all of which were posited as direct threats to children (Jenkins 2006, p. 121). Unlike the late eighteenth century 'child-savers' that pioneered 'a sustained public commitment to children's welfare' and who were concerned not merely with protecting children but with 'protect[ing] society from dangerous children' (Mintz 2004, p. 155), the late twentieth century completely dissolved the dangerous child narrative, lobbying entirely for innocence. Consequently, the discourse of the mandates and agencies from the 1960s and 1970s gives rise to something I call the 'Save the Child' discourse.

The Save the Child discourse is the destruction of a figural Child, such as child characters in horror narratives or the capitalised 'Child' in the political mandates, with the goal of preserving the concept of innocence. This occurs when a figural Child's innocence is at risk, such as Gage when he plays his violent game of hide-and-go-seek. By destroying the child character, innocence can be saved. In most situations, it is the parent that destroys the child. Since constructions of the child, and thus understandings of innocence, are culturally informed, each generation engages with the Save the Child discourse differently. Paula S. Fass (2010) argues that children are 'repositories of important social memories' (p. 155), so each generation must also witness different figural Children. In his article on Puritanism and the 'Counterfeit child', Steven Bruhm (2014) refers to our competing representations and views of the child—as innocent but also monstrous—as 'the paradox of inherent sinfulness and infant innocence' and goes on to note how Gage embodies and reveals this paradox in King's novel (p. 370). The Save the Child discourse exposes this paradox, whereby characters—primarily parents—in horror narratives such as *Pet Sematary* are constantly warring with their desire to save but also kill their children in a way that killing their children becomes a way for them to save them, or 'Save the Child'.

This paradox is most apparent in Anita Bryant's 1977 movement entitled 'Save Our Children'. She claimed, 'I don't hate the homosexuals! But as a mother I must protect my children from their evil influence' (quoted in Jenkins 2006, p. 16). Bryant's mantra at once suggests that the 'evil influence' of homosexuals is only a threat to children, and that she is willing to sacrifice the figural child for the sake of her politics against the homosexual population. By setting the child in opposition to the homosexuals, she must also destroy the child (and its innocence) to prove the need for her platform to exist in the first place. Therefore, it is Bryant's 'Save Our Children' paradox that initially sparked the development of my concept of the Save the Child discourse. There is no proof cited within Bryant's movement that homosexuals present a higher-than-average threat against any real children. Instead, Bryant's culturally constructed child does not align with homosexuality. As a result, to 'Save Our Children', Bryant is suggesting that the child must be heteronormative. Bryant's heteronormative suggestion is evident in many horror narratives where monstrous children are often depicted as hyper-gendered. Consequently, King's works, the 1960s–1970s mandates and agencies, and even the Child-at-Play signs use a figurative child (signifiers, such as the image of a child or a capitalised term) to place the child at risk and sacrifice it to achieve their political goals to prove the value in and need for those agendas. The Child-at-Play signs are one such example because they perpetually put a figurative child at risk: the signs depict a child suspended in play in the street in such a way that they never reach the safety of the sidewalk and their front lawns. The Save the Child discourse, therefore, reveals that there is a delicate balance between what the real child represents and the figurative child faces. King constructs and maintains this delicate balance of real and perceived risk to the child. *Pet Sematary* suggests the child was created as a figure not solely at risk of corruption but positioned as if corruption is inevitable. Bruhm (2006) states that in the Gothic 'there seems to be a startling emphasis

on children as the bearers of death' (p. 98). He goes on to note that 'because the child can be constructed, it can [be] corrupted at the same time' (Bruhm 2006, p. 99) [20]. King's children reveal this eventuality.

