

Notes based around Robin Wood's 1965 essay *Psycho*

Opening Sequence

- Theme of **dominance of the past over the present** introduced in opening sequence – Sam Loomis and Marion Crane cannot get married because of the alimony he owes his ex-wife.
- Opening sequence seems “normal” and unexceptional - it could be us. Straight away Hitchcock invites us to imagine that we could be the subject of the film as much as Marion and Sam. His constant invitations to us to imagine ourselves as the subjects of the film only makes it more terrifying and makes the onlooking camera all the more voyeuristic and sully. The forward tracking shot, from the opening, establishing shot of Phoenix and in through the open window of the hotel, takes the viewer “forwards and downwards into the darkness of ourselves”. Immediately the **corruptibility of human nature** is hinted at - we all have a “darkness” which we can be taken down into - just like the characters in the film.
- The fact that the lovers are meeting “surreptitiously” and doing things that must be “concealed from the outside world” provides a link with Norman Bates and his behaviour. The secrets are also both “sexual in nature”.
- Hitchcock encourages us to side with Marion. The viewer is annoyed at Sam’s lack of romance and his insistence on practical, financial considerations that we feel a “Romantic hero should sweep aside”. Marion, however, is quite prepared to accept Sam as he is and in the situation he is in.
- As a result of this, sex rather than money is revealed as the motivation for the stealing of the \$40 000. Later, sexual lust is the motivation for the murder of Marion. Hitchcock teases us with a shot of the newspaper containing the stolen cash after Marion dies. With this shot, he underlines the fact that the motivation for the crimes in the film has nothing to do with greed for money, but is **sexual lust**. Sam later resumes that Norman killed Marion for the money, which only further highlights his priorities, which are financial rather than romantic or sexual - quite in contrast to Norman (are they two sides of the same coin?).

Office Sequence

- The entrance of the “vulgar, drunken oaf” Cassidy, only serves to underline the unfairness of Marion’s position and creates sympathy for her. His boasts that he “buys off unhappiness” and that he never carries more than he “can afford to lose” make the viewer feel that Marion’s later actions are, to an extent, fully justified.
- “The whole fabric of the film is interwoven with ... **parent-child references**”. The other office girl has a prying mother and pictures of Marion’s family look down on her as she ponders whether or not to steal the money.

Stealing the Money / The Journey

- Hitchcock fully underlines how Marion is unable to act rationally once she has been gripped by the compulsion to steal the money. The voices she hears as she drives away show that she knows Sam will be horrified by what she has done; the fact that her boss sees her as she drives through the city centre shows the impossibility of her getting away with the crime. Yet, despite this, she continues. Hitchcock appears to be suggesting that once corrupted, one is unable to act rationally - one is driven by desires. Is Marion, in this respect, much different from Norman?
- Another way that Hitchcock increases **sympathy** for Marion is through the use of **subjective technique**: all the events and other characters are presented through Marion's eyes, using **point of view shots**, during her journey. This invites the viewer to identify with her.
- "Like her, we resent, with fear and impatience, everything (the policeman, the car salesman) that impedes or interferes with her obsessive flight".
- "We share her hopelessness and her weariness".
- By pulling up at The Bates Motel, she plunges herself into a world of **chaos**. This is the chaotic world initially suggested through the use of urgent music and "slashed" images in the opening credits. This opening music is, in fact, used as a soundtrack to Marion's chaotic and confusing journey through the pouring rain as she approaches the motel to strengthen the parallel. The music stops as she sees the motel sign and pulls in, creating a sense of eerie unease in the viewer. Her irrational actions have plunged her into a chaotic world.

The Parlour Sequence

- During the scene, Hitchcock draws a number of clear parallels between Marion and Norman. Robin Wood sees their relationship and confrontation as the "core of the film".
- They talk of **traps**. Both are trapped: Norman by his psychosis and Marion by her reckless and compulsive actions in stealing the money.
- Hitchcock doesn't provide us with a simple division between "Good" and "Evil" - he rather sees the relationship between the two as being part of a continuum. People are neither one nor the other, they simply are at one point on the spectrum between the two extremes of "Good" and "Evil". We are also all able to "travel" along that line, in either direction. We can all be corrupted.
- This "continuum" between "Good" and "Evil" is demonstrated in this scene when Marion is presented with a logical extension of her present position in Norman. He is undoubtedly corrupted and dark and she is somewhere along the line, travelling in that direction.
- The parallel between the two characters is highlighted when Norman says, "We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?" The obvious answer to this is "Yes". Also, once again, Hitchcock invites the viewers to identify with Marion and answer the question for themselves. Our obvious answer would too be "Yes". This further underlines that we are all capable of being corrupted and that we all have a "dark side" - we could, potentially, go on to do what Norman does. We all

sit somewhere on the continuum between “Good” and “Evil” and are all capable of committing hideous acts.

