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The Embrace of Ambiguity in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*

SUZIE GIBSON

Since Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) was published over fifty years ago, it has captivated critics and readers alike. Peter Weir's influential 1975 cinematic adaptation brought the tale to an even wider audience, both national and international. The success of the film, however, has been double edged, for while it brought fame to the story, it has overshadowed the book, such that the novel and film tend to be erroneously spoken of in tandem or synonymously.¹ Fifty years on, it is time to reconsider *Picnic at Hanging Rock* unmoored from its cinematic adaptation, especially in light of Janelle McCulloch's recent book *Beyond the Rock* (2017). Among McCulloch's many revelations is that Lindsay's literary imagination was significantly influenced by the works of the American novelist Henry James (1843–1916). McCulloch discloses that “Joan particularly admired his novel *The Turn of the Screw* which she called ‘a mysterious tale that was half-truth and half fiction’” (137). McCulloch does not, however, offer any detail or analysis of how and to what extent Lindsay's regard for James's work, written almost a century earlier, might have influenced her own. Certainly, there are some obvious parallels between *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Turn of the Screw*, including the lack of a satisfying ending.

A closer reading of both texts, however, suggests that the parallels run much deeper. Both narratives challenge us to ponder if there are dark supernatural forces at work or if the nightmare comes from within. Both are set in remote locations and involve a female disciplinarian caring for children. Both assign male characters secondary roles as servants, policemen, would-be ghosts, or lovers. Both Lindsay's Mrs. Appleyard and James's unnamed governess are single, lonely women who lack a sexual life. Indeed, the question of sexual repression permeates each narrative and is the trigger for much of the anxiety and apprehension. Considering these remarkable similarities, it is surprising that no one has undertaken a comparative study of these novels. Perhaps this is because commentary around Lindsay's novel has been driven by the desire to locate and foster an Australian literary tradition independent of its British and American counterparts and also by a pervasive need among Australian critics to address and redress specific cultural concerns, such as the omission of Indigenous peoples in our storytelling. While these critical approaches are undeniably valid and valuable, they overlook Lindsay's indebtedness to nineteenth-century realism and romance, particularly Henry James's idiosyncratic mixture of these conventions. This comparative analysis of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The*

Turn of the Screw considers the ways in which Lindsay's work has embraced James's enigmatic imagination. What is ultimately argued is that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* pushes James's obscurity further by moving its drama beyond the social realm that so characterized this American writer's literary worlds.

RURAL ISOLATION AND ABANDONMENT

Lindsay's interest in nineteenth-century American literature is signposted early on in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* when boarder Sara Waybourne is banned from attending the Saint Valentine's Day picnic because of her failure to memorize Henry Longfellow's *The Wreck of the Hesperus* (1842). Reference to the famous ballad not only reveals the Headmistress's penchant for classical literature; it also provides insight into the College's disciplinary culture and foreshadows Sara's death, as well as Mrs. Appleyard's death and the College's eventual destruction. Compounding the allusion is the Headmistress's symbolic association with Longfellow's unlucky vessel: "Now an immense purposeful figure was swimming and billowing in grey silk taffeta on to a tiled and colonnaded verandah, like a galleon in full sail. On the gently heaving bosom, a cameo portrait of a gentleman in side whiskers, framed in garnets and gold, rose and fell in tune with the pumping of the powerful lungs encased in a fortress of steel busks and stiff grey calico" (Lindsay 12–13). What is also striking about this passage is its resonance with James's *The Turn of the Screw*, in which a similar nautical metaphor describes the situation of a governess looking after two children in a remote country mansion. James's unnamed heroine imagines being at the helm of a "great drifting ship" on which her charges are passengers (James, *Turn* 9). James's country mansion of Bly House is imaginatively reconfigured as a large seafaring vessel. Such maritime allusions intensify feelings of isolation since Bly House and Appleyard College are remote properties, removed from the respective metropolitan centers of London and Melbourne. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Turn of the Screw*—though set in land-locked, claustrophobic environments—feature characters who are nonetheless cast adrift in rural desolation, like sailors on a vast ocean.

