

E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

Directed by Steven Spielberg
Produced by Kathleen Kennedy and Steven Spielberg
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1982

The line between adult and child only seems clearly delineated in *E.T.* The story is told from a child's perspective, but adults cried as much as the kids when this box-office titan made its 1982 debut. The story of *E.T.*, and the collective audience reaction to it, makes one thing clear: In the end, children and adults hurt alike. Age and expectations change, but everybody needs protection and seeks transcendence—deliverance from the chronic ills of this world. Children want to be brave like adults, and adults want to be protected like children.

Elliott's an unlikely hero, and all the more endearing because of it. He's got no friends, needs a step ladder to kiss the girl, and has no clue where the playground is. E.T., with no good options, decided to entrust himself to Elliott. The boy thought he had a new pet ("I'm keeping him") and, once Gertie has screamed, his siblings are ushered into the closet, and Mom's been thrown off the scent, Elliott vents his frustration with his bungling siblings in an amusing display of grown-up pique. For the first time he's the one in control. Gertie's cute, Michael is the honored first-born, and Elliott's just hum-drum-stuck in the middle. But those days are over. Assuming responsibility for the creature and displaying admirable ingenuity and bravery in E.T.'s defense, no longer is he the pitiable whiner at the film's opening, longing to be one of the guys. (Notice in that scene that the steaming food has the look of cigarette smoke, transforming the kitchen into a den of iniquity.) Elliott is constantly belittled, but in a great turnabout, at the film's end it is Elliott who is the leader.

Michael, who is probably 15, is eager to start driving, sits in silence as his fellow school bus riders engage in a paper fight, and does great work evading the feds and bringing E.T. home the day after Halloween. He bears a burden as the eldest male in a family that has lost its father. He tries to look out for his mother, acting tough and using humor to hide his pain. (The sobering scene in the garage where he and Elliott reminisce about their dad, longing to be reunited, even reveling in the smell of his old shirt, is Spielberg's warning to fathers everywhere.) The last night before E.T. dies, Michael finds his way to a quiet part of the house, the doll closet. He arranges a place for himself, in the fetal position, amidst these emblems of childhood. He lets his guard down, wanting, if but for a time, to go back.

When he stirs, the sun is shining and the colors of the dolls are bright and cheery. But as the flowers wither, almost all color is drained from the film. Coupled with the cut to Elliott ("E.T., don't go!!!") and a sudden zoom out, such that the doctors now block Elliott from E.T., this is as good as the film gets (from a purely cinematic perspective).

Whether E.T. establishes the psychosomatic connection with Elliott or Elliott, unaware of his power, forges this bond is left ambiguous. But E.T. lets Elliott go before he dies (E.T. gets worse while Elliott's vitals return to normal). E.T. is brave enough to face death alone; he won't selfishly risk his friend's life.

Elliott can't keep E.T. from sickness and he can't stop the federal government from taking charge. The boy feels responsibility and doesn't want to tell Keys (when they talk through the plastic of the isolation tent) what the machine is doing, merely saying, "He came to me." Keys's reply is, "He came to me, too." Keys probably believes that E.T. is the distillation of his vague recurring dreams, going back to his own childhood. In his view, it's just a fluke that E.T. ended up at Elliott's house.

In this same scene Keys puts a major in his place, indicating that he's not a mere cog in this operation but a key player. He then tries to buddy-up with Elliott, but Elliott plays it cool. Elliott, unlike Keys, has nothing to hide. Keys benefits by the steady pay of U.S. government employ. So when this 10-year-old boy tweaks his conscience, Keys tries to distance himself from the rough-and-tumble tactics of national-security power politics.

Elliott is honoring E.T.'s choice, not merely hogging the alien for himself. Recall the earlier scene in the neighborhood national forest where Elliott lays a trail of Reese's Pieces and Keys is checking for tracks while the alien hides. E.T. had his pick, and it was Elliott. Michael's joke in the garage, paraphrasing Elliott, "I found him, he belongs to me," expresses a sobering truth: little brother has more on him than he can handle. Keys is trying to convey that same idea in this scene, but for all his burdens, Elliott will remain loyal. Keys, respecting that, warmly complements Elliott on his efforts, and later allows E.T. to return to space. So he's probably a good guy after all. Maybe he and Elliott's mom can go out to dinner. (They certainly have plenty to talk about.)

It is for security purposes, one hopes, that the United States takes over Elliott's home. They're not monsters, and Elliott is wrong to blame them for E.T.'s death ("You're killing him!") or for disrespecting his best friend ("They're just gonna cut him all up."). E.T. was dying before the feds closed in and a frozen alien corpse is of little value without an autopsy. Now, where the federal government got this power to take over their lives and haul off the corpse is beyond any study of the Constitution and federalism. If pressed, 'national security' would be the answer. It's really just a matter of overwhelming force and the inability to counter it. Of course, E.T. is harmless. But we can't expect the feds to conduct interviews and get permission before going in. They don't know the whole story like we do. After all, if it was somebody else's house, wouldn't we want to get to the bottom of this and 'deal' with the alien? We want to be protected. Only when the alien is in *our* house is the government violating property rights.

In any story it's helpful to have an enemy and the U.S. government, represented by Keys, is a respectable foe. Once Keys is revealed as a decent guy, we realize that the government is just a straw-man antagonist. The real enemy is Loneliness.

When Michael tries to ease his mother into the double-whammy of an alien in her bathroom and her son being terminally ill, he says, "Just swear the most excellent promise you can swear." She doesn't tolerate such games and wants it straight. That's because parents don't operate in the same world as kids. Kids want/need to hide things from parents, but parents have no superior to hide from but the government. Mom would know in a few minutes, as space-suited agents violate her home, that she has a lot more in common with her kids than she realized.

