

**The Ambiguity of the Existence of Ghosts in *The Haunting of Hill House*,  
*The Turn of the Screw*, and Their Netflix Adaptations**

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**Cover image:** Pape, Eric. *I must have thrown myself, on my face, on the ground.* 1898. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University. *File:The-Turn-of-the-Screw-Collier's-7.jpg*, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6f/The-Turn-of-the-Screw-Collier%27s-7.jpg/615px-The-Turn-of-the-Screw-Collier%27s-7.jpg>. Accessed 09 June 2021.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: Wrongly Assigned Scripts and Potential Corruption from Ghosts in Henry James's <i>The Turn of the Screw</i>	9
Chapter 2: Replacement Scripts Leading to Mental Disintegration in Shirley Jackson's <i>The Haunting of Hill House</i>	20
Chapter 3: The Effects of the Adaptation Process Leading to Unambiguous Ghosts in Mike Flanagan's <i>The Haunting of Hill House</i>	27
Chapter 4: Unambiguous Ghosts Affecting the Plot and Themes in Mike Flanagan's <i>The Haunting of Bly Manor</i>	38
Chapter 5: The Functions of the Ghosts and Their Relation to the Theme of Innocence and Corruption	48
5.1 Symbolic Hauntings in Jackson's <i>The Haunting of Hill House</i>	49
5.2 Ambiguous Hauntings in James's <i>The Turn of the Screw</i>	50
5.3 Real Ghosts with Real Agency in Flanagan's <i>The Haunting</i>	53
5.4 Conclusion	64
Conclusion	66
Bibliography	69

## Introduction

Ghost narratives set in domestic settings have always been popular. From *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to the *Paranormal Activity* movie franchise (2007-present), haunted house stories have gripped niche audiences in various mediums. There is also a trend of adapting classic prose fiction ghost narratives for the screen. This has been done with Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983), and Suzuki Koji's *The Ring* series (1991-2013). Among the most famous literary ghost- and haunted-house narratives to be adapted are Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). These novels appear on Barnes and Noble's top ten list of scariest haunted house stories (Somers), which makes them ideal for film and television adaptations. Their long-lasting popularity comes paired with the notorious ambiguity surrounding the existence of ghosts and the "reality" of the supernatural in both stories.. Adaptations seem to have two clear-cut options to address this ambiguity: not showing the ghosts at all, which invites a reading of the narrative in which the ghosts are not real, but figments of the protagonists' imagination; and showing the ghosts explicitly on screen, which invites the audience to understand the ghosts as really existing within the fictional world of the story. While the first option would foreground the psychological themes of the stories, the second option would foreground their supernatural elements.

Both texts have been adapted for the screen multiple times already<sup>1</sup>. Most recently, they were the source material for Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting* series (2018-2020) on Netflix. Flanagan ensures that the series, specifically the second season, titled *The Haunting*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Haunting of Hill House* has most notably been made into the movie *The Haunting* (1963), by Robert Wise and Nelson Gidding, and as *The Haunting* (1999) by Jan de Bont. *The Turn of the Screw* has been adapted as *The Innocents* (1961) by Jack Clayton, Floria Sigismondi adapted it as *The Turning* (2020), and Michael Winner made a prequel film titled *The Nightcomers* (1971).

of *Bly Manor*, contains explicit intertextual references to previous ghost story adaptations, as well as previous adaptations of James’s novella. For example, *The Shining* is alluded to in several ways in the first episode. Dani’s hotel room number is 217, which is the same room number as the extremely haunted room in which the paranormal events take place in *The Shining*. Additionally, the protagonist shares her name with the child who has the shining, and Figure 1 shows how the blocks on Ms. Jessel’s desk spell out “redrum.”



**Figure 1.** Building blocks on Rebecca Jessel’s desk spell out “redrum”. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Two Faces Part Two”. *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 7, 00:18:29. Accessed 17 May 2021.

The word, “murder” spelled backwards, is a central symbolic aspect of both King’s book, Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation, and King’s own 1997 television adaptation of his novel. Other references include the song “O Willow Waly” from *The Innocents* (1961), an adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw*, as well as nods to other works of James’s in the episode titles. The high volume of references is evidence that Mike Flanagan intended for *The Haunting* to be understood as belonging to the central ghost story tradition as exemplified by key contemporary and classic works within the genre.

It is important to note that *Bly Manor*, the second season of Flanagan's *The Haunting*, borrows key elements from many of Henry James's ghost stories. For example, it borrowed the plot of "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" (1868) for the majority of the eighth episode, and the episode titles of the series all come from James's works. However, most of the plot is based on *The Turn of the Screw*. Netflix first announced the series as being based on *The Turn of the Screw*; this was revealed to *Variety* (Otterson), as well as in a tweet (@haunting) that featured a quote from the novella: "the terrace and the whole place, the lawn and the garden beyond it, all I could see of the park, were empty with a great emptiness" (James 170). Hence it makes sense to analyse the second season of *The Haunting* anthology as an adaptation of James's novella.

As mentioned earlier, the popularity of the two novels can be ascribed in part to the ambiguity surrounding the hauntings, because it prompts discussions about the existence of the supernatural in the narrative and speaks to people's imaginations. Another possible reason behind the popularity of ghost narratives in domestic settings is that the concept of haunting in any form allows writers and filmmakers alike to explore the ways in which a person can be haunted. This does not necessarily have to be a supernatural haunting; it can be a symbolic haunting. One such symbolic haunting is the way that a set of rigid expectations concerning a person's thoughts and behaviour within a social context is constantly, yet invisibly, exerting a force on an individual's sense of self. Within the field of sociology, such prescribed patterns of human behaviour are called social or cultural scripts (Goddard and Wierzbicka 153). This critical term will be explained in more detail in the first chapter and explored as a "haunting force" throughout this thesis.

Specifically, this thesis examines the relations between such social scripts and the ambiguity surrounding the existence of ghosts in *The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Turn of*

*the Screw*, and their modern Netflix adaptation *The Haunting*. It critically explores how the adaptation process has consequences for the nature of the ambiguity and thematic function of the ghosts within each narrative. In a visual medium, the representation of ghosts undermines the ambiguity of their existence. In turn, this has an impact on the themes of innocence and corruption that are explored in the narrative, which transform from psychologically oriented to socially oriented themes. The definition of innocence employed throughout this thesis is the Merriam-Webster definition as “freedom of guilt or sin through being unacquainted with evil” (“Innocence”). Corruption, the direct antithesis of innocence, is therefore defined as being acquainted with evil, or “inducement to wrong by improper [...] means” (“Corruption”).

Adaptation theorists such as Julie Sanders and Linda Hutcherson focus on the importance of the screen as a medium for adaptations. However, this analysis focuses on the ambiguity within the language of the text and how the visualisation and representation of the ghosts changes the manner in which the characters, as well as the audience, respond to the ghosts. In order to analyse these visualised ghosts and the roles they fulfil, I turn to the taxonomy of ghosts as set out by Julia Briggs.

Firstly, this thesis provides a close reading of the primary sources, analysing the treatment of the ghosts within each story and their relation to the central themes of the text. Secondly, it compares these findings in the novels and the Netflix adaptations to uncover the differences in treatment of the ghosts and their effects on the themes of the narratives. Chapter one argues that the ambiguity of the ghosts’ existence in *The Turn of the Screw* is caused by the protagonist and her adherence to the wrong script. Chapter two puts forth the argument that Eleanor’s failure to adhere to a new script presented to her in Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* causes her demise, and that the supernatural occurrences are only

symbolic of her deteriorating mental health. Chapter three shows that the ambiguity surrounding the supernatural disappears in Flanagan's *Hill House* because of the visualisation of the ghosts. It also shows that this disappearance causes the show to shift its focus to social themes rather than only psychological ones. Finally, it shows that the ghosts have agency and influence the plot and the themes of innocence and corruption. The fourth chapter argues that *Bly Manor* also has ghosts with agency that actively influence the plot and the aforementioned themes because of the adaptation process. Lastly, chapter five compares the treatment of the various ghosts in the narratives, as well as how they influence the themes of innocence and corruption.



## **Chapter 1: Wrongly Assigned Scripts and Potential Corruption from Ghosts in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw***

120 years after the first publication of *The Turn of the Screw*, the reality of the ghosts' existence at Bly is still debated. This chapter will show that this ambiguity is caused by the governess's peculiar perspective of events. In her attempts to explain the children's strange behaviour, the governess relies on the Victorian script of the naturally innocent child. As such, she cannot accept the possibility of inherent wickedness in the children. To explain their behaviour, she turns to the popular "spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century" of hauntings and possession (Bann 664): the children must have been corrupted by evil spirits. The governess's turn towards spiritualist discourse of possession is explainable. The children's uncle has given the governess a cultural script she is unable to perform successfully as a governess. Rather than being merely the children's governess, she feels she has been given the task of being at the helm of "a great drifting ship" (156) with the ultimate authority over everything that happens at Bly. Unable to successfully carry this weight of responsibility, the governess turns to corrupting supernatural powers to explain her failure to "save" the children.

Scripts, as defined by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson, are standardised chains of events that supply connectivity to a situation (38, 40). Behavioural scripts allow people to make assumptions and judgments in everyday situations, and they are "predetermined, stereotyped sequence[s] of actions" that define recognised situations (41). This chapter, as well as the next, makes use of this definition of scripts to determine why characters behave the way that they do, or interpret another's actions in the way that they do.

When considering the theme of innocence and corruption, especially in Victorian supernatural fiction, children are the first characters that come to mind. According to Claudia Nelson, "[i]t is a truism that, to an extent not shared by any previous culture, the Victorians

were fascinated by childhood” (1). Victorians were particularly fascinated by childhood innocence. As argued by Mary Gryctko, there was an “image of the ideal child as white, ‘innocent,’ and in need of protection” (iv). The children in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* experience both childlike innocence and subsequent corruption due to the supposed ghosts that haunt Bly. Although Miles is expelled from school for corrupting the other children before the ghosts appear, Anna Bocci claims that he corrupted his peers unwittingly, “because [he does] not know the difference between good and bad actions yet; if [he] did, [he] may as well be considered grown-up” (164). The governess does consider the children corrupted by the ghosts, despite this expulsion, because they initially do not talk about bad things in her presence, and she does not ask (Bocci 171). As such, Miles remains innocent in the eyes of the governess because of the mere fact that he is a child, or because he does not speak of bad things. The adults in the frame narrative are quite aware of the fact that children provide an effective method of adding something extra to a story, perhaps gaining sympathy from the audience and making a story more interesting:

[the ghost’s] appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it’s not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have been concerned with a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say of two children –? (145)

There is a cultural convention of childhood innocence being followed by corruption, that the characters in the frame are conscious of. In Victorian times, there was a cult centred around the dead child, eternally innocent, one “that assumes that there is only one sort of harm that can come to a child: ‘corruption’” (Gryctko 119). This contrast between innocence and corruption is made stronger by the introduction of children because children are considered innocent and in need of protection simply because they have not yet experienced the world. According to Jennifer Sattaur, in the Victorian era “to add a child to a ghost story, or a ghost

to a children's story, was to combine narrative indulgence in nostalgia [for childhood] with a pleasurable frisson of horror" (108). It was common then to introduce children into a horror narrative, because, as Bocci argues, their innocence "must be protected by hiding from them the fact that something different exists, and that not everyone in the world is in the same condition – as innocent as them" (165). This innocence can relate to their understanding of the world, as it is limited at their age, or to the potential existence of another realm, and both interpretations are fitting for the novella, as it engages with the supernatural as a concept, as well as the way the children view the world. Miles and Flora, are viewed as innocent by their governess, but there is something eerie about them, nonetheless, as Sattaur claims:

In many ways, the late-Victorian ghost story and late-Victorian perceptions of childhood were a highly compatible, mutually beneficial pairing: the child, like the ghost, could be seen as "not quite there", a something always on the verge of becoming something else, of uncertain motive and indeterminable moral standing.  
(106)

In fact, the protagonist assumes their innocence simply because they are children, because "[t]he child lay at the heart of the late-Victorian familial ideal" (Sattaur 107). Another reason the governess assumes they are innocent is because Miles and Flora are beautiful and angelic creatures. She argues this before even having laid eyes upon them and solely following the word of the housekeeper. For example, the governess is incredulous when given the letter that states that Miles has been expelled:

[Mrs Grose] suddenly flamed up. "Master Miles! *him* an injury?"

