

**“The Holy Grail of Christmas Gifts”: Child Empowerment via Consumerism in A  
*Christmas Story***  
by Brennan M. Thomas

Films chronicling children’s quests for material wealth or possessions are rare, and those that do usually involve the child learning some lesson in the process, such as the importance of honesty, as with *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971),<sup>1</sup> or rejecting the initial object of desire for something more emotionally substantive, as in *Pollyanna* (1960).<sup>2</sup> In part because it lacks these recognizable coming-of-age plot devices, *A Christmas Story* (1983), directed by Bob Clark, is markedly different from most other child-seeks-prize stories. Ostensibly, it is the story of a child’s desire for a toy, a Red Ryder BB gun: the film’s protagonist, Ralphie Parker, schemes to get the BB gun himself, fails, but is given the gun anyway. Ralphie does not mature through the course of the film, nor does he tell the person who eventually buys him the gun, his gruff and foul-mouthed father, that he even wants it. It all happens by chance that Ralphie winds up with his prized gun, which may be whimsical and unexpected but is hardly coming-of-age story fare.

On another level, though, *A Christmas Story* is not a children’s film at all, but a nostalgic film for adults that valorizes children’s empowerment via consumer freedom. Though not as dark or raunchy as Clark’s earlier projects, which include the R-rated thriller *Black Christmas* (1974) and the teen comedy *Porky’s* (1982), *A Christmas Story* departs from other family-friendly holiday films by sidestepping themes of religion and goodwill and instead focusing on consumers’ faith in the “transformative power” of material objects (Haire and Nelson 86). Much of the film’s comedy and conflict is derived from Ralphie’s belief in the Red Ryder BB gun’s power to change him into a sharp-shooting lawman and thus allow him to bypass mentally, or at least endure with minimal unpleasantness, the remainder of his dull, powerless childhood. It is this unflinching confidence in consumerism that resonates with adult viewers, who, having experienced childhood themselves, recognize the futility of Ralphie’s efforts to improve his circumstances with a single toy and yet are able to identify with his reasons for wanting to do so.

### **The Adult Storyteller and the Child Mime**

It seems fitting, therefore, that the film’s events are told from the perspective of an adult remembering his childhood rather than that of the child living through it. *A Christmas Story* is narrated by Ralphie’s grown-up self, played by the late humorist Jean Shepherd, whose stories “Duel in the Snow, *Or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid*,” “The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, *Or The Asp Strikes Again*,” “My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art,” and “Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil” (all featured in Shepherd’s published story collection *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*<sup>3</sup>)

---

<sup>1</sup> In the penultimate scene of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, Charlie Bucket reveals to Willy Wonka that a competing chocolatier had offered him \$10,000 to betray Wonka and thus gains Wonka’s trust and eventual ownership of his factory.

<sup>2</sup> After paralyzing her legs in a terrible fall while trying to grab a doll, Pollyanna denounces her childhood games and toys as “silly” but comes to accept her aunt’s love.

<sup>3</sup> These four stories were republished in the 2003 collection *A Christmas Story: The Book that Inspired the Hilarious Christmas Classic*. All page citations for Shepherd’s stories refer to this collection.

supply the material for the film's story arc. Shepherd's narrations situate viewers within Ralphie's fictionalized childhood past, sometime around 1939 or shortly after the theatrical releases of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), both of which are visually referenced in *A Christmas Story*. The film's opening shot pans across a snow-covered block in a small residential neighborhood, with Shepherd musing, "There it is, my house and good old Cleveland Street." As the camera focuses on young Ralphie running through a labyrinth of ice-coated cars and fences, Shepherd informs audiences that he and they are revisiting this block for a special reason: "Christmas was on its way—lovely, glorious, beautiful Christmas around which the entire kid year revolved." The word "kid" and the concept of a child's year revolving around Christmas, presumably because of the promise of toys and other childhood delights, occlude any religious undertones of this film. This is a secularized tale of childhood desires realized one Christmas, a Christmas from Shepherd's youth that he considers more "glorious" and "beautiful" than any Christmas from his adult life.

