

Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children in Contemporary Gothic Narratives

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Abstract

This article looks into altered views of children and the very idea of childhood in our time by discussing the intersection of the increasingly prominent themes of evil dolls and “bad children” in contemporary Gothic literary and cinematic narratives. To elaborate on this subject, the film *The Boy* (2016) by William Brent Bell and the short story “The Doll-Master” (2016) by Joyce Carol Oates are closely investigated, but a few other literary works and movies addressing related issues are discussed as well. The portrayal of both children and dolls, as well as the intricate bond between them, as being wicked in these works is disquieting, for this child-doll bond may be seen as mirroring a deepening co-dependence between persons and things, makers and made objects in our time, one which could tend to blur the boundary between the living and the inanimate, the self and the Not-Me. To probe more deeply into the uncanny child-doll relationship in these contemporary Gothic tales, we will look at it from various angles—including ancient ritualistic effigies, puppet theater, figurine artifacts for household display, children’s dolls, the concomitant development of the modern toy industry and youth subcultures, and the “possessed doll” Gothic subgenre. Through this cross-disciplinary investigation of the constantly evolving culture of “human simulacra,” the article will try to show how lifeless objects like toy dolls may become material embodiments of our contrasting, ever-changing attitudes toward the idea of childhood and our rapport with things.

Keywords

dolls, evil children, childhood, Gothic literature, horror films, Joyce Carol Oates

This article looks into the altered views of children and the very idea of childhood in our time through discussing the intersection of the increasingly prominent themes of evil dolls and “bad children” in contemporary Gothic literary and cinematic narratives.¹ To elaborate on the subject, the film *The Boy* (2016) by William Brent Bell and the short story “The Doll-Master” (2016) by Joyce Carol Oates will serve as particularly illuminating textual examples, but a few other literary works and movies addressing related issues are discussed as well. The portrayal of children and dolls as being wicked and sinister in these works is disquieting, as is the unusually intricate bonding between them, one mirroring a deepening co-dependence between persons and things, makers and made objects in our time. This tends to blur the boundary between the living and the inanimate, the self and the Not-Me. To probe more deeply into the uncanny child-doll relationship in these contemporary Gothic tales, this article looks at this relationship from various angles—mostly related to the constantly evolving culture of “human simulacra” in general—including those concerned with ancient ritualistic effigies, puppet theater, figurine artifacts for household display, children’s dolls, the concomitant development of the modern toy industry and youth subcultures, and the “possessed doll” Gothic subgenre. Through cross-disciplinary investigations, the article attempts to infer the complex messages the silent dolls in contemporary Gothic texts are trying to give us. It aims to demonstrate how these lifeless objects could be or become material embodiments of our contrasting and ever-changing attitudes towards the idea of childhood and our rapport with things.

The Boy recounts a strange encounter between an American nanny, Greta Evans, and a life-sized porcelain doll called Brahms which she is hired to take care of in a sumptuous English country house. Greta is surprised to find that Mr. and Mrs. Heelshire treat the doll like a living child, bidding her to do the same by following strict rules such as playing music for it, reading it bedtime stories, kissing it goodnight and never covering its face. Soon afterwards the elderly couple leave the house, drown themselves and send back a letter to Brahms, saying “the girl is yours now.” Left alone with the doll, Greta experiences various unusual occurrences,

¹ Psychologists and sociologists have provided varying definitions of childhood and adolescence/youth; it is hard to set a definite age point that marks the boundary between the two, and between adolescence/youth and adulthood. For the sake of simplicity, I use the marker of citizenship common in many countries, following Karen J. Renner in her discussion of contemporary Gothic children narratives, to refer to a “child” as anyone under the age of 18, since this is how the laws generally govern certain rights such as voting, drinking alcohol, age of consent, and so on (*The “Evil Child”* 5).

including the doll moving by itself and a small childlike voice calling to her at midnight, begging her to play with it. From a grocery boy, Greta learns that twenty years ago the real Brahms, the only son of the Heelshires, died in a fire on his eighth birthday, the same day as his playmate, a little girl, was brutally murdered. Scared that the strange events she has witnessed are being caused by this child's unhappy spirit, and reflecting on the child she had herself lost to a miscarriage at the hands of her abusive spouse Cole, Greta begins to treat the doll as her own child. When Cole tracks her down and breaks into the house, Greta asks the doll for help. At last everything is revealed when the real Brahms appears, breaking through a mirror, and kills Cole with a shard of the shattered glass. We now discover that, after murdering the little girl, the real Brahms hid himself behind the walls of the mansion, never appearing again in daylight and communicating his wishes to his parents through the doll. The actual Brahms, now a young man, asks Greta to stay, but she flees after stabbing him. The final shot cuts to Brahms, still alive, piecing together the broken porcelain doll, seemingly awaiting his next nanny.

"The Doll-Master" is another Gothic tale about a malevolent doll and an evil child. After his cousin Emily passes away while still a young girl, a young boy called Robbie takes away her doll. Though he treasures the toy, he is later forbidden by his parents to play with it because "dolls are for girls." However, this only increases his fascination with dolls and leads to his establishing a collection made up of "found dolls" that he has come across out in the streets. They vary in appearance and were discovered mostly in precarious areas on the outskirts of the New Jersey suburb of Prospect Hill. From time to time, there are news reports of girls who have gone missing from the area, but Robbie seems oblivious. Instead, he continues to wander the streets with his Friend, whose identity is never revealed and who often gives Robbie advice or commands during the latter's acquisition of "found dolls." With his life now completely consumed by his doll collecting, Robbie gives up his studies and all social activities; his obsession goes even beyond the grasp of Dr. G, a psychotherapist specializing in troubled adolescents. The truth gradually dawns on the reader: these "found dolls" are missing girls whom Robbie has either discovered already dead or murdered himself. Finally Robbie's mother uncovers his crime, and the story ends on a note of suspense, with Robbie contemplating matricide.

Critical Literature on (Uncanny) Dolls

The dolls in both *The Boy* and "The Doll-Master" are not simply props in

these fictions, but dominant characters in their own right. The presence of the dolls is so striking that we cannot help wondering what these voiceless objects could possibly be articulating in these tales. Furthermore, do these creepy dolls, which confound or subvert our general expectation that dolls will be cute and soothing, have any forbears or siblings in earlier or contemporary Gothic narratives? In any case, what is the reason for, or purpose of, creating such unconventional, shocking dolls? Some scholars from various disciplines have tried to make sense of the cultural messages that these dolls might be meant to communicate. Their research will provide a good starting point for our investigation into these issues.

The social and cultural historian Miriam Forman-Brunell is one of the most prominent scholars in the relatively new field of “doll studies.” She has published *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930*, and edited the 2012 special issue on doll studies in the journal *Girlhood Studies*. In its introduction, she traces the slow development of this academic field—from the late nineteenth-century “A Study of Dolls,” co-authored by G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis, up to the 1990s, when dolls became the subject of greater scrutiny by psychologists, sociologists, educators, and other academics. Forman-Brunell points out several very noticeable new directions in contemporary doll studies, paying particular attention to cross-disciplinary critical approaches, the doll’s agency in “cultural work” (“Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls” 8), and the child’s active production of “cultural meanings” in the course of her or his playing with dolls, where such play is considered to be a site of “shifting, performative, prescriptive” identity formation (“Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls” 9).

