The Old Dark House: The Architecture of Ambiguity in The Turn of the Screw and The Innocents.

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No sooner has she moved into her rooms at Bly House in the opening pages of Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw, than the new governess immediately notices ‘a sound or two, less natural and not without but within.’ At first she dismisses these slight disturbances. ‘[I]t is only in the light, or the gloom, I should rather say, of other and subsequent matters that they now come back to me’ (James, 1948: 445).

Ever since the ghost of Hamlet’s father stalked the battlements of Elsinore Castle, the stock in trade of horror romanticism has consisted of the inhabitants, properties and atmosphere of the haunted house. Without the haunted house, says Eino Railo (1927: 7), ‘the whole fabric of romance would be bereft of its foundation and would lose its predominant atmosphere’. These literary ‘old dark houses’ include such archetypal edifices as Prince Manfred’s castle in Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto (1764); the strange country house in Clara Reeve’s The Old English Baron (1778); Montoni’s mountain fortress in Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794); Ambrosio’s Capuchin monastery in Matthew Lewis’ The Monk (1796); the Mettingen estate in Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland (1799); Mr. Vileny’s family home in Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1816); Roderick Usher’s bog-engulfed mansion in Edgar Allan Poe’s in The Fall of the House of Usher (1839); the infamously possessed house in Bulwer-Lytton’s The Haunted and the Haunters; the legend-haunted ancestral Pyncheon estate in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s House of the Seven Gables (1851); the vampire-infested Carfax Abbey in Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897); the doppelganger-inhabited New York town house in Henry James’ The Jolly Corner (1908); the house that serves as a gateway to the cosmos in William Hope Hodgson’s the House on the Borderland (1911); the deranged Hill House in Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House (1962); and the isolated, malevolent Overlook Hotel in Stephen King’s The Shining (1977).

Usually there is a specific room, or area, that is the source of the most intense ghosting. It might be the attic from which unholy shrieks emanate in Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847); or the locked and bolted upstairs room in J. B. Priestley’s Benighted (1927); or the secret crypt in Richard Matheson’s Hell House (1971). And what spectral doings enliven these dreadful places! Thin-sheeted phantoms slip noiselessly through the corridors, half-seen forms shamble down the stairs, a gigantic armoured man stalks the galleries, a wall portrait drips real blood, eldritch hands slip the latch. . . Add the natural
elements to this conspiracy of dread—sudden gusts of wind that extinguish the fleeing heroine’s candle, streaks of lightning that fitfully illuminate the horrors emerging from under the bed, and cracks of thunder that punctuate the wails of lost souls—and the recipe for terror is complete.

Dramatists and then filmmakers quickly adopted the ‘old dark house’ formula for popular consumption. Just a few of the classic plays include Matthew Lewis’ Castle Spectre (1797), G.K. Chesterton’s Magic (1913), George M. Cohan’s Seven Keys to Baldpate (1913), and Mary Roberts Rinehart’s The Bat (1920). From Hollywood came a plethora of hauntings, from silent films like D.W. Griffith’s One Exciting Night (1923) and Paul Leni’s The Cat and the Canary (1927) to modern classics like Robert Wise’s The Haunting (1965).

British haunted-house thrillers have come in fits and starts, beginning in the 1930s with a few Hollywood-style gothics like The Ghouls (1932), whose second half features Boris Karloff as an ‘undead’ creature stalking a house full of heirs to a fortune, and a cycle of Tod Slaughter guignol pictures. Dead of Night (1945), an anthology film with several sequences set in disturbed houses, promised great things, but that potential was not realized until the 1960s and beyond, with films like Freddie Francis’ Nightmare (1963), about attempts to drive a woman insane (a la Gaslight) in an old mansion; William Castle’s The Old Dark House (1963), a luridly comic remake of Priestley’s Benighted; Roger Corman’s Masque of the Red Death (1964), based on Poe’s short story about Prince Prospero’s plague-ravaged castle; David Greene’s The Shuttered Room (1966), adapted from H.P. Lovecraft’s tale of the maniacal horrors in a New England house; John Hough’s The Legend of Hell House (1973), adapted from Richard Matheson’s novel Hell House (which was more or less an updating of Bulwer-Lytton’s The Haunted and the Haunters); and Peter Walker’s House of the Long Shadows (1982), a satirical remake of Seven Keys to Baldpate.²

What was it?

Occupying a special niche in the pantheon of old dark houses is Bly House, in Henry James’ novella, The Turn of the Screw (1897). It has aroused more controversy and baffled more readers than perhaps any ghostly tale ever written. Each of its incarnations—as novel, stage play (William Archibald’s dramatization, The Innocents, 1950), and film (Jack Clayton’s The Innocents, 1961)—succeeds on its own terms in creating a measure of ambiguity regarding the nature and reality of the haunters and the haunted.³

From their gothic beginnings, the spooks that haunted old dark houses played a game with their readers. Did they vanish in mid-air; or did they just use a secret trap door? Were they a supernatural manifestation, or a cheap stage trick? They were the Penns and Tellers of their day, magicians simultaneously revealing and concealing...
their repertory of effects. The plots of the Gothic novels straddled the line between horror and hoax. ‘To attain this end,’ asserted Clara Reeve, ‘there is required a sufficient degree of the marvellous to excite the attention; enough of the manners of real life, to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic, to engage the heart in its behalf’ (quoted in Varma, 1957: 78). Thus in Brown’s Wieland, the spectral voices that drive Theodore Wieland to slaughter his family are apparently not a ghostly possession at all, but the vocal suggestions of a diabolical ventriloquist, Carwin. On the other hand, the possibility of supernatural agency, however is not entirely ruled out.

