

Confounding Morality in Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)

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Alfred Hitchcock's 1943 film, *Shadow of a Doubt*, concerns a serial murderer, Charles Oakley (played by Joseph Cotton), who happens to be the brother of a woman, Emma Newton (Patricia Collinge), who lives with her family in Santa Rosa, California.¹ This man, Charles, senses that the police are on to him. (He regularly marries and then murders wealthy, lonely widows, making off with as much jewelry and cash as he can.) So he plans to hide out for a while by visiting his sister. We learn that he has there a particularly close bond with the niece named after him, Charlie Newton (played by Theresa Wright). As the film develops, Charlie comes to experience "shadows of doubts" about Uncle Charles. She finally realizes he is "The Merry Widow Murderer," but she does not turn him in to the FBI men hanging around, waiting for certain evidence that Charles is their man (evidence Charlie has but withholds). At one point, when the FBI men think the case has been solved by the death of a second suspect, Charlie knows this is false, that the real murderer is her uncle, but she lets them leave town without enlightening them. She does this because Charlie knows that her mother will be devastated and will probably never recover from such news, and she bargains with Charles that she will keep his secret if he agrees to leave town, where the FBI can presumably eventually capture him. (It is not clear how this will ultimately protect her mother, because we assume that if Charles is captured, she will eventually hear about it. It is apparently the prospect of Charles's being arrested in front of her mother and the neighbors that Charlie wants to avoid.) A series of tense, suspenseful events occur in the film's dénouement, until Charles is finally killed while trying to murder Charlie on the train leaving town. The film then ends with a bizarre, laudatory funeral for Charles, the entire town still believing he is the very model of civic virtue. The irony of the scene is as thick as any in Hitchcock. We would normally as-

sume that soon they will all have to be disabused of this fantasy, even Charlie's mother, but the film ends with this damning irony, and no hint of any future revelation. So much for a very brief plot summary.

My title about the status of morality in the film implies that there might be a way that a film could bear on moral philosophy, and this rather more directly than serving as an illustration or example of a "philosophical problem" or "puzzle." By bear on moral philosophy, I mean to consider film as a form of moral reflection itself (perhaps less controversially, a form of moral exploration), but one that still preserves a strong distinction between such reflection and discursive philosophical reasoning. This is a very controversial claim, one not shared by most in philosophy or film studies. A brief introductory remark about the approach is in order.

Filmed fictional narratives depict actors pretending to be fictional characters saying and doing various things: very particular, even unique, characters doing and saying very particular things. If there is to be some philosophical resonance, the question is how do such cinematic representations intimate anything of the kind of generality required for a philosophical purchase on our attention? Such a level of generality would have to go beyond what the characters think about things—beyond even what the director may believe about things—such that an implied claim is present: that this or that is how things are. One obvious way: the director can control so much of what we are shown, can signal what we should attend to, that he can make use of that power to focus our attention on issues other than plot or character alone. (And we can also gain such insight by placing film in the director's body of work, and attend to such things as how the dialogue shapes our understanding of what is at stake.)

There are features of *Shadow of a Doubt* like this, features that seem to address a general issue. Here are some of those features:

1. The great ease with which Charles, the serial murderer, fools the entire town except his niece, Charlie, and the suspicious out of towners, the FBI men. This invisibility of a serial killer, despite many manifestations of his insanity, is astonishing, and even occasionally amusing in the film and bears on the ques-

tion of what to think of “ordinary” life, a question raised several times in the film. The general difficulty of distinguishing real from apparent seems to be deeply connected by a general idea embodied in the film of what kind of place Santa Rosa is, or who Americans are. (It is widely thought that this was the film where Hitchcock finally found his footing in his new country, understood how to make films for an American audience. That turns out not necessarily to be a compliment to those audiences.)

2. The theme of ordinariness is stressed throughout and very often—by, for example, Charlie and the FBI man. This arises in the film as a kind of question, as if we are being asked: what does it mean to be ordinary? Is it alright? Acceptable? A good thing? Or is it boring and banal, conformist and stultifying?

3. There is a mysterious *bond* between a character manifestly good and virtuous, and a character manifestly evil, nihilistic, and vicious—between Charlie and Charles. Why is there such a bond? How could there be? Is the status of the good-evil distinction itself at issue?

4. The transition from innocence to experience as a mythological genre is clearly invoked by our watching Charlie, who has just graduated from high school, learn in a rather brutal way an essential truth about the adult world—not only that things and people are not often what they seem, but they may be radically other than they seem. This mythological framework raises the broad question of how genre distinctions and repetitions work in narratives like this—that is, in the way that mythic repetitions do. (This is particularly prominent in Hollywood Westerns, as I tried to show in an earlier book.)²

5. The intimation of the theme of incest is just barely below the surface in the film. It obviously concerns the Charles and Charlie attraction, but above all the relation between Emma and Charles, sister and brother. And this introduces what we might call a psychoanalytically inflected generality. At least a question is raised *about* American family dynamics.

