The Notion of Innocence in Henry James's The Turn of the Screw and its Film Adaptations

Stambolija, Lucija

UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Department of English Language and Literature

Lucija Stambolija

THE NOTION OF INNOCENCE IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW* AND ITS FILM ADAPTATIONS

Submitted in partial fulfilments of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

SUPERVISOR:

Dr Antonija Primorac, Assoc. Prof.

September 2020

ABSTRACT

This thesis will analyse the portrayal of innocence in Henry James's 1898 Gothic novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, and its two film adaptations: *The Innocents* (1961), directed by Jack Clayton, and *The Turn of the Screw* (2009), directed by Tim Fywell. The aim of the thesis is to examine the concept of innocence in its broader late Victorian context and its uses in late Victorian Gothic literature, and to compare it to its uses in contemporary film adaptations. The analysis will be carried out through the close reading of the novella, with particular focus on the interconnection between innocence, sexuality and evil. This will be followed by an examination of the two aforementioned film adaptations of James's ghost story, where special attention will be paid to the ways in which the films approach and tackle the themes of innocence and moral corruption.

KEY WORDS: innocence, sexuality, evil, *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James, film adaptation, Victorian conscience

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

1. INTRODUCTION

Since it was first published in 1898, Henry James's novella, *The Turn of The Screw*, has been generating heated discussions among its readers, greatly due to James's writing style, which is characterised by intentional ambiguity. In the form of a framed story written in the first person, the novella recounts the tale of an innocent young woman who becomes a governess to two young orphans, Miles and Flora, at a remote estate called Bly, where she begins experiencing unusual disturbances caused by two ghost-like figures that are identified as Miss Jessel, the former governess, and Peter Quint, the master's valet and quite an infamous character. Given the history of the relationship between the two apparitions, the governess begins to believe that the ghosts are trying to possess the children in order to "keep up the work of demons" (James, 2011:83). The main dilemma that occurs during or after reading the novella is whether what the governess is presenting to the reader is a blood-curdling reality or a fictional product of her own disturbed mind.

While many critics, such as Dennis Chase (1986), employ a Freudian approach to their reading of the novella, arguing that the ghosts are no more than a series of the governess's hallucinations caused by sexual repression, others claim that "the Freudians misread the internal evidence almost as valiantly as they do the external" and that "the determining unambiguous passages from which the critic might work are so plentiful that it seems hardly good critical strategy to use the ambiguous ones as points of departure, to treat them as if they were unambiguous" (Heilman, 1947:436). Regardless of the approach the reader takes, however, there is no denying that, within the story, the ghosts are very real to the governess and represent a major threat to the pure, innocent nature of the children. It is this notion of innocence that she is so focused on and that she so obsessively attempts to preserve, to the extent of assigning to

herself the role of the saviour of the children's souls, which she also confesses to Miles at one point: "I just want you to help me to save you!" (James, 2011:111)

The main subject of this thesis, therefore, will be the concept of innocence in the novella and its connection to sexuality and moral corruption, since it is precisely the perceived danger of innocence being corrupted that essentially drives the plot. This thesis will argue that the governess's rigid religious upbringing is almost explicitly why the governess associates innocence with inexperience and ignorance, and feels that she should be the protector and the saviour of the children's innocent souls. It will also be argued that truth, representing knowledge and experience, is seen by the governess as a potential way of straying further from the path of God, which is why her attempt to preserve innocence – both hers and the children's – involves willingly facing away from the truth. The perception of knowledge and self-awareness as a threat to one's innocent nature is here reminiscent of the Biblical story from the Book of Genesis, in which Adam and Eve stray from God by eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, going suddenly from innocent and unembarrassed by their naked bodies to disobedient and ashamed, which causes not only their own fall, but the fall of man.

Keeping with the metaphor of *the fall*, this thesis will first provide a brief overview of the societal views on the concept of innocence and sexuality in the Victorian era, followed by an examination of the portrayal of innocence in Henry James's novella and its two film adaptations, *The Innocents* (1961) and *The Turn of the Screw* (2009).

2. ON INNOCENCE

The term innocence has a number of definitions, such as: “freedom from legal guilt of a particular crime or offense”; as “freedom from guilt or sin through being unacquainted with evil”; as “lack of knowledge: IGNORANCE”; as “freedom from guile or cunning: SIMPLICITY”; and as “the lack of worldly experience or sophistication; CHASTITY”. (Merriem-Webster Dictionary Online:n.p.)

Many of its meanings were used and elaborated on in Gothic literature, especially in Victorian Gothic fiction, which was marked by an “obsession with protecting innocence from exposure to depravity” (Mogen, 1976:232). The focus was mainly on childhood innocence.

The period prior to the mid-eighteenth century was marked by a “widespread notion that childhood was a perilous period”, due to the “Puritan belief that humans are born sinful as a consequence of mankind’s ‘Fall’” (Reynolds, 2014). However, the perception of childhood changed significantly in the mid-eighteenth century, thanks in part to the work of the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, who introduced the vision of children being “innately innocent, only becoming corrupted through experience of the world” (Reynolds, 2014:n.p.). Thanks to poets such as William Blake and William Wordsworth, “childhood came to be seen as especially close to God and a force for good” (Reynolds, 2014:n.p.).

