A Childhood at the Cinema:
Latency Fantasies, the Family Romance,
and Juvenile Spectatorship

by

Patricia Erens

As almost any adult can attest, images from childhood are inextricably stitched into the fabric of our youth and haunt us for the rest of our adult life. For those of us who grew up in the years immediately following World War II, these images invariably came from movies. I have yet to discuss this subject with anyone of my generation who cannot recall at least one film which marked them in some indelible way, although few have thought about this seriously or analyzed the dynamics at work between childhood, memory, screen, and reception. As a typical child of the 1940s growing up in Washington, D.C., I spent every Saturday at the matinee. For me and my friends this meant entering the theater at about noon and often sitting through two or three screenings of the same movie, interspersed with cartoons, coming attractions, shorts, and serials based on such characters as Superman and Merlin. Although I sometimes attended the downtown movie palaces, the majority of my viewing took place at neighborhood theaters. These theaters were not cleared between each screening as they are today, and the time between

Patricia Brett Erens is a Senior Fulbright Scholar lecturing in the Department of Comparative Film at the University of Hong Kong. Her latest book is *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism.*

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screenings were filled with visits with friends and other social activities. We often took a bag lunch to get us through the afternoon.

The distribution patterns for the 1940s typically included a relatively short run downtown, followed by an appearance at

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the neighborhood theaters whose pattern was unalterably predictable. For me, the three theaters reachable by bus or street car were the Tivoli, the Sheridan, and the Kennedy. Often my girlfriends and I would travel to the Tivoli. If we liked the movie, we would then follow it as it moved from theater to theater each Saturday. In this manner we often saw the same film as many as nine times.

Of the hundreds of films which I saw as a child and young adolescent, five are engraved in my mind so that with little prompting I can call up almost every scene. Not long after entering film school in 1972, I went back to rescreen these films and was surprised at how well I remembered them, and also how well they had survived the test of time. At that point, I was merely interested in checking my memory, although I did conjecture as to why those were the narratives that had fascinated me as a child, as opposed to others which had long since faded away. I would now like to subject these works to an analysis, using several psychoanalytic approaches in an attempt to ascertain why these five films remain so vivid. I shall be focusing on Oedipal issues as delineated by Freud, pre- and post-Oedipal issues as explicated by Lacan, and narcissism as presented in the work of Heinz Kohut.

The five films which remain embedded in my memory are: *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *The Seventh Veil* (1945), *Home, Sweet Homicide* (1946), *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *The Secret Garden* (1949). (A short synopsis of each film is provided at the end of this article.) Each film possessed memorable images. Taken together they spoke of passionate lives and grand adventures.

To this day I can recall the sexual allure of James Mason, who walked with a slight limp and looked out from the screen with a serious scowl, a troubled soul waiting to be saved. His presence provoked my own sense of loneliness and desire to be loved. Or the
mystery of beautiful, blond-haired Ann Todd, running down dark London streets, clad in a thin nightgown. I can still see her climbing a railing and throwing herself into the Thames.

I remember the anxious feelings created by the desolate Yorkshire mansion, with its cavernous rooms and endless, empty corridors and the thrill of entering the secret garden, with Margaret O'Brien as the screen miraculously turned from black and white to color. Or the tension of watching Gene Tierney in a rowboat, as she maliciously urged her handicapped, adolescent brother-in-law to swim out beyond his capacity. And the excitement of seeing her on horseback, as she wildly spread her father's ashes to the winds, against a supersaturated Technicolored background.

And finally, the thrill of following Moira Shearer up the grand staircase of a Monte Carlo villa, looking beautiful in a voluminous pale greenish-blue ballgown, with a tiara atop her flowing red hair. And later, the magic of watching the cineballet, as Shearer traverses land and sky, dancing herself ragged across time and space. How stunned we felt when she fell over the balcony and died on the train tracks below. How we fought back tears as we watched the ballet without its star, a spotlight marking the place where she would have appeared. And finally, the empty feeling as the curtain came down on the single pair of red toe shoes, which closes both the performance and the film.

Given the release dates, I would have seen the first film when I was approximately seven-and-a-half years old, and the last film roughly at eleven. These years fall into what Freud termed the latency period.

What is immediately apparent is that two of these films—*Leave Her to Heaven* and *The Seventh Veil*—are not children's films. My parents, like many parents of that era, did not censor what I saw; in fact they tended to use the movie theater as a babysitter. As graphic sex and violence were not featured in the films of the forties, there was little concern about movies being harmful to young psyches. There were exceptions, such as *Knock on Any Door* (1949), but in the main, I was allowed to see most any movie. What I understood of these films is a different story and part of the work of this research. As Kate Friedlaender noted in her study of children's reading preferences, "Children pick out from this [adult literature], too, those particular novels which, with the least concealment, contain their own phantasies."

The films fall into two well defined genres: two are women's melodramas, two are children's films, while *The Red Shoes* straddles both categories. It is noteworthy
that two are British productions and that *The Secret Garden*, although produced by MGM, is set in England. Finally, it is more than obvious that all five narratives center around a female protagonist.

It is my contention that my receptivity to these five films, as opposed to others which I saw, was a function of specific internal conflicts which I was attempting to work through at a certain age, and that these narratives interfaced with these developmental tasks. Similar conclusions were reached by Martin E. Wiener in his study of boys' relationship to comic-book superheroes.

The individual is free to utilize whichever hero is most appropriate either for his particular level of integration or the level(s) at which his conflicts reside. The extent to which the individual or group will identify with the hero and the manner in which the identification is utilized are related to the amount of need for narcissistic gratification which cannot be provided otherwise.4

Freud's view of the child's development was based on the status of the sexual impulses. For Freud, latency is the period following the end of infantile sexuality and the dissolution of the Oedipus conflict, and the onset of puberty.5 At this point, the urgency of the Oedipal desire subsides through repression and the child begins to identify with the parent of the same sex. Sexual urges decrease, either partly or wholly repressed, and find their outlet through fantasies and daydreaming. Of primary importance at this stage is the continued development of the ego and the super-ego: the former through further adaptation to the reality principle and through elaboration of defense-mechanism; the latter with the aid of sublimation, reaction-formation, and identification.