No one was more notorious for dashing the cold water of reason on ghostly thrills than Ann Radcliffe. After hundreds of pages, The Mysteries of Udolpho reveals that the unearthly music in the haunted castle issues not from a ghost but from a conscience-stricken nun with a lurid past; the mysterious voices and the gliding phantom figure belong to an escaped prisoner; and the horror behind the Black Veil is not a decaying corpse but a wax effigy. As ludicrous a ‘cheat’ as this may seem, there was no denying that Radcliffe had succeeded in overturning our rational defences, if only for a moment. As Edith Birkhead (1963:51) puts it, ‘[Radcliffe] deliberately excites trembling apprehensions in order that she may show how absurd they are’. The strange manifestations in Bulwer-Lytton’s The Haunted and the Haunters reveal the author’s preoccupation with psychic phenomena such as telekinesis, and his speculations that abnormal psychological states might induce—or be stimulated by—preternatural conditions. Bulwer-Lytton’s theory that what is labeled ‘supernatural’ may simply be something in the laws of nature of which we have been hitherto ignorant is echoed in G.K. Chesterton’s play, Magic. A magician known only as ‘The Stranger’ produces an illusion—the transformation of a light from red to blue, then back again to red—so inexplicable that, of course, everyone demands a ‘natural’ explanation. At first he confesses it is indeed an act of magic. But, in the face of his auditors’ incredulity, he finally offers a rational solution. ‘You cannot think how that trick could be done naturally,’ he says. ‘I alone found out how it could be done—after I had done it by magic’ (Chesterton, 1914: 71-2). Cruelly, Chesterton never discloses what this ‘natural’ explanation is; he leaves us suspended between rational causes and supernatural possibilities.

Modern ‘old dark house’ novels, like Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House and King’s The Shining are sophisticated updates of their predecessors. They fix most—but not all—of the blame for their catalogues of horrors on the psychologically unstable characters of Eleanor Vance and Jack Torrence respectively, who serve as energy sources for the houses’ engines of malevolence and dread. Jack’s visions cannot be dismissed entirely as hallucinations, because his young son, Danny, who possesses the psychic gift
of ‘the shining,’ also perceives them. Similarly, Eleanor is indeed a disturbed and damaged character because of her loneliness, frustration, and hidden hate; yet it is not she alone who is affected by the house. Clearly, all these writers are leaving the door to the dungeon open, as it were. They know that too much haste to ‘cover up’ the supernatural with science and logic, and, conversely, to dismiss science and logic entirely for the sake of the supernatural is too simplistic and too dangerous. Jack’s wife and son survive their ordeal because they never lose their capacity for logic while still accepting the possibility of the ghostly. As John Montague, the psychic investigator in The Haunting of Hill House, sums it up: ‘The menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armour of superstition and have no substitute defence’ (Jackson, 1959: 139-140).

**Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw (1896).**

No novel—and its subsequent play and film versions—has had more ink spilled over the precise nature of its terrors than Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw. James himself was a monument to personal and professional ambiguity and ambivalence. His citizenship, either American or British, his sexual identity, his densely-textured prose - all resist strict categorization. In short, he was born to write this story.

While visiting Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, in Addington Park on the evening of 8 January 1895, James lamented that all the good ghost stories seemed to have been told. The Archbishop then remembered a story about some dead servants and the children they haunted. ‘The servants, wicked and depraved, corrupt and deprave the children,’ James wrote in his notebook four days later, ‘. . . so that the children may destroy themselves, lose themselves, by responding, by getting into their power’ (Edel, 1948: 425-6). Two years later, James dictated his ‘fantastic fiction,’ The Turn of the Screw, to his amanuensis, W. McAlpine.

The unnamed governess’ first-person narrative begins with her arrival on a beautiful June day in the 1850s at the country estate of Bly. Two children, Flora and her older brother, ten-year old Miles (who at that point is away at school) are assigned to her care. After a few days, the first disturbing note in an otherwise peaceful scene is struck when a letter arrives revealing that Miles has been dismissed from school. The governess immediately wonders if Miles has ‘contaminated,’ or ‘corrupted’ the other children, but on meeting the boy she finds in him ‘something divine’, responding with a sort of ‘passion of tenderness for him’ (James 1948: 452). However, one afternoon, a disturbing incident breaks the summer serenity. She suffers a ‘bewilderment of vision’, seeing the figure of a man atop the tower of the house. Shortly afterward she encounters two more unexpected apparitions—the same stranger peering at her through the window, and the form of a woman in black standing in
the garden. Although the children refuse to admit it, the governess is convinced that they too see the apparitions. After hearing the governess' descriptions of the two figures, the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, reveals that they resemble the former valet, Peter Quint, and the previous governess, Miss Jessel, who had both died a year before. Jessel had been of a good family, but she had been somehow corrupted by Quint, a drunken villain. Her misadventure had forced her into committing suicide.

