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Innocent No More: How Child Vampires Challenge the Social Narrative of Childhood

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Innocent No More: How Child Vampires Challenge the Social Narrative of Childhood

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Thesis Approval Form



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Abstract

The inclusion of children within Gothic and horror fiction has always been regarded as untoward because children are vulnerable to misrepresentation. However, excluding children from transgressive genres eliminates a space where childhood can be critically analyzed. Fortunately, authors such as Stephen King, Anne Rice, and John Ajvide Lindqvist break the taboo through the inclusion of children in vampiric narratives. These narratives encourage readers to question the social narrative of childhood within the context of vampire stories. Through an examination of *Salem's Lot* (King, 1975), "Popsy" (King, 1987), *Interview with the Vampire* (Rice, 1976), and *Let the Right One In* (Lindqvist, 2007) this paper will reveal the detrimental effects of adherence to the Western conception of childhood. The inclusion of child vampire characters in each novel unveils society's attempt to perpetuate a submissive definition of childhood. Ultimately, my goal is to demonstrate how the social narrative of childhood utilizes monstrous children to maintain a dangerous imbalance of power between adults and children.

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Introduction

Children, traditionally seen as defenseless, have been problematic subjects within horror fiction ever since Henry James's Miles and Flora in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Their appearance in early Gothic works and, later, in modern horror texts is something of a taboo because of the belief that young people are unable to resist abuse and misrepresentation; however, authors such as Stephen King, Anne Rice, and John Ajvide Lindqvist do not shy away from incorporating young characters in their narratives. These writers have depicted children as both victim and victimizer in the form of the child vampire. *'Salem's Lot* (King, 1975), *Interview with the Vampire* (Rice, 1976), *Let the Right One In* (Lindqvist, 2007), and "Popsy" (King, 1987) juxtapose the ideologically innocent and vulnerable 'child' with the violent and mature vampire. Each text envisions the child vampire differently, but collectively they demonstrate the lack of autonomy that defines childhood. Narratives involving child vampires expose the detrimental effects of adherence to the social narrative of childhood, while the child vampire trope reveals society's use of supernatural children to reaffirm its stance that only "monstrous" children are autonomous, violent, and mature.

The Social Construction of Childhood

Minors have not always been seen as innocents to be protected and cherished. Before the sixteenth century, Western society lacked a modern concept of adolescence, meaning adulthood started around the age of six. It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that people began to view children as creatures of God needing protection from the dangers of the adult world (Calhoun 28). However, at the start of the nineteenth-century children were still widely used for manual labor, the majority of which were under the age of eleven. By the end of the

nineteenth century, “a plethora of Acts of Parliament [were passed] which made it increasingly difficult for unscrupulous employers to exploit children as had been the case a hundred years before,” resulting in the eventual increase in the age determining adulthood (Lowe 27). Despite the change in attitude and age, men idealized and sometimes eroticized the children within works of art, provoking that still widespread disapproval of featuring minors in Gothic or horror fiction. A stereotype of childhood had been created by mid-Victorian authors that depicted children as brave, adventurous, loyal, and patriotic; this image was acceptable to adults and has continued to the stereotype. However, James and Sigmund Freud attempted to break this taboo through a new theory of juvenility, one that involved infantile corruption and rejected the Victorian myth of pure youth. James questioned the belief in natal innocence and suggested that children might have corrupt souls, while Freud concluded that even toddlers had sexual lives (Alegre 106). Nevertheless, a social narrative positioning childhood as an idyllic stage of life has persisted (Lowe 28). Children may no longer be used for hard labor, but they are still subject to an adult created ideology.

The word *childhood*, defined as a state or period of being a child or the time from birth to puberty, is a term signifying membership in a particular group. This membership involves requirements and expectations that reflect the “particularities of particular socio-cultural contexts” (James and Jenks 317). Class, age, gender, ethnicity, and location can and *do* change the experience of childhood. Despite these different social determinants and the disparity between how children experience early youth and the institution of childhood, Western culture forces minors to remain enmeshed in a construct based on age. In an ideological world, childhood is socially constructed in a way that “merely serves the adult purpose of extending

normative conceptions into a future already pre-defined by adults” (Bohlmann and Moreland 12). The problem with everyday discourse surrounding ‘childhood’ and ‘the child’ is the tendency to oversimplify the complexity and uniqueness of the individuals who occupy these realms.

Despite the lack of room for individualism within the socially imagined realm of childhood, the definition of childhood does change over time. In the words of James Kincaid, “[w]hat a ‘child’ *is* . . . changes to fit different situations and different needs” (qtd. in Renner 6). This modification becomes most apparent when looking at childhood criminality and violence because the legal definition of “child” can vary on a personal as well as national level. In the United States, adults tend to be cautious when determining what rights to bestow upon children, convinced that they are not mature enough to vote, drink, or serve in the military.

Nevertheless, when a child commits a crime or a horrible act of violence, it is believed that they should be held responsible. In short, children are regarded as too young for purposeful decision-making when they conform to accepted child-like behavior, but old enough to know the difference between right and wrong when they fall outside of accepted parameters (Renner 7). The social construction of childhood assumes implicit rules for socializing rights and duties. Judith Ennew, an advocate for children’s rights, argues that children are seen “as lacking responsibility [and] having rights to protection and training but not to autonomy” (qtd in. James and Jenks 318). Jenny Hockey and Allison James posit four themes that have shaped an understanding of childhood over the last three centuries: children are set apart physically by age, they have unique dispositions, they are innocent, and they are vulnerably dependent (James and Jenks 318). When a society sees childhood as a conceptual category of identity, it is easy to

ascribe certain qualities, traits, and values to that category. The problem with the Western social construction of childhood is that it involves an all or nothing mentality. A minor who “actively rejects or performs against these expectations and is not able to be reabsorbed into a simplistic model of the childhood narrative” is labeled “monstrous” (Cunningham 209). The specter of malevolent youth is particularly evident within fiction involving child and adolescent vampires.

The History of Vampires

It is easy to find criticism that mentions or discusses the vampire’s vast history and unknowable ancestry. Aspa Kandyli writes on the subject, noting that “vampires are creatures of the imagination, yet they have been enmeshed in history more than any other fictional monster” (228). In popular culture, people believe the vampiric creature and the word “vampire” comes from Hungary or Transylvania. However, etymological and linguistic studies show that the word “vampire” in European languages “refer[s] to the Slavic superstitions,” and “the wide dissemination of the term and its extensive use in the vernacular follows the outburst of vampirism in Serbia” (Wilson 583). Despite these studies, critics such as Jan L. Perkowski defend the idea that the vampire’s origins (both linguistically and mythologically) cannot be determined. Even the Slavic explanation may have come from older beliefs in the Middle East. The origin of the vampire is further complicated because all cultures have legends containing vampire-like-creatures.

Even though the concept of the vampire has many faces, popular culture has us imagine the fictional Dracula as the quintessential vampire—an evil, sharp-toothed, shape-shifting, undead monster. The popular image of vampires similar to Dracula makes it challenging to imagine vampires that do not originate from the supernatural or folklore beings; however, Bruce

A. McClelland's *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead* argues that the Slavic word "vampir" was an eleventh-century "label for an individual who either belonged to a specific group or practiced a particular belief or ritual" (31). Early vampires were either pagans or heretics who occupied a lower social position; however, the vampire as representative of a real individual started to change into the folkloric monster after the fourteenth century, representing all that was presumed to be unnaturally dangerous or anathematic (80-83). Despite the long history of the word *vampire* and the accompanying creature, the literary vampire was not created until 1748 by Heinrich August Ossenfelder (1725-1801). Commissioned in 1748 by Christlob Mylius, the editor of the scientific journal *Der Naturforscher* 'The Natural Scientist', Ossenfelder wrote a poem with a vampire theme to be published alongside articles concerning reports on vampiric behaviors and activities (Crawford 4). Ossenfelder created the literary vampire that is seductive, sexual, and erotic, an image that is still prevalent in contemporary depictions of the literary vampire today.

The general characteristics of vampires—bloodsucking, rebellious, and erotic—have mostly stayed consistent throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, but how writers construct them within literature has not. The literary vampire has transformed from a horrifying bestial creature into an appealing popular culture phenomenon. Even if its characteristics have stayed the same, it is seen in a more positive light, allowing readers and viewers to sympathize with the "misunderstood outsider" (Senf 142). The attractive, sympathetic vampire dominates in works such as *Twilight Saga* by Stephanie Meyer and the television shows *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*. Another twentieth-century construction that remains popular is the child vampire. First seen in King's *Salem's Lot*, other writers have since featured

the child vampire in many horror fiction narratives; however, these children are not the docile vampires of *Twilight* who feed on animals or the guilt-ridden adult vampires who try their best to keep their human victims alive. Child vampires are vicious killers.

The Child Vampire

Although an immense body of scholarship on vampire lore exists, it is a challenge to find sources focusing on pre-adult vampires. While some scholars might discuss individual figures, few examine the category as a whole other than Karen Renner. In *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*, Renner divides evil children into six classifications—the spawn of monstrous births, gifted children, ghost children, possessed children, ferals, and changelings—establishing child vampires as either among the ferals or changelings. Feral children are those whose

appetites and beliefs supersede the pity and empathy that prevent the ‘civilized’ from operating according to similar desires. Sometimes they appear as animalistic creatures driven purely by base hungers and instincts. Zombie and vampire children are common examples of this type . . . Zombie or vampire children are so dominated by their animalistic hungers that they will quite eagerly cannibalize their loved ones or any adults who try to help, which is of course one of the prime reasons why they—and feral children in general—are such disturbing monsters.

(qtd. in Nevárez 110)

Often, vampires who fit into this category appear in larger groups such as those in *Salem’s Lot*. The feral child vampire is not individualized, nor is it allowed character development within a narrative. Renner claims that this type exists to “inspire shock in their juxtaposition of iconic

images of childhood innocence . . . with acts of savage violence” (166).¹ On the other hand, vampires not entirely controlled by hunger are considered changelings. Renner stretches the traditional folkloric definition—which characterizes a changeling as the child of a creature (fairy, elf, or troll) that is swapped with a human child—to include any child that physically looks human but is not one biologically; thus zombies, vampires, and aliens can all be considered changelings (153).² Without innocence or vulnerability, changelings lack the fundamental qualities required within the social narrative of childhood (Renner 153). The changeling child vampire still inspires shock, but unlike the feral sort, the changeling has a heightened intelligence that allows it to hide behind the stereotypes embedded in the social narrative of childhood. Renner’s categorization of evil children is not the focus of my argument, but her interpretation of the vampire as changeling is vital to understanding the child vampire trope.

Maria Holmgren Troy has also addressed the child vampire trope; however, Troy does not discuss the child vampire within the context of Renner’s feral child or changeling. Similar to Renner though, Troy does focus on how the child vampire “actualizes and uncannily unsettles a host of dichotomies that pertain, in one way or another, to representations of children: good-evil, angel-demon, agency-passivity, innocence-experiences, naïve-knowing, innocence-guilt, purity-corruption, attraction-repulsion” (132). By manifesting such dichotomous traits, the child vampire presents itself as being just as transgressive, if not more, as its forefather (the adult vampire).