The Victorian era was most known for its rigid set of social conventions, accentuated morality, politeness and restraint in expressing oneself verbally or otherwise. It is important to note that this tradition affected women and children more than men. In such a society, the possibility of a child’s (and, by extension, of a woman’s) purity and innocence being contaminated and eventually destroyed was seen as dreadful, as shown in James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw*. Mogen (1976:234) argues that “the source of villainy in the tale […] is embodied in the mythology of ‘innocence’ itself, the elaborate cultural construct of politeness

and euphemisms which protects those designated as pure – women and children – from what is designated as profane." This Victorian vision of women and children as being and, more importantly, as *having to be kept* untainted by worldly experiences – such as sex or sexual desire – gave way to tabooing such topics, even though they were (and still are) a normal part of human nature. The knowledge of "the unspeakable" was recognised as moral corruption, and was as such socially condemned. In other words, children's and women's innocence was equated with ignorance and (sexual) inexperience; hence, any case of moral violation over their innocence would have designated children as corrupted and women as fallen.

However, recent studies show that the Victorian era was not all that restrictive as it appears at first. For instance, although the Victorian era is taught primarily by stressing its restrictive, repressive nature, Holly Furneaux (2014:n.p.) reminds us that:

> The Victorian period is a key moment in the history of sexuality; it is the era in which the modern terminologies we use to structure the ways we think and talk about sexuality were invented. From the 1880s sexologists such as Richard von Kraft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis pioneered a science in which sexual preferences were analysed and categorised; they created terms including homosexuality, heterosexuality and nymphomaniac.

Nevertheless, the rigidity and repression of the period remained two of its main features; a recognition mark, which served as a departing point for many Victorian Gothic literary works, alongside with James's controversial ghost story that will be analysed in the following chapter.

3. INNOCENCE IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

The novella *The Turn of the Screw* opens as a typical Victorian ghost story, with a group of people around the fire at Christmas time narrating ghost tales. This, however, is just the framing device, setting the Gothic tone and content. One of the guests decides to read rather than tell a story, and what follows is a first-person account of events that happened a while ago to his sister's governess. From that point on, the plot of *The Turn of the Screw* follows her story of the events that followed after she applied for the position of governess at a remote estate at Bly, where she is supposed to be in charge of two orphaned children, Miles and Flora, whose handsome, yet unreliable uncle simply does not want to deal with them. We learn that she is thrilled by the two angelic children and enjoys her new life until she begins experiencing unusual sensations of supernatural presences in and around the house, which she soon discovers to be Miss Jessel – the former governess – and Peter Quint – the Master's valet and Miss Jessel's lover. Nobody sees the ghosts besides her, but her assumption that the children are in danger of being possessed by the two apparitions, along with her obsessive dedication to their supposedly needed salvation, results in a double tragedy – Flora slips into insanity and Miles dies.

Innocence is at the centre of the plot and takes a number of forms within the novella. The first is the most obvious one, signifying "freedom from legal guilt of a particular crime or offense" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, n.p.) and, by extension, of any other kind of wrongdoing. Although many of the characters often act suspiciously unnatural and uncanny, and little Miles is even expelled from school, there is no proper, valid evidence of any character in the story actually being guilty of inappropriate behaviour, therefore, all of them are innocent (until proven otherwise). Not even the letter from Miles's school may be considered valid evidence because it provides no clear information on what the boy had actually done, and it cannot prove that little Miles was not, for instance, simply framed for something his classmates

did. It may be interesting to note at this point that neither the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, despite their previous history, are actually proven to be evil and malicious because they never really do anything other than allegedly stare at the children and then leave, and even that is no more than a remark made by the governess in the role of an unreliable narrator.

The second form of innocence in the novella is simple benevolence, "freedom from guilt or sin through being unacquainted with evil" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, n.p.). It is embodied by the two children, Miles and Flora, who are described by the governess as having a "positive fragrance of purity" (James, 2011:22), which metaphorically ensnares the governess's senses, preventing her from perceiving them in any other way: "It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence." (James, 2011:22-23). It is the closest to a religious image of benevolence, which explains the angel-related similes that will be discussed later in the text. This type of innocence is based on the premise that all children are innately good and innocent, and are gradually corrupted as they grow up and become more experienced.

The third form of innocence is the "lack of knowledge" and "worldly experience or sophistication" (Merriem-Webster Dictionary Online, n.p.), a category represented primarily by the figure of the family housekeeper, Mrs Grose, who is unsophisticated and uneducated, yet is in charge both of the household and the children because she is so dedicated to her job and faithful to her master. Being a simple working woman and caring only about the safety and well-being of the children and the household, Mrs Grose is presented as an innocent, harmless person who always strives to see only the good side of things or, more precisely, to look away from all the bad ones. Innocence as ignorance may also be associated with the children, as they are most commonly described as innocent due to their simple nature and general lack of familiarity with the cruelty and brutality of the real (adult) world. According to Bontly (1969:728), "they [the children] may be aware of the ghosts' presence but untroubled and

uncorrupted by it – immune, in their very innocence, to fear and guilt" because, unlike the governess, Miles and Flora do not have an "intense vision of sexual evil" (Bontly, 1969:728) that would horrify them in any way. This innate type of innocence is also why children are often unable to recognise danger in certain situations, as noted by Mr Grose upon telling the governess that Flora may not mind Miss Jessel's presence due to her "blessed innocence" (James, 2011:53), which, under the premise that she actually is aware of the ghost, prevents her from understanding the malevolent hidden intentions of the eerie figure. Looking at innocence as ignorance gives way to yet another reading of the quoted phrase – *blessed ignorance* – which supports the fact that both the governess and Mrs Grose tend to avoid facing the truth in order to maintain order and protect innocence.