Themes of abandonment and isolation permeate both *The Turn of the Screw* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, involving both orphaned children and their caregivers. James's governess, for instance, accepts the position of guardian to two children on the condition that she "never, never" trouble their charming Harley Street uncle on any account: "neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything, only meet all questions herself, receive all monies from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone" (James, *Turn* 6). Such conditions immediately render James's young protagonist vulnerable and set the scene for her nightmare experiences at Bly House. In a different way, the newly installed English Headmistress of Appleyard College is already isolated by being an ex-patriot widow, childless and without familial bonds. And while her purchase and transformation of "the local

white elephant" (Lindsay 9) into a prestigious college reveals an entrepreneurial spirit and a certain level of autonomy, she is nonetheless alone in a foreign country. Furthermore, Lindsay's description of Appleyard College as an "architectural anachronism" and "a hopeless misfit in time and place" (8) helps reinforce the idea of the Headmistress's displacement.

In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the motif of abandonment is also closely linked to the vanishing of three schoolgirls and their teacher. Mrs. Appleyard feels especially abandoned by Miss McCraw's disappearance, for how could the mathematics teacher of "masculine intellect" be "spirited away, lost, raped, murdered in cold blood like an innocent schoolgirl" (173). Entertaining the idea of Miss McCraw's rape or murder, when there is no evidence, reveals Mrs. Appleyard's particularly dark imagination. The Headmistress is also disturbed by the thought that the schoolteacher was instrumental in her own vanishing. It is perhaps easier to imagine the ethereal, dreamy student Miranda conceding to her fate. The scene of the schoolgirls scaling the rock can be read as a sensuous abandonment, as when Irma, Marion, and Miranda discard their "stockings and shoes" (33). The surviving witness, Edith, is scandalized by their barefoot condition, and interestingly the omniscient narration is critical of her incapacity to be swept away, for "such abandoned folly would always be beyond the understanding of Edith and her kind, who early in life take to woollen bed-socks and galoshes" (34). Here abandonment can be associated with a libertarian spirit that frees the body from restrictive clothing. The idea of liberation is furthered by Edith's perception of her peers defying gravity by gliding "over stones" (35). The concept of an extraordinary power freeing and elevating schoolgirls from their earthly condition is channeled through the perception of stodgy Edith, whose lack of imagination contrasts with the otherworldly, even out-of-body experience of her peers.

Later, when Edith is interviewed over the vanishing, she belatedly and coyly recalls seeing Miss McCraw without her skirt (59), prompting speculation that she too sexually abandoned herself to a mysterious natural force. Days later, when one of the missing schoolgirls, Irma, is found "without a corset" and feet "perfectly clean" (94-95), the idea of an abandoned, liberated body once more comes to the fore. Images of schoolgirls freeing themselves from restrictive clothing suggests that the bush is emancipatory in enabling humans to dispense with their cultural chattels, in this case, corseted garments that are symbolic of a wider rejection of Victorian values.

Victoria Bladen makes the argument in her analysis of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* that in the final posthumously published chapter, the corsets represent the human form, and when "they are discarded like 'confining husks' . . . the girls transform to animal form in order to transfuse into the mystic space of the rock" (164). The idea of the human body changing into another entity is evocative of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*—where transformation is the overarching theme. E. M. Forster's "Story of a Panic" dramatizes metamorphosis through a precocious child, Eustace, who escapes from

