

## Ordinary To Extraordinary: The Hitchcock Effect

Alfred Hitchcock's films are renowned for their suspenseful plots, complex characters, and exploration of human nature under extreme circumstances. A recurring theme in many of his works is the portrayal of ordinary individuals thrust into extraordinary situations, where they must navigate moral ambiguity, personal limitations, and high-stakes dilemmas. In films such as *Rear Window*, *The 39 Steps*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock places regular people amid thrilling, life-threatening scenarios, forcing them to confront their vulnerabilities and their capacity for resilience. Through these stories, Hitchcock explores the complexities of human behavior and invites the audience to reflect on how they would act if faced with similar challenges. This essay argues that Hitchcock's use of ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances not only drives the tension and suspense in his films but also serves as a powerful commentary on human nature, highlighting the remarkable transformation that can emerge when individuals are pushed to their limits.

The film *Rear Window* follows L. B. Jefferies, a photojournalist confined to a wheelchair due to a broken leg. Jefferies, accompanied by his girlfriend, Lisa Fremont, and nurse, Stella, investigate a potential murder within the apartment complex. Jefferies finds himself in a challenging situation, both immobilized and convinced that he is the sole witness to the murder. His investigation is further complicated by the lack of support from law enforcement and his detective friend Doyle, who presents contrasting evidence.

A central aspect of the film is the shifting ethics of ordinary people in the face of extraordinary circumstances. Jefferies' voyeurism, initially a pastime born of boredom, evolves into a

crucial investigative tool as he uncovers a murder mystery. Stella warns him, “New York State sentence for a peeping tom is six months in the workhouse,” highlighting his actions’ legal and moral implications (*Rear Window*, Hitchcock 1954). If caught, Jeffries would struggle to justify his spying, especially as he witnesses neighbors in intimate moments, such as undressing, and doesn’t have any evidence to prove his allegations against Thorwald. This contrasts with later scenes in the film, where Stella and Lisa trust Jeffries and assist him in uncovering the mystery by breaking into Thorwald’s house (*Rear Window* 1954). Hitchcock skillfully illustrates the evolving perspectives of Lisa and Stella, emphasizing the contradictory nature of humanity and the way moral and ethical beliefs often shift in extraordinary challenges. Their willingness to take risks, such as trespassing, underscores the film’s exploration of the moral ambiguity of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. From a judicial perspective, Jeffries, Lisa, and Stella engage in acts of spying and trespassing under the guise of seeking the truth. The narrative enables viewers to discern commendable and questionable actions, as Jeffries emerges as a neighborhood hero by addressing the crime he witnesses. Hitchcock forces us to question how far Jeffries, Lisa, and Stella would go for the ends of their actions to justify the means. Hitchcock uses the film to show how ordinary people when facing extraordinary challenges may take actions that challenge their ‘normal’ ethical boundaries.

Ultimately, the film's profound twist lies in its universality. Through this cinematic lens, Hitchcock encourages a critical examination of our inner selves and challenges our judgments of others. If we faced a similar situation, how differently would we have acted? We also need to examine our role as voyeurs and the actions we might pursue in Jeffries’ shoes. Are we, like Jeffries, quick to judge others based on incomplete or superficial observations? Which of our observations are right, and what do we do about them?

Similarly, *The 39 Steps* follows Richard Hannay, an ordinary man who finds himself in extraordinary circumstances after a chance encounter with a spy, Annabella Smith. When she is murdered in his apartment, leaving behind a warning about an international conspiracy, Hannay finds himself both a fugitive and an unwitting hero, pursued by both the authorities and the real conspirators. His journey to uncover the truth leads him to Pamela, a skeptical woman who becomes his reluctant ally when they are handcuffed together. This extraordinarily unfortunate situation allows Hitchcock to delve into themes of human vulnerability and judgment and their impact on societal and judicial interactions.

The double chase trope in this film is an excellent tool for highlighting the complexity of human nature and societal interactions, especially for an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances. Hannay's struggle to convince others of his innocence mirrors his initial skepticism toward Annabella's claims, showing how we are often quick to dismiss truths that challenge our preconceptions. One particularly notable interaction occurs between Hannay and Pamela while they are handcuffed together and escaping from criminals. Pamela attempts to call out for help to the pretentious detectives, and Hannay threatens to shoot her (*The 39 Steps* 1935). Although he doesn't have a gun, being an ordinary citizen in England, he plays into the false image of being a criminal that has been created by both the real and fake police, as well as Pamela's misconceptions about him. It is only after Pamela eavesdrops on the criminals at a pub later in the film that she comes to believe in Hannay's innocence (*The 39 Steps* 1935). This interaction highlights how people often accept narratives that align with their worldview while dismissing those that feel foreign or improbable. Additionally, the betrayal by Sheriff Watson emphasizes how easy it is for people in power to make decisions clouded by these incorrect judgments. This bias reflects a broader issue: while systems are meant to uphold fairness, it is inevitably shaped by the fallible, emotionally driven humans within them. This failure in objectivity not only undermines justice but also jeopardizes the lives of victims, as Hannay's ordeal demonstrates. Hitchcock uses these

themes to transcend the film's specific plot to a larger, modern audience, prompting viewers to question whether existing systems adequately serve all members of society or perpetuate inequalities through bias and error.