There was such a flood of good faith in it that, though I had not yet seen the child, my very fears made me jump to the absurdity of the idea. I found myself, to meet my friend the better, offering it, on the spot, sarcastically. "To his poor little innocent mates!"  
(158)

When she finally does meet Miles, the governess “concludes that the school staff must have made a mistake, because the boy looks to her perfectly innocent” (Bocci 169). The character makes a clear link between innocence and outward appearance, a view shared by Adam McCune:

[the governess’s] appeal to the children’s beauty as a proof of innocence comes at a moment when they can see that Flora is disobediently shirking her schoolwork and have just heard that Miles has been expelled, and yet the governess and Mrs. Grose are convinced by the cultural script. (958)

The “cultural script” mentioned here is that of innocent Victorian children. They are expected to display specific behaviours and mannerisms befitting them, such as being mainly concerned with themselves, desiring to spend time with others their age, and being beautiful. They do so perfectly, because the governess falls under their spell and makes assumptions about their character based solely on their appearance and what she interprets their script to be. However, as described above by McCune, the beautiful children perform their culturally prescribed role suspiciously well. Therefore, there must be a reason as to why they do so, presumably because they are hiding something. The governess judges a book by its cover, and wrongly so, because the children are aware of their behavioural scripts, thus deviating from them and adhering to others.

The innocence of the children is shown in their desires, according to McCune, as these are innocent, childlike, and considered normal for their age:

they want to amuse themselves (including, on occasion, amusing themselves alone), they want to avoid the less pleasant forms of schoolwork, they want the authority belonging to their social class, and Miles in particular wants the socialisation (school) that will enable him to mature into the social role associated with his gender and class. (952)

All desires expressed explicitly by the children, using phrases such as “I want to see more life”, “I want my own sort” (217) and “I don’t want to go back [...] I want a new field” (227), are normal, according to the Victorian cultural script for children. They often use such self-centred language as they are only concerned with themselves and not yet with others. However, when considering this trait in adults, it could become problematic and warrant negative descriptors such as egocentric and egotistical, words not often considered as a childhood trait that vanishes with age.

The desires of Miles and Flora stand in stark contrast to those of the governess. The way in which she smothers the children in affection reveals how much she wants them to be close to her. This results in the delay of Miles’s education as she prevents him from attending school to always keep him nearby. Her self-centred language is only used in relation to the ghosts or the children, for example when she expresses her desire for knowledge on the ghosts, it is solely so she can better protect the children (160; 220; 228). Her possessive language concerns almost exclusively her relations with Mrs Grose and the children, referring to them as “my friend” 25 times, (231) and “my pupils” eighteen times (152) respectively. Thus, Miles’s immense desire for privacy and his peers is transformed from an odd wish into something reasonable, considering the overbearing nature of his governess.

According to McCune, the children in *The Turn of the Screw* adhere to the cultural script of the perfectly innocent Victorian child prescribed to them by their culture, and the desires that come with it: “*The Turn of the Screw* is the story of the children’s desires, how their desires are inhibited by the governess, and how the children perform childhood and adulthood in an effort to gain what they want” (952). Miles and Flora are aware of their cultural script and perform accordingly: they manipulate the governess with performances, by putting on a show and by presenting themselves according to the scripts she expects them to perform, which suggests that they are more knowing and experienced than the governess

assumes of them. When Flora wishes to go outside, Miles plays the piano for the governess, and tells her that he is unaware of his sister's whereabouts. The governess sees this as a deception, a "trick": realising that "he found the most divine little way to keep [the governess] quiet while [Flora] went off" (231-232). Their performances shift when the governess becomes overbearing in their eyes; they "increase the intensity of their performance of innocent, affectionate, 'good' students in order to achieve their desired privacy" (McCune 960). This further supports the idea that the children are perhaps not innocent after all, or more independent than the governess would like to admit, because of their parents' passing which forced them to mature quickly. Although the governess eventually suspects this lack of knowledge is no longer a correct assessment of the children, she still believes the children are inherently good. Bocci differentiates between good, evil, corrupted, and naughty:

A naughty boy does bad things without being aware of the notion of good and evil. Corrupted people, on the contrary, know what evil is and, through their bad actions, spread evilness in others. This implies, in turn, that people become corrupted because of somebody else's influence, in a possibly perpetual cycle. The text hints at the fact that, when her pupils start acting as if they were not innocent any more, the governess stops referring to them as 'children.' (166)

However, Bocci's support for her argument is ungrounded, for the governess does refer to Miles and Flora as children, until the very end. Flora is indeed referred to as "an old, old woman" (235), rather than a child, before the governess and Mrs Grose find her. This view, however, is immediately amended when Flora is hugged by Mrs Grose, as the governess then refers to her as "the child" once more, even though she sees Flora looking at her over Mrs Grose's shoulder. This gives the governess an uneasy feeling (236). Additionally, when the governess confronts Miles about having taken her letter, she is suspicious of him; she

nevertheless refers to him as “the child” (258). The governess also does not increase her use of the contrasting word “gentleman” once her suspicions begin to arise.

Although the governess certainly believes the children are in danger of being corrupted by the supernatural beings, a critical reader will remain unconvinced of this. For the governess, the existence of ghosts forms a plausible explanation for the strange behaviour of the children, as, according to Jennifer Bann, there was a “rapid spread of and popularity of the spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century [which] contributed a new model of the ghostly to supernatural literature” (664). Ghosts were seen as liminal figures with little to no agency (Bann 674), and because children were presented as being “entirely ignorant of ghosts and ghostly conventions,” the children’s revelation that they have interacted with ghosts has a bigger impact on the reader’s understanding of the narrative (Bann 674).

The first-person narration is at its core a deceptive one, which proposes two different readings of the novella: one that assumes the ghosts are real, and one that assumes they are hallucinated by the governess due to a variety of factors, but most notably including her sexual repression (McCune 952; Davidson 457). Davidson argues this because of the governess’s attraction to the children’s uncle, which is suggested in the text to be “the reason she took the job in the first place” (Davidson 459): “[b]y my discretion, my quiet good sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure—if he had ever thought of it! —to the person to whose pressure I had yielded” (James 163). Davidson proposes the fact that the ambiguity of the ghosts’ existence is the sole reason *The Turn of the Screw* has become the most popular of James’s novels as it brought forth the two polarising readings of the story, but also because the debate is unsolvable, as James apparently intended it to be (457). The first view, the one that adheres to the notion that the ghosts are real, has been the standard for the “first decades after the novella’s publication [...] and most readers viewed the governess as a perfectly sane young woman who does whatever is necessary to save the children from

the ghosts” (Bocci 176). The governess as a narrator is problematic. She is either unreliable or fallible, depending on one’s reading. If, on the one hand, one simply distrusts her motives because she is omitting information for her own benefit, she is unreliable. If, on the other hand, one believes the governess to be genuine but prone to misunderstanding, she is a fallible narrator. The distinction is ambiguous, and hard to make, because she conveys that she is completely convinced of the truth she believes in so fervently: “[i]t is necessary to distinguish between her observations, which may or may not be sincere, and her interpretation of these, which may or may not be credible” (McCune 954). Although, for example, she observes Flora and the apparition of Miss Jessel together at the lake, the governess interprets this as Flora being able to see and converse with the ghost. This, too, is a plausible interpretation for the governess, considering the discourse surrounding spiritualism at the time of writing. As stated by Georgina Byrne:

Children played a part in the growth of spiritualism as a movement, and as early as the 1860s some were being taught and trained in the ideas of spiritualism. Children, and their mediumistic gifts, were taken seriously, and parents were encouraged to develop the talents of their offspring. (62)

As Byrne states, it was common from the 1860s onwards to make children familiar with spiritualism. Because of this, the governess assumes that Flora can talk to the ghost of Miss Jessel. Half of the observation, Flora being at the lake, is true and confirmed by Mrs Grose who comes to hug the child. The other half is only put forward by the governess herself, as there is no agreement from Mrs Grose or Flora on the matter of Miss Jessel’s ghost. The interpretation, therefore, must be taken with a grain of salt. She can be seen as a benevolent caretaker, and the children as lying and performing; or she can be viewed as obsessive and paranoid to a harmful degree.



Whether the ghosts are real, and whether they actively put the children in danger, the governess certainly is a fervent believer, and ascribes every sinister and suspicious detail to their existence, including the children's behaviour:

The protagonist fears that such an influence has nefarious effects on her pupils and, significantly, her suspicions are often based on her pupils' behaviour. In fact, while the children usually act in their best conduct [...], concerns grow that they might be hiding something from adults, and the final dialogues overthrow the initial image of children as essentially innocent creatures. (Bocci 161)

The governess becomes increasingly paranoid and suspicious of Miles and Flora, believing them at last to be corrupted by the apparitions of Mr Quint and Miss Jessel respectively:

“[s]he becomes convinced that Miles adheres to a different script—the corrupted child.

Convinced that Miles is colluding with Quint, the governess believes him to be not boyishly naughty but touched by the kind of evil that can ‘corrupt’” (McCune 963). As she becomes aware of the children's performance of innocence, she links it to corruption and

untrustworthiness. Flora's statements are doubted, and she is assumed to be lying, and

Miles's desires for privacy and curiosity are interpreted as nefarious and imposed on him by

Quint. The ghosts, in the protagonist's mind, are “turning Miles and Flora into evil creatures”

(Bocci 181). However, she does not believe them to be beyond saving — in fact, she believes

herself to be a potential saviour, as evident from the constant insistence that she is able to

“save” the children (228, 248). She characterises herself as a Gothic heroine in her Gothic

fantasy, declaring that she is able to free Miles from the influence of Quint because she is in

possession of Miles. Yet the moment she does so, “his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped”

(262), raising the question of whether he dies in fright, in the governess's tight, potentially

suffocating grasp, or because Quint no longer has a hold of him.

Finally, in light of the further chapters, it is important to consider the residence of Bly. Because the children's uncle refuses to reside there, its ownership is in question. Although technically the uncle is in charge and possession of the house, and Mrs Grose is "the head of the little establishment," this is only the case for the downstairs, and the governess is appointed the "supreme authority" (15) of the house. Despite her efforts to make herself at home at Bly, the protagonist fails at this. According to Davidson:

the demands of property defeat her. In remaining a house rather than a home, in resisting the governess's attempts to assimilate it to a narrative of familial reconstruction, Bly remains a piece of property with its own kind of autonomous identity. (467)

Although she does not own Bly or change its identity in any way, the governess is enwound in a struggle surrounding the ownership of the mansion, with the children's uncle, Mrs Grose (though she takes a more passive role because of her inability to read and therefore manage the house), and the ghosts (Davidson 460). The uncle's script includes ownership and responsibility for the wellbeing of Bly and its inhabitants; but he neglects the children as well as the manor. For that reason, the governess feels as if the house and responsibility for it belong to her own cultural script, seeing herself as the captain of "a great drifting ship" that is lacking one (James 156). Though she is initially positively surprised at its appearance (152), this view is amended in the same chapter to "a big, ugly, antique but convenient house embodying a few features of a building still older, half replaced and half utilized" (156). Nevertheless, the governess can still see herself standing at the helm of this ship, becoming its captain (156) to steer it the way she sees fit.

