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# Dial M For Masculinity: Hitchcock's Dismantling of Male Dominance

## Hitchcock Final Paper

Alfred Hitchcock's films present a subversive critique of traditional masculinity, systematically exposing the hollow performance beneath Hollywood's conventional male hero. Hitchcock reveals masculinity not as natural dominance but as a precarious social construction that collapses when genuinely tested. This paper examines how Hitchcock's male protagonists occupying traditional positions of power consistently fail to exercise genuine control over themselves or others. Their psychological unraveling, physical limitations, and emotional impotence contrast the capabilities of his female characters and male antagonists, who frequently demonstrate greater agency, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Through these deliberate inversions of expected power dynamics, Hitchcock shows that conventional masculinity does not represent inherent strength but rather a performative facade maintained through social convention and female compliance, one that inevitably shatters when confronted with forces operating outside its artificial boundaries. Far from celebrating male authority, Hitchcock's cinema systematically dismantles it, revealing traditional masculinity as fundamentally pathological to both the women subjected to its demands and the men attempting to embody its impossible ideal.

In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock meticulously documents the psychological unraveling of Scottie Ferguson, crafting a protagonist whose masculine identity hinges entirely on his ability to control both himself and others. When we first encounter Scottie, he is already broken, a former detective whose acrophobia has rendered him professionally impotent and socially diminished by failing to embody societal expectations of heroism, protection, and control (Hitchcock, 1958). This initial portrayal establishes Scottie not as the archetypal masculine hero of classical Hollywood but as a fragmented shell of that ideal, desperately attempting to reconstitute his shattered self.

Scottie's psychological deterioration accelerates dramatically when he encounters Judy and attempts to remake her into the image of Madeleine. This transformation project reveals the darkest implications of Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, where women in cinema function primarily as objects of desire for male viewing pleasure, devoid of autonomy (Mulvey 203). In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock literalizes this concept through Scottie's obsessive reconstruction of Judy. His methodical alteration of her constitutes a visual dissection of the male gaze's mechanics, the female body becomes not merely an object of visual pleasure but a canvas upon which male psychological trauma is projected and processed. Mulvey identifies this as the scopophilic aspect of cinema, where pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female (Mulvey 204). Yet Hitchcock complicates this dynamic by revealing the pathological nature of such looking. Scottie's gaze does not simply objectify Judy, it annihilates her identity.

Hitchcock's genius lies in his refusal to validate this masculine reconstruction project. Unlike traditional Hollywood narratives that restore the male protagonist's power by the film's conclusion, *Vertigo* systematically dismantles Scottie's illusion of control. His momentary triumph, the successful transformation of Judy into Madeleine, proves hollow and short-lived. The final scene at the bell tower represents the complete collapse of Scottie's masculine identity. Having seemingly conquered his acrophobia, he momentarily embodies the traditional masculine hero who overcomes physical limitations. Yet this apparent triumph immediately dissolves when Judy falls to her death. In the film's final shot, Scottie stands frozen at the tower's edge, in a posture that mirrors his opening trauma, suggesting that his journey has led nowhere. Unlike the conventional male protagonist who emerges strengthened and authenticated through narrative adversity, Scottie ends exactly where he began: psychologically shattered, emotionally devastated, and fundamentally impotent.

Through this uncompromising portrayal, Hitchcock delivers a devastating critique of masculinity predicated on control and domination. The film suggests that such masculinity is not merely problematic but fundamentally destructive, both to the women subjected to its demands and to the men who attempt to embody its impossible ideal. Scottie's obsessive pursuit of control leads only to emptiness and emotional

ruin. By denying him the restoration of power that classical Hollywood narratives typically provide, Hitchcock exposes traditional masculinity as a pathological performance rather than a natural state of being.

In *Rear Window*, Hitchcock employs Jeffries' physical immobility as a powerful metaphor for the limitations of traditional masculinity. Confined to a wheelchair with a broken leg, Jeffries occupies a position that directly contradicts the conventional Hollywood hero's active physicality (Hitchcock, 1954). His apartment becomes a stage for examining masculine identity when stripped of its primary signifier, the ability to act.