The early stage of latency begins between the ages of five and seven and can continue until the age of fifteen. Contemporary analysts have noted the wide diversity of children in this period and have also found evidence of more sexual activity than Freud theorized. As Robert Galatzer-Levy and Bertram Cohler note, "Where sexuality is not entirely discouraged sexual impulses do not become as inactive."6

Contemporary writers have also challenged Freud's concepts concerning sexual difference. According to Freud, the girl's Oedipal progression is based on her acknowledgment of her inferior castrated state. Turning away from her mother in anger and disappointment, she takes her father as her love object and casts her mother in the role of sexual rival.
According to Phyllis and Robert L. Tyson, “Our broader understanding of the female Oedipus complex is in the context of gender-identity development. Rather than stress the girl’s total rejection of mother...we believe it is important to understand how her attachment to the mother shifts and changes.” Having successfully internalized a loving female imago during the pre-Oedipal stage, “she can become preoccupied with fantasies about being chosen by her father, unhampered by fears of abandonment by her mother but rather confident of her continuing love.”

Just as fairy tales are appealing to young children because of their ability to offer solutions and comfort as the child struggles with universal fears and anxieties, narratives, which Freud termed “family romances,” appeal to the latency-age child. Just as fairy tales are appealing to young children because of their ability to offer solutions and comfort as the child struggles with universal fears and anxieties, narratives, which Freud termed “family romances,” appeal to the latency-age child. These stories, however, first arise in pre-Oedipal children in their belief that their parents are only foster parents and that their real parents are of a higher station. The primary elaboration consists of being adopted, a step-child, or an orphan. The unconscious fantasy is often acted out in play—being a princess or a prince, or some other privileged child.

During latency girls often playact or dream about various gender roles or ego ideals which they may want to adopt later in life. Laplanche defines an ego-ideal as “a model to which the subject attempts to conform.”

Latency is also a time when they rework pre-Oedipal and Oedipal problems. This explains in large measure the emphasis on dyadic relationships in the fantasies of latency aged girls. But also, Friedlaender states, “In the phantasies, which now emerge, one can recognize in what way the Oedipus complex has been dealt with,” (or not dealt with). Galatzer-Levy and Cohler also point out that if the girl “is fortunate, the culture has given her a rich collection of symbols and stories, activities and scenarios, that help her engage and work through these issues.”

The family romance fantasy arises at the time children move out into the larger world beyond the home, where they meet other adults and begin to make comparisons with their own parents. This leads to both a
more realistic evaluation of their parents, but also to great disappointment. In order to protect against such a blow to their self-esteem, children imagine a noble set of parents, perfect like the pre-Oedipal mother and father they remember. This notion allows them to both denigrate their parents and to exalt them at the same time. In other words, children enact a form of revenge against the parents who have disappointed them, while at the same time they retain the image of the perfect parents they have had and long to keep. All is done in the name of retaining self-esteem and some mastery over a world in which they actually feel rather powerless. It should also be pointed out that "the over-idealization of the parents is a reflection of self-over-idealization, and the disillusionment with the parent jeopardizes the self-image. The subsequent reality loss of the omnipotent parent is retrieved through the family romance."\textsuperscript{12} Initially, Freud associated the family romance with neurotic patients, but later analysts observed that these fantasies were hardly ever missing in the normal, healthy child.\textsuperscript{13}

The next stage of the family romance scenario occurs during the Oedipal period when children begin to see their parents as sexual beings. This results in guilt over incestuous feelings and a need to desexualize their parents. In these family romance fantasies, children portray themselves as illegitimate, thus allowing for the playing out of forbidden desire. As Freud wrote, "The young phantasy-builder can get rid of his forbidden degree of kinship with one of his sisters if he finds himself sexually attracted to her."\textsuperscript{14} This would obviously also be true of a brother or a father on the part of a young girl. This fantasy allows young boys to avoid the Oedipus fate and young girls to possess the father.

In some forms of this fantasy, the child sees her/himself as an orphan or lacking one parent, usually the parent of the same sex. This disguised Oedipal wish is one way to circumvent the incest taboo. A variation on this fantasy is that the child imagines a romance between the parent of the opposite sex and a stranger. The stranger is the child grown-up. This thus allows for the fulfillment of the Oedipal wish, and, at the same time, identity with the same sex parent.

A further elaboration of the Oedipal family romance revolves around the rescue theme. Freud discussed this theme with regard to the boy's vision of his mother as harlot and his need to save her. At other times, it is the father who is rescued.\textsuperscript{15} Girls also produce rescue fantasies although they differ in nature. In the main, however, rescue fantasies are not part of the family romance per se, but are attached to them through secondary elaboration. One further point, although both the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal family romance fantasies involve illegiti-
mation, they differ in that, for pre-Oedipal children, the goal is to receive the unqualified love they once knew, while for Oedipal children it arises from sexual desire. "It seems that any factors that contribute to an unresolved Oedipal situation also contribute to the intensity of the family romance."16

Not surprisingly, as there are gender differences in latency, there are gender differences in the construction of the family romance and the material to which the child responds. Boys seem to prefer adventure stories set in far away lands where boy heroes perform acts of bravery, while girls tend toward romances with domestic settings which convey strong moral messages.17 The theme of rescue also differs: boys preferring physical rescues, while girls tend toward emotional rescues enacted by the taming of bad or intractable grownups. As Tyson and Tyson note, the working out of pre-Oedipal and Oedipal conflicts and wishes along with gender related themes in disguised ways is especially strong in females during the latency period.18

Finally, during latency, the family romance becomes a dominant form of dealing with emotional stress, strivings, and erotic and aggressive impulses.19 At this stage, there is strong identification with the same sex parent. Rescue fantasies increase. This continues until children reach eleven or twelve when they then "forsake fantasy as a means for drive discharge and use it for planning."20 Almost all of the elements cited above appear in the films under discussion, as will become apparent.

In the discussion that follows, I have not attempted to separate out the various stages of the family romance for several reasons. First, it is not possible at this date to determine with complete accuracy when I actually saw each film. Second, as Linda Joan Kaplan points out, "Although most authors suggest that the family-romance fantasy is most prevalent in latency, several locate it in the Oedipal period."21 And third, most analysts agree that during latency, there is a fair degree of regression to earlier stages.22 Thus, a child’s response to any given fantasy can involve all of the stages of the family romance.