In short, in *The Turn of the Screw*, the children can be viewed as innocent, or as performing innocence to achieve their desires, and the governess can be seen as innocent because she is unaware of the mysteries of Bly. Corruption comes in two possibilities: if the

governess is sound of mind and the ghosts are real, the children are under the influence of the ghosts and thus corrupted by them. If, however, the ghosts are a figment of the governess's imagination, she is the one corrupting the children with her obsessive need to be close to them, and she herself becomes corrupted due to her deteriorating mental health. This is directly linked to being asked to adhere to the wrong script that gives her too much authority. The themes of innocence and corruption, as well as sanity and madness, frame the story and contribute significantly to the horror of the narrative.

## **Chapter 2: Replacement Scripts Leading to Mental Disintegration in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House***

The analysis of *The Haunting of Hill House* will show that Eleanor's dislike of and failure to adhere to her allotted cultural script – that of the dutiful daughter and obedient sister – causes her to seek an escape and a new script that fits her personal sense of self better. At Hill House, Eleanor encounters Theodora, whose identity and social position initially make her a role model for Eleanor, presenting her with a new script. Yet Eleanor once again fails to adhere to the script. This chapter proposes that Eleanor's failure to perform a new cultural script, characterised by freedom of thought and movement, is due to her past experiences and her past script that retain a hold over her. Although she craves a new script, the old one still determines the way she views the world and the house to a large extent. As in *The Turn of the Screw*, the ambiguity in *Hill House* surrounding the origin of the supernatural events is closely related to the protagonist's failure to act out her prescribed role. Are the supernatural phenomena in the house projections from Eleanor's psyche, expressive of her repressed experiences and desires (her hearing her mother's voice, and the attack on Theodora when Eleanor got upset with her)? Or does Eleanor really have psychic powers, and does she, knowingly or not, cause the mysterious events herself? I propose that the theme of innocence versus corruption is expressed in this text through the more specific theme of sanity versus madness, which is brought about by Eleanor's adherence to, and refusal of, the cultural scripts presented to her. My analysis will show that the ambiguity of the supernatural in *The Haunting of Hill House*, is brought about by the way in which Eleanor is cast as "mad" by the other characters in the novel, for failing to properly perform the cultural script given to her, while Eleanor herself invokes the corruptive powers of the supernatural house to explain this failure.

The eponymous house in *The Haunting of Hill House* is considered an entity of its own, and is described as having agency from the outset by the narrator:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (3)

With phrases such as “Hill House [...] stood by itself” and “not sane” the house is described as if it has a deranged consciousness, which is continued in the following chapter: Jackson uses “Hill House seemed awake” (34) and notes that it “reared its great head back against the sky” (35). The builder of the house, Hugh Crain, is not given the agency the house possesses: it is only mentioned that he built the house with a vision for his children (75), and that his wives all mysteriously died (75; 76). The heir to Hill House, Luke, is the host and is given some authority over the house, but it stands on its own. Michael Wilson uses similar language to describe the house. He indicates that the house “attempt[s] to seduce and then destroy Eleanor” (116) and that “the House is, indeed, hurting Eleanor” (119). According to Wilson, the house is “not interested in seducing and then destroying Theodora” (117). Eleanor, after all, is still searching for a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and a way out of the cultural script she was assigned as a dutiful daughter and caretaker of her ill mother. By contrast, Theodora has already managed to develop a strong sense of self and independence. By living with a female partner in her own apartment, rather than, for example, with a husband in *his* house, she deviates from the cultural script prescribed for young women in mainstream American culture of the 1950s. Although the guests are together as a group, they “walked alone” (3). It is implied that the house is responsible for the discomfort brought to the

characters, especially Eleanor, whom it has chosen as its primary victim due to her mental fragility. I read the house as not having agency as a supernaturally animated mansion, but as being the symbolic setting and catalyst for Eleanor's personal growth, which leads to the supernatural occurrences in the house. The reason for this, specifically, is the cooccurrence of the supernatural events in the house with Eleanor's heightened and intensified emotions, such as the appearance of writing on the wall and blood on Theodora's clothes happening at the same time as Eleanor's growing distaste for Theodora. The house also never targets Eleanor in a malicious manner as it does with the blood on Theodora's clothes; no harm comes to Eleanor, only to the people she dislikes. This is the direct antithesis to the house in *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the ghosts are responsible for either the governess's descent into madness or her growing urge to protect the children. The house of Bly is unimportant: it would not make a difference if the story were set anywhere else. Hill House, contrarily, has a distinct function.

Despite its third-person omniscient narrator, *The Haunting of Hill House* does propose a similar issue of unreliable narration. For most of the novel, the narrator focalises through Eleanor, and the reader experiences Hill House through her eyes. It is apparent that, at her arrival, she is full of expectation and longing for a home and an adventure, which makes her more susceptible to the house's "madness" (Wilson 119). This argument is also brought to the fore by Tony Vinci:

By inviting the reader into the consciousness of a traumatized subject, Jackson reveals how the mind vulnerable enough to be haunted opens itself to the ethical possibilities that become available when it abandons the human as a valid ontological construct. Jackson's posthumanist subjects are often, if not always, victims of severe but often subtle abuse, suggesting that what has been identified previously by Jackson scholars as evidence of 'madness' could be rethought as evidence of trauma. (54)

Eleanor is a mentally unstable and vulnerable young woman who presents herself as the perfect prey for the house because of her past and how the events in her past affect her in the present. The source of her trauma, according to Vinci, is not a singular moment in Eleanor's past, but rather a "sequence of events—Mr. Vance's death, the rain of stones, the people gathering around the house, Nell's mother's paranoid reactions, Nell's and her sister's temporary removal for [sic] the home" (56). Instead of viewing Eleanor as an innocent woman who experiences the world of adults and the supernatural, and its corruption, for the first time, like the children and governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, it is possible and important to consider her as traumatised and descending into insanity, which leads to the supernatural experiences in the house. Although she is not mentally stable at the beginning of the tale due to her traumatic past at the hands of her mother and sister (Vinci 55-56), she becomes increasingly more unstable in the house with the other guests, which leads to an increase in the supernatural events. Curiously, her previous supernatural encounter with the stone shower falling on her roof, left her traumatised, but not yet mad. The stones function more as a symbolic representation of the trauma she endured by her mother and sister. Doctor Montague sees this event as the main reason to bring Eleanor to Hill House, for he believes her to have psychic powers. As argued by Vinci, Eleanor's trip to Hill House is a way for her to start healing from her trauma:

Once liberated from the most immediate sources of non-punctual trauma (the oppressive, hate-fueled dynamics of her family and an alienating social realm that refuses to validate her pain), Nell is free to experiment with ways to manage and work through her trauma. (59)

She eventually does not do so in a healthy manner, but her intentions are good: she strives for independence from her family by taking her first solo trip, seeking out adventure and a way to step out of her comfort zone. However, in her own mind, she must break the law for her to

go on this adventure. She feels guilty for taking the car without her sister's consent, even though she half owns it. In this manner, her corruption commences before she enters Hill House, but after she is made aware of its existence. It can be argued that Hill House's reach is further than the actual grounds of the house, and that it manipulates Eleanor before she steps foot inside. This adventure is necessary for her, because "[Eleanor's] youth has been sacrificed to caring for a sickly and tyrannical mother to the extent that the House's own manifestations take the form of that mother on occasion" (Wilson 122). Her search for independence started because of the need to escape from this oppression, but it has the opposite effect. Eleanor realises she is unable to adhere to the new scripts presented to her, those that include this independence and adventure, resulting in her death.

Another significant aspect of Eleanor is her childlike behaviour throughout the novel, much like the governess and the children in *The Turn of the Screw*. Eleanor is thirty-two years old but had taken care of her mother for eleven years, which robbed her of an active life as a young adult. This has preserved her identity in a state of permanent childhood because she was unable to experience life as a young adult. She is expected to adhere to the script of a grown woman, but instead attempts to relive a past she never had by adhering to that of a child. As such, she is performing the wrong script. As a result, she often describes herself as foolish and childlike: "she could remember only that she had – must have – seemed foolishly, childishly contented, almost happy; had the others been amused to see that she was so simple?" (94) and worries over others' perception of her constantly. Richard Pascal notes that her repeating the phrase "journeys end in lovers meeting" (Jackson 36; 137; 154), an unrealistic hyper-fixation on a Shakespearean phrase, a fiction, is a childlike dream of finding "herself a swain," and she is prone "to crushes and abrupt shifts of affection [because of which] she seems very much like a moody young adolescent" (477). Because of her childishness and her inexperience, Eleanor can be considered innocent before she arrives at



Hill House: innocent, but traumatised and experienced because of her oppression by her mother and her supernatural encounter.

The corruption is subtle, because Eleanor's dreamlike state throughout the novel prevents her from seeing things rationally, having created an ideal mental world in which she is a heroine, much like the governess. For example, after she finds her name written in blood on the walls in the house, Eleanor communicates that she does not like to be "singled out" as the "center of attention" (147), but from her inner monologue, the opposite becomes clear: she becomes jealous of Theodora and states that "[w]e can't afford to have anyone but Theodora in the center of the stage [...]; if Eleanor is going to be the outsider, she is going to be it all alone" (148). It is evident that Eleanor's words do not match her thoughts. Another instance of her overreacting comes soon after, when Theodora is victimised in the house, with her walls and clothes becoming covered in blood. Theodora initially assumes it was done by Eleanor out of pettiness or jealousy, but the latter denies this: her envy does front again after the fact, when she is forced to share her clothes with Theodora. Eleanor becomes filled with resentment, possibly because she is no longer the sole, special victim of the house. She expresses a wish to "hit [Theodora] with a stick", to "batter her with rocks" (158) and to "watch her dying" (159). Eleanor's responses to situations proceeding unlike she planned are those of a child who does not get her way, as if she is imitating the child she meets at the café who has a cup of stars: something Eleanor becomes obsessed with and mentions multiple times throughout the novel. Once she becomes aware of the fact that the new cultural script she has chosen, Theodora's, does not work for her, Eleanor's grip on reality slackens and she descends into madness.

In conclusion, because Eleanor cannot adhere to the cultural script of her past, she seeks out a new one. This new script is presented to her through the example of an alternative lifestyle embodied by Theodora's persona. But this alternative script is yet again not a good

fit for Eleanor because she unable to follow it due to her childish nature and the prior sacrifice of her youth. Her failure to adhere to either script causes her unfortunate demise. Eleanor's being sheltered for all her adult life, and her knowledge of the singular script of the dutiful caretaking daughter, has left her in a state of arrested development. This causes her to experience the world for the first time and become corrupted by it at the age of thirty-two. The themes of innocence and corruption frame *The Haunting of Hill House* as they do in *The Turn of the Screw* and add significantly to the novel's horror. The protagonists are both perceived as mad because of their inability to perform according to their appointed scripts. The supernatural functions only as a symbolic representation of Eleanor's deteriorating mental health.

### **Chapter 3: The Effects of the Adaptation Process Leading to Unambiguous Ghosts in Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House***

In the Netflix adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House*, the ambiguity surrounding the existence of the supernatural, and the subsequent expected madness of the Crains, disappears. This happens because of the adaptation process, as well as the more direct involvement of the Dudleys in the argument against a potential mental illness haunting the Crain family. The adaptation, therefore, no longer focuses on the potential origins of the supernatural. Instead, it focuses on the long-term effects of the experiences of the Crain family in Hill House on their mental health and innocence, as defined in the introduction, as well as their inter- and extrafamilial relationships. This chapter shows that the Crain family's experiences in the house during their childhood make them act outside of their various cultural scripts of their roles in the family, causing the secondary characters outside the Crain family to view them as "mad" or corrupted by the supernatural experiences they undergo.

