



A CLASS OF HIS OWN: THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON

The Innocents

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

‘This perfectly independent and irresponsible little fiction,’ Henry James wrote in his preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, ‘this so full-blown flower of high fantasy.’ The adjectives are slightly – very slightly – self-deprecatory; James was fully aware of how enormously ingenious he had been with *The Turn of the Screw*, but he didn’t perhaps want it to be too solemnly regarded. And it’s this sense of cleverness, of a sleight-of-hand exercise performed, like all the best conjuring tricks, with the minimum of apparatus and that out in the open, which adds to the impact of this ghost story.

The reader is so involved, the writer so dispassionately engaged in giving the screw another decisive twist. Argue that James wasn’t fully aware of what he was doing, that this is the Freudian ghost story written before its time and that the governess is terrifying the children by giving reign to her own repressions, and the plot details pull one back. Essentially this is a broad daylight ghost story, with the spectres appearing across sunlightlakes, on battlements, outside drawing-room windows on quiet Sunday afternoons.

It is not only James’s rejection of supernatural machinery, and his decision that his ghosts should be all suggestion and no action, that makes this novel so difficult to film. Should it be done with all the emotional stops out, with the devoted governess struggling to save the souls of her threatened charges? Or as a firmer clash of wills, in which the children have moved far from innocence and the governess must fight them as much as Peter Quint and Miss Jessel? Or should it assume that the governess is less than blameless and that everyone except the placid Mrs Grose is engaged in the same dangerous game? It’s to the credit of Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents* that it turns down the first, and easiest, alternative in favour of the second, with some excusable hints of the third.

But the difficulty remains: James gives us a narrator who is not a detached observer but a participant; and he leaves her, as critics such as H.G. Wells pointed out to him, under-characterised. Her ‘relation to her own nature,’ he said, was too much to go into within his framework. Put the governess (whom the film calls Miss Giddens) on the screen, however, and one needs more. Deborah Kerr plays her with a good deal of sensibility, within the limits imposed, but all that ‘relation to her own nature’ cannot be ignored. She is our main witness, and how far can we trust her? Once the story is detached from James’s artful context – a narrative within a narrative – the character is over-exposed.

These are the problems the script, by John Mortimer and William Archibald (adaptation) and Truman Capote (shooting script) intelligently faces. It is full of hints which anyone familiar with the novel will pick up, and anyone coming fresh to the film can easily disregard. The only real departure comes when Mrs Grose (Megs Jenkins), before leaving with Flora for London, rounds on Miss Giddens with her own desperate accusation. But Mrs Grose has earlier been given a wonderful line – ‘rooms used by broad daylight as though they

were dark woods' – which catches the whole shuddering curiosity of their conversations about Quint and Miss Jessel. And her final fears prepare the ground for the climax, when Quint and Miss Giddens fight it out, in the centre of a ring of statues, for Miles's soul.

This last scene – in which Quint's clutching hand echoes the twisting hands of Miss Giddens which accompany the credits – is managed with full bravura effect: thunderous, lightning-lit, with desperate laughter from Quint. Generally, Clayton brings rather a lot of weather to the business of the ghosts' appearances – sheets of rain, flapping curtains, thunder-claps mean less than the first, quiet glimpse of Quint, looking over the parapet with clouds of dark behind him. He smiles from outside the window, the black figure of Miss Jessel seen from across the lake or sobbing at the schoolroom table, the long shot from, high up, of Flora solemnly dancing in the little pavilion by the water, find the film at its most effective. But restraint falters in a sequence which begins with Deborah Kerr, clutching her candle, wandering along the night corridors, hearing her enemies whispering and laughing behind every door, and ends with a worked-up flurry of wild yells and whirling images.

The key to any ghost story is knowing when to stop, when to suggest without statement. *The Innocents* puts back some of the machinery James so carefully did without: the attic with the musical box, the creaking doors and cobwebbed stairs, the slow build-up, so that the audience knows a supernatural encounter is on its way. And this fits in with the whole visual style of the film, which is one of elegant deliberation. Clayton doesn't, he has said, greatly like CinemaScope. With his cameraman Freddie Francis, he sometimes uses a curtain or window bar to cut off the sides of the screen. But much of the time he relies on duologues shot in longish takes, one character in close-up, another hovering behind, the two manoeuvring during the scene and the camera following as they change position. The technique is poised, exact; though one may find oneself half a jump ahead, expecting a move before it happens.

