

THE DECEIT AND DESIRE

Main Character Arcs

Character development analysis based on the 29 May 2026 screenplay draft

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1. Overview of the Character Architecture

The Deceit and Desire is structured around a devastating imbalance of power. Arthur Delaney begins as a loving but economically vulnerable father whose trust in a charitable institution is exploited. Emma Stirling begins as an apparently benevolent reformer but reveals an authoritarian conviction that poverty and Catholic identity disqualify parents from determining their children's futures. The drama therefore turns on who is permitted to define care, family, morality and the best interests of a child.

Character	Arc Type	Starting Position	Ending Position
Arthur Delaney	Positive endurance / tragic defeat	Loving husband and working father confident that family loyalty can withstand poverty and prejudice	Crosses the Atlantic and fights legally for his children, but loses them permanently while his love survives through family memory
Emma Stirling	Steadfast negative / institutional self-righteousness	Respected philanthropist convinced that discipline, Protestantism and emigration offer salvation	Defies law and directors, hides the children, escapes practical accountability and remains convinced of her moral authority
Cecilia Delaney	Positive partnership / restorative love	Compassionate supporter entering Arthur's life after bereavement	Becomes wife, mother and active ally in his legal and emotional struggle
Miss Guthrie	Complicit institutional functionary	Well-meaning charity worker who believes intervention rescues neglected children	Carries out the system's decisions and helps conceal the consequences despite signs that parental consent was misunderstood
James Delaney	Separation / survival	Protective eldest child attached to his father and sisters	Endures labour, displacement and permanent separation, but preserves family identity in the names of his descendants
Annie Delaney	Victim / fragile endurance	Young daughter dependent on family stability	Becomes a domestic servant, dies young of tuberculosis and is buried among other Home Children
Robina Delaney	Displacement / adaptation	Youngest child whose vulnerability helps trigger Arthur's decision	Is absorbed into another family and appears to achieve material stability, though without reunion with Arthur
Patricia Dishon	Witness / restorative remembrance	Descendant uncovering fragmented family records	Transforms private discovery into public testimony and restores Arthur and the children to historical memory

The screenplay's unifying idea is that benevolent language can conceal coercion. Arthur's poverty is treated as evidence of moral failure, while Emma's wealth, religion and institutional standing allow her desires to be presented as objective judgement.

2. Arthur Delaney

Arthur carries the screenplay's central positive but tragic arc. He develops from a loving family man who believes affection and hard work are sufficient into a bereaved father forced to confront grief, dependency, law and institutional deceit.

Arthur cannot recover his children, but the story refuses to let the institution erase the fact that he loved them and fought to bring them home.

Starting State

- Arthur is affectionate, practical and attentive to Mary and the children despite financial hardship.
- His mixed-faith marriage places the family outside the approval of parts of both extended families.
- He values love above religious division and rejects the idea that institutional belief should govern his household.
- He is proud of providing through work and initially finds it difficult to accept help.

Driving Want and Internal Need

Initial external want: Provide for Mary and the children while preserving a loving, independent household.

Later external want: Recover James, Annie and Robina from the charity and bring them home from Canada.

Internal need: Accept support without interpreting it as personal failure, and turn grief into sustained action rather than anger or withdrawal.

Central fear: That poverty and bereavement will make him incapable of protecting his children.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Family as resistance

Arthur's marriage and domestic tenderness establish a family held together despite class hardship and sectarian hostility. His promise that Mary and the children are what matter defines his deepest value.

2. Double bereavement

The death of the baby and then Mary destroys the emotional and practical structure of the household. Arthur moves instantly from husband and wage-earner to grieving sole parent.

3. Grief damages judgement

He struggles with childcare, withdraws from work and lashes out at Maggie Clark, even implying blame for Mary's death. His later shame shows self-awareness, but his support network has already weakened.

4. Asking for help

When Robina wanders away and the children become visibly neglected, Arthur accepts the charity's temporary care. The decision is not abandonment; it is a desperate attempt to protect them while he recovers.

5. Trust founded on false terms

Arthur signs the children into the refuge believing he can visit, pay their upkeep and reclaim them when circumstances improve. His promise that he will never leave them becomes tragically vulnerable to the institution's private agenda.

6. Rebuilding with Cecilia

Arthur forms a new relationship, returns to stability and prepares to repay the school. Cecilia does not replace Mary; she helps him recover enough agency to act as father again.

