

For me, Hitchcock's films are similar in theme to that of pulp writer H. P. Lovecraft. In Lovecraft's stories, the normal world is a veneer, temporary and inevitably doomed, which will collapse into the ultimate truth of the universe, which is one of inhumane cosmic horror. Likewise, Hitchcock's films present the normal world as a placid vanity. It is like a bathtub full of water. Hidden somewhere in the water and soap is a drain that will represent the ugly truth of humanity: that murder is an easy thing to the right man. Most people never see the drain, or if they feel its pull, they might ascribe it to more innocent motives. But it is a few men who live as a priest of the drain, in its direct proximity, and their rites are murder.

I say men not as a gender-neutral term, but as a deliberately infused choice. Hitchcock's "masters of inhumanity" is a role only taken up by men. Women are regulated to being aware victims at best, and completely oblivious to the drain at worst. It is the intention of this paper to examine the role of the woman in Hitchcock's films, specifically *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Strangers on a Train*, and *Rear Window*.

Rear Window

Rear Window is actually relatively mild in its treatment of women and the approach to horror. This is mainly because the male protagonist, played by James Stewart is crippled and regulated to being an eyewitness throughout the film. The women, played by Grace Kelly and Thelma Ritter, once convinced by Stewart's character that there is something suspicious going on, they actually become his investigating agents. Kelly even acts very bravely and chances a foray into the murderer's apartment to look for evidence. This is a development of her character, because Stewart refused to marry her before because he didn't

think a society woman could go where he goes in the world and takes pictures in hazardous areas.

Other than the Kelly and Ritter characters, the rest of the women in *Rear Window* are minor side-stories to be observed by Stewart. The most prominent being Miss Torso, the eye candy mentioned most often by the other characters. But there's a tragic figure named Miss Lonelyhearts and a sculptor and a newlywed. But they are proverbial window-dressing to help fill in the story rather than proper characters in their own right.

Lastly, I would also point out that we know very little about the character of the murderer Thorwald, played by Raymond Burr. We only see him through Stewart's eyes, and only very rarely his speech. Thorwald, when he does speak, is trepidatious and cautious, as he's talking to what he thinks is a blackmailer. He gives no speeches about his motivations and we have no idea of why he killed his wife, though we can suspect that he has been poisoning her.

Strangers On a Train

This film is more critical, and even scathing, of the role of women in the hidden world of murder. The most aware woman is Anne Morton, fiancée of the protagonist Guy Haines. She is astute enough to recognize that Bruno Anthony is a danger without any coaching. But Barbara Morton, her sister, has to be directly ogled by Bruno while he's strangling a woman in order to feel that the drain is close by. Worst of all is the society woman who consents to being strangled in public by Bruno because it's all a lark until suddenly it isn't. The final character of a woman that I want to point out in *Strangers* is Miriam, Guy's conniving and cruel wife, who seems intent on extorting Guy and ends up as the murder victim.

First, let us examine Bruno Anthony's character a little. He is going to have some similarities and differences to Uncle Charles, the murderer of the next movie. It is important

to compare and contrast the way he sees his victims to that of Charles, for Charles is much more negative about women than Bruno. Bruno himself is a very clever person, and thinks of methods for perfect murders. However, he is also a very conceited man by virtue of his own cleverness. He isn't particularly out to kill women, because his primary victim is his father.

I think the worst example of the oblivious woman is in Bruno's mother/ Bruno lives as a spoiled man-child, still living with his parents, and wanting his father dead mostly so he can inherit and continue his life of ease without his father's . His mother has to know how much trouble Bruno has gotten into over the years, and yet she decides, consciously or not, to overlook this psychopathic behaviour and instead dote on him. She knows he plans crazy acts like blowing up the White House, which Bruno downplays as "only fooling", which sends her into titters. Meanwhile, the audience is almost certain that Bruno has a long, endless list of crazy plans up his sleeve ready to be produced like a stage magician. Finally, we get the sinister feeling that Bruno's mother is indeed fooling herself as she shows Bruno her latest painting: an abstract of a staring, conniving, evil misshapen lump of a man. Bruno laughs it off as a picture of his father, while his mother mumbles that she was trying for St. Francis of Assisi. But it is left to the audience to piece together that she subconsciously painted her impression of Bruno. She circles around the drain, but doesn't see it straight on. But then, she's not in danger of being a victim. Bruno loves his mother and she's not a target of his wrath.

In this sort of "oblivious to the drain" category, I'm also going to place Barbara Morton, played by Hitchcock's daughter, who plays a society girl. She's taken by Bruno's brash ways at first, but realises that he sees her as a potential victim, given the slight similarities that she has with Miriam and she is gripped by fear. The other oblivious woman is the society woman who finds it titillating that Bruno speaks frankly about murder and

consents to be play-strangled by Bruno. Bruno loses control as he stares at Barbara, and the camera doesn't show the audience how he is strangling the lady, but we're certain he's switched from play to intent without realising it. The incident is sort of half-acknowledged, half-ignored by society, and Bruno is banished, but the police aren't called to investigate.