To begin to understand such issues, I should turn in a very general way to Hitchcock as the maker of a genre unto itself, the ironic suspense thriller. In a recent book, I called the theme that runs through almost all Hitchcock's

films “unknowingness,”³ and I mean primarily our unknowingness with respect to ourselves and to each other. (This is not skepticism. To modify the famous Pascal maxim, we know too much to be skeptics, but much too little to be complacent.) Now unknowingness in various forms in general (from ignorance to being-deceived, to fantasy-thinking, to self-deceit) is something like a necessary condition of the possibility of Hitchcock’s cinematic world. There is no other director as adept and insightful in exploring cinematically what it is to live in, to endure, such a state of profound unknowingness (which is something, as Shakespeare showed us, can also be the subject of great comedy), as well as depicting what great risks lie in store for anyone who challenges everyday complacency, the easy confidence that things are largely what they seem. (As just noted, that danger is on view in the film we are to discuss, an “innocence to experience” fable that intimates something of some generality about such a transition, and, perhaps, that the transition, if honestly confronted, is deeply traumatic.) That easy confidence itself, not acknowledging or appreciating the depth of this unknowingness, is also full of risks, chief of which is a moralism narrow enough to count as a kind of blindness and a smug self-satisfaction. (The family is treated this way, if also gently.) In general the list of Hitchcock’s films in which the wrong person is blamed for or suspected of something, often confidently, smugly blamed, is very long, and the primary technique used by Hitchcock to draw viewers into the film, to “co-experience” it, rather than merely observe it, *suspense*, is one built around either what we or characters know that others don’t, or what we and other characters don’t know but need badly to know in a dangerous situation. There are “shadows of doubt” everywhere in his films, doubts that have all sorts of implications for what the characters decide to do, how they presume to judge each other morally, and it is a kind of doubt that is not easy to eliminate.

There is in other words a kind of constant struggle for mutual interpretability, to avoid on the one hand complacency (like believing that how people present themselves to you is the way they are) and cynicism (everybody’s self-presentation is false and self-interested; no one can be trusted; intimacy is far too risky.)

In this film, we begin with the assumption that we understand well the difference between innocence and experience, what it is to be a child and so not to understand what the adult world is, and what it is to come to understand it. We think we understand what the difference is between a good person and a bad person. We are reasonably confident that we are adept at making such distinctions. We also think we know what the implications of making such a distinction are and what difference in our conduct towards such person this ought to make. In this sense, it is enough of a philosophical achievement simply to say that many Hitchcock films compellingly, credibly, and greatly complicate any such self-confidence. I hope this is all enough to get us started with the details of the film.

As noted, the title refers, it would seem, to niece Charlie's mind. The shadow is the one that falls over her uncle for her when she first sees him getting off the train, clearly pretending to be sick then suddenly recovering. (He had used the excuse of illness to explain his never leaving his sleeping berth, in case the FBI might be on the train. Charlie is, she often says, in tune with him and therefore knows something is wrong with his self-presentation. In several other early scenes too, one could say that she knows something is "off," but she doesn't know clearly that she knows.)

The movie is also about a small town, Santa Rosa, California, almost all of whose citizens are completely incapable of dealing with, understanding, or really seeing (or seeing through) a visiting, charming relative of the Newton family, whom *we* suspect from the opening scene of being a criminal, and whom we soon learn is the Merry Widow Murderer, a serial killer. His niece Charlie begins to suspect something right away and eventually learns the awful truth. A major question thus arises, the central one: what could be the meaning of this *bond* between an innocent, smart, ambitious, very well-meaning and very good girl (Image 1) and a serial killer, the personification of nihilistic, narcissistic evil Uncle Charles (Image 2)—especially since they seem so happy with each other, genuinely "in tune" (Image 3).



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

But the first visual image we see in the film is immediately baffling. As the credits roll, we see what appears to be a nineteenth century ballroom dancing scene, several couples in old-fashioned dress waltzing to what we soon learn is “The Merry Widow Waltz” (Image 4).

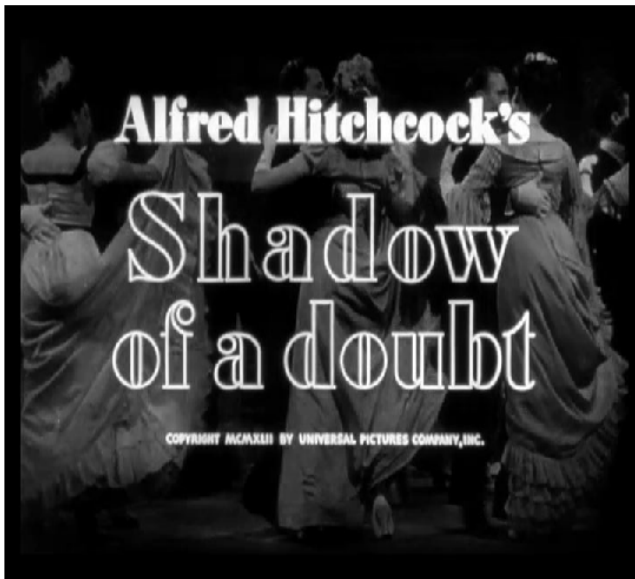


Image 4

Where are we? If we did not know something about the film's time period, we would think we were in a past time. But if this is fantasy or a dream, whose is it? From whose point of view? What does it mean or suggest that Charles, who appears to be source or site, would be daydreaming such things? Something of its meaning unfolds relatively soon in the film, but we remain unsure of the opening's meaning for the film as a whole.