In the five films under consideration, all present families which are headed by a single parent surrogate. In Leave Her to Heaven, Ellen (Gene Tierney) has a living mother and a dead father. In The Seventh Veil, Francesca (Ann Todd) is an orphan living with her guardian Nicholas (James Mason). In Home, Sweet Homicide, Dinah (Peggy Ann Garner) lives with her widowed mother (Lynn Bari). In The Red Shoes, Victoria Page’s (Moira Shearer) family consists solely of an aunt. Finally, in The Secret Garden, we again have an orphan, Mary Lennox (Margaret O’Brien), who comes
to live with her uncle (Herbert Marshall), and her cousin Colin (Dean Stockwell). Furthermore, the upper-class settings of all the films, apart from *Home, Sweet Homicide*, plus the additional aura of a British context in three of the works, would easily serve the purposes of the family romance for a solidly middle-class child like myself.

The role of the father deserves further comment. In all five narratives the presence/absence of a father or father substitute is a pivotal concern within the film. In each work, this figure is either absent, emotionally distant, or totally rejecting. In *Leave Her to Heaven*, although Ellen lives with her mother, it is her dead father who plays the crucial role in her psychic life. We learn that from the time she was first able to walk, the two had been inseparable. The film implies that this dyadic relationship eventually resulted in Ellen surplanting her mother. The plot revolves around Ellen's efforts to reconstitute this relationship through a marriage to a man who looks like her father (Cornell Wilde, in the role of Richard) and the lengths to which she will go to have him all to herself.

Nicholas, Francesca's second cousin and guardian in *The Seventh Veil*, is a confirmed bachelor whose home has never admitted a female before her arrival. Nicholas is often away from home (leaving her in the care of male servants), seldom speaks to Francesca, and is highly critical of her looks and behavior. Their main point of contact is his supervision of her piano training. In this he is a stern taskmaster.

*Home, Sweet Homicide*, the one film with a mother figure, continues the theme of the unavailable parent. Mrs. Carstairs, unlike most mothers of the 1940s, is a professional writer, who has little time for the normal chores of cooking meals and tending children. In fact, throughout the course of the film, it is the children who attend to these tasks as she is preoccupied in finishing a new mystery book. Thus, despite her seemingly loving nature, she is basically unavailable.

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In *The Red Shoes*, there is no mention of parents whatsoever. However, as Victoria rises in her career as a ballet dancer, she comes increasingly under the domination of Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook), the company’s impresario, who serves as her mentor. Like Nicholas in *The Seventh Veil*, he drives the heroine towards technical perfection. To achieve this goal, he needs to control every aspect of her life, including the personal. Aloof, arrogant, and sarcastic, he inspires Victoria to greatness. The trade-off is his demand for her total dedication to her art. However, when she thwarts his wishes, by falling in love with a composer (Marius Goring), she is met with total rejection. Intertwined with Lermontov’s stern supervision of Victoria’s career is an underlying love and sexual attraction.

As in the previous four films, the primary caretaker for Mary in *The Secret Garden* is frequently absent and emotionally unresponsive. Archibald Graven, a widower of ten years, chooses to live in London rather than in his ancestral home in Yorkshire. Depressed and suffering ill-health, he has little interest in his own child Colin, whom he associates with the loss of his wife, and no interest in young Mary. She is left to fend for herself among the household help.

Taken as a group, excepting *Home, Sweet Homicide*, these scenarios speak to the young female’s efforts to win over or win for herself an unavailable father figure, made easier by the absence of a rival. This theme is especially strong in *Leave Her to Heaven* and *The Seventh Veil*. There is little doubt that *Leave Her to Heaven* and *The Seventh Veil* spoke to my unresolved Oedipal wishes.

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Despite the fact that I might not have understood all of the subtleties of these adult narratives, I most certainly gleaned what was of primary interest to me at the time.

I especially remember being upset and unsettled by *Leave Her to Heaven* and thrilled by *The Seventh Veil*. These would have been appropriate responses structured to the drama and romance of these melodramas. However, I would like to propose that the condemnation of the heroine Ellen as an evil woman (she kills her brother-in-law and destroys her own unborn child), who is obsessively jealous and possessive, spoke to me not as a cautionary tale against certain kinds of female behavior, but rather
as a dictum against the incest taboo, and that the repercussions were sufficiently frightening to remain in my memory for years to come. No doubt Ellen achieved what I desired, marriage to a seeming reincarnation of her father. Likewise, Ellen's removal of both brother-in-law (a boy still in his teens) and her own baby, no doubt stimulated my own sibling rivalry, and reawakened memories of the birth of my younger brother. Here was a forceful heroine who did what I would have liked to have done, and got away with (until the end). My agitated reaction to this film could easily have come from a guilty suspicion that I had been found out and that my secret wishes were being enacted on the screen for everyone to see.

The scenario of *The Seventh Veil* offers a rather different male/female dynamic. Francesca is passive and responsive; Nicholas is dominant and active. Driven by fear and a need for his approval, Francesca spends most of the film trying to please him. This dynamic and the accompanying fantasy, being desired by and ultimately winning the emotionally distanced, unavailable man, is common for many girls, as well as women.

The themes which permeate the two children's films are more clearly appropriate to latency tasks than the two women's melodramas, which to some degree, regressively reactivates earlier conflicts. A common task for latency age children of both sexes is the creation of ego ideals. These can be drawn from life or from a fictional medium. In previous eras this included literature of all kinds, as well as orally communicated stories. For twentieth century children, many of these models are taken from mass produced media images. For my generation this meant the movies.

All five films offer models of female agency, a rare and exciting experience for a young girl in the 1940s, and unfortunately, just as rare in today's cinema. To me each heroine had enormous appeal. All are intelligent, self-determined, and each grows increasingly assertive over the course of the film, unlike so many other films where the heroine sells out in the last reel.

The women's melodramas, on the other hand, spoke to future events. Despite Ellen's malevolence in *Leave Her to Heaven*, there was little doubt in my mind as to who motivated the plot. And though Francesca in *The Seventh Veil* is a docile heroine, by film's end she has broken free of Nicholas, and in the final scene, it is she who chooses which man she will have as her life's partner.