Other researchers have tried to investigate the meaning(s) of dolls from diverse perspectives. Bill Brown, for example, has placed his reflections on dolls and toys within the broader framework of “thing theory.” In *Other Things*, he directs our attention to the phenomenal increase in our interest in things or objects as part of the “new materialism” of the first decade of the twenty-first century (*Other Things* 11). Regarding the cultural meaning of those objects most associated with childhood—toys—Brown acknowledges the contribution of Walter Benjamin, who in his view laid the foundation for a new understanding of the child at play through his interpretation of toys. Benjamin regarded toy play as demonstrating a child’s special “interaction with the material world,” and this subsequently inspired political and historical approaches to interpreting the child-doll relationship. In contrast to disciplines such as child psychology and cultural anthropology, which had previously described how the “object world” produces those subjects by which it is produced, Benjamin was more attracted to the “highly-charged reproduction of

the material world” that doll-playing might involve (qtd. in Brown, *Other Things* 235).

Brown also notes a peculiar type of child’s toy—probably the most unsettling type—the “talking dolls,” which he refers to as “the dummy or doll-come-to-life figures” (*Other Things* 227). Specific examples of these include the automaton Olympia in E. A. Hoffman’s tale “The Sandman,” and the possessed dolls or ventriloquist’s talking dummies from 1950s horror films and *Twilight Zone* TV episodes. Seemingly possessing a secret life that pits them against human beings, these talking dolls have become firmly rooted in our collective cultural nightmare. What makes them objects of such abiding fascination, Brown contends, is their “instability,” that is, their “fluctuation between the animate and inanimate, person and thing” (*Other Things* 227).

This ontological “instability” of the doll-coming-to-life type explains the apparently improbable association between a child’s plaything and terror; eventually “evil dolls” even became a well-recognized subgenre of contemporary horror fiction and film. It is said that the malevolent ventriloquist’s dummy Hugo in the 1945 British horror film *Dead of Night* was the first killer doll in the history of cinema; William Goldman’s 1976 novel *Magic* also belongs to this “evil ventriloquist’s dummy” subtype. The episode “The After Hours” in the 1960 *Twilight Zone* TV series featured a “fashion” mannequin who longs for a real life, while the 1975 made-for-television “anthology” horror film *Trilogy of Terror* depicted a fetish doll in the warped form of a warrior from the Zuni tribe, one which unleashes a malicious spirit. The archetypal killer doll of late twentieth-century popular film is of course Chucky, a “Good Guys” doll possessed by a criminal who is exercising voodoo or black magic. “Chucky” has developed into a lasting franchise with several spin-offs since its first appearance in the 1988 feature film *Child’s Play*. Another doll-horror sensation in recent years has been *Annabelle* (2014), which is based on the supposedly true story of a possessed doll now housed in a museum. Acknowledging the particular charm and terror of dolls, Ellen Datlow published the first collection of doll-themed horror tales in *Doll Collection* (2016), anthologizing a brilliant handful of works that try to capture the mesmerizing yet bewildering allure of dolls.

These contemporary “evil doll” narratives demonstrate just how thin the line is between our love and fear, and our senses of comfort and horror, with regard to dolls. Sigmund Freud’s discussion of “the uncanny” has often been referred to in the context of interpreting our ambivalent sentiments regarding dolls. In his 1919 essay “The ‘Uncanny,’” Freud already noted that dolls can arouse feelings of unease

or eeriness because they fall into the category of objects that look real enough to be alive. “Uncanny,” or *Unheimlich* in German, is defined by Freud as meaning both “at home” and “not at home,” whereas here we might think of dolls and their defining characteristic of being “alive” and “not alive,” both in themselves and in the way we perceive them. Theories of uncanniness have been further elaborated upon since Freud’s time, and one remarkable extension of Freud’s observation is the well-known theory of “the uncanny valley” put forward by robotics professor Masahiro Mori. Aiming to attribute human reactions to robots, this theory posits that objects with features that are human-like yet are not exactly like actual human beings tend to elicit visceral feelings of revulsion. Here the “valley” image suggests the undulation of the degree of our sense of comfort regarding these objects. This “rises” as the objects look more and more human, until they reach a certain point at which they look simultaneously too human and not quite actually human. At this point our comfort level drops off sharply; it may rise again on the other side of the valley when the object is made to look and move exactly like a human being. According to this pattern, it may be in the very *valley* of uncanniness that the Gothic doll-coming-to-life *type* takes up residence.

Freud’s concept of *unheimlich* as meaning simultaneously “at home” and “not at home” illuminates another, closely-related aspect of the evil doll’s “power of terror.” Freud said that “uncanniness” in this sense is the result of something familiar that should have been hidden and kept secret but which was nevertheless brought to light (224-25). In the so-called “evil doll” narratives, what has been brought to light is not the evilness of the dolls, creepy as they may look, but more often than not what lurks in the human beings who interact with them. These could be the doll’s owner or manipulator or the lingering human spirit that clings to the doll. What is truly uncanny about these dolls is that they expose the darker side of their human masters that they have tried to keep hidden.

Victoria Nelson offers a more complex explanation of what we really fear in these uncanny dolls. Contrasting the ventriloquist’s dummy Hugo with Hoffman’s automaton Olympia, Nelson holds that this first killer doll (Hugo) marked a significant turning point in the representation of human simulacra. The mechanical doll Olympia, however human-like she might have looked, was only an insentient accomplice in her master’s crimes; she was no more than a soulless, self-less void made of elaborate mechanical pieces. However, more recent evil dolls are often characterized by autonomy and spontaneity; humans are no longer in charge of them, but become their terrorized, abused victims (257).

Considered from another angle, this new image of rebellious, monstrous dolls

could come to problematize the very idea of childhood. As Nelson remarks, “These stories play on the seeming self-contradiction of an inanimate object invested with the aura of childhood innocence that is suddenly infused with (always) demonic energy—the upsurge of the supernatural grotesque from the least anticipated source” (258). It is indeed noticeable that in recent Gothic narratives, the bonding between evil dolls and children has been increasingly emphasized. Formerly, evil dolls commonly served the purposes of adults, such as the ventriloquist or the fetishism cultist; however, Chucky, Annabelle, and Brahms are all depicted as children’s playmates. The dolls and children then establish a very special intimacy and co-dependence that even their parents cannot understand or even attempt to enter into. This new manifestation of the child’s playmate suggests an altered understanding of childhood itself.