Finally, Lee Edelman altered the cultural construction of the child in his fin de siècle essay on queer children and the death drive. He states that 'the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust. The image itself, however, in its coercive universalization, works to discipline political discourse' (Edelman 1998, p. 21). Edelman's child has no signifier (no real child) in a way that suggests the culturally constructed, idealised child, is more real, almost hyperreal, than any actual child. Edelman's child exists without a body; it is an overarching concept that is not killed off when a child character is destroyed. Instead, it signifies how the concept of the Child precedes its representations, and therefore, all representations must be held up in comparison with the Child. Edelman's child is what exists in the Save the Child discourse, standing in for the real thing. Similar to Bryant, the Save the Child discourse does not expect anyone to actually 'Save Our Children,' but to save the concept itself.

Throughout the '200 years of child-worship' that shaped the modern child, the primary consistent 'characteristic', although one that undergoes changes of its own during this time, is innocence (Kincaid 2000, p. 36). Kincaid (2000) argues that 'innocence makes you vulnerable, badly in need of protecting, which is one reason adults like it to be in others' (p. 32). By displacing innocence onto another body, adults effectively Other the child. Kincaid (2000) argues, 'when we invented the modern child, we made it live in another country, a country we then decided to make exotic and heartbreakingly attractive, so attractive we did not know how to deal with it—except by invading it, eroticizing it, protecting it with heavy arms, weeping over it, hating it, loving it, lusting after it, disowning it—doing everything but leaving it alone' (p. 30). The very fabrication of the child means that, according to Kincaid (2000), 'we care for the idea of the child so deeply that the actual children before us are annoying intruders. The idea of the child can hardly put up with actual children' (p. 30). The 'idea'—the Child—is inherently idealised, and Kincaid's argument that 'actual children' are 'annoying intruders' highlights how any real child cannot truly embody what the idea of the Child demands because those demands are so great; therefore, the representations—Gage and Ellie, for instance—serve as sites to play out this annoyance: the chance to push them out of the way so that the idea of the Child remains ideal and innocent.

King seems to be aware of the role that the child plays in upholding the delicate balance between innocence and experience, and not only is that precarious balance at work in *Pet Sematary*, but it informs King's own hesitation in initially publishing his novel. In an interview with *Playboy*, King admits, 'I've written some awful things, terrible things that have really bothered me [...]. In one particular scene a father exhumes his dead son. It's a few days after the boy has been killed in a traffic accident, and as the father sits in the deserted graveyard, cradling his son in his arms and weeping, the gas-bloated corpse explodes with disgusting belches and farts—a truly ghastly sound and smell that have been described to me in grim detail by mortuary workers and graveyard attendants' (quoted in Chilton 2019). King was so deterred by what he had written onto the body of this child that, after completing the draft, he hid it away in a drawer and began work on *Christine* (King 1983a) (Chilton 2019). King's reservations about the novel, combined with how he handled the first draft, reveal three things crucial to my argument: firstly, the death of the child and the desecration of its grave are taboo topics to take up, but there is a strange desire to do so anyway; secondly, the child's body contains monstrous potential that cannot be contained—it will decay; thirdly, King's shift to writing a novel about a possessed car that runs people down suggests that even though he moves away from the death of the child, he cannot move away from the role that the motor vehicle plays in that death. Cars, like children, become uncanny figures haunted by capital letters.

