

THE DECEIT AND DESIRE

Treatment

Format: Feature

Genre: Historical Drama / Social Justice Drama

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Logline

When a widowed Edinburgh labourer places his three children in the temporary care of a charitable refuge, he triggers a devastating chain of deceit that sees them trafficked into Canada under the authority of religious philanthropy, forcing him into a years-long legal and personal struggle to bring them home before they disappear forever.

Overview

The Deceit and Desire is a sweeping historical drama about child migration, class vulnerability, sectarian prejudice and the devastating gap between charitable rhetoric and lived cruelty. Framed by testimony at the 2020 Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, the film reconstructs the ordeal of **Arthur Delaney**, a young Irish Catholic working man in 1880s Edinburgh whose life collapses after the death of his wife. Overwhelmed by grief, poverty and childcare, Arthur places his three children — **James, Annie and Robina** — in the temporary care of the Edinburgh and Leith Children's Aid and Refuge Society, trusting the assurances that they will be fed, clothed, educated and returned when he gets back on his feet. Instead, they are illegally transported into the machinery of colonial child migration under the authority of **Emma Stirling**, a woman whose evangelical certainty and institutional power allow her to convert vulnerable children into exportable labour while convincing herself she is saving them.

The film is not simply about one family tragedy, though it is that in full emotional force. It is about a system. Emma Stirling's Scottish refuges, the training farm at Leadburn, the Nova Scotia transfer point, the Hillfoot Farm distribution network and the complacency or cowardice of board members, church allies and officials all combine into a structure that transforms children into commodities under the language of moral rescue. Arthur's struggle to reclaim his children becomes, in dramatic terms, a battle between lived parental love and an institution that has recast his poverty as unfitness and his children as assets. The inquiry frame gives the story an essential final dimension: this is not only a nineteenth-century tragedy, but a wound whose consequences echo across generations, with descendants still piecing together what happened and how.

Tone and Style

The tone is intimate, mournful and indignant. The film begins in domestic naturalism — close tenement life, family humour, neighbourly warmth, religious and class tensions woven into everyday existence — before widening into a procedural and transatlantic injustice story. The emotional register should stay human and immediate even as the scale grows. This is not a costume melodrama about noble suffering. It is a working-class tragedy told with clarity, texture and anger. Emma Stirling's world — ledgers, committees, church approval, training farms, transport routes — should feel chilling precisely because it is orderly and respectable. Arthur's world — grief, drink, shame, love, recovery, determination — is chaotic, bodily and painfully real. The film's power comes from the collision of those two orders.

Treatment

The film opens in 2020 at the **Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry**. In a plain conference room, **Lady Smith** questions **Patricia Dishon**, a descendant of the Delaney family, about documents discovered after her grandfather Patrick's death in 1979. The exchange is formal, procedural and emotionally restrained, but it immediately establishes that the story we are about to enter is not lost history. It is testimony. It has been carried forward in family papers, memory and legal residue until finally being spoken aloud in public. Patricia begins to explain what her family uncovered, and the film moves into the past.

Edinburgh, 1882. **Arthur Delaney**, a 22-year-old engraver from the Irish Catholic community of "Little Ireland," walks home through the Royal Mile carrying his tools. He returns to a poor but loving tenement household where his wife **Mary** is heavily pregnant, their children **James, Annie and Robina** are playing, and the family's resources are stretched but intact. Arthur is tender, practical and affectionate. He whittles toys for his son, reassures Mary about the baby, jokes

about religion and makes clear that for all the conflict between Protestant and Catholic branches of the wider family, his loyalty is to his wife and children first. The opening movement of the historical story is warm and alive for a reason: the audience must feel the life that is later dismantled.

Running parallel to Arthur's domestic world, the script introduces the institutional machinery that will one day consume his children. At **Mackenzie Place Home for Girls**, **Emma Stirling** oversees children with iron certainty, speaking the language of God, discipline and duty. She is already in motion on a much larger plan: she meets treasurer **Bernadette Auld** to discuss the finances of the charity, the sale of residences, and a new venture in **Nova Scotia**, where the Canadian government has authorised a farm scheme to absorb children emigrated from Scotland. Emma presents it as piety and compassion, openly stressing both her horror at "Roman priests" and her insistence that no Catholic practice be permitted within her institutions. Her prejudice is not incidental colour; it is a core part of her ideological justification. Children like Arthur's are not merely poor in her eyes. They are morally claimable.

Arthur's immediate family life then shatters. Mary gives birth prematurely to a tiny daughter who survives only momentarily. Arthur cradles the child, singing softly and brokenly to her, while Mary, exhausted and grieving, is barely able to comprehend the loss. By dawn, Mary herself is dead, likely from blood loss after the birth. In the span of a single night, Arthur loses both wife and newborn daughter, leaving him a widower with three small children and no practical system for keeping the household going. The sequence is devastating not only because of the deaths, but because it makes clear how quickly working-class life can collapse when one person — especially a mother — is removed from the structure of survival.