The Innocents has ideas to play with: the house filled with flowers, so that a swirl of a crinoline sends the rose petals flying; the shifts in attitudes to the children (Martin Stephens and Pamela Franklin), so that their happiness in playing together gradually becomes a sinister opportunity for secret consultation; the juxtaposition of charm and corruption. A bush conceals a decaying statue, with a beetle dribbling from its mouth; and Miss Giddens, expecting to find Quint on the turret-top, encounters only Miles, fondling his white pigeons. On the sound track, a bluebottle buzzes, a slate-pencil squeaks; noises to play on the nerves. Yet, ingenious and apt as these devices are, effects which should be deft and easy too often come across as over-calculated. One is aware of effort as well as intelligence behind the film; and it's the cold daylight intensity of *The Turn of the Screw* that finally eludes this graceful, studied adaptation.

Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1961/62

THE INNOCENTS

Director: Jack Clayton
©/Production Company:
Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Executive Producer: Albert Fennell
Producer: Jack Clayton
Production Manager: James Ware
Unit Manager: Claude Watson
Assistant Director: Michael Birkett
Continuity: Pamela Mann
Script Editor: Jeanie Sims
Screenplay: William Archibald, Truman Capote
Additional Scenes/Dialogue: John Mortimer
Based on the story 'The Turn of the Screw' by: Henry James
Director of Photography: Freddie Francis
Camera Operator: Ronnie Taylor
Camera Grip: Ray Jones
Supervising Floor Electrician: Maurice Gillett
Editor: James Clark
Assistant Editor: Mary Kessel
Art Director: Wilfrid Shingleton
Set Dresser: Peter James
Costume Designer: Motley
Make-up: Harold Fletcher
Hairdresser: Gordon Bond
Music: Georges Auric
Lyrics of 'O Willow Waly': Paul Dehn
Conductor: Lambert Williamson
Sound Recording: A.G. Ambler, John Cox
Boom Operator: Ken Ritchie
Dubbing Editor: Peter Musgrave

uncredited
Production Company: Achilles Film Productions Ltd.
Production Accountant: Charles Wilder
Assistant Accountant/Cashier: Bob Blues

Secretary to Mr Clayton: Ann Travis
Production Secretary: Joan Williams
2nd Assistant Director: Claude Watson
3rd Assistant Director: Ken Softley
Focus Pullers: Ronnie Maasz, Bernard Ford
Clapper Loader: Simon Ransley
Stills: Ted Reed
2nd Assistant Editor: Pamela Gardner
Assistant Art Director: Martin Atkinson
Draughtsmen: Tony Woollard, James Sawyer, Anthony Pratt
Scenic Artist: Alan Evans
Production Buyer: Marjory Whittington
Construction Manager: Gus Walker
Dress Designer: Sophie Devine
Wardrobe Mistress: Brenda Gardner
Wardrobe Assistant: Lily Lynch
Publicity: Paul Grocott
Publicity Secretary: Jean Barnett

Cast

Deborah Kerr (*Miss Giddens*)
Peter Wyngarde (*Peter Quint*)
Megs Jenkins (*Mrs Grose*)
Michael Redgrave (*the uncle*)
Martin Stephens (*Miles*)
Pamela Franklin (*Flora*)
Clytie Jessop (*Miss Jessel*)
Isla Cameron (*Anna*)

uncredited

Eric Woodburn (*coachman*)

USA/UK 1961©

100 mins

A CLASS OF HIS OWN: THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON

Room at the Top

Thu 2 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting); Sat 18 Dec 14:10; Wed 22 Dec 18:10; Wed 29 Dec 14:30

The Innocents

Sat 4 Dec 20:40; Thu 9 Dec 20:45; Mon 13 Dec 18:10; Thu 23 Dec 14:20; Mon 27 Dec 15:20; Thu 30 Dec 14:30

Our Mother's House

Tue 7 Dec 20:40 (+ intro); Mon 20 Dec 18:15

The Passions of Jack Clayton

Wed 8 Dec 18:10

The Pumpkin Eater

Wed 8 Dec 20:40; Sat 18 Dec 12:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by critic Lucy Scholes); Tue 28 Dec 12:15; Thu 30 Dec 18:10

The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne

Fri 10 Dec 20:30; Tue 21 Dec 14:20; Wed 29 Dec 17:50

The Great Gatsby

Sat 11 Dec 20:20; Mon 27 Dec 12:45

Something Wicked This Way Comes

Sun 12 Dec 18:30; Tue 21 Dec 20:40

Memento Mori + The Bespoke Overcoat

Sun 19 Dec 18:00

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