Childhood at the Center

The Horror of Miles and Flora in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Jack Clayton's Film Adaptation *The Innocents* (1961)

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> "*Schizoid* behavior is a pretty common thing in children. It's accepted, because all […] adults have this unspoken agreement that children are lunatics."
> (King 1977: 114)

Children as Children

Although for any contemporary academic working with James's *oeuvre*, it'd be hard to completely dismiss the role childhood and, more specifically, the characters of Miles and Flora, play in *The Turn of the Screw*, it's evident that their utilization as mere stepping stones in the service of grander hermeneutical pursuits is far from a rare occurrence. The primary efforts of scholars of the novella tend to shift between the psychosexual Freudian reading anchored in the psychological state of the adult characters, particularly the governess, and the metaphysical aspect associated with the reality of the occurring supernatural events. Though

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childhood is often at play in both of these approaches, the aforementioned characters tend towards utilization as complements more than as the narrative axioms they can be considered, if one but acknowledges how transversally present they've been in the original work and subsequent adaptations.

The tendency of academic literature to read Miles and Flora as elements of supplementation instead of causation has led me to believe that even though research around *The Turn of the Screw* has recognized the importance of the narrative interplays the characters offer, it has been rather insufficient in properly articulating the paramount role they have in dictating and influencing other characters' actions and motivations. This realization is the root for the titular article, which aims to dialogue with other texts in the now-expanding conversation about the centrality of childhood in the narrative, via the proposal of a mode of reading that classifies Miles and Flora as the hermeneutical centers, therefore challenging the prevailing viewpoints that relegate them to peripheral analytical roles in this context. I aim to illustrate that they can constitute the interpretative focus independently of the interpretative approach one adheres to, by shedding light on the key mechanisms through which they (and childhood *stricto sensu*) are present and reverberate on other textual narrative elements.

Believing *The Innocents*, directed by Jack Clayton, to be the adaptation which best illustrates this connection to childhood, by virtue, for example, of its title (which denotes its focus on childish innocence), I aim also to cross-read it with James's novella, and offer a comprehensive contextualization of some of the themes introduced by the presence of Miles and Flora in both works. I wish to treat the child characters as children and, ultimately, I aim to prove that they allow for the existence of narrative dichotomies of innocence/sexuality and child/adult power dynamics, effectively surging on the narrative its most important elements of uneasiness, ambiguity, horror, moral panic and perversion.

To many readers, the most important aspect of the original novella, which also evidently translates into the titular adaptation, is its deliberate ambiguity. Douglas and the governess are seen as its major contributors because they infuse the narrative with their subjective

perspectives and biases. Douglas, as the primary narrator, serves as the intermediary between the reader and the written account of the governess. While he presents himself as an authoritative figure, possessing the manuscript that serves as textual basis and recounting the story to his attentive audience, his own motivations and biases come into question; his interpretation and retelling of the events inevitably shape the reader's understanding, introducing an element of uncertainty and subjectivity. Douglas's role as a storyteller and his privileged position means the governess's account is *washed through* his thoughts and words. The readers are left to question his reliability, wondering whether he may be embellishing or interpreting the account, and what implications this may have for the overall reception of textual information. This choice of structure allows for a layered storytelling approach, but also perceivably distances the reader from direct engagement with the children.

Similarly, the governess herself emerges as an unreliable narrator, due to her increasingly obsessive behavior towards the perceived malevolent influence of the ghosts, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. As a central figure in the story, she serves as the primary conduit through which the events unfold, creating what appears to be an even deeper disconnection to what this paper proposes. It is through this deliberate ambiguity that Henry James masterfully crafts a narrative that transcends a straightforward ghost story; both Douglas's and the governess's untrustworthiness act as endlessly fascinating invitations to debate, allowing the novella to still constitute itself as a fertile ground for different academic pursuits. Even if the acknowledgement of Miles and Flora's narrative importance isn't necessarily incompatible with the importance of both of these characters (I'm not adopting an essentialist stance on interpretation), can their hermeneutic centrality be defended?