From there, the film enters Arthur's long descent. He tries to keep the children together, but work becomes impossible to sustain. His foreman gives him sympathy and a warning: time away from the factory may mean no job to return to. Neighbour **Maggie Clark** helps with food and chores, but Arthur, ashamed and fraying, lashes out at her when Robina briefly goes missing in the close. His grief curdles into drink, absence and despair. He leaves the children insufficiently supervised, misses work, loses the room and eventually spirals low enough to be found weeping in St Patrick's Church with whisky in his pocket and no home left to keep. The script is careful not to idealise Arthur through this. He fails. He drinks. He disappears for stretches. But those failures are rendered as grief and social collapse, not moral rot. That distinction matters, because Emma Stirling's entire case against him will depend on turning desperation into proof of unfitness.

The key turning point comes when **Miss Guthrie**, one of Stirling's assistants, finds Robina wandering and presses Arthur to consider the refuge. She promises safety, education, food, shoes, clothing and temporary care until he can recover. Arthur, looking at three children increasingly ragged and underfed, agrees to bring them to Mackenzie Place. Emma Stirling receives them without warmth. She has him sign a formal agreement, charges him one shilling per child per week for their upkeep, forbids Catholic practice inside the institution, and assures him he can retrieve them once he is stable again, provided payments are not left outstanding. Arthur believes he is entering into hardship management. In reality, he is delivering his children into a system already preparing to export them.

At exactly the same time, Emma's Canadian operation is gathering momentum. At **Leadburn Farm**, boys are already being "trained" under the McGregors in rural labour, Bible reading and discipline. Emma inspects the dormitories, the work routines and the economic viability of the scheme, then travels to Nova Scotia where **Hillfoot Farm** functions as the receiving and distribution point for emigrated children. Working with **Walter Durham**, she discusses advertisements to place children with farms, the distances they may be sent and the need for further labour and transport. The language is chillingly managerial: itineraries, placements, produce, domestic duties, healthy bodies, permanent locations. The children are spoken of as moral beneficiaries while being moved and allocated like labour stock. The film's great institutional horror is that nothing about the process is secret. It is all happening in ledgers, on agreements, with government authorisation and board acquiescence.

Six months pass. Arthur, thanks largely to the compassion of **Cecilia**, a young woman who finds him in church, gives him money for lodgings and points him toward work, begins to rebuild. Cecilia becomes his lifeline, then his wife. With Father Hannan's support and the Delaney family slowly rallying, Arthur sobers, remarries and starts to restore some order to his life. The film is wise to let him climb before the next blow falls. His recovery is not miraculous, but it is real enough that when he finally returns to Mackenzie Place with the money he owes and the intention of reclaiming his children, he does so as a man keeping his word. The institution, not Arthur, is now the betrayer.

That betrayal is absolute. Rachel, one of the refuge staff, tells Arthur that the children are gone — taken months earlier to **Nova Scotia** with Miss Stirling. Arthur erupts in panic and rage, pushing through the refuge in disbelief, calling for James, Annie and Robina. Cecilia pulls him away, but the truth is unmistakable: the promise of temporary safekeeping was a lie, or at best a deceit upheld by omission. Intercut with Arthur's horror, the film shows James at Hillfoot Farm, separated even there from his sisters and asking when he can go home. Emma answers not with comfort, but with the theology of colonial uplift: here he is free from deprivation; tomorrow he will go where he can work and prosper. What she offers is not family restoration but imperial repurposing.

The middle act becomes a legal and moral battle. Father Hannan sends Arthur to lawyer **Ross Stewart**, who confirms the central injustice clearly: no institution had the right to remove the children without Arthur's permission. Stewart begins legal action against the refuge directors, demanding the children's return. The board, now cornered, holds a tense meeting with Emma Stirling. They understand that she has put the entire organisation at risk, but Emma refuses contrition. She insists Arthur is an absent father, unworthy of such charity, and makes plain that she believes her judgement superior to law. The board's weakness is exposed here in full. They disapprove, but too late, and without the moral courage to stop her before damage is done.

The legal material is some of the script's strongest because it gives voice to the systemic failure rather than only Arthur's suffering. In court, Judge Brownthorpe presses the refuge directors through their counsel: if they knew Emma Stirling had absconded with the children and then failed to recover them, what exactly have they done? Ross Stewart argues that Arthur's suggestions — detectives, rewards, advertisements, travel funding — were all ignored. The court increasingly loses patience with the evasions of the directors, and eventually finds them in contempt, making them liable for Arthur's costs. It is a moral victory and an essential plot turn because it gives Arthur the means to travel to Canada. But it is also limited. The system has acknowledged failure without yet restoring what it took.

Parallel to the legal struggle, the film keeps Emma active and dangerous. Arthur confronts her once in the street, calling her the devil incarnate, only for her to retreat into sectarian contempt and social performance, presenting him as an abusive papist. Later she returns from Canada and eventually leaves the refuge for France, slipping in and out of accountability with the confidence of someone long accustomed to institutional protection. She is not written as a melodramatic villain, but as something arguably worse: a woman of conviction whose certainty about what is right has made her incapable of recognising the humanity of those she is destroying.