As the summer wears into autumn, the children continue to be models of exemplary behaviour. The governess, though, is increasingly distraught. More appearances by Jessel (seen across the pond, in the stairwell, at a writing desk) and Quint (peering through the window again) have convinced her that they are pursuing some sort of unholy communion with Miles and Flora. The governess grows obsessively protective and presses the children more and more to admit their complicity and appreciate their danger. Realizing that she has lost control over them, she feels that she has no other recourse but to draft a letter explaining the situation to the children’s uncle. The letter disappears, and the governess decides she has no choice but to send Flora and Mrs. Grose away to the uncle, while she will remain behind in an attempt to talk things out with Miles. Resentful of the governess’ obsessive control, Flora denounces her. That night, Miles, under pressure, admits that he had been dismissed from school for ‘saying things’ and that he had stolen the letter intended for his uncle.

When she once again sees Peter Quint’s face at the window, the governess tries to shield Miles from the sight. ‘It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul,’ she states. Terrified at her hysteria, Miles finally asks, ‘It’s he?’ And an instant later he shouts, ‘Peter Quint—you devil!’ (James, 1948: 549-50) He sinks back, dead, into the governess’ arms.

What, exactly, has happened? What transpired in the past between Quint and Jessel? Were the children involved? If so, were they the ‘innocents’ they first seemed to the governess, or willing go-betweens? Worse, were they sexually abused by Quint and Jessel, and are they now somehow re-enacting those activities? Is the governess protecting them from real evil, or is she subjecting them to her own obsessive agendas? Is she sexually repressed, and transferring her fantasies onto Miles? And finally, the central question which arises from all this—are the ghosts real or just figments of her imagination?

Particularly striking about James’ novella is the contrast between the governess’ increasingly possessive, even hysterical behaviour, and the consistent, placid sweetness of the children. At first, obviously enamoured of her employer, whom she is bent on pleasing, she is the very model of gentility and decorum at Bly. She even displays a moment of wry humour when she wonders if Bly contains a ‘secret’—’a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement (ibid: 457). But as time wears on she loses her equilibrium and grows increasingly
possessive of the children. Just what threat she thinks they face is never made clear. All she can say is that the spirits want ‘to get hold’ of the children to ‘ply them with that evil’ (ibid: 498). Accordingly, she regards the liveliness and secretiveness of the children not as natural behaviour, but as sinister and provocative collusions with Jessel and Quint. She construes Miles’ declaration that he is a boy who does not want to be cooped up with females as an act of defiance. Further defied by Flora, who stoutly denies that she sees the apparitions, the governess falls into a hysterical faint. Eventually, she begins to doubt the children’s innocence and insists to Mrs. Grose they have seen ‘things terrible and unguessable.’ (ibid: 504). Her attitude frightens the children, and they plead to be taken away from her. Certainly a root cause of the governess’ emotional turmoil is her transfer onto Miles of her hopeless infatuation with her employer. She repeatedly expresses her pleasure when he calls her ‘my dear,’ and there are numerous descriptions of hugs and kisses. In one startling scene, after mockingly telling her to think of him as ‘bad,’ Miles kisses her. ‘I met his kiss,’ she says to herself, ‘and I had to make, while I folded him for a minute in my arms, the most stupendous effort not to cry’ (ibid: 496). By contrast, because she perceives Flora as her rival for Miles’ attention, she can now see only hideousness in the little girl: ‘Her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished. . . . she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly’ (Ibid: 529).

By now, we may well wonder, as have countless commentators and biographers since the book was published, whether there is any real ghosting here at all; perhaps all this turmoil is merely the result of the governess’ own psychological and sexual hallucinations. As James' biographer Leon Edel points out, the author himself expressed seemingly contradictory views on the matter. Originally, he had envisioned a tale of a haunting, pure and simple, whereas later, in the 1908 New York Edition revision, he altered the text so as to depict a ghostly possession alleged to have occurred, the credibility of which must be determined by the reader himself. ‘The evidence left by James himself,’ concludes Edel, ‘is that he intended to make the story the record of the young governess’ mind, as he did with other of his characters in his ghostly tales’ (Edel, 1948: 429). Bly ‘is filled not so much with the evil of the ghosts as with the terror of the governess, her wild suppositions and soothing self-consoling explanations’ (ibid: 204). They are, in the words of Howard Kerr (1972: 210), ‘occult personifications of the metaphorical illuminations through which those characters. . . sometimes perceived reality’. Other commentators, particularly Edmund Wilson and Elizabeth MacAndrew, have pursued this interpretation at considerable length. According to this reading, the governess seems to be a good character, even a heroine, but is actually an evil, or at least destructive, woman. Quint and Jessel may be real for the governess, MacAndrew suggests, but
problematical for everyone else, including the reader. The existence of evil and the ghostly is ultimately a matter of perception. ‘It is [the governess] who is the intruder into the children’s world,’ argues MacAndrew (1979: 238), ‘and the supernatural beings who enter it with her are projections of her guilty feelings’. In the end, however, we may simply have to accept that the essence of The Turn of the Screw is its very ambiguity on these matters. After all, as James himself put it: ‘so long as the events are veiled the imagination will run riot and depict all sorts of horrors,’ he once said. ‘But as soon as the veil is lifted, all mystery disappears and with it the sense of terror’ (quoted in Edel, 1969: 214).6

Jack Clayton’s The Innocents (1961).