3. It's All Fun and Games: The Emergence of Uncanny Play

According to Sigmund Freud (2010), 'Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies' (p. 833) and 'death and re-animation of the dead have been represented as most uncanny themes' (p. 837), but to leave it at this would be too simple. The uncanny produces not merely fear, but a feeling of unsettlement (Freud 2010, p. 833). For example, when the Creed family first ask about the mysterious path leading to the Pet Sematary, Jud promises to tell the story of the place, but only 'after you get settled in'. What is a typical neighbourly sentiment turns into something that engenders a feeling of unease as if Jud knows much more than just 'the story' of the Pet Sematary. Consequently, one can only become 'unsettled' after first experiencing 'settling in'. Thus, the uncanny occurs when something familiar becomes unfamiliar. Freud uses the example of 'when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one' (Freud 2010, p. 833), which is why the dead body produces the feeling of the uncanny. Freud (2010), citing the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch's original use of the term, argues that 'a doll which appears to be alive' produces the feeling of the uncanny—not necessarily for the child who often plays with the doll as if it is alive, but for the adult (p. 833). If a dead body dressed like a doll returns and beckons us to play, then the uncanny would abound. A closer look at Freud's definition reveals the uncanny not simply to be any doll or any dead body, but that which is 'unheimlich': 'something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud 2010, p. 833). There are two pertinent parts to this definition: (1) the relationship of the unheimlich to the home and (2) the relationship of the unheimlich to the repressed. According to Freud's (2010) etymological analysis, 'heimlich' roughly translates from German to mean 'homely' (p. 833) and the 'un-' prefix functions much as it does when the child becomes a site of 'un-enlightenment': the unheimlich is not merely the opposite of the heimlich, but, according to Freud, it 'is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich' (p. 828). Similar to any subspecies, the unheimlich is descended from the heimlich; therefore, it is not the opposite of something in the home but is something familiar that comes from the home that is then transformed into the unfamiliar. As a result, the home itself is a potential site for producing the uncanny.

The children in *Pet Sematary* and its cinematic adaptations represent shifts in the post-1968 American cultural constructions of the modern child, who are rendered uncanny when they diverge from the expectations inherent in these constructions, and their behavioural divergence manifests most prominently in how they play. In the 1989 film, Gage is the innocent child who requires the protection of his parents, who fail to provide it, and Ellie—like her counterparts in *The Shining* and *Firestarter*—possesses a unique ability: she has dreams that accurately reflect the world around her. However, the 2019 cinematic remake makes some significant changes to the roles of Gage (Hugo Lavoie) and Ellie, whereby Gage has scrying abilities that are mostly ignored because he is too young to fully communicate what he knows, and Ellie becomes the victim of her parents' failed protection. We can compare the 1989 film with its 2019 counterpart to better understand what role King's work plays in exhibiting uncanny play to interrogate the social, cultural, and political constructions of the child in America. Linda Hutcheon believes that 'while no medium is inherently good at doing one thing and not another, each medium (like each genre) has different means of expression and so can aim at certain things better than others' (2004, p. 109). For instance, the original film comments on the rapidly evolving roles of parents in 1980s America resulting from a series of socioeconomic changes, such as an increase in women in the workplace that shifted mothers from places of full-time domesticity and parenting to offices and hospitals. This shift can be seen in the mother Rachel, who is an at-home mother but always dresses like a 1980s secretary. Rachel's fashion choices suggest two things: (1) she embodies the dual roles that women were fulfilling at the time the film was released, but she ultimately fails in both of these roles, and/or (2) her role is less about being a mother and more about being a kind of assistant to her husband, Dr Creed. The 2019 film makes the growing anxiety about less parental involvement at home more explicit.

The film comments on the failure of parents, whether they are present or not, and on how their refusal to accept their child's sexuality leads to the inevitable loss of innocence.

Play, which is transformed into the uncanny in both films, reveals ongoing parental failure and leads to the downfall of the ideal American family. Play as a signifier of childhood emerged in America in the early twentieth century in response to—and thus a counterpoint to—public concerns with child labour (Mintz 2004, p. 181). While Steven Mintz (2004) notes that play became a homogenous childhood action, highlighting how class was not meant to be an obstacle for children to engage in play (p. 181), because play is idealised alongside representations of ideal—read, white, middle-class American—children, there emerges a set of culturally acceptable play behaviours. Whenever play behaviours change, childhood itself much be re-evaluated, so play—and uncanny play—demonstrates the shifting cultural attitudes toward childhood. Consequently, how play shifts between the 1989 *Pet Sematary* and its 2019 remake reveal what Mintz (2004) calls 'contradictions at the heart of the child-saving impulse' (p. 162).

