

The Innocents (1961) Clayton

P Michell, 2023

Synopsis

This genuinely frightening, exquisitely made supernatural gothic stars Deborah Kerr as an emotionally fragile governess who comes to suspect that there is something very, very wrong with her precocious new charges – Miles and Flora. . A psychosexually intensified adaptation by Truman Capote and directed by Jack Clayton, The Innocents is a triumph of narrative economy and technical expressiveness, from its chilling sound design to the stygian depths of its widescreen cinematography by Freddie Francis. (criterion.com)

This very special film is once again due to the sum of its contributors – actors, director & script. Most importantly music and cinematography act in unison. Good example when Miss Giddens first comes to the house – inside and outside shots. Especially good in cinemascope.

The Innocents is a 1961 [gothic psychological horror](#) film directed and produced by [Jack Clayton](#), and starring [Deborah Kerr](#), [Michael Redgrave](#), and [Megs Jenkins](#). Based on the 1898 novella [The Turn of the Screw](#) by the American novelist [Henry James](#), the screenplay was adapted by [William Archibald](#) and [Truman Capote](#), who used Archibald's own [1950 stage play](#)—also titled *The Innocents*—as a primary source text.

Prod Co: Achilles Film Productions & 20th Century Fox **Prod:** Jack Clayton **Dir:** Jack Clayton **Scr:** William Archibald, Truman Capote & John Mortimer **Phot:** Freddie Francis **Ed:** Jim Clark **Prod Des:** Wilfred Shingleton **Mus:** Georges Auric

Cast: Deborah Kerr, Peter Wyngarde, Pamela Franklin, Martin Stephens, Michael Redgrave, Megs Jenkins, Clytie Jessop

Creative personnel

Jack Clayton – Producer / Director (16 credits)

Known for this film, *Moby Dick* (1956) (UC), *Room at the Top* (1958), *Pumpkin Eater* (1964).

Though relatively sparse of output, he was acclaimed as an exponent of social realism and as one of the most literary of film makers. Virtually all of his films were adapted from classic novels.

His works have been widely admired and praised by leading film critics like Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert, and by film industry peers including Harold Pinter, Martin Scorsese, Guillermo del Toro, François Truffaut, Tennessee Williams and Steven Spielberg.

Freddie Francis – Cinematographer (37 credits)

Acclaimed British cinematographer. Started his film career as a cameraman for [John Huston](#) (second unit UC on *Moby Dick*) and for the directing team of [Powell and Pressburger](#) before becoming a cinematographer for British films such as [Jack Cardiff's](#) *Sons and Lovers* (1960), [Jack Clayton's](#) drama *Room at the Top* (1959) and psychological horror film *The Innocents* (1961). He became known for his collaborations with [David Lynch](#) with *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Dune* (1984), and *The Straight Story* (1999). He also

earned acclaim for his work on [The French Lieutenant's Woman](#) (1981) starring [Meryl Streep](#), and [Martin Scorsese's Cape Fear](#) (1991)

He was not very fond of special effects, which he thought diminished the cinematographer's art.

Truman Capote - Script

One of the 'New Journalists' who rewrote non-fiction books. Famous for his short stories such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Became a celebrated 'celebrity'. Open rivalry with fellow writer Gore Vidal.

Gore Vidal wryly once observed, "*Truman Capote has tried, with some success, to get into a world that I have tried, with some success, to get out of.*" (Wikipedia)

[Truman Capote](#) took a break from writing "In Cold Blood" in order to rewrite the screenplay for this film.

Georges Auric / Daphne Oram (UC) – Joint composers - Music (132 credits)

[Auric](#) (132 credits) – Accomplished classical composer. Worked with Jean Cocteau on at least two films – most famous being *Beauty and the Beast* (1946). Other noted films inc: *Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), *Moulin Rouge* (1952), *Tifiteld Thuderbald* (1953), *Wages of Fear* (1953), *Rfifi* (1955).

For the remainder of the 1960s and sporadically in the mid 1970s, Auric did some additional scoring, mostly French TV, but he was busy elsewhere as of 1962 being director of Paris Opera. Providing a unique finesse to film music, George Auric contributed nearly 130 scores, placing him along side some of the most prolific of the contemporary Hollywood film composers.

Oram – (3 credits)

Her only feature film. One of the founders of the justly famous BBC Radiophonic Workshop. (Her work at the Radiophonic Workshop also helped pave the way for [Delia Derbyshire](#), who arrived at the BBC in 1960 and later co-created the original [Doctor Who](#) theme music.)

British composer and [electronic musician](#). She was one of the first British composers to produce electronic sound, and was an early practitioner of [musique concrète](#) in the UK. The Oram Awards launched in 2017, to celebrate "emerging artists in the fields of music, sound and related technologies in honour of Daphne Oram, and other pioneering women in music and sound.

