

## ***The Innocents* (dir. Jack Clayton, 1961)**

**Lesson by Jenni Heeks, Teach First**

### **Key Stage 3 English**

A lesson that uses the setting of *The Innocents* to discuss the conventions of setting within the gothic genre. This is then used as inspiration for students' own descriptive writing.

The lesson allows students to develop an understanding of a single gothic film in relation to a genre of film, and develop understanding of what conventions are, within both film and literature.

#### **Curriculum Links**

- Reading Focus: AF 7 – Understanding of conventions of genre
- Writing Focus: AFs 1 and 2 – Producing creative, thoughtful texts that suit purpose and audience

#### **Lesson Objective**

To understand conventions of setting within the gothic genre, and to understand how opposites are used to increase the impact of setting.

#### **You will need...**

- **Trailer:** still (provided)
- **Main Attraction:** DVD of *The Innocents*

## Activities

### **TRAILER: WHAT MAKES THIS HOUSE HAUNTED?**

At the beginning of this lesson, with as little input as possible, ask the students to draw a haunted house. You can use the still from *The Innocents* that shows Miss Giddens on the staircase as a prompt if desired, or for weaker ability groups. Get students to share ideas with each other and the class, using the following thinking points to help structure your discussion:

- What did you draw?
- Why did you draw that?
- What specifically about your setting makes it scary?
- If you were going to transfer this drawing to a film, is there anything you would include that you cannot draw on the page?

The aim of this activity is to get students to not only consider what is included in a typical 'Haunted House', but also to begin to consider why these things are frightening.

### **MAIN ATTRACTION: PATTERNS EMERGING...**

Watch the following clips with the students:

- From 07:30 – 09:34
- From 34:00 – 36:18
- From 1:32:10 – the end

Ask students to note down in their workbooks anything about the setting that makes the story more frightening while they watch the clips. You could use 'the wind' as an example to start them off if they are struggling.

After watching all of the clips, ask students to create a list (or a poster) entitled 'Rules of a Haunted House'. Examples include: gardens, lake, stairs, shadows, toys, statues, darkness, the big house, the isolation etc. Get students to share their ideas with each other and to include as many

different elements as possible as this will later be used as inspiration for their writing.

Extra Activity for Higher Ability students: Use the Rules to discuss the use of opposites within the film and the genre. Ask the students to explain what changes from the first clip of the setting (gardens bathed in sunlight) to the last clip (at night, dark, shadows). Use this to explain how this use of opposites within the genre heightens the impact of both: for example, the use of very happy music makes the sinister music even more sinister. Give the students a few minutes to see if they can come up with any more opposites that they spotted in ‘The Innocents’.

Explain how all the elements that students have noted down form a part of the Conventions of the gothic genre. A convention is an element that is used often, and repeated, within a genre, until it becomes part of that genre. A good example might be that a convention of romantic comedy is that the guy always gets the girl in the end.

The pupils’ main task is to create their own opening to a gothic story by writing a piece of descriptive writing about the setting of the story in first person, using the conventions of the genre as have been discussed.

It may be useful to have starter sentences on the board that the students could use for inspiration:

- “Through the mist, the outline of the house on top of the hill revealed itself to me.”
- “The door creaked. It did not want me to open it.”
- “I had only been to this place once before; a long time ago.”

### **END CREDITS: 5 STARS?**

Get students to read out their descriptions to the class, whilst the others tick off how many conventions they managed to include. Perhaps give a reward to the student who manages to include the most.

Try to allow students to engage with why certain parts are scary:

- As a reader, why would this freak you out?
- What about that is scary?

## Extras

### Other Ideas

- If you have the resources, the main writing activity could be changed into an artistic one: either designing a puppet theatre set within a haunted house; or making the classroom itself 'haunted'.
- The section of the lesson on opposites could be used as part of a wider discussion on the idea of opposites within the gothic genre – this would be more suitable for high ability or Key Stage 5 students.
- How seriously do we take the plight of Miss Giddens? Do we think that she is imagining the haunted goes on at Bly, or not? How important is the setting of the story in our opinions of the characters and events that take place; and how important is Bly in terms of the fear that we feel as members of the audience? Students could explore these ideas further by changing certain elements of the setting in which the plot takes place: the house, the music, the time of day, the weather... and see what effect this has on the audience.

### Read

If you like haunted house stories...

- Edgar Allen Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839)
- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)
- Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898 - the story on which *The Innocents* was based)
- Roald Dahl (ed.), *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories* (1983)
- Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book* (2008)

If you want to find out more about the film...

- Film review on Screenonline - <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/456108/>
- Jonathan Rigby, *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema* (2007)

## Watch

- *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1979)
- *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980)
- *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982)
- *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenàbar, 2001)
- *The Orphanage* (dir. Juan Antonio Bayona, 2007)
- *The Woman in Black* (dir. James Watkins, 2012)