4. Gage: The Terrifying Tot

In the 1989 film, play—or rather improper play—consistently drives the narrative and becomes the site of fear, to the point where the mention of 'play' is synonymous with death. For example, after Gage is newly resurrected, the neighbour, Jud, responds to the sounds of a disembodied child's laughter, running feet, and a little voice saying, 'let's play hide-and-go-seek' by asking, 'Gage, you the one playing games?' (Lambert: 1:18:48—1:19:33). Jud is not planning to 'play' an actual game in this moment but adopts this discourse specifically to lure the child out of hiding. Jud's question constructs Gage's actions—however violent—as a form of play. Play in the hands of the monstrous child becomes uncanny by the very fact that it is wielded by something resisting innocence. According to Edelman (1998), the Child's 'innocence calls out for defense' in a way that is distinctly American and distinctly tied to a 'dangerously political' agenda (p. 19). Specifically, Edelman alludes to political mandates put forth by government agencies similar to those from the 1960s and 1970s discussed earlier. When the Child becomes 'corrupt'—as it inevitably will—the concept of innocence is threatened, so the monstrous child (already corrupted) must be eliminated to preserve that innocence. I would also add that because the Child is rooted in a 'dangerously political' agenda, part of its innocence calling out for defence becomes a political responsibility of the parent. When a child is rendered monstrous, it carries with it the potential to 'Save the Child'. The monstrous child continues to embody the markers of innocence purported by the Child even though its actions speak otherwise: even though it kills, it still constructs its own actions as 'play'. The monstrous child, therefore, temporarily displaces the child as a respite from the demands dictated by the cultural construction of the Child and its impossible innocence. What this means is that the monstrous child provides parents—and adults in general—with the opportunity to destroy that which they have simultaneously desired and hated. Monstrous children give adults the opportunity to finally kill the child without the repercussions of damaging its innocence.

This desire-hatred paradox—the Save the Child discourse—manifests most prominently in the 1989 *Pet Sematary* through two cinematic techniques: the 'unscene' and the childlike camera angles. Gage's death takes place in the 'unscene'. We see the Orinco oil truck barreling toward him, and we see flashes of objects suggestive of his death (Lambert: 49:57—50:29), but the moment of death itself is never depicted, which is also true of Ellie's death in the 2019 remake. This is because witnessing the death of the child on screen violates and disrupts the narrative of innocence that the Child upholds. The term 'unscene' was originally used to refer to scenes in Early Modern drama that occur offstage and are constructed solely through the dialogue of characters onstage, but it has also been used in reference to cinema. In the 'unscene', there is a tension not merely between what is seen and what is not seen, but specifically how the 'scene' is constructed by what is not depicted. This is because the 'un-' prefix gestures toward something that cannot be separated from its root term, similar to the uncanny; therefore, it means that the events signified by the scene

can never be separated from the unscene. Marjorie Garber (1984) states that 'to perform it [the scene that is hidden] would be to risk anticlimax, as spectacle competes with words. The scene gains in power precisely because of its displaced or deflected nature' (p. 33). Essentially, there is no way that Gage's death could be filmed that would make it as horrific as the scenes around it construct it to be.

Gage's death takes place during the scene with the perfect American family picnic where Gage is flying a kite, and it is a combination of failed parental supervision and play (or failed play, as he drops, rather than flies, the kite) that leads him into the street where he is hit and killed. Therefore, Gage participates in age-specific actions with a toy that is not ideally suited to his age; thus, revealing this to be culturally unacceptable play. When it comes to flying kites, 'attention span can be very limited in this age group [2–3 years old]. After a short while, watching the line or the kite, they tend to play "toss the reel"!' (Parish 2007), which is exactly what Gage does. Clearly, Gage is too young to fly the kite; hence, his play is not age appropriate. His play is not yet uncanny, but it is also not culturally acceptable in late 1980s America, and this transgression is what leads to his death. While many kites seem to have a recommended age of five and up, the basic red diamond kite pictured in the film does not seem to have a recommended age and is often only marketed as 'an ideal kite for beginners' (Toy Review Experts 2020). However, the moment of parental neglect in this scene also contributes to Gage's death. Louis is the one overseeing Gage's kite flying while Rachel sits on the picnic table in the background with Ellie. Despite the kite not being recommended at this age, both parents allow—and encourage—Gage to play with it. When culturally unacceptable play occurs, parental supervision or intervention is crucial, but Louis is momentarily distracted by Ellie, leaving Gage vulnerable. The lack of proper parental supervision results in Gage wandering into the street.

