



The Innocents

Wednesday 26th March, 1.00pm, Omniplex

Study Guide **Tony Tracy**

The Innocents

The Innocents (1961)

Cast

Deborah Kerr	Miss Giddens, Governess
Peter Wyngarde	Peter Quint
Megs Jenkins	Mrs Grose, the Housekeeper
Michael Redgrave	The Uncle
Martin Stephens	Miles
Pamela Franklin	Flora
Clytie Jessop	Miss Jessel
Isla Cameron	Anna the Maid
Eric Woodburn	The Coachman (uncredited)

Crew

Director	Jack Clayton
Screenplay	William Archibald and Truman Capote John Mortimer (additional scenes and dialogue) adapted from Henry James novel 'The Turn of the Screw'
Producer	Jack Clayton
Cinematographer	Freddie Francis
Editor	James Clark
Music	Georges Auric
Art Direction	Wilfred Shingleton
Costume	Motley

(another adaptation in 1971, loosely based on James's story, dir. by Michael Winner; British/French adaptation from 1992, dir. by Rusty Lemorande, starring Patsy Kensit, Stephane Audran, Julia Sands)

The Director

Born in 1921, Jack Clayton came to prominence in 1959 with the film 'Room At The Top', a searing indictment of the British class system, which also earned him an Oscar nomination. A long-time worker within the British film industry, he had worked with the great director Alexander Korda from a young age. He joined the RAF during World war 2 and returned to work with Korda as associate producer on many of his films. An Oscar for Best Short Film – 'The Bespoke Suit' – in 1956 gave him the opportunity to direct larger production such as 'Room At The Top' and 'The Innocents'. Intermittent work followed including the high-profile adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby' (1974) which featured Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. The disappointing reception which '...Gatsby' received meant that Clayton didn't follow up with another film until another literary adaptation, this time Ray Bradbury's 'Something Wicked This Way Comes' (1983). Again poorly received, the film was a sensitive look at father and son relations within a fantastical setting. His last feature 'The Lonely Passion Of Judith Hearne' (1987) which featured Maggie Smith in a towering performance, restored Clayton's reputation. Jack Clayton died in 1995

Selected Filmography:

Memento Mori (1992) (TV)
Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne, The (1987)
Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983)
The Great Gatsby (1974)
The Pumpkin Eater (1964)
The Innocents (1961)
Room at the Top (1959)
The Bespoke Overcoat (1956)
Naples Is a Battlefield (1944)



Introduction

A new governess is assigned to look after a brother and sister living in a country home – little aware of the sinister forces lurking in the shadows. She gradually becomes aware that the place is haunted by two spirits, of a man and a woman, who have died there recently. The children, she believes, are possessed by these two spirits and she must do everything within her power to rescue them before it's too late.

Jack Clayton's 1961 adaptation of Henry James' novel 'The Turn Of The Screw' is a masterly piece of cinema. Childhood innocence is turned on its head as two seemingly normal children are turned into malevolent beings. Clayton's film leaves the central question unanswered: are the children really possessed or are the well meaning but confused beliefs of their governess projecting this evil upon them?

Strong on location, the film is set, for the most part, in one rambling Victorian house. The film is a shadowy melodrama, but holds strong an inherent maxim, the evil that is suggested is often more powerful than that which is visible. The true fear in the film is placed in the mind of the audience by Clayton's skilful handling.

Before viewing

Questions

Look at the title of this film. What do you think it will be about?

What kind of characters do you expect to encounter – age, personality, lifestyle?

What time period might it be set in? Is the period setting of a film important to the way we respond to it?

Think of the term 'childhood'. What thoughts or associations does it provoke? Are these associations visual or abstract – pictures or ideas – or a mixture?

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*What kind of feelings does the term childhood evoke?
Has the experience of childhood changed over time – is it
different being a child today than it was, say one hundred
years ago?*

*Finally, in your opinion, what is the most significant
aspect of childhood – what should a child experience
or not experience?*

Things to watch out for...

- The film's opening – the evocation of atmosphere at the very beginning through sounds and images.
- The repeated use of mirrors, windows and reflections throughout the film.
- The use of atmospheric sound and music as a way of increasing tension and uneasiness in the viewer.
- The centrality and persistence of questions in the screenplay
- The use of lighting and the position of actors in the frame – especially the frequent use of close-up

Story

Set in Victorian times, the story opens in a city office with Miss Giddens, a governess, being asked by a man to take care of two children at Bly House in the country. The man is the children's Uncle and he wants Miss Giddens to take sole care of the children; on no account is he to be disturbed. Miss Giddens accepts and the Uncle entrusts their care to him.