Continuing with this theme of commercialized Christmas, Shepherd's narration leads viewers to a shopping center in downtown Hohman, Indiana, the setting of many of Shepherd's stories, with carolers and buyers milling about and gathering in front of window displays of seasonal goodies. At the corner window of the department store Higbee's, young Ralphie, his little brother, Randy, and his friends Flick and Schwartz stop to stare longingly at the toys in the window display. Played by child actor Peter Billingsley, Ralphie appears to be about nine or ten years old; he is what Gary Cross would call a "tween," one of "those children between eight and fourteen years of age who are neither dependent children nor relatively autonomous teenagers" (*The Cute and the Cool* 11). Ralphie is at a perfect age, therefore, to launch his quest for power via the procurement of some toy hovering between plaything and weaponry—like, say, a gun.

Initially, Ralphie is indistinguishable from fellow "tweens" Flick and Schwartz as the three watch different-colored trains disappearing into tunnels and wind-up tank toys attacking miniature frontier forts. Yet there are some aspects of Ralphie's demeanor and physique that make Ralphie's toy wishes more desperate than his companions'. First, Ralphie appears more awkward than either of his male friends. Whereas Schwartz and Flick (their full names are never given in the film) chatter inaudibly but excitedly to each other about the toy display, Ralphie remains silent, eventually drifting away from the group for a closer look at a Red Ryder BB gun rack. Ralphie also wears glasses and is noticeably shorter than Flick and chubbier than Schwartz. Neither the gregarious talker nor an athlete, he is simply the blonde-haired, blue-eyed innocent among his cohorts. With his round cheeks and pale, unblemished skin, Ralphie resembles a painted cherub, the nineteenth-century visual embodiment of "the quintessence of childhood" innocence (Holland 9). Even Shepherd is somewhat repulsed by his young counterpart's physical appearance. "But there I am," he groused in self-reproach, "with that dumb round face and that stupid stocking cap!"

Yet with that "dumb round face" and silent stare, the filmmakers are already insinuating that Ralphie is just the sort of youth who needs the boost of artificial strength and confidence one might get from a BB gun. Shepherd even justifies the mania with which young Ralphie pursues the gun, describing it as "the Holy Grail of Christmas gifts" and Ralphie's obsession with it as bordering on insanity. "For weeks," Shepherd narrates, "I had been scheming to get my mitts on one of these fearsome blue-steel beauties." Without such eloquent phrasing, Ralphie's fixation

on the BB gun might seem childish, even silly. But Shepherd's description of the toy as a "fearsome" beauty vindicates Ralphie's desire for one. After all, who would not want "the Holy Grail of Christmas gifts"?

With Shepherd's narrations superimposed over young Ralphie's internal voice, the filmmakers have carefully constructed the illusion that Ralphie thinks and reacts like an adult. In fact, far more words are spoken by Shepherd than by Ralphie (Billingsley) during the film. Little can be gleaned of Ralphie's true emotional state; every feeling or response is filtered through the voice of Shepherd, expressed with the language, sagacity, and remoteness of a middle-aged man. Still, the filmmakers are careful never to draw any attention to the incongruity between the nine-year-old's behavior and facial expressions and his adult counterpart's narration. Every time Shepherd suggests an emotion, such as elation or embarrassment, Billingsley visually matches it. One of the film's establishing shots of this congruence between the adult's narration and the child's acting occurs at Higbee's store window; while Ralphie presses his face into the glass, mesmerized by the off-screen BB gun, Shepherd explains the boy's hungry gaze. "There it is!" Shepherd whispers shrilly. "The Red Ryder two-hundred shot range model air rifle!" Cue young Ralphie mouthing the dialogue scrawled upon the talking balloon emanating from a cardboard cutout of Red Ryder. Other children's attention shifts wildly from one part of the window display to another, but Ralphie's eyes remain locked with un-childlike tenacity upon the cardboard cowboy as Shepherd continues cataloguing the toy's brilliant qualities—"the knurled stock of as coolly deadly-looking a piece of weaponry as ever I had laid eyes on." By conveying the toy's mythical properties in this manner, this amalgam of child mime and adult narrator recasts the BB gun as the centerpiece of Shepherd's perfect Christmas memory; it is as if the older Ralphie has chosen this toy for his younger self to be certain that the Christmas of his nine-year-old life is as "beautiful" and "glorious" as he remembers it.