the confines of his Edwardian childhood by merging with the natural environment: “Eustace jumping over the parapet of the garden alighted in an olive tree, looking like a great white moth, and from the tree he slid on to the earth” (38). The motif of transformation is also evident in *The Turn of the Screw*, and it is linked to the governess’s altered vision of the children, Miles and Flora, once she believes that they are communing with evil spirits. James captures this moment of metamorphosis in dramatic detail when the governess watches over Flora to see if she acknowledges Miss Jessel’s ghost: “My heart had stood still for a moment with the wonder and terror of the question whether she too would see; and I held my breath while I waited for a cry from her, what some innocent sign either of interest or alarm. . . . I waited, but nothing came” (29). Flora’s failure to register the presence of the previous governess is interpreted as an act of deception that transforms her from being an innocent “rosy sprite” (9) into a knowing little girl. In James, metamorphosis is experienced as a drama of perception: a child’s resistance to see (or inability to see) transforms Flora from being an angelic creature into a calculating dissembler. The thought of this child’s chicanery causes James’s heroine to feel a great deal of anguish: “There are depths, depths! The more I go over it the more I see in it, and the more I see in it the more I fear. I don’t know what I *don’t* see, what I *don’t* fear!” (30) The emphasis on the negative—“*don’t* see” and “*don’t* fear”—reveals the governess’s anxiety over what she does not know. The unknown territory of childhood sexuality opens up an epistemological abyss.

Anxiety over sexual knowledge is also expressed in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* when Irma’s body is found and medically examined to check if her virginity is intact (95). As Irma is close to the marriageable age, sexual purity is crucial to preserving her moral and social status. In light of this, nature’s indifference to human morality, far from being sinister or even evil, might be seen as liberating; it provides an alternative to society’s rules and conventions, especially Mrs. Appleyard’s peculiar embrace of English austerity. But even beyond Mrs. Appleyard’s rigidity and oppressive rule, there is a pervading social concern over childhood sexuality in the narrative, as expressed through a detective who suggests that worse than being kidnaped or dead, the missing schoolgirls could be working in a “Sydney brothel” (103).

As has been suggested, fear over childhood sexuality is similarly important in *The Turn of the Screw*, in which it is linked to the ghosts of the deceased servants Miss Jessel and Peter Quint and their perceived haunting of Flora and Miles. James’s governess believes it is her duty “to protect and defend the little creatures” (27), and this becomes a matter of urgency once she sees Flora performing a sexually suggestive act of screwing one small piece of wood inside another: “They *know*—it’s too monstrous: they know, they know!” (29). For James’s heroine, sexual knowledge means that the children are “lost” (32). Here the notion of the lost child is not about vanishing into the wilderness but a question of moral, even spiritual, loss.

Much has been written about the lost child in Australian literature, including Peter Pierce’s analysis of this perennial cultural anxiety in our films and novels,

as well as Elspeth Tilley's study into how the Indigenous landscape and presence is appropriated by stories of white vanishing ("Lost-Child"; see also Tilley, "Uses"). Although *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is infamous for the disappearance of schoolgirls, in the narrative the question of the lost child is not limited to the natural environment. For instance, Sara Waybourne is coachman Albert Crundall's lost sibling, and the absence of her "elusive guardian" (105) leaves her abandoned to another kind of wilderness, that which takes the form of institutional abuse. Perhaps it is this aspect of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* that is more disturbing because it results in the orphan's violent death. In light of Australia's royal commission into child sex abuse, this aspect of Lindsay's novel is timely in revealing the failure of institutions to protect the rights of children (see Davey).

The question of lost innocence—and it is a question because it is uncertain if it exists in the first place—is also posed in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* through those surviving schoolgirls who are wounded by the vanishing of their peers. This is dramatically enacted in the scene in which Irma bids farewell in the school gymnasium and is encircled by girls shouting, "Miranda! Marion Quade! Where are they?" (138). The shadow of Hanging Rock darkens the room as tensions climax with the girls baying like hyenas demanding to know what happened. Irma, bewildered and "near suffocation," is subjected to Edith's howl of "They're *dead ... dead*. Miranda and Marion and Miss McCraw. All dead as doornails in a nasty cave full of bats on Hanging Rock" (137–38). Such behavior temporarily lets us see under the veil of polite society, revealing the darkness at the heart of turn-of-the-century white Australian culture. For the refined French governess, it is a moment of terror comparable to the French Revolution (137).