The Canadian act transforms the story again, from courtroom drama into frontier search. Arthur, now accompanied by agent **Grant Cunningham**, travels to Nova Scotia and begins tracing the routes by which the children were distributed. At Hillfoot Farm they confront Walter Durham, who first pretends minimal involvement, then is exposed through ledgers showing where the children were sent. Arthur learns that **Annie** went to **Grand-Métis, Quebec**, while **James** was placed near Middleton with **Rufus de Wolfe**. Robina's whereabouts are missing. In one of the film's most moving touches, Arthur finds the small whittled wooden figure by a fencepost at Hillfoot — the physical trace of James still carrying something of home with him. It is a tiny, devastating proof that the children did not forget.

The search produces information, but not reunion. At de Wolfe's cabin, Arthur learns James ran away after being treated as little more than labour. The confrontation nearly turns deadly when de Wolfe pulls a pistol and asserts the brutal local law of property and force. At Grand-Métis, Arthur and Grant discover that Annie and Robina had also been moved on, collected by a supposed uncle — in reality almost certainly Walter Durham, recognised from the description of the mole on his right cheek. By the time Arthur and Grant return to Hillfoot, the farm has been emptied of anything useful. The children are gone again, folded back into distance, paperwork and lies. The transatlantic search becomes the dramatic expression of the wider historical crime: children moved so often and so far that parental recovery becomes practically impossible even when law briefly aligns on the parent's side.

Arthur returns to Edinburgh defeated but not disproven. Cecilia meets him at Waverley Station and tells him the final insult: Emma Stirling was found, but because Arthur had accepted the money awarded against the directors, the court deemed further prosecution effectively annulled. Stirling leaves for France. Arthur is left with no practical route to recovery and only the knowledge that deceit, law, philanthropy and empire have combined to place his children beyond reach. His line — that what one woman's deceit has done will haunt him forever — becomes the film's central ache. He is not wrong. It does.

The 2020 inquiry frame then returns to complete the story in a way Arthur himself never gets to witness. Patricia Dishon explains the eventual fates of the children. **Annie**, always frail, worked as a domestic servant and later died of

tuberculosis in Cayuga, where she was buried among the “home children.” **Robina** was raised by the Tisdales in New York State, educated at boarding school and appears to have had a stable and materially secure life. **James** eventually married, raised a family in Florida, and lived long enough for descendants to recover his story. The inquiry also reveals the story’s most moving emotional fact: James named his daughter Annie Robina, and another son Arthur, suggesting he never forgot his sisters or his father. Arthur Delaney lost his children in life, but he was not erased from them. That is the inquiry’s terrible consolation.

The film ends not on legal triumph but on memory. Patricia leaves the inquiry room and hears echoes of the past — Arthur’s voice, Mary’s, the ordinary sounds of family life before rupture. The effect is profoundly moving because it restores what the systems of church, state and charity tried to erase: the children were never merely “placements,” “cases” or “orphans.” They belonged to a home, a language, a father, a mother, a close, a city. *The Deceit and Desire* closes by insisting that memory itself is a form of resistance against institutional forgetting.

Themes

At its core, *The Deceit and Desire* is about **the violence hidden inside benevolence**. Emma Stirling and her network repeatedly describe their work as rescue, moral improvement and Christian charity, yet everything they do converts vulnerable children into labour and strips poor parents of their rights. The film’s title speaks to that contradiction directly: deceit disguised as desire to do good.

It is also about **class, sectarianism and moral authority**. Arthur’s poverty becomes the pretext by which others claim superior moral judgement over his children. His Catholic identity is openly held against him in Protestant charitable structures that present themselves as universal and benevolent. The story shows how power can make its prejudice sound like principle.

The film further explores **parenthood against institution**. Arthur is flawed, grieving, inconsistent and sometimes broken. But he remains recognisably and fiercely a father. The drama derives much of its force from how clearly the script distinguishes parental fallibility from abandonment. The system calls him absent when it is the system that has removed the children.

Finally, the inquiry frame makes the film about **historical afterlife**. These wrongs are not sealed in the nineteenth century. They continue in descendants, legal documents, family names and graves across oceans. The closing revelation that James named his children after those he lost becomes a quiet act of resistance: memory crossed the Atlantic even when Arthur could not.

Closing Statement

The Deceit and Desire is a deeply moving historical drama about family, faith, poverty and the machinery of child removal hidden inside charitable respectability. It combines domestic tragedy, institutional critique, courtroom drama and transatlantic search into one emotionally coherent story anchored by a father’s refusal to surrender his children to the lie that he was never fit to keep them. It is ultimately a film about the cost of being poor in a world where power can rename theft as salvation — and about the long, stubborn survival of family memory after every official system has failed.