Jeffries' voyeurism emerges as a compensatory mechanism for this physical limitation, a way of maintaining the illusion of control and engagement despite his confinement. His observation of his neighbors through his rear window allows him to maintain Mulvey's traditional active male position in visual dynamics. His camera equipment functions as a prosthetic extension of his masculinity, allowing him to penetrate private spaces and maintain the illusion of dominance through surveillance.

Yet Hitchcock systematically exposes the hollowness of this voyeuristic power. When Jeffries believes he has witnessed evidence of Thorwald's crime, his inability to physically investigate reveals the fundamental impotence of the male gaze when separated from action. His attempts to engage with the potential murderer through intermediaries highlight the gap between looking and actual intervention. This gap becomes particularly pronounced when Lisa enters Thorwald's apartment. At this moment, Jeffries can only watch helplessly as she places herself in danger, inverting the traditional gender dynamic where male protagonists act while female characters observe/support. This role reversal represents Hitchcock's most explicit challenge to traditional gender hierarchies, undermining the conventional distribution of power in classical Hollywood narratives.

As Tania Modleski argues, Jeffries' relationship with Lisa reflects a deeper anxiety about female independence and power. His consistent rejection of her romantic advances and his dismissal of her professional world suggest a fundamental discomfort with her autonomy. According to Modleski, the dominant male character often perceives the independent woman as a threat of castration, leading him to

control and fetishize her in an attempt to neutralize this threat (Modleski 73). Jeffries' initial treatment of Lisa, reducing her to a beautiful but ultimately unsuitable object of desire, represents his attempt to maintain psychological distance from a woman whose independence challenges his already compromised masculine dominance.

The film's final scene offers a powerful visual summation of this critique. Jeffries, now with both legs in casts, sleeps helplessly in his wheelchair, while Lisa, comfortable and composed, reads a fashion magazine before switching to a travel book. This image inverts the opening sequence, where Jeffries occupied the dominant position of the observer while his neighbors (including several women) were positioned as objects of his gaze. This visual arrangement suggests that Lisa, not Jeffries, possesses genuine agency and adaptability, qualities traditionally associated with masculine power but revealed through Hitchcock's lens to transcend conventional gender boundaries.

Through this sustained examination of voyeurism, mobility, and gender dynamics, *Rear Window* delivers a nuanced critique of traditional masculinity. Hitchcock suggests that masculine power based on observation and control is fundamentally illusory, a compensatory mechanism that collapses when confronted. By positioning Lisa as the narrative's true agent and Jeffries as increasingly dependent and immobilized, the film inverts traditional gender hierarchies and exposes the contingent, fragile nature of masculine dominance.

In *Rebecca*, Hitchcock presents perhaps his most explicit examination of masculinity as performance through Maxim. Despite his aristocratic lineage, imposing estate, and patriarchal authority, Maxim emerges as a hollow figure whose apparent power masks profound psychological vulnerability and dependence (Hitchcock, 1940). His relationship with Rebecca reveals his shattered masculine identity due to her dominance. Though outwardly embodying the ideal of the English gentleman, wealthy, reserved, and socially powerful, Maxim submitted entirely to her infidelity, emotional manipulation, and social dominance.

This revelation fundamentally contradicts traditional conceptions of masculine authority within marriage. Maxim should represent the patriarchal ideal, a man whose social position grants him

unquestioned dominance over his household and family. Yet his relationship with Rebecca inverts this dynamic entirely. Rather than controlling her behavior, he followed her terms, allowing her to maintain the appearance of a perfect marriage while pursuing her desires and systematically undermining his authority. This arrangement exposes the performative nature of his masculinity, a facade maintained through social convention rather than actual power.

Even Rebecca's death fails to free him from her influence. Her continuing psychological presence at Manderley, suggests Maxim's authority remains contingent and compromised. He inhabits Manderley physically, but Rebecca's spirit continues to dictate its emotional and psychological atmosphere, undermining his position as master even in her absence.

