

## By the Grace of Hitchcock - Theology in Hitchcock

*by Alba Daza*

Alfred Hitchcock is one of the most revered directors of the twentieth century. He is praised for his innovations in plot construction, aesthetic storytelling, and creation of the suspense genre. Modern cinema would not be what is today without his influential work. Critics have analyzed Hitchcock's films through endless lenses, this essay will explore his films and plot lines through the lens of Christian theology. To the untrained eye of the twenty-first century, theology may seem like a dated and even irrelevant topic to discuss when analyzing cinema, however I believe that Christian theology is at the root of western culture and western storytelling. Once we begin to look for references of biblical and Christian ritualistic practices they begin to appear like ants at a picnic; first one, then another, and before long they start to consume the film in its entirety. As theology is such a broad topic and endless points of reference could be made I will be focusing on a select few when analyzing Hitchcock's work. This essay will explore the role Hitchcock assumes as God, and his use of original sin to highlight female sexuality and Christ figures in his films. To discuss these ideas this essay will make an analysis of *Psycho*, *Notorious*, and *The Wrong Man*. Each of which engage with Christ figures, religious symbolism, and save for *The Wrong Man*, female sexuality. Alfred Hitchcock grapples with the complexity of humanity in all of his films, but for him one of the greatest questions lies fundamentally in morality and the treatment of sin.

Original sin, is a term coined by Saint Augustine of Hippo in 386 CE. He was a North African bishop and author of *Confessions* and *City of God* who converted to the Christian faith in later life after many years of living, in his words, "sinfully." His theory and the theory that has

been passed down through generations and spread to many corners of the earth is that Adam and Eve committed the original sin by disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Once that sin was committed Adam passed down the seed of original sin to all humankind. This is a theory of determinism that implicates every human being at the point of their birth as a sinful being bound to commit sinful acts. According to Augustine's theory the only way to be relieved of original sin is through the grace (forgiveness) of God. Hitchcock however does not quite play by the same rules of the Christian God, as his world is not the same world as that of the Christian God. There is a moral vacancy, an emptiness in Hitchcockian films: there is an absence of a higher power ensuring that everything will turn out alright "but the vacancy in the sky [is] promptly filled by Hitchcock — the author and organizer of life, the controller of fates, the referee of the blindly chancy games we play." (Conrad, 43)

In Hitchcock's films each character is tainted by an aspect of original sin (lecture, Nov.8 2017). Nicholas Haeffner explores the notion that "the Catholic abhorrence of sin is even more deeply woven into the texture of Hitchcock's films through the manner in which his heroes are punished for their sinful wishes as well as for their deeds" (Haeffner, 15). In *Psycho* Marion Crane and Norman Bates are two characters who are at the mercy of temptation; in Augustine's terms they are beings that are still tied to original sin. Both characters are motivated by lust, although in Marion's case, lust includes the complexities of a woman's role in era of the fifties and is accompanied by the desire for security, marriage, and children, while Norman's lust is a physical one. Marion steals \$40,000 from her work and Norman commits murder as a result of these temptations, in each of these cases the transcendental sin lies in the form of female sexuality. In Hitchcock's world both characters ultimately meet their dissolution because of their

compulsions towards lust. If Marion had not stolen the money from her work she would have never been in the position where she had to stay at the Bates Motel which resulted in her gruesome demise. Norman's compulsion towards lust, watching Marion undress through the peephole in the bedroom led to his darker compulsion of murder.

This leads into the idea that Hitchcock treats female sexuality as inordinately dangerous. It is commonly accepted that female sexuality is dangerous within the Christian tradition, women are shunned in the Bible and the myth of Mary Magdalene as a fallen woman still has strong cultural remnants in today's society (there is no reference of her as a prostitute in the bible). The women in Hitchcock's films who are aware and in possession of their sexuality are often punished for it. Not only is it misogynistic, it fits the reality of the punishment women would face within the Bible. Marion Crane for example is clearly having sexual relations with Sam Loomis, she is physically present in her sexuality and is punished for it in an abstract way, yet another way in which Hitchcock plays God.