Ultimately, there is another form of innocence as ignorance appearing in the novella and it relates to the lack of life experience, represented primarily by the governess – a twenty-year-old girl who comes to a big city to apply for a job that requires much more than she perhaps expects or can handle. Already overwhelmed by the new opportunity that has been given to her, the inexperienced religious young woman learns that her new master is a confident, intriguing and handsome man, skilled in the art of seduction, which only increases the intensity of her emotions: "This person proved, on her presenting herself, for judgment, at a house in Harley Street, that impressed her as vast and imposing—this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage" (James, 2011:6). The governess is independently gaining new experiences outside her hometown for the first time in her life, and being in the presence of a successful, charming man is rather exciting. As Dennis Chase (1986:197) points out, she is the daughter of a country clergyman, "suggesting limited informal contact with the opposite sex", which explains why the governess's new unsupervised

surroundings, far from the rigidity of her home, drive her desire to experience and try new things, giving her the sense of liberty she never had before:

> I learned something—at first, certainly—that had not been one of the teachings of my small, smothered life; learned to be amused, and even amusing, and not to think for the morrow. It was the first time, in a manner, that I had known space and air and freedom, all the music of summer and all the mystery of nature. And then there was consideration—and consideration was sweet. Oh, it was a trap—not designed, but deep—to my imagination, to my delicacy, perhaps to my vanity; to whatever, in me, was most excitable. (James, 2011:24)

The excitement does not decrease, as preserving her innocence, that is, her virtuous behaviour, success in her job, and her reputation, in order to impress her employer, becomes extremely important to the governess:

> I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me. I now saw that I had been asked for a service admirable and difficult; and there would be a greatness in letting it be seen—oh, in the right quarter! — that I could succeed where many another girl might have failed. (James, 2011:47)

This may be interpreted as the beginning of her self-assigned mission of a saviour. Raised in a very rigid religious environment, the governess thinks herself uncorrupted in the first place: "An unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred." (James, 2011:27). It makes her see herself worthy enough to assume the role of the pure-hearted heroine and protector of innocence. Once envisioned as a most honourable quest, the governess's heroic mission becomes the main source of her courage and desire to prove herself: "any clouding of their innocence could only be—blameless and foredoomed as they were—a reason the more for taking risks" (James, 2011:64-65).

James's style of writing throughout the novella is purposefully ambiguous, facilitating in many ways the Freudian interpretations of the text. Firstly, the story contains multiple typically Victorian Gothic elements: a virginal maiden who is young, inexperienced and innocent (the governess); a foolish older woman (Mrs Grose, the housekeeper); a predatory male (Peter Quint), and a gloomy setting (a remote house on an estate with no residents other than the all-

women staff and two orphans). Secondly, words that James uses repeatedly throughout the novella and in very specific contexts are highly ambiguous and allusive of sex: *erect* (three times), *intercourse* (five times), *perverse*, *intimately* (three times), etc. There is even an entire scene dedicated to the outrage of seeing little Flora play with two pieces of *wood* – again, a noun that carries multiple meanings, one of which is closely related to the male sex organ – that form a small boat when one piece is put into the hole of the other, which is most likely intended to be an allusion to penetration (Chase, 1986:197-98). According to David Mogen (1976:231), James "strives for an effect of sinister and erotic suggestiveness, a perfect pitch of terror that evokes everything while presenting nothing". All of these seemingly small, but crucial elements affect the way the novella is read. According to Bontly (1969:724), "the reading [of the novella] turns not upon the neurosis of the governess herself but her symbolic role as a representative of the Victorian conscience, with all its sexual self-consciousness and anxieties and repression"; therefore the governess may be seen as an embodiment of Victorian social and religious visions of sexuality in connection to one's innocence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the link between the limited Victorian mind-set and Christianity's restrictive views on gender and sexuality may also be found in expressions such as *the angel in the house* and *the fallen woman*, the former being an exemplary model of female chastity and purity, and the latter "encompassing any women who had, or appeared to have, sexual experience outside of marriage, including adulteresses and prostitutes" (Furneaux, 2014: n.p.). Such social division of women "helped to enshrine a sexual double-standard" (Furneaux, 2014: n.p.), in which women were rebuked for even the slightest deviation from what was considered "correct" feminine behaviour.