Flanagan's *Hill House* focuses on the Crain family (Olivia, Hugh, and their five children), who move into Hill House temporarily to renovate and sell the property. According to Craig Tomashoff, it is "the story of a family coping with the trauma of growing up in a haunted mansion." The show jumps between past and present, which highlights the social development of the Crains, as well as their development as a family unit. The segments set in the past focuses on the five children and their initial experiences in the house. The segments set in the present focus on the lingering effects of these incidents on the Crain children as adults, in a traditional ghost story theme of the past influencing the present. The show has been described as "the corpse of a dysfunctional family drama infused with the embalming fluid of Gothic horror" (Feay), combining elements of horror and drama to form a hybrid genre:

Even though the limited series was based on the 1959 Gothic horror novel by Shirley Jackson, [Flanagan] wanted to make it his own by having all his writers "pour out [their] own family stories into the show." So, even though his series featured plenty of unsettling things such as a specter known as The Bent Neck Lady, Flanagan discovered that "people who'd recently lost a parent or sibling all said the show actually gave them a sense of peace and hope. That's why the best horror has to very much function like a drama. If you take away the horror elements, would we still care about these people?" (Tomashoff)

It was a deliberate decision to focus on the social dynamics of the various characters, as Jackson did in her novel. The horror partly stems from their interactions with each other and with people outside of the family. As in Jackson's novel, the series includes Eleanor and Theodora, and much of their personalities remains the same after the adaptation process. Eleanor is the mentally unstable youngest sibling, and Theodora is the free-spirited and sensitive character, with a female partner, as in the book. In addition to the two sisters, the Crain siblings consist of Steven, Luke and Shirley, whose name is a homage to the author of the novel. Like Jackson's novel, the series focuses more on the haunting of the characters that become symbolic of their mental states, rather than on unambiguous supernatural occurrences. They draw "the focus away from the house itself as haunted space and towards a complex examination of the memories of the individuals who lived there" (Robson 2). This is similar to how the focus in Jackson's novel is more on Eleanor's psyche rather than on uncovering the supposedly supernatural events taking place in Hill House.

Significantly, the five Crain siblings all represent one of the stages of grief as originally introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: these being denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (265). Flanagan confirmed that he ascribed the Crain siblings' traits according to these stages of grief on Twitter (@flanaganfilm), and the episodes that

engage with each sibling individually appear in that order, too. The characters only start representing these stages once they become adults, as they have experienced grief themselves in the form of their mother and sister's death. Because the children have not yet experienced this grief, they do not represent stages of grief either. This adds to the contrast between the innocent children and the adults who have experienced loss and grief and have learned to cope with these emotions. Therefore, it can be argued that the show takes grief as its main theme. The ghost of Poppy Hill allows Olivia to explore grief by showing the matriarch hallucinations of her children potentially dying, as shown in figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Olivia hallucinates her son Luke dying as an adult. Source: Flanagan, Mike. "Screaming Meemies." *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 9, 00:10:11. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Olivia, in turn, dies, becomes a ghost, and causes her children grief, which makes them experience the horrors of the world in the form of losing their mother. This can be seen as the Crain children losing their innocence.

Kübler-Ross's stages can be considered a script for those who deal with grief. She states that "people go through [these stages] when they are faced with tragic news" (147), implying that the experience is universal and it is therefore expected of people to adhere to

these stages when dealing with grief, making it a script. The characters of *Hill House* each represent a stage, and the script that accompanies it.

The first episode, “Steven Sees a Ghost,” concerns Steven, who represents the stage of denial in Kübler-Ross’s scheme. He has not experienced the supernatural events of Hill House to the degree his siblings have, causing him to believe the paranormal does not exist and his siblings all suffer from the same mental illness:

STEVEN: Our family has a disease that’s never been treated, because it was easier to listen to your crazy stories about an evil house. [...] The whole fucking family is on the brink of a breakdown and seeing things that aren’t there, hearing things that aren’t there, and that shit happened after the house. It’s not the house. There’s something wrong with our goddamn brains. (S01E08 00:24:32-00:25:19)

Because he has repressed the supernatural events at Hill House in his childhood to the degree that he does not remember them, unlike his siblings, it shocks him in the present when he sees a ghost for the first time. However, he still ascribes this to his deteriorating mental health and rationalises seeing Nell as a ghost.

Shirley represents anger, and her episode, “Open Casket,” concerns her tendency to control every aspect of her life. When this is no longer possible, she becomes furious. She fears going off her cultural script, as well as others going off-script, to an obsessive degree. According to *TVInsider* journalist Meaghan Darwish;

We ultimately learn that part of Shirley’s anger stems from the uncertainty of what’s going on around her, as well as her losing control — she likes having a handle on things. She also has pent-up guilt over a one-night stand that took place years ago, which comes bubbling up to the surface when she catches her husband and sister Theo in a compromising position. Though it’s actually not what it looks like, it forces Shirley to wrangle with her true feelings.

She also resorts to anger when Steven notifies her of the book he has written. Shirley disagrees with the way he writes about events, and she refuses to take the “blood money” he offers her as compensation (S01E06 00:34:28). She believes the script Steven adheres to, that of the dutiful and caring oldest brother, does not permit him to lie to his siblings and use their experiences for his personal gain. When he goes off-script in her eyes, her anger surfaces.

Theodora represents the bargaining stage, and her episode, “Touch,” is centred around her struggles with physical contact. Theodora is psychic and the psychic information is conveyed through touch. For example, as a child, she is able to sense that the house is infested with ghostly activity, stating that “this whole house is cold”, implying that the activity is not limited to a single cold spot (S01E03 00:08:30). Her ability reinforces the notion that ghosts are present. She uses gloves to regulate her abilities, given to her by her mother so she can appear normal, like she follows a regular script for a regular teen, and later a regular woman. When she allows herself to feel and be touched, it is entirely on her own terms.

Luke represents depression, in the most obvious sense: he is unable to cope with his grief and his trauma and uses drugs to forget both: “Luke becomes addicted to heroin, using the drug as a coping mechanism” (Darwish). His addiction defines him to such a degree, that it creates a cultural script for him. When he is sober, no one believes him. He is experiencing his sister’s suicide by hanging instead of heroin withdrawal symptoms: these sensations include a stiff neck and limbs, as well as a fever (S01E04 00:50:05). This is explained in the series by the “twin thing,” which allows Luke and Eleanor to feel what the other feels, both emotionally and physically. Because the cultural script of the heroin addict has become the default script for Luke, Steven does not believe that the symptoms he displays are anything other than the scripted behaviour for yet another relapse. He also does not believe that the possessions Luke attempts to steal from him (S01E04 00:36:46) will be sold to pay for

Luke's friend's stay at a hotel, rather than Luke's heroin addiction. Because every sign points towards Luke's addict script, Steven refuses to consider the possibilities of another script for his brother.

The events at Hill House affect Luke and his twin sister, Eleanor, the most. They are the ones who struggle to cope with their experiences at the house the most. Despite her death in the first episode, Eleanor represents acceptance, but only because she can influence her siblings from her position in the afterlife. The others either hallucinate her, or she appears to them as a ghost: “[i]n a nod to the source novel’s subtlety, the question of hallucination or delusion regarding the haunting is kept open” (Feay). In fact, Steven’s monologue about the family all sharing the same mental illness is a good example of an instance that can make a viewer question whether the supernatural events happened or not. However, the involvement of the Dudleys suggests the opposite. They are not members of the family but warn the Crains against the house. They provide concrete evidence that the house either has agency or contains a malicious entity that causes the Crains’s experiences and is to blame for the corruption of the family: the Dudleys refuse to stay on the property after dark, because their paranormal experiences, such as hearing the cries of their unborn child and having terrifying nightmares, stopped once they left before sundown (S01E07 00:27:11-00:33:01). They were present for the downfall of the Hill family. Because of what they witnessed, they caution and inform the new owners against the house and staying inside too long. When Olivia Crain starts behaving strangely, losing fragments of her memory, and waking up holding a screwdriver to her husband’s neck, as seen in figure 3, Mr. Dudley warns Hugh.





**Figure 3.** Olivia Crain sleepwalks and wakes holding a screwdriver to her husband's neck. Source: Flanagan, Mike. "Eulogy." *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 7, 00:41:48. Accessed 26 May 2021.

This event reminds Horace Dudley of his mother, who talked to herself and sometimes went out into the woods and slept there. This brings the count of affected families up to three (the Dudleys, Hills and Crains). Combined with the fact that two families were unaffected before encountering the house, this provides evidence that the Crains were not, in fact, all suffering from the same mental illness that causes hallucinations and odd behaviour. The blame must be on the house or something inside.

A character that did suffer from a mental illness, is Eleanor, or Nell. In the first episode, it is revealed that she never fully recovered from her traumatic experiences at Hill House and has taken her own life (S01E01 00:57:34). Most of the siblings live a relatively normal life, having learned to cope with their past trauma. For Nell and her twin brother Luke, however, this is not the case. Luke struggles with his addiction, and Nell has gone through various forms of psychotherapy and medication to help with her sleep paralysis and nightmarish hallucinations. However, these did not help her, and after the death of her husband, which she believed to be caused by a ghostly apparition from her childhood, she stopped taking her medication. There is a strong pattern of mental disintegration where Nell is concerned, which can be interpreted as Nell being corrupted due to her inability to deal

with her grief. As soon as she met her husband, she was able to take her mind off her past and believed things to be better. When he passed away, she reverted to the mindset she had before him, which ultimately resulted in her demise. In her childhood innocence, Nell was tormented by nightmares and visions in the house, and her father rationalised these for her:

YOUNG HUGH CRAIN. You remember what we talked about before? About our dreams?

YOUNG NELL. They can spill.

YOUNG HUGH CRAIN. That's right. Yeah, just like a cup of water can spill sometimes. But kids' dreams are special. They're like...

YOUNG NELL. An ocean.

YOUNG HUGH CRAIN. That's right. And the big dreams can spill out sometimes.

(S01E01 00:02:45-00:03:15)

However, this attempted reassurance did not have the desired effect, because Nell continued to have her nightmares. She also continued to see the specific spectre that tormented her, the Bent-Neck Lady, for as long as she lived in the house, and even after she moved out. In a final attempt to rid herself of these visions, she visited Doctor Montague, who, much as his counterpart in the novel is the sole reason for her encountering Hill House, convinced Nell to return to the house one last time (S01E05 00:18:46). This resulted in her death.

A cinematographic technique Flanagan employs to convey the contrast between the innocent children and the corrupted adults, is match cutting, which is a certain type of cut transition:

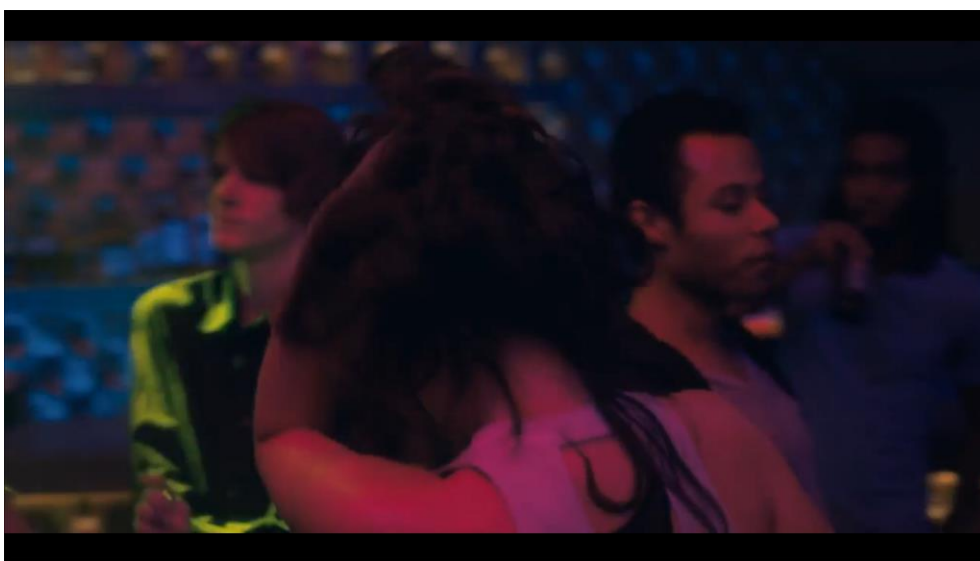
flashbacks to the Crains's time at Hill House are framed distinctly as memories originating from one specific character, which forms the focus of the episode. These memories are transitioned into via a cut, normally following the character seeing or

hearing something that evidently reminds them of a moment from the past. (Robson 3)

The match cuts heighten the contrast between the Crains as children and adults, because they are sudden and startling. As an example, in the episode centred around Theodora, there is a scene of her dancing in the red room. She is copying the movements of the music video to “Cold Hearted” by Paula Abdul, an eighties pop song. She is dancing on her own, with soft orange and brown lighting, seen in figure 4 (S01E03 00:14:40).



