

Hitchcock's Respectable Rogues

Choose one of the following themes—a) the falsely accused “Wrong Man”; b) respectability used as a mask for insidious behavior; c) spectatorship and voyeurism—and discuss the implications of the theme for Hitchcock’s view of social institutions (as embodied in social norms of behavior, the justice system, the church, marriage, business, the cinema, etc.).

Respectability often signifies virtue and trustworthiness, but Alfred Hitchcock’s films reveal it as an act hiding insidious motives and corruption. He explores the duality of human nature, showing loving family members, upstanding citizens, or respected figures secretly engaging in manipulation and violence. Hitchcock's films reveal the fragility of institutions like marriage, family, and law enforcement, exposing them as facades of hidden wrongdoing. He critiques society's blind faith in appearances, showing how power and prestige often enable deception instead of preventing it.

In Hitchcock’s films, family is not just a source of stability but also mechanisms that enable deception and violence, illustrating how societal institutions often protect rather than expose wrongdoing. *Shadow of a Doubt* exemplifies this idea through Uncle Charlie, who crafts the mask of a loving relative while secretly operating as the Merry Widow Murderer. His charm and wealth grant him unquestioned trust within the family and the residents of Santa Rosa (*Shadow of a Doubt* 1943). Young Charlie’s gradual realization of his true nature forces her into a moral crisis as she grapples with the uncomfortable truth that family loyalty can become a dangerous form of complicity. Hitchcock reveals how the reverence for family, meant to foster

security, can suppress suspicion and silence those who recognize threats, making family members unwitting accomplices to evil.

A similar dynamic unfolds in *Rebecca*, where marriage, another institution built on trust, conceals the dark reality of Maxim de Winter's past. He cultivates the image of a noble, grieving widower, which allows him to evade scrutiny despite his involvement in disposing of Rebecca's body (*Rebecca* 1940). Society's admiration for his wealth and image of a happy marriage with Rebecca reinforces this deception, making it unthinkable that he could be a murderer. Colonel Julyan's casual suggestion of a golf outing before the second inquiry even begins underscores how Maxim's respectability preemptively absolves certain individuals from guilt. Through these films, Hitchcock critiques society's blind faith in the institutions of family and marriage, revealing how they can function not as safeguards against evil but as shields that allow it to thrive under the guise of respectability.

Hitchcock's films also expose the judiciary as a system that prioritizes its interests through its mask of authority instead of being an impartial institution. *Blackmail* exemplifies this critique through Detective Webber, who presents himself as a just officer while secretly using his position for personal gain. When Alice, his girlfriend, murders an artist in self-defense, Webber chooses to cover up her involvement, not out of a commitment to justice, but to protect his romantic interest (*Blackmail* 1929). Rather than offering true protection, he manipulates Alice into silence, effectively blackmailing her into dependence. This corruption results in an innocent man being wrongfully pursued and killed for the crime, highlighting how law enforcement's priorities can lie outside of delivering justice. Hitchcock reveals how the judiciary uses its mask as an institution meant to safeguard the public to perpetuate corruption while letting morally compromised figures flourish unchecked.

In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock reveals how religious institutions, revered for their purity, can serve hidden earthly agendas. In the film, the Tabernacle of the Sun conceals a group of Germans plotting to assassinate a European head of state, aiming to create political turmoil (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1934). This facade of moral authority contrasts the church's involvement in a sinister scheme, highlighting the hypocrisy that lurks beneath its sanctity. A pivotal scene accentuating this theme is when Bob and Clive are held hostage. Clive manages to escape and returns with an officer to rescue Bob. However, the police readily accept the religious figures' account, framing Clive as the source of the disturbances and dismissing his version of events entirely. This moment allows the villains to proceed with their plot unchallenged. Hitchcock critiques the unquestionable trust that religious institutions wield and how religious figures prioritizing self-interest over 'divine' justice can easily deceive the public.

In *The 39 Steps*, Hitchcock critiques how wealth and social status allow individuals to evade justice, illustrating that successful businesspeople and elites are often perceived above the law due to their influence and respectability. In the film, Richard Hannay uncovers a dangerous spy ring led by Professor Jordan, a well-regarded and affluent figure (*The 39 Steps* 1935). Despite possessing critical information about the espionage plot, Hannay's warnings are immediately dismissed. Sheriff Watson even arrests Hannay, unable to believe that his "best friend in the district" could be involved in espionage. Similar to Maxim de Winter, Professor Jordan's status as a respected member of society grants him immunity from suspicion. Hitchcock uses this moment to emphasize how business and social elites can manipulate their reputations to shield themselves from scrutiny. Their ability to leverage resources, connections, and social capital ensures that their wrongdoing goes overlooked, reinforcing that respectability can function as a powerful disguise for insidious behavior. Through *The 39 Steps*, Hitchcock

critiques society's tendency to trust figures of authority and wealth, revealing how these qualities can serve as tools for deception rather than indicators of virtue.

In conclusion, Hitchcock's films reveal how respectability, rather than being a sign of virtue, often serves as a mask for corruption and deception. Through his characters, he demonstrates how family, marriage, law enforcement, religion, and social status can shield wrongdoing rather than expose it. By dismantling the illusion of respectability, Hitchcock urges viewers to question the institutions they place their faith in, revealing that beneath the mask of virtue often lies something far more sinister.

References

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. 1929. *Blackmail*. United Kingdom: Associated British Picture Corporation.

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. 1934. *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. United Kingdom: Gaumont-British.

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. 1935. *The 39 Steps*. United Kingdom: Gaumont-British.

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. 1940. *Rebecca*. United States: Selznick International Pictures.

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. 1943. *Shadow of a Doubt*. United States: Universal Pictures.