The Boy and “The Doll-Master” both feature an intricate bond between the doll and the child, but set themselves apart from other evil doll narratives by subverting the commonplace pattern according to which the possessed doll is the vicious victimizer, while the child is the innocent prey, as in the cases of Chucky and Annabelle. This is why I chose these two texts but not other, more well-known “evil doll” tales for closer examination. We can see that, in contrast with the former criminal doll vs. pure child binary opposition, now the doll and the child are *two in one*, composing a devilish duo that terrorizes home sweet home. The evil dolls were formerly either possessed by malevolent spirits (almost always those of adults) or manipulated by a crooked ventriloquist (as in *Dead Silence* [2007]). However, the doll Brahms is actually operated by a boy who is hidden in darkness; the invisible, quasi-supernatural and hostile specter haunting the house is the child himself. The inseparable porcelain doll and spectral child compose a bizarre body-and-soul synthesis. Likewise, the transformation of dead girls into “found dolls” depends totally upon Robbie’s wishful thinking; the dolls’ very existence is purely founded on the child’s fantasy. The child and the doll have an intertwining, mutually-dependent coexistence, serving for each other by way of compensation as the extension or even the replica of the(ir) self. This intricate human-thing relationship will be further explored in the following section, where a broader perspective on the cultural history of human simulacra will be taken.

The Doll and the Child as Evil Twins: Cross-Disciplinary Interpretations

To probe the new, uncanny relationship between child and doll in

contemporary Gothic fictions, I will look at this from a widened angle, that is, from the perspective of the ever-changing relation between humans and their simulacra in general. Here I will start with a brief review of the development of the Western conception of human simulacra, including ritualistic effigies, puppets and marionettes, toy dolls, and computer game avatars. By comparing and contrasting these different forms of human simulacra, we may be able to see the peculiar nature of the Gothic child-doll relationship in a clearer light.

Let us begin by reconsidering the late nineteenth-century Italian children's book *The Adventures of Pinocchio: Story of a Puppet* (afterward referred to as *Pinocchio*), a well-known tale featuring a puppet that comes to life and turns into a real boy. The radical contrast between *Pinocchio* and my subjects is that the real boy Brahm's chooses to turn himself symbolically and, in what seems a form of reversal or inversion, into a doll; likewise, Robbie prefers to regard human girls as baby dolls. Thus, these stories are no longer about the *animation* of a doll that is brought to life, but about the voluntary *de-animation* of human beings—the decision to live, or treat others, like dolls which have abandoned their human identity. This extreme reversal, as I will demonstrate in what follows, reflects a changing view of childhood, parent-child rapport, and human-thing relationships from the time of *Pinocchio*'s publication to current times.

Written by Carlo Lorenzini, who used the pseudonym Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio* was first published in book form in 1883. This immediately popular tale echoed the new fascination of artists with popular entertainment such as pantomime, circus performances, and the shadow plays of the era. More significantly, it embodied the new interest in, and excitement about, *children* at the turn of the century. In an era when artists openly defied the traditional, conservative values of bourgeois society, youthful vitality was being counted on to bring forth fresh visions and daring attitudes in order to challenge the senescent culture. This proclivity was opposed to the Enlightenment philosophers' stress on maturity, since rational thinking and a sense of civic responsibility were assumed to be capacities that only fully-developed adults could cultivate. Turn-of-the-century Europe nevertheless saw in childhood the qualities of innocence, spontaneity, and a creative imagination that had not yet been compromised by socialization, and that were more likely to destabilize the status quo.

This longing for social and spiritual "rejuvenation" was expressed in a new obsession with the idea of childhood. Driven by this zeitgeist were a multitude of modernist movements throughout Europe that mostly shared the agenda of breaking free from the old order: Young Germany, Young Vienna, Young Scandinavia, Young

Belgium, Young Poland, and the Young Turks (Segel 38). The very idea of the “child” was greatly romanticized and idealized; the new popularity of the puppet show at this time perfectly reflected a rediscovery of the world of the child. The visual arts and literature also offered abundant evidence of the response of modernist artists to these new stimuli. Emerging from this cultural backdrop, *Pinocchio* expressed Collodi’s own response to a changing artistic and social climate through his endearing portraits of children and his employment of the puppet motif.

Despite the general glorification of childhood, another and subtler aspect of *Pinocchio* begs a contradictory interpretation. Eventually the puppet wishes to become a real boy; in other words, he voluntarily gives up the perpetual state of childhood carefreeness that his puppet existence affords, opting for a path that inevitably leads toward maturing, aging, and dying. This choice might betray his desire for an acknowledged place in his family and society, in spite of the greater restraints this entails. We can even say that the moment Pinocchio chooses to become a real boy, the death knell sounds on his childhood. As Harold B. Segal indicates, Pinocchio’s choice “can be read as a manifestation of Collodi’s social conservatism and his intention in *Pinocchio* to inculcate into the young a sense of responsibility toward society and the state” (41). The English translator of the book, Nicholas J. Perella, also noticed the author’s ambivalent attitude toward childhood: on the one hand, childhood is represented through a nostalgic, romanticized lens; on the other, Collodi expresses a clear consciousness of the necessity of repressing childhood’s inclination toward the “amoral vitality and primordality that represent a threat to the idea of maturity and a workable social order” (qtd. in Segel 42). Here it is implied that Pinocchio will one day become a typical adult in a bourgeois society: punctual, conformist, and controlled by the invisible strings of various social forces, ironically not unlike a puppet.

Pinocchio probably established the first modern prototype of the puppet-human synthesis, which was followed by a host of uncannily humanized robots, cyborgs, and artificial intelligences in science fiction writings of the twentieth century. Interestingly, the equally uncanny human-doll syntheses in *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” reverse the Pinocchio prototype. Transmutating in the opposite direction, Brahmsh hides his flesh-and-blood body behind the walls and makes the porcelain doll his avatar; Robbie, meanwhile, transforms living women into collectible dolls in his private garage-gallery. What is truly disquieting about this interpretation of *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” as counter-Pinocchio narratives is its implication of an adolescent *resistance to the end of childhood*. Indulging in

extended play with dolls and seemingly perpetuated childhoods, Brahms and Robbie have been shunning the social expectations for adult males, and alienating themselves from the social structures that Pinocchio was so desperate to integrate himself into. What makes childhood so treasurable probably lies in its very transience and irreversibility; just because it is doomed to vanish, it evokes poetic nostalgia. Our tolerance of childish immaturity is probably also based on this temporal limitedness. Our responses to such contemporary “evil child” narratives as *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” insinuate, I would argue, only *limited* patience with childhood despite the long-standing praise and honor afforded childlike qualities—as found in ancient Greek culture and Romanticism, to take two prominent examples. When childhood outstays its welcome, the child who refuses to grow up will become a perturbation of normal social functions, and be regarded as a social misfit or rebel. These “bad boys” who refuse to grow up often end up being excluded or punished by adult society in contemporary Gothic “cautionary tales.”