**Figure 4.** Young Theodora is dancing before the match cut. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “Touch.” *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 2, 00:14:40. Accessed 26 May 2021.



**Figure 5.** Adult Theodora is dancing in the club after the match cut. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “Touch.” *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 2, 00:14:42. Accessed 26 May 2021.

After a sudden match cut, Theodora, now an adult, is dancing in a club-setting, seen in figure 5. Her movements are looser, no longer copied from someone else. The remixed song features a heavy bass, and the lighting has changed to darker blue, pink, and purple. Shirley is intoxicated, and flirts with a girl to eventually end up in bed together. This corruption, the use of alcohol and sexual intercourse, is in stark contrast with the innocent dancing of Theodora as a child. These match cuts occur in every episode, and an example is given by Robson from the “Two Storms” episode:

Steven proceeds to stare at Luke, saying, “Luke. Luke. Luke?” before the second cut occurs. The connection between Shots Two and Three is formed in a sound bridge as young Steven’s voice morphs into older Steven’s voice chanting Luke’s name, trying to get his attention in the funeral parlour. (Robson 5)

The episode contains the traditional cuts Flanagan uses in the other episodes, but the camerawork is distinctly different. He has the camera circle the characters to convey the similarities of the physical storm outside, and the metaphorical storm inside as the tension heightens because of the characters’ growing annoyance and anger.

A final technique used is the repetition of scenes to showcase different points of view belonging to different characters. Taking the example of Olivia Crain holding a screwdriver to her husband’s neck, the first perspective a viewer gets is that of Hugh: all he sees is his wife, straddling him with the weapon (S01E07 00:41:46). Two episodes later, it becomes clear that Olivia is being manipulated by the house, or one of its ghosts, which causes her to behave irrationally: she becomes paranoid, obsessed with the idea that her children will die horribly one day. Because of her hyper-fixation on the children’s safety, on preserving their innocence and shielding them from the world’s potential corruption of them, she pays no attention to her actions and movements throughout the house (S01E09 00:21:15). This

showcases the possibility that the main characters of *Hill House* are limited in their perspectives, and their narratives must be combined to obtain the full picture.

To conclude, *Hill House* addresses the themes of innocence versus corruption and uses cultural scripts to explore this theme. The contrast between the two themes is expressed through the difference in the characters as children and adults, the children being innocent and the adults having their innocence corrupted by their supernatural experiences. The cause of the corruption is the house and the supernatural events that occurred inside, the ambiguity of which has been removed because of the direct involvement of the Dudleys. The corruption is shown, for example, in Eleanor's deteriorating mental health that culminates in her suicide. The use of cultural scripts in the series shows the othering of the Crain siblings by people outside of the family, such as Theodora's issues with being touched and Luke's inability to break free from his allotted script of the heroin addict. The stages of grief that the siblings represent can also be considered cultural scripts, which heightens the contrast between innocence and corruption in the children and adults, because the children have not yet learned to cope with their grief. Therefore, the themes of innocence and corruption are explored by the character development in the Crain siblings, as well as by its use of cultural scripts.

## **Chapter 4: Unambiguous Ghosts Affecting the Plot and Themes in Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor***

The ambiguity surrounding the ghosts' existence disappears in *Bly Manor*. This is due to decisions made during the adaptation process from literary text to small screen drama. In the television series, the ghosts are unambiguously visualised for the audience to see, independent of a specific character's perspective. A viewer cannot doubt their existence. In the series, Mrs Grose is also a ghost. Her ghostly presence is especially unambiguous because she is introduced to the audience as a ghost before being aware that she is a ghost herself. The real ghosts actively affect the plot and the characters. Consequently, the themes of innocence and corruption are treated differently. In contrast to James's novella, the protagonists in the television series actively work against the potential real corruption of the children from real ghosts.

The method of showing multiple versions of the same scene, discussed in the previous chapter, is also used to foreground differing perspectives and interpretations of the scene by different characters in *Bly Manor*. In the first episode, the inhabitants of Bly receive a phone call, presumed to be a prank call when the cook answers and no one responds (S02E01 00:26:22). In episode six, the caller is revealed to be Henry Wingrave, the children's uncle (later revealed to be Flora's father), who wishes to speak to Flora, but is hesitant to say anything (S02E06 00:48:47). Flanagan also employs match cutting in the same manner as in the first season. For example, a fireplace in the house's living room is the focus of the transition from the past into the present. In the first scene it is lit, giving a warm and cheerful atmosphere to the room. After the transition to the present the fire is out, signifying that it is later in an evening and the mood has shifted to something melancholier and more anxious, with darker colours (S02E03 00:24:01). This heightens the contrast between past and present, giving the impression that the situation in the past was better, especially because of the

characters involved. Peter Quint and Rebecca Jessel stand in the living room in the first scene, in which they are still alive, and Quint has not yet corrupted Jessel. After the cut transition, both are dead, and the first people the camera zooms in on are Owen and Mrs Grose. The latter is a ghost, the former is about to lose his mother in the final minutes of the same episode. The sudden transition from a burning fireplace to an empty one signifies the darkness that is yet to come.

Innocence and corruption are once again central themes in the second season because of the way the children are portrayed, as well as the ghosts and their ability to corrupt the children from the afterlife. This is the direct antithesis to Nell's actions in the first season as a benevolent ghost determined to set things right. As in the source material, Miles and Flora are initially viewed as "perfectly splendid" by the governess when she first meets them (S02E01 00:18:08); but they bring unease before they even appear on screen. From the first mention of the children, there is great emphasis on how exceptional and wonderful they are: Henry mentions it thrice in the first sentence he speaks of them (S02E01 00:07:40). The same can be said for Bly. The fact that it is a "great good place" is mentioned twice in the first ten minutes of the episode (S02E01 00:06:10, 00:08:34), and again ten minutes later (S02E01, 00:19:56). This provides a link between the children and the house. If one of the two brings unease, the other must too. The representation of the house also generates a sense of uneasiness: the voice-over narrator implies that it becomes uncomfortable and foreboding specifically by mentioning that the governess's "first look at Bly yielded no discomfort, no foreboding" (S02E01 00:19:54). Immediately following, the voice-over narrator describes the house as if it has agency. Like Hill House, in Jackson's novel, Bly Manor "yawned open to welcome her home" (S02E01 00:20:05), and at night, it seemed as if "the house itself had inhaled deeply, [...] expanding as it held its breath for the morning" (S02E01 00:30:04).



**Figure 6.** The house yawns open to welcome Dani home. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Great Good Place.” *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 1, 00:20:05. Accessed 26 March 2021.



**Figure 7.** At night, the house expands to swallow Dani whole. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Great Good Place.” *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 1, 00:30:04. Accessed 26 March 2021.

The former is visualised, as seen in figure 6, by a single wide shot of the house’s entrance hall, with its staircase on either side, after showing a close-up shot of Dani entering through the front door. The contrast between the close-up and the wide shot is big enough to convey the entrance hall as a yawn. The latter is visualised with a shot of Dani walking into the great,



dark emptiness of the hallway, as shown by figure 7. Her frame becomes increasingly smaller, and the darkness of the hallway increasingly bigger, as if to swallow her whole. Because the children are mentioned in the same breath as the house, by claiming the house is a “great good place” and the children are “exceptionally wonderful,” the unease that is created by these scenes also applies to Miles and Flora. Alan Sepinwall has noted this disquietude as well, and praises Flanagan and the crew for it:

Now, Flanagan happens to be very good at atmosphere. The sense of dread and confusion throughout the house are palpable. Much of the action takes place at night, and Flanagan, the other directors, and cinematographers Maxime Alexandre and James Kniest do well at making things clear whenever they need to be.

The house is the setting as well as the source for the discomfort, and the children are treated similarly: Sepinwall declares them “a puzzle — perfectly splendid little angels in one moment, unnerving monsters the next.” The children, therefore, are not innocent, and perhaps already corrupted by the ghosts, just as their counterparts in *The Turn of the Screw*. Firstly, Owen, the cook, addresses the matter in episode two:

We all do terrible things sometimes. That’s expected. It’s baked into us from the start. But it’s that feeling of remorse, that guilt, that terrible guilt, burning inside your chest, that’s what distinguishes us in God’s eye. None of us are blameless. Except the soul that’s not yet conceived and the animals. [...] They’re the only innocents. (S02E02 00:16:48 - 00:17:22)

He acknowledges that no one is expected to be fully innocent, not even children, and that corruption can and will occur after “a soul” is “conceived,” which means that Flora and Miles have, according to Owen, been corrupted, and done the terrible things he speaks of. This stands in stark contrast to the governess and Mrs Grose’s opinion of the children in *The Turn of the Screw*, who believe the children fully innocent simply because of their age and

appearance: it is where the series' modern perspective of what makes a child innocent differs from the novella's Victorian perspective. In the series, corruption mainly comes in the form of Peter Quint's ghost, who teaches Miles about manipulating people by "finding their keys," (S02E03 00:17:45) or finding out exactly what makes them want to open up to others. Miles takes Quint's advice to heart. When summoned by Flora to return home from school, he attempts to find Father Stack's "key", which is revealed to be his pet pigeon; so Miles kills it. By not showing remorse for his actions, combined with his fight and his fall from a tree, he is finally sent home. Miles is not the only person Quint manipulates and corrupts. His influence on Miss Jessel is recognised by Mrs Grose: "there was a man. Which really is the only thing that can bring down a woman like that. All the world's vices in disguise of its graces" (S02E01 00:42:08). Jamie comments that Quint is not aware of the difference between love and possession (S02E03 00:25:34). The two women rightfully attribute Miss Jessel's suicide to him, but the matter is more complicated than they assume: Quint, as a ghost, convinces Miss Jessel to first allow him to possess her, then drowns her while he has control over her body, so the two of them can be together again.

Another character that becomes corrupted throughout the series, in the sense of losing her innocence, due to the supernatural experiences at Bly, is Dani, the governess. In the first episode, there are hints at her troublesome past, as she is haunted by flashes or hallucinations of a man with glowing yellow eyes. She sees him only in reflections, as in the car window in figure 8, which has made her paranoid around mirrors and reflective surfaces to the point that she needs to cover these up wherever she stays.



**Figure 8.** Dani encounters a hallucination in traffic, before she even steps foot in Bly. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Great Good Place.” *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 1, 00:06:15. Accessed 07 April 2021.

It becomes clear that there is a distinction between the ghosts of the people who died at Bly, and the ghost that belongs to Dani. She is the only one who can see Edmund, but everyone else can see Quint, Jessel, Mrs Grose, and the Lady in the Lake. Her corruption does not come in the form of her dead fiancé Edmund, though, as she learns to finally cope with her loss at the end of the fourth episode, when she burns his glasses, the last thing she had of his (S02E04 00:49:27). Instead, she becomes physically and mentally corrupted by Viola, the Lady in the Lake. Dani sacrifices herself without understanding what the act means, in the same manner as Miss Jessel sacrificed herself to Quint: their bodies merged. However, it is not until much later that she starts to experience the effects of this union. In addition to her seeing Viola’s reflection instead of her own, Dani also undergoes a change in her physical appearance that signals to the viewer that she is not entirely herself anymore. She has heterochromia, which was not the case in earlier episodes, as shown in figure 9 and 10.