7. Discovery of the removal

He arrives to collect the children and learns they were shipped to Nova Scotia months earlier. His rage is the moment private grief becomes a public struggle against institutional authority.

8. Legal persistence

Arthur seeks lawyers, petitions the charity and accepts the slow discipline of legal action. He must place hope in systems that have already failed him.

9. Crossing the Atlantic

His journey to Canada proves that his parental love is active rather than rhetorical. He risks money, reputation and safety to locate children who have been dispersed as labour.

10. The limits of rescue

Arthur finds traces rather than reunion. James has run away, the girls are moved and the institution stays ahead of him. His physical journey cannot overcome information controlled by others.

11. Judicial defeat

The court's decision and Emma's legal escape expose the difference between moral truth and available remedy. Arthur has done everything expected of a father yet remains powerless.

12. Love preserved through memory

The modern inquiry reveals that James named children after Annie, Robina and Arthur. Arthur's practical goal failed, but the emotional bond survived across generations.

Arc Resolution

Arthur's arc ends in tragic defeat rather than personal failure. The institution removes his ability to act as father, but cannot erase his identity as one. The modern frame converts that distinction into the screenplay's final act of justice.

3. Emma Stirling

Emma follows a steadfast negative arc of institutional self-righteousness. She does not experience herself as cruel. Her danger lies in the certainty that her social position, religion and charitable mission permit her to override parents and children.

Emma's deceit is sustained by desire: she desires control, admiration and proof that her moral vision is superior, then names that desire compassion.

Starting State and Character Engine

- Emma is organised, commanding and admired by church, board members and supporters.
- She views children collectively as a social problem to be trained, placed and morally corrected.
- Her anti-Catholic prejudice is integrated into policy while being presented as religious protection.
- Financial success and institutional trust have insulated her from meaningful challenge.

External want: Expand the charity's emigration system and create a permanent pipeline of children into Canadian homes and labour.

False belief: Poverty, Catholic identity and parental instability justify transferring authority to morally superior institutions.

Central contradiction: She speaks of each child's welfare while treating children as units within a programme and denying their emotional bonds.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Benevolence as administration

Emma's opening scenes show kindness in manner alongside strict control. She believes order, prayer and discipline demonstrate care.

2. Children become investment

The farms, training schemes and Canadian placements are discussed through ledgers, capacity and labour. Her vocabulary reveals that humanitarian intent has fused with institutional expansion.

3. Sectarian belief becomes policy

Catholic practice is forbidden, priests are excluded and Protestant conformity is treated as rescue. Emma interprets cultural erasure as moral improvement.

4. Arthur's children enter the system

She assesses them through his poverty and their physical condition rather than through the circumstances of Mary's death or Arthur's stated temporary intent.

5. Removal without informed consent

The children are shipped abroad while Arthur expects to reclaim them. Emma converts ambiguous authority into permanent possession.

6. Defiance of the board

When directors cite the father's legal rights, Emma openly refuses return and describes Arthur as a down-at-heel papist. Her private prejudice becomes explicit institutional insubordination.

7. Dispersal as protection from recovery

The children are separated and relocated, making practical reunion increasingly impossible. Their supposed welfare also serves to secure Emma's control.

8. Legal victory without moral vindication

The court outcome and technical barriers prevent accountability. Emma treats this as confirmation that she was right rather than evidence that the law failed to address the harm.

9. Escape

She leaves for France and avoids further prosecution. Her arc ends not with recognition but with the persistence of self-justifying certainty.

Arc Resolution

Emma remains internally unchanged. The audience's understanding changes instead: the celebrated philanthropist is revealed as an authoritarian whose language of rescue permits abduction, religious erasure and permanent family separation.

4. Cecilia Delaney

Cecilia follows a positive partnership and restorative-love arc. She enters after Mary's death and helps Arthur move from isolated grief toward renewed family life and purposeful resistance.

Cecilia does not rescue Arthur from grief; she gives him a relationship in which grief, love and action can coexist.

1. Compassion without intrusion

Cecilia recognises Arthur's pain and allows trust to develop without demanding that he erase Mary.

2. A new household

Their marriage and child show Arthur rebuilding rather than replacing the lost family.

3. Active ally

She accompanies Arthur to the refuge, shares his outrage and supports the legal campaign.

4. Emotional stability

When the search fails, Cecilia receives Arthur on his return and gives him somewhere to bring despair that would otherwise become isolation.