Her uncredited scoring work on the 1961 film [The Innocents](#) helped to pioneer the electronic soundtrack in films.

Established Oramics studio covering a wider range of sound than at the BBC Radiophonics. Oramics Machine is in the Science Museum, London.

Wilfrid Shingleton – Production Designer (35 credits)

Distinguished British art director, who began as a junior assistant in the art department at Ealin. He was involved with naval camouflage during wartime service, then joined Cineguild in 1947. Shingleton was assigned a number of prestige pictures, including *Great Expectations* (1946), *The African Queen* (1951) and *The Blue Max* (1966) (for which he won a BAFTA in 1966). Other credits include Polanski's *Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967), *The Avengers* TV series – 6 episodes (1967). Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971).

Pamela Franklin – Flora (58 credits)

Born in Japan. This is her film debut. Was the rebellious Sandy in Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1969) with Maggie Smith. In 1970s was in horror films as a 'scream queen'. Retired from acting in 1980s. The role of "Jenny" (played by [Ann Davies](#)) in [Doctor Who \(1963\)](#), was first intended for her.

Martin Stephens – Miles (18 credits)

Famous for this and Village of the Damned (1960). Popular child actor active in 1950s and early 1960s. Then retired from acting and became an architect.

Trivia

[François Truffaut](#) regarded this as the best British movie since Sir [Alfred Hitchcock](#) had left for America.

When Miss Giddens ([Deborah Kerr](#)) first arrives at the house, it's a bright, sunny day. In fact, [Freddie Francis](#) had had some of the trees painted lighter to exaggerate this.

Producer and director [Jack Clayton](#) was dismayed to learn that Twentieth Century Fox insisted on making the movie in CinemaScope. Cinematographer [Freddie Francis](#) set about making that less of a problem by framing the wide horizontal frame with lots of vertical lines to break it up. Conversely, he also used the wide space to emphasize shadowy spaces and using the emptiness towards an unsettling effect. To that end, he would often place characters at opposite ends of the frame.

Much of the screenplay was not actually derived from [Henry James'](#) novella "The Turn of the Screw", but from [William Archibald's](#) 1950 Broadway adaptation "The Innocents".

To create such sharp visuals, director of photography [Freddie Francis](#) used lots of huge bright lamps. [Deborah Kerr](#) sometimes had to resort to wearing sunglasses between takes. He also had candles custom made with four or five wicks entwined to produce more light.

Producer and director [Jack Clayton](#) didn't want the children to be exposed to the darker themes of the story, so they never saw the screenplay in its entirety. The children were given their pages the day before they were to be filmed.

[Deborah Kerr](#) was said to have regarded this as her finest performance.

Analysis / Reviews

The Horrors of Childhood

Amanda Garrett, [filminquiry.com](#), 2015

Miss Giddens (**Deborah Kerr**), the new governess for two orphaned children in Victorian England, arrives at their idyllic country estate in the beginning of the psychological horror film, *The Innocents* (1961). The naive young woman, who has lived a solidly middle class existence as a vicar's daughter, marvels at the stately home and spacious grounds. Everything, including her two young charges, seems innocent and perfect. Then Miss

Giddens glides past a perfectly arranged bouquet of roses. The fresh blooms wither and fall to the ground, a dark hint of things to come.

The Innocents, brilliantly directed by **Jack Clayton** from **Henry James** novella *The Turn of the Screw*, is one of the best classic horror films. In some ways it is a traditional ghost story filled with virtually every haunted house trope, including candelabras, billowing curtains, and specters tapping on window panes; but it transcends its Gothic setting to become the story of what writer **Christopher Frayling** termed a “shattered Eden.” Miss Giddens soon finds out that behind the idyllic exterior of country life, there lies dark tales of lust, murder, and childhood innocence lost.

A TALE OF SHATTERED INNOCENCE

The Innocents begins with Miss Giddens taking on a job as the new governess at Bly House, a country estate where a rich man (**Michael Redgrave**) keeps his orphaned niece and nephew. The uncle (significantly, he never has a name in the movie) wants nothing to do with the children; instead, he prefers the whirl of social life in London and Italy. He puts Miss Giddens in complete charge of the affairs at Bly. When she arrives, she soon finds that her two young charges, Flora (**Pamela Franklin**) and Miles (**Martin Stephens**), may be in contact with the ghosts of the previous governess and valet, who both died in a mysterious manner.

James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* as a Christmas ghost story (haunted Yuletide tales are an English tradition) to amuse his literary friends. The creepy story became a major success both among the public and the critics, and solving the story’s central mystery became a popular parlor game among the intelligentsia. The story inspired a successful stage adaptation by **William Archibald**, which changed **James**’ original title to *The Innocents*.