The reason she wanted Gertie and Elliott out of the bathroom is that she didn't believe. Sure, E.T.'s laying right there; his existence is undeniable. But the mother refuses to see anything but harm in the alien, despite her childrens' entreaties. In time, once she realizes the joy E.T. brought to Elliott, she grasps her mistake and, like her daughter, wishes out loud that the dead alien could come back.

Save for the mother, no adult face is represented until the quarantine. Gertie is told that "only little kids" can see E.T. She's incredulous, but consider: Mom misses E.T. hiding in the closet amongst the dolls (understandable), E.T. plodding through the kitchen in a drunken stupor (curious), and E.T. doubling for the taller and thinner Gertie in the Halloween get-up (inexplicable). Moreover, the investigators, led by Keys, never see E.T. until just after Mom does, despite looking feverishly. It seems E.T.'s magic is not limited to telepathy, levitation, and powers of healing. He can disappear, too.

Apart from Keys, the feds dwell on E.T. as a physical entity, excited by DNA and anatomy, not what this alien can teach humanity. ("Elliott thinks its thoughts...." / "No—Elliott...Elliott feels his feelings.") That's why Elliott tells the corpse, "I'll believe in you all my life, every day." He will, against the odds, despite what others will tell him, embrace this alien as an agent of truth, embodying our hope for salvation. The memory of their time together will inspire Elliott and will order the course of his life. Only Elliott knows the import of man's single brush with extraterrestrials.

He'll manage well. The problem is, with E.T. dead, Elliott doesn't know what to feel. Bereft of E.T., Elliott tells God (who else is he talking to when he looks up at the ceiling?) that he has lost the capacity for feelings.

The miracle of the rejuvenating flowers, with all that portends, sends a surge of heart-racing energy through Elliott. From here until the story's conclusion Elliott will know panic, fear, exultation, bravado, heartbreak, and love. And since the film ends with that extraordinary shot of a wind-buffed Elliott staring down the future with self-assured sagacity, we know that E.T. didn't leave the boy bereft of emotions, but restored the full spectrum to Elliott, each distinct feeling like a color of the rainbow wedded to the California sky.

As soon as Elliott brings to fulfillment our fantasy wish that we could raise the dead, the story proceeds to deconstruct immortality. Elliott taught E.T. the phrase—"I'll be right here"—on their first day together, to reassure E.T. that, despite Elliott's leaving the room, everything would be O.K. E.T. hears this again just before he dies, in his final exchange with Elliott.

Once E.T. has revived, and the feds are left in the dust, E.T. is leaving for home and is not coming back. That kind of permanent separation carries overtones of death. E.T.'s parting words are, "I'll be right here." Whether E.T. is imparting his spirit to Elliott or memories of E.T. will be so vivid that it will be as if the alien is ever-present, E.T.'s promise means that the feeling of hopeless separation we know upon the death of a loved one will not be felt by Elliott.

In light of these themes of abandonment, childhood, death, and resurrection, it's very appropriate that the book Peter Pan is given extensive treatment in the film. If Peter Pan never grows up, he cannot die; at least, not by natural causes. Fiercely independent, he has no fear of being left behind by a parent who can't bother to feign interest. And the passage the mother

reads concerns Tinkerbelle, who expires, only to be revived by spirited clapping which signifies a belief in fairies. (Note that E.T. comes back to life just after Elliott tells him that he'll always believe in him.)

Gertie believes in E.T. but can't understand the significance of it all. She gets more excited about this story than she does the alien living in her house! She broke her promise not to tell Mom about E.T., but, unloading the groceries and fielding the phone call regarding Elliott's drunken spree in Biology, Mom was too busy to pay attention. (That which is wondrous seeks *us* out; we don't have to go looking for it. Keys and the mother illustrate this truth nicely.)

E.T., keen observer that he is, watches mother and daughter enjoying the book together. Elliott, burdened as much by worries of the immediate future as by the box of components necessary for constructing the transmitter, shuts the louvers of the closet door—they've got work to do, and there's a risk E.T. will be seen.

Picking up a circular blade, Elliott slices his finger badly. E.T., in sympathy, heals his friend with the touch of a glowing digit. E.T., like he's saying *That's why we're going to do it my way*, opens the louvers back up so that he can return to this compelling bedtime story. Elliott, awestruck, takes his place at the right hand of his friend. Grateful for this chance to catch his breath, Elliott marvels at the scene before him. Looking at Gertie there with Mom, it's like he's seeing his past replayed.

Elliott knows too much. He fears that the admission of vulnerability and ignorance necessary for wonder are now hopelessly beyond him. And there is serious work to do. But E.T. is confident of their success. (Or is he resigned to their defeat?) And he doesn't want to burden his best friend any more than he has already. Why miss this chance to share a great memory together?

So, the scene provides a distillation of the entire movie. E.T. is empowering Elliott to stay a child, for a little while longer. His family problems were threatening to overwhelm his trusting innocence. Childlike wonders were dying, and well before their time. E.T. provides a way for Elliott to believe. And it is not a purely child-like belief, but a robust and confident assurance that can succor Elliott in all the days to come. (Elliott's address at the open casket of his fallen friend are the words of a man, not a boy.)

E.T. wants to go home, but he won't leave his best friend any sooner than he must.

Once a mere pet, E.T. concludes his adventures on earth as Elliott's soul mate.

It was because he came that Elliott's life was saved. But Elliott, by summoning the courage to stay, finishes the job, himself. Mesmerized by the film's final shot of Elliott imbued with a wisdom beyond his years, we emerge from the story, wondering... We all identify with Elliott, but do we have what he has? The victory—is it already won for us? Would that we all have the courage to embrace our last, best destiny in the same way—unflinching, selfless, true.