Miss Giddens travels to Bly House, a creaking mansion of many rooms, with a housekeeper Miss Grose, who has been taking care of everything since the last Governess, Miss Jessel, left. Miss Giddens settles in, meeting Flora, the young girl in her care. The boy, Miles, is still at school and Flora and Miss Giddens become friends.

Miss Giddens is unsettled by the appearances of a young woman. Mrs Grose divulges that there was disturbances at the house in previous years with the death of the last Governess and also that of Quint, a man who also worked in the house.

Things return to some normality, until Miss Giddens receives a letter from Miles' school, saying that he has been expelled. Miles returns home and for a period the house is filled with the children's fun. But this is again disturbed by Miss Giddens seeing the figures of a man and woman. These ethereal figures, Miss Giddens believes

are the spirits of Quint and Miss Jessel. She becomes convinced that Flora and Miles are linked in some way with the two spirits. Mrs Grose reveals again that the children were very close to the two adults and that Quint and the former Governess had had a relationship which ended violently.

Miss Giddens becomes convinced that the children must be saved from these malevolent spirits. The ghost of Quint is seen as the evil presence which controls the actions of the children. Miss Giddens sends Flora and Mrs Grose away. She feels that if she can get Miles to admit that Quint is within him, he can be saved.

She confronts Miles, who runs from her. In a moving finish to the film, Miles agrees to admit that the ghost of Quint exists, but the stress and violence of this forced admission, makes him collapse and die. Miss Giddens is left to wonder if she has really saved him at all.

After viewing

Questions

What did you think of the film – what aspects of it did you like / dislike?

Did you find it believable?

Did you find it shocking or frightening?

How did the director create mood and atmosphere – were there particular moments you found particularly evocative or memorable?

How would you describe the film's two central characters. Flora and Miles?

What is your judgement of the Governess, Ms Giddens? Is she a comfort or terror to the children?

Finally, what kind of story is this? Is it like any other story you've heard, read or seen before?

Setting

Setting is extremely important to a story. Fairy tales may begin with 'Once Upon a Time...' taking their story out of history to a 'land far away' in the realm of fantasy or an ideal world. Historical stories on the other hand allow us into the past – where people behaved differently, where dress and customs as well as the structure of society, was quite different from our own. Conversely, futuristic stories allow us to imagine the way our world might become.

Think of the importance of setting to these films:



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'Harry Potter', 'Lord of the Rings', 'Braveheart', 'Titanic', 'Minority Report', 'Star Wars'.

Name other films or books where an appreciation of the setting is important to understanding the story and its characters.

'The Innocents' was made over 40 years ago, by the English director Jack Clayton. But what about its setting? Is it set in the early 1960's? When does the film take place? In order to answer this question make a list of clues which might help e.g. transport, clothes, customs, relationships.

Would the film change in its mood and atmosphere if it was set in the present? Would it be as effective?

Setting not only refers to time of course – it also has to do with place. 'The Innocents', with the exception of the short interview in London at the beginning, is entirely set in one location – the house at Bly. Again, how important is this physical setting to the story? What does it evoke? List as many parts of the house at Bly as you can remember and use words to describe the atmosphere in each.

Utilising Cinematic techniques

Along with setting and costume a director uses the techniques of cinema – sound and image – to create atmosphere and condition the responses of the spectator.

Do you remember the film's opening credits? Can you recall how sound and images were used to open the film? What kind of mood was created? What tone was established for the rest of the film?

The act of looking is central to the film – we see many close-ups of characters watching. Why does the director repeat such shots so frequently?

Looking is also drawn attention to in the repeated use of reflections, mirrors, glass and windows. List as many instances of each you can remember. What is the purpose and effect of these to the story?

Can you remember anything distinctive about the way in which lighting is used in the film? What atmosphere is created by the use – or non-use – of light?

Sound is another element of film technique which is effectively used throughout 'The Innocents'. Are there any scenes in particular where you recall the use of sound or music.

Making sense of the story

Now that we've examined the use of setting and technique in creating atmosphere in 'The Innocents' we can approach the story. Before we discuss the characters it might be interesting to ask: What is it about? See if everyone in your class agrees a response to this simple question.

On one level, the answer is also simple – a new governess comes to rescue two children who have been possessed by evil spirits in the absence of loving parents and an indifferent uncle. In the end she succeeds in ridding Bly of their corrupting presence but at a terrible cost.

Questions

Do you understand the story as being simple or complex?

How is the story told – objectively or from the point of view of a particular character?