### **The Unattainable "Holy Grail"**

Unfortunately, acquiring such a toy was a more formidable task for Ralphie in 1939 than it would be for most children today. A *Christmas Story* is set in the Great Depression, and although Ralphie's family is not destitute, they do not seem able or willing to spend much money on frivolous items. In his story "Duel in the Snow," Shepherd makes several explicit references to the Depression's effects on his hometown, such as the closed mills and specious job offers (10). In a period of such prolonged economic uncertainty, Ralphie's family is doing better than most. The father earns a steady income, the family has enough to eat, and although their house is not spacious or ornate, it appears clean and warm, with a refrigerator, an oven, and a radio. These markers of modest living, along with store-bought items lining the kitchen and bathroom shelves like Quick Arrow soap flakes and Lifebuoy soap, indicate that the Parkers are active consumers in an unsteady economy. Still, they are on the fringes of middle-classdom. Their meals are ordinary and repetitive, consisting primarily of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and red cabbage; Ralphie's father incessantly battles a clinking furnace, and Ralphie's younger brother can barely breathe when stuffed into a snowsuit two sizes too small. It is conceivable that the Parkers will not be able to afford a BB gun for Ralphie, even if they think he is old enough to handle one.

But if there are doubts about whether his parents can afford such a toy, there is little doubt about Ralphie's inability to buy one. Although children of the Depression often bought

inexpensive items such as yo-yos (Mintz 217), major toy purchases were made by children's parents and then only for special occasions. Only a handful of advertising companies even targeted young children as serious consumers during the pre-WW II era. Manhattan Institute Fellow Kay S. Hymowitz observes, "Though catalogues and magazines hawked children's toys and books to mothers as early as the mid nineteenth century, it wasn't until fairly recently that marketers sought to do an end-run around parents and seduce the young while the adults weren't looking" (126). The Daisy Manufacturing Company, which produced Red Ryder BB guns, was an exception, being one of the earliest companies to market directly to children, although its advertisements were not so much soliciting children as enlisting children's efforts in soliciting Mom and Dad. Advertisements for Daisy air rifles often instructed boys on how to lure their parents into buying them one by placing copies of advertisements into parents' magazines or on tables or porch steps (Cross, "Children and the Market" 82). An early scene in *A Christmas Story* shows Ralphie sliding a Red Ryder ad inside his mother's copy of *Look* magazine, to no effect. Advertisements aimed at children also encouraged them to appeal to parents' growing social desires to coddle and please their children (Cross, "Children and the Market" 82). An advertisement described in Shepherd's story tells boys to remind their fathers that the Red Ryder BB gun "will make a swell Christmas gift" (7). These advertising schemes reflect the changing dynamics between parents and children of this era. Explains Cross, "Few children were able to purchase toys with their own money. But toy companies recognized that in an era of growing permissiveness, children had influence over parent's [sic] spending" (*The Kid's Stuff* 31). No longer viewed as an exploitable workforce or financial burden to their families, children had become "cute" in their parents' eyes, adorable in their curiosity of the world as well as precious enough to be pampered and protected from the toils of factory work (Cross, "Children and the Market" 82-87). As such, children were given additional time for play as well as toys that encouraged them to imagine their future adult roles as breadwinners and caregivers, with erector sets and pop guns for boys and baby dolls and carriages for girls (Cross, "Gendered Futures").

By the 1930s, a growing number of retailers were tying in toy product lines with the trends, icons, and personalities popularized by radio, film, and print (Cross, "Gendered Futures"). The Daisy air rifle, which had been produced and sold in America since the late nineteenth century, was an established toy gun during the Depression, though hardly a standout. To recapture its waning popularity, the Daisy Manufacturing Company created a line of air rifles with the name and insignia of Red Ryder, a rough-riding fictional cowboy featured in a comic strip of the same name that ran from 1938 to 1964; Red Ryder would also become a popular staple of Saturday matinee serials, with stars such as Don "Red" Barry, Jim Bannon, and Allan "Rocky" Lane playing the titular character (McGillis 72, 168). By explicitly linking their products to the comic/serial cowboy icon, the Daisy Manufacturing Company encouraged child consumers to continue their experience with Red Ryder after reading the comics or watching the serials. The company also imbued their air rifle with Red Ryder's heroism and gun-slinging prowess; the advertisement described by Shepherd in "Duel in the Snow" insists that the Daisy air rifle is the same gun Red Ryder uses when "chasin' them rustlers and bad guys" and that its special attributes—i.e., sundial, compass, and cloverleaf sight—allow youngsters to find their way out of the wilderness or shoot any target as accurately as Red Ryder himself (Shepherd 7). Such advertisements encouraged children to incorporate the cowboy icon and the suggested storylines (like being lost in the wilderness) in their fantasy play with the gun. In doing so, the

Daisy air rifle repurposed the BB gun as a commodity that could empower children by making them feel autonomous, powerful, and in control.