The transgressive behavior and existence of the child vampires included in *‘Salem’s Lot*, “Popsy,” *Interview with the Vampire*, and *Let the Right One In* uncovers how Western

¹As will be discussed in Chapter 1, Danny Glick is a child vampire who dwells somewhere between the feral child and a changeling.

² Claudia, Eli, and the unnamed boy from “Popsy” can be considered changelings.

society—through the assertion that autonomous, violent, and mature behavior is only accomplished by “monstrous” children—preserves its ideological and submissive definition of childhood, a definition with detrimental consequences that children endure when adults adhere to the social narrative of childhood. In chapter one, I will explore how the child vampire trope functions in relation to the socially imagined definition of childhood, as well as the correlation between monstrosity and abuse. These concepts will again be examined in chapter two, where the child vampire trope has been evolved by Stephen King. Chapter two will deepen the analysis on the effect of monstrosity within the definition of childhood as it presents a different conception of the child vampire. Then, in chapter three, I will investigate the inclusion of femininity in childhood. Chapter three expands on the ideas from chapters one and two, but, through its inclusion of a mentally grown female vampire, it will allow greater insight into the struggle children, especially female children, encounter in their submissive position. Finally, in the last chapter, I will scrutinize the damaging impact the social narrative of childhood has on childhood sexuality. Chapter four will also round out the analysis of monstrosity through the incorporation of human children who behave in violent and mature ways.

'Salem's Lot

Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* (1975) tells the story of a semi-successful writer—Ben Mears—who returns to Jerusalem's Lot ('Salem's Lot) in search of inspiration. Ben's new novel incorporates a traumatic experience in the legendary Marsten House, where he ventured as a young boy. The house is still standing, but its new occupants, Ben begins to realize, are vampires. Following a series of disappearances, Ben teams up with some like-minded locals in an attempt to kill the monstrous resident of the Marsten House, Kurt Barlow—an aristocratic vampire of old with intentions to invade and conquer a 'new' world.³ In *'Salem's Lot*, other than the mostly absent Barlow, the vampires are the everyday citizens of small-town America. They have a mindless nature and act as servants to their "master," consumed by an impulse to feed and increase their numbers.

The indiscriminate and rapid rate of infection provides the atmosphere for children to become an integral part of the vampiric narrative, and consequently, it produces an opportunity to explore the social narrative of childhood. *'Salem's Lot* urges readers to question their belief in and adherence to the Western definitions of adult and child through its juxtaposition of childhood and adulthood, which reveals the impossible and destructive nature of these established concepts. The text also introduces the child vampire trope through Danny Glick, a twelve-year-old resident of 'Salem's Lot, who happens to be the first convert. As a vampire, Danny embodies an empowered form of himself that allows him to explicitly reject the social narrative of childhood by repurposing stereotypical child-like behaviors to enact violence.

³ I.e. New England

As a social construct, the notion of “childhood” is as much a fictional product of social imagination as is a vampire; therefore, it is unsurprising that King creates such close connections between them through child vampires. When Matt Burke, the local high school English teacher, begins to suspect the existence of vampires, he notes, “One was taught that such things could not be [. . .] Bram Stoker’s evil fairy tale [was] only the warp and woof of fantasy” (King 260). When children are young, adults teach them that supernatural beings are the stuff of imagination and dreams, and, as adults, they accept this fact as truth. Similarly, adults believe that childhood is a conceptual category of identity distinctly separate from adulthood. Western cultures have the “tendency to view ‘the child’ as a developmental stage in the journey toward a presumed adult telos” (Bohlmann and Moreland 12). However, such separation between childhood and adulthood is just as much the warp and woof of fantasy as is *Dracula*. The presence of vampires in *Salem’s Lot* forces Matt to suspend his disbelief while the child vampires, chiefly Danny, encourage readers to question their belief in the social narrative of childhood.

Many of King’s stories, including *Salem’s Lot*, focus on the experiences of children. In the words of Douglas Winter, “King’s fiction often looks to our youth as the earlier way of life whose ‘swan song’ must be sung. His stories are songs of innocence and experience, juxtaposing childhood and adulthood” (qtd. in Davis 263). Despite the often authoritative adults within his stories, they encourage a view of minors that affords them agency, power, and respect. Children in King’s fiction are not all innocent, helpless, and non-threatening, and they are often more tenacious and talented than the adults. King’s substantial interest in children rests in their imaginative abilities, which makes them more potent than their adult counterparts (Davis 257). In fact, Mark Petrie, a twelve-year-old boy new to *Salem’s Lot*, concludes that the “eventual

ossification of the imaginary faculties [. . .] is called adulthood” (373). Mark’s imaginative strength makes it possible for him to believe in supernatural creatures such as vampires, but, more importantly, it saves him from becoming a vampire himself.

Having extensive knowledge of movie monsters, Mark manages to resist Danny’s vampiric solicitation. Mark hears a scratching at his bedroom window, making him look out: “Danny Glick was staring in at him through the glass, his skin grave-pale, his eyes reddish and feral. Some dark substance was smeared on his lips and chin, and when he saw Mark looking at him, he smiled and showed teeth grown hideously long and sharp” (368). Mark is frightened, but when he looks into Danny’s eyes, his fear dissolves. Mark quickly pulls himself out of this trance-like state, making Danny angry: ““Mark, let me in! I command it! *He* commands it! [. . .] Mark! Open the window!”” (369). Thus far, Danny has manipulated his victims through hypnosis and comforting words; this, combined with the alleged innocence and harmlessness of children, has made adults effortless targets. For the first time, Danny encounters opposition when he attempts to prey upon a peer.

Mark’s resistance partially stems from his familiarity with monsters, but, more importantly, it comes from his position as a minor. Being a twelve-year-old who still retains imaginative power, Mark can act on instinct: “With no pause for thought or consideration (both would have come to an adult—his father, for instance—and both would have undone him), Mark swept up the cross, curled it into a tight fist, and shouted: ‘Come on in, then’” (368). Adults, with rational minds, would not believe that a vampire is real; therefore, they would spend too much time trying to rationalize what is before them rather than protecting themselves. For example, Mark’s parents are slaughtered by Barlow after Mark’s father, Henry, refuses to suspend his

disbelief in both vampires and his son. Mark and Callahan, the local Catholic priest, hurry to Mark's house after receiving a threat from Barlow, indicating that he intends to kill Mark's parents. Both try to explain the dire situation unfolding in town and the danger that surrounds them, but Henry's rational, adult mind rejects the existence of vampires: "Impossible [. . .] Let's see if we can't work this delusion or whatever it is out like two reasonable men" (529-530). Unfortunately, all of the time spent discussing the matter logically hinders the attempt to derail Barlow's plan. In a matter of seconds, Henry and his wife—June—are dead: "Barlow's hand flew out [. . .] and then seized Henry Petrie's head in one hand, June's in the other, and had brought them together with a grinding, sickening crack" (535). In this instance, the exclusion of imagination from adulthood is a death sentence, revealing that the strict separation of childhood and adulthood is detrimental to adults.

Mark's parents are not the only adults in *'Salem's Lot* who illustrate the adverse consequences of viewing childhood and adulthood as mutually exclusive. The only characters who have a chance of surviving the vampiric infestation are those who open themselves up to the child-like imaginative ability that they denounced when they entered adulthood. However, restoring this ability does not guarantee survival. Ben Mears, the novel's main character, is essentially the only adult still "alive" in *'Salem's Lot* when the narrative ends. By permitting himself to take on traits designated as "child-like," he quickly sets aside his skepticism and lives. The importance of considering the fully grown characters in relation to the social narrative of childhood lies within its emphasis that childhood is "something one passes out of at a particular moment in one's life, or as something one must set aside in gaining maturity" (Bohlmann and Moreland 15). As is seen in *'Salem's Lot*, conforming to this mindset is harmful. King himself

addresses how destructive this can be when he expressed that people need “to go back and confront [their] childhood, in a sense relive it if [they] can, so that [they] can be whole” (qtd. in Davis 263). The perspective that childhood and adulthood are disconnected leaves people incomplete, and in this instance, unable to protect themselves.

Adhering to the social narrative of childhood can be detrimental to adults, but, more significantly, it authorizes adults to make decisions for minors, providing opportunities for adults to mistreat them. Western conceptualization of childhood places regulations on behavior and restricts articulation of individual intent, thus deeming the young unable to self-govern (James and Jenks 318). Ralphie (nine-years-old) and Danny (twelve-years-old) Glick encounter experiences where their involuntary lack of autonomy results in abuse. When they are on their way to visit Mark, R. T. Straker, Barlow’s human assistant, ambushes them. Danny wakes up in the woods confused and alone, unable to explain to his parents where Ralphie is or what happened. Unbeknownst to the authorities and the Glick family, Ralphie has been used by Straker in a ritual sacrifice that allows Barlow’s entrance into ‘Salem’s Lot. Shortly after the disappearance of Ralphie, Danny falls mysteriously “sick.” His parents take him to the hospital where, despite medical care, he later dies. However, Danny is undead and becomes the catalyst for converting all of the ‘Salem’s Lot citizens into vampires. Ralphie did not elect to be sacrificed just as Danny did not consent to his transformation; these choices were forced upon them by Straker and Barlow.

While it is true that Straker and Barlow treat all humans as subordinate beings that they can manipulate as they see fit, this is not true for Sandy McDougall. A young and unhappy mother, Sandy unleashes her frustrations through abusing her young infant, Randy. In response

to his crying, “she screamed back suddenly and threw the plastic bottle at him. It struck his forehead and he toppled on his back in the crib [. . .] she felt a horrid surge of gratification, pity, and hate in her throat. She plucked him out of the crib like a rag [. . . and] punched him twice before she could stop herself” (72). Randy’s young age necessitates the need for an adult caregiver who makes choices on his behalf; however, his vulnerability and perceived lack of autonomy grants Sandy the opportunity to harm him. Regardless of age, dismissing the autonomy of minors creates situations where they can, and often do, experience abuse.

Unlike Ralphie and Danny, Randy—an infant—manifests many of the qualities assigned to children; he *is* pure, innocent, and vulnerable. While child abuse is never acceptable, “dehumanizing the child, suggesting that he or she is something other than A Child, helps justify treating him or her according to different standards than those typically afforded to minors” (Renner 171). In other words, proving that a child does not conform to the characteristics provided by the social narrative of childhood legitimizes physical harm. For example, when ten-year-old Robert Thompson and Jon Venables murdered two-year-old James Bulger in 1993, they were painted as monsters in the press and tried as adults. Loretta Loach writes,

[i]t seems difficult to imagine that the label ‘evil’ could be tagged on to these two, but the tabloids did so with repetitive ease, as if cruelty and violence did not belong to a realm that was human [. . .] a child who has murdered another child is placed beyond the realm of childhood and is seen to have committed an adult crime with grown-up intention. It is this perception that allows us to treat these children with a strong element of retribution. (qtd. in Renner 171)

Loach exposes the hypocritical nature of the social narrative of childhood and its ability to condone the mistreatment of minors. Bob Franklin and Julian Petley similarly wrote that the media “vilified Venables and Thompson as ‘monsters,’ ‘freaks,’ ‘animals,’ or simply as ‘evil,’” causing the children to be identified as “anomalous exceptions to childhood, leaving the category of childhood as an age of innocence intact” (qtd. in Renner 171). Yet, Randy, who seemingly belongs in the constructed category of “child,” is mistreated. More importantly, upon her son’s death, Sandy notices that Randy’s “bruises were gone. All gone. They had faded overnight, leaving the small face and form flawless. His color was good. For the only time since his coming she found him beautiful, and she screamed at the sight of the beauty—a horrible, desolate sound” (329). It is not until Randy is dead that his mother can see him as beautiful and, subsequently, possessing the qualities needed to be considered a “perfect” child. Randy’s fate demonstrates the consequences of adults presuming that minors are inherently helpless and unfit for autonomy, but it also reveals the impossibility for *any* child to genuinely reside in the social narrative of childhood.