**Figure 9.** Dani’s eyes are both blue in the first episode. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Great Good Place.” *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 1, 00:16:53. Accessed 07 April 2021.



**Figure 10.** After her union with Viola, one of Dani’s eyes has changed colour to blue. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Beast in the Jungle.” *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 9, 00:23:25. Accessed 07 April 2021.

There is a zoom-in on Dani’s eyes immediately after she takes Viola into her body, but because of the lighting, it is impossible to see whether her eye changed colour in that moment. However, the voice-over narrator tells the audience that in the scene in figure 10, Dani is still herself, even though her eye had changed colour in an earlier scene. Although the physical change happened, she was still in control of her own body. As the episode progresses, Dani finds herself staring at Viola’s reflection and eventually awakens one night

to find herself on the verge of strangling her girlfriend, much in the same manner as Olivia Crain. Viola has taken over her physical movements, and Dani's corruption is completed when she travels back to Bly and drowns herself to be in the same place as Viola's body once was.

Furthermore, the cultural script of the children is different from that of Miles and Flora in *The Turn of the Screw*. In James's work, the matter of their parents is only briefly addressed. In Flanagan's adaptation, the deaths of Mr and Mrs Wingrave dictate the cultural script of their children. This deviation from the traditional script of children is addressed in the series, because odd actions are constantly being excused. Mrs Grose mentions that "you can't blame them for [locking their governess in the closet]. Given what they've lost, strangeness is expected" (S02E02, 00:25:42), and the governess herself understands that Miles acts more mature and "like the grown-ups," because he had to grow up faster than regular kids with regular scripts (S02E04 00:23:36). Children are expected to be a little rebellious, and the occasional fight is acceptable if there is a catalyst for the fight; especially when the child's parents have recently passed. But because there was no catalyst for Miles's fight (the other boy was only nice to him), he is not adhering to the cultural script, which is considered odd. He is actually aware of his cultural script because he apologises for the acts he committed, but also "for being such a child about it. Being around Flora [he] sometimes forget[s himself]" (S02E02, 00:32:37). He realises his script is different from Flora's, who is younger than him and more immature.

Dani's script is also addressed: she can be eccentric, because she adheres to a different script than the inhabitants of Bly: that of an American woman (S02E05 00:17:12). This insertion of an American in Britain is a potential nod to James's similar situation, or to his *Portrait of a Lady*, about an American woman in Europe. Because of the modern setting, the class barrier between a nameless aristocrat and a lower-class governess is transformed

into difficulties with adjusting to a new culture with new traditions and habits. Henry Wingrave, the children's uncle, also has a script to adhere to: one that dictates his role in the family as their uncle. It includes being interested and present in their lives to a degree, especially after the passing of their parents when the role of guardian falls to him. When he has an affair with his brother's wife, he acts outside of his script, and his brother Dominic acknowledges this when he discovers that Flora is the product of the affair, and not *his* daughter: after the death of Dominic and Charlotte, Henry is faced with his guilt, that has manifested in the form of the "shit-grinning demon" that Dominic branded his "real self" (S02E06 00:45:32).

Perhaps the most obvious script incorporation is that of Hannah Grose. As a ghost, she literally reads a script in her head in multiple repeated scenes. She acknowledges that the scene has already taken place and appears flustered when she is unable to follow the script as before: Owen, who acts as her subconscious in these scenes, becomes frustrated with her (S02E05 00:22:20). Hannah Grose, along with the other ghosts of the series, will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

The fact that the children are performing rather than genuinely and authentically adhering to their script, additionally, is more explicit in the series, than it is in the source novel. Flora's constant repetition of the phrase "perfectly splendid" (S02E01 00:18:57, S02E01 00:20:17) is odd, but not alarming (until the viewer discovers where she learned it: from her dead governess Miss Jessel). Her constant wordless communicating with someone invisible to the audience and Dani, does raise concern (S02E01 00:25:18). Miles's unsettling actions, again, are attributed to his cultural script: he steals a pin to give to Dani, stares at her while she undresses, and shows her a spider to scare her, but she instantly forgives him because he is expected to show this behaviour as a rebellious little boy, especially after losing a parent. However, the most obvious instance of a performance, is the play the children put

on at the end of episode three. Flora's part is endearing, and the characters are shown smiling after she is finished. But Miles ends his part with angry yelling about puppets on strings, and his acting is very similar to the performance he put on when first meeting Dani. By theatrically bowing and kissing the top of her hand, he attempts to win her heart.

*Bly Manor* makes use of cultural scripts more explicitly than Flanagan's *Hill House*. Miles and Flora use and abuse their scripts to get what they want, and characters such as Mrs Grose become visibly uncomfortable when they are no longer able to follow their cultural script. The source of corruption in the series are the ghosts, most notably the Lady in the Lake and Peter Quint, whereas innocence is personified in the children. The Lady in the Lake will be discussed at length in the next chapter. The ghosts corrupt the children, much like in the novel if one reads it as the ghosts being real. Because of the lack of ambiguity in the series concerning the existence of ghosts, the ghosts have real agency and can influence the theme of innocence versus corruption more directly.

## **Chapter 5: The Functions of the Ghosts and Their Relation to the Theme of Innocence and Corruption**

In exploring the exact function of the ghosts in the texts under scrutiny in this thesis, this chapter employs Julia Briggs's classification of ghosts and their motivation for existence and actions:

If a ghost walks, it is because its owner has not been buried with due ceremony, because he has to atone for some great sin, or perhaps to warn, or provide information concealed during life [...] The dead seldom return merely to reassure fond relatives that they are not lost but gone before, or to dictate their latest symphony. Thus, the behaviour of the traditional ghost resembles that of a restless sleeper whose bed is uncomfortable or who is troubled by guilt or an unfulfilled obligation. (15-16)

In short, Briggs argues that ghosts in literary texts have a set motivation and can be classified as either atoning for a sin or a wrongful action with perilous consequences; having a duty to warn the living of danger or other, more nefarious ghosts; or to resolve a conflict with knowledge the ghost concealed during their life. Notably, a ghost does not simply exist to be kind to their next of kin. Instead, there must be an underlying reason for their appearance. These descriptions of how ghosts act within ghost stories can be considered scripts that the ghosts must adhere to. In addition to Briggs's classification, I propose one last ghost script, that of the vengeful ghost. Bann uses this category to describe Old Hamlet, who wishes to get revenge on his brother (663). This chapter discusses how the adaptation process enables Flanagan to insert ghosts that follow the aforementioned traditional ghost scripts, with the exception of Mrs. Grose and Olivia Crain. His vengeful ghosts attempt to further the corruption of the living characters, the helpful ghosts wish to halt it. This stands in antithesis to Jackson's and James's ghosts, whose status as ghosts is ambiguous, which does not allow



them to follow the traditional ghost scripts as outlined above, and which makes the ghosts act more as a symbolic influence on the living characters.

### **5.1 Symbolic Hauntings in Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House***

It is necessary to consider that Jackson's novel does not contain ghosts in the traditional sense. There are no full-body apparitions. Because the novel is mostly focalised from Eleanor's point of view, it is debatable whether the hauntings are supernatural, as is the case in *The Turn of the Screw*. As Theodora suspects, it is entirely possible that Eleanor, for example, stained Theodora's room and clothes with blood herself and simply does not remember doing so. Tony Vinci proposes an alternative reading of the potential ghosts in the novel:

While Nell haunts her mother's home as a dutiful ghost, she is in turn haunted by her sister's domestic life that, at least on the surface, provides all of the security promised by the nuclear family of the 1950s—a set of conditions that Nell lacked as a child and was, at least before Hill House, unable to pursue as an adult. (57-58)

Nell herself is the ghost that haunts her mother before coming to Hill House, and after her arrival, she is haunted by the life script exemplified by her sister's mundane existence and the life expectations it offers her. This comes as an addition to Nell hearing her mother's voice in the house, or at the very least believing it to be her mother's voice, as well as her mother's knocking on the doors and walls. The realisation finally dawns on Eleanor that she is no longer at home, and her mother is no longer with her (127). The Vance family haunts each other in a metaphorical sense, possibly unintentionally. Her mother, even after death, still dictates most of Eleanor's decisions. For example, Eleanor refuses to enter the library in the tower because of her mother, though the precise reason is unclear. The same thing happens when Theodora paints Eleanor's toenails and the latter remarks that she does not "like to feel

helpless [...] My mother—” (117). As discussed previously, Eleanor feels haunted, too, by her sister’s script that she could not adhere to and escaped from, although it initially seemed ideal. Vinci considers this a bigger haunting than what happens in the house, stating that “Jackson engages the ghost and spectrality as a means to grapple with the traumas inflicted by mid-century American ideologies that codify identity under the rubric of anthropocentric humanism” (55). The house and the supernatural events that happen inside act as metaphorical vehicles that express Eleanor’s attempt to work out the traumatic familial experiences she went through prior to her arrival at Hill House. As such, the ghosts are mostly in Eleanor’s past, and can be seen as the catalyst for her corruption by the house, as well as her deteriorating mental health, as discussed in chapter 2. The ghosts are not characters that come back to life, evident from the fact that the supposed ghost of Eleanor’s mother is never seen, nor is she heard by anyone other than Eleanor herself. Therefore, it is not possible to assign them a ghost script. Instead, the novel shows that every living character is allotted a script, and Eleanor receives one that is not fit for her. This is the reason for her eventual demise.

## **5.2 Ambiguous Hauntings in James’s *The Turn of the Screw***

The ghosts in James’s *The Turn of the Screw* are Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. As mentioned previously, the debate of their existence is ongoing after 120 years. Therefore, it is important to consider the ghosts’ influence on the themes of innocence and corruption as if they were real characters, as well as if the governess simply imagined their appearances. Either the ghosts are real, and they cause the corruption of the children, or they are conjured up by the governess as a plausible explanation for the children acting off-script. If Jessel and Quint are actually ghosts and the children are in cahoots with them, they are the source of the corruption of the children. The children are going off-script, abandoning their prescribed

roles of innocent Victorian children, to comply with the ghosts and fulfil their wishes. The governess suspects this influence: “‘You weren’t afraid of anything else? Not of his effect—?’ ‘His effect?’ she repeated with a face of anguish and waiting while I faltered. ‘On innocent little precious lives’” (178). The ghosts’ motivation for their actions, however, is unclear. The governess believes it to be plain and simple: they want to get to the children and use them for evil, “to keep up the work of demons” (207). In the eyes of the protagonist, the ghosts are vengeful and malicious, potentially using the children to further some nefarious agenda or achieve a goal, but it is impossible to know the truth of this assumption as their perspective is never given, as discussed by Anna Bocci:

Is it correct to sustain that the governess is right about them? When the governess details how the ghosts would want to “get hold” of the children and corrupt them, is it possible to determine if she really has understood their purpose correctly, or even to determine if they have any purpose at all? (177)

Perhaps the ghosts have no goal, and simply exist to torment the children; the reader cannot be certain either way. This would mean that the ghosts, even if they exist, do not follow the ghost scripts provided by Briggs. Instead, they are evil for the sake of being evil and providing an antagonist for the text.

If the ghosts are not real, but figments of the governess’s imagination, they still have powerful influence on her. Instead of the children, it is the governess they now corrupt: the possibility and the idea of ghosts fascinates and terrifies her to the point of acting outside her own script. She creates a new script for herself, naming herself the hero, stating that the situation demanded of her “an extraordinary flight of heroism” (179). With this new script, she gives her life meaning and purpose that she did not have previously. Additionally, taking the metaphor of being “strangely at the helm” of a “great drifting ship” (156), she is afraid of losing control over the people under her command, as she has wrongfully prescribed herself

the role of the captain. The ghosts can thus be seen as projections of this fear. Because of this idea, she grows increasingly obsessive over the children, to the point of smothering Miles to keep him safe from the ghosts. Whether the ghosts are real or not, characters become corrupted because of them or the idea of them.