THE WILDERNESS OF THE MIND

James too knew of this darkness. Comparable to *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, in many ways *The Turn of the Screw* chronicles an interior wilderness of the mind. This is best revealed in a scene in which James's unnamed governess grapples with unseen, psychological forces: "There were exactly states of the air, conditions of sound and stillness, unspeakable impressions of the *kind* of ministering moment that brought back to me, long enough to catch it, the feeling of the medium in which, that June evening out of doors, I had my first sight of Quint, and in which too, at those other instants, I had after seeing him through the window, looked for him in vain. . . . I continued unmolested; if unmolested one could call a young woman whose sensibility had, in the most extraordinary fashion, not declined but deepened" (50). James's heroine is awash with impressions of the "unspeakable" after twice sighting the ghost of Quint. She is also alive to "states of the air," in which there is the expectation that the specter of the valet will present himself once more. Strangely, his nonappearance is read as leaving her "unmolested"—as though his haunting has caused some sexual interference. The notion that James's governess

is a frustrated young woman whose ghostly visions are psychological projections of her repressed sexuality is given credence with the repetition of the word “unmolested,” as sex is near to her mind. Earlier the question of her sexual yearning is further implied, when she first sees Quint after fantasizing that she would chance upon a charming gentleman—hopefully the handsome Harley Street Uncle—during one of her afternoon wanderings (15). This desire turns into a reality when she discerns an unknown man in the distance (15–16). Such a vision prompts instant rape-anguish, for “an unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred” (16). The governess’s loneliness and sexual longing encourages readers to question the validity of her ghostly visions, with thoughts of rape and molestation entangled within her anxious perceptions.

The power of suggestion likewise proves to be tormenting for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*’s governess: “Strong-minded persons in authority can ordinarily grapple with practical problems of facts. Facts no matter how outrageous, can be dealt with by other facts. The problems of mood and atmosphere . . . are infinitely more sinister. . . . An atmosphere can be generated overnight out of nothing and everything” (101). In this passage, the intangible is recognized as being infinitely more difficult and unwieldy than the definitive sphere of facts. The invisible forces of “mood and atmosphere” that come from “nothing and everything” shake Mrs. Appleyard to the core. Here the impact of James can be discerned in Lindsay’s work, as his fictions too sustain high levels of anxiety by generating moods and mind states that have no solid foundation.

While James’s governess becomes a prisoner of her own thoughts and fears, Mrs. Appleyard is held captive by what she cannot control. In a desperate bid to exert some power over her financially failing college, the widow focuses on punishing the orphan Sara, for in her twisted mind, Sara comes to represent the “nameless malady from which every inmate of the College was suffering” (Lindsay 105). Echoing the obsessive attitude of James’s governess, who tries to exorcise evil spirits from her charges, Mrs. Appleyard too seeks to expunge from Sara a secret inner strength. Insight into Sara’s consciousness reveals a lonely orphan mourning the loss of her beloved Miranda. The “secret strength” of Mrs. Appleyard’s observation is wedded to her powerful memories and dreams of her ethereal lost friend (105). Sara’s feelings toward Miranda run deep as she reminisces over shared intimacies in their coveted bedroom, her yearning capturing the intensity of adolescent desire.

While the Headmistress’s abuse of Sara appears irrational, there is a deeper sense of punishing the child over her secret world of desire. By denying Sara access to art classes and drawing materials, it seems that Mrs. Appleyard tries to disrupt her rich interior life. “Turning the screw” further, she also threatens to send Sara to an orphanage, and to her delight, such a cruel proposition elicits a reaction: “For the first time a change of expression flickered behind the great eyes” (106). Later we learn that Sara previously spent time in an orphanage, where she suffered abuse. The fear of being returned to a place where a sadistic matron shaved her head is