Like *Vertigo*, *Notorious* also uses a woman's sexuality as a tool to manipulate a man for a greater purpose. It is this use of sexuality that nearly leads to Alicia's death in *Notorious*, and Judy's death in *Vertigo*. Both films treat female sexuality as sinful and is sentenced with dire consequences. Throughout *Notorious*, many comments are made painstakingly about Alicia's dark past to ensure that the audience knows she is a "bad, girl with a dirty soul." Early in the film Alicia comments playfully to Devlin in a Brazilian cafe, "every time I look at you I can see you running over slogans, once a crook always a crook, once a tramp, always a tramp." She asks him "don't you think women can change?" he responds "sure, change is fun... for a while." She goes on to say "I'm making fun of myself, I'm pretending that I'm an unspoiled child whose heart is

full of daisies and buttercups” to which he responds “nice day dream, then what?.” All this dialogue enforces that Alicia is irrevocably corrupted, that she will always be sinful and can never be purified. Tania Modleski discusses Alicia’s sin in *Notorious* as transferred down by her father (Modleski, 64). Alicia inherits the sins that her father committed, she is imprisoned in her soul as he is imprisoned physically. Metaphorically Alicia and her father fit into Augustine’s theory, Alicia’s father passed down the sin to her through his seed and she must now repent for it (Modleski, 64). However the sin is passed down to her in form of drunkenness and promiscuity. It is up to her to cleanse herself of her father’s sin, and Devlin leads her down a dangerous path of purification.

Alicia wants to reform and let go of her destructive lifestyle but her past catches up with her when American agents want her to be a spy, sacrificing her sexuality for politics and duty. Devlin, also an American agent, and whose name conspicuously resembles devil, puts her on the “pure path” only to drive her to her into darkness again when he announces the job the agents have in mind for her. He is the devil on her shoulder that makes her doubt her conscience, and after a brief discussion Alicia decides that she will take the job of “honey potting” Alexander Sebastian. “Down the drain with Alicia that’s where she belongs” she says disparagingly, again informing the audience that Alicia deserves whatever harm comes to her. Devlin is trying to find a way to cure Alicia, but his cure is what leads to her attempted murder; in trying to save Alicia from herself he almost kills her (Modleski, 69).

Alicia’s wardrobe is a visual metaphor for her “purification” process. At the party in the second scene she is wearing a scandalous and revealing shirt, implicating her promiscuity and “party girl” character, the shirt is a zebra print associating her sexuality with animalistic qualities

(Modleski, 61). A third of the way through the film Alicia looks practically virginal dressed completely in white at Alex's first dinner party. Even though she is dressed modestly Alicia is clearly larger than Alex insinuating that she has physical power over him sexually. Throughout the film Alicia's body becomes more and more occulted and is completely covered by the end of her illness. This wardrobe choice is a metaphor for Alicia's sinfulness as she puts on more clothing, she becomes more purified, until finally her sickness cleanses her of all her past sins and she is reunited with Devlin and they can live supposedly happily ever after. Thus by "allowing [Alicia's] sexuality to be placed *in the service of* a harsh and unbending law and nearly dying the same death as her father —death by poison—... Alicia can expiate her own sins and those of her father" (Modleski, 68). Unlike in *Psycho* this story does provide grace, Alicia is able to repent for her sins and move on into a better life with Devlin.

As the story of Adam and Eve goes, Eve stole the power from Adam by convincing him to eat the forbidden fruit, "Hitchcock never ceases to fear that men are constantly in danger of having their power undermined, — of being deprived of the keys to their secrets by women who, through notorious, can never be completely subdued or fully known" (Modleski, 71).

The story of Jesus Christ is one of the most compelling melodramas in history: it has love, omnipotence, miracles, accusations, betrayal, death and revival. It is no surprise that western society draws so heavily from this rich and evocative piece of literature, spiritually and secularly. Christ figures are constructed characters that loosely or tightly resemble the character or narrative of Jesus Christ. There are a few criteria that make up a Christ figure. To be a Christ figure a character must fit multiple characterizations of Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus Christ. Christ is the Greek word for "anointed one" or chosen one by God, so a character should be chosen or

special for some reason in particular. A Christ figure could also be the “golden age,” thirty years old, the age at which Christ began his ministry. A Christ figure could also have disciples, perform miracles, be resurrected after death and atone for the sin of others.

This last attribute of atonement is especially prominent in Hitchcock films. Hitchcock’s Christ figures are often sacrificial in Nature, and there is a heavy theme of the wrongly accused. Hitchcock’s characters that have been analyzed as Christ figures or contain elements of Christ include Fr. Michael Loganin in *I Confess*, Manny Balestrero in *The Wrong Man*, Marion Crane and Norman Bates in *Psycho*, Alicia Huberman in *Notorious*, Judy Barton/ Madeleine Elster in *Vertigo*, the Lodger in *The Lodger*, to mention a few. What differentiates Christ figures in Hitchcock’s films is that his characters are tied into paying for the sins of others, the theme of the wrongly accused is much more prominent in Hitchcock than other common Christ figures appearing in popular culture (for example, Jake Scully in *Avatar*, Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Randy Robinson in *The Wrestler*). Where other popular stories focus on the “chosen one” aspect, or the resurrection aspect, Hitchcock again focuses on the idea of sin and the wrongful accusation of sinful crime on an undeserving character (Haeffner, 15). As mentioned above in *Notorious* Alicia inherits the sins of her father. She decides to try to live a different life and cleanses herself of her sins throughout the film. She sacrifices herself for her country and her people to atone for the crimes committed by her father and nearly dies in the process. Manny in *The Wrong Man* “takes on the burden of guilt of another man:” he is subjugated to the treatment of someone who has committed a crime only the crime is not his own, and so Manny must repent for sins of another man.