The rapid scenes following Gage's death include the red kite falling to the ground, Gage's bloody, blue booty bouncing eerily across the road, and a series of happy family portraits flashing across the screen (Lambert: 50:06—50:29). It is these post-death scenes that construct the kite flying as uncanny. When Gage was alive, even though he did not have the kite in his hands, it still floated through the sky, yet after he is hit by the truck, the kite falls lifelessly toward the ground in a reflection of Gage's body. Play—intimately linked to the life of the child—abruptly ends when the child dies. Even before we know that Gage is dead, the image of the falling kite produces a sense of dread, and an object that is familiar is transformed into something unfamiliar. Likewise, Gage's bloody, blue booty bouncing soundlessly across the asphalt heightens this feeling of the uncanny. Tiny, bloody, and bouncing separately from the body of the baby, it is severed from its purpose. Finally, the series of family portraits that flash across the screen reveal the fracturing of the ideal, white, middle-class American family. Each image presents itself as the perfect moment: one of the mother and baby, one of the father and baby, and finally, one of both parents posing happily with both Gage and Ellie. It is through these scenes that Gage's innocence is maintained but kite flying is rendered uncanny. A similar series of family portraits flashes across the screen when Louis euthanises Gage at the end of the film. As newly resurrected Gage slowly dies for a second time, flashbacks of a living Gage appear onscreen, suggesting that, like his first death, there is something unsettling about death being interspersed with flashes of life.

After Gage's resurrection, the scenes taking place in Jud's house occur from a knee-level tilt angle, as if from Gage's perspective. Just before Gage kills Rachel, the camera follows Rachel around Jud's house from this perspective (Lambert: 1:22:39—1:24:35). Similarly, a few scenes later, when Gage plays with/kills his mother, a flashback reveals Gage's point of view at the time of his death; from a low, knee-level tilt shot, we see the oncoming Orinco truck with a sign on the front that says 'Danger' (Lambert: 1:25:43—1:25:46): a scene that calls to mind the Child-at-Play signs. Ironically, the 'Danger' sign on the front of the truck is rendered useless because the truck must already be too close for anyone to read it. Is this a critique of whether Child-at-Play signs are useful? In both the moment of his

death and the moments of post-resurrected 'play', the camera's perspective is childlike, and these are the only moments when the audience visually identifies with Gage. During these scenes, the adult audience momentarily achieves that which it secretly desires: a return to childhood, but the fact that this identification can only be achieved momentarily when the child dies or when the child is monstrous suggests that the adult's desire for a return to childhood is unsustainable and uncanny.

The 1989 film ends with Louis having to kill his monstrous son. Louis finally finds Gage wandering around in a blue robe and a top hat, which is a costume he is never depicted in while alive during the film. However, there is a creepy portrait hanging in Rachel's parents' home of an infant in this exact outfit (Lambert: 1:05:40). Gage's costume suggests three things: firstly, that he is dressing a part that may contribute to his 'play' and the feeling of the uncanny; secondly, that the portrait functions as a Victorian *memento mori*—the practice of post-mortem photography—that is set in direct contrast to the happy family portraits that flash across the screen at the moment of Gage's death, and thirdly, that the monstrous Gage embodies more innocence than the living Gage ever did because his outfit takes him back to a more 'innocent' time from which the portrait and the construction of the child originate. When Louis finally euthanises Gage, the boy's innocence becomes stronger than his monstrosity as Gage's motor skills regress—he cries and stumbles up the hallway like a helpless infant before finally falling over (Lambert: 1:34:48—1:35:20). All the while, Gage utters 'no fair' as if indicating that Louis has not played this game properly. Gage's monstrosity provides Louis a chance to give in to his desire to kill the child. After all, according to Alegre (2001), 'the figure of the child in horror fiction has nothing to do with the world of childhood: it is part of the adults' desire for and hatred of the child' (p. 107). This combination of desire and hate results from the child representing what the adult can never be: innocent. For example, the loss of innocence is illustrated by the portraits of Ellie and Gage that hang above their parents' bed: Ellie's image hangs above Rachel and Gage's image hangs above Louis, suggesting that their children are miniature versions of themselves (Lambert: 23:42). Similar to the *memento mori*-esque image of Gage in Rachel's parents' home, these portraits function as representations of a previous state of innocence to which Rachel and Louis can never return. Thus, they must destroy their own children to preserve this innocence before Ellie and Gage lose it themselves, but also, because both Ellie and Gage fail to conform to the model of the culturally constructed figural Child.