The film's universal appeal lies in its ultimate twist: the realization that anyone could find themselves in Hannay's position. Hitchcock's portrayal of Hannay's journey compels us to empathize with the hidden struggles of others. By exploring the ambiguities of truth, deception, and human behavior, Hitchcock fosters a deeper sense of empathy and self-awareness in his audience, reminding us of the complexities inherent in ordinary lives thrown into extraordinary turmoil.

Additionally, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* follows the story of Bob and Jill Lawrence, a British couple vacationing in Switzerland with their daughter, Betty. Their holiday takes a dark turn when they befriend a spy who is subsequently shot. In his final moments, the spy warns them of an assassination plot in London. To silence the Lawrences and prevent them from revealing this information, the criminals kidnap Betty, dragging the couple into their world of espionage. Operating without the help of law enforcement for fear of endangering Betty's life, the couple must rely on their resourcefulness and courage. The story emphasizes the profound psychological and emotional trauma that the Lawrences and parents in general experience as they struggle to save their child from a dangerous situation.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the film is the Lawrence couple's decision to refrain from involving law enforcement in their efforts to secure their daughter Betty's safety. This choice puts them at great risk as they face extraordinary dangers throughout their journey to rescue her. At the start of the film, Bob burns a note revealing that Betty has been kidnapped, despite the Commissioner being present in the room and requesting to see it (*The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock 1934). This sets the tone for their determination to keep the situation under wraps. When back in London, the couple chooses not

to share the details of their phone conversation with the kidnappers with the man from the Foreign Office. They are aware that any involvement from law enforcement could jeopardize Betty's life. The man from the Foreign Office points out that her kidnapping is directly linked to their knowledge of critical information regarding an assassination plot, pressing them for more details. However, the Lawrences stand firm, unwilling to compromise their daughter's safety, even at the cost of potentially igniting a war. In a poignant moment, Jill asserts, "Our child comes first, it must come first," (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1934). As the plot unfolds, the man from the Foreign Office later threatens to hold the Lawrences accountable should anything go wrong or should England go to war, remarking, "Not a very nice thing to have on your conscience," (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1934). This adds to the immense pressure they face. Bob travels to Whopping in an attempt to rescue Betty, ultimately becoming a captive himself without support from any government resources. The stakes continue to rise when Jill takes the ultimate risk of shooting Levine, a kidnapper poised to catch Betty, demonstrating her desperation and resolve when no officer is willing to act for fear of hitting Betty (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1934). Throughout these harrowing events, we witness the parents' growing trauma as the emotional and mental toll of the situation weighs heavily on them. Each scene depicts their willingness to take increasingly significant risks while remaining steadfast in their pursuit of bringing Betty back home safely. Their relentless determination serves as a powerful testament to their love and commitment as parents.

The universality of the film is accentuated by Hitchcock's portrayal of an ordinary couple thrust into extraordinary circumstances. The Lawrences, though regular people caught in a high-stakes world of espionage, demonstrate how the most unlikely individuals can rise to meet overwhelming challenges when motivated by love and the desire to protect their child. Hitchcock masterfully uses their ordinary status to highlight the remarkable resilience and courage people can summon in times of crisis. By

focusing on everyday characters like Bob and Jill, Hitchcock invites the audience to reflect on how they might react when faced with similarly impossible situations.

In conclusion, Hitchcock's masterful use of ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances serves as a central theme throughout his films, demonstrating how regular people are often capable of exceptional feats when faced with unpredictable challenges. In *Rear Window*, *The 39 Steps*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, characters who typically remain within the confines of their everyday lives are thrust into situations they typically don't encounter, forcing them to confront moral dilemmas, personal biases, and physical limitations. Through these characters, Hitchcock explores the complexities of human nature, questioning how far ordinary individuals might go when their values, beliefs, and survival instincts are put to the test. These films resonate with audiences because they remind us that anyone could find themselves in such situations, encouraging self-reflection on how we might react and what we are capable of when pushed to our limits. By focusing on the actions of ordinary people, Hitchcock makes his thrillers universally relatable, illustrating the inherent strength and resilience that lies within all of us.

#### References

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