However totalizing and satisfactory these observations seem to be in accounting for the element of ambiguity, one must consider that the governess only comes to constitute herself as unreliable due to her intense focus on the children and their protection. Her supernatural conundrum stems from the necessity to shield the pure innocence of Miles and Flora from the hints of sexuality, corruption or possession associated with the

spirits. Their actions and interactions with the governess become pivotal moments that shape her psychological journey – and therefore, any assumption of the governess as the central hermeneutic element realistically underlies the assumption of Miles and Flora's evident narrative reverberations. Her self-imposed duty is not only central to her character's existence; it is the baseline, relentless and most stable building block when considering her presentation, actions and thoughts. Her fixation permeates every aspect of her existence, as she admits to "overscoring their full hours" (James 2008: 43). Literary critic Shoshanna Felman (qtd. in Hanson 2021: 249), highlights the way *The Turn of the Screw* turns readers, especially those with a psychoanalytic perspective, into governesses who become suspicious of the sexual secrets of the children themselves; effectively arguing for the children's centrality to the reader experience. Douglas, in turn, recognizes the children's central importance in the story immediately in the prologue, when mentioning the metaphorical connection between the act of "turning the screw" and the vanguardist insertion of childhood characters in a report about spiritism filled to the brim with sexual undertones. Describing this section of the original novella, English literature expert Tydal writes:

> After one particularly spine-tingling tale, involving a young boy awakened by an apparition, the friends agree that ghost stories where children play a prominent part are the most chilling; the presence of little ones in the face of the spectral, as it is put, provides 'another turn of the screw.' Much to the delight of everyone present, one of the men in the party announces that he also knows a story falling under this category. What is more, not only is the story allegedly true, but it also has the added attraction of involving two children – giving 'two turns' to that same screw. The story the man proceeds to tell then becomes the story we are reading, as the governess proceeds to take up her position at Bly House. While the prologue does not necessarily attribute monstrous agency to the children, it does suggest that their role in the story is central to the reader's experience of horror. (Tydal 2015: 192)

Miles and Flora can easily be considered the root cause of ambiguity in the novel through association with other thematic dichotomies, mainly class transgression and sexually improper behavior. Mrs. Grose's revelation of a hinted sexual connection between the valet Quint and Miles hints at not only a class conflict but one of (homo)sexuality and depravedness. It seems that they are, indeed, inescapable, and in Clayton's *The Innocents*, this argument is even more sustainable, as the paranormal elements are introduced before the idea of the governess's unreliability. Shortly after her arrival at Bly, the governess witnesses Flora "humming the vaguely eerie song 'O Willow Waley', as if a mystical summons" (ibid: 194) and, "at this point in the film, the viewer has little reason to believe that anything is afoul at Bly, since no ghosts have yet appeared. […] In other words, we are introduced to the idea of the potentially monstrous children before the idea of the potentially insane governess" (ibid). Considering this very promising landscape, the centrality of childhood in the novella seems like a delicious proposition.

Transgressive Fantasies: Childhood, Innocence and Sexuality

It'd be impossible to refer to the story's themes without referring, primarily, its emphasis on innocence. Though not a lot has been written about the novella in a perspective that privileges its child characters, most of the scholarly contributions in this regard tend to lean heavily on the concept. Literary scholar James Kincaid, with his work *Erotic Innocence* (1998) is one of the biggest contributors to this conversation, bridging the themes that give this chapter its title.

In his work, Kincaid, referring to the original novella, emphasizes three crucial aspects of its innocent child characters. Firstly, he argues that Miles and Flora's innocence is not something inherent or discovered but rather shaped by norms and expectations; a "concocted" process (2021: 156). This type of process, he defends, is characteristically unnatural in the sense that it's not necessarily biologically dictated, constituting itself primarily as a social advent as opposed to an intrinsic property of the children. Secondly, he notes said innocence is allowed to thrive due to

not only being "protected but actively inculcated" (ibid), calling attention to the necessity of enforcement in order to achieve its implementation[2]. Lastly, Kincaid critiques the exaggerated prominence of the concept of innocence during the Victorian era, suggesting that it reveals our own contemporary needs of projecting pureness and injecting it into the figure of the child which is, by itself, a far more complex and often discomforting category (ibid).

What I'd like to argue for, through Kincaid's matrix, is that any attempts to, as he writes, maintain this innocence by enforcing it on behalf of the governess, who conceives it as intrinsic to the children, feeds into a misguided paradox, and end up generating the opposite effect of further corrupting them. I would also like to argue that innocence, as it is portrayed in the novella and the film, is fundamentally paradoxical, as it is by necessity built against and upon its contrary: sexual impulses, sexuality and sexual depravity. Above all, though, I will attempt to defend, mainly referring to Kincaid's arguments about infant sexualization in mainstream media, that Miles and Flora's significance as conductors of James's and Clayton's narratives heavily relies on relations established between childhood, innocence and sexuality as concepts associated to them via the novella's implied Victorian frame of reference.