5. Ellie-Phant: The Great and Terrible

In the 1989 film, when Gage is learning to fly the kite and accidentally drops the spool, Ellie yells, 'It got away from him! That numb shit!', causing Louis to turn away from watching Gage. When the attention of all three adults—Louis, Rachel, and Jud—is focused on Ellie, Gage wanders into the street where he is then hit and killed (Lambert: 49:16—50:06). It is Ellie's use of the term 'shit' that contributes to Gage's death; essentially, her verbal resistance to childhood innocence. While the 2019 cinematic remake makes several significant changes from the 1983 novel and 1989 film, the most notable of these changes is the switch from Gage being the highway victim to Ellie. Therefore, age and gender are significant factors in the relationship between children and play in the 1980s versus 2019. Lorenzo di Bonaventura, the producer of the 2019 film, admits that the film's team was initially nervous about the decision to switch from Gage to Ellie, and that it was 'one of the most controversial things' about the new film (Chilton 2019). King was in favour of the change, and Jason Clarke, who plays Louis in the remake, argues that 'It's pretty easy to justify the change [. . .]. You can't play that movie with a three-year-old boy. You end up with a doll or some animated thing. So you're going to get a much deeper, richer story by swapping for a seven-year-old or nine-year-old girl' (quoted in Chilton 2019). Clarke's emphasis that 'you end up with a doll' instead of a child actor playing the character invokes a resistance to the uncanny; perhaps, a doll in place of Gage would have been more accurate than Clarke knows. However, what Clarke's point really reveals here is a continued resistance to a child's ageing and losing innocence. By

suggesting that a three-year-old child cannot play the part accurately, Clarke reveals that he believes children cannot perform violence. King (1981), however, believes that 'kids are bent. They think around corners. But starting at roughly age eight, when childhood's second great era begins, the kinks begin to straighten out, one by one' (p. 407). King (1981) refers to how we begin to question our relationship with fantasy and the supernatural around age eight (p. 407). Innocence breaks down as children begin to exhibit just how much they know, or seek to know, through this questioning. By changing the victim in *Pet Sematary* from age three to age nine, the emphasis on play is significantly downplayed (so to speak) in favour of the potential of puberty.

Ellie's tainted white dress that she is wearing when resurrected speaks to the loss of childhood innocence marked by puberty. Alegre (2001) argues that the modern child was 'demonised to express the parents' failure to control them', and that, specifically, this demonisation was a response to the realisation of child sexuality and the parents' 'anxiety to control the child's body' at the moment of puberty (p. 107). To combat puberty, parents often impose a gendered paradigm through the clothing and toys they choose for their children, and in *Pet Sematary*, this is also true. Hyper-gendered clothing becomes the ultimate marker of an innocence preserved in the death of the child. Karen Macfarlane (2023) identifies the hyper-gendered little girl in horror narratives as the simultaneous signifier of innocence and uncanniness (p. 1). While Macfarlane's 'Creepy Little Girl' is not quite the same as the monstrous child, she is still adorned with similar visual markers of her gender. Macfarlane (2023) states that 'she is marked by all of the overdetermined and overdetermining elements of the ideal little girl: the frilly dress, the shoes, the haircut [...] all signifiers in western culture of an innocence, of a sweetness, and of an unknowing that precedes and overlays the girl as subject' (p. 7). What Macfarlane refers to when she states that these signifiers 'precede' the girl as subject is that the actual representation of the little girl in horror is created in accordance with these ideal gender markers and underlies parental expectations of their own children. In death, Ellie's innocence is preserved in her clothing: a white dress with a ribbon around the waist, white tights, and white shoes. By burying her in this outfit, her parents ensure that she will always be their 'little girl', and this turns out to be mostly true even when she is rendered monstrous. However, Ellie's resurrection dance in the dirt-stained dress turns the hyper-gendered signifier into an uncanny embodiment of her lost innocence.