A young woman's innocence being threatened by an experienced male figure at the beginning of the governess's story foreshadows the strong connection between innocence and sexuality, which intertwine throughout the novella. Losing the former by means of the latter

seems to be seen by the governess both as an arousing and terrifying thought because, even though she is frightened of innocence being lost, she cannot help but to obsess over the thought of it, showing great excitement when considering the risk. Furthermore, it ought to be noted that intervening and rescuing the children from their spiritual collapse works as fuel to the governess's sense of self-worth:

> I had an absolute certainty that I should see again what I had already seen, but something within me said that by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquillity of my companions. The children, in especial, I should thus fence about and absolutely save. (James, 2011:44)

It is rather unsurprising that the governess immediately starts to imagine herself as a saviour presented with a praiseworthy task of protecting innocent souls from sinful ways, given that, growing up, she was deeply influenced by her own father – a clergyman who most likely spent a great amount of time stressing the dangers of moral corruption and unreligious behaviour, which were and still are rather closely associated with sexuality and "liberal" lifestyles. By default, then, not conforming to religious values becomes an act of voluntary engagement in the so-called "Devil's work", which then leads to the fall of man. This way of looking at the novella, as noted by Bontly (1969:722), comes from "the apparitionist interpretation", which "sees the tale as a moral and religious allegory in which evil is given a force of actuality in actual ghosts, and is explicitly associated with human sexuality." This interpretation differs from, for instance, the Freudian readings of the novella because it does not approach the story exclusively from a psychoanalytical point of view nor does it perceive it in such literal a way that they "[reduce] the psychoanalytical explanation to the simple 'lack of sexual satisfaction'" (Felman, 1977:108), but rather tries to explain the connection between the governess's fear of losing innocence and her personal values.

The loss of innocence is the governess's greatest fear and is strongly associated with evil, especially when it comes to children, who are incessantly compared to beatific images and

divine creatures. The contrast between good and evil is apparent, for instance, in Flora's "beatific image", "angelic beauty" and her being compared to "one of Raphael's holy infants" (James, 2011:12-13), all of which stand in stark contrast to the "pale and ravenous demon" (James, 2011:122-123) that was Miss Jessel or the "white face of damnation" (James, 2011:146) that was Peter Quint. While it is rather clear that the governess's idea of the greatest danger to one's innocence is directly related to sexuality, it is not the ghosts who create the gloomy atmosphere that the governess so fears. As Bontly (1969:727) points out, it is, in fact, the governess "who instinctively identifies sex with the powers of darkness and evil, and who conjures up the murky atmosphere of sexual perversity which infests Bly. The ghosts themselves remain, as it were, asexual." The ghosts are, indeed, represented by the governess throughout the novella as the ultimate form of foul human nature: "Another person—this time; but a figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil […] the woman's a horror of horrors" (James, 2011:52-53). However, when it comes to actual danger manifesting in the story, the reader cannot affirm that such danger actually exists, as the ghosts never really do anything other than allegedly observe the children from a distance. It is precisely at this point that the reader begins to question the credibility of their seemingly innocent narrator.

There are several indications of the governess being quite fond of younger boys, not only in the case of Miles, but also in the case of Douglas, who is ten years younger than the governess yet hints to the reader that he, having spent quite some time with her, had reason to believe that she liked him as much as he liked her (James, 2011:3-4). Furthermore, James cleverly inserts a relatively brief conversation between the governess and Mrs Grose in which the two discuss a male potentially corrupting the governess: "'Are you afraid he'll corrupt *you*?' She put the question with such a fine bold humour…" (James, 2011:19). Left unanswered, this statement creates confusion as to who the conversation actually refers to – the uncle or little Miles, since both are addressed as "masters" in the story. All of the remarks made above suggest that the

governess may not be the person she presents herself to be, and that this sense of evil presence may not be coming from the ghosts, as it may have seemed at first, but from the governess herself, that is, from her own moral judgement, which is based on values implanted deeply in her conscience by her upbringing, and are now brought to surface by her new life and the freedom that comes with it.

Having established the complexity of the inner battle that the governess is faced with, we can continue discussing the relationship between her religious views and her self-imposed heroic role of the saviour of innocent souls. The way that she approaches the battle against the potential malicious influence of the two ghosts is rather interesting, as she constantly attempts to avoid explicitly mentioning or talking about the matter in front of the children. The governess tends to deny all possibilities of the children being anything other than pure and innocent:

> To gaze into the depths of blue of the child's eyes and pronounce their loveliness a trick of premature cunning was to be guilty of a cynicism in preference to which I naturally preferred to abjure my judgment and, so far as might be, my agitation. […] with their voices in the air, their pressure on one's heart, and their fragrant faces against one's cheek, everything fell to the ground but their incapacity and their beauty. (James, 2011:58)

She does so despite the fact that, for instance, little Miles was expelled from school, which is a matter the discussion of which is delayed as long as possible. It seems as if the governess believes that not speaking of bad things will prevent them from happening. The voluntary act of denying or looking away from the truth requires from the governess a certain determination to convince herself of the children's innocence under all costs, which she unquestionably does: "My conclusion bloomed there with the real rose flush of his innocence: he was only too fine and fair for the little horrid, unclean school-world" (James, 2011:32). Any moment of doubt is immediately discarded, as well, often in a sequence of self-comforting thoughts: "He was quiet; he might be innocent; the risk was hideous; I turned away." (James, 2011:75). In chapter 22 the governess even admits that she willingly turns away from the truth: "My equilibrium depended

on my rigid will, the will to shut my eyes as tightly as possible to the truth that what I had to deal was revoltingly against nature" (James, 2011:138). Weisbuch (2006:106) comments upon this very same quote by claiming that "whatever one feels, the language of blindness supplants that of vision to measure the governess's self-incriminating complicity with evil". Not voicing the unspeakable, however, may be interpreted as merely a way in which the governess copes with the truth that she struggles to accept. In other words, the deceitful self-comfort may be understood as something that she does for herself, not for the children, because it helps her deal with the issue, especially in moments of self-doubt:

> I seemed to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure, and within a minute there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent […] for if he were innocent, what then on earth was I? (James, 2011:149-150)

Keeping Miles and Flora in the dark by not telling them anything either about Miles's expulsion or about the potential presence and danger of the two ghosts, however, is a whole other issue because it is seen by the governess as a way of protecting the children. As noted by Bontly (1969:726), the governess "has equated innocence with ignorance and knowledge with corruption", which is rather reminiscent of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Eating from the tree meant acquiring knowledge, becoming self-aware, which is how Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness. This knowledge was not intended to be acquired by man, as man would then get to know shame, pain, evil and other negative constructs:

> But God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:3-5)

Adam and Eve's disobedience resulted in the loss of their innocence, which then led to their banishment from the Garden of Eden. The analogy between the two stories is found primarily in the fact that knowledge is presented as something forbidden and fatal for one's innocence

and purity, therefore, it ought to be kept out of reach. What the governess fails to realise, however, is the fact that – other than going completely against her duty as a teacher – shielding the children from knowledge will not shield them from harm, as one cannot fight what one is not aware of, which explains why both children meet a tragic destiny in the end – Flora practically losing her mind from the shock of being attacked by the governess for not seeing something only the governess sees, and Miles literally dying.

According to Mogen (1976:232), "it is the Victorian notion that 'virtue saves' which is being subjected to ironic scrutiny" in the novella. Indeed, ironically, the very thing that eventually harms the children turns out to be the governess herself – a symbol of virtuousness and "proper" behaviour. Mogen (1976:232) explains that "the revelation that the forms they [the governess and those similar to her] live by are essentially hypocritical brings about the collapse of a system of repression and sentimental evasions that has maintained their 'innocence'". Losing the foundations that one's character is built upon brings about the feeling of losing control, which then leads to seeking control in any other possible aspect of one's life. The governess, for instance, realises at a certain point that her limited upbringing does not coincide with the unlimited reality of the adult world, filled with temptation, misbehaviour and broken values. Losing the threads of her own life, the governess seems to hold on to the only thread left – the children and their supposedly needed salvation. She becomes rather obsessive about it, relishing the thrill that the mission of a saviour would give her:

> The inspiration—I can call it by no other name—was that I felt how voluntarily, how transcendently, I *might*. It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul, and when I had fairly so appraised it I saw how the human soul—held out, in the tremor of my hands, at arm's length—had a perfect dew of sweat on a lovely childish forehead. (James, 2011:146-147, original emphasis)

This goes on to the point where she becomes the evil she believes the children are to be possessed by. To extend the allegory connected to the Garden of Eden, one may say that the governess is the snake in the Victorian gardens of Bly, who ends up harming the children more

than any of the supposed demonic figures in the story. Hence, her attitude toward the children becomes increasingly pathologically possessive: "'What does he matter now, my own?—what will he ever matter? I have you,' I launched at the beast, 'but he has lost you forever!'" (James 2011:152)

Interestingly enough, somewhere along her obsessive, yet unsuccessful, attempt to protect the children from the truth, the governess actually finds a way to protect (at least superficially) her own innocence by denying an entirely different truth – that of what actually happened at Bly. She lives to tell a story of how she was the heroic figure who put her heart and soul into battling evil, but simply failed to do so. As we find out from Douglas in the Prologue, she continues to work as a governess even after the traumatic events at Bly, which implies that she does not really consider herself responsible for destroying two innocent lives and feels quite capable of performing her duties as a governess even after the tragedy. It is the knowledge of her unsettling indifference to the past events that really strips the governess's character of her innocence and purity, urging the reader to question not only her credibility, but also her intentions, values, and moral agency. This lack of self-awareness, which only becomes clear to the reader at the end of the novella, although it has been subtly pointed out from the very beginning, significantly amplifies the effect of horror.

3.1) *The Innocents* (1961)

Directed and produced by Jack Clayton in 1961, and starring prominent actors of the day, Deborah Kerr and Michael Redgrave, *The Innocents* immediately attracted public attention, becoming a subject of debate and generating a series of analytical and critical works in various fields, especially in psychology and film theory. This psychological horror is a kind of a transmedia adaptation because it is, in itself, based on William Archibald's play that adapted James's novella for the stage. Archibald's original material, advocating the position that the supernatural events in the story are, in fact, legitimate, was reworked into the screenplay by the well-known American novelist, Truman Capote, who managed to restore James's ambiguity that would divide the audience once more. Innocence is unquestionably at the centre of the film. The director even kept the young actors innocent, never giving them the whole script until they were of age (Frayling, 2006 – 15:41) because he wanted their performance to be unaffected by the knowledge of the darker themes that the film tackles.