### **“Deadly Weaponry” and Fantasy Play**

Promises of empowerment and control likely had a profound impact upon Depression-era children seeking escape from their strained economic conditions. Steven Mintz notes that “superheroes served as symbols of empowerment and national pride for powerless Depression-era adolescents” (249). Shepherd himself describes the magazine *Open Road for Boys*, with its seductive advertisements of the Red Ryder carbine, as a *Playboy* for pre-adolescent boys, selling them on fantasies of wild adventures, daring heroics, and “the effluvia of the Good Life” (5), to which young Ralphie easily succumbs. He sees the gun as a way to escape his ordinary life and enter a much more exciting fantasy realm where justice prevails and he is the key dispenser of it. In his analysis of utopian elements in advertisements, environmental communication specialist Shane Gunster explains that the images, descriptions, and stories often used in advertising “can hardly be said to offer a coherent social plan for a different way of living and being. Yet read as symptoms of a strong desire to escape the conditions of everyday life—a desire that has fuelled the origins of all utopias—such images may be understood as deeply utopian” (212). Ralphie’s utopia, shaped by his readings of Red Ryder advertisements, revolves around his transformation from a weak, bespectacled child into a tough lawman. Such transformation is possible only with the gun, however, which holds its own mythical allure. Romanticized in every medium as “a necessary adjunct to justice,” the gun has become the weapon that “ensures peace and order and fair play and freedom” (McGillis 6). Roderick McGillis recalls his own childhood attempts to persuade his mother to buy him a Red Ryder BB gun: to the ten-year-old McGillis, the gun was the embodiment of male protection. “The gun was not a weapon,” McGillis explains; “it was a tool every real man should have in order to accomplish his work as provider and protector” (7).

Similar to McGillis, Ralphie sees the gun as a tool, but a tool that fulfills needs created by external sources like magazine advertisements, or what Benjamin Barber refers to as “imaginary needs” (9-11). Ralphie does not really *need* a gun to ensure his family’s survival. But once he succumbs to the Red Ryder rhetoric, Ralphie conjures up all sorts of scenarios that can be resolved only with a BB gun, such as grizzly bears terrorizing a local candy store and outlaws infiltrating his family’s property. These imagined needs mask Ralphie’s implicit physical and emotional needs, which Barber labels “irreducible needs” (11), including Ralphie’s need to feel safe and secure, his need to achieve, and his need to be understood and recognized by the important adults in his life. Ralphie’s single driving “irreducible need,” social success, is a fairly common need, according to University of Massachusetts Communications Professor Sut Jhally. Jhally claims that what people usually desire are social rather than material commodities. Most people seek happy, healthy relationships and the time to enjoy them; they also want to experience less stress and freely explore their worlds (Jhally 251). Unfortunately, manufacturers cannot make or sell such things, so they package the promise of fulfilling these needs with material goods, selling the idea of stress-free living with a new vacation package or the ability to foster more successful relationships with a wardrobe change. “In short,” surmises Jhally, “the advertising image-system constantly propels us toward things as means to satisfaction” (252). Ralphie ascribes properties to a toy gun meant to fulfill his “irreducible needs.” With the gun, he

can defeat a criminal gang and save his family, thus earning the respect of his father and the admiration of his mother and younger brother.