Jack Clayton had directed only one major feature film, Room at the Top (1958), before taking on The Turn of the Screw in 1961. Subsequent films, such as Our Mother’s House (1967), a strange drama about children who bury their dead mother on their property and try to continue their lives while communicating with her spirit, and Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983), an adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s gothic fantasy about an infernal carnival which invades a small Illinois town, he would further confirm his sensitivity to this sort of material.7 For the screenplay, Clayton called upon William Archibald to adapt his own two-act play based on James’ novella. This had premiered in New York at the Playhouse Theatre on 1 February 1950. After consulting Harold Pinter and Nigel Kneale, two acknowledged masters of subtle terrors, Clayton turned to John Mortimer and Truman Capote for the final rewrites, although few of Mortimer’s contributions seem to have survived to the final cut.

It is apparent from the detailed notes which Clayton kept during his preparations that he was primarily concerned that the film, like the novel and Archibald’s play, should have a ‘dual life’, i.e., on the one hand, the ghosts could be interpreted as projections on the part of the governess (here, as in the stage version, named Miss Giddens), and, on the other, ‘there are the ghosts and they are after the children.’8 Following James’ own example, Clayton was careful not to box himself in on the issue of supernatural events versus psychological projections. On the one hand, he went on record as blaming Giddens’ repressed sexual attraction for the children’s uncle—and perhaps, by extension, for Miles—for the disaster at Bly. ‘She just sees him once, and he is like a god to her,’ Clayton said in an interview. ‘She would have left the house long before unless it was her love for him that held her there. Therefore anything that is repeated by the children, or any suggestions about what might have happened in the house before she arrived, would then be magnified, as was common for Victorian people to do’ (Gow, 1974:14). On the other hand, Clayton insisted that Giddens did indeed see ghosts—or at least was convinced she did. ‘This is what I love about the story,’ he said in an interview for Show Magazine.
(January 1962: 30). ‘There is nothing black and white about it; it’s full of question marks and possibilities. I don’t want, you know, to say absolutely what the picture means. There should be an area of uncertainty; that’s what I think James intended. I want the audience to exercise its intelligence’.

Clayton hit upon an unusual method of scene dissolves to enhance this ambiguity. A telling example of this technique occurs when Giddens asks the housekeeper if the children have intimated anything about a ghost in the house. At that moment, Flora pokes her head out from behind the sofa and says, ‘Know what, Miss Giddens?’ The image then dissolves into the next scene, a conversation between the governess and the housekeeper. But lingering right in the middle of the screen is the persistent image of the child’s face. At other times, images of clouds, trees or rain appear in the brief seconds before one shot has entirely yielded to its successor. ‘The Innocents is completely mood-oriented,’ Clayton explains in the Show interview, ‘and it gave me opportunities to explore this field, which I had never done before; to create, in those multiple dissolves, images which hang there, and have a meaning which applies both to the end of the last scene and the beginning of the next’.

The inclusion of one scene, a contribution from screenwriter Truman Capote, might seem on the face of it to tilt the scales toward the definite conclusion that real ghosts inhabit Bly House. After seeing Jessel seated at the schoolroom desk, Giddens advances toward her. The figure vanishes, but a teardrop is left upon the desk. Giddens touches it: it is real. Capote later thought this a mistake: ‘Up until then it wasn’t clear whether the ghosts were real or in the governess’ mind. But the tear was real, and that spoiled everything’ (quoted in Svehla, 1996: 141). Even here, however, interpretations may vary. Events at Bly House are real enough for Giddens at least, and the physical presence of a teardrop merely confirms those perceptions, both visual and tactile. As far as the film viewer is concerned, why is the image of her finger touching the teardrop any more or less credible than the images of Quint and Jessel? For Clayton, the scene has only one purpose: to convey Giddens’ growing anxieties about the ghosts: ‘What would be the most terrifying thing for me? I might think I was having an hallucination, or that it was some trick of the light. But if I suddenly saw a tear mark on a piece of paper, I think it would really frighten me very much, as well as being very sad.’ (Gow, 1974: 14).