Maxim's relationship with his second wife further illuminates the dependent nature of his masculinity. Maxim’s attraction toward his second wife is precisely because she seems unthreatening, the antithesis of Rebecca's confident autonomy, and her submission to him strengthens his fragile sense of masculine control.

This dynamic aligns with Modleski's observation that the female often mirrors the man's desire to attach herself to him (Modleski 50). Yet Hitchcock reveals this mirroring as a mechanism that supports not genuine masculine strength but a fragile illusion of control. Maxim derives satisfaction from his second wife's passivity because she poses no challenge to his authority. His masculinity is revealed as fundamentally reactive and dependent, defined not by internal qualities but by the responses he elicits from the women around him.

Through Maxim, Hitchcock exposes the contingent, performative nature of masculine authority. Maxim's position as master of Manderley provides the trappings of power without its substance, while his relationships with both Rebecca and his second wife reveal how thoroughly his sense of masculine identity depends on female validation and support. By presenting masculinity as a social performance maintained through external structures rather than an inherent quality, *Rebecca* critiques patriarchal assumptions about male dominance and self-sufficiency.

While Hitchcock's protagonists reveal masculinity as a fragile construct through their failures, his villains provide an even more devastating critique by embodying the charisma, intelligence, and dominance his heroes lack. Subverting Hollywood convention, Hitchcock positions these antagonists, not his insecure heroes, as the true drivers of narrative action. This deliberate inversion suggests that traditional masculine virtue leads paradoxically to impotence, while the villains' freedom from social constraint grants them authentic power, further exposing the hollow performance of conventional masculinity.

In *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock delivers his most scathing deconstruction of conventional masculinity through the stark contrast between Guy's impotence and Bruno's effortless dominance (Hitchcock, 1951). Guy, the film's hero, embodies all the external markers of American masculine success: athletic prowess, political ambition, and conventional good looks. Yet Hitchcock immediately exposes this facade by rendering him fundamentally passive. During their pivotal train encounter, Guy's nervous acquiescence to Bruno's murderous proposition reveals not momentary weakness but a fundamental inability to assert himself. This single interaction establishes the film's power dynamic: Bruno conceives, controls, and executes while Guy merely reacts, a complete inversion of the classical Hollywood hero who drives narrative action through decisive agency.

Robin Wood's framework of the film as a struggle between superego and id crystallizes Hitchcock's critique (Wood 97). Guy, representing social conformity and moral restraint, is systematically dismantled by Bruno's uninhibited desire and action. Bruno doesn't just suggest the criss-cross murders, he executes his half of the bargain, methodically stalking Guy, and orchestrating each confrontation with calculated precision. Guy's responses: panic, denial, and ineffectual resistance, underscore his fundamental weakness. Even the film's climax mocks heroic convention. Guy's survival stems not from masculine triumph but sheer chance, while Bruno's death grip on the incriminating lighter demonstrates his control extending beyond mortality. Guy doesn't defeat his antagonist, he merely outlasts him through circumstantial intervention.

Bruno's queer coding provides Hitchcock's most radical subversion of masculine norms. As Doty argues, Bruno's homosexuality carries a disruptive power that threatens Guy's heteronormative identity at its foundation (Doty 487). Bruno's flamboyance, maternal attachment, and obsessive fixation on Guy create a homoerotic undercurrent that Guy resists and seems unwillingly drawn toward. Yet Bruno's queerness doesn't diminish his power, it amplifies it by freeing him from the rigid performance of heterosexual masculinity that constrains Guy. Where Guy's conventional masculinity renders him reactive and insecure, Bruno's freedom from these norms allows him genuine agency, creativity, and command. Hitchcock thus inverts expected power dynamics. Guy's conformity to masculine ideals becomes his fundamental weakness, while Bruno's rejection of these norms becomes his strength, suggesting that traditional masculinity isn't natural dominance but a performance that collapses when confronted with any force unconstrained by its artificial rules.

