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ENG 355: Ghost Stories

Dr. Sullivan

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The Not So Innocent

The Innocents, Jack Clayton's cinematic adaptation of Henry James' story *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the most haunting films in history. Its delicate handling and direction by Clayton were very effective and important; it gave the film the extra depth, the extra eeriness that kept audiences engaged and frightened throughout the whole experience. The very specific and deliberate camera shots kept the audience focused on what was happening, everything taking place in the center of the screen. But the question that haunts audiences long after the film's conclusion is was Miss Giddens right about the possession of the children or was she simply experiencing her own mental breakdown? The film can be read either way, but the most compelling evidence leads me to believe that Miss Giddens was crazy the whole time, perhaps schizophrenic even.

Right from the start, Miss Giddens, played by Deborah Kerr, is portrayed as a wide-eyed young girl who hasn't yet been married and is seeking a "good" job, a job that will gain approval from her pastor father, and who is also completely enamored and infatuated with her employer and the uncle of the children, played by Michael Redgrave in his only scene in the whole film. Her character is naïve, knows little of life as she is hardly an adult herself. But from her first encounter with the maid, Mrs. Grose, it is clear that she is in over her head. She has no idea what to make of Flora's off the wall comment of, "Oh, look, it's a lovely spider and it's eating a butterfly!" with a

horrendously creepy smile plastered upon her face, but tries to ignore them nonetheless. She has led a very sheltered life as the daughter of a pastor and has been sexually repressed as such as well. This makes her infatuation with her employer more understandable; he may very well be her first interaction with an older, suave and attractive gentleman. She was also rather nervous and a bit hesitant to take the position, as part of her instructions were never to contact the uncle with any problems, leaving her feeling isolated and helpless, thrust into motherhood without any help.

As the film progresses, Flora hums a creepy tune, and something about that tune triggers Miss Giddens to “see” some sort of apparition. The audience must keep in mind, however, that Miss Giddens does not see these apparitions until after she has heard the stories of the deaths of both the gamekeeper and the previous governess. Only once she learns that the old governess died does she see her “ghost” across the lake. And only once she discovers an old photo of the gamekeeper is she plagued by his “ghost,” in a terrifyingly spooky shot of his figure appearing through the glass doors to the terrace. Even in the instances when she sees these “ghosts” while the children are present, she remains the only one who sees them. Flora vehemently denies ever seeing the old governess, as does Miles with the gamekeeper. And later in the film, when Miss Giddens is walking through the mansion late at night, she seems to be the only one plagued by the increasing sexualized chatter and noises as she wanders the halls. This in itself mimics the breakdown of a schizophrenic: hearing sounds, feeling overwhelmed and helpless in a situation nobody else perceives, extreme fear. And Clayton never tries to explain it; Miss Giddens never addresses it to Mrs. Grose or the children, perhaps because she knows she was the only one who experienced it.

At the climax of the film, when Miss Giddens confronts poor Miles, screaming at him to admit that he's possessed, the audience sees Miss Giddens' real breakdown. She gets physical, grabbing and shaking Miles, and once again, the apparition of the gamekeeper appears, but Miles denies being able to see him, shouting, "Where? Where is he?" when Miss Giddens cries out, "He's here!" It even goes so far as to imply that Miles wants to see him, but is incapable of doing so, which supports the assertion that Miss Giddens is, in fact, crazy and experiencing a schizophrenic break. It is just extremely unfortunate that this breakdown causes poor Miles to have some sort of heart attack and die, right there in the garden. What the film does not explore is Flora's reaction to the death of her brother, an unbelievably tragic loss for her at this point in the film.

Let us not ignore, however, how odd the children seem to be. Their behavior is overly proper and they always seem to have eerie smiles on their faces, constantly whispering to each other. And Miles' creepy recitation of a poem that seems to conjure the dead mustn't be overlooked, either. There is definitely something not quite right about them. Although, I wouldn't go so far as to say they are possessed by the dead residents, and coincidentally lovers, of the mansion Bly, I do assert that they are two young children who have nobody left in the world aside from each other because they lost their parents as well as their mentors, the gamekeeper and previous governess. They have experienced far more trauma in their short lives than most young children ever experience and are trying to cope in some way with those great losses. We must consider, also, that the audience sees only through the lens of Miss Giddens, a less than reliable narrator. Mrs. Grose never thought anything wrong with the children until Miss

Giddens arrived, planting her crazy ideas in Mrs. Grose's head and drawing inconclusive connections between the children and the "ghosts" of Bly. And while the uncomfortable kiss scene between Miles and Miss Giddens may seem Freudian to some, if we keep in mind the unreliable narrator, it may simply have been a cry for maternal affection from a young eight-year-old boy.

There is no doubt that *The Innocents* as a film is frighteningly haunting; it resonates with the audience for a long time after viewing. John Clayton did a fantastic job at creating this world where isolation creates fear and causes a breakdown, yet also leaves room for the notion that perhaps these children are possessed by these "ghosts" of Bly. Leaving the film as open-ended as Henry James did in his story makes it much scarier than if Clayton had taken a position on the story himself and filmed it through that lens. Regardless of how the film is read, *The Innocents* leaves audiences haunted for a long time and reconsidering whether they want to employ a nanny to care for their children.