

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# The Hands of Orlac (1924)

Robert Wiene (1873-1938)

## OVERVIEW

*Auteur:* Robert Wiene (b. 1873- d. 1938) was a writer and film director of the silent film era of German cinema. He is particularly known for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) which is considered to be one of the finest examples of German expressionism. He is also famous for *Raskolnikow* (1923), an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment; *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), a silent horror film; *One Night in Venice* (1934), an operetta film. He was born in Breslau as the elder son of the successful theater actor Carl Wiene. Following the rise of the Nazis to power, he fled Germany as he was of Jewish descent. Wiene died of cancer at the age of 65.

*Film:* *The Hands of Orlac* is a 1924 Austrian silent horror film directed by Robert Wiene. The film stars Conrad Veidt, Alexandra Sorina, and Fritz Kortner. The screenplay is written by Louis Nerz. The film is based on the novel *Les Mains d'Orlac* by Maurice Renard. The cinematographers are Günther Krampf and Hans Androschin. The film was released in Germany in 1924. It was shot at the studios of Listo Film in Vienna. The film's story is about the concert pianist Paul Orlac who loses his hands in a tragic railway accident and gets transplanted the hands of a recently executed murderer. The film was generally well-received by critics. Many academics also raised questions about how the film interacts with the issues of disability.

*Historical background:* *The Hands of Orlac* is based on the novel *Les Mains d'Orlac* which is a French fantasy/horror novel written by Maurice Renard. *Les Mains d'Orlac* was first published in 1920. It is an early example of the body horror theme in fiction. Body horror is a subgenre of horror that: 'intentionally showcases grotesque or psychologically disturbing violations of the human body or to any other creature'. The plot of the novel is very similar to that of the film. The pianist Stephen Orlac is deprived of his hands after a railway accident. The famous and controversial transplant doctor Cerral gives him new hands which are transplanted from a freshly guillotined assassin. Soon, Orlac begins to wonder whether he has inherited the criminal tendencies of his donor via his hands. In the novel, the character of Dr. Cerral was inspired by French surgeon Alexis Carrel (1873-1944) who 'was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1912 for pioneering vascular suturing techniques'.

## CHARACTERS

*Paul Orlac:* A successful pianist who loses his hands in an unfortunate train accident  
*Yvonne Orlac:* Paul's wife who loves him and takes care of him in the most difficult times  
*Old Orlac:* Paul's hateful father who is indifferent toward his son's circumstances  
*The Servant:* The maid of Paul's wife who knows the secrets about the murder of an old moneylender  
*Dr. Serra:* A rational doctor who operates on Paul and gives him practical advice later on  
*Nera:* A strange man who appears to Paul and scares him, used to be friends with Vasseur  
*Old Orlac's servant:* Old Orlac's faithful servant who looks and acts strangely

## SYNOPSIS

Pianist Paul Orlac loses his hands in a train accident. His wife Yvonne begs a doctor to save Paul's hands. The doctor operates on Paul and transplants the hands of a recently executed murderer called Vasseur. After Paul finds out about his new hands, he is horrified and believes that his hands drive him to commit crimes. He goes to the surgeon to tell him to remove his hands. The surgeon tries to explain to him that a person's acts are guided by the head and the heart and not by the hands, but Paul is still terrified of what he might do to others.

Soon Paul and his family run out of money as Paul cannot play the piano anymore. The creditors give them one more day to pay their debts. Yvonne goes to Orlac's father to ask for money. However, the father does not care about his son's problems. Later, Paul goes to see his father. However, his father is stabbed to death with the same knife as Vasseur's. Paul leaves and goes to a coffee shop. There he meets the strange man who had appeared to him before. He claims that he is Vasseur and that the assistant of the surgeon who did the hand transplant of Paul also transplanted the head of Vasseur to a new body. He claims that Paul killed old Orlac. He asks for money to keep quiet about the murder.