Moreover, Pinocchio and the doll Brahms perfectly represent two very distinct patterns of the doll-coming-to-life type. Both somehow break free from their materially-determined conditions—those predestined by their wooden and porcelain bodies; however, the consequences of their liberation are very different, which, I would argue, reflects their contrasting attitudes toward the youthful pursuit of liberty and autonomy. Pinocchio frees himself from the state of thing-ness but not from social confinements, willingly submitting to the ordinance of his father or The Father. However, the doll Brahms, alongside other contemporary “evil dolls,” manifests more a will to rebel against human authorities, especially parental figures, voicing a more sophisticated, dissent-based agenda. Such a new anti-authoritarian character tellingly correlates these Gothicized dolls with those rebellious youth subcultures which have been buoyant since the 1960s.

In some sense, these rebellious dolls have mirrored deviant youth as both a social and a cultural phenomenon. An increasing number of studies have tried to provide interpretations of the growing conspicuousness of Gothicized children in contemporary literature and cinema. The collection of essays, *The “Evil Child” in Literature, Film and Popular Culture*, edited by Karen J. Renner, for example, is the first book-length study devoted to the subject. Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967), and its highly-acclaimed movie adaptation by Roman Polanski, kicked off a new era which witnessed an enormous number of fictions and films depicting child villains. Stephen King, for example, began his career in horror fiction with the novel *Carrie* (1974), which featured a teenage girl with supernatural destructive powers. Further depictions of “evil children” can be found in King’s short story

“Children of the Corn” (1977), and the novels *The Shining* (1977), *Firestarter* (1980), and *Pet Cemetery* (1983). In the 1970s, evil children had become such a mainstay of fictional worlds that one *Newsweek* editorial voiced concerns about a “growing anti-child sentiment” (Renner, “Evil Children” 3).

These upsetting contemporary portrayals of children as being deviant or “corrupted” may have reflected a multitude of familial and social changes: higher divorce rates; neglectful dual-earner couples; dysfunctional families; over-protection of children in modern families with fewer children, and especially in well-off families in prosperous countries that were often seen as producing self-centered brats; the pursuit of independence and individualism that has been promoted by modern educational theorists but that has also been associated with a boost in narcissistic, antisocial, and aggressive inclinations in adolescents; and the implicitly antisocial cultural products that were developed in advanced capitalistic market economies to cater to young consumers, which could have also contributed to the kind of inflated egoism and belligerence that characterizes contemporary youth culture. These self-demonizing, untamable youngsters, whose image has been exaggerated by sensationalist media coverage, understandably found their counterparts in contemporary Gothic narratives.

Ray Bradbury is one of a number of contemporary authors who made some trenchant observations about the evil potentiality of children, and some of his tales, including “The Small Assassin” (1946), “The Veldt” (1950), and “Let’s Play ‘Poison’” (1946) leave us with bone-chilling portraits of little monsters in the home. As Lahna Diskin puts it, Bradbury accurately depicted parents’ unspeakable fear of their own offspring: in moments when they allowed themselves to be honest about their feelings, they would admit that their children unsettled or even frightened them. The infantile psyche, not yet or not sufficiently socialized and moralized, does not follow the dictates of conscience, which have not yet been cultivated. Driven by the animalistic instinct of self-preservation, children are free from the moral obligations that constrain most adults. “The impulsive spontaneous behavior of Bradbury’s boys is seldom spoiled by conscience, for egocentricity is their prime mover,” Diskin observes (50). Hence the portrayal of monstrous children in Bradbury’s tales: they are primitive beasts; they are crouching freaks with the wrinkled faces of little old men; they are aliens who invade and loot—simply put, they are *the Other*, from a planet or species different from ours.

It is reasonable to see contemporary demonic doll narratives as a derivation from, or co-evolution of, this Western cultural imagination when it comes to aberrant children. The particular intimacy between the doll and the child, in the

horror genre and in reality, is part of the “hidden lives” of children, which sometimes bewilder their parents. Since the nineteenth century, the nursery has become the hub of many children’s “secret lives” in Western societies. According to Forman-Brunell’s doll study, by the nineteenth century the nursery had become an important and specialized area within the Western white middle-class household; organized amusements came to be located in the nursery, the space specially reserved for children. In the *Peter Pan* stories, for example, J. M. Barrie described the nursery as an “autonomous” space, where children lived apart from parents and the rest of the household (*Made to Play House* 369).

It is in such a privatized space that children may begin to enjoy an independent life, one not subordinated to and controlled by adults. They can indulge more fully in their fantasy world with toys and dolls. In this universe, these playthings have an existence that is half physical, half imaginary. Children play with dolls and arrange dollhouses according to a fantasy scenario known only to themselves, and they usually resist adult interference. They can see things in or about the dolls which grownups cannot; they can even do things which they claim the dolls have taught them. This “childish” view of dolls as living individuals was vividly reflected in the “doll fictions” of late nineteenth-century America: “Nursery shelves were lined with books about dolls, books for them such as *The Dolls’ Own Book*, which went through numerous editions, and even books *by* dolls. Stories such as ‘Dolly’s Experience, Told by Herself’ or doll memoirs were ostensibly written by doll authors” (*The Politics of Dollhood* 370). These Gilded Age doll fictions emphasized more than ever the exploration of self, interpersonal relations that reinforced the reciprocal and communicative love between child and doll, and a fantasy world that brought children beyond the confines of the materiality of dolls.²

As children are often encouraged to develop their creative imaginations, the boundary between reality and fantasy can sometimes be blurred, with the doll being

² This article may appear to be so partial to the “confusion”-between-child-and-doll thesis as to ignore the “connection” or “interaction” between the two, as I seem to suggest in this passage. It is admittedly very instructive to observe the “interactions” between doll and child and interpret them from such perspectives as child developmental psychology and pre-school pedagogy, which are inclined to regard the doll as a useful instrument for the young individual’s socialization, emotional maturation, and so on. However, in my view, it is precisely the *confusion* between the person and the thing, and that occulted longing to exist in a material form, that are truly uncanny and disturbing in contemporary Gothic doll narratives like *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master.” No doubt the child-doll “connection” could be a wonderful theme to study in children’s literature, as part of the fantasy genre, but in so far as the *Gothic turn* in the child-doll relationship is concerned, a closer scrutiny of the boundary-crossing and split-self issues may be more pertinent.

treated as a living person. Silent and immobile as the doll is, it seems to have an ability to “talk” to children and “mobilize” them. It can somehow establish communication with their little minds, which are often opaque and inaccessible to their parents. This inter-dependence of the doll and the child is quirky and sometimes worrying to adult eyes, so it understandably finds its distorted and darkened representations in Gothic narratives. The doll becomes a sinister presence that haunts the home, compromising the parent-child relationship, and even worse contaminating the hallowed domain of childhood that is believed to be immaculate and immune to evil.

The Boy and “The Doll-Master” draw from the disconcerting “hidden lives” of modern children behind closed doors. However, unlike the case in most “evil doll” narratives, *The Boy* does not blame the doll; rather, it is the boy who takes advantage of the adults’ fear of “paranormal” dolls in order to satisfy his desires. This peculiar human-thing relationship resembles what exists between a role-play-game player and his/her “avatars” nowadays. The avatar could be a sniper, a ninja, or even a hybrid monster, completely different from the player’s real identity in age, gender, race, appearance, social status, and whatever else defines and restricts an individual in the real world. These avatars provide temporary alternative identities in virtual reality; though cast in a digital, high-tech form, they essentially make possible an updated childhood experience of doll-play or other make-believe games.