Meanwhile, there are young characters who explicitly reject the ideological standards adults expect them to follow. As the conduit for Barlow’s evil, Danny plays a pivotal role in the transmission of vampirism, a role that challenges the social narrative of childhood by blurring the line between adult and child. Mike Ryerson—Danny’s first victim—is tasked with burying the boy’s coffin. The whole time Mike is in the cemetery he is uneasy, convinced that Danny’s eyes are open despite the awareness that the town coroner always glues them shut. Upon pulling the coffin out of the grave and opening it up, Mike sees that Danny’s “eyes were open. Just as he had known they would be. Wide open and hardly glazed [. . .] He tried to drag his eyes away

from that glittering, frozen stare and was unable” (217). While not explicitly stated, Danny feeds on Mike, initiating a series of violent encounters in which he “demonstrates the typical behaviors of a child in a most unchildlike context” (Renner 167). Essentially, in his adolescent body, Danny combines the incompatible: innocence and violence.

Readers first perceive Danny’s distortion of child-like behavior during a scene with Matt, the local English teacher who teams up with Ben to take down Barlow. When Matt invites Mike to spend the night at his house, Danny comes to finish feeding on his first victim: “And in the awful heavy silence of the house, as [Matt] sat impotently on his bed with his face in his hands, he heard the high, sweet, evil laugh of a child—and then the sucking sounds” (262). Minors who have not hit puberty often have asexual high sweet voices, and sucking sounds are reminiscent of an infant nursing. However, Matt also hears what he describes as an evil laugh. He reflects, ““The laugh I heard—or thought I heard—was a child’s laugh. Horrible and soulless, but still a child’s laugh” (288). The violence and unnaturalness of Danny consuming Mike’s blood is intermingled with an image of nursing and the typically innocent laughter of a child.

Danny’s return home to his mother revisits the juxtaposition of nursing and violence. At first glance, the language Danny uses with his mother would suggest that love and instinct fuel his reappearance. He calls her “mommy” and tells her that he is “so glad to be home [. . .] he’s [her] baby again [. . . her] own son, at [her] breast again” (334-335). Breastfeeding is undoubtedly associated with intense bonding and love, and the instinct for an infant is to suckle. But, Danny is not an infant; he is an undead twelve-year-old boy. Margie describes experiencing “a feeling of sweetness with an undertone of bitterness, so much like it was before he was weaned but after he was beginning to get teeth and he would nip—’ (335). Though unknown to

Margie, she is describing her son consuming her blood in a manner resembling how he used to consume her milk. Danny taints this innocent act with violence and the eventual death (and resurrection) of Margie.

Danny's perversion of typical childish behaviors is not the only way he blends childhood and adulthood. Danny's victimization of adults, such as his mother and Mike Ryerson, is achieved through the use of adult-like manipulation. Lisa Nevárez similarly comments on the unnerving lengths to which King's vampires go in their pursuit of blood, arguing that the mindlessness shown by the vampires connects them to Renner's 'feral' child. But, she adds, "[King's vampires] are not quite feral. They return home out of a complex mix of instinct, love, and a quest for vengeance" (99). Indeed most, if not all, of the vampires in *'Salem's Lot* return home, and it is indicated later in the story that the vampires seem to "move more on instinct than real thought" (King 586). However, neither Nevárez nor Renner addresses the very adult tendencies that Danny possesses. Danny instinctively comes home, but then he exploits his mother's love for him and her belief that he is innocent to victimize her effortlessly.

Danny purposely uses his presumed innocence and purity to feed on adults; however, adults are not the only people he preys upon. Danny also visits the ten-month-old baby, Randy McDougall. The way Danny feeds on Randy mirrors how his mother abuses him. Danny comes in through a window and "pluck[s] the baby from his crib and [sinks] his teeth into a neck still bruised from a mother's blows" (327). In the morning, when Sandy goes to wake Randy, she sees his "small body [. . .] flung into the corner like a piece of garbage. One leg stuck up grotesquely, like an inverted exclamation point" (328). Both Sandy and Danny "pluck" Randy from his crib in scenes of abuse and treat him like he is just a "piece of garbage." Western

culture predominantly sees child abuse as an adult action, and the United States federally defines it in a way that refers explicitly to parents or adult guardians (“Definitions of Child Abuse”). Danny’s participation in this traditionally adult act combined with his victimization of adults calls into question the dichotomy between adult and child.

People typically identify victimizers and child abusers as adults; thus, Danny—a child—is engaging in adult behavior. Readers could conclude that Danny subverts the social narrative of childhood through his dissolution of the separation of childhood and adulthood. However, Danny is not a human child. As a vampire, he is a “monstrous” child and, thus, unable to successfully expose innocence as a false ideal within the social structure of childhood. It is true that “children who commit such violent acts [. . .] disassemble the traditional binary opposition between the categories of ‘child’ and ‘adult’” (James and Jenks 322). However, society removes such children from the category of “child” in an attempt to reestablish the customary ideological form of childhood and reaffirm the “natural” essence of children. Maintaining social order requires that anomalies be identified and named, and, in this case, given labels of “otherness.” (James and Jenks 322-323).⁴ Danny’s status as a nonhuman challenges his subversive efforts because readers will likely see him as a deviation from childhood rather than an example of the violence “real” children can execute. Nevertheless, Danny’s brutality and existence as a vampire broadcast the societal anxieties surrounding violent or otherwise unruly minors. By creating narratives that declare aberrant behavior is a result of supernatural forces, adults can pacify their anxiety and confirm the essential innocence of children.

⁴ The two types of “otherness” often associated with atypical children label them either inherently evil or an adult-child composite creature (James and Jenks 323).

'Salem's Lot examines the social narrative of childhood through the lens of horror fiction, or, more precisely, through a vampiric invasion. The text urges the reader to question the social norms associated with childhood and acknowledge the consequences of conforming to these norms. The main characters, Mark Petrie and Ben Mears, reveal the necessity for a redefinition of childhood—and adulthood—that recognizes the false and damaging ideological stance that these states of being are mutually exclusive. Without certain child-like qualities, the adult residents of *'Salem's Lot* cannot protect themselves. Likewise, being denied the adult privilege of autonomy, children are susceptible to abuse. Building upon this idea, the maltreatment of the ten-month-old infant, Randy, affirms the impossibility of any minor perfectly embodying the socially imagined figure of “a child.” The novel explores the blending of child and adult through its inclusion of the child vampire, Danny. After being transformed, Danny gains the autonomy his peers lack, allowing him to reject adult expectations and repurpose child-like and adult-like actions to violently prey upon others.

As a whole, *'Salem's Lot* unveils the detrimental consequences for all, regardless of age, when the Western conceptualization of childhood is heedlessly supported and enforced. However, the novel also illustrates the societal fear that minors are not wholly innocent and pure through its obvious compulsion to label deviant children as “monsters.” Adults can feel safe and dominant insofar as they can (falsely) assure themselves that minors do not pose a threat to the accepted social order and eradicate those who *do* rebel. It is essential to examine the self-governance Danny gains from being a child vampire because it uncovers the challenge that emerges when someone attempts to reinvent the definition of childhood. Rather than changing the established qualities assigned to children to include autonomy and violence, society regards

minors who exhibit unfavorable or contradictory characteristics as outliers, dangerous exceptions to the rule. Or, in Danny's case, an unnatural monster adults need to annihilate. While *'Salem's Lot* does scrutinize the social narrative of childhood and its damaging possibilities, the text fails to offer a solution in regards to ending the misrepresentation of childhood.

“Popsy”

In the last chapter, I showed how *Salem’s Lot* exposes the impossible and destructive nature of the Western social narrative of childhood. Stephen King’s inclusion of a child vampire provides the opportunity for an attempt to subvert this narrative through the employment of child-like behaviors and qualities to commit acts of violence. What becomes clear, though, is the strength of societal anxieties surrounding children who actively or inadvertently do not comply with childhood social norms. Rather than undermining the social stratification of age, child vampires seem to substantiate the belief that unruly, “mature,” and violent children are monstrous or “not” children. However, King revisits the existence of young vampires again in his short story, “Popsy” (1987).

In this chapter, I will further develop the argument that the social narrative of childhood is damaging and generates conditions that can facilitate abuse. Additionally, through the story’s juxtaposition of the humanly mundane and monstrously supernatural activity, I will continue analyzing the effectiveness of child vampires to challenge the conventional characteristics assigned to those under the age of eighteen. “Popsy” glosses over any in-depth examination of the vampires and their intentions, setting it apart from the other vampiric narratives included in this analysis. Despite its dissimilarity, “Popsy” is a crucial text to consider because, when paired with *Salem’s Lot*, it presents King’s unique evolution of the child vampire trope.

“Popsy” tells the story of a man—Sheridan—who kidnaps children to pay off his gambling debt. While at the mall, Sheridan abducts a six-year-old who is not as innocent and frail as he seems. Unbeknownst to Sheridan, he has captured a child vampire whose vampire grandfather will come to save him. King’s unnamed child vampire is seemingly human and does

not actively hunt, which sets him apart from King's previous creation, Danny Glick. Sheridan makes multiple assumptions about the boy throughout the story, with the most significant being that the boy is a helpless and scared *human* child. Considering the boy's vampiric status is undisclosed to both Sheridan and the reader, both proceed believing he is human. The boy's actions reinforce this presumed humanity. Instead of violently and manipulatively preying upon others—like Danny—he cries childishly when he becomes conscious of the fact that he cannot find his Popsy. Before approaching the child, Sheridan notices that he is “looking around with increasing panic [. . .] look[ing] for help, look[ing] for somebody to look at him and see something [is] wrong [. . .]” (168). Seeing the human helplessness and vulnerability of the boy, Sheridan asks him, “You get separated from your dad, son?” (169). As he wipes tears from his eyes, the boy replies, “My *Popsy* [. . .] I . . . I can't find my P-P-Popsy!” (169). Nothing about this interaction indicates that the boy is not innocent and vulnerable, and when combined with his continued naïve behavior, he acts in accordance with the social narrative of childhood.