Ellie's innocence is also marked by her stuffed cat toy that is pictured in a frilly pink dress, frilly pink shoes, and with wings. By giving her a hyper-gendered toy (especially one with angel wings) at her ninth birthday party as a surrogate for her missing cat (Kölsch and Widmyser: 51:40—52:59), Louis imposes a gendered play paradigm upon his daughter that is predicated on the death of her cat as well as Ellie's ageing. What makes this toy uncanny from the moment she unwraps it is the fact that Louis knows Church has been killed, resurrected, and finally abandoned in the middle of the road, yet he stills gives Ellie a toy that functions as a post-death (angelic) representation of her cat. Therefore, the toy marks death and brings Ellie one year closer to puberty from the moment it appears. After Ellie's death, Rachel curls up with the bloody stuffed cat and cries (Kölsch and Widmyser: 56:30—56:54). Blood here becomes a dual marker of Ellie's death and the potential onset of puberty and menstruation. Crying over the bloody toy is not just about mourning physical death but can also suggest the death of the child as when, quoting King (1981), 'the kinks begin to straighten out' (p. 407).

6. Beware: Children at Play

The 1980s were characterised by 'adults [who were] much more anxious about succeeding as parents, hence, paradoxically, more liable to fail' (Alegre 2001, p. 113). The 2010s were characterised by parents facing the fact that their children are sexual beings and clinging to their child's innocence by subjecting that child to a hyper-gendered paradigm. In both cases, the child is always already abandoned and doomed because it literally is only a matter of time. As Hutcheon (2004) says, 'perhaps it is the very possibility of telling

the same story so many different ways that provokes us to make the attempt' (p. 109); essentially, that perhaps this time we can Save the Child. Bruhm (2014) believes that 'the future-present crisis of infant salvation is also a present-past condemnation of the parent: the logistics of the doomed child, the contours of what resurrects beyond the Pet Sematary, bespeak divine wrath against the parent for not having engendered a better human being. What resurrects in Ludlow is parental failure' (p. 370). Bruhm's use of the term 'engendered' suggests not only that parents are responsible for creating a 'better' child (both genetically and by raising them properly), but also that they should engender to ensure that their child adheres to culturally appropriate play according to their gender. Otherwise, the child's play may become uncanny.

While *Pet Sematary* significantly embodies uncanny play and reflects the shifting attitudes towards children and play between 1989 and 2019, it is not the only film concerned with the growing agency among children during this time. Beginning in 1989—the same year that the original *Pet Sematary* film was released—a trend of representing uncanny play appeared in a host of other films: *Beware! Children at Play* (Cribben 1989), *Beware: The Children* (Thomas 2009), and *Beware the Children* (Fagan 2018). The latter of these films operates under the tagline, 'beware the innocents', revealing how even monstrous or evil children seem to be markers of innocence while they kill. Mintz (2004) argues that 'child-saving was driven by a mixture of hope and fear' (p. 157), which becomes evident in each of these respective films as they invert the discourse of the Child-at-Play signs to suggest that we should not fear the idea that an innocent child may wander into the road and find themselves involved in a motor vehicle accident; rather, we should fear the monstrous children playing in the road as they pose the greatest threat of all. Perhaps, then, the sign that should be posted along Route 15 is a bright yellow rectangular one stating, 'Danger: Children at Play'.

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