

## ***The night of the hunter:* children & adults in the secret**

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*"Lord, save little children! They abide.  
The wind blows and the rain is cold.  
Yet, they abide."*

Rachael in *The Night of the Hunter*

**Abstract:** *Night of the Hunter* is the 1956 Charles Laughton's film considered one of the best discussions about childhood. In this film, the story revolves around the fate of John and Pearl, two orphaned siblings whose father was hanged for stealing. The father had given the children the money, and they hid the money inside the girl's doll. When the Preacher Powell enters their lives, both John and Pearl are in danger. The siblings have to keep a secret which is both where they put the money, and the fact that, for children, money is simply paper.

**Key words:** Hollywood, childhood, violence, money, secret, adulthood.



Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) is one of the great Hollywood films about children. Part of the reason is because some of the most venerable ideas of our culture about childhood are so explicitly stated in the film: children are pure, innocent beings, who need to be protected from the predations of adults. In their most extreme form, these predations become the murderous designs of the Preacher, Harry Powell, just as protection from

these designs results in the maternal care of the widow, Rachael Cooper.

Indeed, her care is so vital that she assumes the identity of the shadowy woman who constitutes the framing device of the film, addressing what is quickly revealed to be an audience of children. At first, though, we ourselves are nominally that audience, as if it is never too late as well as too early to be instructed about the danger of false prophets, before whose duplicity we are all as children.

Yet of course even within the respective terms of the polarity of Powell and Cooper, the venerable idea of childhood innocence is not so simple. Powell himself articulates the general view of children as "little lambs" as often as he curses Pearl and John in particular when they succeed in eluding his grasp. ("You poor silly disgusting little wretch" he says of John.) Rachael

herself suffers the waywardness of the eldest of the five orphan children in her care, Ruby, whose sexual urges threaten to shatter the boundaries of purity.

In fact, can it be that innocence itself is not so innocent in *Night*? Take the moment early in the film after the father of Pearl and John has been hanged. Shaken, the hangman returns home and looks in on his own two children, sleeping. There they lie, seemingly oblivious to such things as robbery and death, from which it is the special burden of adulthood to shield them, lest their precious innocence be lost.

However, already in the security of the bedroom we hear the voices of children singing a nonsensical song, “Hing, Hang, Hung,” and then we see a cut to one of these children who scrawls a chalk sketch of the figure of a hangman on a brick wall. Could these children already in some way know about death, and have it within their power to represent it? How are we to reconcile these children with the ones so sweetly sleeping?

Ostensibly, with the appalling exception of Preacher Powell, adults in *Night* act towards children with a uniform concern: they strive to nurture and protect them. Children are most quintessentially – or ideally – seen playing among themselves at the picnic (as Powell leads the rest of the congregation in a spirited rendition of “Bringing in the Sheep”). But increasingly in the film adult motives become suspect, and not only because of Powell.

For example, we first see Rachael Cooper at a distance, when she almost immediately picks up a switch and drives them in line in front of her. Before we think of Mother Goose, we may think for an instant of more

disturbing motives. No matter the full measure of Rachael’s actual care. There seems to be that in childhood that needs to be *disciplined*. Children left to themselves would be—what?

On the surface, it appears that adults are content not to inquire further into the possibility of children as somehow inhabiting an alluring, recalcitrant, separate world. It suffices to comprehend them as part of *our* world. And yet Powell’s own comprehension haunts the film. “Children, children,” he hails them so unctuously, as if to lure Pearl and John out of themselves. In the most real sense, especially through him, *Night* increasingly assumes the character of a interrogation of childhood by adulthood. Childhood contains some secret. Adulthood needs to learn it.

# 1.



This secret is reified in *Night* as the money that the father of John and Pearl has left with them after he has stolen it. John doesn’t want the money. But he lacks the strength to refuse it. The money comes to him with the force of a paternal inheritance, to which he must be responsible. It is not long after this that he blurts out to Powell (who has announced his impending marriage to his mother): “You think you can make me tell! But I won’t! I won’t! I won’t.”

Thereby John protects the secret—and, in the process, effectively protects childhood itself as a state beyond the monitoring of adults. Powell, unlike Icey and Walt Spoon, neighbors who are utterly awash in sentimental attitudes about children, understands that John has a secret. But the Preacher

doesn't understand the resources that enable the boy to resist him. Indeed, he can't really attribute any power to John at all—hence his frustration and outrage.

As Jeffrey Couchman puts it in his “biography” of the film: throughout it, “John has been powerless—that is to say, without a story” (144). He has no words to defeat the Preacher. “John has only the truth, and in the world of Cresap Landing, that is not enough” (145). Not enough, that is, to contest other stories. Yet the fact that this truth cannot be spoken increases its power as a secret.

