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The Prophetic Parlor: How *Psycho*'s Parlor Scene Foreshadows the True Nature of Norman Bates' Mental Illness

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is a thriller film ostensibly predicated on deception fueled by the unpredictability of a madman. The film's first quarter primes the audience for an on-the-run thriller, led by actress Janet Leigh, who fits the appearance of a prototypical Hitchcock blonde. Such a plot perfectly aligns with Hitchcock's filmography, luring the audience into a sense of calm as their assumptions about a Hitchcockian creation are reinforced. It is through the deranged antagonist Norman Bates that expectations are subverted. At first blush Norman is odd, boyish, but nonetheless friendly, a seemingly minor character playing a small role in Marion Crane's flight from Phoenix. Yet in the parlor scene, just a few minutes of runtime after Norman is initially introduced, his psychosis is exposed so that to the observant viewer, and with the benefit of hindsight, *Psycho* transforms from a tale of twists and turns to a series of inevitabilities. Dialogue coupled with the use of mirrored imaging, avian decor, and paintings of partially nude women, reveal the inner mechanics of Norman's mind, and a surprising degree of lucidity, far before the psychiatrist's diagnosis in the film's conclusion.

Norman's mind houses two personalities and the use of reflection and shadow visualizes the entrapment of Norman's "Mother" personality along with his own in a single body. This dissociative identity disorder is first conveyed at the scene's outset when Norman and Marion are discussing the verbal lashings dealt by Norman's "Mother." Throughout their dialogue Norman

stands in front of a window, his reflection clearly visible on the glass, giving the impression that Norman's words and actions are being simultaneously produced by two copies of himself. While innocuous in isolation, the film's score adds an off-putting air of creepiness through long notes played in minor key. A similar effect is produced later in the scene via shadow. While Marion eats the provided sandwiches, she discusses with Norman his hobby of taxidermy. Eventually, the conversation turns dour as Norman laments, "well it's more than a hobby, a hobby is supposed to pass the time, not fill it," while simultaneously leaning back in his chair. This shift in position creates a crisp silhouette on the adjacent wall thereby projecting the subtle movements of his head as he speaks. Again, the figure of Norman is on the screen twice, once for each inner persona.

The hidden side of Norman, his "Mother" side, is portrayed via metaphor by the stuffed owl perched with wings outstretched and talons extended in the parlor's upper corner. The parlor is adorned with excessive avian decor, as stuffed birds, products of Norman's taxidermy hobby, encircle the room's occupants. Norman explains that he thinks "only birds look well stuffed, well, because they look kind of passive, to begin with." This assertion of passivity however is in stark contrast with the owl posed in an attacking position. During the enumeration of his daily activities, Norman's assertion that he performs errands for his "Mother" is coupled with him shifting his gaze from Marion towards the window through which his mother's residence stands but also towards the owl. When the topic of Norman's mother again enters the conversation the camera shifts to adopt a low angle and perfectly frame two objects: Norman in the fore and the owl in the background. As Norman openly fantasizes about rebuking his "Mother" and discloses the origins and qualities of her illness, the owl looms above him in the shot. The low camera

angle works to empower the “Mother” personality by placing Norman near the ground like a piece of prey ready to fall victim to the owl’s striking claws.

However, if the “Mother” personality, and therefore the owl, are shown to be primed for attack, why does Norman make the assertion about avian passivity? Furthermore, if birds are not truly passive, what is the true reason for them being Norman’s animal of choice? For Norman, birds must be passive because to affirm otherwise would be to admit his “Mother” is dangerous, a truth Norman avoids to protect the illusion in which he is trapped. His denial is evident in his response to Marion’s suggestion that Norman’s mother be placed in a mental hospital in which he argues, “But she’s harmless. She’s as harmless as one of those stuffed birds.” Yet, despite the derangement Norman nonetheless recognizes his imprisonment when he ruminates, “I think that we’re all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out.” Indeed, Norman Bates is cognizant of his predicament, and during the parlor scene he exhibits flashes of lucidity. Like a stuffed bird Norman is superficially capable of action, but in reality he is stuck in a pose unable to fly away to freedom.

In addition to avian decor revealing characteristics of Norman’s “Mother” personality, additional ornamentation of semi-nude women suggests Norman harbours suppressed platonic and intimate loneliness. No less than three pictures portraying semi-nude women adorn the parlor’s walls, though they are artfully tasteful. These pieces seem innocuous until Norman returns to the parlor after Marion retires to her room. Upon his return, the already dim parlor is further draped in darkness as if Marion’s departure drained the room of its luminance. We see Norman, in the dark, contemplating his next move as the film’s ominous score increases in volume, preparing the audience for an unsavory act. Norman proceeds to remove a picture revealing a peephole through which he spies on an undressed Marion. The concealing picture is

in fact a copy of *Susanna and the Elders*, a painting depicting a biblical story in which two men spy on a bathing woman, and thus Norman's peeping was foreshadowed from the scene's genesis (Powers). Furthermore, Marion Crane's last name, not only aligns with the avian motif, but also establishes her as a subject of sexual desire as crane's are renowned for their beauty and mating rituals. Also notable is the slightly low camera angle which allows the owl, once more lurking in the background, into the frame. The owl, watching Norman's perverted act with undead black eyes, is a representation of the "Mother" side of Norman disapproving of his sexual desires. As the psychiatrist later explains Norman commits matricide after his mother takes a lover and to internally justify his actions he must imbue his "Mother" with the same murderous intent when the roles are reversed.

Yet, despite his mania, Norman's dialogue and facial expressions illustrate he is aware of his "private trap" and is furthermore mindful of his mental instability, though he denies its severity. Marion's suggestion to place Norman's mother in a mental institution sends Norman into a passionate monologue about the nature of mental illness. Norman is incensed by what he perceives as Marion's callousness and leans forward in his chair as his eyes become fixed in an unbroken stare. Simultaneously a close-up shot is adopted, allowing Norman's face to fill the screen and his rage be easily perceived. During the monologue the eerie music is reintroduced, adding a sinister undercurrent to Norman's words. As these changes in cinematography and sound take place Norman recounts, seemingly from personal experience, "the laughing and the tears, and the cruel eyes studying you," associated with a madhouse. The audience will later learn Norman has suffered from mental illness since childhood reaffirming his possession of personal experience with psychiatric facilities. Norman goes on to proclaim, "It's not as if she were a maniac, a raving thing. She just goes a little mad sometimes." These statements shift

Norman's disposition from fury to melancholy as he seemingly tries to convince himself that temporary fits of mania, even those which result in murder, are normal symptoms of the human condition. Norman's eyes lose their fire as he leans back in his chair and yet again seeks reassurance as to his sanity by asking Marion, "We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?" to which she replies in the affirmative.

The first viewing of *Psycho* is likely to illicit shock as the true character of Norman Bates' mind is slowly revealed in all its gruesome glory. However, in retrospect Norman's mental instability is heavily foreshadowed, especially in the Parlor scene where dialogue, mirrored imaging, stuffed birds, and nude paintings coalesce into an abstracted representation of Norman's disorder. Despite the bloodshed, the audience nonetheless pities Norman, an already troubled man driven mad by intense loneliness and the prospect of losing his mother, his only human connection, to a lover. In brief stints of semi-sanity Norman subtly seeks reassurance, but ultimately his mental demons prove too powerful and he succumbs permanently to the madness strewn about the parlor of the Bates Motel.

Worked Cited

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