Guy Davidson raises the possibility of another ghost existing within the narrative: “the governess is positioned as a kind of ghost, a voice from beyond the grave: one of the many ways in which she is aligned with the abjected figures of Quint and Miss Jessel” (468). The governess’s story is read aloud by a character in the frame narrative, much like that of Quint and Jessel is told by Mrs Grose. This ensures a close link between the actual ghosts and the governess, and thus “the novella blurs the line between the ghostly and the living, and the strange and the familiar” (Davidson 468). Davidson also gives another example of the governess being likened to the ghosts:

Compounding this effect of identification, the governess feels, with uncanny affect, that “it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always” (29); she then runs out onto the terrace where Quint stands, finds him gone, and “places [her]self where he had stood,” thereby scaring Mrs. Grose, who now comes to stand at the spot in the dining room where she had stood (30). (461)

Because the governess takes over Quint’s position on the terrace, as well as Jessel’s position in employment and in the children’s lives, it can be argued that she is likened to the ghosts in the story. If one considers the governess another ghost, her function would be to warn the children, according to the options set out by Briggs. It would explain why the governess is paranoid about the other ghosts if she has extra knowledge that she chooses not to share in her narrative. However, the possibility of atoning for a great sin, perhaps with a previous family, or providing information concealed in life in the form of the report sent to the character in the frame narrative, still stands as well.

### 5.3 Real Ghosts with Real Agency in Flanagan's *The Haunting*

Flanagan's *Hill House* contains a multitude of ghosts with varying levels of screen time and importance to the plot. First and foremost, there are the original inhabitants of the house, the Hill family, among others consisting of Poppy, William, and Hazel Hill. Poppy and William, husband and wife, were clinically insane, and met and married in an asylum. William is the ghost that haunts Luke specifically. His body remains at the house, as he has walled himself in for unknown reasons. What is known is that he changed his mind and attempted to scratch himself out of his hiding place, resulting in the noises heard by young Hugh and Steve. He haunts Luke but does not actively do anything to scare him. He simply hovers behind him, as shown in figure 11. Despite this, Luke is shown being scared, having had encounters with this specific ghost in his childhood as well.



**Figure 11.** The ghost of William Hill behind Luke, terrifying the latter despite not actively doing anything to warrant this fear. Source: Flanagan, Mike. "The Twin Thing." *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 4, 00:48:28. Accessed 25 April 2021.

In his childhood, Luke was given a bowler hat, the same hat the ghost of William Hill wore. The one condition that comes with it, is that it "is a big boy hat [...] big boys, they know the difference between what's real and what's imaginary" (S01E04 00:08:00). He is given the hat, on the condition that he stops talking about his supposed imaginary friend, who is later revealed to truly exist. The ghost of William perhaps haunts Luke as a reminder that his

parents did not believe him when he told the truth. Despite not actively harming Luke, the ghost does corrupt him. Luke starts abusing substances because of the ghost and his inability to rid himself of it. William Hill adheres to the script of the ghost whose body has not yet been buried, but his goal, motivation and function are never specified. He simply makes Luke adhere to his addict script, for reasons unknown.

Poppy Hill, by contrast, has a clear function. The episode in which she features most prominently is presented as a flashback. She haunts Olivia and fills the woman's head with delusions and hallucinations of her children growing up in a cruel world and dying. She steers Olivia towards corruption, towards killing two children, Abigail and Eleanor, to keep them safe from the harm the world could do to them and preserve them in their perfect innocent state as children. When it comes to Poppy's motivation, however, her clinical insanity must be considered. She targets Olivia specifically because she is a mother like Poppy; Poppy, during her lifetime, had vivid dreams of her children dying violently. Ethically, killing the children in a more humane manner is not a viable solution to her problem; however, due to her insanity, Poppy does believe so. Her dreams of her children, especially the one about her son, in which his legs have stopped working and he is suddenly unable to see, are eerily familiar when considering the appearance of the ghost of a blind boy in a wheelchair in the series. Viewers remain unsure as to how the boy has died, but, as the ghost of Hazel, William's sister, tells Olivia: Poppy lies, and Olivia must be careful (S01E09 00:48:43). It is implied that Poppy killed her son to preserve him and is now attempting to have Olivia do the same to her youngest children. Thus, she steers Olivia towards corruption, whilst Olivia still believes she is behaving innocently and in her children's best interest. However, her actions are nefarious, and murder is a prime example of a corrupted action.

Hugh Crain, the patriarch of the family, is haunted by a vision of his late wife, Olivia. He is the only person who can see her, which implies that she is a hallucination, much like

*Bly Manor*'s Edmund. Olivia's ghost or apparition functions as Hugh's subconscious and moral compass, steering him towards good behaviour and helping him make the choices he believes are correct. He struggles to connect with his children after their traumatic youth in the house, and the vision of Olivia helps him with this. Olivia also appeared to Nell before her death, when the latter decided to revisit the house to confront her fears. Olivia's ghost, corrupted by the ghosts of the Hill family, was the one to give Nell the noose to hang herself with, and the one to push Nell from the railing, resulting in her hanging. Olivia is a morally ambiguous ghost, because she still believes, even after death, that she was doing the right thing by protecting Nell from future harm. Nell, too, saw the noose as a necklace in her hallucination, just as she believed the house was filled with light and people, rather than the empty carcass in the woods it truly is. It remains unclear whether the ghost Hugh sees is the same ghost Nell saw, because the behaviour of the two ghosts is completely different. The way in which Olivia manifests herself to Hugh is benevolent and she helps him make correct decisions with no underlying nefarious motivation, but Nell's visions of her mother result in her death. Following the options for scripts set out by Briggs, Olivia goes off-script by having morally sound reasons for her actions, but these actions themselves being immoral.

Nell, finally, is a ghost that clearly adheres to multiple scripts developed by Briggs in her ghost taxonomy. She is a benevolent ghost, and although Steven does not realise she is dead when he first sees her apparition, Nell herself is very much aware of this fact. She does not speak, and the only sound she makes in Steven's apartment is a loud, unsettling scream, during which her face becomes distorted and devoid of colour, including her eyes, as seen in figure 12. Nell has not yet been buried. Her body is still in Hill House. Therefore, her function is to make her relatives, in this case her brother, aware of the fact that her "body has not been buried with due ceremony", which is one of the potential ghost scripts as set out by Briggs (15). This is similar to the script of William Hill's ghost.



**Figure 12.** Nell first appears to Steven as a ghost. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “Steven Sees a Ghost.” *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 1, 00:57:52. Accessed 27 April 2021.

Another notable appearance by Nell, in which she clearly adheres to Briggs’s script of ghosts that warn their relatives, occurs when Nell appears in episode eight. This cooccurs with a startling musical effect and a deafening scream that terrifies both Shirley and Theodora (S01E08 00:34:55). She warns her sisters to stop their fighting in the car and pay attention to the road, because they will need to work together when they get to the house to save their brother.

In the final episode, each of the remaining living siblings goes through a dream sequence curated for them by the house. In these scenes, Nell is the one to pull her siblings out and back into reality. Shirley is mostly haunted by her tendency to control things, and once, briefly, by a manifestation of her guilt because of her affair. Theodora struggles to master her psychic ability, but neither of them sees any ghosts, except for Nell and the occasional ghostly figure of a Hill family member during their movements through the house. Nell is the one who haunts her siblings with a clear goal and motivation: to save them from the same fate.

*Bly Manor* also includes multiple “real” ghosts, among which are Peter Quint and Rebecca Jessel. The two are named in the same breath, but their functions and motivations



for their actions are different. Peter, much as in the novel, is the source of corruption for the children, especially Miles. He possesses Miles to the point of having him commit murder on Peter's behalf, and persuaded and possessed Rebecca, to the point of committing suicide while she was not in control of her own actions (S02E07 00:33:24). He could do so by earning her trust and giving her false promises about what would happen once she accepted Peter into her body: they would share everything, including her body, but he took over and "tucked her away" in a memory to make space for Peter's presence. Once she passed away, the two were separated again into two entities. From that moment forward, Rebecca starts to cooperate with Peter to gain a physical body back: that of Flora, while Peter focuses on Miles. However, at the last moment, Rebecca retreats and with Flora's help, tricks Peter into thinking she possesses Flora now. This shows that she either worked against Peter the entire time or changed her mind at the last minute. Her motivation is not to corrupt, but, as per Briggs's classification, to either atone for a sin (this being either her suicide, trusting Peter, or her part in the deception of the children), or to warn the children, which she does for Flora. Her goal, by extension, is to preserve Flora's innocence, and protect it from Peter's corruption.

Another ghost that occurs in *Bly Manor* is the Lady in the Lake. She is first introduced through Flora's dollhouse. The dollhouse contains dolls of every resident of Bly, including the Lady in the Lake, as seen in figure 13.



**Figure 13.** Dani picks up the doll of the Lady in the Lake from under the dresser. Source: Flanagan, Mike. “The Great Good Place.” *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 1, 00:28:42. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Flora is extremely protective of the doll, ensuring that it “sleeps” under a dresser and not inside the dollhouse. The positions of the dolls are representative of their corresponding characters in the series, which Flanagan confirmed in an interview with *Vanity Fair*: “[t]he more attention a viewer focuses on Flora’s dollhouse [...] the more they’re likely to see what’s happening and why” (quoted in Breznican). Once the Lady in the Lake’s doll has been moved from under the dresser to inside the dollhouse, and Dani’s doll from her bed, a scene quickly follows that contains the Lady in the Lake walking around in the hallway behind an intoxicated Dani, while the children attempt to distract the governess so she does not see the ghost (S02E04 00:45:41, S02E04 00:47:17). The children’s fear of Dani seeing the ghost and being taken reinforces her position as a malevolent ghost and opens questions as to which of Briggs’s scripts she adheres.

The full story of the Lady in the Lake is explained in episode eight, in which it is revealed that she is the original inhabitant of Bly Manor, Viola Lloyd. Due to her initial inability to come to terms with her impending death, and her later need for retribution, Viola

becomes trapped in an endless cycle of sleeping, waking, and walking, which started when she was still alive, but unable to fall asleep due to “a restlessness new to her heart” (S02E08 00:08:33). Then, she falls gravely ill, and after five years of a “living death,” she is murdered by her sister Perdita. However, Viola’s consciousness survives in a trunk full of expensive gowns she had kept for her daughter as an inheritance. The trunk, for Viola, takes the form of her own locked bedroom: “her room was a dream, a construct, a lie preferred to the truth of the trunk” (S02E08 00:41:37). In this trunk, the cycle starts anew: “she would sleep, she would wake, she would walk” (S02E08 00:39:50) through her room and find the doors and windows locked. Because Viola’s consciousness survives, she can see her daughter open the trunk and claim her inheritance when she has grown big enough to fit into the dresses.

Perdita and Arthur, now married, go into debt, which causes Perdita to open the trunk with the intention of selling the garments. Viola, disappointed and enraged that she does not see her daughter, strangles Perdita. After the murder, Arthur and the daughter must move, and they throw the trunk in the lake because of superstition. Viola thus becomes the Lady in the Lake. She still sleeps, wakes, and walks to her old bedroom, hoping to find her family as if in a dream. She refuses to move on to the next realm:

the pull of that next world ignored, she instead made her own gravity, gravity of will, that would change the terrain of Bly Manor forever [...] Her gravity, it seemed, her invented gravity that held her to the grounds, that kept her in purgatory, it would hold others too. (S02E08 00:45:34 - 00:49:06)

Although only the children and the other ghosts are aware of her existence at the beginning of the series, her presence causes discomfort for others. As Owen claims: “I’ve actually never liked Bly. The people, here, most of them, they’re born here, they die here. The whole town is one big gravity well. And it’s easy to get stuck” (S02E01, 00:17:06). He is aware of her gravity, and his comment rings true when considering the information revealed in the

penultimate episode. As the original ghost, Viola keeps everyone who dies at Bly Manor as ghosts and prevents them from moving on.

