

Movie: Orphan (2009)

Synopsis

Orphan (2009) is a mystery/thriller, horror film featuring Kate and John Coleman who, following the death of their daughter, try to pick up the pieces of their lives and adopt a 9-year-old girl, Esther, from a nearby orphanage. The innocent, sweet, educated, well-spoken Esther is not who she claims to be. Kate, her adopted mother, becomes suspicious, unraveling a plot that reveals [spoiler alert] Esther to be a 33-year-old Russian woman named Leena who suffers from panhypopituitarism.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Orphan serves as an opportunity to teach Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) and “sociopathy.” Esther is an intelligent, highly manipulative, and superficially charming “child.” She easily induces fear, empathy, and even admiration when it suits her ambitions, as evidenced by the first time Kate and John meet her in the orphanage.

It is evident that she is charming and manipulative at her own whim in her interactions with John. Her agenda is to seduce him, so she behaves accordingly for his continued approval. This is not the case with the other characters in the film, especially with Kate. Esther preys on Kate because she believes she took her family for granted. This trope parallels that of John Kramer (Jigsaw), the antagonist from the *Saw* franchise who also demonstrates sociopathic traits. In response to her discordant relationship with Kate, Esther brings John closer and closer.

Kate depicts a “dry drunk,” absent spiritual recovery when she discloses to her mother-in-law that she “simply stopped drinking.” While Kate serves as a case study of Alcohol Use Disorder, Esther turns her attention to John. One component of Esther’s desire to seduce her adoptive father stems from her fixation at the phallic stage. The phallic stage, according to Freud, is the third stage of psychosexual development that occurs between 3-6 years of age when the child becomes aware of their bodies and the bodies of others. Esther’s fixation at this stage could be due to the abuse she experienced as a child at the hands of her biological father. In support of this, the European psychiatrist tells Kate that Esther has a history of having seduced her father. Her sexual feelings towards the opposite sex, and hostile feelings towards the same sex, are examples of being fixated in the phallic stage; an unresolved Oedipus Electra complex. Interestingly, if Jaume Collet-Serra would have written the character of Esther to be a 6-year-old child (rather than 9), her reported age would have ironically been consistent with her psychosexual age.

Sister Abigail comes to the house to warn Kate and John that there is something suspicious about Esther; she is always “around” when bad things happen. Just as Kate suspected, Esther has a

history of crime (she burned down the Saarne Institute), legal problems, and impulsive/aggressive behavior; features consistent with APD.

In the scenes where Esther smashes a bird with a rock, pushes a girl off a slide (breaking her leg), and murders Sister Abigail, her lack of remorse and calm demeanor depict the cold and emotionless features of APD. This reinforces her lack of a moral compass. When Esther cuts the special roses to give to Kate, she knows that they were part of Jessica's memorial (the unborn child) and that Kate would be devastated. Esther can feel what other people feel (empathy) and exploit that. These features of APD and sociopathy reinforce her disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others.

Orphan approaches commentary on the etiology of APD (nature versus nurture) when it's revealed that Esther was born on April 20 (the birthdate of Adolph Hitler). Much like Rhoda Penmark (*The Bad Seed*, 1954), Esther was originally written as having fair skin, delicate features, and platinum blonde hair (IMDB) until Isabelle Fuhrman auditioned for the part.

One must also consider whether Esther's antisocial traits are the direct physiologic effect of an underlying medical condition. Beyond the endocrinologic effects, signs of panhypopituitarism may generally be attributable to the underlying cause. While a space-occupying lesion may present with headaches, double-vision or visual-field deficits, a pituitary tumor would not be as likely as a frontal lobe tumor (such as John Kramer) to cause antisocial traits. Despite this, another fictional orphan with antisocial traits is thought to suffer from panhypopituitarism.

In J. M. Barrie's 1904 play, *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, Peter Pan was introduced to the world while chasing his shadow. Named after the mischievous Greek god of the woodlands, Pan may be interpreted as chasing his Jungian dark side (shadow archetype) on his quest to disobey adults and authority figures. Like Peter Pan, Esther is both physiologically and emotionally stunted; serving as a re-make of "Peter Pan-hypopituitarism."

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