Both doll-play and RPG games depend on intricate human-thing coordination to *flesh out* the player’s “soul” through the physical performance of the doll or the avatar. In some way this is what Brahms and Robbie both yearn for—to project their true self upon the porcelain doll or the “found dolls,” which serve as their avatars, fulfilling the roles they find impossible to fulfill in real life—either as a child who never grows up, or as a boy who embraces, uninhibited, his feminine temperament. Serving as “avatars” of their true selves, the dolls in these two tales appear to be the adolescent protagonists’ “doubles”—the less repressed, more spontaneous “other halves” of themselves. This is more explicitly the case in *The Boy*: here Mrs. Heelshire insists that the doll should behave exactly like the boy himself, sitting in his own chair at the dinner table and praying to God at bedtime. The boy expresses all his emotions—discontent, desire, jealousy—through the doll, making it shed tears, write threatening words on the wall, and take away Greta’s dress to prevent her from going on a date. Even after the real Brahms breaks out from behind the wall, he still asks Greta to take care of him the way she treated the doll, as if they are one and the same.

Forman-Brunell’s doll study also supports the theory that the dolls are often

appropriated by children as a medium to “act out” their inner selves. Dolls have long been undervalued as exercising only temporary and inconsequential functions in a transitional period of not-fully-developed intelligence and psychological immaturity; a child’s interaction with dolls is often taken as unsophisticated and mostly meaningless. However, Forman-Brunell highlights the “agency” of child-players (“Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls” 9): Research reveals that children show a considerable level of independent thinking when picking and matching doll’s clothes and accessories; they often make doll’s dresses, accoutrements, and dollhouses by themselves; many children also work out original short plays with their dolls and share the videos of these performances online. In this process, the children actually conceive and materialize their ideal body-image and the environment they wish for. This conscious action-taking shows that doll-play could be a process of autonomous and active production of cultural meaning, or even an embryonic form of artistic creation. Children tend to “act out” their true selves through doll-play, constructing and expressing different subjectivities.

In a strikingly *literal* sense, Brahms and Robbie make full use of the dolls to construct their desired self-images—the ideal versions of themselves. The perfect porcelain doll promises Brahms an eternal childhood—perpetual youth and beauty, the appearance of angelic innocence, and a monopoly on the attention and love of the whole household. As for Robbie, the first Baby Emily doll symbolically extends the life of his prematurely-deceased cousin Emily; the subsequent “found dolls” pamper without judgment his feminine inclinations; they are loyal companions who never bully him like his schoolmates. In his fantasy world, he becomes the genuine “doll-master,” one who not only exercises total control over his “found dolls,” but practically reimagines his own life the way he wants, as if it were his own puppet show: “The other *found dolls* might have exhibited some jealousy, or envy, regarding my taffy-skinned *found boy doll*. But they disguised their emotions well, for they knew their place and did not wish to offend me, he who was their *Doll-Master*. It was my Friend who had told me, one day, *Robbie, you are the Doll-Master. You must never surrender your authority*” (69; emphases in original).

What makes *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” complex and intriguing Gothic doll texts, I find, lies in their ability to reflect the multiple desires that human beings have attempted to gratify via various types of human simulacra throughout history. The strong mutual identification of human and doll, as discussed above, could also be understood from an anthropological perspective: anthropologists have unearthed abundant examples of humanoid replicas—probably the most primitive forms of dolls—in ancient burial sites and other holy places, thus affirming their strong

correlation with primitive religions and popular rituals. These “primeval dolls” were believed to be “the doubles” of the departed or of deities: “Kings and people of means often created replicas of themselves; artisans were enlisted to fabricate doubles and triples of the royal personage, often burying the additional selves with the original” (Asma 317). These earliest dolls were essentially a remake molded upon one’s own image so as to actualize the divine state of immortality; they played a key role in resurrection rites, and were expected to extend life to infinity.

In their informative doll studies, German folklorists Manfred Bachmann and Claus Hansmann include also these ancient ritualistic effigies in their global historical survey of dolls, where they mention an African tribal custom related to childbirth: According to tradition, when women miscarried or had difficulty giving birth, they bought a gourd doll and played with it until they had a child. After the children in question grew up, they, in turn, were made to play with that same gourd doll, “as if they were twins,” until they too had their own children. The families involved were warned that, if the doll was thrown away or sold, the family would get sick or die (25). Indeed, the tie between doll and human in these earlier phases of civilization was so strong that some researchers, including Stephen T. Asma, even consider this sort of primitive custom to be one of the cultural contexts from which the haunting Gothic trope of the *doppelgänger* emerged.

In his famous discussion of the *doppelgänger* in the “The Uncanny,” Freud also addressed the ritualistic significance of these primitive dolls. The idea of another version of ourselves, Freud argued, is a thinly veiled expression of our desire to extend our lives (not unlike the promise of contemporary cloning mechanisms). Freud quoted Otto Rank in interpreting the double as “originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial’ of the power of death” (235).³ Here the desire to live on and not perish, to never terminate, is made manifest in the form of a fantasy about having another self. This fantasy, Freud pointed out, “led the Ancient Egyptians to develop the art of making images of the dead in lasting materials” (235). Freud thus made explicit connections between primitive dolls, the double, and our age-old resistance to human finitude. He reasoned further that, as we grow up, we learn to overcome our desire for eternal life; this urge must be repressed so as to transform it from a positive to a negative desire. However, like whatever is negated, this longing is often only pushed deeper underground, turning into part of the unconscious. The *doppelgänger* thus comes to

³ With regard to his discussion of doubles, Freud acknowledged his debt to his colleague Otto Rank’s 1914 work *Der Doppelgänger*.

be regarded with dread and repulsion: “From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (235). In this way, Freud addresses the questions of why we are so disturbed by horror stories of doubles generally, and why “evil twin” scenarios are so commonly feared.

To some extent, *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” are innovative appropriations of ancient, ritualistic doll customs and the Gothic trope of the *doppelgänger*. These two traditions can be seen as ingeniously merged in these two texts so that the porcelain doll and the “found dolls” turn out to be the boys’ *doubles*, enabling the extension of their narcissistic selves. They clearly suggest the return of a long repressed, hence “unfamiliar” or “uncanny” desire: the infantile wish to confound the restrictions of time by creating a copy of oneself. We can even regard Brahm’s as symbolically burying his mortal self (behind the walls) and aspiring to live his second life or “afterlife” in the everlasting form of a porcelain doll—his double, his inhuman and immortal twin. Likewise, Robbie’s “carriage house,” where he stores his doll collection, is nothing less than an Egyptian *mastaba* that is expected to preserve the youth and beauty of his cousin Emily and the other girls in their prime.