perhaps too much to bear. The English widow's persecution so intimidates the child that she crouches behind doors and refuses food. Even the unpopular Edith Horton likens her to a "creeping oyster" (109). While it is unclear if the governess of *The Turn of the Screw* is lucid and level-headed, it is quite evident that Lindsay's Headmistress is unstable: "Nowadays the very sight of the child Sara slumped over a book in the garden was enough to send a flush of irritation crawling up the Head's neck under the boned net collar. The small pointed face was somehow the symbol of the nameless malady from which every inmate of the College was suffering in varying degrees. If it had been a weak rounded childish face it might have aroused an answering pity instead of a sense of resentment that one so puny and pale possessed a core of secret strength—a will as steely as her own" (105). The bizarre idea that a "weak rounded childish face" could inspire pity reveals Mrs. Appleyard's erratic state of mind. However, it appears that the apparent main irritation is with the orphan having "core secret strength" that is equal to her own. Here the Headmistress perceives the young Sara not as a child but as her rival.

Correspondingly, in *The Turn of the Screw*, the features and mannerisms of a girl-child come to reflect shortcomings. When Flora denies seeing the ghost of the previous governess, her angelic appearance miraculously vanishes (70). The governess's much-altered vision of Flora enables her to construct the orphan as an obstacle to truth; this leads to her swift departure to her uncle's lodgings. The girl-child's absence then enables James's heroine to forge a closer bond with her brother. Once alone with Miles, the governess again imagines being at the helm of a great ship that she steers well enough to avoid calamity (76). Her vivid imagination also wanders to the question of romance, when she thinks that she and Miles are like "some young couple, who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy at the presence of the waiter" (78). Her fantasy of being on a honeymoon with a child once more alerts readers to the possibility that her ghostly visions are extensions of her repressed sexuality.

Thus, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* both feature frustrated governesses whose lack of a sexual life is perversely projected onto the children under their care. Yet while James's governess deals with her repression by turning Miles into a would-be lover, Mrs. Appleyard transforms Sara into an object of contempt. The Headmistress's cruelty toward the orphan is a violent expression of her barely concealed desire for revenge. And while it appears that Mrs. Appleyard is incapable of erotic thoughts and feelings, when she fondly remembers her deceased husband, it is evident that she yearns for his male company. Early in the novel, when she dreams of swimming with her "dear Arthur" like a fish, she is temporarily free and unburdened by her stiffly corseted identity (Lindsay 37). There is, then, a hidden emotional life existing deep beneath the hardened layers of Mrs. Appleyard's petrified personality.

What is also analogous in the two fictions is their foregrounding of unrequited love. In the spirit of James, Lindsay introduces the question of romance through Englishman Michael Fitzhubert's infatuation with Miranda, only to have his desire

frustrated by her disappearance. Similarly, *The Turn of the Screw* begins with the question of romance—we learn that the governess “was in love” and that “she couldn’t tell her story without it coming out” (3)—only to leave this narrative thread unrealized. Elsewhere I have argued that love’s frustration is repeatedly enacted in James’s fictions: heterosexual romance falls short of being redemptive or recuperative.² In light of this, failed love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is evocative not only of *The Turn of the Screw* but of all James’s novels. For example, it is surely *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) from which Lindsay adopts the distinctive phrase “turning one’s face to the wall” (James, *Wings* 436). In James’s parlance, turning one’s face to the wall registers defeat and disappointment. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the heroine memorably turns her face to the wall after learning of her lover’s deceit. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Fitzhubert does the same when he learns that he did not save the girl he loves, the white swan Miranda, but Irma, “the little dark one, with the curls” (99). Lindsay draws on this phrase once more when a bedridden, exiled Sara turns her face to the wall after ostensibly rejecting morsels scavenged from the kitchen, when in truth she is another disappointed lover (150). Miranda is once more the object of affection, and in this instance, unfulfilled lesbian fantasies are foregrounded.