*Strangers on a Train* doesn't simply show a villain temporarily overwhelming a hero, it systematically dismantles the entire concept of masculine heroism by exposing its fundamental hollowness. Guy, the embodiment of American masculine aspiration, proves so easily manipulated and controlled that Hitchcock's critique becomes unavoidable. Masculinity is revealed not as inherent power but as a social construction utterly dependent on external validation and normative compliance; a facade that shatters when confronted with anyone willing to operate outside its restrictive boundaries.

In *Shadow of a Doubt*, Hitchcock methodically exposes the facade of patriarchal authority by positioning Uncle Charlie, a murderer, as the film's most commanding masculine presence, while systematically emasculating the supposed pillars of moral authority (Hitchcock, 1943). The film's opening sequence establishes this power dynamic with clarity. Uncle Charlie reclined in his bed, coolly smoking and calmly orchestrating his escape while professional detectives fumble ineffectually outside. This visual juxtaposition immediately subverts audience expectations, the murderer possesses composure and control while lawful authorities appear disorganized and impotent. Uncle Charlie's effortless evasion isn't merely plot mechanics but Hitchcock's deliberate commentary that institutional masculine authority, represented

by law enforcement, proves hollow when confronted with genuine masculine dominance, regardless of its moral corruption.

This critique extends more devastatingly to the domestic sphere through Joseph Newton, whose position as family patriarch Hitchcock systematically dismantles. Joseph embodies traditional patriarchal entitlement without its substance, occupying physical spaces of authority (the head of the dining table) and performing rituals of masculine importance (newspaper reading, intellectual thinking) while exercising no control over his household. His obsession with hypothetical murder theories during dinner conversations becomes Hitchcock's most cutting irony. Joseph intellectualizes violence as entertainment while remaining oblivious to the killer dominating his house. This blindness isn't accidental but emblematic of patriarchy's fundamental disconnect from reality, a system so invested in symbolic power that it cannot recognize genuine threats even when they directly infiltrate its domain.

Uncle Charlie's systematic undermining of Joseph's authority culminates in the newspaper-tearing scene. The newspaper, Joseph's daily symbol of connection to the world and intellectual authority, is casually destroyed by Uncle Charlie. Joseph does nothing. McLaughlin says that the family structure rests on "flimsy materials" that cannot withstand genuine testing of Joseph’s patriarchal authority (McLaughlin 145). Uncle Charlie shows that masculinity through patriarchal authority is literally as strong as a paper house.

What makes *Shadow of a Doubt* Hitchcock's most devastating critique of masculine authority is its dual exposure of both public and private patriarchal systems as performative rather than substantive. By positioning Uncle Charlie, morally reprehensible yet undeniably effective, as the film's dominant force, Hitchcock subverts the fundamental assumption that social position, moral righteousness, or institutional backing confers genuine power. The detectives' badges, Joseph's position at the head of the table, and the social respect accorded to both prove meaningless against Uncle Charlie's raw capacity to manipulate, adapt, and command attention. Hitchcock thus reveals traditional masculinity as fundamentally theatrical, a collection of symbols and positions entirely dependent on collective agreement

to maintain the illusion of authority. An illusion that collapses immediately when confronted with genuine, amoral dominance that refuses to acknowledge its legitimacy.

In *Notorious*, Hitchcock critiques toxic masculinity by inverting the traditional spy narrative's gender dynamics, exposing how masculine emotional detachment serves not as strength but as a dangerous liability (Hitchcock, 1946). The film positions Alicia, a subordinate female operative, as its true protagonist, while Devlin, despite his official authority, becomes a case study in masculine failure. Alicia's espionage work demands both extraordinary physical courage and emotional intelligence as she infiltrates the Nazi circle, cultivates Sebastian's trust, and ultimately discovers crucial intelligence about uranium development. This comprehensive competence contrasts sharply with Devlin's performance of masculinity, characterized by emotional withdrawal, passive observation, and paralyzing pride.