That is, Charles, after presenting presents to the family, including an old photo portrait of his and Emma's parents, remarks about the past that "everybody was sweet and pretty then, Charlie, the whole world. A wonderful world, not like the world today, not like the world now." So his daydream (when we first see him awake on his hotel bed) of waltzing couples must have been a nostalgia fantasy, a golden age somehow lost and not at all like "the 'foul sty' he will later call the contemporary world." Roger, the young son, expresses the current view of such an age—that it was a long, long time ago: "1888; whew."

That fantasy world would be Charles's view simply of the world *before*, perhaps before his accident changed him ultimately into a serial killer (the head injury is analogous to the trauma Charlie will soon undergo when she learns the truth), or perhaps before the world changed into the urban landscape seen in the film's first scenes. Or perhaps it refers simply to a fantasy world before it had monsters like Charles in it. We will soon learn that Charles is a psychotic killer of women (whom he calls "fat wheezing animals") out of some misogyny. But he is mostly a nihilist. Killing is no different than talking or eating; the universe is devoid of any moral structure.

There is a connection with Charlie again at the first family dinner, as she begins humming that very tune—the Merry Widow Waltz—played in Charles's daydream. And she tells us the answer—that tunes can jump from one head to another—and in this case from Charles's head to hers. (So we have further evidence that the first scene was a fantasy of Charles and his rather ironic meditation on the nickname given him, the Merry Widow Murderer.) And he *fears* the song she is humming, perhaps because he fears Charlie's access to his mind, as their strange bond is stressed again. Before she can say aloud the name of the music, he deliberately spills his water and stops the conversation. All this

descends from the waltz in the opening, but the waltz will reappear throughout, when Charles is under stress, and at various other moments in the film.

But the actual opening of the film narrative is also dense with intimations of meaning below the surface. There is a camera entrance through window, opening with someone in bed, our first shot of Charlie (Image 5). And right away the theme of *this* world now versus that of the past emerges. The contrast is obvious—a somewhat pastoral life (Santa Rosa as if from an earlier time, the time of the dancers, pre- or non- urban) versus urban life today.



Image 5

We see a desolate scene, material dumped in front of a “do not dump” sign, as if there is no, or only very weak, real allegiance to law—as if staying on the right side of the law is a matter of just what you can get away with. The suggestion is of unjust wealth, mal-distributed, a film noir world, something suggested too by the odd off-center camera angles (Image 6).



Image 6

The city kids we see outside Charles's building are playing in the street instead of fields, and we see an ominous first shot of a brooding, daydreaming, smoking Charles. His apparent indifference to money is emphasized (it's on the floor, scattered on a bedside table), as if to signal right away that this is not why he kills—for money—as if he kills in chilling indifference. The landlady comes into a room of shadows and closes the blinds. We are reminded of the superstition that with a dead person in room, you close blinds, and this introduces the strong role of superstition in the film. We hear many examples. Never throw your hat onto a bed. Sing at table and you will marry a crazy husband. Step on a crack and break your mother's back. Superstition, of course, is one way of dealing with unknowingness. Anne, the younger daughter in the Newton family, has another way: read two books a week. That might protect you. Her brother and the youngest, Roger, puts his faith in science. Charlie places a lot of faith in telepathy. Her father and his friend Herb escape into fantasies of murder and getting away with it. And all of this is contrasted with the easy confidence, charm, and charismatic power of Charles.

But on the arriving train, Charles must pretend to be sick to avoid being seen and perhaps recognized. The police are after him, following him, so our first encounter with Charles emphasizes what is a constant recurring theme in Hitchcock: *pretense*—the theatrical roles we adopt, often unknowingly and sincerely, in daily life. The distinction not only runs through this film, but throughout all his films. Who really is the murderous neighbor in *Rear Window*? Is Alicia a bad character in *Notorious*? Is Eve trustworthy in *North by Northwest*? Or who really *is* Roger Thornhill? Is Norman Bates who he seems to be in *Psycho*? Who is he when he is his mother? Who is Madeleine, who Judy in *Vertigo*? We are constantly dealing with the possible difference between a self-presentation in the public world and a supposed real self, or who one is for oneself. The theme is one of wariness of others and a constant interpretive struggle. There are shadows of doubt everywhere in Hitchcock. (It is on the train that we see our cameo of Hitchcock, playing bridge with a doctor and his wife. We note that he holds all spades, or the perfect bridge hand—one chance in 635,013,559,600 deals. There is a great deal of chance in life, but in a movie, Hitchcock holds all the cards, and we should attend carefully to the details (Image 7).