Despite the boy's adherence to social norms, he—like the ten-month-old infant, Randy McDougall—is mistreated by an adult who uses the social narrative of childhood to disregard the well-being of minors. Sheridan lacks concern for the boy as a fellow autonomous human being, and it is evident from the beginning of the story that he intends to kidnap someone. Whether or not the victim he chooses deserves to harm is of no concern to Sheridan; the boy is only a means to an end for him: “he was in a jam and that kid over there could solve some very big problems” (167). The six-year-old has become an object that functions as money to pay off Sheridan's debt to Mr. Reggie, a contemptible man whose vocation involves the trafficking of children. Both Mr. Reggie and Sheridan use society's denial of autonomy for children as justification to violate

them, while simultaneously using biological age to group them and strip away their individualism. Neither Mr. Reggies nor Sherdian disclose the names of their victims. In fact, Sheridan does not even ask the boy his name and instead uses a variety of endearments—“son,” “kid,” and “little buddy”—in place of a proper name, feigning kindness and harmlessness when in reality he denies the boy his personhood. The words used in place of the child's proper name are a denotation of his presumed inferiority. The word *son* comes with the connotation of lesser than the father, *kid* is an informal—often demeaning—variation of child, and *little buddy* asserts that the child is small or less than. Even when used to show love or affection, these words are problematic because they reveal who has power and who does not.

The perception that children do not have the right to self-governance and are unable to protect themselves is not the only reason for Sheridan's abduction of the boy. Multiple times during their encounter he worries about being caught, yet, despite the presence of a cop, Sheridan decides to take a chance because “if he didn't cover his markers at Mr. Reggie's [. . .] a couple of very large men would pay him a visit and perform impromptu surgery on his arms, adding several elbow-bends to each” (169). Sheridan considers his own self-preservation as more important than a child's, despite being privy to the fate of the young ones he takes. For instance, after the first kidnapping, Sheridan “hadn't slept for a week. He kept thinking about the big greasy Turk [Mr. Reggie] who called himself Mr. Wizard, kept wondering what he did with the children” (166). Shortly after discovering that the victims go on a “boat-ride,” Sheridan chooses to block it out of his mind, choosing to protect himself instead of the children. Readers could argue that Sheridan believes his life is superior to all humans; however, this mentality—combined with society's emphasis on the helplessness of children—makes them the

accessible victims, further illustrating how the social narrative of childhood is detrimental to those it should protect.

On the contrary, “Popsy” briefly considers how the assumption that children are weak, naïve, and unreliable, can be hazardous to both children and adults. Characterizing children as unreliable, or—rather—as unable to discern truth, influences the discrediting of important information that a child might share with an adult. Children’s words are often mistrusted by adults who deem age rather than experience as a gauge for the child’s ability to tell and even know the truth (James and Jenks 329). Sheridan demonstrates this mistrust when he ignores the boy’s warnings about Popsy:

“My Popsy’s really strong, mister.”

“Yeah?” Sheridan asked, and thought: *I bet he is kid. Only guy in the old folks’ home who can bench-press his own truss, right?*

“He’ll find me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He can smell me.”

Sheridan believed it. *He* could smell the kid . . .

“Popsy can fly.”

“Yeah,” Sheridan said, “after a couple of bottles of Night Train. I bet he flies like a sonofabitchin eagle.” (179-180)

Sheridan’s sarcastic comments and internal monologue reveal his distrust of the boy, which ultimately leads to Sheridan’s death. While this example might seem implausible, it asks readers to contemplate the possible consequences of ignoring the words of children.

Considering King wrote “Popsy” in 1987, Sheridan’s disbelief may also be reflective of the ritual abuse panic in the 1980s. During this time it became paramount that adults believed children when they spoke up about abuse (Renner 81). As children began to report abuse, adults trusted that they were telling the truth; however, a new problem arose. Although adults felt sympathy for the ill-treated child, it did not last because the adults were always waiting for the child to transform from a victim to a victimizer. Thus, the children who spoke up could no longer reside in the realm of childhood (Renner 89). The skepticism surrounding information communicated by children reveals itself to be damaging in more than one way. For instance, if an adult does not take a child’s confession seriously, the abuse or physical harm could continue. However, when their narrative is accepted, they can no longer be deemed innocent because of the abuse they have suffered. Additionally, in reference to child sexual abuse, the fight against abuse traditionally idolizes childhood innocence, which results in stigmatization against the “experienced” or “knowing” child. The most significant reason innocence is disadvantageous to minors is because it denies them access to knowledge and power, which increases their vulnerability to abuse (Renner 162). In this case, the assumption that children are innocent, pure, and unwise does more harm than good and reveals that the social narrative of childhood is an impossible ideology.

Sheridan’s reluctance to heed the boy’s warnings about Popsy mirrors his misjudgment of the six-year-old boy’s physical strength. Sheridan identifies him as naïve, weak, and vulnerable, a plausible conclusion considering “the boy looked parchment-white, [and] not just scared but perhaps physically ill” (167). Regardless of the child’s sick appearance, Sheridan reminds himself of the potential physical power of children: “He had learned the second time he’d done

this that you didn't want to underestimate even a six-year-old once he had his wind up" (175). However, Sheridan is still unprepared for the strength of the boy. After tricking him, Sheridan attempts to handcuff him to a bar welded onto the side of the passenger seat in his van, but it does not go as planned. Like any frightened child, the boy "fought like a timberwolf pup, twisting with a powerful muscularity Sheridan would not have credited had he not been experiencing it" (176). Eventually, Sheridan temporarily subdues the boy with a punch. Yet, moments later, the boy struggles to get free, challenging Sheridan's confidence in his dominance over the child:

The kid pulled at the handcuffs and made a cobbing noise. "Quit it. Won't do you any good." Nevertheless, the kid pulled again. And this time there was a groaning, protesting sound Sheridan didn't like at *all*. He looked around and was amazed to see that the metal strut on the side of the seat—a strut he had welded in place himself—was twisted out of shape [. . .] The kid yanked at the handcuffs again and Sheridan saw the metal strut bend a little more. Christ, how could *any* kid do that? *It's panic*, he answered himself. *That's how he can do it.* (178)

Sheridan convinces the boy to stop pulling on the handcuffs by threatening him with an injection that could possibly kill him, but the strength exhibited by the child worries Sheridan, making him justifiably uneasy. Underestimating the capabilities of the boy as well as those of his grandfather results in Sheridan's death. Again, outside of this fictional world, the underestimation of children will likely not lead to death. Nevertheless, the interaction between Sheridan and the boy exposes the tendency for adults to "repeatedly underestimate children and treat them condescendingly" (Renner 161). The problem that arises when adults minimize the strength, intelligence, or power

of children is that it creates a vastly imbalanced power dynamic between them (Renner 162). Once again, Sheridan's actions and attitude towards his victim reveals the inherent power structure built into the social narrative of childhood that is disadvantageous for both adults and minors.

As previously established, the boy in "Popsy" does not violate the image of the child in obvious ways like Danny, Claudi, and Eli. He is seemingly human throughout most of the story, allowing him to represent how the social narrative of childhood does more harm than good. However, he is a vampire. The text does not contain the word *vampire*, but it does reveal many details indicating that the boy and his grandfather are monsters. During the boy's first attempt to escape from Sheridan, he "bit [Sheridan's] hand twice bringing blood [. . .] his teeth were like razors [. . .] Two shallow, ragged tears, each maybe two inches long, ran up toward his wrist from just above the knuckles" (176). Unlike Matt Burke from *'Salem's Lot*, Sheridan fails to question the appearance of his wound, which were two identical marks.⁵ Sheridan does suspect that the child is not normal, but he rationalizes the strangeness of the boy, missing any supernatural clues. For instance, he believes the pinkish hue in the boy's tears results from the glow of a red sign; however, when the boy cries again, Sheridan has to make a different conclusion: "The kid was crying again, and his tears still had that odd pinkish cast, even though they were now well way from the bright lights of the mall. Sheridan wondered for the first time if the kid might have some sore of communicable disease" (177). People could see vampirism as a byproduct of contamination in human blood, but Sheridan is merely referring to a non-supernatural ailment.

⁵ At first, Matt believes that the marks found on Danny Glick are scratches, but he quickly realizes what they truly are: "*Scratches? Those marks weren't scratches. They were punctures*" (King, *'Salem's Lot* 260).

Popsy's appearance lifts Sheridan's blindness to the boy's vampiric nature. Despite an attempt to maintain his grasp on "reality," Sheridan can no longer deny what is before him:

The kid's lip was drawn back from his teeth again. His teeth were very white, very big.

No . . . not big. Big wasn't the right word. *Long* was the right word. Especially the two at the top at each side. The . . . what did you call them? The canines.

His mind suddenly started to fly again, clicking along as if he were on speed.

I told him I was thirsty.

Why would Popsy go to a place where they—

(?eat was he going to say eat?)

He'll find me.

Popsy can fly. (180-181)

As Sheridan comes to understand that the child and his grandfather are vampires, so does the reader. The realization that they are not human is a crucial point because it challenges the cultural perceptions concerning those deemed monstrous. As supernatural creatures who feast on human blood, Popsy and his grandson should be the antagonists of the story. Despite their categorization as monsters, they are not the ones committing unsolicited acts of violence or preying upon children; hence, they are the victims.

The banal ending of the story intensifies King's humanization of vampires. Popsy is painted in a very mundane fashion, as is the boy. He tells Sheridan, "We came to the mall because my grandson wanted some Ninja Turtle figures' [. . .] 'The ones they show on TV. All the children want them'" (182). Nothing about these statements suggest that a nonhuman being

spoke them. Even as the vampires consume Sheridan's blood—a horrifically violent act—they and their actions are described surprisingly human:

[Sheridan] saw Popsy's thumbnail for just a second before it disappeared under the shelf of his chin, the nail ragged and thick. His throat was cut with the nail before he realized what was happening, and the last things he saw before his sight dimmed to black were the kid, cupping his hands to catch the flow the way Sheridan himself had cupped his hands under the backyard faucet for a drink on a hot summer day when he was a kid, and Popsy, stroking the boy's hair gently with grandfatherly love. (182)

The last lines of "Popsy" are significant in many ways, including the normalcy of the grandfather/grandson relationship. As the boy gingerly drinks Sheridan's blood, Popsy shows affection for the boy by stroking his hair. This feeding scene is distinctly different from those in *'Salem's Lot*, *Interview with the Vampire*, and *Let the Right One In*. Rather than depicting a ravenous feeding, it is compared to a child drinking water from a hose during the summer. This soft ending combined with Sheridan's victimization of children, supports the conclusion that he is the true antagonist. By switching the antagonist and protagonist in a vampiric narrative, King frustrates the notion that monstrosity is equivalent to immorality and corruption. The inclusion of a child urges readers to reevaluate the essential institution of childhood in terms of its impulse to label children who rebel as evil or monstrous and, therefore, expel them from the realm of childhood. As has been demonstrated through the unnamed child vampire in "Popsy" and Randy McDougall in *'Salem's Lot*, inclusion or exclusion from the social narrative of childhood is arbitrary.