The title itself is rather suggestive, since all the individuals in the story are, indeed, innocent (Frayling, 2006 - 04:03). It redirects the focus toward the fact that no character has really done any wrong, especially not consciously. As it has been already noted, not even the ghosts may be described as dangerous because their only wrong deed is their presence; they are merely observers, never agents of action. Although Miles admits at the end of the film that he had, indeed, said things that had upset the masters of his school, we never find out either what or to whom he had said them. If Miles had merely said something to "those [he] liked" (James, 2011:149) – as he did in the novella – we may assume that the information was passed on and possibly modified by others before it reached the masters, therefore we do not have enough evidence to proclaim Miles guilty.

The film follows rather faithfully the original plot of the novella, although it features some significant differences that will be discussed further in the text. It starts with a monochrome screen featuring Deborah Kerr as the governess, kneeling and praying, while softly sobbing and nervously clutching her hands, which suggests that she is a religious woman whose beliefs might possibly play an important role in the film. Furthermore, the first line we hear in the film is: "All I want to do is save the children, not destroy them", which immediately sets the tone of the film. The sound of birds chirping suggests that she is located outside, which helps us understand at the end of the movie that the opening scene was, in fact, the final scene, giving the film a certain flashback structure that the novella has.

From the expositional point of view, Clayton's adaptation cleverly follows the emotional and psychological side of the narrative, putting emphasis on facial expressions – especially the governess's (here called Miss Giddens) – and subtle movements, which work both to intensify the emotions the film should provoke and to undermine the credibility of the characters. For instance, the lengthy opening scene, featuring a seemingly ordinary job interview between Miss Giddens and the uncle, is deliberately set to plant the seeds of doubt into the audience's mind, making them question the soundness of Miss Giddens's mind and the intentions she has. Although she seems no more than a nervous job candidate, she consciously plays into the uncle's hands and handles the conversation almost too easily, hinting that her innocence is not as unyielding as it may have seemed. The long shots that Clayton opts for focus mainly on Miss Giddens's steady, continuous eye line toward the uncle and draw our attention in the moments in which the eye line suddenly breaks, such as the point when she shyly turns her look away and maintains – although for no more than a second – an insatiable look on her face that shows she is not only aware of her employer's close presence and seductive tone, but also gladly allows it. In such long shots, one may assume that the cuts were carefully chosen in order to draw the audience's attention to what is happening on screen beside the seemingly ordinary dialogue

between the characters, especially because verbal communication points to one interpretation and the visuals at another.

Clayton's adaptation is rather mood-oriented, complementing the themes that the film tackles:

> Through the use of shadows, oblique camera angles, and an atmospheric soundtrack, Jack Clayton captured not only the horror of James's story, but also its deeper sadness – the children's isolation from the real world, the governess's problematic sexuality, and the curiously pitiful nature of the former governess, Miss Jessel. (Slide, 1985:103)

Brightness symbolizes innocence and purity, which is why Flora is always dressed in bright dresses, as is Miss Giddens at the beginning of the film. Toward the end, however, she dresses more and more in black, very much in accordance with her state of mind. Unsettling scenes are always darker, dimmed or blurred, which suggests that evil is not to be explicitly demonstrated. It is almost as if the audience is being protected from evil just like the Miles and Flora are. Clayton's recurring use of dissolves, on the other hand, increases significantly the tension in the film, creating an unsettling atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. The gloom and the Gothic atmosphere of the mansion and the estate are a part of Capote's influence, especially the repeating motif of the white rose that loses a petal upon the governess's arrival at the mansion, which represents the external beauty that hides the decadent atmosphere in the house (Frayling, 2006 – 10:40).

The rigid views on sexuality of the period become apparent in the dialogues between Miss Giddens and Mrs Grose, both of whom avoid explicitly mentioning or openly speaking about sex: "rooms – used by daylight as though they were dark woods" (*The Innocents*, 1961 – 00:53:42). Sex seems to be seen by the governess as an act of utter moral corruption, which is why it enters the category of "the unspeakable evil" severely threatening one's innocence. Mogen's (1976:234) remark on "the mythology of 'innocence'" as a "cultural construct of

politeness and euphemisms" assumes its full meaning in Miss Giddens's and Mrs Grose's attempt to protect purity and innocence – both theirs and the children's – by never speaking their minds openly and always holding back. Mrs Grose is even embarrassed by, to use her words, "the secrets" they all have, which is why she tries to talk the governess out of turning to the vicar for help, being afraid that "people might talk" (*The Innocents*, 1961 – 00:55:00). On the other hand, the fact that Miss Giddens sees the vicar as possibly the only one who could help them suggests that she is absolutely sure that what she sees is not only real and dangerous, but also supernatural and beyond her as an ordinary human.

The influence of the governess's father is best visible in one of the final scenes of the film, where Miss Giddens desperately attempts to get a confession out of Miles and justifies her actions by saying that "[her] father taught [her] to love people, and […] help them even if they refuse [her] help, even if it hurts them" (*The Innocents*, 1961 – 1:29:00). Convinced that the children being controlled by the two apparitions, the governess decides that the only way to save the children is to make them confess and utter the name of the demon possessing them, which is a method commonly used in exorcism rituals. The emphasis is, therefore, put once again on the governess's persuasion that she is pure and innocent enough to assume the role of the saviour of the children's souls.