Image 7

We then have our first look at Santa Rosa. We see it in a way as it sees itself: peaceful, contented, cheerful. The first noticeable aspect of town life is the kindly policeman keeping order. The force of order is friendly and grandfatherly. All is in tune and harmonious, but we already sense that the forces of law and order here are incapable of dealing with anything really serious—certainly not with Charles (Image 8).



Image 8

We also note the little but significant things, such as the voiceover that tells you it is Santa Rosa is *Charles's* voice. Why? Is it a signal that his point of view, his perception of the amiable stupidity that characterizes the town, is the objective one?

Our first introduction to Charlie is of a very unhappy and morose young woman, someone who appears dissatisfied with the world as it is now, even if not with the murderous rage of her uncle. She complains to her father that nothing ever happens in the town, and that her mother works “like a dog” and is never acknowledged or appreciated properly. The dissatisfaction is the first sign of their bond. This is especially so since we note, too, the striking similarity to our first look at Charles in Charlie’s pose on the bed and her melancholic

tone, dissatisfaction with ordinary life (a dissatisfaction that is soon supported by what we see) (Image 9).



Image 9

The two seem to be two sides of the same coin, but what coin?

Another link quickly emerges: she sends him a telegram just as he sends her one. She gets the idea of a visit just as he gets the idea of hiding out with them. It almost seems as if she is suggesting to him that he come and hide out with them—that they won't understand Charles, but she will, she appears to promise.

Charlie and Charles, of course, raise the famous themes of doubles in Hitchcock's films: Guy and Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*, Madeleine and Judy in *Vertigo*, Norman and his Mother in *Psycho*, Roger Thornhill and his fake double George Kaplan in *North by Northwest*, the two characters Ingrid Bergman has to play in *Notorious*—there are many examples. In many cases, one is like the other's secret let out—a fantasy version—just as the fantasy version wants to think it is really the other, good side. And Hitchcock clearly suggests that he and the viewer are another double, as if we are Charlie and he is the Uncle Charles we are fascinated by, and as if Hitchcock is warning us about himself, that these

films are not at all what they seem to be.

Charles gets off the train feebly, assisted by the conductor and doctor, apparently very frail, almost too weak to stand. But as he sees Charlie, he straightens up—becomes erect would be a better way to put it—throws off his coat, and starts strutting confidently with his cane, yet another phallic symbol (and the train itself is photographed with the usual suggestion of powerful sexual potency). Is some aspect of the bond sexual, incestuous? Charlie notices the radical change in his bearing and for a while does not let go of the issue, saying three times, “You’re not sick,” and, “That was the strangest thing.” There is, of course, heavy irony in Charlie’s “You’re not sick.” Yes, he is, actually, *very*, but not in the sense she now means. But right away, she suspects him and perhaps is beginning to suspect that the ordinary world is not what it seems, and we see one illusion transformed in front of us: sick Uncle Charles turns into amiable old Uncle Charles, as the notion of the self as a theatrical accomplishment appears again. Charles must note this suspicion and must see how quick and sharp Charlie is. She almost does not let his faked frailty go by, and almost starts pressing the point.

This is also a very common theme in Hitchcock, given fullest treatment in *Vertigo*. The adult world is adult by being a complex web of personae, the public roles one assigns oneself, how one wants to be perceived, and our confronting various desires of others, who have their own agendas for seeing us as they want to. And all of this occurs vice versa: their struggle to be seen a certain way and our attempt to see them as they are, complicated by our desire, sometimes our need, to see them a certain way.

This is most complicated in romantic relationships. Am I being loved for who I am; if he or she knew me as I really am, they would be disgusted, etc. Here this issue is at its most elemental: an amiable, gift giving public persona and a murderous, nihilistic, sadistic psychopath, the real persona. As we shall see, the greatest irony in the film is that this real persona is brightly shining through the cracks of the theatrical, normal persona almost *all the time*. It is hidden in plain sight. And only Charlie sees any indications of that reality.

In another mark of their closeness, Charles sleeps in Charlie's bed. He looks over the room, unable to conceal a smile at the gullibility of these townsfolk, and having been warned about the bad luck of throwing his hat on the bed, does so anyway with a flourish. These people are not going to be a problem at all. They will be good cover.

In yet another ceremonial demonstration both of their closeness and the hint of incestuous desire, Charles gives Charlie his present for her, a ring, privately, and the movie now begins to be downright creepy. Everything that Charlie says about their bond is fraught with this metaphorical reference to innocence and experience, virtue and vice, Santa Rosa and Newark, the orderly ordinary world and the world of unreason and madness often underneath it. She thinks of the sophisticated, beautifully dressed Charles as her redemption from ordinariness, and she emphasizes again that they are not the normal uncle and niece and that she is deeply in tune with him. They are "sort of like twins." (We will hear a speech later by the FBI man, Graham, about how good the ordinary is and how wrong it is to want to be other than ordinary. He is a cop; he knows where that leads. They have followed Charles to Santa Rosa and get into the Newton house by pretending to have selected Charlie's family as the "most perfectly ordinary" family in America, as if they are working for a magazine. This is something that greatly upsets Charlie and is a badge of shame for her, not honor. Throughout, this will be a recurring question, returning again and again to the question: what, if anything, *is* wrong with being ordinary?)