Further, two of the heroines evidence exceptional creative talent. Francesca proves herself a world-class pianist, while Vicky,
Fig. 3. Victoria Page (Moira Shearer) in *The Red Shoes*. Photo courtesy the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
the rising ballerina of *The Red Shoes*, dances all the lead roles. For a young girl, who secretly wrote poetry, attended ballet school three days a week, and did a lot of daydreaming, these heroines offered a message. They proved that with hard work, and persistence (and of course, talent), a female could achieve fame, fortune and the glamorous life depicted on the screen. If these heroines served as ego ideals, figures of identification, models of who I might want to be when I grew up, then their partners were of equal interest, for they indicated who I might be interested in when I was old enough for real romance.

The fact that both heroines were subject to the control and possessive jealousy of their male mentors may or may not have reached my consciousness. If it did, I suspect it served to suggest male attentiveness and possibly sexual excitement, as well as a certain security and protectiveness. Despite dreams of independence, children also crave boundaries. The demanding male master is a common fantasy for many females, related to female masochism and beating fantasies in their sexualized form. The fact that these fantasies turn up in latency is not surprising. According to Novick and Novick, in their revision of Freud’s original theories:

If we compare this development with the reconstructed stages of the beating fantasy described by Freud, we find that the sequence is very similar: the child moves from an aggressive beating wish to a sexualized wish to beat or be beaten and then on to a wishfulfilling masturbation fantasy involving beating or a derivative of beating. The timing of this evolution in childhood material differs from that suggested by Freud, in that the beating fantasy *per se* arises only after the Oedipal phase. Similarly, the wish to be beaten, standing for the Oedipal wish, is or can be made conscious at that time. The ease with which the beating fantasy of latency could be transformed, elaborated and distanced from the beating wish of the Oedipal phase, coupled with the subsequently good development of the girls in whom it was found, leads us to the conclusion that this beating fantasy is a normal transitional component of post-Oedipal development in girls and may be more common that is generally supposed.24

Furthermore, I no doubt deduced that in discipline there is also protection and emotional investment. I am sure I recognized the love which lay at the heart of the sometimes cruel actions of both Nicholas and Lermontov. The connection between caring and discipline, punishment and love, is a common nexus and the appeal of such a
paternal figure as lover would be most understandable. Bringing these dynamics together in a cogent manner, Gaylyn Studlar makes the following comments on Letter From an Unknown Woman. They are equally applicable to a good deal of The Seventh Veil:

The relationship dynamics of Letter offer the lesson that we must expect that pre-Oedipal issues will be subject to displacement in ‘love stories’ with masochistic ‘heroines’ since pre-Oedipal patterns of desire and defense typically are displaced in the manifest content of female subjects’ masochistic fantasy. The process resembles that discussed by Freud in “Female Sexuality,” where he notes that the attachment of the pre-Oedipal girl to the mother may be reiterated in both its difficulties and intensity in the Oedipal relationship with the father and later with her husband, so that “except for the change of her love-object, the second [Oedipal] phase had scarcely added any new feature to her erotic life.”

Unlike the sexually graphic films on today’s screens, the films of the 1940s allowed us to be romantic without having to deal with the realities and specificities of sex. Of the five pictures, only Leave Her to Heaven and The Red Shoes depict married heroines. In The Seventh Veil, despite Francesca’s two love affairs, the film is amazingly chaste and Francesca appears an innocent young woman throughout the film. Likewise, The Red Shoes implies love and sex, but shows very little. There is nothing to frighten a prepubescent girl.

But the females who I could immediately emulate were Dinah in Home, Sweet Home and Mary in The Secret Garden. Both figures must have seemed enormously compelling. Each not only drives the plot, but also takes on adult responsibilities of restoring order. While mother is too busy working on her novel, Dinah, with the help of her siblings and friends, solves the neighborhood murder. Like many other detective films, she manages to do this ahead of the police who only serve to thwart her efforts. By the film’s end, she successfully finds a new mate for her mother, and simultaneously, a father for herself.

In The Secret Garden, Mary is no less active. Arriving at the gloomy Craven mansion, she solves the two mysteries of the narrative. She discovers that the frequent screams are not the wind, but rather Colin Craven, her sickly cousin. She also finds her way into the secret garden. In addition, she is responsible for bringing both Colin and the garden back to health. In accomplishing this, she simultaneously rescues Colin and reunites him with his uncle. Both young
girls are responsible for creating a new family in which they will gain a father. And like Francesca in *The Seventh Veil*, Mary has transformed the distant father figure into a warm and loving protector. In keeping with female variations of the family romance, all of the narratives revolve around domestic space and include romance, as well as moral, rather than physical, rescues. *The Secret Garden* begins in faraway India, but immediately moves to the house in Yorkshire. *Home, Sweet Homicide* encompasses the space of a few blocks.

Another aspect of these films is the foregrounding of a secret or mystery. Secrets and mysteries are appealing at any age, but during latency, as young girls and boys are preparing for adolescence, trying to figure out how male/female relationships work and the secrets of the grown-up world, they take on an added appeal. *The Seventh Veil* begins with a mystery. Why did Francesca throw herself off a bridge in the first scene of the film? With the help of the psychiatrist and hypnosis, the film unravels the mystery as we move back into time and then progress forward. *Leave Her to Heaven* uses an identical plot structures to answer the question, “Why has a fine young man like Richard spent two years in prison?” Both of the children's films are built around a mystery. The central enigma in *Home, Sweet Homicide*, is “Who killed Mrs. Sanford?” *The Secret Garden* is loaded with secrets, the garden being only one of them.

Along with these secrets and mysteries is the real mystery of sexuality. Both *The Seventh Veil* and *Leave Her to Heaven* end, as most commercial films of the 1940s, with a closure on a newly constituted heterosexual couple—Francesca and Nicholas; Richard and Ellen’s cousin Ruth (Jeanne Craine)—the good woman. *Home, Sweet Homicide* ends with Marian Carstairs’ new alliance with Bill Smith (Randolph Scott). *The Secret Garden* ends with Mary having found not only a new father, but perhaps even a future husband, her cousin Colin. Only *The Red Shoes* ends tragically.