Hitchcock methodically dismantles Devlin's masculine authority throughout the narrative. Though technically Alicia's handler, he consistently fails at the fundamental responsibilities of protection and support. His emotional repression is presented not as stoic strength but as a crippling weakness that prevents him from acknowledging either his feelings for Alicia or her extraordinary sacrifices for the mission. When she begins showing symptoms of poisoning, Devlin dismisses her deterioration as mere overindulgence, demonstrating how his determination to maintain emotional distance compromises even his basic observational capabilities. This failure represents Hitchcock's indictment of traditional masculine detachment. Rather than enhancing perception or judgment, it creates dangerous blind spots that jeopardize the mission and Alicia's life.

Hitchcock's most devastating critique emerges through his ironic portrayal of the Nazis as more emotionally attentive than the American hero. Sebastian demonstrates genuine tenderness and concern for Alicia's well-being (until he discovers Alicia is a secret agent), while Dr. Anderson insists on medical attention when she falls ill. This deliberate inversion challenges fundamental assumptions about masculine virtue: the Nazi antagonists, for all their moral corruption, possess emotional capabilities that the supposedly heroic Devlin lacks. By positioning emotional responsiveness in the film's villains rather

than its hero, Hitchcock suggests that traditional masculine detachment isn't merely personally destructive but fundamentally inferior to even compromised forms of emotional engagement.

The film's resolution appears to reinstate conventional gender dynamics as Devlin physically carries a weakened Alicia from Sebastian's mansion. Yet Hitchcock systematically undermines this superficial reading. Alicia, not Devlin, first recognizes the poisoning plot and initiates their escape plan. Even in her physically compromised state, she retains psychological clarity and determination, walking out of the house largely under her power while Devlin simply facilitates her self-rescue. This sequence doesn't reinforce the damsel-in-distress trope but rather exposes its artificiality, momentary visual conformity to the convention that the narrative has already dismantled.

Modleski's observation that the film "purges" Alicia of her sexual autonomy to fit patriarchal expectations highlights the complexity of Hitchcock's critique (Modleski, 198). Alicia's poisoning can be read as punishment for her independence, particularly her sexual freedom that so visibly disturbs Devlin's masculine pride. Yet Hitchcock simultaneously subverts this reading by showing that Alicia's survival depends precisely on the qualities that patriarchy seeks to suppress: her independence, adaptability, and refusal to conform to Devlin's limited perception of her. While the narrative superficially reincorporates her into a conventional relationship with Devlin, it has already demonstrated that his model of masculinity is fundamentally broken and dependent on her capabilities rather than the reverse.

*Notorious* stands as one of Hitchcock's most comprehensive dismantling of traditional masculine power. Through Devlin's failures and Alicia's triumphs, the film reveals that emotional detachment, pride, and aloofness, characteristics of conventional masculinity, do not create strength but dangerous weakness. True effectiveness, Hitchcock suggests, lies in qualities traditionally coded as feminine: emotional intelligence, adaptability, and the courage to form genuine connections even at personal risk. By positioning these traits as essential to both national security and personal survival, Hitchcock doesn't merely critique toxic masculinity but suggests its fundamental incompatibility with both individual and collective well-being.

Hitchcock's cinema offers a profound and systematic dismantling of traditional masculine authority, revealing it as a fragile performance rather than an inherent quality. Hitchcock exposes the hollow center of conventional masculinity, its dependence on the control that inevitably fails, its psychological vulnerability when challenged, and its fundamental impotence when stripped of institutional or social support. Even more subversively, Hitchcock positions his antagonists and female characters as the true bearers of agency and emotional intelligence. By repeatedly denying his male protagonists the restoration of power that classical narratives typically provide, Hitchcock suggests that masculinity built on control is not merely problematic but fundamentally unsustainable. Hitchcock reveals traditional masculinity not as a natural state of being but as a pathological performance that ultimately destroys both those who embody it and those subjected to its impossible demands.

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