In the scene where Charles gives her the ring—the ring of a woman he killed with his bare hands—we can see how threatened Charles feels by her persistent insistence that she knows some secret about him. But he is still quite confident and insists she takes the ring, putting it on her finger as if in a mock marriage, standing too close to her, and looking too intently at her. We note too how old-fashioned, even how old maidish we might say, Charlie's clothes are. (We learn later that the out-of-date outfit had been a previous present from Charles.) Sexual innocence and emerging sexual desire tinge and color almost every scene between them, and so there is obviously heavy irony everywhere in the scene. At the end of the scene, we see that Charles has slipped up; Charlie

notices the ring is already engraved with someone else's initials, and this is what finally gives him away (Image 10).



Image 10

We have seen enough of this theme to ask: what sort of bond, between goodness and innocence and sadistic narcissism and evil, could this be? There are some obvious answers—that goodness, even if motivated by good motives, always *also* involves motives that are not purely good, but egoistic (these are Nietzschean themes: e.g., humility is fueled by great vanity; pity is a way of expressing one's superiority, of putting the other into a position of subservience, and so forth), and that evil always finds a way to treat what it is doing as good. (Charles's bizarre speeches about women imply that he thinks he is doing these “fat wheezing animals” a service by killing them. Somehow or other, in his own mind he acts “under the guise of the good.”) Or, sometimes one has to do something that would be considered evil in order to accomplish a greater good. (This will come up in Charlie's decision at the end, in the most important scene.) And there is the Platonic point in the *Republic*: a band of thieves must observe some rule of justice in order to achieve evil ends. Perhaps most broadly, we can say that good and evil are “bound together,” in that no triumph of one

side over the other is ever complete or lasting, and a morally good motive or judgment must face, take in, its own limitation and the limits of any expected result. Evil is all too often successful in the world; the bad thrive, and the good often fail. Somehow this must all be born; a life must be sustained in the light of this dreary fact. (Graham, the FBI man, tries to minimize all this, saying that the ordinary world, ordinarily good, just goes a little crazy sometimes and requires a little watching. But that scene is framed ironically, as we shall see.) However, the most important issue the film is raising is not the objectivity of moral distinctions (Charles is clearly evil, and Charlie is clearly good) or these dimensions of their bond, but the confidence with which we *apply* the distinctions. For there to be such confidence, we must be relatively certain that we understand another's motives, have described the action properly, and that we understand ourselves well enough not to doubt our personal stake in some moral condemnation. Hitchcock is constantly disabusing his viewers of such confidence, and in this film, Charlie trusts her "bond" with her "twin," trusts her self-knowledge and knowledge of others so much, and is so reluctant to judge him, that she keeps faith in Charles for a long while—almost catastrophically long, if Charles's two attempts to murder Charlie had succeeded.

We could also say that good and evil are comprehensible only by contrast, but there appears to be a stronger sense of their understanding each other. Perhaps it is that good would not be good without an active struggle with evil, something that Charlie has not yet had to do. Her goodness is innocence more than goodness. And evil is only evil in the awareness that what is done is a violation of the good, and done anyway, something Charles's nihilism suggests. These elements also play into Nietzsche's sense of the complexity of moral standards: the two moral postures are not strict contrasts or oppositions. For example, Charlie's dawning distaste for bourgeois domestic life is on a continuum with Charles's nihilistic rage at it. And this link is true of Charles too: that rage of his is also attracted to something like peace, the end of such violent rage—even death. So perhaps the religious terms used at the beginning are not accidental but ironic: Charles "can save us"; "it's a miracle"; "He heard me." All of these turn out to be true in a way that is the opposite of what Charlie

means. She is “saved” from the innocence and naiveté so obvious in the rest of her family, and saved by Charles, by having had to struggle with him. And this seems to be Hitchcock religion: there is a hell but no heaven. (We recall Charles enveloped in all that cigar smoke, Satanic.)

Let us return to the family with all this in mind. In our first viewing, the treatment of the family can appear to be affectionate. We trust the appearances. But, perhaps on second viewing, we notice that no one really pays attention to the young son, Roger: Anne has also created her own world and has contempt for what her father reads, Charlie is bored to death, there is no real affection from Joe, mother doesn’t know who she is—there is actually only a thin veneer of familial warmth. Emmy is so excited by Charles’s visit; we realize by contrast how dissatisfying her life had become, and we sense that she doesn’t really know this and cannot acknowledge it. Each is lost in their own world: Emmy in the past, Joe in crime magazines and fantasies of murder, Anne in books, and Joe and Herb are both rather impotent men who harbor a love of violence that seems some kind of mirror for Charles’s very real violence. (This is another uncomfortable link or bond with us, the viewers. We laugh at Joe and Herb, but we have come to a film about a serial killer, to be entertained.)