For a young girl, however, I believe the secret mystery is not just what happens between a woman and a man, but also what is involved in adult female sexuality. None of these films answer that question, but several of the works add a little something. Along with coitus, for females, adult sexuality translates into changing body formation: menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and menopause. In *Leave Her to Heaven*, Ellen becomes pregnant. Consistent with her image as the evil woman, her views on pregnancy are depicted negatively. She resents the transformation of her body and the confinement to which she is subject. Ellen’s rejection here of her proper gender role, along with her strong identification with her father, a male ego-ideal, constitutes a sub-
text in the film and is one of the reasons, along with her actual crimes, that she is coded as evil and eventually punished. The strong admonition against her assertiveness, which is depicted as masculine and thus improper, must also have left me troubled.

A less disturbing image of female sexuality is offered in The Secret Garden. Not only is the garden a secret, but it is also an enclosed space, like the female anatomy, where things blossom and grow. It is not surprising that Nancy Friday chose to use that as the title of her volume on female sexual fantasy.26 Thus, Mary’s discovery of the secret garden and her tending of this place can be seen as the latency girl’s discovery (although not her first discovery) of the pleasures of her body and its secret places, something she will later share with a male/other.

It is also noteworthy that when Maria Bonaparte was preparing her essay on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Gold Bug,” and the mysteries surrounding buried treasures, she recalled a conversation with Freud. Paraphrasing his words, she wrote:

One hardly dares venture it, lest it seem too far-fetched, but there must be, in the unconscious, a connection between tales of seeking or finding treasure and some other fact or situation in the history of the race;

something that belongs to a time when sacrifice was common and human sacrifice at that. The “buried treasure” in such cases, would then be the finding of an embryo or foetus in the abdomen of the victim.27

These observations seem appropriate to The Secret Garden as well, not solely because of the garden imagery and its potential fecundity, but because it was here that the tree trunk struck Craven’s wife, taking her life, but sparing the foetus living in her abdomen. The phallic tree trunk still remains to mark the site of this event. And it is because of her accidental death that Craven has turned the garden, once the space of happiness, into a hidden place—a secret garden whose treasures are now buried.

* * *

Up to this point I have used a Freudian model to explain the extraordinary hold these films have had on my imagination. Freudian theory has always emphasized that that which is not mentioned, forgotten, or repressed, is often as important, if not more so, than what is verbalized. The fact that only one mother appears in all five films is certainly provocative. It is possible that these stories are Oedipal wishes to rid myself of a rival for my father’s affection, arranged so as to reduce anxiety and guilt feelings. But an alternative interpretation
Fig. 4. Ellen (Gene Tierney) and Dick (Cornell Wilde) in *Leave Her to Heaven*. Photo courtesy the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
might conclude that the males are only substitute figures for my real desire for a nurturing mother, an interpretation I would like to pursue further.

Of the five films, *The Secret Garden* remains the most memorable, so I will focus on this film, working from a different perspective. As discussed above, the latency period is one in which the conflictual issues brought on by the Oedipus complex are put to rest, although the respite is only temporary and seldom total. Freud's writings focus heavily on the Oedipal stage and he offers less insight into the workings of latency.

However, Jacques Lacan, in his seminar on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, offers an instructive paradigm. This essay is especially useful for my purposes in that it demonstrates the working of what might be termed the post-Oedipal period as reflected in a work of art.

In Lacan’s essay, “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet,*” he discusses the connection between the object of desire and mourning. This connection is based on Lacanian notions which assert that once the subject suffers the blow of symbolic castration, she/he recognizes that there is no way to restore the unity which once existed with the mother. The subject then goes into a period of mourning, a mourning for the loss of this unity (which Lacan refers to as “the phallus”), and the plenitude offered by the child’s oneness with the mother. This mourning occurs after the end of the Oedipal period; thus in trying to master the sense of loss, the child enters a stage of narcissism. If the child successfully negotiates this period, she/he will emerge with the ability to construct another object relation with a suitable other. If not, the child will remain forever fixed in a narcissistic state. According to Lacan, *Hamlet*, until the end of the drama, has remained in a state of narcissism and has thus been unable to take action or to form a relationship with Ophelia. In short, he has not been able to appropriately or successfully mourn.

All five of the films under discussion deal with loss and mourning in one form or another, and except for *The Red Shoes*, which ends with the death of Victoria Page, they all demonstrate the successful negotiation of this phase through recovery and the substitution of the object of desire, which leads to the reestablishment of a new order.

In *Leave Her to Heaven*, Dick suffers the loss of his wife Ellen, as well as his brother Danny and his own unborn child. His marriage is presented as an unnatural relationship, with overtones of incest, suggested by Dick's resemblance to Ellen's father. By film's end, he has relinquished this unhealthy bond, suffered his punishment (symbolic castration) in prison, and is
now ready to form a new liaison with Ruth. Ellen, on the other hand, having failed to properly mourn her father, remains stuck in a narcissistic state. As her mother states in the film, “There’s nothing wrong with her. It’s just that she loves too much. It makes her an outsider to everyone else. She loved her father too much.” This is echoed earlier in the film when Ellen says to Dick, “I’ll never let you go—never, never, never.”

The next three films all deal with childhood loss of parents. Francesca has lost both mother and father; Dinah has no father; and Mary is an orphan. This is doubled in The Secret Garden, in that Colin has no mother and an absent father. To a degree this is also descriptive of Dinah. Mrs. Carstairs actually functions as a father figure in that she is the sole family supporter, is consumed by her work, uninvolved in any domestic duties, and generally unavailable, which means that Dinah is still missing a mother.

Although The Secret Garden reflects little of Mary’s mourning in terms of crying or references to death, her very denial (repression) speaks volumes and her behavior demonstrates many of the symptoms of depression and mourning. She acts out scenarios with her dolls wherein she is the parent and angrily punishes them. In route to England she is boastful and disruptive. In Yorkshire she is arrogant and demanding, thinking only of her own needs. In fact, she remains in this state until she is able to accept the loss (of the phallus/mother) and to form new object relations. This she does first with Martha, then Dickon, a village child, and finally with Colin and her uncle.