As for the second consideration, regarding the process of adaptation, Clayton’s notes reveal that his reservations about William Archibald’s first screenplay attempt. It was too much ‘an expanded version of the existing play,’ which relied on an ‘overabundance’ of dialogue regarding the backstory. James’ story was itself a ‘strange kind of detective story’ and ‘all the important incidents have in fact occurred before we arrive on the scene.’ How to provide this information?
Flashbacks might solve the problem. An alternative solution might be to have the governess fill in the information by narrating the story herself. Another problem with Archibald’s theatrically-oriented adaptation was the paucity of characters and the limiting of all the action to the house. This was fine for the stage, but ‘[it] does not give us the opportunities that one normally has in a film for constantly varying the tempo, atmosphere and tension by going from one scene to another scene. . . usually with fresh characters.’ Clayton suggested expanding the scenic possibilities beyond the house and restoring James’ additional locations of a lake and a country church. Perhaps a statuary garden adjoining the house could also be added. Instead of confining Miles’ death scene to the house, the action could move outside to the garden.

As for the house itself, its aspect was all important, Clayton stated in his notes. The play had revealed its sinister atmosphere too early; the film must allow the sense of evil to ‘slowly grow out of the house, grow out of the scenes, grow out of the atmosphere.’ The house must be ‘like an enormous old-fashioned rose—but it’s too big—it’s almost overbloomed. . . .’ Clayton’s notes also reveal he was concerned with Archibald’s ending. There must be more of a sense that ‘evil has been divorced from the earth.’ And why not restore some of James’ eroticism—entirely lost in Archibald’s play—by depicting a last kiss between Miles and the governess? James himself had provided a precedent for such a scene in Miles’ bedroom. Why not restore that scene midway through the film and then repeat the kiss at the end? Moreover, the kiss should transpire ‘as a grown-up man would kiss her.’ But what then? Should Giddens carry Miles’ corpse back to the house and repeat the kiss, ‘completely on the lips as one would with one’s lover’?

Impressed with Archibald’s use of music, Clayton suggested that the film should introduce a leitmotif, an ‘eerie tune,’ that could function both diegetically and non-diegetically. It could be sung by the children, and could also reappear in a number of variations in Georges Auric’s score. Clayton is unclear how such a tune could be introduced. Perhaps it is something the former governess taught the children and which Giddens finds herself playing on the parlour piano—a metaphor for the ghostly possession in the house. . . .

The Innocents was the first time Clayton worked in CinemaScope. Freddie Francis photographed the film in Sheffield Park, a Gothic revival estate in Sussex. The shadowy interiors of Bly House, with their decorative antiques, tapestries, staircases, and fluttering draperies, were built on the soundstages of Shepperton Studios.

The resulting film, which retains the title of William Archibald’s play, reveals that most of Clayton’s ideas were incorporated into the final script. It begins with a dark screen and the sounds of a child singing a song. As the credits roll, the face and clasped hands of Deborah Kerr swing into view. ‘All I want to do is save the children,’ she
whispers, ‘not destroy them. More than anything I love children. More than anything. They need affection, love. . . . someone who will belong to them.’ The image fades. The action proper begins as the children’s uncle (Michael Redgrave) interviews Miss Giddens (Deborah Kerr) about taking on a job at Bly House. This exchange, missing from the play, was adapted from James’ prologue to the novel, in which one of the narrators relates the governess’ meeting with her employer, her obvious attraction to him, and the curious instruction that she handle all affairs at Bly herself, without seeking his aid. The screenplay adds certain details to this exchange: the uncle tells her that the former governess, Miss Jessel, has died, leaving Miles at school and Flora in the care of the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose. Miss Giddens is clearly impressed by his cosmopolitan charm; as they shake hands, she looks at him with frankly adoring eyes.

Upon her arrival she finds the house occupied only by Flora (Pamela Franklin), two servants and Mrs. Grose (Mags Jenkins). Straightaway, like the play, the film loses no time establishing an air of unease. In a detail borrowed from James, as she walks down the broad driveway, Giddens hears the name ‘Flora’ called out in a high voice—but sees no one in the area. When Flora appears, she immediately seems oddly precocious. In a detail not in the novel but in the play, she twice announces that Miles will be coming home soon, even though the school term is still continuing. In another addition to both novel and play, that night, after prayers, when Giddens assures her that she will go to heaven because she’s been a good little girl, Flora wonders aloud: ‘And if I weren’t, wouldn’t the Lord just leave me here to walk around? Isn’t that what happens to some people?’ She rises from her bed late at night and gazes out upon the grounds. She smiles slightly, but we are not granted a glimpse of what she sees. The next day a note arrives informing them that Miles has been expelled from school and sent home. Unlike novel and play, an additional piece of information is provided concerning the letter, i.e., that Miles ‘is an injury to the others.’ In a full close-up, Giddens murmurs—in words right out of the novel—that Miles might ‘contaminate’ and ‘corrupt’ the other children. Grose laughs and adds, ‘—and contaminate you?’