Through the framework of child abduction, “Popsy” exposes the connection between the socially imagined definition of children and abuse, furthering the argument that how society defines minors can have detrimental effects. Sheridan’s complete disregard for his victims reveals the consequences of dismissing the autonomy and individuality of children. His behavior also demonstrates the imbalanced power dynamic between adults and children which contributes to the victimization of the young. Unlike Danny Glick from *‘Salem’s Lot*, the unnamed six-year-old child vampire in “Popsy” invalidates the assumption that violent and unmanageable children are monstrous through his status as a vampire who seemingly portrays the characteristics of a child who fits into the social narrative of childhood. King changes the child vampire trope, leading it away from the mold of the child vampire as a viciously violent monster. All of the vampiric—and seemingly “evil”—behavior of both Popsy and his grandson are mundane acts of self-defense. The real “monsters” are the adult humans.

It is important to include a text such as “Popsy” in the exploration of Western ideologies pertaining to childhood because it enriches the discussion on the damaging effects caused by adults who adhere to these ideologies. It also builds upon the work already done in *‘Salem’s Lot* to verify a connection between the ideal characteristics of a child and abuse. In the previous chapter, the figure of the child vampire struggled to challenge the social narrative of childhood because, as a vampire, he affirmed the belief that only “monstrous” children commit acts of violence. However, the boy in “Popsy” falsifies this notion because he is a monster who embodies the qualities of a “perfect” child, thus contradicting the definitions of children and monsters. Through changing the child vampire trope, the novel can subvert the social narrative of childhood. Just as child vampires repurpose innocence to commit acts of violence, “Popsy”

repurposes the definition of monster to expose the contradictory and impossible nature within the Western conceptualization of children.

Interview with the Vampire

In chapter 2, I refined the association between the social narrative of childhood and abuse, exposing the underlying imbalance of power between adults and children. The treatment of a—seemingly human—child vampire reiterated the developing theory that the Western conception of childhood and its defining traits are more damaging to minors than protective. The six-year-old vampire successfully subverts the socially imagined childhood through his existence as an innocent and mostly peaceful vampire, a contradiction that reveals how the determination of who can be an “ideal” child is arbitrary. While *Salem’s Lot* and “Popsy” offer rich insight into the social narrative of childhood and the effect it has on both adults and children, they fail to address one significant element: female children.

In this chapter, I will deepen the analysis of childhood through the inclusion of the young female vampire Claudia from Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Written and published around the same time as *Salem’s Lot*, Rice’s novel takes a distinctive approach to the vampire narrative by giving us a first-person account. Louis, the main character, chronicles his creation and subsequent existence as a vampire, later spending a significant amount of time detailing the challenges involved in raising a vampire child. By examining how the definition of child affects Claudia and her immortal fathers, I will show a connection between childhood and womanhood that furthers the conclusion that the Western definition of childhood is harmful. As a vampire, Claudia has the power to challenge the social narrative of childhood through patricide; however, being unnatural and becoming a woman in a child’s body deems her not a “child” and reduces her existence to the social fear of children behaving in adult-like ways.

During an emotionally-charged scene, Louis and his creator—Lestat—bring home a five-year-old orphaned girl whom Louis had previously fed on but left alive. Louis believes Lestat intends to have him finish her off, but right before her heart stops, Lestat gives her his wrist so that she might drink from it and become like him. The motivation behind turning the young girl is to provide a companion for Louis and keep him from leaving Lestat. It is distinctly evident that the men do not take the girl's life into consideration, and, as an adult male construction, she has “no identity apart from the obsessions of her fatherly lovers who made her” (Auerbach 158). These “fathers” treat Claudia like a living doll that they can dress up and play “family” with; however, Claudia continues to develop emotionally and intellectually. Eventually, she becomes a grown woman trapped inside the body of a child. Claudia's inability to physically change restricts her to the realm of childhood, but it also unveils the unjust future all female children face. Within patriarchal society, men dictate the fate of women and often “infantilise them despite their adult status” (Mitchell 121). Regardless of age, women are given—or, rather, not given—the same rights as children while also being expected to remain child-like.⁶ Therefore, the detrimental consequences children experience because society adheres to an ideological definition of childhood apply to women.

Claudia, both when she is a child and when she matures, is stripped of her right to autonomy and individualism. As Louis attempts to resist feeding on her, he notes her soft, tiny arms and satin hair that resemble the features of the toys she later plays with. Louis' observation initiates Claudia's perpetual comparison to a doll. Louis explains that “mute and beautiful, [Claudia] played with dolls, dressing, undressing them by the hour,” directly paralleling how

⁶ Innocent, pure, naïve, and non-violent.

Lestat and Louis “play” with her (97). In fact, they bring in dressmakers, shoemakers, and tailors to create outfits for her. Louis recalls calling her ‘doll’ and telling her, “let me dress you, let me brush your hair” (101). Louis and Lestat’s “joint desire to control and condition [Claudia] according to their own specifications epitomises the [. . .] struggle for autonomy within a domain of male supremacy” (Mitchell 120). Through controlling what she wears, how she looks, and what she plays with, Louis and Lestat prevent Claudia from making decisions for herself, reiterating her passive position as both a child and a female. The act of physically dressing and grooming Claudia enhances the already established idea that the enforced passivity of children allows adults to manipulate them however they wish.

Louis and Lestat “play” with Claudia comparable to how a child plays with dolls, yet, unlike a doll, Claudia is not an inanimate object. At first, Claudia enjoys the figurines given to her, but, as she ages mentally, it becomes evident that her toys and doll-like appearance represent her “entrapment within an infantile physique” (Mitchell 122). Made of porcelain, the dolls project the image that female children are vulnerable (fragile) and innocent (unblemished), and, as inanimate objects, they lack personality and individualized physical features. The problem with this image is that it does not grant young girls agency or autonomy. Claudia, forever in a five-year-old female body, will be eternally read as a child and restricted to a lower social status. She views the dolls as a “symbol of her own social misrepresentation,” believing that a mature body would give her the agency and equality she craves (Mitchell 123). Louis and Lestat’s failure to respect her as an adult and consider her their equal exacerbates her frustration with her childish body. Louis admits that as time passed, Claudia’s “doll-like face seemed to possess two totally aware adult eyes, and innocence seemed lost somewhere with neglected toys and the loss

of a certain patience” (100-101). He also tells Lestat, “She’s not a child anymore [. . .] She sees herself as equal to us now, and us as equal to each other” (105). Despite the awareness that Claudia is a woman, their behavior toward her does not change.

Consequently, Claudia’s resentment toward her creators and physique continues to increase until she decides to take action. Louis and Lestat underestimate Claudia’s internal turmoil, thus “neither [one] anticipates that she will direct her predatory skills upon them” (Renner 168). After learning her own origin story, Claudia determines that she and Louis should rid themselves of Lestat. She tells Louis that Lestat has made slaves of them, and she can set them both free by killing him. As Lestat is the more patriarchal “father,” Claudia’s murderous desire symbolizes her attempt to escape her misogynistic position as a female child. Under the guise of offering Lestat a gift, she brings home two little boys. Her demeanor toward Lestat changes during this scene, going from confrontation to harmonious. When she enters the room to speak with Lestat, she sits at the piano with her “hands folded on the wood, her chin resting on her hands,” producing a charming child-like aura (129). She continues by sweetly and softly telling him, “I came to make peace with you, even if you are the father of lies. You’re my father” (130). Distracted by her childish performance, Lestat accepts the peace-offering; however, Claudia has drugged the boys, tainting their blood. Claudia detects the “childlike image she represents, and she uses the fetishized (and thus necessarily reductive) view of children to strike back violently against Lestat” (Cunningham 217). Claudia’s patricide rejects the social narrative of childhood through her repurposing of the innocent and vulnerable image of a female child to commit murder, while at the same time dismissing the feminine passivity of childhood and womanhood.

In spite of murdering Lestat, Claudia does not gain admittance into adulthood. Being read as a little girl because of her small stature, Claudia continues to be frustrated. After visiting Madeleine, a grieving mother who creates dolls in the image of her deceased daughter, Claudia asks Louis, ““Do you know why [Madeleine] made [a doll] for me?”” (206). Louis responds by telling her that she is a beautiful child therefore Madeleine made the figurine to make her happy. Enraged by Louis’ continued insistence that she is a child, Claudia viciously shatters the doll:

‘A beautiful child,’ she said [. . .] ‘Is that what you still think I am?’ And her face went dark as again she played with the doll, her fingers pushing the tiny crocheted neckline down toward the china breasts. ‘Yes, I resemble [Madeleine’s] baby dolls, I am her baby dolls. You should see her working in that shop; bent on her dolls, each with the same face, lips.’ Her finger touched her own lip [. . .] And then I saw what her still childish figure was doing: in one hand she held the doll, the other to her lips; and the hand that held the doll was crushing it, crushing it and popping it so it bobbed and broke in a heap of glass that fell now from her open, bloody hand onto the carpet. (206)

The crushing of the doll represents Claudia’s anger at her perpetual imprisonment in a child’s body. She crushes the model of the “ideal” female child, in an attempt to once again free herself from this submissive state.

Unfortunately, Claudia—unlike the other vampire children—is graphically killed within the narrative. Her belief that her physical body prevents her from having autonomy causes her to seek out a solution. Her first two attempts to gain freedom—killing Lestat and breaking her doll—fail to produce a change in her situation, and when Lestat reappears, Claudia realizes that

gaining autonomy is impossible while she resides in a child's body. In response, Claudia concludes that the only way to obtain autonomy and be released from the social narrative of childhood is to have an adult form. With the help of Armand, a fellow vampire who yearns to have Louis all to himself, Claudia orchestrates one last effort to achieve a body that matches her mental state. Armand disassembles Claudia's body by decapitating her and re-attaching her head to that of an adult female vampire. The transformation is not sustainable, but Armand cannot "reverse that damage and [. . .] leaves this spoilt version of Claudia out into the sunlight to be destroyed" (Mitchell 125).⁷ Claudia's plan does not work, unveiling the futility of altering her circumstances. She cannot liberate herself from childhood because of her femininity. For Claudia, "vampirism in [not a] release from patriarchy, but a perpetuation of it until the end of time" (Auerbach 154). Though she can act subversively, Claudia is ultimately under the control of patriarchy, revealing the powerlessness of both children and women.

Despite Claudia's inferiority, she is a vampire, which means she has a profound disposition for violence. She is a "fierce killer [. . .] capable of the ruthless pursuit of blood" (96). The violence in and of itself is enough for Claudia to challenge her child-like image, but she takes it a step further. When hunting, Claudia

would sit alone in the dark square waiting for the kindly gentleman or woman to find her [. . .] Like a child numbed with fright she would whisper her plea for help to her gentle admiring patrons, and as they carried her out of the square, her arms would fix about their necks, her tongue between her teeth, her vision glazed with consuming hunger. They found death fast in those first years, before she

⁷ Armand's account of Claudia's death is found in Anne Rice's *The Vampire Armand* (1998).

learned to play with them, to lead them to the doll shop or the café where they gave her steaming cups of chocolate or tea to ruddy her pale cheeks, cups she pushed away, waiting, waiting, as if feasting silently on their terrible kindness.

(99)

Imitating the expected vulnerability and innocence of children, Claudia lures in her prey. Similar to Danny Glick, Claudia has enough forethought and intelligence to manipulate those who choose to underestimate her by placing her in the non-threatening realm of childhood. Claudia's child-like and doll-like appearance gives her the power to easily manipulate adults, making her the most dangerous and successful vampire in her clan. However, unlike Danny, Claudia has the mind of an adult. The manipulation she uses when feeding should not be surprising, yet her adult-like behavior is meant to be unsettling because it is juxtaposed with her five-year-old appearance.