Firstly, it's easy to notice that both Miles and Flora are weak and fragilized in terms of their susceptibility to external influences: the estate of Bly is rather isolated, and with the death of their parents, any peripheral social interaction apart from the one established with the housemaid Mrs. Grose is sure to be paramount in their upbringing. The two main ideas present in this characterization – a child's influenceability and the lack of a parental figure – are deeply connected to

2 In the case of Miles and Flora, this can be best exemplified by the governess's hesitation in acknowledging Miles' wrongdoings as it pertains to his academic expulsion, for example – going so far as to equate him to a divine figure. Schober's analysis very eloquently shows how her perception of the children as unmistakably innocent happens not through cause and effect, but by definition; she sees them as the embodiment of goodness, as "even when [they are] bad, they are good" (Schober 2004: 57).

Victorian literary tropes that permeate James's transitional fin-de-siècle background. Scholar Ben Moore writes that one of the most prominent ways of representing children in Victorian literature deals with "the idealized Romantic child, typically conceived as naturally innocent and close to God" (2017: 1). In her book *The Gothic Child* (2013), child literature researcher Margarita Georgieva also mentions the prominence of orphanhood, claiming that these tropes reflect the anxieties and societal concerns of the time, regarding the breakdown of the traditional family structure in the periods pre-dating the first world war.

As English literature historian Scofield denotes, Miles and Flora's characterization stands in concordance with the ideals of "female purity" and the "unspeakableness of sexuality" (2003: 4). It is the absence of parental figures mentioned by Georgieva which accentuates the children's susceptibility to external forces, and allows for the computing of the supernatural entities in the titular works as perilous and potentially dangerous. At the same time, it's the fear for erosion of traditional family values that calls forth the sexual innuendo associated to the characters of Quint and Miss Jessel – the spectral deviants that would lead them astray from innocence (with innocence and family being directly correlated to religious values of Christian familyhood, moral purity and sexual celibacy). Any act of sexual engagement, even if part of regular development, is posited as outside of the domain of the Christian and Victorian child by default, and therefore considered as corruptive of the child character's innocence.

Whether it's Quint being *too free* or strategic nods to class conflation as a consequence of his and Miss Jessel's relationship, sex is at the basis of the element of corruption associated with the spectral figures. According to child literature researcher Lucija Stambolija, "words that James uses repeatedly throughout the novella […] are highly allusive of sex: erect (three times), intercourse (five times), perverse, intimately (three times), etc." (2020: 12). It seems, then, that the question of sexuality is unavoidable, even if we don't adhere to the idea that the ghosts are a symbol for the governess's repression of it. As Victorian literature scholar Ellis Hanson denotes, sexuality is also a rather primary element in accounting for reader discomfort and for one's engagement with the narrative. It's an

element of connection between our discomfort and the governess's report:

> By proposing that Quint was too free not only with the boy but with 'every one', Mrs. Grose would seem to include not only herself and the governess but also the reader in a pedophilic seduction that knows no limits, as if to seduce a child were to court the essence of seduction itself and implicate even the most casual bystander. There are no innocent readers of this text, it has often been pointed out, but we are infantilized by our very belief in innocence. We feel that our childlike innocent has been imposed on and corrupted by Quint, that we have been made to contemplate matters, specifically sexual matters, that ought to remain safely outside of our ken. (Hanson 2021: 246)

By trying to deliberately shield the children from sexuality (the ghosts – either symbols of child sexualization or echoes of anti-Christian conduct), the governess inevitably draws attention to it as a constitutive axiomatic opposite at every turn, creating what is essentially a paradox of protection that actively undermines its pretenses. If one considers the very concept of childish innocence in the texts, which the governess tries to preserve, as constituted by elements that can only exist when built upon the opposite force of sexuality, it becomes easy to notice that every attempt at preserving innocence is by default counterproductive – it leads Miles and Flora away from Christian, pure values of family and sexual inexistence. Since one could go so far as to say that a lack of sexual engagement/development is a necessary stepping stone in this acceptation of innocence, it becomes possible to argue, even, that the concept of innocence itself, as portrayed in the novella and the film, works as a sort of vacuum, a state of *not-knowing*. It's built by opposition to the expectation of sexual deviancy.