A rather significant difference between the text and the film are the two kisses on the lips that Miles and the governess exchange, which raises the question of how it is possible that kissing a young boy on the lips was not corruption but everything else was. Slide (1985:103) argues that Clayton "said that he feels Miss Giddens is in love with Miles's uncle, and that perhaps this infatuation influences her feelings towards the child". While Miles's attempt to kiss the governess may be justified by his inexperience and his lack of knowledge about its meaning, which indicate that he may not be capable of recognising the potential corruption of a kiss, the final kiss performed by the governess over the boy's dead body is not as easily

justified. However, there is a possible explanation to the governess's shocking action, and it is the dramatic effect that the film was supposed to provoke. Throughout the film, Miles begins to increasingly resemble Peter Quint, especially when talking to Miss Giddens. In order for the relationship between the two lovers to be fully enacted, Miss Jessel's counterpart was needed, and it just so happened that Miss Giddens was the one to take on the role.

The final scene assumes an even deeper meaning when Miles dies in the governess's arms, in the very centre of a ring of statues that resembles a group of guardians, emphasizing the irony in the governess's failure as a guardian to the children. Michael Newton (2013: n.p.) also notes that the "statues of cupids, satyrs and garden gods surround the house, [as] images of a disturbingly hedonistic pagan past, and so the dead lovers' illicit lust beleaguers and perhaps invades the governess's pious Victorian virtue." Hence, the governess's Victorian belief system seems to ultimately fall apart under the challenges of her new life, causing her to lose what was most dear to her – her innocence.

3.2) *The Turn of the Screw* (2009)

Adapted for the screen by Sandi Welch and directed by Tim Fywell in 2009, the more recent adaptation of James's novella begins in 1921, although the actual story is set in 1848. The reason for this may be the fact that the governess, here called Ann (Michelle Dockery), is in a in a mental institution where she is subjected to psychoanalytical therapy, which was only established in the 1890s by an Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). The fact that the governess is locked up in an asylum seems to suggest that it has been almost decided that she is insane and dangerous. However, being locked up in a mental institution also benefits the governess's character because seeing her mentally shaken and traumatized actually gives her that necessary dose of humanity, unlike in the original story where the governess simply continues to work with children after the tragedy. Furthermore, the way that the children are portrayed in the film, the addition of the character of the maid, called Carla, and the fact that Dr Fisher, the psychoanalyst, eventually comes to believe in the governess's story – to the point when he, too, sees Quint's face on an officer upon taking the governess off to her sentence – reduces the ambiguity of the tale and suggests a rather clear interpretative decision.

The film is composed of a series of flashbacks and memories of events that led to the governess's mental breakdown in the first place. It differs from James's story in many ways, one of which is surely the sexual element that is highly prominent in the film, indicating that the primary cause of the corruption of innocence are sex and sexual desire. There are many elements that supports this, such as the governess's job interview, which contains sexual undertones; her attraction towards the uncle, which is much more openly expressed than in the original story: "Could Flora tell how much I was longing for him? How I wish the master would come […] 'Was he thinking of me?', I wondered" (*The Turn of the Screw*, 2009 – 00:22:00); and the relationship between the late lovers, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, which seems to be

enacted by Miles and Flora, especially in the scene when the two are playing and rolling in the grass.

One of the first lines we hear in the movie is spoken by the psychoanalyst who describes the governess as young and innocent upon her arrival to London. This is essential to her further development as a character because it shows how her system of beliefs and moral values crushes under the weight of the challenges that her new life and position bring along. The scene of the job interview is rather focused on Anne's desire to appeal to her employer, and his manipulatively seductive nature. The gestures and the tone of the two characters suggest attraction and seduction between the two. There is quite a lot of physical contact and it is almost as if the uncle is using emotional blackmail on the governess by making her hope that he would come to her if she succeeded "where all the others [have] failed" (*The Turn of the Screw*, 2009 – 00:05:57).

Other than on the sexual content, the most emphasis is put on the governess's religious background. For the governess, the events at Bly represent a battle between good and evil, which is why the children are considered God's work, innocent angels, as opposed to the demonic figures of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, who are considered to be the Devil's work. The role of the governess, once again, is that of a saviour. Her father's influence is even more highlighted in this adaptation through numerous flashbacks of him fiercely preaching at her and imposing his beliefs and values on her. The fact that the governess has not yet given up on the Bible, keeping it by her side, although she began experiencing a crisis in terms of her faith after the trauma at Bly, shows how strong her faith remains and how hard her inner battle is now that her faith is beginning to crumble.

In this context, Dr Fisher – an advocate of knowledge and reason – represents a challenge to the governess's religious beliefs, which form the base of her innocent outlook on life.

Metaphorically, this highlights once again the discord between knowledge and innocence. As we note from the very beginning of the film, the psychoanalyst is an atheist who protests against the priests coming to "treat" the patients in the asylum. At one point he even takes the governess's Bible and throws it aside, saying that the book is unnecessary, and questioning Ann's faith. When asked whether she still believed in God, Ann answers that she believes in "the other", which only confirms that her faith is shaken, but not gone because, according to Christian beliefs and tradition, believing in the Devil's (Lucifer's) existence is unlikely to be possible without believing in the existence of his creator, God himself.

The film promotes the governess's portrayal as a saviour, regardless of her failure, and ultimately gives her the status of a martyr-like figure, who bears the sacrifice of having to die for attempting to save two innocent lives.