Neil P. Hurley links Manny to Christ’s narrative in seven additional *signals* of which I

will discuss five. The first signal is his name Christopher, which means "Christ-bearer" in Greek, his second name Emmanuel which means "God-with-us" in Hebrew. The detectives condescendingly call him Chris (even though everyone else calls him Manny), a direct reference to Christ. Secondly, the detectives come for him in the early hours of the morning, very similar to the Roman guards coming for Jesus before the break of day in the Garden of Gethsemane. Thirdly, Hurley places the detectives as modern Pharisees as they self-righteously tell "Chris"(Manny) that an innocent man has nothing to fear. Fourth, Hurley associates the rosary Manny is permitted to keep as an object of devotion to the blessed virgin. Fifth, the devotion to the sacred heart, there is a picture of Jesus with an exposed heart on the wall of Manny and Rose's room. The film strongly implies that by praying to the photo of Jesus a miracle occurs and Manny is saved from his sentence (Hurley, 141). Through Hurley's analyses it is easy to understand the connection between Christ and Manny. The idea of transferred sin is highly prominent in Christian thought; Christ died to save humanity from our sins (original sin), he died so that we could live. In this instance Hitchcock took a true instance that occurred and placed a Christian spin on the narrative to toy with his audience, retelling them a story they are already familiar with.

Marion in *Psycho* is another Christ figure, although not quite as overtly as Manny in *The Wrong Man*. Hurley suggests that the "implication is that Marion is a type of angel woman" (Hurley, 144). A blatant biblical reference is made with "the peephole Norman uses to watch Marion undress for her shower: it is hidden by a framed painting of the scene from the Old Testament of Susanna and the two elders who perjured themselves to accuse her of seduction when she refused their sexual advances" (Hurley, 144). After she commits theft she has a

revelation speaking to Norman over dinner in his office. He speaks to her and through his words offers her a chance of salvation, which she takes. Hurley sees this as a resurrection of Marion's character which is appropriate. She realizes that she is in a downward spiral based on little more than a dalliance and makes the decision to take responsibility for her actions, much like Alicia in *Notorious*. Hurley also highlights Phoenix as that name of the city Marion decides to return to, metaphorically she will rise again just as a Phoenix does (Hurley, 146). Hurley also places Marion in the role of a martyr, an idea which is particularly relevant in the discussion of sin and Christ figures (Hurley, 147). Hurley states: "In the mother guise, Norman is the instrument of making the repentant Marion a type of martyr for Hitchcock's ironic combination of sex and atonement is 'passion' in the fullest sense" (Hurley, 146). He goes on to explain that Norman has "the need for psychological cleansing: "this can be seen in the Norman/Mother Bates schizophrenic personality which seeks ceremonial purification by eliminating all elements of threat" (Hurley, 147). The threat Hurley is discussing is the sexual threat that Marion puts onto Norman: he must cleanse her, himself, and the environment of this dangerous sexual energy (Hurley, 147). By this thought Marion becomes a sacrifice for a better reality, just as Jesus was a sacrifice. She is the scapegoat for other people's sins "and the act [of sacrificing] has the effect of placing her close to the source of the holy" (Hurley, 147).

These Christ figures are linked to Hitchcock's notion of a world in which original sin prevails, where there is no rule that bad is always followed by good. These Christ figures are haunted by the cruelty of Hitchcock's dark world, the unjust realities that no one is safe and good actions are not always rewarded. To quote Hurley, "there is manifest in Hitchcock's vintage films, a pervading Christ-consciousness, secularized in terms of popular entertainment, but

revealed covertly or overtly, in the obsessive motif of the wrong man” (Hurley, 153).

Hitchcock addresses sin in his films with fervency. He appears to play the role of God, determining the punishments that his characters will receive according to the severity of their crimes. Each of his characters is guilty of original sin, guilty of the basic humanity which creates flaws in each individual. In Hitchcock’s universe no one is safe, and no one is innocent. By placing his characters in these biblical roles Hitchcock twists the reality of his audience, whilst at the same time creating a world where he is omnipotent and the ultimate conspirator of fates.

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