Even Louis is disturbed by the disharmony between Claudia's mental state and physical body. He describes how she is forever in a child's body but begins to behave in ways traditionally seen as mature. Louis notices that as she ages mentally, she begins to look dreadfully sensual when "lounging on the settee in a tiny nightgown of lace and stitched pearls," remarking that she had become an "eerie and powerful seductress" whose voice had the resonance of a woman" (101). Louis was "aghast at such moments," but then she would "sit on [his] lap and put her fingers in [his] hair and doze there against [his] heart" (101). While Claudia's womanly disposition is not improper for her intellectual age, it is for a five-year-old child. Readers are further disturbed when Claudia performs uncharacteristically adult behaviors in child-like manners. For example, after first being turned, she shows the greediness of a child

when feeding from Lestat's wrist: "[Lestat] was trying now to push her off, and she wouldn't let go. With her fingers locked around his fingers and arm she held his wrist to her mouth [. . .] 'Stop, stop!' he said to her [. . .] He pulled back from her and held her shoulders with both hands. She tried desperately to reach his wrist with her teeth, but she couldn't" (91). Her insatiability and demand for more "resembles one of those children who would happily consume their weight in ice cream" (Renner 167). However, her yearning is for blood, not ice cream. Considering Claudia's adult mind, her perversion of child-like behavior does not entirely subvert the social narrative of childhood; rather, she exposes societal anxieties surrounding adult-like behaviors in children and the fear that children are more "adult" than society currently admits.

Even during her final moments, Claudia blurs the line between adult and child. When Louis witnesses the aftermath of Claudia's murder, he notices the similarity between Claudia and Madeleine's deathly embrace and other moments from Claudia's life. As a human child, Claudia demonstrates the importance of a mother to her child. After hearing a child crying, Louis investigates:

I slipped my hand up under the heavy wooden shutter and pulled it so the bolt slipped. There she sat in the dark room beside a dead woman, a woman who'd been dead for some days [. . .] the mother lay half clothed, her body already in decay, and no one else was there but the child [. . .] she began to tell me that I must do something to help her mother [. . .] She begged me to help [. . .] She began to shake her mother now and to cry in the most pathetic and desperate way.
(73)

In this heart-wrenching scene, Claudia epitomizes the image of the vulnerable, innocent child who yearns for the love and comfort of a mother. Claudia's first words following her transformation into a vampire are, "Where is Mamma?" (92), again emphasizing the significance of a child's relationship with their mother. This innocent sentiment is then juxtaposed with Claudia's slaughter of a mother/daughter duo working as servants for Louis and Lestat. Despite the violence, Claudia leaves them together in a loving embrace: "There they lay on the bricks, mother and daughter together, the arm of the mother fastened around the waist of the daughter, the daughter's head bent against the mother's breast" (105). The position Claudia leaves the dead pair in combined with her tendency to victimize mothers and children, illustrates that even with an adult mind and the violence of a vampire, Claudia has the childish need for a mother. Claudia tries to fill this need through Madeleine, and, in the end, her last moments are in the arms of her "mother." The final embrace between Madeleine and Claudia furthers the concept that certain aspects of life transcend age.

Through Claudia and her dolls, *Interview with the Vampire* explores the connection between childhood and womanhood, exposing how the social narrative of childhood is detrimental to children and women. As a woman stuck in a child's body, Claudia does not have the same effect as Danny Glick in *Salem's Lot* or the unnamed boy in "Popsy." However, she is still able to reject the definition of an "ideal" child through her vampiric violence, specifically patricide. Claudia never stops fighting for autonomy and makes multiple attempts to change her submissive position. In the end, the juxtaposition of her adult mind and childish body expose the societal fear of children who are more "experienced" than their peers as well as the fear that children use the child-like qualities of innocence and vulnerability against adults.

Interview with the Vampire is an essential text in the exploration of the Western definition of childhood because of its attention to the female perspective. As a patriarchal construction, childhood is created to be beneficial for adult men and is used by them to infantilize women. Through the framework of a vampiric narrative, *Interview with the Vampire* successfully illustrates the lower social status society perpetually places women and children, represented by Claudia's entrapment in her five-year-old body and the institution of childhood. The novel continues the exploration of the negative consequences that arise from adherence to the social narrative of childhood, but it does not give a satisfactory response in relation to redefining childhood—or, in this case—womanhood. Similar to the fate of Danny, Claudia's death suggests that redefinition is not possible. However, the text does address the societal anxieties surrounding children, giving insight into possible explanations for casting out those who reject the established definition of childhood.

Let the Right One In

In the previous chapter, I showed that a connection between childhood and womanhood exists. Society forces women into the lower social status of children, which readers see through Claudia's eternal treatment as a child despite her aged mentality. Similar to '*Salem's Lot* and "Popsy," *Interview with the Vampire* revealed how the social narrative of childhood has negative consequences, such as a lack of autonomy that enables abusive behavior. I also further reinforced the idea that the child vampire trope fails to successfully redefine childhood, though it does reveal the social anxiety that children are more "adult" than society would like them to be. The preceding chapters have criticized many elements inherent to the Western conceptualization of childhood and *Interview with the Vampire* added sexuality through its inclusion of a female vampire; however, none of them have addressed the notion of gender and sexual identity.

In this chapter, I will continue to explore the role sexuality has in the definition of childhood, demonstrating that childhood sexuality is rebellious. Also, through an examination of the young characters (human and vampire), I will advance the argument that the social narrative of childhood is harmful, as well as inaccurate. John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* (2004) is the most contemporary text out of the four in this analysis, and it is also the only one not originally written in English. This Swedish novel sets itself apart from '*Salem's Lot* and *Interview with the Vampire* through its attention to both a human child and a vampire child. The main character—Oskar—is a thirteen-year-old boy obsessed with murder, especially the murder committed in his neighborhood. As a social outcast at school, Oskar is thrilled when a seemingly twelve-year-old girl moves in next door. The girl—Eli—is not what she seems on many levels,

but this does not stop Oskar from developing a relationship with her and the violence her life as a vampire engenders.

According to Bohlmann and Moreland, the social narrative of childhood “offers a radically distorted view of childhood sexuality, given [that] ‘the general cultural and political tendency [is] to officially treat *all* children as straight, while continuing to deem them asexual’” (16). Oskar and Eli challenge this heteronormative ideology through Eli’s gender and their deep affection for one another. Early on in their relationship, it becomes apparent that despite Eli’s physical appearance, her gender might be more complicated:

“Oskar, do you like me?”

“Yes. A lot.”

“If I turned out not to be a girl . . . would you still like me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. Would you still like me even if I wasn’t a girl.”

“Yes . . . I guess so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?” (125)

Eli and Oskar are interrupted by Oskar’s mother, so Eli does not have time to explain why she asks Oskar such a question, deepening the mystery surrounding her existence. Despite Eli hinting that she might not be female, Oskar still sees her as a girl. Shortly after this conversation, Eli shows up at Oskar’s window. After gaining entrance, she asks Oskar to close his eyes and gets into his bed naked: “A cold hand crept over his stomach and found its way to his chest, over his heart. He put both hands over it, warming her hand [. . .] Eli turned her head and laid her cheek

between his shoulder blades” (168). The two children lay awhile in this romantic and intimate embrace. While they do not have sex, Eli’s nakedness has sexual connotations that deem their embrace inappropriate for children.

Shortly after being in bed together, Oskar decides to ask Eli to be his girlfriend. Once again, Eli tells Oskar that she is not a girl:

Oskar snorted. ‘What do you mean? You’re a *guy*?’

‘No, no.’

‘Then what are you?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What do you mean, ‘nothing’?’

‘I’m nothing. Not a child. Not old. Not a boy. Not a girl. Nothing’ (170-171).

Eli’s description is important for plot development, but it is also significant because it exposes the limits of the gender binary. Oskar’s assumption that Eli must be a boy because she told him she is not a girl demonstrates the cultural assumption “that a child’s assigned sex will predict and circumscribe their gendered sensibilities and identities (“boy” or “girl”)” (Rahilly 341).

Additionally, Eli’s declaration that she is neither boy nor girl reveals the heteronormative expectation that humans must be gendered a boy or girl. Essentially Eli is announcing to Oskar that she identifies as non-binary.⁸ Despite this information, Oskar is still perplexed by Eli’s gender and asks again if she will “date” him. After Oskar tells them that dating just means they keep hanging out as they have been, Eli agrees to be his “girlfriend.” Pre-teens “dating” is not an

⁸ In the novel, Eli is referred to with feminine pronouns and then masculine pronouns. I will keep using the feminine pronouns until the narration changes to masculine. Please note that I have not changed the pronouns used in quotes, therefore some quotes later in this chapter might refer to Eli with feminine pronouns.

action that would deem Eli or Oskar unfit for the social narrative of childhood, but Eli's gender complicates their relationship.

Unable to find an adult that he trusts, Oskar confides in his female teacher to try and understand Eli's gender as well as how that will affect their relationship. He begins by asking her, "How do you know when you're in love?" (190), but then summons up the courage to inquire about homosexuality. Still questioning love, Oskar asks, "What if it's two guys?" (191). The teacher begins by discussing friendship, but when she realizes why Oskar might be asking, she lets him know that two men can have a romantic relationship. Before other students can claim her attention, Oskar probes a little further: "Can you be . . . both girl and boy at the same time? Or neither?" (191). She responds by telling Oskar that humans cannot be both or neither, but is interrupted before she can elaborate. Oskar himself is also distracted, so he forgets his internal reflection on sexuality and gender. But Oskar's interaction with his teacher is concerning because of her lack of understanding or acknowledgment of non-binary identities.

Finally, after discovering that Eli is a vampire, the mystery of her biological sex is alluded to again. Oskar asks her, "What do I call you, then? This thing that you are" (289). While Oskar is referring to her status as a vampire, Eli responds with her name:

'Eli.'

'Is that really your name?'

'Almost.'

'What's your real name?'

[. . .]

'Elias.'

‘But that’s a . . . boy’s name?’

‘Yes.’ (289)

Oskar quickly falls asleep, unable to process or question Eli’s revelation; however, in the morning, as Oskar tries to find Eli, he remembers that her real name is Elias: “*Elias*. A boy’s name. Was Eli a boy? They had . . . kissed and slept in the same bed and . . . ”(307). Despite having explicit confirmation that Eli’s biological sex is male, Oskar still refers to Eli with feminine pronouns.

Later in the novel, when Eli is most explicit, Oskar thinks he understands Eli’s sexuality and accepts his relationship with her. During another romantic moment between them, Eli decides to show Oskar her sexuality rather than tell him:

[. . .] [Eli] undid the towel knotted around her waist. It fell to the floor at her feet and she stood there naked a few feet away from him. Eli made a sweeping gesture with her hand over her thin body, said: “Just so you know.” [. . .] The small nipples looked almost black against her pale white skin. Her upper body was slender, straight, and without much in the way of contours. Only the ribs stood out clearly in the sharp overhead light. Her thin arms and legs appeared unnaturally long the way they grew out of her body: a young sapling covered in human skin. Between the legs she had [. . .] nothing. No slit, no penis. Just a smooth surface. (346-347)

Oskar questions Eli about the lack of genitalia, and though he believes that he understands her gender, it is clear that he is still confused. Eli addresses the complexity of their relationship by asking Oskar if he is disappointed:

‘Are you . . . disappointed?’