A Toy Story: From Youth Subcultures to Reactionary Nostalgia

In the following section, I will continue my discussion of the person-thing relationship as reflected in *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master,” but examine it from another perspective, that of the cultural meanings of toys. This is clearly a comprehensive topic, but I will focus first on the transition (in the human world) from childhood to adulthood, and then on the role played by dolls in contemporary youth subcultures, and finally on the conflicting social-class ideologies which might be embodied or implied by these dolls. This cultural-historical perspective is brought in to further elucidate the significance of toys—of which dolls are one of the most important types—in the material culture of children. We might look at the significance of toys in general from the perspective of their therapeutic psychological function, that of their role in constructing social relationships and helping to form their users’ self-identity, and that of their potential to provide their users with an unspoken but embodied expression of their users’ ideological inclinations. As I will demonstrate, these three perspectives are reflected and also further nuanced and further complicated in the child-doll relationships we find in *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master.”

Discussing the role of toys in children’s development, social psychologist Erik H. Erikson observed their ability to ease the anxiety of their users when the latter

are approaching the end of their childhood—that is, when they begin to envisage themselves in certain “work roles”:

The work role which we begin to envision for ourselves at the end of childhood is, under favorable conditions, the most reassuring role of all, just because it confirms our sense of our skills and permits us to recognize ourselves in visible works. But the unrest of puberty and the need to leave childhood behind ... combine to produce a variety of conflicting self-images, just at the age when we must begin to see ourselves not only as workers, but also as mates, parents, and citizens, such that we may feel that we ourselves are being sacrificed to technical perfection and the general streamlining of roles.... No wonder that the young may be apt to regress in order to stay in touch with the playful child within themselves, or to “drop out” in order to gain more time. (106)

Both Brahms and Robbie are confronted with psychological crises during their transition to adulthood—sexuality and gender orientation, the father/mother issue, peer bullying, societal isolation, antisocial behavior and so on—which are similar to those that Erikson pointed out. They are thus consciously or unconsciously inclined toward regression to a relatively less stressful phase of life. This longing for a prolonged childhood is expressed through their unusual attachment to toys, with which they wish to flee from the grip of time. In *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master,” children construct their narcissistic world centered on toys; their excessive, even morbid, obsession with these tokens of childhood generates the very Gothic terror of the tales. In fact, many other contemporary Gothic literary and cinematic narratives repetitively explore the horror lurking behind children’s toys and games, including “The Veldt” and “Let’s Play ‘Poison’” by Ray Bradbury, *Beware! Children at Play* (1989) by Mik Cribben, and *Hansel and Gretel* (2007) by Yim Pil-sung.

Looking at toys from an individual psychological perspective and also a social-networking perspective, many researchers have argued that it is often through the act of “playing” that children construct their distinct subcultures, which not infrequently subvert the mainstream values that adults try to impose on them. The so-called “monster kids” phenomenon of mid-twentieth-century America, for example, points to an energetic, contemporary, youth-dominant and distinctly material culture that is centered on toys. Children’s fascination with apparently ugly,

disgusting, and even “monstrous” toys is puzzling to adults; the emotional, even ideological affinity between young people and these alien “things” is even more disconcerting. W. Scott Poole has pointed out that *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, a monster-themed magazine featuring the monsters of 1930s and 1940s horror and sci-fi movies, contributed significantly to the emergence of the first youth-centered sub-culture of “monster fans” in Western history (187). Young readers often purchased the magazine in secret to avoid the admonishments of disapproving adults, and passed it around among their peers, forming a loosely structured fringe group through mutual recognition, one which possessed a certain underground, clandestine character. These young monster fans expressed a rebellious attitude toward authority and conformity through their fascination with violence and terror, an attitude which was decried, and perhaps also feared, by their elders.

These “monster kids” later exercised a considerable impact on toy design and marketing in the late twentieth-century. Previously toys had been characterized by explicit pedagogical purposes and were intended to cultivate moral values in members of the younger generation. These toys often constituted a miniaturized worldview of adult life: With their parents’ guidance, girls were taught to take care of dolls, cook, and do house chores via games such as playing house, while boys were initiated into the world of athletic competitions, professional careers, and even warfare with their model racing cars, ambulances, tanks, and so forth. However, in the 1960s, toy manufacturers, most notably Aurora, began launching monster figures, insect toys, and other items with deliberately “unattractive” appearances. This new wave of toy design reflected the idiosyncratic tastes of “monster kids”: rather than learning to adapt to social life and take on adult responsibilities, this new generation of youngsters was more inclined to indulge in surreal fantasies as an escape from pragmatic, everyday adult life. These monster toys later even became infused with a certain anti-social character, reinforcing young people’s desire and ability to express their rejection of adult values. As Poole rightly acknowledges, it is often within marginal cultures where “monster fandom” is common that adolescents tend to find a sense of belonging that they have difficulty acquiring in their family and school (188). These monstrous toys relate more to their secret selves, which often conceal a sense of dislocation and exclusion.

Catherine Spooner also discusses the extension of the 1970s “monster kids” beloved toys into “The Living Dead Dolls,” a series of dolls designed by artists Ed Long and Damien Glonek. The American toy company Mezco took an interest in the commercial potential of Long and Glonek’s small-scale, hand-made toy business and began mass producing the figures in 2000. As the creepy name

suggests, the “Living Dead Dolls” are inspired by popular Gothic (or “goth”) culture and feature such gruesome figures as disfigured prom queens, maniac clowns, straight-jacketed psychopaths, and Jack the Ripper, all sold with miniature cardboard coffins and death certificates. The collectors of “Living Dead Dolls” express an even stronger identification with these freakish figurines; mirroring their own dolls, they dress themselves in goth street-fashion style which is to outsiders synonymous with eccentricity.⁴ Spooner describes it as “a predilection for black clothing in a combination of *faux*-period, punk and fetish styles, elaborate jewelry, ‘vamp’ make-up for both sexes, and dyed hair, also frequently black” (96). For these goth teens, neo-gothic dolls and other toys embody only partially an entire set of distinct attitudes and tastes. As Spooner indicates, “teen goth identities are fashioned through performance and *play*” (87; emphasis added). These alternative dolls represent a fundamentally subverted, materialized childhood culture: breaking away from old myths of innocence and diminutive “cuteness” (as Ellis and Hall indicated in their pioneering “A Study of Dolls”), these spooky dolls call for a new understanding of contemporary youth and its unusual identification with *things*. This latter point is central to *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master,” whose protagonists could perhaps easily find real-life equivalents among these “monster kids” and teen goths. These tales and the new post-1970s toy culture highlight a new worldview of children, one centered on escapist fantasy and a fixation on playthings.