Viola's impact on highlighting the theme of innocence and corruption is a complicated matter. She killed Peter. Although this is done when he starts to steal from the Wingraves, she is not a benevolent ghost that seeks to right wrongs. Instead, she is the vengeful ghost that punished her sister; Peter happened to be in her path to the bedroom. The same happened to a little boy that Viola had mistaken for her daughter, as well as the plague doctor who can be seen in the background of scenes, such as the scene in figure 14.



**Figure 14.** The ghost of the plague doctor lurks in the background as Dani walks past. Source: Flanagan, Mike. "The Way It Came." *The Haunting*, season 2, episode 4, 00:46:10. Accessed 1 May 2021.

These characters, much like Peter, are killed by Viola because they are literally in her way, in her path to the bedroom. All the ghosts of these characters are shown in the background throughout the series, which indicates that there is another story of which the viewer, as well as Dani, is not yet aware. The ghosts appear until their existence is explained in the penultimate episode.

Viola is fuelled by “need, and loneliness, and rage” (S02E08 00:51:51). However, Miles and Flora discover her pattern of sleeping, waking, and walking, and, to save Dani from also being taken, they lock the governess in a closet and attempt to distract her with lies. On the one hand, these actions can be considered corrupt; so in that manner, the Lady in the Lake is corrupting the children. On the other hand, the intentions of the children are still innocent and good: to protect Dani from harm. So, in that manner, she preserves the children’s innocence. The Lady in the Lake does not follow any of Briggs’s prescribed ghost scripts, but much like her gravity, makes her own, because she forgot her original goal. This is a duality as well, as her original goal consisted of punishing her sister, as well as reuniting with her daughter and protecting her daughter’s inheritance from falling into the wrong hands. Viola may be considered the main antagonist of the show, but it is Peter who corrupts many characters, including Miles, Flora, and Rebecca Jessel. He does so to gain a semblance of his life back, by attempting to permanently possess Miles. However, he fails to do so, having been thwarted by Flora and Rebecca.

Another ghost of *Bly Manor* that is of importance to the theme of innocence and corruption is Mrs Grose. She is only revealed to be a ghost in the fifth episode. While this may come as a surprise to a casual viewer, the previous episodes contained various narrative clues that alert an attentive viewer to the fact that there is something unusual about her.

The effect of the ambiguous status of Mrs Grose in the early episodes of the series can be explained through the Russian formalist concepts of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, as applied to audio-visual story telling by Erlend Lavik. According to Lavik, the *syuzhet* is the way specifically audio-visual information is arranged and presented. That which is not shown must be filled in by the audience: “seeking order and coherence, we instinctively make hypotheses about what is going to happen (and, in some cases, about what has already happened) as we are watching (54). The *syuzhet*, furthermore, supports the *fabula*, the pattern

created with the information given (54). In the case of *Bly Manor*, the *syuzhet* is capable, as Lavik argued about *The Sixth Sense*, of supporting “two mutually exclusive fabulas,” and the “obvious extreme care that has gone into the organization of a *syuzhet* capable [of this] suggests the narration’s recognition of the audience” (58). The narrative clues invite the audience to watch the series a second time with the knowledge gained after the first watch with a newfound awareness of the clues and the audience’s own “position as viewers” (Lavik 58). A second viewing creates a form of dramatic irony as the viewer now knows Mrs Grose is a ghost, even though her representation on the screen is ambiguous.

Some of the early narrative clues in *Bly Manor* that become apparent on a second viewing are Mrs Grose’s refusal to eat, continuously touching the back of her head, and seeing a tear in the wall that is not there. It is revealed to be the tear in the well she was pushed down. These narrative clues are not indicative of her being a ghost from the beginning, but they can make the audience wonder about what is happening to Mrs Grose and why she behaves in such a manner and sees things that are not actually there. These narrative clues “exhibit the kind of narrational bifurcation whereby we come to notice how traces of the correct *fabula* were actually available to us the first time” (Lavik 59). However, it is not possible to perform the two coexisting readings simultaneously, according to Lavik: “we perform one reading that is in synch (sic) with the unfolding of the *syuzhet* (up to the introduction of the twist) and one that emerges in hindsight” (62). Until it is revealed that Mrs Grose is a ghost, the narrative clues are not sufficient to string together the *fabula* of her as a ghost. This information is revealed in the twist: Mrs Grose is dead, has been wandering the grounds as a ghost, and does not eat because she does not have to sustain her body in the same manner as the living do. The script Mrs Grose adheres to, is the script of a ghost whose body is not yet “buried with due ceremony” (Briggs 15), much like William Hill and Nell Crain. She has been murdered, and her body remains in the well on the grounds of Bly.

The final ghost that appears in the series is that of Edmund O'Mara, Dani's late fiancé. He is a hallucination with glowing eyes rather than an actual ghost, as Dani is the only one who sees him. There are no interactions with him, as discussed previously, he appears in reflective surfaces only to Dani. At first, he seems to be just another ghost:

Malevolent spirits seem to lurk just out of the corner of Dani's eye, or in the reflections of any mirror she's not meticulous enough to cover up. It is unclear at first which ones are native to Bly, and which she brought with her from the States.

(Sepinwall)

This uncertainty is enhanced by the insertion of the plague doctor's ghost. Dani does not see him, but he is shown in an upper body shot, fully in view and visible to the viewer.

Edmund is different from Bly Manor's ghosts. It is revealed in the fourth episode that his eyes glow because the headlights of the truck that drove into him are reflected in his glasses. As a result of a fight the night before their wedding, in which Dani reveals that she does not feel anything for Edmund, he steps out of the car and the truck slams into him (S02E04 00:28:45). His ghost is a hallucination for Dani, perhaps a manifestation of her guilt as she feels responsible for his death. When she finally lets go of her grief and her guilt by burning his glasses, the hallucination disappears (S02E04 00:50:28). Although he is not exactly a ghost, his manifestation does have a purpose. He is not atoning for a great sin, but he haunts Dani, as a reminder that she has not yet come to terms with her feelings. Once she does, he disappears. It can be argued, therefore, that Edmund protects Dani's innocence, making her live as honest a life as possible. Without him, she would not have admitted her homosexuality or bisexuality, including her feelings for Bly's gardener. Edmund is a benevolent ghost who attempts to halt Dani's corruption.

## 5.4 Conclusion

The ghosts in both Jackson's novel and James's novella are ambiguous in nature. Jackson's ghosts are not ghosts at all, and she instead works with symbolic hauntings, hallucinations of Eleanor's past that manifest in Hill House. Eleanor is haunted by her family's script and the expectations that come with it, but the ghosts cannot be assigned a concrete script or function in relation to the theme of innocence versus corruption. James's ghosts, however, Quint and Jessel, have a clear function, despite their ambiguous nature. If, on the one hand, they truly exist and they are not a figment of the governess's imagination, they corrupt the children and steer them away from innocence. If, on the other hand, the governess hallucinates the ghosts, they steer the governess away from innocence, ensuring she becomes obsessive and overprotective over the children. The existence of Flanagan's ghosts is no longer a matter of debate because they are clearly shown on screen for the viewer to see without specific focalisation through one of the characters, with the exception of Edmund, who is a hallucination only Dani sees. This lack of ambiguity in the ghosts' nature leads to a different type of ambiguity, namely the morally ambiguous ghosts of Mrs Grose and Olivia Crain. However, most of Flanagan's ghosts are either a corrupting influence on the living characters, such as Peter Quint, the Lady in the Lake, and Poppy Hill, or actively work to protect the living characters' innocence, such as Rebecca Jessel and Nell Crain. The figure of Mrs Grose is ambiguous because she follows the modern tradition of "narrative twist" movies, as established by M. Night Shyamalan's ghost story *The Sixth Sense* (1999), in which the audience must reassess their knowledge of the narrative clues to create a second *fabula*. The character of Olivia Crain is morally ambiguous because her motivation is innocent, but her actions are corrupt. The questions set out in the adaptations are which script the ghosts adhere to, and what the motivation is behind their actions. Briggs's categories are a solid starting point to determine this, but as shown, not all the ghosts have clear goals and motivations for



their actions, including *The Turn of the Screw*'s Quint and Jessel, Poppy Hill and the Lady in the Lake. These characters instead adhere to the vengeful ghost script as described by Jennifer Bann.

## Conclusion

This thesis examined the effect of the adaptation process on the ambiguity surrounding the existence of ghosts, as well as their function in relation to the theme of innocence and corruption in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, and Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting* series on Netflix, which is an adaptation of both. To do so, this thesis employed the notion of scripts as set out by Schank and Abelson to determine what makes characters be viewed by others as innocent or corrupt, or sane or mad. It also used Briggs's classification of ghosts to demonstrate that ghosts, like the living characters, adhere to scripts.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess views Miles and Flora as innocent because she expects the children to adhere to the script of innocent Victorian children. When they begin to exhibit behaviour unfit for the script, the governess adjusts her expectations to the opposite script, that of the corrupted child. Because the existence of the ghosts is ambiguous and debated, there are two options to explain her behaviour. The first option is that Quint and Jessel are hallucinations conjured up by the distressed mind of the governess, as a plausible explanation for the children's behaviour. This would make them guilty of corrupting the governess. The second option is that the ghosts truly exist and, therefore, truly corrupt the children. What the visualisation of the ghosts leads to, in *Bly Manor*, is the transformation of the ambiguous haunting into an unambiguous one. Quint and Jessel are real ghosts, and they are no longer the sole ghosts that haunt the living at Bly. New ghosts are introduced, such as the Lady in the Lake, with the purpose of presenting a true antagonist for the governess to struggle against and eventually succumb to. Mrs Grose is inserted as the ghost whose existence is revealed halfway through the series in the tradition of "narrative twist movies," but all ghosts are definitively ghosts. They are characters of their own as much as the living.

The ambiguity no longer concerns the existence of the ghosts, but instead which script they adhere to.

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, by contrast, presents a symbolic haunting rather than an ambiguous one. Because there are no traditional apparitions of ghosts, the haunting comes in the form of scripts. Eleanor is haunted by the script of her past life, that of the dutiful daughter and caretaker. She can no longer adhere to this script because the person she took care of has passed away, and her journey to Hill House represents her search for a different script. When she finds one, it is so different from the script she was used to, that Eleanor cannot adhere to it, with fatal consequences. Because of this failure to perform any script, Eleanor is perceived as mad by the secondary characters. Since there are no ghosts in the novel, there are no ghost scripts to be assigned. In the process of adapting Jackson's novel for the small screen, Flanagan's inserted real ghosts into the story that have agency and ensure the series focuses on socially oriented rather than psychologically oriented themes.

Steven contemplates whether it is merely a genetic illness or disorder that makes him and his siblings experience the supernatural events at Hill House, but this matter is solved by the involvement of characters outside the family that undergo the same experiences. The decision in the adaptation process to include ghosts ensures that the series explores social dynamics between the various characters and the ghosts instead of the psychological development of only Eleanor. The ghosts yet again have agency and directly influence the living characters; Eleanor is persuaded by the house and its ghosts to return, after which she is killed by the ghost of her mother. Olivia believes she is doing good, as a ghost, by protecting her youngest children from the corruption of the outside world. This is not the case, however, as the protection comes in the form of murder. In turn, Olivia is influenced by the ghost of the clinically insane Poppy Hill. After her death, Nell truly protects and saves her

siblings with no moral ambiguity. Nell is a benevolent ghost and adheres clearly to Briggs's classification of the ghost that comes to warn the living.

The research presented here prompts the question of whether this insertion of ghosts in adaptations is a trend in modern times. *The Turn of the Screw* has been adapted many times in film and theatre, as has *The Haunting of Hill House*. Especially given the recent popularity of film franchises such as *Paranormal Activity* and *The Conjuring* with their unambiguous agentic entities, there is a possibility that modern audiences are more interested in the ghosts and their actions, rather than their influence on the living characters. This must be investigated further to determine whether *The Haunting* is a standalone case, or part of a bigger trend in modern supernatural narratives.

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