‘Why would I be?’

‘Because . . . I don’t know. Because you think it’s . . . complicated. Your friends—’

‘Cut it out! Cut it out! You’re sick. Just lay off.’ (348)

Despite Eli’s knowledge that they are sexless and neither boy nor girl, she seems to detect that Oskar might misunderstand and believe their relationship is homosexual. Oskar’s outburst confirms his misjudgment that Eli is male, implying their relationship is not heterosexual. Earlier, when Oskar was grappling with Eli’s revelation that they were born male, he also hinted at the homosexual implications for himself: “[. . .] he didn’t get it. That he could somehow accept that she was a *vampire*, but the idea that she was somehow a *boy*, that that could be . . . harder. He knew the word. Fag. Fucking fag. Stuff that Jonny said. To think it was worse to be gay than to be a [vampire]” (307). Even though Oskar seems distressed by the thought that he is homosexual, he does not want to end his connection with Eli, and he begins using masculine pronouns when speaking about Eli. His ignorance surrounding sexuality is conceivably a result of cultural conditioning, considering his teacher told him that humans cannot be both boy and girl or neither. Oskar does not have the words or knowledge to address that Eli is in fact non-binary. As previously established, adults expect children to be heterosexual. Within the confines of heteronormativity, a relationship that does not consist of one boy/man and girl/woman would not be considered heterosexual. Therefore, Eli’s non-binary gender causes society to deem his relationship with Oskar transgressive, resulting in both children defying the social expectation surrounding childhood sexuality. Despite this social norm, Eli and Oskar

continue their intimate relationship, thus challenging the social narrative of childhood as well as compulsory heterosexuality.

Eli continues to oppose the definition of children through brutal acts of violence. Similar to Danny Glick and Claudia, Eli kills and turns human beings. He “is a rabid killer . . . [who] draws [people] in close with her performance of childlike innocence” (Cunningham 217). While walking home at night, a man—Jocke—hears a child calling out for help. Despite a “strong desire to walk away,” Jocke heads towards the child because he believes the Vållingby murderer—who is evading police—has hurt the child (73). When Jocke finally gets close to the child, he sees what he believes is a girl. “She” asks him to pick her up and carry her. As soon as Jocke starts to walk toward a restaurant with the little girl in his arms, he feels something akin to a bee sting on his neck; however, Eli has latched onto Jocke’s throat: “the girl’s jaw lay pressed against his chin. Her grip around his neck grew tighter and the pain stronger” (75). Not only does Eli use his body to gain the trust of adults, but he also uses his ability to pass as a girl. Eli pretending to be a girl works “because of the cultural investment in the construction of ‘little girl’ as helpless object, [no one] thinks twice before stopping to pick up the small vampire body in the snow, allowing that very assignation of value—of innocence and threatlessness—to cause [them] death directly” (Cunningham 218). By playing the part of an innocent, helpless female child, Eli can easily find and kill prey.

Eli’s utilization of the “little girl” image echoes Claudia’s deliberate manipulation of victims through her child-like body. However, unlike Claudia, Eli is not biologically female. Eli’s decision to use his physical androgyny to be read as female supports the idea that society views female children as being more vulnerable and innocent than their male counterparts.

However, as Eli becomes more desperate for blood, he abandons the feminine ruse to attack a local woman named Virginia. As she walked home, “a heavy weight struck her in the back and she fell helplessly to the side. Her cheek met snow and the film of the tears was transformed into ice . . . Then she felt searing pain in her throat as sharp teeth penetrated the skin . . . Against her cheek there were claws digging into the soft flesh . . . all the way in until they reached the cheekbone” (221). Eli’s physical assault on Virginia is severely violent and executed through an ambush rather than manipulation. Eli’s violence, both through manipulation and not, is a rejection of the expected innocence of children. Nevertheless, like Danny Glick and Claudia, Eli’s violence does not successfully subvert the social institution of childhood because, as a vampire, he is already not considered an “ideal” child.

Eli’s vampiric status is not the only reason society cannot and will not view him as a “real” child. Similar to Claudia, Eli’s physical body does not correlate with his mental age. Eli is physically twelve-year-olds; however, the child vampire tells Oskar that they were born 220 years ago. While it is true that Eli has been around for many years, he admits to Oskar that inside he still feels twelve:

‘So you are old, inside. In your head.’

‘No, I’m not. That’s the only thing I still think is strange. I don’t understand it.

Why I never . . . in a way . . . get any older than twelve.’ (272)

Eli’s behavior throughout the novel contradicts his statement, making it unclear whether or not he is sincere at this moment. Considering Oskar eventually becomes Eli’s new caregiver, he might be misleading Oskar in an attempt to connect with him. Further evidence to support this claim is in Håkan’s description of Eli. Håkan—Eli’s human companion—is a child predator who

procures blood for Eli when he is unable to do it for himself. He notices that Eli's eyes showed "an ancient person's knowledge and indifference," and he truly believes that Eli is "older than he. No longer a child" (108). Therefore, Eli is essentially an adult in a child's body. Eli's age, violence, and non-binary gender do not subvert the social narrative of childhood, but they do expose characteristics that are deemed unacceptable or "monstrous," revealing the societal fear that children are more mature, violent, and sexual than adults are comfortable with.

The disparity between Eli's mind and body may not be subversive, but it does reveal one of the dangers associated with the traditional definition of childhood. Unlike Claudia, Eli does not voice any distress concerning his entrapment in a twelve-year-old body. In fact, he believes his body is the reason he has been able to survive: "That's maybe why I've been able to survive. Because I'm small. And people want to help me. But . . . for very different reasons" (349). Eli's stature has ensured his survival, but it has also attracted help from child predators. The agreement between Håkan and Eli requires Håkan to obtain blood for Eli in exchange for contact that will satisfy Håkan's sexual needs. As a child sexual predator, Håkan finds Eli perfect because he is "eternally twelve years old, beautiful, and still older than any human child" (Troy 141). Håkan's sexual preference for children exposes how society has socially constructed childhood in a way that James Kincaid argues "has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing" (qtd. in Troy 5n133). Håkan revels in the fact that Eli will forever fit his sexual preference, while also denying how inappropriate his sexual preference is because Eli is "older" than him.

The dynamic between Eli and Håkan, though unpleasant, is consensual. Eli controls when and how Håkan can be intimate with him. Despite Eli's physical capabilities, his small physique

makes him vulnerable. Eli tells Oskar that he has slept through a large portion of his existence, and “when [he] wake[s] up [he is] . . . little again. And weak. That’s when [he] need[s] help” (349). Thus, Håkan could have physical power over Eli, but he does not exert that power because he does not want to lose the convenient and essentially eternal physical relationship between them. However, Håkan’s patience and self-restraint vanish following his death. While out attempting to obtain blood for Eli, the police capture Håkan, but he manages to pour acid on his face before being arrested. The acid does not kill Håkan, but it does cause massive injuries that place him in the hospital. Eli comes to visit him, and—knowing his life is essentially over—he silently asks Eli to drink his blood, which he knows will end in death.⁹ Eli grants this request but is interrupted, prohibiting him from breaking Håkan’s neck. Eli rushes off, and Håkan decides to jump out of the window, causing his body to die; however, as a result of Eli’s feeding, Håkan does not stay dead for long. The newly risen Håkan is not a vampire like Eli, rather he is more like a zombie with one thing on his mind: his beloved.

When Håkan returns to their apartment building, Eli assumes Håkan is intent on killing him, but the truth is much worse. As an undead creature, “Håkan is the epitome of the pedophile as [a] ruthless predator, governed exclusively by his cravings: a brain-dead monster with a constant erection” (Troy 141). At first, Eli is afraid of his former assistant, but this quickly dissipates as he assumes Håkan is governed by the same rules as a regular vampire.¹⁰ Håkan—lacking previous inhibitions—pursues the sexual gratification he has always wanted, resulting in a horrific rape scene. Håkan’s attack reveals what can result from the social fixation on the innocence and vulnerability of children: “Eli was being handled, like an object. While he

⁹ Eli has to break the neck of his victims so they do not return as vampires or worse.

¹⁰ I.e. they have to be invited into a residence, and they can be killed by a stake through the heart.

was swimming to the surface of the darkness he had sunk into he felt how his body, at a distance, in another part of the sea [. . .] was being handled” (392). Eli’s assault illustrates how innocence can make children more vulnerable to abuse, but it also points to another recurring theme within the child vampire narrative: a lack of autonomy allows adults to make decisions about children’s bodies. Believing that children are vulnerable, means they are helpless. At best, this results in adults protecting children, but it opens the door to those who wish to harm children and/or their bodies.

Eli openly rejects the social narrative of childhood through his existence as a vampire while also uncovering the damage it can do to children; however, he is not the only character with this ability. Oskar, though not a vampire, also rebels against the assertion that children are pure, innocent, and nonviolent. When readers first encounter Oskar, he is the target of extreme bullying. He is small, weak, and often releases his bladder when being tormented by his classmates, Jonny, Micke, and Tomas. It is not quite clear why Oskar is the victim, but through examining Oskar and his tormentors, it becomes evident that none of these children would fit the socially imagined definition of a child. Full and constant innocence is impossible for anyone to achieve—adult or child, as readers see through Oskar. He is not wholly innocent and does express violent desires. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, he tends to steal: “He had been caught shoplifting once at a Konsum, another grocery chain, about a year ago now” (15). He continues to steal from other stores throughout the novel; he even calls himself the “Master Thief” (15). His stealing is relatively harmless, typically only resulting in a few pieces of candy. However, Oskar also has a strong desire for violence that manifests itself through role-playing.

Oskar has an inability to defend himself against his tormentors, further placing him in a powerless position. To feel like he does have power, he often pretends to kill the lead bully, Jonny. Armed with the biggest kitchen knife he could find, Oskar hurries into the forest near his home. In a frenzy, Oskar jabs his knife into a tree fantasizing all the while that the tree is Jonny: *“One stab for what you did to me in the bathroom today. One for when you tricked me into playing knuckle poker. And I’m cutting your lips out for everything nasty you’ve ever said to me”* (26). Oskar saturates his false revenge in extraordinarily violent language and images. Oskar imagines that Jonny is “bleeding from every orifice,” and when he has finished, Oskar licks a cut on his hand, pretending “it was Jonny’s blood he was tasting” (26). During his walk home, Oskar no longer feels fear from either Jonny or any unseen threat in the forest. In fact, his murderous performance positively affects him to such a degree that he decides it is “something he [is] going to do again. It [is] a fun game” (27). Oskar gains a sense of dominance from this game, revealing the power of a child’s imagination. In *‘Salem’s Lot*, Mark Petrie and Ben Mears showed how important imagination is for both adults and children. This sentiment is presented again through Oskar who unveils the potential for imagination to alleviate the negative feelings associated with being stuck in a powerless position. However, the violent nature of Oskar’s “game” indicates that he is not wholly a nonviolent, innocent child.