After Miles’ arrival, more unsettling moments befall Miss Giddens. While gathering roses, she sees a dim figure atop the battlements of the tower (at which point both the music and sound track grow silent for a prolonged moment). During a game of hide-and-seek, she catches a glimpse of a woman in black crossing a hallway; moments later she confronts a man’s face staring through the window pane. In an action duplicating both novel and play, she races outside to peer back through the window to a startled Mrs. Grose. During an amateur theatrical—a scene derived from the play—Miles wears a kingly robe and recites a spooky poem: ‘Enter my lord, Come from thy prison, Come from they grave! For the moon is
arisen!’ At an outing by the lake the governess sees the silent, black-clad form of a woman standing in the reeds across the lake. The woman reappears in the schoolroom, sitting at the desk, sobbing (and leaving a very real tear on the slate). Several key dialogue scenes between Giddens and Grose pull all this together and make painfully clear what James had only hinted at - albeit over many pages - namely, that Quint and Jessel had had a physical relationship, carried on openly in ‘rooms, used by daylight as though they were dark woods’; that Jessel had been the victim of physical and sexual abuse and had drowned herself in the lake; and that the children had been ‘corrupted’ and ‘contaminated’ as a result. Giddens reaches the conclusion that the children are wicked liars who were—and still are—’playing some monstrous game [that is] secretive, whispery, and indecent.’ They are being ‘used’ by Quint and Jessel as the only way in which they can be reunited in their lust. The children must be watched constantly so as not to succumb to their unholy ‘possession.’ And they must be forced to acknowledge the haunting as the only way to exorcise ‘those devils.’

The famous kiss transpires, as in the novel, after Giddens discovers Miles walking outside in the moonlight, barefoot in his nightshirt. As she tucks him in for the night, he confesses that he and Flora had conspired to be ‘bad’ so as not to become boring. He then startles her with a very adult-like kiss, held in a prolonged, tight closeup. Another Jamesian scene which survives the translation to film is Flora’s hysterical outburst to Giddens after refusing to admit that she sees the figure of Jessel across the lake: ‘I think you’re cruel. I don’t like you!’ Flora’s screams echo through the house long afterward, and Mrs. Grose tells Giddens she is shocked at the ‘obscenities’ that issued from Flora. Giddens seizes upon this as justification for her conviction that the children are being perverted via ghostly possession. But, in a departure from both James and from the play, Grose angrily turns on Giddens, insisting not only that there was there nothing to be seen across the lake but also that Giddens was inducing the girl’s hysteria:

Grose: ‘All I know, is that Miss Flora was a sweet, innocent child until you came and made her face that—that—’

Giddens: ‘—that woman!’

Grose: ‘No, that memory!’

Undaunted, Giddens is determined to exorcise the evil by exposing it. She orders Grose to take Flora back to her uncle while she remains behind with Miles to force him to acknowledge the evil. Again, Grose rebukes her, arguing that she is risking damaging the child. But Giddens is firm. ‘What am I tell their uncle,’ asks Grose. ‘The truth!’ answers Giddens. Grose is silent. ‘The truth. . . ’ she breathes, slowly, confusedly.

Whereas both novel and play had confined the climactic confrontation between Giddens and Miles to the house's interior, the film opens up the
scene, beginning in the house, continuing to the pavilion outside, and concluding beyond that in the statuary park. After insistent questioning by Giddens, Miles admits that in school he had ‘said things.’ Not content with this Jamesian hint, however, the screenplay adds to Miles’ confession that he had ‘frightened the children’ and that ‘there were screams.’ As Giddens begs Miles to say Quint’s name, Quint’s face appears at the rain-smeared window behind the child. In a sharper rebuke than in either the novel or the play, Miles breaks into hysterical laughter and accuses Giddens of being a ‘damned hussey’ and a ‘dirty-minded hag.’ The image is striking: in a tight two-shot Miles screams as he faces the camera while, behind him, Quint’s face breaks into silent laughter. They never face each other as they do in the play. Suddenly, Miles breaks away and races into the statuary park, where Quint’s form appears among the standing statues. At last, Miles utters the name ‘Peter Quint.’ In an overhead shot, Quint’s gesturing hand hovers over Miles. The child crumples to the ground. Giddens rushes to him and holds him in her arms, murmuring that she ‘has him’ now. For the second time, their lips meet. After several moments, her head arches backward, and she and the boy fall away from each other, leaving only a dark void in between.

**The Architecture of Ambiguity.**

We now turn to a consideration of how the story’s central ambiguity—that balancing act between rational and supernatural trappings outlined earlier—is developed and supported on both the page and the screen. For example, the elements of time, place setting, and story pacing function in different ways. On the page, James sets most of his action inside Bly House, excepting occasional sequences in the grounds, at church, and at the lake. Events transpire across an approximate six-month span of time, affording him a leisurely pace by which to complicate the story, enhance the suspense, and provoke confusion in the readers’ minds. Clayton’s film is comparable to the novel in terms of its latitude of time and space. The settings of the house and environs are splendidly picturesque and sumptuously detailed, and key scenes move fluidly from one to the other across an unspecified period of time. The film’s 99-minute playing time, however, which is comparable to the stage version’s length, shoehorns characterizations and incidents into a rather narrow compass, sacrificing some of the story’s subtlety.