We should also touch briefly on the character of Miriam, who seems like she is such a heinous person that she deserves to die. Guy even laments to Anne that he wishes he could strangle her to death. Guy doesn't act upon this motive, but it is very strongly there. Miriam is also portrayed as a hedonist, going to the theme park with two young men, eating everything that strikes her fancy, and interpreting the stalking of her by Bruno as sexual attraction. I'm not sure if this hedonism is admonished by Hitchcock as part of her character or not, but it certainly doesn't make her seem sympathetic.

Finally there is the character of Anne. Anne is like other Hitchcock female leads such as Janet Leigh's in *Psycho* or Tippi Hedren's in *The Birds* in that she isn't a flighty, oblivious woman. She recognizes very early on that Bruno isn't who he claims to be, and is stalking Guy. She manages to also get the truth of the situation out of him. She even acts with agency and tries to inform Bruno's mother of the danger her son has become, but accidentally tips off Bruno. But I think Anne's character represents the most that Hitchcock thinks about women, they can be intelligent and capable, but they can't belong to the cult of murder. They also cannot resolve the problem of the murderer either, except by accident, as we'll see in the next film. Janet Leigh's character is murdered in the first act. Tippi Hedren's character (and actress) are traumatised, but the movie is not resolved. Anne can only go so far into her investigations, but it takes Guy to finish off Bruno.

Shadow of a Doubt

This is said to be Hitchcock's favourite film, and although I haven't seen even most of his films, so far this is mine as well. I think it is very clever in building suspense through revelation. A film critic once said there were no red herrings in this film, like there were in *Suspicion*, but I must disagree. We are given a very blatant red herring at the beginning of the film, and it is the testimony of a woman that throws us off.

The film starts not with the idyllic life of the Newtons in Santa Rosa, but with a quick look at Uncle Charlie. We don't know what sort of person he is at the beginning. We do know that he is in trouble with the law, and perhaps a gangster? But we're given a camera shot of him lying down on his bed. His landlady enters the room unannounced. She dotes on him, worries about him, tells him that men are trying to see him, whom she's turned away. There's even money on the floor which she picks up for him. Charles is terse with her, but not cruel. He seems more preoccupied with his problems than short with her. We don't see the landlady again, but it seems that she's testifying in favour of Charles' character. He's not that bad a person, maybe in a rough spot. This testimony tricks the audience into thinking that Charles is indeed trouble, but a mild, even perhaps reformable one.

We are also quickly introduced to Emma Newton. Emma is another of the women who fall into Hitchcock's "oblivious" trope. To be fair, none of the other family members besides young Charlie will realise that Uncle Charles is a murderer, but Emma takes the cake in seeing two plus two and being unable to reach four. She recognizes that it is unusual for Charlie to fall down a collapsed stair or be locked into a garage with the engine running, but she just cannot assert that her daughter's life is in jeopardy.

We are also introduced to the little sister of the family, Ann. Ann is a precocious little child who'd rather read a book than interact with other humans, but I was much the same way as a child, so I can't really fault her. I think she, with her greedy brother, are more

lumped into the category of “horrid little children” rather than “examples of women”, so I shall pass over her character.

The protagonist of the story is Charlie, named for her Uncle Charles, whom she idolises. The story can also be seen as a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story, where Charlie sloughs off her idealistic childhood and is rudely introduced to Hitchcock’s bathtub of a world, hidden drain and all. At the beginning of the film, she is bored out of her mind living in the sleepy town of Santa Rosa, California. She is terribly excited that Uncle Charles is coming to visit. When he arrives, she ascertains that they are very much alike, and that she’s going to find out everything about Uncle Charles, which gives him pause, but he chalks it up to youthful exuberance.

It is Charlie’s boredom that fuels her curiosity into examining Charles’ behaviour. Charles does a rather foolish thing and gives her a piece of evidence of his crimes to Charlie as a piece of jewellery. Immediately she picks up on an engraving on it, but doesn’t investigate it/ Charles does give another clue that he is suspicious by accidentally destroying a page of a newspaper that has a story in it investigating his whereabouts. Charlie will eventually investigate a copy at the local library and find another, more dangerous clue that Uncle Charles is actually a murderer. She’ll also be approached by federal agents trying to track down Uncle Charles and prove him to be a criminal.

Charlie’s life turns into one of turmoil. Her naivete has been brutally ended. Uncle Charles is getting suspicious of her sudden taciturness. He keeps trying to keep her from sharing her secrets from the family, and he brings her to a seedy bar to have a private conversation. In this bar, we meet another woman. It is one of Charlie’s old friends, but she has dropped out of high school and fallen upon rough times. In a way, she is Charlie, but it’s Charlie without the happiness of her family. She spots the emerald ring that Charles has given as a gift and says she would just die for it, obviously coveting it. I believe she

represents Charlie's other choice: to help her uncle cover up his crimes and be silent.

However, Uncle Charles cannot help but reveal some of his cold philosophy, that the women that he murdered were just parasites on the dead, hard working men that they married, and just "fat, wheezing animals". Charlie is in the quandary where she cannot accept her uncle's view of the world or crimes, and she cannot destroy her family by revealing him. The movie then squeezes tighter with suspense until it is finally resolved, but it is important to note that Charlie never gave in to her fears and continued to search bravely for more evidence until the end.