

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Les enfants terribles. 1950

Jean Cocteau. (1889-1963)

STORY

The present film was based on a novel of Cocteau, published in 1929, and itself grounded in the personal experience of the author. It is co-directed with the distinguished Jean-Pierre Melville, who on many important occasions disagreed with Cocteau, as in the case of casting for the part of Paul, for whom Melville felt that Cocteau had chosen an actor who was too muscular. (Many of these decisive casting decisions turned around the question of degrees of masculinity and femininity—in this film where gender tones determine the whole achievement.) Unlike many of his contemporary auteurs—Bergman, Godard, Herzog—Cocteau was both a multiple talent (poet, playwright, critic, dramatist, painter) and a classicist, with a tale to tell, and limited patience with self-conscious reflections on the art and peculiarities of the camera itself.

Tale. The tale opens as Paul, a student at the Ecole Condorcet in Paris, is hit in the chest by a snowball, during a mass unruly snowball fight as school lets out. Paul is helped home by a friend, Gerard, and they are taken to Paul's home, where his sister Elizabeth rapidly takes over the role as her brother's nurse. The family doctor appears, advises rest for Paul, and the teen age family—whose mom, in another part of the building, is seriously ill—settle down in a major bedroom-sitting room area of their house, and with the help of a couple of housekeepers, live through the transitional period pretty successfully. It doesn't hurt, actually, that Mom too passes away during this period, leaving the house and considerable funds, to her children.

Marriage. After her mother's death, Elizabeth gets a job as a model, and brings home with her a friend, Agathe, who will now stay in the house with Paul and Elizabeth. Paul, it seems, pretty quickly falls for Agathe. But that is not the only shake up from within the young persons' home. Elizabeth meets and marries a Jewish American businessman, Michael, who dies shortly after the marriage, leaving his own sumptuous mansion to Elizabeth, who is now truly the Madame of a significant and substantial urban dwelling, and can settle down there with her brother, Agathe, and various old school friends of her brother. While the occupants of this house look younger than they must be, nonetheless there is something oddly out of the mainstream of life that remains in the world of Paul and Elizabeth. They are 'children, enfants,' but at the same time they display adult traits and are soon to face themselves with adult consequences for their choices.

Mishap. A fatal accident occurs, which accelerates the seemingly static mode the tale has reached. Paul, who is an attractive guy in his early twenties, makes one of the clumsy mistakes that are characteristic of him. In love with Agathe, he confesses to Elizabeth that he is in despair because he knows that Agathe will never care for him. Prior to this disclosure, however, Elizabeth, who is the mistress of manipulations, par excellence, has ascertained that Agathe feels for Paul as he does for her, and shares with him the same reluctance to reveal her secret. Chance brings her the opportunity of thwarting this relation, of Paul to Agathe—and of arranging a marriage between Agathe and Gerard, Paul's old friend, the one who conducted him back home in the cab, after the initial 'snowball incident.' (Why is she so determined to carry through this plan? Elizabeth, the driver of this whole tale, say, a nostalgic and neurotic character of gothic fiction, perhaps a figure out of Truman Capote or Henry James, or Jose Donoso's *Obscene Bird of Night*, is hauntedly drawn to her childhood past which is threaded through with neurotic implications—Elizabeth sets up and rejoices in a marriage between Gerard and Agathe, who take off for a honeymoon, leaving Paul and Elizabeth as owners of the family house.)

Finale. A fittingly baroque finale is preparing itself, as Gerard and Agathe return from their honeymoon. They bring with them word from Dargelos, the lad who had opened the film by throwing a stone filled

'snowball' at Paul. Dargelos sends along a small poison bag, which Elizabeth and Paul can add to their medicine treasure collection, a fetish which had amused the kids in childhood, and reference to which still held them together. As it happens, Paul himself takes the poison, and dies, and Elizabeth, united to him through her secret plotting, survives one on one with her (passed away) brother, with whom her ancient 'game of escape' survives as robustly as it had when they were children in the house.

THEMES

Childhood. The childhood that united Paul and Elizabeth, then gradually enlarged to let in Paul's friends, was intimate, privileged, and made feasible by the almost total absence of parental intervention. The death of the children's mother forced the children to be their own children and their own parents, their own parents and their own children.

Sexuality. Within the Paul-Elizabeth family the shaping interpersonal mode is essentially playful, insider-ish, but not maturely sexual. Through to the end, even when the stakes are of life and death, there is an element of 'harmless play' in the interactions of the children.

Holiday. Though plunged into group loyalty, independent of one another, the children live as though they were on perpetual holiday. Even the narrator, who knows the world, envies the children their innocence.

Death. While serving as a terrible finale to the children's game mentality, even death becomes, between Elizabeth and Paul, the kind of 'binding game' by which the family was united in its origins.

CHARACTERS

Elizabeth The principal character is **Elizabeth**, the doyenne of the small family, and the most true to its untouchable character. It is Elizabeth who knows the unity of the group, and who, in a Peter Pannish way, refuses to grow up. She is capable of running an imaginary household.

Paul is Elizabeth's close brother, the one who turns to her first when solace is needed, or advice given. While Paul does not fully understand Elizabeth's plot to win him away from Agathe, he dies contentedly under the spell of his sister, who shares an ambiguous sexuality which holds them together.

The doctor is a steady and reliable family friend, who makes it possible for the children to survive living virtually on their own.

Gerard is a close friend of Paul, who helps him after the accident which opens the film, and who keeps him in mind, rather lethally, when it comes time, at the end, to send Paul one more treasure for their nostalgic 'treasury box.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ELIZABETH

Character. Elizabeth is a rich and commanding figure, in the society of youngsters who form the nucleus of the film. Elizabeth is at her happiest, we see, when she is caring for Paul, visiting him in his room in the house she has inherited from her husband. Although she appears to succeed as a model, we never experience her on the job, nor do we understand exactly why she is so eager to break up Paul's marriage.

Parallels. Earlier we referred to texts concerned with the power of childhood, and of the intimate bonds created by siblings. We might well have thought of Elizabeth in terms of Marcel Proust's childhood, which is full of unspoken intimacies, hidden fears and desires, and unspoken subtleties. Henry James' 'The Turn of the Screw' is built around the implicit sexuality of two children attracted to each other in a fashion we can only call 'erotic.' The kind of pubertal fascination felt between Elizabeth and her brother is mirrored in the relation of Jerome and Alissa, in Andre Gide's *Straight is the Gate*(1909).

Discussion questions

Is the present film intended as an allegory—concerning the intimacy of the family?—or is it a social study of one kind of self-sufficient family environment?

Is Elizabeth a loving manager of the remains of her family, or is she in fact an 'enfant terrible,' a wild kid who has no desire to bring her siblings and friends into conformity with society? How do you judge her 'crime' in destroying the love letter to Agatha, which Paul foolishly addressed to himself?

Does the present film reflect the historical actuality of its creation? Did the Nazi occupation of Paris, and the subsequent street fighting in the city, cause many residents to remain inside their homes—arguably creating a kind of withdrawal existence of a sort we see Elizabeth and Paul—and their friends—occupying?

How do you see the role of gender identity in the present film? Elizabeth works as a model, for sure, but is there not a strong masculine trait to her? What about Paul? Though strong and burly—too burly for the role, thought Cocteau's codirector—is he not too 'beautiful and soft,' in certain angles, to carry any masculine weight into the family?