John's truth of course is not equivalent to that of his younger sister, whose emotional economy is more closed to the external world. Thus, her possession of the secret is less sure and more careless than John's. If not him, Powell feels with good reason that he can manipulate her into telling him where the money is hidden. She scarcely seems aware of the secret, *as* a secret.

That is, she scarcely seems aware of the money, as money. This is especially evident in the scene where she removes some of the money from her doll and makes paper cut-outs from the bills. When Powell hails the children, John is barely able to stuff the money back into Pearl's doll before it can be discovered. The scene ends with a few of the bills being blown away unseen, headed underneath the house.

Once underneath, what will the money be? What value will it have? The special genius of *Night* is to provide an answer to these questions in terms of childhood. To the children, the ten thousand dollars has only at most an abstract value—something of value to adults, not to them. The bills themselves are merely paper—a medium of play rather than of exchange. The money is nothing in itself.

Or rather, like childhood, it might be something in itself. But this can't be known, especially by adults who have a vested interest in disdaining this way of looking at the matter; to them, ten thousand dollars can no more be recreated as paper than adulthood can be recreated as childhood. The secret of childhood is in one respect simply the power to reinvest the value of money—to play with money as paper. However, Pearl and John can't speak about this power.

Having escaped Powell's literal clutches, the children are free for a time to drift down the river, under the auspices of the nature world, including a frog, a spider, rabbits, a turtle, sheep, and a fox. As the rowboat drifts, Pearl sings a story of two “pretty children” who “flew away/into the sky, into the moon.” It may be the case that childhood exists ultimately in *another realm*, one that “abides” away from human society. This society is the creation of adults.

The consummate creation of adults is money. Only children know a deeper secret about money: that it's only paper. But this secret must remain hidden. It can't be spoken. In *Night* children are only asked to speak about things which adults understand. (Much of what Simon Callow terms the “extraordinary natural benevolence” of the river sequence stems from the fact that the children aren't required to speak [72]). The things that children understand abide under the sign of the secret, which rather necessarily conceals more than it reveals.

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What is a secret? Whatever else, it is knowledge capable of producing all manner of other knowledge—questions, speculation, hints. As Robert Frost's

famous two-line poem has it: "We dance round in a ring and suppose,/But the Secret sits in the middle and knows." *Night* is a film filled with such "dancing," so curiously all out of proportion to the secret, once revealed. As Callow notes, neither the Preacher nor the police "hardly registers" the money, once John, unable to bear another arrest, throws the doll streaming with money at Powell's feet (76).



Callow further notes: "The truth is that by now the money, being the main engine of the plot, is insignificant.". Why? His gloss is instructive: "John has learned that money can never justify human suffering, of which he has experienced more than any child should" (76). In other words, the money is enlisted as a moral example. It was always under the sign of adulthood, by which John was always comprehended and now into which he will proceed to live.

Curiously, however, Callow has earlier cited a French critic, who has a different reading of John. The Preacher has made it possible for the boy "to escape the embrace of an envious mother figure." Nevertheless, the boy seems fated to a life of "sexless bachelorhood": "The little boy will stay committed to a world of cakes and affectionate astonishments. He will never become a man. No doubt of it, these Americans are always going to be big children" (60).

What we have here are two differing readings of the secret. In one, it always contained adulthood, into which, once revealed, knowledge is properly released. Adulthood is a world of meanings and lessons. In the adult world, money cannot be ignored. However, in a second reading, the secret retains the character of childhood, which is revealed to be inconsequential to adults—hence, their curious lack of interest in the money, as soon as it is made visible.

Each of these readings is gendered. A John who suffers his knowledge grows up by the end to be a man. As Couchman states, adults "leave him stranded and force him out into the world. There he does discover his courageous, resilient self. When at the end of the story he snuggles under his quilt in Miz.Cooper's house, the suggestion is that he will live happily with someone who will never abandon him" (43). This last statement, however, locates the boy back among women, and suspiciously still dependent upon women for his identity. This is the world of childhood, where consequences can be ignored and secrets can still be kept.

In fact it seems that the respective worlds of childhood and adulthood can ultimately be no more extricated from each other than women from men, secrecy from knowledge, or play from money. To the end, *Night* teases each of these things apart from the other, only to show them to be inseparable. Why, precisely? How can childhood be at once beneath adult supervision and complicit with it? The answer constitutes the film's own secret.

What we can suppose is that the film's secret is contained in the actual secret of the film, the money that Pearl and John's father originally stole (and stole,

he assures them, for them). Thereby the most important thing to adults is consigned to the care of children. But of course the children don't care about the money at all, which may be – we can never be sure – yet another facet of the secret that they know, but can't tell.

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