In accomplishing her goal (accepting the loss of the phallus), Mary goes through several stages. This begins with what might be seen as a symbolic replay or a regression to the pre-Oedipal state. Curious about the sobbing she hears from other parts of the house, Mary decides to investigate on her own. As she moves through the dark hallways at night, she comes face to face with an image which at first frightens her. It is, of course, her own reflection in the hall mirror, which she subsequently recognizes as her own. This sets the stage for her further development whereby she is enabled to accept loss, find new object relationships, take action, and assume some control over her life. In addition, she restores health to both her cousin and her uncle, typical of the female version of the family romance. In short, Mary is able to accomplish all that young Hamlet was not able to do. One could also theorize that finding the secret garden is a form of recovery for Mary, a recovery of the phallus. This works very well because of the garden’s association with the maternal body.
Fig. 5. Dickon (actor unknown), Mary (Margaret O'Brien), and Colin (Dean Stockwell) in *The Secret Garden*. Photo courtesy the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
I would like to stress here the importance of the loss of the mother as a possible reading for these films and for my response to these works. As Marianne Hirsch points out in her study of the female family romance, Freud's 1925 essay on "Negation" emphasized that "the elimination of the mother, is only a recognition and corroboration of her overwhelming importance." Likewise, Kaplan states that the persistence of the family romance fantasy not only results from an unresolved Oedipal situation, but also from some form of narcissistic trauma resulting from disillusionment with and loss of the love object. Although this is a pre-Oedipal event, I suspect it hovers over the mental life of most children and adults. Certainly as a fairly indulged first child, doted on by my mother, I did not so readily accede to the loss of my special position upon the arrival of my younger brother at the beginning of my third year of life. Phyllis Greenacre, in describing the relationship between the family romance and pre-Oedipal loss states, "The germ of the family romance is ubiquitous in the Hankering of growing children for a return to the real or fancied conditions at or before the dawn of conscious memory when adults were Olympians and the child shared their special privileges and unconditional love without special efforts being demanded." It is not surprising, therefore, that I would identify with Mary and Colin. Kaplan also points out the propensity of children who are exceptional in some way or treated by their parents as exceptional (overindulged) to cling to family romance fantasies. The relevance of exceptional individuals will be dealt with at the end of this article.

* * *

I would like to carry this analysis one step further by drawing upon the theoretical work of Heinz Kohut on narcissism. The history of psychoanalysis over the course of the twentieth century has moved from the study of libidinal drives, to ego psychology and object relations, and more recently to a focus on narcissism. The primary texts are those written by Heinz Kohut in the 1970s. The theories have long been incorporated into therapeutic treatment. They have also been adopted by literary critics; however, little of Kohut's findings have been applied to film studies.

In brief, Kohut believed that there are two developmental lines: the first grows out of a healthy love which parents bestow upon a child, allowing the child to progress from an infantile narcissistic stage to a mature object love; the second developmental line grows out of parents' narcissistic love for a child which results in the child's progression from a primitive infantile stage to mature narcissism. Kohut described infantile narcissism as a state defined by the child's sense of grandiosity, omnipotence, and a desire to
merge with the omnipotent object. Adults with narcissistic personality disorders are fixated at this stage. In other adults, primitive narcissism gradually transforms into mature self-esteem, ambition, and a desire for self-mastery. Kohut’s theories, known as “self psychology,” assert that the development of a child’s cohesive, nuclear self depends upon the beneficial interactions between the child and the child’s selfobjects. Selfobjects are persons or things from the child’s environment that function as annexed parts of the self. Usually the primary selfobject is (initially) the mother. The formation and use of selfobjects facilitates the child’s progression through the developmental stages, the first being infantile narcissism in which the child exhibits grandiosity, exhibitionism, and feelings of perfection. At this stage, the child also builds an idealized parent image with which she/he wishes to merge.

If the selfobject fails to respond empathically or to mirror the child sufficiently, the child will remain in this stage of narcissism. Further, rather than develop a cohesive self, the child will develop a self prone to enfeeblement, a fragmented self filled with narcissistic rage and fantasies of grandiosity, which mask a deeper sense of inferiority and dependency. Typical expressions of narcissistic rage are insatiable demands on others, easily activated destructiveness, a ruthless disregard for others, and hypochondriasis. In addition to failures on the part of selfobjects, Kohut also cites other situations in which narcissistic injury leads to outbursts of narcissistic rage. These

Kohut’s theories, known as “self psychology,” assert that the development of a child’s cohesive, nuclear self depends upon the beneficial interactions between the child and the child’s selfobjects.

include occasions of loss, sickness, failure, deprivation, or betrayal. For Kohut, these narcissistic personality disorders can originate at any time from the late oral stage through the latency period.

In order to cope with her/his narcissistic injury and to survive its enfeebled state, the child uses one of several strategies, depending upon the severity of the injury. Among the various possibilities, Kohut describes three types of reaction formations: 1) merger through the extension of the grandiose self; 2) the alter-ego or twinship; and 3) the mirror transference in the narrower sense. Merger, the most severely disturbed response is one in which the child sees the other person as an extension of her/himself.
In twinship, the child sees the other as being like or similar to her/his grandiose self. Finally, in mirror transference, the most mature form of mobilization of the grandiose self, the child clearly experiences the other as a separate person, but one who reflects her/his grandiose self.37

In therapy, the early infantile narcissistic imago (the grandiose self and the idealized object) are reactivated. When this happens, a mirror transference takes place, wherein the patient identifies with the analyst. The analyst echoes the patient’s emerging grandiose fantasies, especially the desire to feel special and admired. The analyst thus confirms the patient in a way that the parent previously failed to do.

At the same time, an idealizing transference takes place wherein perfection is assigned to the analyst by the patient. In both transfersences the analyst serves as a selfobject. Through the process of “working through,” the patient comes to deal with her/his narcissistic injuries and rage, and eventually is able to relate to the analyst as a separate person.