Barnsley, childhood and post-colonial literature expert, demonstrated this effect quite well, by denoting, for example, how the effect of visual representation of child nudity as innocent tends to "have the effect of sexualizing the child through the look" (2010: 328). Though not referring to the titular novella and adaptation, this insight can real-

istically be called forth in an analysis of either, as the need to enforce innocence inevitably engages and draws attention to its opposite. The forceful framing of children as inherently non-sexual (innocent) in the novella and film implies the existence of a possibly corrupting force – or, in other words, the governess's overprotective tendencies end up calling attention to and conjuring ghosts of sexuality which are consciously repressed.

The argument for the implications traditional Christian values could have in the sexual repression of children as they traverse puberty is appealing in the sense that it's easy. However, I'd instead like to explore the concept of agency, more specifically the governess's agency, in accounting for the corruption of the children. Though the ghosts of Quint and Jessel are perceived as opportunistic in the sense that they'd take advantage of the parentless and influenceable children, how wrong would one be to suggest a similar process is at play with the governess? Not only does she have a significant hold over the children which allows her to assert her more comparatively powerful status (she assumes the role of a parental figure as the children's uncle allows her for full educative freedom), she's also the only real contact with the outside world Miles and Flora enjoy during the duration of the narrative[3]. Keeping in mind that the governess, when compared to the spectral presences of Quint and Jessel, has the same tools for corruption at her disposal, and is attempting to forcefully instate a very specific mode of existence upon the children (Christian values, family, celibacy, asexuality), is a necessity.

In order to talk about the governess's influence on the children, it's important to mobilize once again Barnsley's seminal paper "The Child/The Future", where the author writes that "the figure of the child often indicates spontaneity, innocence and originality as well as pure simplicity and imitation" (ibid: 323). I particularly wish to focus on the word "imitation" and its employment here. The idea that children learn through imitation is not new. According to Aristotle, as far back as the 5th century BC, human beings have an innate tendency towards imitation, which plays

3 There is, eventually, a reference to the nearest village which contains a church. By itself, however, it is insufficient in disproving the point.

a significant role in the formation of their character and understanding of the world (Poética, 1448b5). In the context of innocence, mimesis suggests that children, in their naivety and lack of worldly experience, imitate and reflect the behavior and ideals of those around them. Meltzoff and Moore's imitation study (1977), is a rather elucidating inquiry that points to newborn infants' ability to imitate facial expressions, for example, effectively proving this process of imitation as learning to be, at least to some extent, true. The researchers found that infants as young as 12 to 21 days old could mimic specific facial gestures made by an adult model, which allows for the framing of imitation as a fundamental mechanism for learning during childhood. Equally, Albert Bandura's Bobo Doll experiment (1961) shows how imitative processes can work inversely, allowing for the undertaking of more questionable learnings. In the experiment, children observed an adult model engaging in aggressive behavior towards a doll, and it was found that children who witnessed the aggressive behavior were more likely to imitate it compared to those who did not.

The implication of imitation as an apparatus for learning is clearly something the governess recognizes, as when thinking about the children's previous misbehaviors, alluded to by Mrs. Grose in Chapter IX, she tends to associate them to the ghosts of Quint and Jessel. In framing the ghosts as a malevolent entity that aims to contaminate and pervert the children, the governess seems to posit herself as a worthy alternative for imitation. Flora and Miles are under the spell and she is the one to break it. She regards herself as a pure soul from which to model the children after. At the very least, one can claim she does not believe or is in any way conscious of any elements that would disrupt this perception. Oddly, however, the children never seem to passively absorb her teachings; she has to constantly and forcefully (even violently) compete with the supposed spectral influence through enforced behavior. As critic and essayist Richard Locke puts it, she's constantly "imposing such violent absolutes on [the] children in ways that empower [herself] and destroy children." (2011: 88). Stambolija even goes as far as to note that "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. […] It is, in fact, the governess 'who instinctively identifies sex with the powers of darkness and evil'. […] The ghosts themselves remain, as it were, asexual.'" (2010: 14).

How should we go about accounting for this purposeful projection of a sexual nature onto the spectral figures when they do not manifest in any sexual way to the governess? The only possible solution is to consider her morally degraded. Should we adhere to the psychoanalytic reading and identify the ghosts as a manifestation of sexual repression, this position becomes even easier to defend. If the ghosts are, then, a symbol of the consequences of her sexual fantasy with Miles's uncle, which is often hinted at in the novel, then the evident conclusion is that she is neither uncorrupted nor pure – she becomes a wicked model for imitation. Al-Qurani, assistant professor of literature at King Khalid University, writes:

> Miss Jessel, in a psychoanalytic reading of the text, may then exist as a symbolic representation of the desires the governess cannot admit or express. This hallucination has been borne of the governess's dangerous indulgence in sexual fantasies about her employer. Miss Jessel must therefore be detested as evil by a governess seeking to repress her own similar sexual urges. (Al-Qurani 2013: 84)

The idea that she can, as a character, mirror the same amount of impurity and corruption as those she comes to associate with Quint and Miss Jessel is very telling.