It is little wonder that the family, apart from Charlie, cannot even hear the speeches that give Charles away. He says almost the same murderous things in both. The second occurs later in the bar, but the first is right out in open. As he speaks, the continuum of dissatisfaction between him and Charlie (although Charlie is already entertaining obvious doubts) is again on view. And in the first, a dinner table speech, we note the significance of the moment when Hitchcock breaks the first and most important rule of all film acting: don’t look at the camera.

Charles tries to compliment “women in these small towns”: “they keep busy.” But the cities are full of women:

middle-aged, widowed, husbands dead, husbands who spent their lives working, making fortunes ... Then they die and leave their money to their wives, their silly wives. And what

do the wives do, these useless women? You see them in the hotels, the best hotels, every day by the thousands, drinking their money, eating their money, losing their money at bridge, playing all day and all night, smelling of money, proud of their jewelry but of nothing else—horrible, faded, fat, greedy women.

Charlie interrupts to say, “They ‘re alive, they’re human beings,” and Charles turns to us as well as to her (Image 11) and says, “Are they? Are they, Charlie? Are they human or are they fat wheezing animals? And what happens to animals when they get too fat and too old?”



Image 11

All Emma can say in response is “For heaven’s sake, don’t talk about women like that in front of my club.” And she unknowingly proposes the next victim for Charles, another widow, “that nice Mrs. Potter.”

This first glaringly obvious incident of the mind of a psychopath shining through the cracks of a public persona during the dinner table speech is some-

thing only Charlie is upset by! Innocence of that magnitude can be culpable too, as can ignorance. Herb and Joe think they know all about murder, but they are right in front of a serial killer who is talking this way to them. (And, knowing we will feel superior to these clowns, Hitchcock is again pointing out that we too have come to the theater to indulge our imaginations about murder plots. Ad so what differentiates us from Joe and Herb? Perhaps that is the point of the glare at the camera.)

It is probably fair to say that Charlie suspects something without being able to admit to herself that she suspects it; she tells herself it is curiosity fed by the secret bond they have. But when she sees Charles destroy part of the evening paper, and then sees it hidden in his coat, she cannot resist, in her own conscious mind playfully, investigating further. (It was a story about the Merry Widow Murderer and the manhunt for the two possible suspects.) We note that when Charlie pulls out the torn-out newspaper story, Charles comes right at us again, striding aggressively toward her and grabbing her hands violently, and we note the sudden shift from violence to an unmistakable suggestion of attempted sexual intimacy (Images 12 and 13).



Image 12



Image 13

Charlie investigates further, rushing to the library to check that day's paper. The library scene is the decisive moment when she leaves the teenage world and enters the adult world, quite a dramatic moment and staged as such. She will now have not only the suspicion that Charles is someone else, but also that the adult world is full of people, perhaps everyone, who must be carefully assessed and interpreted and who cannot be taken at face value; the view of themselves they act out in the public world is liable to be built on fantasy, need, vanity, and self-deceit.

We should note here too how Hitchcock has, in cinematic terms, elevated this scene to a kind of mythic dimension, a moment of general significance, and not just an aspect of a story about a particular young woman. In a way Charlie is discovering that Charles is at least partly right: the world *is* a foul sty—it has people like Charles in it.

We note the powerful effect of the shift in music, from a pleasant and everyday version of the Merry Widow Waltz to something dark, ominous,

and foreboding. And that dark version of the Merry Widow Waltz is very effective—it confirms that Charlie was in tune with Charles, that she knew and somehow did not know that she knew something was off. (It was in his head in the beginning, and now it is in her head—visions, nightmares, as he will say, of more victims of his murders.) The camera pulls back and up, and we sense another consequence of full entry into adult world—sense of aloneness, being finally, fundamentally, on one's own (Image 14). The expression on Charlie's face in profile tells the story of this awakening (Image 15). (It is this revelation that confounds our security in moral distinctions and in our ability to ascribe motives to others and be able to describe properly what they are doing.) This is true about us too, true about Charlie's motives, as we shall see. The decisive moment occurs when Charlie reads the name of the last victim and knows that it is her initials engraved on the ring Charles gave her.