Turning our attention to Mary Lennox, the The Secret Garden suggests that she has suffered a series of narcissistic blows, ones that probably developed before the death of her two parents. What information we can gather about her early life in India points to a rather solitary existence in which there was little warmth and empathy from either parents or parental surrogates. As she impertinently explains to the British officer at the beginning of the film, her parents “Went away. They’re always away,” reflecting her sense of anger and abandonment. And rather than use the servants as selfobjects who could provide the emotional sustenance she desperately needs, Mary has introjected her parents’ superior attitude towards the serving classes. Echoing introjected disdain, Mary observes, “Mother’s right. You can’t trust the natives.” Her whole interchange with the British officers reflects a child puffed up by her own self-importance, which no doubt masks deep feelings of loneliness.

Mary’s behavior following the death of her parents clearly indicates the degree of her narcissistic injury. On board ship to England, she holds herself apart from the other orphans and insults them in an insolent manner. She talks grandly about her uncle’s house with “one hundred rooms,” “acres and acres of gardens,” and “a great many servants.” Not surprisingly, she ends up in a physical row. When she is collected by the Craven’s housekeeper, Mrs. Medlock, a stern, aloof figure dressed entirely in black, there is little warmth or empathy. In fact, Mrs. Medlock makes it plain that she finds Mary homely and unattractive.
Not until she meets Martha does Mary come into contact with a warm loving maternal figure. Martha is the first of a number of characters who will affect a change in Mary. More important than the characters who offer Mary love, trust, and validation, is the relationship she develops with Colin. In many respects the two children are doubles. Both are ten years of age and both have lost parents. Colin’s mother died at his birth; Colin’s father is both emotionally unavailable and physically absent, so for all intents and purposes, he is dead.

Using Kohut’s theories on the coping mechanisms of severely disturbed narcissistic patients, we can see these mechanisms at work in Colin. We can also observe Mary’s involvement in this process. Having successfully emerged from her own infantile narcissism, she is now able to help Colin do the same. It might even be said that she takes on the therapist role.

While Mary exhibits many narcissistic traits, Colin’s behavior indicates a more severe disturbance. This is not surprising in that Mary had some nurturing before her parents died, while Colin was born motherless and received no parental love from his father. Not only are his tantrums wilder, his depressions deeper, but he has already somatized his illness. Unable to walk, Colin remains confined to his bed in leg irons, suffering the pains of his psychosomatic illness. And he is convinced that he will not live to adulthood.

In a key scene Colin is having one of his ubiquitous tantrums. The servants have all failed to calm him down. Mary enters the bedroom and begins to imitate Colin’s behavior, outperforming his every move. When he is finally calm, she holds his hand and tells him the story of the secret garden, thus passing on the secret gift. For Colin this experience is one of twinship (the child sees the other as being like or similar to her/his grandiose self). Later in the film he will progress further as he is able to see Mary and then Dickon as separate individuals. This is achieved through Mary’s successful efforts to mirror Colin.

Although my focus in this part of the essay has been on The Secret Garden, I would like to point out the large number of characters in these films who exhibit narcissistic traits. Ellen in Leave Her to Heaven is depicted as a self-centered, jealous woman who always gets her own way. The degree of rage and destructiveness which she exhibits when her desires are thwarted, indicate a narcissistic personality disorder.

In The Seventh Veil, Francesca is extremely shy and self-effacing. According to Kaplan, shyness is often a cover for feelings of grandiosity. Shyness and social discomfort result from the fear that the grandiose
ambitions will be exposed. Both Nicholas and Craven have physical deformities—Nicholas walks with a limp and Craven has a hunchback. In Freud’s observations, patients with congenital handicaps or physical injuries acquired early in life often hold themselves above and beyond the rules that govern other people. According to Jacobson, Freud found a conspicuous resistance among such patients in accepting the reality principle. Most claimed that “they had suffered enough, and behaved as if they were exceptions to whom such rules did not apply.” However, as Jacobson explains, the presence of rebellion and scorn usually masks an unconscious masochistic need for self-punishment. In short, these character-types, as Freud called them, simultaneously exhibited aspects of grandiosity and self-destructive behavior. The same can be said of Nicholas and Craven, each of whom display arrogance, a withdrawal from social intercourse, and lack of empathy for others. They are also the same characteristics that define Colin for the long period when he remains confined to his bed in leg irons. It is noteworthy that as his sense of grandiosity diminishes, his physical affliction also subsides.

In trying to rediscover the complex psychological configurations which drew me as a preadolescent to these five films, I have drawn on the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Kohut. My description of an unresolved Oedipal complex lasting into the latency period and an incomplete sense of mourning for the pre-Oedipal mother are fairly common occurrences. I suspect that my reading of these scenarios, as reflections of my own conflictual latency issues, may have been reflective of much juvenile spectatorship of the time. My use of Kohut, however, may need some additional autobiographical explanation.

One month before my third birthday, I was sent to a boarding facility somewhere on the outskirts of Washington for the four weeks my mother remained in the hospital to deliver my younger brother. As there was no relative who could care for me, this was deemed the best solution. Whatever explanations were offered have long since faded from memory. What does remain is the sense of abandonment and betrayal, as well as guilt and anger. I was being sent away either because I had done (or thought something really bad) or to make room for the new and possibly favored child.

For one month I did not see my mother, although my father visited almost daily. When I did return, I became ill with both the mumps and the measles and thus had to be again separated from my mother. According to my mother’s memories, I emerged from this experience a sullen and angry child, one who demanded inordinate attention, who threw temper tantrums, and
who refused to be physically touched by either parent, in short, "a difficult child."

Prior to my brother's arrival, I had been a pampered child in a child-centered household. I had been treated as special and I fought to retain this position after his birth. Much of my behavior from this point forward was manifested in narcissistic symptoms like those described by Kohut. There is little in Mary's feelings or behavior that I could not understand, although it never reached the excesses of a Colin. Like Mary, I felt abandoned, uncared for, and betrayed. Like Colin, I felt rejected and knew what it meant to be separated from others because of illness. Although my sickness was not psychosomatic, my vulnerability at that time was not surprising. Also, like Colin I perceived my father as a shadowy, distant figure, who would have to be won over with the persistence and tactics of Mary. And like both children, my response was one of rage in which I demanded special treatment because, on the deepest level, I felt less worthy. Simultaneously, I rejected the expressions of love and affection I so desperately craved out of a fear of dependence and further hurt, and as a means of exacting vengeance against my parents. In brief, I chose to adopt the role of orphan and I easily identified with all the abandoned children in the films discussed above.