Clayton, who had worked his way up through the ranks of British cinema, decided to adapt *The Innocents* to the big screen after his first movie, *Room at the Top* (1959), was an international hit. **Archibald**’s play was a creaky melodrama that featured the ghosts actually grasping characters hands and attempting to drag them away. **Clayton** knew this would be laughable on screen, so he hired American writer **Truman Capote** to adapt the screenplay. Crucially, **Capote** made the ghosts much more ambiguous – it is unclear throughout the film whether the phantoms are real or just figments of Miss Giddens’ overactive imagination – and he introduced the concept of tarnished innocence, which became the movie’s central theme.

Today, *The Innocents* is often referred to as a psychosexual thriller, and while that’s somewhat true, the movie really isn’t that racy even by 1961 standards. Instead, it is about the painful journey from childhood to adulthood, and all of the confusing emotions, including sexuality, that come with growing up. Flora and Miles were both emotionally scarred by the tragic events at Bly House. The governess and valet were their surrogate parents, and they are both dealing with the grief of their unexpected and violent passing. Also, the valet and the governess were having a romantic liaison, and the children were probably exposed to adult sexuality. Miles especially seems to have picked up on this: the valet was something of a ladies’ man and Miles copies his behavior by flirting, teasing, and even at one point, kissing Miss Giddens in a very adult manner.

However, the real subject of *The Innocents* is Miss Giddens. In many ways, she is more childlike than her young charges (while **Kerr** is brilliant in the part, at age 39, she was much too old to play the governess, who is supposed to be a teenager). Miss Giddens has led a sheltered existence – this is the first time she has lived apart from her parents – and she seems to be overawed by the grandeur of Bly House and the persuasive charm of the childrens’ uncle.

Most importantly, Miss Giddens is an innocent when it comes to human nature. She does not understand that even the best behaved children act out at times, and she seems not to understand adult relationships at all. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most unmarried Victorian women were not given any sex education, and Miss Giddens, who is attracted to a portrait of the darkly handsome valet, is in the grip of emotions that she does not understand. She continuously digs for information about the governess and the valet’s relationship. At one point Miles calls her “dirty minded,” and her fevered imagination leads her further and further into becoming dangerously agitated and unstable.

A GROUNDBREAKING HORROR FILM

Even if you don’t care about the complex psychological dynamics in *The Innocents*, this movie is a great Halloween chiller. It’s certainly not a gut-bucket horror movie, but its old-fashioned scares are real. The movie is solidly within the haunted house genre, but unlike most of those films, **Clayton** doesn’t titillate the audience with cheap thrills. It is all about atmosphere, which is brilliantly created by the wide-screen photography of cinematographer **Freddie Francis** and pioneering sound technology by **Daphne Oram** (this is a film that is absolutely worth watching on Blu-ray to get the complete effect). *The Innocents* has many memorable set pieces that are seminal to the horror genre, including a chilling poetry recital by the children and the ghostly presence of the drowned governess, all wet and dressed in black, beckoning to Flora from across a pond.

Clayton and his team use all of their technical skills to create an insular world in *The Innocents*. The film never leaves the ground of Bly House except for trips to church, which places the audience in the same claustrophobic atmosphere as Miss Giddens. Along with her, we marvel at the beauty of Bly House (filmed on location at Sheffield Park in Sussex), and strain to see the shadowy figures peaking through windows and peering over rooftops. Along with her, we shiver at the chill of an autumn evening and feel the ghostly presence that withers the blooms on the rose.

The Power of Imagination

[Wheeler Winston Dixon](https://sensesofcinema.com/2019/wheeler-winston-dixon/), sensesofcinema.com, 2019

The Innocents (Jack Clayton, 1961) is one of the screen’s supreme ghost stories, and also one of the last great films shot in black-and-white CinemaScope by the gifted cinematographer Freddie Francis. It is, of course, based on the novella *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, and is arguably one of the most faithful translations of his work to the screen. But as the title of this essay indicates, it’s a film that requires both attention and imagination from audiences, for much of the horror in the film is implied rather than directly stated. It’s a film of shadows and sighs, of mysterious goings-on in an enormous Victorian mansion, a mixture of wonder and dread. To my mind, it’s one of the “perfect storm” movies, in which a group of

enormously talented people gathers together to make a specific project but the end result turns out to be much more than the sum of their individual contributions.

In addition to director Jack Clayton, whose other films include *Room At The Top* (1959, also photographed by Francis), *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964), *Our Mother's House* (1967) and his most high-profile film, the Robert Redford version of *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *The Innocents* also had the benefit of a haunting musical score by Georges Auric (which was reworked by W. Lambert Williamson when Auric fell ill); a suitably Gothic screenplay masterminded for the most part by Truman Capote, who took some time off from writing his famous non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood* (finally published in 1966) to do a three-week polish on William Archibald's original screenplay, and wound up spending several weeks on the set during contributing additional dialogue, along with John Mortimer; and Jim Clark's seamless editing, weaving all the material shot by Francis and Clayton into a fever-dream of all-encompassing evil.