It might also be possible to identify, on her part, a sense of erotic fascination towards the children and, in particular, towards Miles, which constitutes an even more evident transgression to his innocence, and an even more immediate parallel with some interpretative approaches to the presence of the ghosts in the narratives. As Schober, expert on childhood in cinema, writes, to the governess, "Miles appears at once innocent and childlike and experienced and adult, which both excites and disturbs her" (2004: 62) – emphasis on "excites". Similarly, as pointed out by Locke, "she is attracted to Miles because he has something divine […]

as if he had never for a second suffered" and, in the perceived necessity to shelter that holiness, she actively chooses to neglect his tragic reality; "his family history of death and neglect – the deaths of his parents and grandparents and of Jessel and Quint; the many separations and displacements." (2011: 91). The Christian notion of the sanctity of the body, especially the child's body, which is definitely present in the text, while not explicitly erotic, can be seen as inherently charged with sexual undertones, as it focuses attention on the body itself. Similarly, the religious *ethos* of self-sacrifice is evidently twisted in the governess's character, through a process of *quasi-fetishization* of her acts of service in the domains of their education, upbringing and sociality.

A very significant difference between the original novella and Clayton's film are the two kisses the governess exchanges with Miles – both very erotic and on the lips. Though erotic tension in the novella is often present, such as in most of the scenes where Miles refers to the governess as "my dear", it is never as direct as what is shown to us by Clayton. As Stambolija notes, Clayton may simply be pointing towards the fact that "she is in love with Miles's uncle, and that perhaps this infatuation influences her feelings towards the child." (2020: 22). However, in both scenes, it's she who initiates the kissing action, with Miles being but a passive receiver and appearing shocked – be it because of the pervasive sexual intrusion of the situation, or because he is really possessed by the ghost of Peter Quint. Either way, making a case for why her attempts at reinforcing the children's innocence are counterproductive in this interpretative optic becomes rather easy. Similarly, the idea that Miles's and Flora's susceptibility to their environment might be central in the novella becomes ever more appealing. In her 2016 book, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*, horror film scholar Karen Renner writes:

> Possession narratives act as cautionary tales that warn viewer, in symbolic terms, that children are vulnerable to dangerous influences when traditional family structures are damaged and parents are negligent in their duties. These texts imply that 'exorcism' requires not merely a formal religious ritual but an entire reconfiguration of the family unit. (Renner 2016: 123)

Equating the governess in the way I have thus far advocated for would imply seeing her as a poor substitute parental figure. Miles and Flora are always central to James's and Clayton's irony: we are introduced to the theme of family value preservation by association with Quint and Jessel, and then he inverts them as it pertains to how he characterizes the governess. The "exorcism" (the expulsion of the entities that hold such a corruptive power of the children) that Renner mentions might find a worthier adversary in the governess than the spectral appearances, especially considering we cannot say for sure whether they are or aren't framed as actually real.

The ultimate argument that can be conjured to support the idea that innocence is indeed constituted practically in relation to sexuality and sexual expression, however, is the one related to Miles's confession. In the novella and film's climax, the governess demands that Miles confesses to having seen Peter Quint, therefore implying the specter to have had some sort of corruptive influence upon him. Whether you adopt the psychosexual interpretation (and therefore assume this confession to mean the corruption of the child through sexual depravity) or the metaphysical one (and therefore assume the sexual innuendo to be directly interlaced with sexual development and maturation), if Miles confessed, he would be breaking his *façade* of innocence regardless. Though she asks him to confess in an ultimate grand act – a big final attempt at the preservation of his innocence, a saving of the soul – if he obeys, he is doomed never to go back to untarnished innocence. By staying silent, he passively engages in the governess's fantasy of ghostly influence, which will cause her to classify him as being over the point of salvation, considering how convinced of the reality of possession she seems by the end of the novella. By speaking, he confesses to having been influenced, and *knowing* (both literally and figuratively, or even in a biblical sense) sexual deviancy. Miles cannot go back to being innocent because wanting to do so implies knowing what is and isn't innocent; and to distinguish between the two makes for the impossibility of forgetting said distinction. To know what innocence isn't is to automatically stop being innocent, and not being able to return. As Hanson writes, "Such innocence always bears in its logic of purity the fantasy of its

own violation, the fantasy that sustains it and shatters it at the same time. It must perform itself without knowing itself, since, for a child, to understand the meaning of innocence is to already have lost it." (2021: 252).