A contentious point with regard to *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master,” viewed in the context of toys’ cultural history, is that on the one hand they are perfectly in tune with contemporary, defiant youth subcultures, while on the other hand they also insinuate an attachment to a certain passé hegemonic aesthetics and ideology through their preference for time-honored artisanal toys rather than cheap, modern, mass-produced articles. Brahm’s obsession is focused only on the porcelain doll, while one of the rare “real” dolls in “The Doll-Master” is an antique Dresden painted wooden doll, dating back to 1841. On discovering it in the psychiatrist’s office, Robbie is immediately enchanted: “It was then I noticed a doll in a chair on the farther side of the room. Her head was large for the body and her face seemed to glow, or glare, with an arrogant sort of beauty” (62). Both Brahm and Robbie harbor a nostalgic affection for the traditional style of European handcrafted dolls, as opposed to assembly-line-manufactured plastic and metallic toys like Chucky or those featured in *Toy Story*. Cultural-anthropological approaches to doll studies

⁴ Spooner gives a simple but helpful definition of “goth”: “an autonomous youth culture [that] has developed since the late 1970s, derives its aesthetic from the Gothic literary and cinematic tradition, and is relatively resistant to mainstream consumerism and advertising” (93).

remind us that European porcelain and wooden dolls embody a certain set of bourgeois aesthetic and social values that were in vogue for several hundred years before the twentieth century. Bachmann and Hansmann let us know that exquisite handmade porcelain dolls were prominent decorations in most European bourgeois households up to the turn of the century. Owing to the enthusiasm for German wooden and porcelain dolls, the Thuringen area around Nuremberg and Sonneberg was in fact the capital of the European toy industry for centuries (41). This trend impacted American families as well. Forman-Brunell notes that it was in the Gilded Age that American middle-class children began to be encouraged to play with European dolls, in ways that obviously “aped the conspicuous display of consumer goods and social status epitomized by the European bourgeoisie their parents emulated” (*Made to Play House* 376). Through these various forms of doll-play, adults expected their children to “imitate the new rituals of high society with the largely imported dolls in their nurseries. Elaborately dressed dolls were thought useful in the instruction of social conventions such as housewarmings” (369).

In agreement with such cultural histories, the antique dolls in *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” seem to betray certain implicit ideological proclivities of their masters or admirers. The porcelain doll might seem incongruous in most modern households, filled, as they are, with the latest high-tech gadgets; however, its presence fits the trappings of the Heelshire residence in *The Boy*—a genteel mansion located in the English countryside. The film’s opening sequence introduces the audience, as well as the new nanny, to this secluded abode: family portraits on the walls alongside the spiral staircase, antique furniture, artwork collections, exquisite kitchenware, embroidered textiles and so on, all reflect the dimming glare of a now-declining family of wealth and status. The first scenes set the tone for the environment where Brahms was brought up, immersed not only in inherited physical possessions but in the immaterial yet powerful presence of *passé* bourgeois taste.

The outmoded lifestyle of the Heelshire household is all the more obvious to its young American observer—surely a deliberate device on the part of the author, director and/or filmmaker. Greta acutely senses the differences in culture and social class, feeling awkward when confronted with the extravagant lifestyle, the conservative speech and conduct, the constrained family atmosphere, and later on the patriarchal control over women, echoing Brahms’ overt desire to dominate. Greta’s arrival reveals how out of touch this self-enclosed family is with the outside world—a world that has embraced the modern, democratic and egalitarian ideals that America claims to stand for. Against this broader backdrop, we could say that

Brahms's preference for the classic porcelain doll over modern toys expresses a nostalgia not only for an idealized childhood, but also for a certain set of European bourgeois values that are now an anachronism.

Robbie in "The Doll-Master" is also keenly aware of social class differences. From his early childhood, he has learned that his family owns the most prestigious house in the community and distinguishes itself from the poverty-stricken underclasses. "My father's family had been well-to-do until the early 1960s," he says. Even though they have fallen on harder times, they still stand out from the *hoi polloi* because of their property. "Still, the house on Prospect Hill was one of the old, large houses envied by others . . . , which [my father] had inherited from his father" (57). His very first "found doll," Mariska, comes from "one of the ugly asphalt-sided houses down the hill. Not just one family lived in the house but several families, for it was a *rental*, as my mother said. These were people who lived *down the hill*, as my mother said. They were not people who lived *on the hill*, as we did" (55; emphases in original). This sense of social hierarchy that he has acquired from his upbringing helps to account for his admiration of the haughty-looking Dresden doll and his treating of the "found dolls" from deprived neighborhoods as submissive playthings:

But I was riveted by the Dresden doll, who stared at me boldly through the full fifty-minute session.

The Dresden doll was not afraid of me because she was protected by Dr. G., who never left the office and never left us alone together.

You can't touch me—not me! I belong to her.

You didn't "find" me. I was always here. And I will be here when you are not. (63; emphases in original)

Such a craving for toys from a previous era, as expressed in *The Boy* and "The Doll-Master," could find an unexpected echo in Walter Benjamin's toy memoirs.⁵ Reminiscing about handcrafted toys and other everyday objects in his nineteenth-century childhood, Benjamin laments the disappearance of an *aura* in the products of the modern era. In a time of mechanical manufacturing and mass reproduction, we can no longer "feel the hand of the worker" on the products (Brown, *A Sense of Things* 6). Benjamin draws a parallel between a child's "melancholy and gloom"

⁵ These include "A Cultural History of Toys," "Old Toys: The Toy Exhibition at Märkisches Museum," "Berlin Toy Tour," and the related passages in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, among others.

(qtd. in Brown, *A Sense of Things* 6) triggered by his or her disillusionment with soulless toys, and the response of adults to soulless modernity: Modern industry dissociates products from the intimate human touch, hence magnifying the “thingness” of things; the greatly secularized life built predominantly upon materiality leads to a pervasively felt sense of spiritual emptiness. Benjamin thus correlates our nostalgia for childhood toys with our discontent with the status quo, where the latter could mean both adulthood and modernity. Viewed from this perspective, Benjamin’s doll memoirs share with *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” a certain attitude: A more desirable state of being is more likely to be found in an earlier—now lost and irrecoverable—stage of development, whether in terms of our personal life or our collective culture. What makes contemporary “toy horror” tales so upsetting is often the grownup’s unwholesome attachment to these childhood *residues*, while *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master” intensify the anxiety through their characters’ penchant for an obsolete set of cultural values. The antique dolls that fascinate them are like their bourgeois manor houses, correlated with outdated beliefs that should be abandoned but are passed on to the next generation.

Paradoxically, children’s “unholy” longing for a perpetual childhood and a return to waning values, as depicted in *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master,” has often been encouraged by the evolving doll culture, which has itself been shaped by the changing values of adults. Forman-Brunell believes that from the late nineteenth century onward, American dolls began to look increasingly like their owners in terms of physical and mental age, as compared to the previous generations of adult-looking dolls. Since then, the focus on the educational potential of dolls, their ability to internalize adult social responsibilities, has diminished as the dolls have increasingly become peer companions with whom children can develop emotional bonds and indulge in childhood fantasies. Some interrelated changes in the lives of American children in this period, including increased affluence, new consumer outlets, smaller family size, and a more encouraging attitude toward formalized play, are all contributing further to “lengthening childhood and prolonging [the children’s] ‘dollhood’” (*Made to Play House* 368). Furthermore, despite the United States’ political independence from Europe and that distinct set of values dubbed “American,” French and German luxury dolls still flood US markets. With their hourglass figures and *bébé* design (a very popular baby-look doll), these have signaled the triumph of the older European dream of “idealized and romanticized representations of European bourgeois girlhood” (367).