THINKING EVIL

Elsbeth Tilley’s suggestion in “The Uses of Fear: Spatial Politics in the Australian White-Vanishing Trope” that Appleyard College is “distinguished from something far more sinister in the surrounding bush” (36) can underplay the psychological harm of unchecked institutional power. The rural isolation of both Appleyard College and Bly House allows their respective governesses to rule without much, if any, oversight. And the fact that this eventually results in children dying—Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* and Sara in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*—implies that human institutions are hardly protective spheres. However, in the spirit of ambiguity, it is unclear whether James’s governess kills Miles through her psychological bullying or whether he dies of shock after confronting the ghost of Quint. Likewise, it is unclear whether Sara Waybourne commits suicide or dies at the hands of Mrs. Appleyard.

The Headmistress’s involvement in Sara’s death is obliquely revealed when the novel closes in on her tortured psychological condition: “From the staircase the grandfather clock had become so loud that Mrs. Appleyard fancied she could hear its everlasting tick-tock. . . . Minute by minute, hour by hour: like a heart beating in a body already dead” (Lindsay 172). Here, Edgar Allan Poe’s 1843 neo-Gothic short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” is chillingly evoked. The relentless ticking of the clock rattles the widow’s nerves to the point that she cannot sleep. Her once-strong sense of self-possession has deteriorated to the point that she contemplates the impossible—a heart throbbing in a corpse. Poe’s tale is again alluded to when the repetitious “tick-tock, tick-tock” envelopes Mrs. Appleyard’s guilty conscience (174). The plight of Sara is indirectly revealed through Mrs. Appleyard’s murky memories

of hearing her scream, “No, no! Not that! Not the orphanage!” (174). Through the muffled darkness of the Headmistress’s Lady Macbeth-like delirium, she rummages through Sara’s bedroom, taking account of all that is there, including Miranda’s silver-framed photograph. It is unclear what transpired in Sara’s bedroom, but it is implied that it is a crime scene. Mrs. Appleyard dimly remembers bending over a child whose “enormous black eyes” burn into her own (174). The Headmistress looms over small Sara like a malevolent Gothic monster. Clearly something very wrong happened in Sara’s quarters, but we never learn the precise details.

J. A. Wainwright’s “Desolation of Angels—World and Earth in Picnic at Hanging Rock” argues that Mrs. Appleyard murdered Sara and that her crime is linked to Lindsay’s vision of a stained and grotesque world (123). While it seems likely that the unhinged widow killed Sara—indeed, her false information to the French governess Miss de Poitiers that she departed from the College with her guardian heightens suspicion—her guilt can never be proven. Such ambiguity echoes James’s method of drawing on the power of insinuation and suggestion to inflame the reader’s imagination. It may well be that Lindsay is following James’s writerly advice in the preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, in which he refers to the force of innuendo in making readers “think the evil” (128).

James’s governess certainly thinks the evil enough to believe that she is involved in a grand supernatural drama in which the children’s souls are at stake: “It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul. . . . I saw how the human soul—held out, in the tremor of my hands, at arm’s length—had a perfect dew of sweat on a lovely childish forehead” (*Turn*, 82). *Picnic at Hanging Rock*’s final pages also record a supernatural conflict between the governess and the Rock she believes is her nemesis. Notably, Mrs. Appleyard confronts the monolith after Sara’s corpse is discovered under flowerbeds. The Headmistress turns her attention from Sara, no longer alive to be a scapegoat or an aggravation, to a more challenging adversary: Mother Nature. Lindsay’s metaphor of a dark pattern taking form and spreading over everyone since the picnic encompasses Mrs. Appleyard, who completes its design by confronting Hanging Rock (122, 152). Imitating the actions of her missing pupils, she scales the rock, “stumbling and sweating upwards through the bracken and dogwood,” thinking of Miranda and Marion “without compassion” (186). The prose transforms into a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness reverie: “Dead. Both dead. And now Sara lying under the tower” (186). Like the captain of a sinking ship, Mrs. Appleyard itemizes the Rock’s missing and dead, who are also her victims. Before plunging to her death, she sees Sara Waybourne “in a nightdress, with one eye fixed and staring from a mask of rotting flesh” (187). Like a drowning sailor in a shipwreck whose last memories flash before his eyes, the English widow becomes awash with her own guilt. Much like the fate of a Gothic monster, she suffers from a violent death as her body clumsily bounces from one rock to another, her head finally impaled on a “jutting crag” (187). The demon might be destroyed, but the dark pattern of Lindsay’s imagination still lives.