Monster Children: Childhood, Normativity and the Uncanny

> 'Master Miles is a good boy,' Mrs. Grose almost pleads with her, 'there's nothing wicked in him.' To this, the governess retorts: 'Unless he's deceiving us; unless they're both deceiving us', after which she stops for a second, to then carefully articulate: 'The innocents …' The delivery of the line is striking: it is as if the governess realizes the irony of what she is saying at the moment she speaks it. Standing out due to its invocation of the film's title, the comment goes to the very heart of the difference between the novella and Clayton's adaptation, namely how it shifts the weight of titillating ambiguity from the insanity of the governess to the monstrosity of the children. In doing so, *The Innocents* also opens up a site of potential horror that was indeed present in the original tale, but which had been obscured by the polarization of the critical debate: the secret world of childhood. (Tydal 2015: 196–197)

In both the film and the novella, the idea of a *secret world of childhood* plays a significant role in evoking discomfort and fear for both the governess and the readers. The idea of a *secret world* as it pertains to childhood denotes an inherent incomprehension of what said world entails, and not understanding the children is inevitably a source of discomfort for the governess, as it furthers her possible paranoia with regard to the spectral influence the ghosts hold over them. It becomes important, then, to explore the elusiveness of Miles and Flora's actions, situating them in said *unknown world*, arguing for it as a point of liberation, autonomy and escapism which stands opposed to the governess's tyrannical impositions. I will try to show how prevalent the ideas of occultation and absence are in the construction of several narrative devices, and how they're usually products of Miles and Flora's central hermeneutical presence, essentially

contributing to the most notable axiom of James's original novella: its interpretative ambiguity. Lastly, I will also try to explain why this occultation and absence are elements that classify the children as monsters, and how exactly they come to signify as such.

One pivotal moment highlighting the theme of childhood secrets occurs during a conversation between the governess and the children. When the governess comments on the size of the house, Miles responds by inquiring about her own family home, asking if it was too small for her to have secrets. Unbeknownst to the governess, the children exchange a knowing look. While she fails to grasp the subtext, the implication is clear: the expansive estate of Bly allows the children to maintain their private world, hidden from the prying eyes of adults (ibid: 197). The grand and mysterious estate serves as an ideal setting for the children's privacy; its sheer size and sprawling nature create a physical space that fosters seclusion and hidden corners, shielding them from external intrusions. The vastness of the manor allows for secret spaces and areas they can retreat to and utilize to cultivate their own realm of mystery and intrigue while remaining absent from the governess's general influence. Miles's defiant act of sneaking out during the night, which can be seen as his frustrated attempt at asserting independence and dissociating from the governess's authority, illustrates the umbilical relationship between privacy, misdirection and the sheer size of the estate of Bly. He manages to keep his true intentions hidden because the space physically allows him to do so, which wouldn't have necessarily been possible was he sleeping in the same room as the governess, like Flora. Bly, one could say, by its existence alone, seems to act as a rather central, almost character-like bit of the narrative, as the governess herself remarks on its magnitude, highlighting its capacity to hold numerous hidden secrets within its walls: "Was there a 'secret' at Bly- a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?" (James 2008: 21). By giving the children a space where their intentions and motives remain shrouded in mystery, the estate not only amplifies the governess's uncertainty about the children's innocence, it also impedes the reader of fully deciphering their true nature, which both intrigues and horrifies her. It manages to keep

absent what would otherwise be present. Clayton's film, by deliberately dipping substantial parts of the house in darkness, as if hiding from possible spectators that which is also outside of the governess's sway, can spawn even more examples.