### The “BB Gun Block”

Ralphie’s fantasies of empowerment, however, sharply clash with his mother’s efforts to keep her son safe. Ralphie’s mother declares BB guns “dangerous” and insists that Ralphie will “shoot [his] eye out” if he is given one. “That deadly phrase,” Shepherd recalls, “uttered many times before by hundreds of mothers,” was so well known to children of Shepherd’s childhood era that it became the “classic mother BB gun block.” Peter Stearns observes that by the 1920s children were seen not as mere commodities but as personal possessions of significant value (37), becoming “priceless,” to borrow sociologist Viviana Zelizer’s term (qtd. in Stearns 37). The infant mortality rate had decreased significantly by the early twentieth century, as had the birth rate (Stearns 38), which meant that family size was shrinking even as more children reached adulthood. With just two sons, the Parkers are a small, self-sufficient unit. There are no grandparents, uncles, or aunts living with or near the family, and the only other relative mentioned in the film, Aunt Clara, visits sporadically. In short, the nuclear family is the beginning and end of the Parker household. Ralphie’s mother cannot call on other relatives for guidance about her children’s upbringing, a situation that was not uncommon for many young mothers of this era. “The 1920s,” observes Stearns, “also saw the separation of many older kin from the households . . . and resultant increased reliance on the nuclear household—another change that could make the need for new sources of advice seem more vivid” (38-39). These “new sources of advice” Stearns refers to are the parenting manuals and child-rearing resources that flooded the literary markets after World War I, most of which touted the idea that children were too delicate to be left to their own devices (39-40). In denying her son’s request for a BB gun, therefore, Ralphie’s mother is likely drawing from the era’s social constructs of the “precious” and vulnerable child (Zelizer 11) as well as her own parenting logic.

### The “Transformative Power” of a Toy Gun

To circumvent his mother’s authority, Ralphie turns to other adults—his teacher and later a department store Santa—for aid. He first writes for his teacher, Miss Shields, a short theme titled “What I Want for Christmas” explaining why the Red Ryder BB gun is the ideal Christmas present. Ralphie convinces himself that his “masterpiece” theme is so well written that Miss Shields will excuse him from having to write themes ever again. Surmising that grading student papers is soul-crushing drudgery for teachers, Ralphie seeks to be the exceptional student whose words end Miss Shield’s miserable grading sessions. He imagines his classmates proudly hoisting him on their shoulders while an elated Miss Shields sprays the classroom walls with A+s. Since this fantasy was originally dreamt up as part of Ralphie’s efforts to gain Miss Shield’s sympathy in his desire for a Red Ryder carbine, the toy itself takes on new meaning. It becomes the final trophy to a whole host of dominoes that will inevitably fall Ralphie’s way, with the theme assignment being the first domino: Ralphie writes a “magnificent, eloquent theme” that saves Miss Shield’s career and sanity, gains her sympathy, and with her help gets his gun.

Thus, one common element of the film's fantasy sequences is impressing adults. All of Ralphie's fantasies, even those not directly associated with the BB gun, culminate with adults' admiration of him. In the example above, Ralphie writes a brilliant theme and his teacher fawns over him. In another fantasy sequence, Ralphie imagines himself defending his family against a band of trespassing outlaws, picking off each one as his father gasps, "Oh, he's a dead eye, ain't he?" and his mother croons, "You saved us!" Garnering adults' admiration is intertwined with another fantasy element: gaining control over his surroundings. During these fantasies, Ralphie's demeanor becomes bold and assertive. In the outlaw fantasy, for instance, he casually clops around the kitchen while his parents and younger brother crouch beneath a table. Ralphie tells his trembling father, "Don't worry, Dad, as long as I got Old Blue," and pats his gun, implying that the gun will either augment or serve as the primary source of Ralphie's resourcefulness and bravery. Seen through a boy's eyes, explains McGillis, the toy gun becomes "an *objet petit a*, something of an extension of himself and something that fills a lack" (74). In Ralphie's hands, the gun is capable of righting wrongs, of protecting the innocent and freeing the oppressed.

With this gun, Ralphie's persona is likewise transformed. As a regular nine-year-old, Ralphie is meek and clumsy, a Clark Kent type, but in these fantasies, particularly the one in which he defends his family from bandits, Ralphie turns into a super cowboy resembling the fictitious Red Ryder. From Ralphie's vantage, therefore, acquiring the gun to fulfill these fantasies becomes the chief method by which he can affect adults' attitudes toward him. That in his fantasies Ralphie's persona is so radically altered—from mild-mannered, soft-spoken boy to quick-witted, confident gunslinger—suggests that Ralphie is all too aware of how vulnerable he really is and how hostile the outer world can be.