- Norman says, “We are all in our private trap. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it we never budge an inch”. In this statement he defines his own psychotic state - one from which he can’t escape, no matter how he tries.
- When, at the end of the scene, Marion decides on returning the money, she is released from her “private trap”. She regains her freedom of will and her rationality. She (albeit briefly) escapes this world of chaos.

The Shower Sequence

- It is the very fact that Marion has finally escaped from her “private trap” and that she has regained her respectability and rationality that makes her murder all the more horrific. It seems so meaningless, so unfair. Up until this point, Hitchcock has encouraged us to identify and sympathise with Marion and now we feel her relief and sense of freedom. However, Hitchcock, by having her murdered, violently severs this relationship. Her murder is senseless. There is no real motive, beyond lust, for it. When she is dead, we are left without the central character to sympathise with in the film and this leaves us utterly shocked.
- As a result, we look for a new central character. The only character, at this point, to sympathise with is Norman. Hitchcock has cleverly prepared the viewer for this change in sympathies. Norman is “sensitive, vulnerable, trapped by his devotion to his mother”. All these aspects are highly laudable and make it easy for us to transfer our sympathies to Norman. Obviously, this perception is reversed once we discover, at the end of the film, that he murdered his own mother.
- However, at this point in the film, Norman appears to be a likeable human being in desperate need of help.

The Investigation

- For the rest of the film Sam, Lila and the Private Investigator, Argobast, become the instruments for the viewer’s search for the motives and reasons behind Marion’s senseless murder.
- The audience wants to know the truth and to put an end to the horrors we involved ourselves in.

The Exploration of the House and the Attempted Murder of Lila

- The sense that Norman and Sam are simply two sides of the same coin is emphasised in this section by the fact that the actors strongly resemble each other as they sit across the counter from one another.
- The fact that Sam has a “dark side” is highlighted by the fact that he sits in front of a mirror which reflects the back of him, which is in shade. It is underlined that

both he and Norman both have the capacity for evil. Given the fact that Sam fully believes Norman is responsible for Marion's death, it may also reflect his more brooding, unsavoury desires, as he contemplates what he would like to do to the man who murdered his lover.

- "Norma's exploration of the house is an exploration of Norman's psychotic personality".
- The Victorian *décor* emphasises the atmosphere of sexual repression.
- Cupid and Venus are both represented in statuette form in the house. Cupid is Venus's son. Venus resented Cupid's love for the beautiful mortal, Psyche, as she was jealous of Psyche. Venus sought to destroy the relationship. This all has parallels with Norman's morally censorious, overbearing mother, who, in his mind at least, is violently jealous of any woman he is attracted to and destroys his chances of having a sexual relationship.
- Norman's bedroom is stuffed with things from his childhood, underlining his stunted emotional development.
- Lila finds the mother in the fruit cellar. Fruits carry connotations of sexual reproduction. Note how these "fruits" are contained below, out of sight and secret in a cellar. This further heightens the sense of sexual repression. It may allude to the fact that his desire for his mother is inappropriate and something to be hidden from the world.
- Whenever we hear the famous stabbing, staccato violin musical theme that accompanies the murders in the film, it symbolises the fact that the mother has fully taken over Norman's personality. The fact that the dramatic musical theme continues after Norman has been wrestled to the floor by Sam suggests that the "mother" side has now completely taken over Norman. He has been consumed by his corrupt, evil side. Evil/Darkness has triumphed.

To Consider:

- The effect of the tracking shots in the film is to always carry us deeper into the darkness, the psychosis. "All the time we are being made to *see*, to see more, to see deeper". Norman makes reference to "the cruel eyes watching you" when talking about institutions. How many instances can you think of in the film where someone is being watched, or you get the sense someone is being watched? Or even, that we are watching something we shouldn't? Hitchcock constantly guides us to stare more deeply into the darkness, the horror - of the open window, the policeman's sunglasses, the rainy night, the parlour, the hole in the wall, the plughole, the eyes, the cellar...
- How many child-parent references can you find in the film? What do they seem to indicate?
- Summarise the meanings/effects of the three key motifs in the film: birds, shadows and mirrors.
- How does the music add to the symbolic meaning of the film? Give examples.
- To what ends does Hitchcock use high, low and wide angle camera shots?