Narrative modes differ in each version. In order to distance himself from the story, James utilizes a triple framing device: an unnamed narrator relates the circumstances of an eyewitness tale that is told many years after the fact in the form of a document that is in turn presented at a dinner party by a guest named Douglas. Thus, by the time the story proper begins, the governess is a vaguely-defined figure in the middle distance, as it were, and her words provide the only evidence with which the reader can proceed (a questionable presumption, as it turns out). This, of course, is a crucial and necessary ploy in casting doubt on the
veracity of ensuing events. ‘It involves an epistemological quandary,’ writes Jeanne Thomas Allen (1977: 134) in her study of the novel and the film, ‘for given the expertly balanced and irresolvable ambiguity, the reader cannot be certain of what has actually happened’. Archibald’s play, almost of necessity, maintains an objective, omniscient view. Quint and Jessel are real, corporeal presences. Stage directions indicate that on several occasions they elicit reactions from the children (this is most evident in the final scene when Miles faces Quint and expires after Quint raises his hand in a gesture). The resulting effect damages the story’s ambiguity by firmly suggesting that the ghosts are real.

Clayton’s film, however, attempts to restore Giddens’ specific viewpoint through the employment of particular camera angles and editing techniques. Usually, when the apparitions appear, they are presented either from her foreground point of view in a deep-focus two-shot or via the simple means of eyeline cutting. Either way, the viewer participates in her point of view. When the camera shifts to a more omniscient angle, however, the phantoms vanish. For example, the scene in which she sees Miss Jessel sitting at the school room desk foregrounds Giddens, allowing the viewer to look past her shoulder toward the black-clad woman. However, when the vantage point changes to a reverse angle and the camera dollies with her as she walks toward the desk, the figure vanishes. If Clayton used this strategy entirely consistently throughout, Giddens’ subjective inflection of events would be confirmed. However, there are significant variations in this schema. In one scene early in the film, Quint appears at the window behind Giddens. Because we see him and she at first does not, his objective presence is implied. This is confirmed during the film’s conclusion at the moment of Miles’ death. Giddens has raced, breathlessly, after Miles as he flee to the garden. A subjective camera simulates her disorientation with a 360-degree pan, coming to rest momentarily on the figure of Quint, standing atop one of the statue pedestals. So far, so good. But then, in an astonishing departure from Giddens’ point of view, an overhead shot reveals her and the boy in the middle distance while in the foreground Quint’s gesturing hand dominates the frame (this is the same gesture that Archibald wrote into the last moments of the play). Miles crumples to the ground, lifeless. The effect is extremely disconcerting because, for the first time in the film, the viewer sees the action from Quint’s point of view. This apparent inconsistency—or carefully calculated manipulation—disrupts the subjective strategy of much of the rest of the film and suggests the possibility that the ghosts are real. In a counter move, however, the succeeding shot of the kiss—in a prolonged, tight close-up—re-establishes Giddens’ ‘possession’ of Miles. ‘Dispossessed by Quint,’ writes Jeanne Thomas Allen (1977: 142), ‘Jack Clayton’s Miles becomes possessed finally and wholly by a new captor’.

Although music and sound effects were, of course, unavailable to James,
they are everywhere in evidence in both play and film, and play a key role in this game of ambiguities. Archibald’s playscript contains detailed instructions on the use of music. In particular, several songs are introduced that seem to embody, by turns, the sweet innocence of childhood and the darker implications of maturity, whilst background music inflects key scenes and accompanies transitions from one scene to another, and sounds such as heartbeats and chiming clocks underscore actions with ominous emphases.

Doubtless due to Archibald’s influence, the use of music and sounds is extensive in Clayton’s film. As in the play, there are two songs, each associated with either Flora or Miles. Heard against the black screen before the credits is the voice of a child singing ‘Willow Waylee’:

>We lay, my love and I,
>Beneath the weeping willow
>But now alone I lie, . . .
>Oh Willow, I die.
>Oh Willow, I die.

Coming from the lips of a small child, this is especially disturbing. Who has died? Is it just a children’s innocent folk song, or does it suggest the death of someone in the film? A leitmotif for the entire film, it reappears in a variety of guises. Flora plays it as a simple tune on the piano, and she hums it softly to herself on several occasions, usually implying the presence of Quint or Jessel—while gazing through her bedroom window, while picking flowers at the moment Giddens sees Quint on the tower, and at the lake just before the appearance of Miss Jessel. (Curiously, at the very moment the that apparitions appear, Flora ceases singing). It is heard several times from the music box in the attic. And the soundtrack takes it up to underscore many scenes, plaintive and gentle during an outing to the church, violent and dissonant during Giddens’ nightmares.

Miles, too, has his own song, ‘Enter, my Lord’, the same song he declaimed in Archibald’s play during the scene in which he and Flora play a ‘dress-up’ game. The lyrics suggest not only a death, but a return. At the finish of the song, Miles walks to the window. ‘Welcome, my lord,’ he repeats.

The sound track is, according to Jeanne Thomas Allen (1977), in many ways more upsetting than the visuals. The use of echoes and electronic effects throughout—which includes distortions of Flora’s song—is generally ambiguous and suggestive both of the apparitions and of Miss Giddens’ deranged mind. It may be that the echo effects are ‘a sign of passing from objectively heard sound into an inner chamber of subjective haunting sound’ (ibid: 141), but, as Allen stresses, the truth is that the viewer simply cannot identify aural shifts in point of view as easily as visual ones.