### The Powerlessness of Childhood

In the outer world, Ralphie is at the mercy of the whims of the adults around him. Scenes of Ralphie at his most undignified or powerless—e.g., stuffed into a pink rabbit costume or deflated by a C+—occur when he is forced to confront the discord between how he wants adults to see him and how they actually do. One obvious example of this discord is the rabbit costume Ralphie's Aunt Clara gives him for Christmas. Though the costume is large enough for a "tween" boy, indicating that Aunt Clara is at least cognizant of Ralphie's physical dimensions, the costume does not appear to be *meant* for a boy. The bunny suit is a fluffy pink, the codified color for little girls (Zuckerman 55), and outfitted with two bunny-faced feet. Adult Ralphie/Shepherd explains that Aunt Clara made Ralphie the costume because she refuses to see him as anything but a four-year-old girl. Ralphie's mother then orders her son to put on the costume despite his protests, suggesting that perhaps she also harbors some secret desire for her eldest son to be the little girl she will likely never have. It is only when his father intervenes on Ralphie's behalf, asking his son, "Are you happy wearing that?" with Ralphie vigorously shaking his head, that Ralphie is given permission to take off the costume, although Ralphie's father's invention may have been driven more by personal disgust—by shouting at Ralphie as he darts up the stairs to "take it off!" Ralphie's father is showing his disapproval of Ralphie wearing anything pink or bunnyfied—than by his son's mortification. Ralphie's father may simply be trading Aunt Clara's projected image of Ralphie as a girl toddler with his own image of a pre-adolescent boy.

In another instance of powerlessness, one less visually comical but more integral to the film's plot, Ralphie is confronted by his teacher's assessment of his Christmas theme: a thick red C+. Ralphie, who had been expecting nothing less than an A+, can only stare in shock, first at the grade itself, then at Miss Shields, whom he has reimagined as the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, tauntingly reprising his mother's refrain that Ralphie will shoot his eye out. In Ralphie's mind, Miss Shields thinks he is not only incapable of handling a BB gun but also incapable of communicating his need for one. Dumbfounded, Ralphie concludes that his mother must have taken possession of Miss Shields. With no other adult to intervene on his behalf, Ralphie can do little else besides slump in his chair and stare dejectedly at the C+, convinced that Miss Shields, like his mother, believes he is too weak and clumsy for such a dangerous toy.

Ralphie's final appeal is to a department store Santa Claus, who, like Ralphie's mother and Miss Shields, rejects Ralphie's request for a Red Ryder BB gun. "You'll shoot your eye out, kid," the store Santa flatly tells him before pushing Ralphie with a booted foot down a red slide. That Ralphie solicits Santa Claus's help in circumventing his mother's authority indicates that Ralphie sees Santa as a viable solution only because he, as something not quite human or natural, lies outside the system of parental control. Perhaps because Ralphie believes he has exhausted his final appeal when Santa (literally) gives him the boot, Ralphie seems to take this rejection more personally than the first two. When his mother tells him no, Ralphie tries subtler approaches, first by slyly hinting to his mother that one of his friends is getting a BB gun and then feigning interest in another toy; neither has any discernible impact on his mother's attitude. When his teacher tells him no, Ralphie surmises that his mother "must have gotten into Miss Shields" and that he cannot outmaneuver his mother without appealing to a higher authority, namely, Santa Claus. But with his third and final strike, Ralphie is not merely told that he will not be getting a BB gun for Christmas; he is told that he is too weak and effeminate for the gun by the film's only masculine source of power and control other than Ralphie's father. Perhaps sensing that the "You'll shoot your eye out" proclamation carries greater finality because it comes from Santa Claus, Ralphie openly protests this hasty, hackneyed assessment of his physical prowess, screaming "NO!" all the way down the slide until he lands in a soft bed of faux cotton snow, where he lies, flaccid and emotionless, until his father arrives and lifts him up.

### **The Right Gift at the Right Time**

The resolution comes about not because Ralphie initiates it—he does not get a paper route and buy the gun, for instance—but because another adult, his father, figures out (or correctly guesses) what his son wants. The Christmas memory, therefore, is an entirely male creation. Female goals—protection, safety, security, practicality—are circumvented by male goals of consumption and dominance. The father's delighted expression as he watches his son unwrap the gun on Christmas morning suggests that he is superimposing his own Christmas memories of consumer empowerment over his son's, even telling his befuddled wife, "I had one [a BB gun] when I was eight years old."