Over the years I have returned to these five films from the perspective of an adult. They continually provide me with new insights into who I was and whom I have come to be. Given the impact of visual narratives on young viewers, the rich manner in which children utilize such material and the duration wherein the images remain active agents, it is surprising that so little work has been done on juvenile spectatorship. I hope that my attempt to theorize such a position will stimulate further analysis.

In her study, Origins of the Novel, Marthe Robert writes about the family romance, "From Freud we learn that in early childhood we all consciously fabricate this fabulous, wholly mendacious and fantastic tale, but that we forget or 'repress' it as soon as the requirements of our development make it impossible for us to take it seriously... Though conscious and normal at its incipience in early childhood, it is unconscious and pathological during the remainder of our lives." Commenting on the same phenomenon, Freidlaender notes, "One finds frequently among adult patients that an impression is still left by those books [here read films] of the latency time, which contained the phantasy, under whose influence they still continue to live." But lest anyone assume that the retention of family romance fantasies into adulthood is only present in neurotic patients, let me end with a quote from Kaplan: "I suggest that the family romance is an expression of the
universal dissatisfaction with the limitations of having only one life. An individual who has become fully resolved to himself [herself] and his[her] own sense of identity would have worked through the issues of the family romance and would have no need for the fantasy. *It is unlikely that there are any such individuals.* (italics mine)\(^44\)

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Notes:

1. I am not able to pinpoint the exact date when I might have seen each of these films. There is also the problem of whether I saw the film in its initial release or in a rerelease. This pertains most specifically to *Leave Her to Heaven.* It is possible that I saw the release in 1950s when I was close to twelve.

2. This film was considered a brutal look at juvenile delinquency. I managed to see it when my babysitter, an older cousin, took me without asking my parents.


5. The end of the Oedipus complex and the beginning of the latency period usually occurs around the age of five or six. Galatzer-Levy and Cohler refer to this as the five-seven shift. See Robert M. Galatzer-Levy and Bertram J. Cohler, *The Essential Other: A Developmental Psychology of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 142.


10. Galatzer-Levy and Cohler, 143.


13. Friedlaender, 137.


18. Tyson and Tyson, 271.

19. Kaplan, 175.


22. Galatzer-Levy and Cohler, 149; Tyson and Tyson, 267-68; 270-71.

23. It is significant that in my memory of the film, Dinah’s widowed mystery writer parent was a male. Perhaps I mixed it up with the Nancy Drew series which features a girl detective who lives with her father. Nonetheless, the transposition is telling.


28. Freud did not use this term; however, it was suggested to me by Lawrence Goodman in a course at the University of Chicago. It is also used by Novick and Novick in “Beating Fantasies in Children,” 239.


31. Kaplan, 182.


33. Kaplan, 183.


38. Kaplan, 186.


40. Jacobson, 199.


43. Friedlaender, 144.

44. Kaplan, 181.
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Galatzer-Levy, Robert M. and Bertramn J.


Film Synopsis:

Leave Her to Heaven. Directed by John Stahl. Starring Gene Tierney, Cornel Wilde, and Jeanne Crain, with Vincent Price, Ray Collins and Gene Lockhart. The story centers on Ellen (Tierney), a willful young woman, who falls in love with and marries a writer, Dick (Wilde). Little by little she isolates him from everyone, including his invalid brother, so she can have him all to herself. She even throws herself down the steps so as to abort the child she is carrying. In the end, she takes poison, but arranges to make it look like murder. Dick goes to prison and upon his release comes back to Ruth (Crain), Ellen’s cousin, who has stood by him through his trials. The film is in Technicolor and is told in flashback.

The Seventh Veil. Directed by Compton Bennett. Starring James Mason, Ann Todd, and Herbert Lom. The film tells the story of Francesca Cunningham (Todd), an orphan who comes to live with her older, wealthy, bachelor cousin, Nicholas (Mason). Nicholas is disinterested in her until he discovers her musical talent. Thereafter he rigorously grooms her to become a concert pianist. When she falls in love with a music student,
Nicholas breaks up the romance. Later she turns to a painter for love. After an attempted suicide and some psychiatric hypnosis, Francesca discovers she has loved Nicholas all along. The film is told in flashback. A British production.

*Home, Sweet Homicide.* Directed by Lloyd Bacon. Starring Peggy Ann Garner, Randolph Scott, Lynn Bari, and Dean Stockwell. Dinah (Garner), an adolescent gathers a group of children under her wing, who outsmart the local police by solving a neighborhood murder. In the process, Dinah finds a new husband for her widowed, mystery writer mother (Bari), by uniting her with Bill Smith (Scott), a police detective.

*The Red Shoes.* Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Starring Anton Walbrook, Marius Goring, Moira Shearer, Robert Helpmann, Leonide Massine, Albert Gasserman, and Ludmilla Tcherina. The film follows the rise of a young ballerina, Victoria Page (Shearer). Under the demanding eye of impresario Boris Lermontov (Walbrook), she stars in a new ballet based on the fairy tale of “The Red Shoes.” Simultaneously she falls in love with the composer of the ballet, Julian Craster (Goring). Both are ousted from the company by Lermontov who can tolerate only artists willing to dedicate their lives to their art. Secretly in love with Victoria, he later takes her back to dance “The Red Shoes.” Moments before the performance, torn between her love for Julian and her devotion to dancing, she runs after her departing husband and accidentally falls to her death. The ballet continues without her as a final tribute. Filmed in Technicolor. A British production.

*The Secret Garden.* Directed by Fred M. Wilcox. Starring Margaret O’Brien, Herbert Marshall, Dean Stockwell, Gladys Cooper, and Elsa Lanchester. The story of Mary Lennox (O’Brien), an orphan who comes to live with her depressed and remote uncle Archibald Craven (Marshall) in Yorkshire. Here she is befriended by Dickon, a village’s son, and together they discover the secret garden which Craven locked up following the death there of his beautiful, young wife. The two children restore the garden to its original beauty. Mary also discovers Colin (Stockwell), her invalid cousin, and is instrumental in helping him walk again and reuniting him with his father. The film is in black and white, with color sequences in the secret garden.