

Children in horror

[Family](#), [Children](#)



With the release of *Orphan* upon us, it seems as good a time as any to consider the role that kids have played in the horror genre. Other groups have fairly consistent, even ritualized roles in films. Men as antagonists are usually the threat of aggressive male sexuality, wielding phallic weaponry and chasing down hapless female victims. Women are either the sexualized teenaged victim, the virginal survivor, or in some classic horror, the threat of female social and sexual empowerment to male hegemony. But children in horror movies have not had such a stable role.

There are, however, three major trends in the way children fit into horror plots. We'll call them "the silent witness," "the creepy little kid," and "the un-victim." The silent witness is used most commonly in ghost films like *The Messengers* and *Mirrors*. These characters often don't speak at all (perhaps due to some earlier trauma or developmental shortfall) or they only speak in short, cryptic messages. The driving notion behind these characters is that in their innocence they don't know to be scared of the ghosts and ghoulies, or in other cases, they retain some knowledge of trust or secret about life that we as adults have forgotten.

Either way, these characters represent an almost covetous reverence for the ideal of childhood innocence. The sound of the child's laughter is usually central to at least one scene, reminding us again of the child's innocence, but also implying that the child is not alone. One of the most elegant, though not central, uses of this character type is in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in the scene when the child, Barry, goes missing. Of course everyone's favorite use of children in horror movies is the creepy little kid.

This is the category that Orphan falls under and also incorporates a lot of ghost films like *The Grudge* and *The Unborn*, but it can also include demon-child movies like *The Omen*. The protagonists of these films are often the parents, or adopted parents, of the creepy kid in question, and these films play subliminally on oedipal anxieties. In films where the kid is a ghost, it will sometimes be “the good ghost” who is trying to warn and protect the other characters. But even if the child ghost is not benevolent, it’s still usually not the embodiment of pure rage that ghosts of adult men tend to be.

Instead, the threat they pose is usually more akin to a trapped animal, and often these characters are associated with a specific animal or take on animalistic traits. Whether alive or dead though, creepy little girls have become iconic within the horror genre. With sunken eyes, perfect hair, and always the same style of going-to-church dress, the image of the creepy little girl has become standardized, but the fact that it still remains creepy while being so familiar is a testament to its ability to strike a deep psychological chord with the audience. In many ways the creepy little girl is the flip side of the silent witness character.

Both imply that young children know more about their surroundings than they let on, but whereas the silent witness can’t communicate, the creepy little girl won’t, inevitably to nefarious ends. Where the silent witness represents the purity and innocence of childhood, the creepy little kid represents all the cruelty and selfishness that children are capable of. Finally, there is what I like to call the un-victim. These are the kids in movies who get chased by the bad guys, but everyone knows they’re going to live

through the end of the film. Classic examples would be Tommy Jarvis in *Friday the 13th Part IV*, or Reggie in *Part V*.

A more recent example would be the two kids in *Signs*. These kids are un-victims because they're threatened through the entire movie, but never get killed off because killing a kid in a movie is going too far for most filmmakers (though apparently not for Lars Von Trier in *Antichrist*). As a result, these kids end up being a sort of safety blanket for the viewer. We know that they're safe, and therefore we allow them to provide us some security and even the occasional moment of levity. For many horror fans though, these kids turn into an annoyance very quickly (Dakota Fanning in *War of the Worlds*). This is of course not at all comprehensive.

Films that break these molds are often far better off for it, as just in general movies that buck or reverse trends and stereotypes are usually more creative and better made movies. Plus, this summary does not include demonic pregnancy movies like *Rosemary's Baby*, or movies aimed at children like *Gremlins*. And then there are a few movies that merge and meld these tropes together. Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* has not only the prototypical creepy little girls, but Danny Torrance incorporates all three character tropes. He is himself a creepy little kid at times, but at other times he acts as the silent witness.

But then in the third act when the emphasis of the film begins to shift towards Jack's insanity, Danny becomes an un-victim. So this is by no means a bible of children in horror movies, but it is an interesting topic to contemplate how children factor into a genre that is specifically meant to not be seen by them. Adults have always had a very interesting and compelling

relationship with notions of childhood, and it's certainly not insignificant that children, in one role or another, find their way so consistently into the horror genre, where all the fears and anxieties of the human psyche find their voice.