But what does Ralphie gain from all this? By applying to the film Benjamin Barber's definition of "genuine empowerment" as "the domain of education, not advertising" and "increased capacity to resist manipulation, not increased vulnerability to it" (33-34), one would

conclude that Ralphie is neither genuinely empowered nor enlightened by receiving the gun. He does not acquire any new knowledge or insight; in fact, Ralphie does not actually *do* anything to get the gun, and his near maniacal obsession with Red Ryder is a testament to advertisers' increasing influence over his impressionable nine-year-old mind. In another way, however, the toy does what most pre-1960s toys did for parents and their children: it serves as a "source of shared enjoyment between the generations" (Cross, *Kids' Stuff* 6). Both Ralphie and his father become giddy when Ralphie finds the gun hidden behind his father's desk, suggesting that, whether young Ralphie realizes it or not, his fantasy has perfectly melded with his father's. Thus, each gets from the other exactly what he wants; Ralphie gets his toy and his father relishes watching his son enjoy himself. Cross explains, "One of the greatest pleasures of modern parenting became the act of giving children fresh and unexpected pleasures... In return, the giver expects to feel pure delight, an emotion long lost in his or her own encounter with consumer goods" (*The Cute and the Cool* 15). This is precisely what transpires when Ralphie opens his present. Prior to the Victorian era, gift exchanges generally served to establish or reinforce "social ties" (Cross, *Kids' Stuff* 44). By the late nineteenth century, however, "gift-giving, especially to children, served quite different purposes," principal among them the development of "emotional ties within the nuclear family" (Cross, *Kids' Stuff* 44). "Thus Christmas," Cross continues, "ceased being a communal festival. Rather, it became a celebration of family home life. Symbols of this sentimental union of parents and children . . . reinforced the separation of family and outsiders and made the holiday one of domestic intimacy" (*Kids' Stuff* 44). Indeed, in that moment when Ralphie inspects his new gun and his father instructs Ralphie on how to load it, the emotional bond between them seems genuine and secure.

But is this intimate scene between father and son, in which one is enamored with a gift and the other with his child's happiness, attainable? Probably not, and in the scene immediately following, the gun loses some of its mystique. Ralphie runs outside and shoots his gun at a target hung on a metal sign. Predictably, the BB ricochets off the sign and hits Ralphie in the face, barely missing his eye. Yet the ethos of male protector and righteous peacemaker that Ralphie has attached to the gun is not shattered when Ralphie almost injures himself; he does not reject the gun even though the gun essentially rejects him. To maintain the impression that he is capable of handling "deadly weaponry," however, Ralphie must lie to his mother about how he has hurt himself. He reverts to an earlier stage of childhood; crying like a toddler, he runs into his mother's arms, whimpering that an icicle fell on him. His subterfuge is successful, and Ralphie keeps his gun. By resolving the conflict in this manner, argues McGillis, "the film sides with Ralphie and his dad" (82).

The final scene of the film shows a sleeping Ralphie, exhausted from the day's festivities and mishaps, clutching his gun lovingly, a contented smile playing across his face. Shepherd tells viewers that this gun was "the greatest Christmas gift [he] had ever received or would ever receive." Why the "greatest Christmas gift" is this toy gun and not some gift that Ralphie was given by his mother, brother, wife, or children is never explained. Shepherd imparts viewers only with the knowledge that nothing else in Ralphie's life quite measured up to this gun. Even so, what the gun represents in the film's final moments is not more action—after Ralphie's initial outing with the gun, which ended in near disaster, he is never again seen using it—but more fantasy play. As he dreams, Shepherd tells us, Ralphie becomes immersed in some other world

with his gun, one in which he has regained control over the gun and is using it as he always imagined he would, “pranging ducks on the wing and getting off spectacular hip shots.”

Whether Ralphie will ever learn to shoot the gun properly seems immaterial at this point. Even if he could shoot well and accurately, he certainly would not be able to use the gun to carry out any of his fantasies—to kill an outlaw or a grizzly bear, for instance. Not being able to control the gun has not shattered Ralphie’s fantasies of control, though. The mere possession of it has enabled Ralphie to enter another world that offers some respite from the disillusionments and drudgeries of ordinary life. If nothing else, Ralphie can at least revel in the possibility of shooting marauders tunneling through his backyard or bears harassing candy store patrons; without the gun, neither of these things would feel conceivable.

