

No Escape: Hitchcock's Middle Class Monotony to Madness

In his essay "Retrospective," the critic Robin Wood argues that Hitchcock's "best" films—the films that most honestly reflect his worldview—are the ones that end on despairing notes rather than redemptive ones. This claim leads to the central point of Wood's essay: Hitchcock's films portray middle-class "normalcy" as oppressive and destructive, but they also portray life beyond this "normalcy" as even worse. Take Wood's position: Illustrate his argument using two Hitchcock films of your choice.

Robin Wood argues that Alfred Hitchcock's key films replace resolution with despair, exposing the oppressive nature of middle-class life while depicting alternatives as even more chaotic and disillusioning. *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Rebecca* exemplify this paradox: although middle-class existence is monotonous and restrictive, attempts to escape it lead to even greater suffering. Hitchcock critiques not just the limitations of middle-class life but the dangers outside of it, reinforcing Wood's claim.

In *Shadow of a Doubt*, an early scene establishes the monotonous nature of middle-class life and the difficulty individuals face in finding meaning or joy within its confines. Little Charlie, lying on her bed, reflects on the repetitive nature of her days, lamenting how family interactions have lost warmth due to their predictability (*Shadow of a Doubt* 1943). She states, "It'll be the same thing: dinner, then dishes, then bed," emphasizing her growing awareness of the dullness that defines her existence. Longing for excitement, she eagerly anticipates her Uncle Charlie's visit, believing he will reinvigorate her family's stagnant dynamic.

However, Uncle Charlie personifies the dangers of seeking escape from middle-class normalcy. While he initially appears charming and worldly, offering Little Charlie a glimpse into a more thrilling life, he soon reveals himself as the infamous Merry Widow Murderer. This transformation starkly illustrates how the allure of excitement can conceal something far more sinister. Rather than liberating Little Charlie, his presence forces her into a terrifying confrontation with deception and death. The man she once idolized becomes a threat, leading her to push him away and realize that the predictability she resented was, in fact, a source of security. This internal shift reinforces the film's central argument: while middle-class life may be dull, stepping beyond its confines invites destruction and danger.

The destructive consequences of rejecting middle-class safety extend beyond Little Charlie to other characters. Her father, Joseph, treats murder as an amusing intellectual exercise, casually discussing it with his friend Herb as a form of entertainment. This underscores the detachment of middle-class existence, where even violence becomes trivialized. However, Uncle Charlie's attempts to kill Little Charlie turn this detached curiosity into an immediate threat, acknowledging the dangers lurking outside the structured and predictable middle-class world.

Little Charlie ultimately learns that escaping normalcy does not bring adventure but horror. She understands the paradox of middle-class life: while monotonous and dull, it at least offers stability. In the end, she is left burdened by the weight of her uncle's crimes instead of a resolution, trapped and forced to maintain the illusion of normalcy for the sake of her family.

In Rebecca, Joan Fontaine's character, the second Mrs. de Winter, escapes her middle-class identity by marrying the wealthy Maxim de Winter. However, she soon discovers that aristocratic life is not the glamorous alternative we usually associate it with but an environment of psychological oppression and emotional ruin.

From the moment she arrives at Manderley, Fontaine's character struggles to navigate the expectations of upper-class society. Lacking self-confidence and unfamiliar with aristocratic customs, she constantly second-guesses her actions, making her an easy target for manipulation. Her insecurity is worsened by the terrifying presence of Mrs. Danvers, the obsessive housekeeper, who constantly undermines her. Fontaine's character is also burdened by relentless comparisons to Rebecca, Maxim's late wife. Most characters remember Rebecca as beautiful and courageous, qualities Fontaine's character believes she lacks (*Rebecca* 1940). The pressure to live up to this ideal is overwhelming, as demonstrated in the disastrous costume party. Hoping to restore a sense of normalcy and tradition at Manderley, she is manipulated by Mrs. Danvers to wear a dress only to discover that it is the same gown Rebecca once wore, triggering Maxim's anger. This moment underscores her futile attempts to conform to upper-class expectations while emphasizing how badly she fails to.

Despite her newfound wealth and social status, Fontaine's character remains powerless, emotionally stifled, and dominated by those around her. Her fragility is evident in her frequent breakdowns, reinforcing her psychological vulnerability. Her suffering reaches its peak when her life is threatened upon the revelation of Rebecca's cancer diagnosis and "suicide". This revelation shatters Mrs. Danvers' obsessive devotion to Rebecca. Unable to accept Fontaine's character as Rebecca's replacement, Mrs. Danvers sets Manderley on fire in an ultimate act of destruction while Fontaine's character is asleep.

Ultimately, Rebecca critiques the illusion of freedom and happiness associated with the upper class. Fontaine's character escapes the perceived limitations of middle-class life only to become entrapped in a world that erodes her identity and autonomy. Though she survives

Manderley's destruction, she remains psychologically haunted by her experience, raising the question of whether she has truly escaped the constraints she left behind.

In conclusion, *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Rebecca* illustrate the paradox of middle-class life. While it may seem monotonous and restrictive, the alternative often leads to even greater suffering. Both Little Charlie and the second Mrs. de Winter experience psychological turmoil, manipulation, and danger when they step beyond their middle-class existence. Their experiences with life outside the middle-class normalcy reinforce Hitchcock's bleak worldview: while middle-class life is stifling, the alternatives are even more destructive. This aligns with Robin Wood's argument that Hitchcock replaces resolution with despair, highlighting how the security of middle-class life and the illusion of escape ultimately lead to greater despair and destruction.

References

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

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