Secrets and occultation of information often end up acting as twisted confirmation. Faced with this absence, the governess's reaction becomes exacerbated to the point of no return. As Schober mentions, "the apparitions themselves function as blank pages upon which meaning is inscribed" (2004: 60). Similarly, the process through which information is hidden as it pertains to Miles and Flora's doing allows the governess a platform for projection of her wants and needs. She interprets the possible spectral presences as a confirmation of evil. Likewise, the possessed children's unnatural goodness is defined through the absence of sexual deviancy, which suggests the potential for evil to occupy them – once she loses confidence in Flora's innocence, interpreting her silence as a sign that she is under the influence of the malevolent Miss Jessel, the emptiness of the child is filled with the knowledge of impurity. The limited insight into the children's private world parallels her tendency to want to be integrally aware of the children's every dimension and, at the same time, her sheer inability to perceive childhood as anything more than mere inherent innocence.

Absence of innocence is also communicated through the vessel of Bly and through the idea of occultation and secrecy. One of the unsettling aspects of the novella, for example, is the children's ability to speak in a manner that surpasses their expected age and experience. Miles's use of the term "my dear" (found aplenty in chapter XVII) to address the governess is particularly noteworthy, and though it is reverberated in scenes outside of Bly manor, it keeps mostly to one-on-one interactions inside the confines of said space. This endearing way of addressing the other, typically associated with adult discourse, creates a disconcerting effect by blurring the boundaries between childhood innocence and adult familiarity, defying and undermining the traditional power dynamics one would expect between children and adult, and also, clearly challenging the governess's assumed authority by problematizing the reductive categorization of the child as inherently innocent which she tends to en-

force. It works on the basis of its assumed instability; Miles utilizes it just enough to arouse suspicion and ambiguity for the reader and the governess, but never fully transgresses into the realm of the unnatural. This blurring of boundaries disrupts our understanding of the children's mental and emotional states, effectively problematizing any monolithic approach to childhood as a category.

The concept of language extends beyond the children's verbal expressions, touching also on the significance of silence in the narrative. Schober, mentions that "one possible sign of Flora's and Miles's corruption is their use of shocking language, the apparent reason for the latter's dismissal from school. (2004: 58). The hinted taboo nature of his possible homosexual proclivity (he only says things to 'Those [he] liked, – James 2008: 90) is underscored by the emphasis on what is left unsaid. The power of silence and absence is once again exemplified by the governess's belief that the children are being controlled by the spirits of Quint and Miss Jessel. She becomes convinced that the only way to save them is to make them confess and utter the names of their tormentors. The act of speaking, of breaking the silence, holds the potential to confront and banish the malevolent forces that possess them. Language, in this context, becomes a tool to combat the unspoken and to restore order – it becomes paramount to the construction of the concepts of confession and control that permeate both the novella and the titular film.

A major tension point of the novella comes from the profound sense of not being able to fully understand the children's mental states. As we delve into the narrative, we often encounter the notion that odd behavior is forgivable in the light of more normalized child behavior. This is significant as it shows that we're used to the trespassing of rational behavior by children, and we've made peace with the idea that the inherent strangeness of children's actions elicits a dual response from adults. When children are perceived as *just being children*, there is a certain allure in observing the inner workings of their minds. It's as if they inhabit a realm that transcends conventional understanding. However, this fascination is equally tempered by the disconcerting notion of *not-knowing*, of never being able to fully grasp the depths of their thoughts and moti-

vations. This tension – a mixture of fascination and horror – is explored repeatedly in the novella and is what transmutes the children from tangible, innocent beings into something more sinister and mysterious, even demonic:

> He [Miles] sat down at the old piano and played as he had never played; and if there are those who think he had better have been kicking a football I can only say that I wholly agree with them. For at the end of a time that under his influence I had quite ceased to measure, I started up with a strange sense of having literally slept at my post. (James 2008: 111)

The truly terrifying aspect of this scenario is that Miles's capacity for destruction is limited only by his inherent helplessness. The children's actions are curtailed by the natural constraints of childhood, where they rely on adults for supervision, guidance, and protection. Their lack of physical strength or independence is what often keeps their potentially harmful desires in check. However, the heart of the horror lies in the idea of removing this helplessness. If you take away the restraints that naturally limit the actions of children, you unleash the potential of an unmeasurable power. As such, the idea of the children being endowed with an extremely high level of communication, connivance, verbosity or even musical proficiency makes it so we can no longer set rational boundaries, which turns Miles and Flora into a very powerful source of fear and discomfort.