The Turn of the Screw's governess also embarks on a dangerous journey, one that proves fatal in rupturing what she believes is a secret bond between Miles and Quint. She trusts that the spell of possession will be broken when Miles identifies his oppressor. James's heroine manages to extract from the boy the name of his corrupting influence: "Peter Quint—you devil!" (85). Such progress, however, is undermined by the fact that Miles cannot see his tormenter. The governess's sense of pride in obtaining from her ward some kind of admission is short-lived, for Miles wails like the "cry of a creature hurled over an abyss" and collapses. Holding him for the last time, the governess discovers that "his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (85). Like James, Lindsay draws on the imagery of falling in describing the death Mrs. Appleyard. While Miles is psychologically "hurled over an abyss," the Headmistress commits suicide by leaping from Hanging Rock.

Yet another similarity between the novels is that they deploy an epistolary method in mediating the reader's relationship to incidents. The effect is twofold: it distances the reader from the immediate action and imitates the conventions of a true story. This framing device is used in *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the governess's diary narrative, recited forty years after she penned her account, buffers our relationship to the text. And in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, letters and witness statements likewise work to foster distance. Lindsay's final chapter adopts the epistolary mode: a newspaper extract dated Saint Valentine's Day, thirteen years after the "College Mystery," operates as the epilogue. The mock newspaper report details the fates of some of the people involved in the vanishing: Irma Leopold has become a distinguished Countess; Edith Horton has died of causes unknown. It is also noted that a year after the disappearance, a bush fire tore through the once monumental Appleyard College, reducing it to ashes. The article also reports the discovery of a piece of "frilled calico" (189) thought to be part of the missing schoolgirl's petticoats, a tantalizing detail that fosters more questioning and speculation.

EMBRACING AMBIGUITY

The Turn of the Screw and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are each ambiguous, dark fairy tales. In Lindsay's later book, excursions into the wilderness are, as in James's work, psychological pilgrimages in which a character's internal fortitude is tested. The interior, claustrophobic realm of the mind is a sphere that James masterfully chronicled. *The Turn of the Screw's* unnamed governess provides a complex psychological study in which readers are kept in suspense concerning her supernatural experiences, which might be genuine or misleading. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* similarly records the drama of Mrs. Appleyard's interiority, in which an inexplicable vanishing leads to crazed thoughts and perceptions. James's penchant for the enigmatic and obscure is channeled in Lindsay's tale, in which suspicion and paranoia, though transported to an Antipodean landscape, open up a parallel abyss of fear and anxiety.

Each novel focuses on the theme of evil and whether it exists as a natural or supernatural phenomenon. Joan Kirkby's "Old Orders, New Lands: The Earth Spirit in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*" offers an insightful perspective on this question: "natural forces suggest the presence of evil in nature, however, the earth itself is not evil, it is human violation of the earth that precipitates inexplicable occurrences in nature and eruptions of evil in human society" (256). The disharmony of the British widow's anachronistic College in the Australian bush (Lindsay 8), as well as her domineering will, fosters a malevolent atmosphere that precipitates one child's demise and scars others. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess's steely determination to save her charges from damnation has analogous results. Much of the harm inflicted in both novels is grounded in the human sphere of malice.

Yet this does not rule out *Picnic at Hanging Rock*'s vanishing as a supernatural event. The ancient landscape of Hanging Rock itself is deeply evocative of primeval fears of being overwhelmed by something beyond the human—or at least prehuman. Significantly, a powerful sense of the prehistoric distinguishes Lindsay's tale from James's socially centered narrative locked within human minds and dwellings. The eeriness of Lindsay's novel is not limited to the built environs of Appleyard College or to the psychological realm of the mind but moves beyond and outside human experience. Rosemary Miller's "Return to Hanging Rock: Lost Children in a Gothic Landscape" argues that Lindsay's novel reminds us that "the human figure is neither the sole nor central inhabitant of time and place" (154), and as such, human subjectivity is decentered.