Our obsession with childhood or with the past in general, often manifested through an attachment to old-time childhood symbols—toys, dolls, fairy tales, and

so on—has found numerous expressions other than *The Boy* and “The Doll Master.” A good number of contemporary literary and cinematic works have adopted and broadened this theme to include various psychological needs driven by different times and social milieus. Steve Szilagyi’s novel *Photographing Fairies* (1992) and Charles Sturridge’s movie *Fairy Tale: A True Story* (1997) were both inspired by the famous Cottingley Fairies incident: two young girls claimed to have captured images of fairies in photographs taken in the English countryside. An incident that should have been dismissed as a mere child’s fantasy evolved in unexpected directions. The fairy photos were published by major magazines and rapidly caught many people’s attention. Those who saw them chose to suspend disbelief and indulged themselves in this “fairy mania.” Scholars tried to explain it in terms of the historical background: The sorrow felt after the First World War, given the loss of so many young lives, explained the need for psychological comfort regardless of the whole incident’s, including the photos’, irrational nature. Fairies, fairylike little girls and rapidly vanishing natural landscapes combined to compose an idyll infused with a charm that could only be found in fairy tales and childhood memories.

The Boy and “The Doll Master,” I would argue, alongside these Cottingley-Fairies inspired fictions, investigate and question childhood myths: Both the ability to see fairies and to talk with dolls are thought to be the privileged blessings of a child in his or her most innocent state; popular myth holds that only the pure heart of the child could truly communicate with transcendent spheres peopled by magical creatures. However, both *Photographing Fairies* and *Fairy Tale: A True Story* expose the darker undercurrents of the euphoric fairy mania. The fairies that have re-enchanted so many enlightened minds are now revealed as being violent and sexually aggressive; the darling girls who claim to have spotted the fairies are likely to tell lies for vanity’s sake. Both tales end by unveiling the repressed desires and concealed secrets of the adults who have become ensnared by this fairy craze. The actual problems of their real lives become secondary to the frantic pursuit of mythical creatures, as well as of mythologized childhoods and idyllic old times. Along with *The Boy* and “The Doll Master,” these works all may be seen as presenting a critique of our self-indulgent nostalgia, our lamenting of a lost childhood and/or of a vanished pre-modern era. Of course, contemporary gothicized doll narratives such as *The Boy* and “The Doll Master” may also reflect our confusion and worrying about the younger generations by showing us multiple facets of the player-plaything relationship.

Curing the Peter Pan Syndrome?

Tracing the evolution of doll culture from *Pinocchio*, through turn-of-the-century Europe and Gilded-Age America, to the dawn of modernism and up to contemporary Gothic doll horror fictions and goth-fashion doll product lines, we can observe a drastically changing view of dolls/toys as well as of childhood. While we once praised the innocence and purity of childhood, we more recently seem more likely to fear the effects of our children being given unduly-extended periods of immaturity and irresponsibility. Many cherished symbols of childhood—dolls, toys, games, fairy tales and so on—have been increasingly associated, in contemporary gothic imaginations, with pathological symptoms including transference, escapism, distorted perceptions of reality, fixation on nonliving objects, obsession with the past, and so on. In the latest gothic tales, children have themselves become the evil force that haunts and endangers the home, and whose redemption can only be achieved through symbolic rites of “*exorcism of childhood*,” including the destruction of its most emblematic themes and objects. *The Boy* ends with a porcelain doll smashed into pieces, *Annabel* with the rag doll locked away in a museum’s glass case, *Dead Silence* with all the ventriloquist’s dummies burned, “The Veldt” with the “nursery” or video-game room closing down, the Korean-gothic version of *Hansel and Gretel* with an escape from the candy house.

These Gothic doll horrors sometimes can find real-life counterparts. A recent documentary film, *Living Dolls: The Subculture of Doll Collecting* (2014), features a group of adults who are reluctant to let go of their “infantile mania.”⁶ The several distinct individuals portrayed in this film refuse to withdraw from “the repository of customs abandoned by the adults”—as Ariès interpreted childhood—centering their lives on everything related to dolls. Their unusual zeal for dolls is expressed in diverse ways: collecting dolls, joining doll aficionado communities, assembling second-hand doll-pieces into robot-figures and shooting erotic films with them, or indulging in sex with their life-sized dolls. The film’s characters’ devotion to dolls more often than not leads to personal or familial crises: financial troubles due to considerable doll-related expenses; voluntary unemployment in order to spend more time with their dolls; crumbling marriages due to eccentric hobbies like taking

⁶ Charles Baudelaire described “infantile mania” in his essay “Philosophy of Toys” as “the overriding desire of most children [to] get at and *see the soul* of their toys” (qtd. in Brown, *A Sense of Things* 6; emphasis in original).

erotic selfies with sex dolls and publishing doll-themed pornography magazines. The “subculture” community that this film explores seems to be a shadowy subterranean world, where adults cling to dolls, hanging onto the Neverland of prolonged childhood. No wonder one housewife in the film acknowledges suffering from “Peter Pan syndrome,” a psycho-pathological complex which contemporary evil-doll-and-bad-children-narratives, I would think, might be set to diagnose and treat through symbolic exorcist rites.

Since the mid-twentieth century, youth counter-cultural movements and subcultural forms of self-expression have considerably reshaped the younger generation. The social perception and cultural representation of children and of the idea of childhood have accordingly been remodeled. The doll, as a quintessential symbol of childhood, has also undergone a remarkable metamorphosis through the emergence of our contemporary “evil doll” gothic subgenre. Dolls have now become the child’s bad companion or even their “evil twin.” *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master,” through their latest incarnation of “uncanny dolls,” reexamine childhood myths and present new ways of looking at children and their sometimes unjustifiably prolonged childhood. These most recent doll narratives extend, while at the same time complicating, the long cultural history of the production and representation of dolls.

The developing doll scholarship of Forman-Brunell, Bachmann and Hansmann, and Brown, among others, has borrowed from folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and new materialism—to name just a few disciplines—to probe into the cultural significance of dolls. Their historical research and philosophical reflections have inspired and enriched this article. They have helped to illuminate, for me, the unusual bond and even inter-subjectivity between humans and things in *The Boy* and “The Doll-Master.” Being a residue from pre-modern European bourgeois cultural tastes, these antique dolls’ outdated, incongruous existence mirrors the uncertain social and psychological states of the tales’ adolescent protagonists. Struggling between physical adulthood and mental childhood, between the social expectations of an adult male and our inner feminine inclinations, and between desires and moral dictates, both Brahms and Robbie seek in their dolls for their truer other selves, their darker doubles. Such intricate relationships between humans and inanimate objects perhaps reflect(s) one of the more disconcerting characteristics of our time: an excessive obsession with *things*. In a world that is overtly materialistically oriented, perhaps we are all still children clinging to our respective playthings—playthings which, paradoxically, are the real “doll-masters” in our time.

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