The concept of the *uncanny valley*, albeit originated in the field of robotics, offers an interesting matrix in this context. It was usually utilized to refer to the discomfort or eeriness that people often experienced when they encountered a humanoid robot or animated character that closely resembled a human but fell just short of achieving true human-likeness; the idea brought forth by this notion is that as an entity becomes more human-like, our emotional response to it becomes increasingly positive and empathetic. However, there comes a point where the likeness is almost perfect but not quite, and at that juncture, our response turns negative, eliciting a sense of unease, repulsion, or even

fear. Miles and Flora, as characters, evoke what could be described as a sense of the uncanny valley – they are human, and yet, their behavior and demeanor deviate ever so slightly from what is expected of children. The novella carefully positions them in this unsettling space, where their actions and speech are just off-kilter enough to create an eerie and disconcerting effect. Arguably, this effect is transversally present across children, turning Miles and Flora into a sort of mirror for the instability of childhood as a category. *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Innocents* both take on the burden of exposing the uncanny nature of childhood by further suggesting that the inherent instability of that category is in itself unsettling; they tease and play with the notion that, due to it lying at the intersection of innocence and the unknown, of what is understood and what remains hidden, childhood is, in and of itself, often scary to adults.

When we consider the entirety of this chapter, it becomes evident how Miles and Flora assume a symbolic significance akin to our cultural imaginaries' monstrous figures, stemming from enduring literary and cinematic creatures that have intrigued and fascinated through similar mechanisms. Just as possessed characters like Regan in William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) are imbued with the horrors of a turbulent coming-of-age, Miles and Flora, too, symbolize a transition of the sort. They share common ground with such archetypal creatures as vampires and werewolves, often depicted as more susceptible to external influences and less adept at navigating complex moral choices, rendering them at the same time vulnerable to and a risk to those around them. Much like the classic Jekyll and Hyde archetype, they even embody the notion that the purity of childhood can swiftly give way to darker impulses and behaviors, underscoring an essentialist view of the dualistic nature of humanity.

In essence, Miles and Flora can indeed be perceived as *the two little monsters*, and Miles's plausible homosexuality further reinforces this claim, as for many individuals within our shared English-language culture, homosexuality was historically regarded as a monstrous condition. "Like an Evil Mr. Hyde, or the Wolfman, a gay […] self inside you might be striving to get out." (Benshoff 1997: 1). In fact, literature of the Victorian

era is rife with examples of monstrous themes that can be examined through a queer lens, from Le Fanu's depiction of the lesbian vampire seductress in *Carmilla* (2005) to the complex secret homosocial relationship in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (2003) to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2003), with its theme's tangents to gender subversions and bodily transformations. Ultimately, Miles and Flora are in concordance with their monster contemporaries in their symbolic status, and remind us that within the supposed innocence of childhood lies a deep well of ambiguity, a space where the line between the familiar and the other blurs.

> It is somewhat analogous to the moment of hesitation that demarcates Todorov's Fantastic, or Freud's theorization of the Uncanny: queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo and, in many cases within fantastic literature, the nature of reality itself." (Benshoff 1997: 5)

Final Remarks

In conclusion, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and its film adaptation, *The Innocents*, directed by Jack Clayton, can be read as primarily an inquiry into the intricate themes of Victorian innocence, sexuality, and the enigmatic nature of childhood existence. Central to both the novella and the film are the roles of Miles and Flora, through which the governess can constitute her narrative significance. The presence of the children as central figures in any interpretation of the narrative highlights their agency and autonomy, urging us to consider their perspectives and motivations, as well as problematizing their power dynamics, their uncanny demeanor and their sophistication in language – all of which resist simple categorization.

By embracing the enigmatic nature of childhood, exploring the repressed themes of sexuality, and placing the central focus on the complex characters of Miles and Flora, the titular objects continue to

captivate audiences, provoking thought and inviting us to question our assumptions about how we acknowledge and interact with children. Ultimately, the exploration of the intratextual and intertextual dichotomies of innocence/sexuality and child/adult power dynamics effectively illustrates the significance these characters, as well as the concept of childhood, surge on the narrative and the production of its elements of uneasiness, ambiguity, horror, moral panic and perversion. Both works illuminate the limitations of human understanding of the child, serving as a poignant reminder that the human experience is multifaceted and inherently ambiguous, while defying the status of Miles and Flora as mere *children characters* and instead opting for a more complete characterization which mirrors the inherent monstrosity and uncanny elements transversal to childhood and to its horror media representations.

Author Bio

Vítor Alves Silva is a visual artist, researcher, and curator. His primary research focuses on cinema studies and adaptation processes between literature and cinema, though he often writes on tangent issues pertaining to intermedial studies in general. He maintains a personal interest in side projects encompassing queer and women's themes as well as classical literature.

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