The sublime landmark of Hanging Rock, a monolith that conquers the novel's chief antagonist, encircles our imagination. Its primeval force is inexplicably related to other strange disturbances such as the bizarre death of the junior governess Miss Lumley, consumed by fire at a Melbourne hotel soon after quitting the Macedon region. Another strange occurrence is the young valet Albert Crundall's dream about his lost sister, Sara, who appears to him in her white nightgown the very evening she dies at Appleyard College. Each of these incidents is suggestive of a mystical netherworld beyond the realm of human knowledge.

There is also a haunting sense of the unspeakable preceding, exceeding, and dwelling within Lindsay's novel, bound to a monumental landscape that hosts the dead—countless and nameless custodians shamefully annihilated. Kathleen Steele's "Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in *Bush Studies* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*" criticizes the novel's omission of Indigenous Australians, arguing that while Hanging Rock poses an "un-nameable threat," Lindsay's fiction encourages one to perceive "Australia as an un-peopled land where nothing of consequence occurred until the British gave it history" (44). Yet *Picnic at Hanging Rock*'s powerful evocation of a primordial nature, shaped and carved throughout the ages, foregrounds the limits of white expansion. Appleyard College's destruction by fire reveals how its built environment can be easily demolished. If anything, Lindsay's

tale reminds us of our own impermanence and how the hubris of colonialism can be crushed by nature's elemental force. The landscape's indifference to human life not only stresses the transitory nature of human existence but also sheds light on the insignificance of an individual's life span in comparison to a primeval nature that exists despite and regardless of us.

Perhaps a different sense of the eternal is evoked in *The Turn of the Screw*, in which it is still possible that malevolent spirits haunt Bly House. The novel's boundless world of the undead disrupts the governess's fabled vision of childhood innocence. The specters who taint her perception appear across sculpted bodies of water, behind glass windows, on staircases and distant towers. They are located within the designed environs and architectural ramparts of Bly House and are therefore anchored within the tame sphere of an English country estate. The ghosts are recognizably former servants who worked for the Harley Street uncle, and so they are human in origin. Although the supernatural realm causes a great deal of disruption, the phantoms in James's novel are not formless disturbances who challenge our place in the world but are identifiable horrors who were once human. The mixture of fear and awe in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is more dramatically associated with what Kirkby describes as an "inarticulate" nature that precedes and exceeds our existence (260). However, despite these differences, each fiction reminds us that the world is still a mysterious place.

Both *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Turn of the Screw* stir the imagination by their refusal to provide complete, intelligible worlds. While Lindsay evokes James's complex, protomodernist sensibility, her novel ventures beyond the ghostly hauntings of the social realm, embracing the mysticism of nature itself. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* takes the notion of flawed knowledge, central to James's fictions, a step further by suggesting that there may be unknown forces lurking somewhere beyond human-centered experience. The haunting idea of an absolute unknown thwarting representation spills outside and beyond the frame of Lindsay's fiction, inspiring speculation about alternative worlds and realities yet to be perceived. There is a strange comfort in the idea that despite our plundering and appropriating of the Earth through exploration, colonization, and industrialization, the natural environment, although diminished, still endures, and part of its survival is linked to its inalienable otherness. In evoking this realm, Lindsay has ultimately transcended the powerful influence of Henry James and produced a classic novel that is uniquely Australian in its uncanniness.

Notes

1. There is quite a large body of criticism that analyses the book and film together, but for examples of articles in which the book is noticeably overlooked, see Carr; and Catania.
2. In "Love's Negative Dialectic in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*," I argue that in all of James's fictions, romantic love is unfulfilled.

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