Does this have an effect on its structure, on the way it unfolds?

Characterisation The Uncle

The Uncle's voice is the first we hear in the film – although we see the face of Ms Giddens. Although he is present for very little of the film, he introduces the film's central theme in these opening words: 'Do you have an imagination?' he asks, 'truth is very rarely understood by anyone except those with imagination'.

Questions

What kind of man is he?

What are the demands he makes of Miss Giddens?

What is his importance to the story?

What does he mean by his opening words?

Mrs Grose

Mrs Grose has been at the house for many years – she is representative and defender of continuity and the past. She is a typical housekeeper – kind, gentle and maternal. But she also knows about the things that went on at Bly before Miss Giddens arrived – things which won't go away, although she wishes they would.

Questions

What kind of person would you describe Mrs Grose as?

What does she keep repeating to the children and Miss Giddens? Why?

Why does she eventually break down and tell Miss Giddens about what went before?

Does her attitude to Miss Giddens change over the course of the film?

Quint

Amazingly, the central 'presence' of the film – the character who dominates so much of the discussion and action does not have a single line of dialogue. Quint is the 'monster' of this story but a strangely remote one.

Questions

Is he more or less effective because he doesn't speak?

How does the director convey his personality in the absence of dialogue?

We only learn about Quint from others. What effect does this have on our understanding of him?

What is the nature of his evil?

Miss Giddens

Miss Giddens begins the story as a kind of Mary Poppins character – a young and proper English governess who loves the children in her care and who is delighted to get her first job.

Questions

Has she changed by the end of the film? In what way?

Trace the change in her character through significant moments in the film.

What is her relationship with Mrs Grose? Does it change over the course of the story?

How does she begin to suspect that the children may not be quite what they seem?

The most problematic issue in the film is how trustworthy Miss Giddens is. Are the visions her own or are they 'real' ?



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Do you trust Miss Giddens? Do you think she is right in her analysis of what is going on at Bly?

Could she be wrong? What arguments could be made against her version of events. Could it be argued that she is simply imagining things?

Miles and Flora

Crucial to the difficulty we have in judging the reliability of Miss Giddens is the way in which the children are presented – angelic but with a shade of doubt as to their innocence. Do you agree? Can you recall moments in the film which left you confused about their innocence?

Questions

Flora is the first child we meet – playing by the lake. She is associated with water throughout the film. Why? What is the significance of the music box and the tune associated with it?

How would you describe her? Do you believe, as Miss Giddens does, that she is under the influence of the dead governess? Why?

How would you describe Miles? How does he differ from Flora?

Describe his relationship with Miss Giddens?

How does she react to him?

Do you feel sorry for him or do you feel that he is, in Miss Giddens words, possessed?

Do you think his death breaks the spell at Bly?

Miles' Poem

“What shall I sing to my lord from my window?
What shall I sing, for my lord will not stay?
What shall I sing, for my lord will not listen?
Where shall I go, for my lord is away?
Who shall I love when the moon is arisen?
Gone is my lord, and the grave is his prison.
What shall I say when my lord comes a calling?
What shall I say when he knocks on my door?
What shall I say when his feet enter softly, leaving the
marks of his grave on my floor?
Enter my lord, come from your prison.
Come from your grave, for the moon has arisen!”

Miles recites this poem as a piece of ‘entertainment’ for the governess and Mrs Grosse. But it is hardly a typical recitation for a small boy.

Questions

Describe its tone. What kind of language and images are used in the evocation of mood and atmosphere? How would you describe the narrator of this poem? What is its significance in the overall structure of the film? Do you think it was composed by Miles or learned?

Last Word

At the film’s beginning we hear in voice over the voice of the governess say, ‘all I want is to save the children not destroy them... more than anything I love children.’ The film’s climax – after the intense interrogation in the greenhouse – sees Miss Giddens force Miles to name Peter Quint. No sooner has he, but he dies. The question is, has she saved them or destroyed them?

Critics Comments...

“There are few moments in cinema as primally scary as Peter Wyngarde’s gliding ghoul appearing at the windows, or the wretched dead governess, sobbing at a school desk, a single, very real tear appearing on the woodwork.”
The Guardian – Friday, October 19th, 2001.

“... an alluring yet distant film, easily the movies’ most ghostly ghost story.” *Movieline.*

“Elaborate re-vamping of Henry James’ ‘Turn of the Screw’, the ghosts being now (possibly) the figments of a frustrated woman’s imagination. The fissions would have worked better on a normal-shaped screen, but the decor and general handling are exceptional.” *Halliwell’s Film Guide.*