5. Witness to permanent loss

She cannot restore the children, but prevents the defeat from leaving Arthur entirely alone.

Arc Resolution

Cecilia represents the possibility of life after bereavement without suggesting that new love cancels earlier bonds. Her presence strengthens Arthur's agency and deepens the tragedy because he becomes stable enough to reclaim the children only after they have been taken beyond reach.

5. Miss Guthrie

Miss Guthrie is a complicit institutional functionary. She is less ideologically extreme than Emma and initially appears genuinely sympathetic, which makes her role in the children's removal more troubling.

Miss Guthrie shows how harmful systems depend not only on fanatics, but on respectable people who translate authority into routine action.

1. Apparent rescue

She finds Robina and offers Arthur help without overt judgement. Her assurance that there is no shame in asking for help earns his trust.

2. Institutional interpretation

Arthur's grief and poverty are converted into a case for intervention. The charity's assumptions begin replacing his stated intentions.

3. Administrative complicity

She manages communications, receives legal warnings and helps operate a system in which children are moved before parents can effectively object.

4. Concern without resistance

The legal letter troubles her, but she responds by notifying Emma rather than independently protecting Arthur's rights.

5. Moral limitation

Her arc does not become open rebellion. She remains an example of unease contained within obedience.

Arc Resolution

Miss Guthrie's significance lies in the gap between kindness and accountability. Her good manners reduce Arthur's suspicion, yet her continued service to Emma helps make the deception possible.

6. James, Annie and Robina Delaney

The children share an involuntary separation arc but experience different outcomes. They begin as siblings within a loving but poor household and end dispersed across institutions, employers and substitute families.

Their material outcomes differ, but every path begins with the destruction of their right to remain a family.

James Delaney

- As the eldest, James carries memory, responsibility and resistance more consciously than his sisters.
- His whittling echoes Arthur's early domestic tenderness and preserves a connection to his father.
- He questions when he will return and resists Emma's account of Canada as uncomplicated hope.
- He is placed as labour, runs away and eventually creates a family of his own.
- Naming descendants Annie Robina and Arthur becomes the clearest proof that separation did not erase identity.

Annie Delaney

- Annie's vulnerability makes the institution's promise of food, clothing and safety persuasive.
- Her life as a domestic servant reflects how charitable rescue becomes labour placement.
- Tuberculosis ends her life at seventeen.
- Her burial among other Home Children gives her an institutional resting place rather than a return to family.

Robina Delaney

- Her disappearance in Edinburgh triggers the moment that convinces Arthur he cannot cope alone.
- She is young enough to be absorbed most completely into a substitute household.
- The Tisdales provide education, affection and inheritance, suggesting genuine care within an origin that remains coercive.
- Her apparent stability complicates the story without validating the decision to remove her.

7. Helen Delaney

Helen follows a modest positive arc from guarded family loyalty toward more active support. She initially defends her neutrality within the sectarian family conflict, but Arthur's collapse forces her to acknowledge that distance has had consequences.

1. Affection mixed with judgement

She loves the children but retains misgivings about Arthur's Protestant marriage and avoids confronting the wider family's prejudice.

2. Practical support

She cares for the children and listens when Arthur admits he is failing.

3. Pressure toward reconciliation

She urges Arthur to seek family help and return to work, recognising that pride cannot sustain the household.

4. Ally in the legal struggle

Once the children are removed, she supports Arthur and shares disbelief that the institution can deny him.

5. Limits of support

Age and health prevent her from becoming a permanent solution, underscoring why Arthur was vulnerable to the charity's offer.

Arc Resolution

Helen's arc reflects imperfect but genuine family care. She cannot undo earlier prejudice or provide full-time rescue, but she moves toward Arthur rather than allowing judgement to justify abandonment.

8. Patricia Dishon and the Inquiry Frame

Patricia follows a witness and restorative-remembrance arc. She begins with inherited documents and unanswered questions, then reconstructs a family story that institutions had fragmented.

Patricia cannot deliver justice to Arthur, but she can prevent the official record from ending with Emma Stirling's version of events.

1. Discovery

Family papers reveal that the children were the subject of legal proceedings and prompt descendants to investigate.

2. Reconstruction

Patricia gathers the separate outcomes of Annie, Robina and James, replacing institutional categories with individual lives.

3. Consolation through names

James's use of Annie, Robina and Arthur for his descendants proves memory survived displacement.