Image 14



Image 15

This returns us again to the theme of ordinariness. The family thinks of themselves as perfectly ordinary, and we are about to learn that every moment of the ordinary can be extraordinary and full of meaning, although it appears boring and banal. (This is a kind of point that Freud made so prominent.) We recall Graham, the FBI man raising the topic of the ordinary to her and defending it vigorously. But she resists and tells him flat out that she will not help him capture Charles in town. We tend not to believe her, but Hitchcock has managed to introduce quite a large theme under the surface of a conventional thriller set in a small town. Ordinariness in the film means primarily the world of the family, and Charlie is in effect acting out something like an *Antigone* role, saying here that she sides with the family, with her duties to her family and mother, and not with the state, not with her duties as a citizen. This is so extraordinary that, as noted, we tend not to believe her, but this is exactly what she will do. She knows the FBI is wrong to think the man who died while trying to escape was the murderer, but she lets Graham ride off without telling him, hoping she can get Charles out of town on her own. (Charlie tells Charles that if he

“touches” her mother—a strange and intimate phrase to use, raising the incest theme again, which is a much stronger element of the brother-sister relation than the uncle-niece one—she will kill him herself.) In fact, we, the viewers, tend to think of Charlie as such a good girl that I would wager that for most viewers, the dense moral complications of Charlie’s attitude—threatening to kill Charles, not helping the FBI—goes, if not unnoticed, not judged. This is a remarkable effect.

So there is a discovery here of the profound, massive depth of the illusoriness of the adult ordinary. Not only can Uncle Charles be other than he seems, but he can be the moral *opposite* of how he presents himself to be seen—a dimension of himself he will reveal in another speech at the bar (with its central image of tearing the fronts, the facades, off houses). It is also the moment when Charlie must learn that Santa Rosa has bars and girls not like herself but instead like her high school classmate Louise. It has an underworld. It will now be impossible for her to treat as harmless her father’s and Herb’s fascination with brutal, bloody murders, and eventually she will be allowed to see what kind of despair, every day, her mother feels about her role in life and what lies behind her appearance.

Charles knows that Charlie is now deeply suspicious, takes her to a bar, and both demands to know what she knows and actually tries to justify the murders to her. In this defense, we descend even deeper into Charles’s nihilistic loathing. As he talks with her, he violently twists, as if strangling it, a napkin, and the more he talks, the more he confesses in a strange way, as if he could persuade Charlie of his view of the world. In the speech he again mentions, with contempt, her ordinary little life and how much it conceals from her the truth of the world. “How do you know what the world is like? Do you know that the world is a foul sty? Do you know that if you rip the fronts off houses, you’d find swine? The world is a hell, what does it matter what happens in it? Wake up, Charlie. Use your wits, learn something.”

They are occasionally interrupted by Louise, the bar maid, and we hear about another aspect of what has become the ordinary world—the materialism of consumer society. Louise is an almost religious awe about the emerald ring,

and when she says, and then says again, that *this* in modern society is worth dying for, we believe her.

But Charles thinks he is off the hook. The other suspect has been killed in a way that makes identification impossible, so they assume he must have been the murderer. (He had walked into an airplane propeller. Hitchcock never cared much for plausibility of plot details.) But the bond between Charles and Charlie, unfortunately for Charlie, goes both ways. He sees immediately that she is not convinced (the shadow of her doubt is visible for the rest of the film) and that she deeply suspects him. There is even a clear moment when he decides he has to murder her. (In the first attempt, he loosens the stair tread so she will fall to her death, and in the second, he manages to lock her in a garage with the car motor running and no way for her to turn it off.) Charlie is framed in the doorway when he decides, when in effect a death sentence is pronounced, all without a hint of sadness or regret. “What does it matter what happens in [the world]?” is indeed, his credo. It doesn’t even matter if Charlie is killed (Image 16).



Image 16

The second murder attempt fails, ironically because of Herb, the “murder expert.”

And then the most intense and most significant scene in the film occurs:

Charlie’s descent down the staircase, having found the tell-tale ring, and Emmy’s speech about her brother—the latter being the justification for what Charlie is willing to do and how far she is willing to go.

First, let us remember what we have noted before: Charlie now knows the dead second suspect is not the murderer and her uncle is. But she does not tell Graham and lets him drive off. She has kept her word. She has not helped him. And she is the good character in the film—the best, really. Second, she has become something far different from the innocent teenager we first saw. At this point in the film, we do not doubt her insistence that if Charles does not leave, she will kill him herself. (We might be a bit bewildered by the change, though.)

In the next scene, as we watch her descend the staircase, we see that Charlie has retrieved the ring, the piece of physical evidence that will doom Charles and is—again silently, visually—threatening to expose Charles if he does not leave. But she does not expose him. He accepts the deal and announces he is leaving, and Charlie learns that Mrs. Potter is going along, placing her at great risk. Amazingly, Charlie seems willing to allow this and shows no interest in warning Mrs. Potter or prevailing on Charles to go alone. She seems willing to issue her own death sentence to another merry widow.

Of course, this issue is quite complicated. Here is a summary of the steps that seem to be involved. Charlie has a deal with Graham not to say anything to Charles or anyone, and Graham agrees to arrest Charles out of town. Charlie discovers the ring evidence and tells Charles to get out of town or she’ll kill him herself. Charlie does not tell Graham that their belief the second man was the culprit is false and that Charles is in fact the Merry Widow Murderer. Charles tries to murder Charlie twice.