The Haunted and the Haunters

When the mists of ambiguity have cleared, or at least thinned out, it is apparent that all three adaptations have one very important aspect in common: their suggestion that it is the governess as much as any ghosts who truly
‘haunts’ Bly House. This is demonstrated in a key scene that appears in all three versions: When the governness sees Quint’s face at the window, she races outside in pursuit. Finding nothing, she then turns around to peer back through that same window. Mrs. Grose is startled at the apparition - just as if she had seen a ghost, in fact. Bereft of an identity of her own, Giddens is a hollow being searching the corridors and stairs of the old dark house for the very substance and purpose which she lacks.

This is not the only ghost story by James in which the living assume the roles of both the haunted and the haunters. For example, in The Jolly Corner Spencer Brydon’s obsessive search for a ghost transforms him into a wraith-like creature stalking the hallways and stairs of his own home: ‘People enough, first and last, had been in terror of apparitions, but who had ever before so turned the tables and become himself, in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror?’ (Edel, 1948: 742). And in one of James’ last ghostly tales, The Third Person (1909), two elderly spinsters think they have discovered the ghost of a hanged smuggler in their house. With no other purpose in their life, they are delighted to spend their time in search of an apparition which, if anything, is more real than they are, and which, as James says, ‘had converted them into wandering ghosts’ (Ibid: 651).

What are they all looking for?—Miss Giddens and the rest? Surely not just for spooks and goblins. Whether they realize it or not, they are in fact seeking an identity and a truth about themselves. Their gaze into the spirit world is reversed and thrown back upon themselves, onto the world of the living. As Brydon realizes, ‘after confronting the object of his search, what he had come back to seemed really the great thing, and as if his prodigious journey had been all for the sake of it’ (ibid: 757).

For the reader of James’ novel, the theatre-goer of Archibald’s drama, and the viewer of Clayton’s film, the great revelation is the degree to which the ghostly actually resides in the living—and, by extension, in us. Truly, The Old Dark House is terrorised by haunters and haunted alike.
Notes

1 All quotations from The Turn of the Screw are taken from the 1908 text in Edel (1948).

2 A partial listing of other representative titles includes Dark Interval (1950), a psycho-thriller that anticipates the Hammer cycle of the 1960s; Someone at the Door (1950), a creepshow in the manner of James Whale’s The Old Dark House; Jacques Tourneur’s Night of the Demon (1957), whose most effective sequences were set in and around the mansion of the evil Dr. Karswell; the anthology film The House That Dripped Blood (1970), derived from Robert Bloch’s stories about the inhabitants of a ‘blighted’ house; Curtis Harrington’s Whoever Slew Auntie Roo? (1971), a grand-guignol catalogue of household horrors loosely patterned after the Hansel and Gretel story; Radley Metzger’s The Cat and the Canary (1977), yet another remake of the 1922 theatrical ‘old dark house’ archetype; Neil Jordan’s High Spirits (1988), about turning a haunted Irish castle into a tourist trap; and Nancy Meckler’s Sister My Sister (1995), a Repulsion-like thriller.

3 There is yet another incarnation of The Turn of the Screw. Benjamin Britten, with librettist Myfanwy Piper, brought it to the opera stage in 1954. Despite their avowals that it was not an ‘interpretation’ but a ‘recreation,’ the staging does include very visible ghosts, who sing some of Britten’s most gripping music. One of them even quotes a line from Yeats’ poem The Second Coming (‘The ceremony of innocence is drowned’), which would seem to suggest that ghosts have indeed corrupted the
innocence of the children. A second, very free, movie version of the novel, Michael Winner’s *The Nightcomers* (1971), insisted on explaining away all the ambiguities that previous versions had worked so strenuously to promote. Marlon Brando as Quint and Stephanie Beacham as Jessel gleefully induct the children into perverse practices. When they try to leave, the children kill them. At the end, a newly recruited governess arrives, unaware of the dangers awaiting her.

4 Having said that, however, what about the apparitions in the ghost story read by Ludovico during his vigil in the haunted chamber? We never receive a rational explanation of them, which, by now, we have every reason to expect.

5 Freudian interpretations notwithstanding, there is no evidence that Henry James had ever heard of Freud. As early as 1916, speculation arose questioning the sanity of the governess. Edmund Wilson’s groundbreaking essay, ‘The Ambiguity of Henry James,’ appeared in *Hound and Horn* in 1924 and hypothesised that the governess was a neurotic.

6 An examination of James’ other ghostly tales fails to resolve the issue. Owen Wingrave (also turned into an opera by Britten) and *The Real Right Thing* have no perceivable ghosts, but many psychological ramifications. *The Ghostly Rental* and *Sir Edmund Orme*, on the other hand, have substantial haunts. Somewhere in between is *The Jolly Corner*, a story that is, if anything, even more baffling than *The Turn of the*
Screw. A man confronts a ghost, to be sure, but it is his own doppelganger that appears before him, his alternative self had his life pursued different directions.

7 For an interview with Jack Clayton about his work with children, see Rebello (1983).

8 The author is deeply grateful to Professor Neil Sinyard of the University of Hull for access to Jack Clayton’s pre-production notes for The Innocents.

**Bibliography**


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