Most importantly, receiving the gun at this “tween” stage of childhood allows Ralphie to feel his own worthiness for the gun and the inevitability that, even if he never gains control over the gun, he will at least be gaining greater control over his own life in years to come. The gun does not symbolize a change in Ralphie. He does not behave differently towards his brother or suddenly stop swearing; the gun has not accelerated Ralphie’s maturation. Rather, it symbolizes the changing opinions of those around him—certainly that of his father, who gives him the gun, and more subtly that of his mother, who permits him to keep the gun. The incongruence between how Ralphie imagines himself and how adults see him is thus resolved temporarily. The adult Ralphie gives viewers the impression that this resolution occurs because that particular Christmas—and maybe the only Christmas ever—the gift exactly matched what Ralphie wanted, which, Shepherd’s final musings imply, was a rare thing for Ralphie.

All these film elements work to ensure that the viewer is delighted rather than dismayed that Ralphie has finally found his Christmas joy. Even when Ralphie almost shoots himself in the eye, the gift loses none of its luster for the film’s protagonist, even if it has already lost some luster for viewers. Sut Jhally explains, “The object world interacts with the human world at the most basic and fundamental of levels, performing seemingly magical feats of enchantment and transformation, bringing instant happiness and gratification” (252). Ralphie is an embodiment of any older viewer whose earlier Christmas memories dredge up long-forgotten favorite toys and happy gift-opening moments. No doubt, then, having experienced this moment once himself, the next step towards achieving Christmas nirvana will be recreating the joy of giving the exact right gift (if not a BB gun, then some equally coveted toy) at the right time to his own child.

## Works Cited

- Barber, Benjamin R. *Con\$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. Print.
- Black Christmas*. Dir. Bob Clark. Warner Bros., 1974. Film.
- A Christmas Story*. Dir. Bob Clark. MGM, 1983. Film.
- Cross, Gary. “Children and the Market: An American Historical Perspective.” *Understanding Children as Consumers*. Ed. David Marshall. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2010. 81-95. Print.
- . *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

- . "Gendered Futures/Gendered Fantasies: Toys as Representations of Changing Childhoods." *The American Journal of Semiotics* 12.1-4 (1995): 289-310. *ProQuest*. Web.
- . *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001. Print.
- Gunster, Shane. "'On the Road to Nowhere': Utopian Themes in Contemporary Auto Advertising." *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29.2-3 (2007): 211-238. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.
- Haire, Erin, and Dustin Nelson. "Crummy Commercials and BB Guns: Son-of-a-Bitch Consumerism in a Christmas Classic." *Christmas—Philosophy for Everyone: Better than a Lump of Coal*. Ed. Scott C. Lowe. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 80-90. Print.
- Holland, Patricia. *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004. Print.
- Hymowitz, Kay S. "Childhood for Sale?" Rev. of *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* and *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*. *Public Interest* Winter 2005: 125-130. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 4 Jan. 2011.
- Jhally, Sut. "Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture." *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*. Ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2003. 249-257. Print.
- McGillis, Roderick. *He Was Some Kind of a Man: Masculinities in the B Western*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. Print.
- Mintz, Steven. *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.
- Pollyanna*. Dir. David Swift. Buena Vista Distribution, 1960. Film.
- Porky's*. Dir. Bob Clark. Twentieth Century Fox, 1982. Film.
- Shepherd, Jean. *A Christmas Story: The Book that Inspired the Hilarious Christmas Classic*. New York: Broadway Books, 2003. Print.
- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Prod. Walt Disney. RKO Radio Pictures, 1937. Film.
- Stearns, Peter N. "Analyzing the Role of Culture in Shaping American Childhood: A Twentieth-Century Case." *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 6.1 (2009): 34-52. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.
- Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Dir. Mel Stuart. Paramount Pictures, 1971. Film.
- The Wizard of Oz*. Dir. Victor Fleming. MGM, 1939. Film.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. Rotman. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Print.
- Zuckerman, Michael. "The Octopus and the Child—Another Perspective on American Culture: A Commentary on Stearns." *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 6.1 (2009): 53-59. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.