4. Public testimony

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry converts family history into recognised evidence.

5. Final act of mourning

Patricia hears the voices of the past and whispers 'Rest in peace Arthur,' giving the father a dignity denied during his lifetime.

Arc Resolution

The modern frame transforms the ending from total defeat into historical recognition. It does not pretend that remembrance repairs separation, but it establishes that truth can outlive the authority that suppressed it.

9. Supporting Character Arcs and Functions

Mary Delaney

Establishes the emotional standard of the family. Her love, death and remembered voice shape every later decision Arthur makes.

Maggie Clark

Embodies community care strained by grief. She supports the children, receives Arthur's unjust blame and shows how bereavement can damage the very relationships a family needs.

Ross Stewart

Turns Arthur's moral claim into legal procedure. His limitations demonstrate that formal rights are only as effective as enforcement and access to information.

Grant Cunningham

Accompanies Arthur in Canada and provides practical restraint, evidence and witness. He helps ensure Arthur's desperation does not become self-destructive illegality.

Bernadette Auld and the Directors

Begin as financial and institutional supporters. Their later alarm exposes how governance failed by granting Emma authority until the harm threatened the organisation itself.

Father Hannan

Offers spiritual and community continuity. Unlike Emma, he does not treat faith as authority to erase family bonds.

Walter Durham and placement families

Represent the colonial machinery receiving children. Some provide genuine care; others treat children primarily as labour, revealing the unpredictable human consequences of the programme.

10. Interlocking Relationship Arcs

Relationship	Beginning	Ending
Arthur / Mary	Loving mixed-faith marriage resisting family prejudice and poverty.	Mary's death becomes the emotional wound underlying Arthur's struggle to preserve the family.
Arthur / Emma	Grieving father trusting an apparently charitable institution.	Open moral and legal conflict between parental love and institutional control.
Arthur / Cecilia	Bereaved man cautiously accepting new companionship.	Marriage and active partnership through the campaign to recover the children.
Arthur / children	Present, affectionate father temporarily seeking help.	Permanent physical separation, but emotional memory survives through descendants.

Emma / children	Benefactor claiming to offer salvation.	Authority figure who disperses them according to her programme and denies their father's claim.
Patricia / Arthur	Descendant initially knowing him through incomplete records.	Witness who restores him as a loving father within public history.

11. Overall Evaluation

The character architecture is strongest when the screenplay keeps material outcome separate from moral truth. Some children eventually receive education, affection or stable homes, but those outcomes do not retroactively grant Emma the right to deceive Arthur or destroy the sibling unit.

- Arthur's arc is tragic because he grows into the determined father the institution claimed he was not, yet that growth cannot reverse the removal.
- Emma's unchanging certainty makes her a more credible institutional antagonist than a privately sadistic villain.
- Cecilia gives Arthur renewed agency without displacing Mary's emotional importance.
- Miss Guthrie demonstrates the complicity of well-meaning administrators.
- The children's differing lives resist a simplistic claim that every placement produced identical suffering.
- Patricia's testimony supplies recognition rather than false restorative justice.
- The title's deceit belongs to the institution; the desire belongs both to Emma's controlling ambition and Arthur's enduring wish to reunite his family.

Arc Classification Summary

Character	Arc Classification	Essential Movement
Arthur Delaney	Positive endurance / tragic defeat	Loving provider -> bereaved, dependent father -> relentless but unsuccessful seeker
Emma Stirling	Steadfast negative	Respected philanthropist -> exposed authoritarian who evades accountability
Cecilia Delaney	Positive partnership	Compassionate companion -> wife, mother and active ally
Miss Guthrie	Complicit functionary	Sympathetic helper -> administrator who serves harmful institutional decisions
James Delaney	Separation / survival	Protective son -> displaced labourer and family founder preserving memory
Annie Delaney	Victim / fragile endurance	Loved daughter -> domestic servant dying in institutional exile
Robina Delaney	Displacement / adaptation	Young child -> materially secure but permanently separated daughter
Patricia Dishon	Witness / restorative remembrance	Curious descendant -> public custodian of the family's truth

The final testimony completes the screenplay's emotional argument. Emma's system succeeds in separating the family, but not in defining what the separation meant. That authority ultimately returns to Arthur's descendants.

Source: Analysis based on THE DECEIT AND DESIRE, screenplay draft dated 29 May 2026.