Furthermore, as Oskar’s relationship with Eli deepens, he begins to transform his “play” violence into real acts of violence. In a moment of self-defense, Oskar pummels Jonny with a big branch: “Oskar clenched his teeth. When Jonny was a little more than an arm’s length away Oskar swung the stick against his shoulder. Jonny ducked and Oskar felt a mute thwack in his hands when the heavy end of the stick struck Jonny square on the ear. He fell to the side like a

bowling pin, landing outstretched on the ice, howling” (195). Although this instance shows the violence Oskar is capable of, it also shows how Oskar—similar to child vampires—encompasses both adult and child traits. Oskar feels a rush after subduing Jonny and drawing blood, even thinking, “*I could whack him a few more times and then it’s all over*” (194). However, in the end, Oskar feels guilt and remorse, offering his sock to Jonny as a way to stop the bleeding. In this one scene, Oskar displays the violence of an adult and the innocence and compassion of a child. Thus, he exposes the inaccuracy of using innocence and nonviolence to define childhood and a loss of innocence to define the entrance into adulthood.

Oskar illustrates the inaccuracy of the boundary between childhood and adulthood again when he participates in the killing of an adult. After Virginia orchestrates her own death, Lacke, Virginia’s on-again-off-again boyfriend, craves vengeance. Through the deduction of multiple clues—Jocke’s death, witnessing a child attack Virginia, and a newspaper article and picture of Håkan—Lacke eventually identifies Eli as the vampire who killed Jocke, turned Virginia, and ultimately caused Virginia’s death. Knowing where Håkan lived, Lacke goes directly to Eli’s apartment, where he is sleeping. In anticipation of leaving with Eli, Oskar ditches school to await nightfall at their apartment building. After seeing police officers outside of his building, Oskar rushes to check that no one has discovered Eli. Noticing the door ajar, Oskar sneaks toward the bathroom where Eli sleeps. Oskar reaches the bathroom while Lacke has a knife raised above Eli, ready to kill him. After unsuccessfully pleading with Lacke, Oskar forcefully bashes his Rubik Cube into Lacke’s head. This attack does not kill Lacke, but it throws him down and allows Eli to latch onto Lacke’s throat, finishing him. Oskar's attack on Lacke is violent, but he

does it to protect Eli. Once again, Oskar behaves violently, but shows compassion by protecting Eli.

Oskar does not behave like the social narrative of childhood requires of him, but these actions are only done in secret when no adults can see him, suggesting that children have desires, thoughts, and behaviors that fall outside of the social narrative of childhood. Additionally, it suggests that children have a higher level of agency when they are not around adults. Jonny, Micke, and Tomas consistently shove Oskar's head into the school toilets and even whip him on the playground after school. While this treatment is violent and physically harms Oskar, his life is never in danger until he starts to fight back. In retaliation for Oskar damaging Jonny's ear with a stick, Jonny and Tomas ambush Oskar as he gets off the train after school. The boys "grabbed [Oskar] by his arms and pulled him to his feet [. . .] Jonny whispered: 'You're going to die now, you understand.' [. . .] They forced him out so his upper body was hanging out over the tracks" (431). The boys pull Oskar back from the edge in time, but they make it clear that they are the ones in power, not Oskar. By this point in the novel, it seems possible that Oskar and Eli might run away together. Thus, Oskar has the courage to burn Jonny and Tomas's desks at school. In turn, Jonny gets his older brother involved and they attempt to drown Oskar. While society expects children to engage in childish pranks and mischief, the "torment [Oskar] undergoes at the hands of the boys at school is unusually violent, easily making the point that monstrous children can come in forms other than the supernatural variety" (Calhoun 31). Readers can explain Eli's violence as a result of her existence as a vampire; however, this is not true for Oskar or his bullies. Oskar, Jonny, Tomas, and Micke challenge the social narrative of childhood by

existing as violent children who are not supernatural, implying that children who engage in violent acts are not “monsters.”

To conclude, *Let the Right One In* challenges the traditional social narrative of childhood through its young characters. Both separately and collectively, Eli and Oskar allow the reader to explore issues of the Western conception of childhood. Their intimate relationship threatens the notion that children are asexual and naturally heterosexual. Eli himself rejects such limited definition through his extreme violence and gender fluidity, while at the same time exposing how the desired quality of innocence increases a child’s vulnerability to abuse. Despite not being vampires, Oskar and those who bully him challenge the rejection of children who are violent and lack innocence, proving that the social narrative of childhood does not parallel the lived experiences of children.

Ultimately, *Let the Right One In* forces readers to contemplate the inaccuracies inherent within the definitions of adult and child, while also exposing the harm that society can do when expecting children to fit into a social construction. The novel introduces the idea of childhood sexuality and gender into the child vampire trope, expanding on the discussion of femininity from *Interview with a Vampire*. Through the use of violent human children *Let the Right One In* furthers the idea from “Popsy” that the categorization of children into either “ideal” or “monstrous” is arbitrary. *Let the Right One In* is an essential text to be included in the analysis of the social narrative of childhood because it explicitly addresses childhood sexuality and child sexual abuse, strengthening the argument that adherence to the socially imagined definition of childhood is detrimental to children.

Conclusion

Karen J. Renner argues that the intention behind stories about evil children is to confirm the innocence of children, rather than liberate children from the restrictive social narrative of childhood. The supernatural elements found within these narratives represent the causes of a child's deviant behavior such as defective genes, flawed parenting, faulty education, violent video games, sex-obsessed consumer society, and war-mongering culture. Ultimately the stories do not credit the child for their evil actions and instead find symbolic explanations for these behaviors. *'Salem's Lot*, "Popsy," *Interview with the Vampire*, and *Let the Right One In* are examples of such stories, showing that vampirism is what gives rise to "evil" in its child characters. However, these texts do urge readers to question the Western conception of childhood by uncovering the detrimental effects of adult adherence to this social construction. Together these works of fiction employ the child vampire trope to expose how society perpetuates its definition of childhood by asserting that autonomous, violent, and mature behavior is only executed by monstrous children—or, in this case—child vampires.

Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* exposes the damage that society can do to children who are not given autonomy. Danny Glick, Ralphie Glick, and Randy McDougall are all abused by adults who disregard the human right to self-governance. Mark Petrie, not having been 'turned,' has less agency than the child vampire Danny; however, Mark—like so many of King's child characters—represents how imagination makes children stronger than adults, challenging the notion that the former are naïve, and thus, always vulnerable. Danny blurs the boundary between child and adult through his predatory nature, specifically his victimization of people of all ages. Through Danny's adult-like and child-like behavior, King rejects the image of children as

innocent, pure, and nonviolent, thereby exposing the societal fear that children might not be wholly blameless and unadulterated.

In contrast, Stephen King's short story "Popsy" changes the child vampire trope, flipping it on its head. Rather than being a bloodthirsty monster, the child vampire is the epitome of the "ideal" child. Sheridan's kidnapping and subsequent poor treatment of the boy further develops the connection between a child's lack of autonomy and abuse. By disregarding the boy's personhood, Sheridan reveals the inherent imbalance in power between adults and children, a dynamic that society keeps in place by insisting that children adopt a submissive position. In the end, "Popsy" rebels against the social narrative of childhood by demonstrating that monsters are not always evil and that sometimes the real monsters are actually human. King's revision of the child vampire trope suggests an awareness of the difficulty of challenging the established norms of childhood using a creature that does not belong in the category of an "ideal" child to begin with.

Like Danny, Claudia from Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* defies the social narrative of childhood through her violent acts. She aggressively feeds upon humans and employs female child stereotypes in order to manipulate adults. However, Claudia's position as a grown woman trapped inside the body of a five-year-old girl illustrates that women are placed in the same social status as children, uncovering the influence of patriarchy on how children are viewed. The connection between womanhood and childhood made in the text expands on the imbalance of power addressed in "Popsy." While Claudia spends most of the novel resisting her submissive position when it does not suit her needs, she is ultimately killed by a group of adult vampires. Claudia's execution, fueled by the societal fear of children engaging in adult-like

behavior, demonstrates an attempt to reestablish childhood norms through the extermination of an “unideal” child.

John Ajvide’s *Let the Right One In* challenge the social narrative of childhood through Eli and his human friend Oskar. Eli, in a similar way to Claudia, acts with extreme violence that is often hidden behind innocence and vulnerability. Eli quite noticeably rejects the definition of “child” through violence, but he also defies heteronormativity through his fluid gender. Together Eli and Oskar challenge childhood sexuality through their non-heterosexual romantic relationship, showcasing the limits of the gender binary as well as a child’s restricted access to a sexual identity that falls outside of asexual and/or heterosexual. Oskar and the other human boys challenge the idea that only monstrous children are violent through their own many physical altercations. Similar to “Popsy,” *Let the Right One In* questions the idea that monstrosity equates to violence.

Despite the differences in each text, collectively, they demonstrate the lack of autonomy that defines childhood in Western society. *Salem’s Lot*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Let the Right One In*, and “Popsy” challenge adherence to the social narrative of childhood by exposing the detrimental effects it has on children. Each text involves the abuse of children, connecting the lack of autonomy as well as inherent innocence to child abuse. Regardless of the power they gain as vampires, Danny, Claudia, the unnamed boy, and Eli are still vulnerable to the mistreatment of adults. Their vulnerability suggests that even those deemed “not” children are negatively affected by the definition of childhood. Together these stories

The child vampire in each text is able to reject the basic tenets of childhood, but their existence as vampires does not allow them to redefine it successfully. As Renner points out,

society uses their supernatural status to show that only “unnatural” children behave in violent and mature ways. When transformed into societal truth, Renner believes, the narrative pattern of the evil child is problematic (7-8, 13). Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A.

McDaniel argue that

[a]ccounts that sound familiar can create the feeling of knowing and be mistaken for true. This is one reason that political or advertising claims that are not factual but are repeated can gain traction with the public, particularly if they have emotional resonance. Something you once heard that you hear again later carries a warmth of familiarity that can be mistaken for memory [. . .] In the world of propaganda, this is called “the big lie” technique— even a big lie told repeatedly can come to be accepted as truth. (qtd. in Renner 13)

Similarly, evil child narratives have the potential to create and promote so-called self-evident truths, truths that can then shape perceptions, practices, institutions, and even public policies (Renner 13). If child vampire narratives are left unexamined, they can strengthen and encourage the contemporary social narrative of childhood. However, if they are explored and discussed, it is possible to recognize and expose the damaging effects of the socially constructed definition of children and childhood on the very individuals that it purports to protect. *‘Salem’s Lot*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Let the Right One In*, and “Popsy” may not perfectly subvert the social narrative of childhood, but they do challenge its existence by revealing its destructive nature. Child abuse is still prevalent, and these texts present the argument that the way we define children contributes to this perpetuation. My analysis of the child vampire trope is in no way an exhaustive study. Those who wish to expand upon the ideas presented here could explore how

the social narrative of childhood affects minority youth within Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005). Future research should continue to look at narratives involving children, especially as newer narratives emerge because, as has been shown, they can function to help us overturn the submissive status given to children.

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