The cast, too, is excellent: Deborah Kerr is completely believable as the novice governess Miss Giddens; Megs Jenkins is suitably credulous as the long-suffering housekeeper Mrs. Grose; and Michael Redgrave lends just the right touch of pompous indifference to his brief turn at the beginning of the film as the libertine uncle who has unexpectedly been saddled with two children he admits he cares nothing for (a responsibility he wants no part of, now or in the future) while he pursues a life of unceasing pleasure. But the film ultimately belongs to the two children who are placed in Miss Giddens' care at an enormous country estate, Bly House: the precocious Miles (played to perfection by the then 12-year-old Martin Stephens, fresh off his star-making turn in Wolf Rilla's *Village of the Damned* [1960] as the cold, emotionless leader of a group of alien children); and Pamela Franklin, as Miles' sister Flora, in her screen debut.

Then there are two additional characters to reckon with, both phantoms: the spectral Clytie Jessop, wordlessly portraying the ghost of Miss Jessel, the previous governess, who committed suicide but still haunts the grounds of the estate; and Peter Wyngarde, as her sadistic lover Peter Quint, clearly a malign influence on the children, also deceased, but whose ghostly presence is still felt throughout the house. Everyone in the film *inhabits* their respective roles, particularly Stephens, who admitted:

“I knew it was an unusual part. I quietly liked it ... having these very adult qualities and having control over the adult. Imagine having that power – and I could taste a bit of that. You realise how powerless you are as a child. I don't think I found it too much of a stretch.”¹

The film's plot is deceptively simple: in Victorian England, Miss Giddens, engaged by the children's self-confessedly “selfish” uncle, is charged with taking care of Miles and Flora's education and welfare at the uncle's country estate, with the specific mandate that she must never contact him about anything; Miss Giddens is to have, in his words, “supreme authority” over the children, and to leave him entirely alone. Although it is her first post as a governess, Miss Giddens accepts, and is initially dazzled by the luxurious splendour of the country mansion, which appears at a distance to be warm and inviting. Upon her arrival, Miss Giddens has only the young Flora to contend with; but shortly afterwards, Miles is unexpectedly expelled from his boarding school for “corrupting” the other students, and sent home to Bly House.

What ensues is an escalating battle of wills between the children and Miss Giddens, while the ghostly presences of Quint and Miss Jessel exert ever-increasing influence over the children's behaviour. Miss Giddens struggles to assert her authority over Miles, in particular, whose

superficially pleasant manners hide a darker, more sinister intent with surprisingly sexual overtones. Mrs. Grose, while helpful, is clearly out of her depth – she can't even read – and as the film reaches its climax, Miss Giddens sends Flora, the servants and Mrs. Grose away to London as she and Miles come to a final confrontation in the enormous, ill-lit house, with disastrous results.

While Clayton's meticulous direction is certainly a key factor here, and the performances throughout – as well as Auric's quietly insistent musical score – are uniformly excellent, the lynchpin of the entire enterprise is Francis' stunning cinematography. During the daylight hours, when the sun is out, the scenes are slightly overexposed to give them an appropriately "hot" feeling; but when Miss Giddens prowls the corridors of Bly House at night, her path lit only by the candelabra she carries, the dark house threatens to swallow up all those who dare to inhabit it. Interestingly, to enhance the light of the candelabra, Francis created special candles with four or five wicks apiece, so that the candlelight itself illuminates much of the scene.

To enhance this feeling of perpetual unease, Francis actually painted on the edges of the lenses to create a vignetting effect, so that one feels that *something* is always lurking at the edges of the frame. Though *The Innocents* was originally to have been filmed in standard Academy ratio, Francis responded to 20th Century Fox's insistence on CinemaScope by composing shots that are at once claustrophobic and yet sinuously inviting. The film's running time is compact; but, by the end, one feels that one has become part of the world of the film, seduced by the luxurious mansion, Francis' elegantly polished imagery and the dreamlike editing, which makes the entire film seem like an all-too-plausible nightmare. Once seen, never forgotten, *The Innocents* is that rare film that inspires fear through the power of imagination – a phrase the children's uncle uses repeatedly in his initial interview with Miss Giddens – leaving the viewer intoxicated, unsettled and altogether entranced.

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The Innocents (1961 Great Britain 99 min)

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Endnotes:

1. Mark Burman, "Return of the Cuckoos," *The Guardian*, 4 December 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/dec/05/2> 