4. CONCLUSION

Although ambiguity is intended to be the first element to capture the reader's focus, one must bear in mind that, in order for the novella to be truly ambiguous, the ambiguity must be believable, which is why character development is so important. James's subtle elaboration on the governess's family background gives the reader just the right amount of information that will make all the possible interpretations plausible, yet unable to be absolutely confirmed.

In her overview of the clash between the Freudian and the anti-Freudian approaches to the text, Shoshana Felman (1977:106) claims that James equated vulgarity with literal interpretations "because [the literal] stops the movement constitutive of meaning, because it blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution. The vulgar, therefore, is anything which misses, or falls short of, the dimension of the symbolic, anything which rules out, or excludes, meaning". Regardless of the interpretation the reader chooses, however, the tragic outcome of the tale remains fixed – one child is mentally damaged and the other is dead – which suggests that the only important thing is, in fact, what is real to the governess.

Her origin, childhood and the Victorian ideals she is surrounded with inevitably define the governess's personality, as well as her outlook on life and sexuality. Staying true to her rigid beliefs, however, prevents her from the necessary changes she needs to undergo in order to keep up with the challenges of her new, unsupervised life. Instead of considering embracing and modifying her beliefs in order to adapt to this new world she enters, the governess falls into the trap of placing herself in a superior position, assigning to herself the role of a Christ-like figure that is to save the innocent souls of the two children, forgetting that arrogance is a sin that destroys innocence, as well. She, like many in the Victorian period, equated innocence with ignorance and corruption with experience.

The two adaptations of the novella discussed in the previous chapters interpret the novella in similar ways, however, the 1961 version focuses more on the ambiguity of the plot and the irony of the governess's attempt to save the children's innocence, while the 2009 adaptation attempts to examine and explain the governess's actions by focusing on her psychological state and her moral and religious beliefs. Both depict sexuality as a threat to one's intrinsic innocence and find hope for its preservation in religious values, which, as it has been demonstrated in the novella and the films, may have a complete counter-effect when complied with too rigidly. Both films also put an emphasis on the connection between the governess's outlook on sexuality and the influence of her father, the country parson. The main difference between the two films is their ending. In *The Innocents* (1961) the governess's failure in protecting the children is highlighted through the use of irony, while in *The Turn of the Screw* (2009) she is led to her death as a hero who may have failed her honourable mission, but has stayed true to her beliefs.

Both the tale and its adaptations portray innocence as inexperience and ignorance, reflecting the belief system of the Victorian era. Moral corruption is here recognised primarily in sex and sexual desire, the knowledge of which is seen by the governess as a certain way of straying from the path of innocence. This may be due to the fact that she was strongly influenced by her father, the local clergyman, who inevitably implanted Christian values deeply into her mind. This may also explain her pathological fear of corruption, as she is likely to associate the knowledge of "shameful", unreligious behaviour with the Biblical story of the original sin, in which Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, causing the fall of man.

However, it is not knowledge but the fear of experience and change – alongside with the rigidness of her beliefs – that ultimately causes the governess to lose what she treasures most – her innocence.

WORKS CITED:

Bontly, Thomas J. “Henry James’s ‘General Vision of Evil’ in *The Turn of the Screw*.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1969, pp. 721–735. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/450043. Accessed 28 June 2020.

Chase, Dennis. “The Ambiguity of Innocence: *The Turn of the Screw*.” Extrapolation, Vol. 27, No. 3, Kent State University Press, 1986, pp. 197-202.

Felman, Shoshana. “Turning the Screw of Interpretation.” *Yale French Studies*, 1977, No. 55/56, Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise (1977), pp. 94-207. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2930436. Accessed 5 September 2020.

Frayling, Christopher. “Introduction to *The Innocents*.” UK, 2006 – the documentary available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpV5J91BnV0 Accessed: 30 August 2020.

Furneaux, Holly. “Victorian Sexualities.” British Library, 15 May 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-sexualities Accessed 24 July 2020.

Heilman, Robert B. “The Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*.” *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 62, no. 7, 1947, pp. 433–445. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2909426. Accessed 28 June 2020.

James, Henry. “The Turn of the Screw.” Collins Classics, London, 2011.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster. Available at: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innocence. Accessed 4 September 2020.

Mogen, David. “Agonies of Innocence: The Governess and Maggie Verver.” *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1976, pp. 230–242. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27748029. Accessed 6 July 2020.

Newton, Michael. “The Innocents: Angels and Demons.” *The Guardian*, 26 December 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/26/innocents-christmas-ghost-story Accessed 5 September 2020.

Reynolds, Kimberley. “Perceptions of childhood.” *British Library*, 15 May 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/perceptions-of-childhood# Accessed 6 September 2020.

Slide, Anthony. “Fifty Classic British Films, 1932-1982: A Pictorial Record.” Courier Corporation, 1985, pp. 100-103.

The Book of Genesis. *New International Version*. Bible Gateway, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+3&version=NIV Accessed 5 September 2020.

The Innocents (1961) Directed by Jack Clayton. Screenplay by William Archibald, Truman Capote and John Mortimer. USA: Twentieth Century-Fox.

The Turn of the Screw (2009) Directed by Tim Fywell. Screenplay by Sandi Welch. UK: BBC.

Weisbuch, Robert. “Henry James and the Idea of Evil.” Cambridge Companions Online, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 102-119.