At this point, Charlie seems to realize it is useless to try to continue to protect her mother. Charles is capable of killing anyone, and, now terrified because she knows Charles has tried to kill her and that he may try again, she

finally tries several times to call Graham, presumably to tell him the truth. Failing to reach him, she stages her visual threat to Charles. Since she had tried to call Graham, it is reasonable to assume that once Charles leaves (and Charlie herself does not have to worry about being murdered), she will tell Graham the truth, and Mrs. Potter will be safe. But it is not entirely clear. Perhaps with Charles out of the way, not a threat to her or likely to be arrested in front of her mother, she will keep quiet to continue to protect her mother (especially after the intense emotional despair her mother has shown). The FBI will continue to think the real murderer has been killed. Most importantly, she does not know if she can get to Graham in time to save Mrs. Potter, but she still stays silent. We never know enough to resolve any of this (Image 17 and 18). (In a beautiful small touch, once Charlie sees that Charles has accepted the deal, she discreetly covers the ring with her left hand, as if sealing the bargain.)



Image 17



Image 18

All of this underscores the difficulty of understanding a character's intentions, and it makes it very hard to know whether we should condemn Charlie for protecting her mother and putting Mrs. Potter at great risk. This all, that is, does not lead us to any moral or general philosophical truth. It more often has the force of adding a kind of shading or qualification on what we think we understand about issues like jealousy, betrayal, or romantic love, or the relation between family and the law. We often get more confused by complex aesthetic treatments like this, but this is a philosophical consequence of some importance too.

Then the full force of what had worried Charlie about her mother at the beginning—the dreariness and lack of significant purpose in her life that was destroying her and robbing her of happiness—surfaces in bitter poignancy. By this point, this all strikes the viewer as deeply credible, as the pathos of a housewife stuck at home in small town or suburban American is given beautiful expression by Patricia Collinge, the actress who plays Emma (Image 19). She is clearly in free-falling despair at going back to life without Charles.



Image 19

Emma explains how close they were growing up: “Then Charles went away, and I got married, and then you know how it is. You sort of forget you’re you.” The screen goes dark and we hear her last words, “You’re your husband’s wife ... ”

We have been watching Charlie while she speaks, and Charlie is obviously deeply pained. Everything she had halfheartedly thought about her mother’s plight is far truer than she had ever imagined. The others are uncomfortable with this expression of intense affection for a brother. There is no reaction shot of Joe, the husband. (It is in this scene that the vague allusions to incest become more explicit, and the excessive reaction of Emma seems to be making everyone uncomfortable in just this sense. In more general terms—that is, Charlie’s loyalty to her mother at the expense of her responsibilities as a citizen—Emma’s reaction touches on the dangers of the “absolutization,” we might call it, of the family as the exclusive source of authority, order, and love. It falls in on itself in a way that does not grant each his or her own independence and autonomy.)

On the train leaving town, Charles prevents Charlie from leaving and tries to kill her by throwing her from the train, but Charlie manages to twist

away and propel Charles to his death. The film closes with an elaborate funeral for Charles, a parade even, as if for a head of state. It is all way over the top and full of an irony about the town's ignorance and blind innocence that is almost bitter. But some elements of it are even stranger.

For, we should note that, with respect to the issue of Charlie's choice between her family and her duty as a citizen, Hitchcock does not soften the choice by suggesting a love affair blossoming between Graham and Charlie, as if to bring the law inside the circle of family obligations and familial love. When Graham professes his love for Charlie in the garage before the murder attempt, he hears what no one who has just professed love wants to hear: Charlie says that they can be friends, that, in effect, "she doesn't feel that way about him." And as they stand outside the steps of the church, Hitchcock has them both facing outward, with Charlie only occasionally glancing at Graham (Image 20).



Image 20

But Charlie also says that she couldn't get through the funeral "without someone who knew," and we are startled. That means that Graham, the FBI man, knows that Charles is the real murderer and has kept completely quiet about

it, has not made it public, and apparently has not informed his superiors (who would certainly have made it public). He apparently believes this representative American town could not well withstand the revelation, and he tries to console Charlie and disabuse her of Charles's view that the world is a horrible place, insisting that it just needs watching and goes a little crazy every now and then. In other words, he tries to recreate the myth of the ordinary, of its fundamental goodness, even though as he does so, we realize that it is all built on a fiction, a lie as enormous as the grotesque laudation of Charles we hear coming from the church. The minister is talking about heroes like Charles, and the last words we here are about him and his like: "The beauty of their souls, the sweetness of their characters, live on with us forever." This seems yet another doubling, here equating the tranquilizing narcotic about the ordinary that Graham is trying to give Charlie, and the ludicrous ignorance embodied in the last words we hear.

1 *Shadow of a Doubt*, film, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (Universal City: Universal Studios, 1943).

2 Robert Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

3 Robert Pippin, *The Philosophical Hitchcock: Vertigo and the Anxieties of Unknowingness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).