Police find Vasseur's fingerprints at the crime scene. Paul goes on to explain everything he knows to the prosecutor. He tries to explain how Vasseur's hands are on his body and also about the strange man who tried to blackmail him. In the end, the strange man turns out to be Nera, a con man. The maid of Orlac's wife explains that Nera was friends with Vasseur and he had made a set of gloves with Vasseur's fingerprints. The gloves were used during the murder of old Orlac. She also tells that Vasseur was innocent of the murder of the old money lender. Therefore, Paul has the hands of an innocent person rather than a murderer. Paul is profoundly happy to have learned this and the film ends with Paul and Yvonne hugging each other.

## PLOT

**Paul, the pianist** The film begins with a woman reading a letter. In the letter, it says: 'Dearest, Just one more night and day and I'll be with you again. I will embrace you...my hands will glide over your hair...and I will feel your body beneath my hands...' Next, we see a newspaper article that shows a photo of Paul Orlac with the title 'Last Concert of Paul Orlac'. 'Paul Orlac is today not only the great virtuoso but also the greatest artist of the piano.' Then we see the pianist playing his instrument. Meanwhile, Paul Orlac's wife, Yvonne, is getting ready for the arrival of Paul. The servant who helps her says: 'Madam, it is nine o'clock and the train will arrive at eleven.' Yvonne looks very excited and happy about the arrival of her husband.



**A train accident** Next, we see a train riding. However, there is a problem when the train changes the track it needs to run on. Thus, an accident occurs in Montgeron. Yvonne is horrified to hear this news. She immediately finds a driver and tells him to drive her to Montgeron. In the area where the accident occurred, there is the wreckage of the train and people are running around to save the ones who are still alive.



**Search for Paul** Yvonne and the driver arrive at the accident scene. They start looking for Paul and searching the compartment where he has been traveling. We see people running with stretches to carry the injured. Yvonne finally finds the compartment that he has been traveling in. She shouts: 'He's alive!' and calls the driver to help her. The driver calls several people so that they can get Paul out of the train wreckage. They bring a stretcher to carry Paul. Then they put the stretcher in the car and drive away from the accident scene.



## OPERATION

**The professor is informed** Next, we see a man talking to a doctor: 'It's 5.30, Professor. At six o'clock, Vasseur will be executed...and eight minutes later, the car will bring the body to the clinic.' The professor nods and puts on his glasses. As he is preparing, the man comes in again and says: 'A train wreck...Orlac is badly injured.'



**Yvonne pleads with the surgeon** The doctor runs out of the room and sees Yvonne in a devastated, delirious state. She tries to tell him what happened and asks for his help. The doctor sees Paul and later says to Yvonne: 'There's still hope...a skull fracture that we'll operate on...only...his hands...' Yvonne repeats: 'His hands...for God's sake...his hands...' It looks like she is gasping for air. She finally finds the strength to get up and says: 'Save his hands...his hands are his life...' She repeats once again: 'Save his hands...his hands are more than his life...' The doctor does not say a word in reply. He looks out the window and sees that they bring the executed body of the criminal. Yvonne is sitting on the ground with a desperate look on her face repeating and telling the doctor to save his husband's hands. The doctor seems conflicted as to what to do and has a puzzled look on his face. He finally says: 'I'll try.' Yvonne smiles for the first time after the accident when she hears this. She looks relieved.



**After the operation** Next, we see the operated Paul with bandages covering his head and hands. Yvonne is near him. He smiles when he sees her. She says to him: 'Only a short time now and you can come home...and sun, light, and lots of flowers will be there to greet you when you come.' They both smile, hopeful for the future. The doctor comes in, greets them, and says to Yvonne: 'We want to give your husband back to you...in part at least. Today you should be able to see his face again.' They



remove some of the bandages on his hand. Yvonne and Paul finally see each other.

**Something strange happens** Yvonne says: 'Your eyes...how I love your hair...', '...and your hands...your beautiful, tender hands...' She directs her gaze to his hands. However, something is off. Paul sees that some man from the outside is looking at him, in particular, his hands: 'There...that head...isn't he looking at my hands...? He's laughing...' Yvonne looks behind to see if there is anyone out but she does not see anyone. The man seems to be gone. Paul looks very frightened.



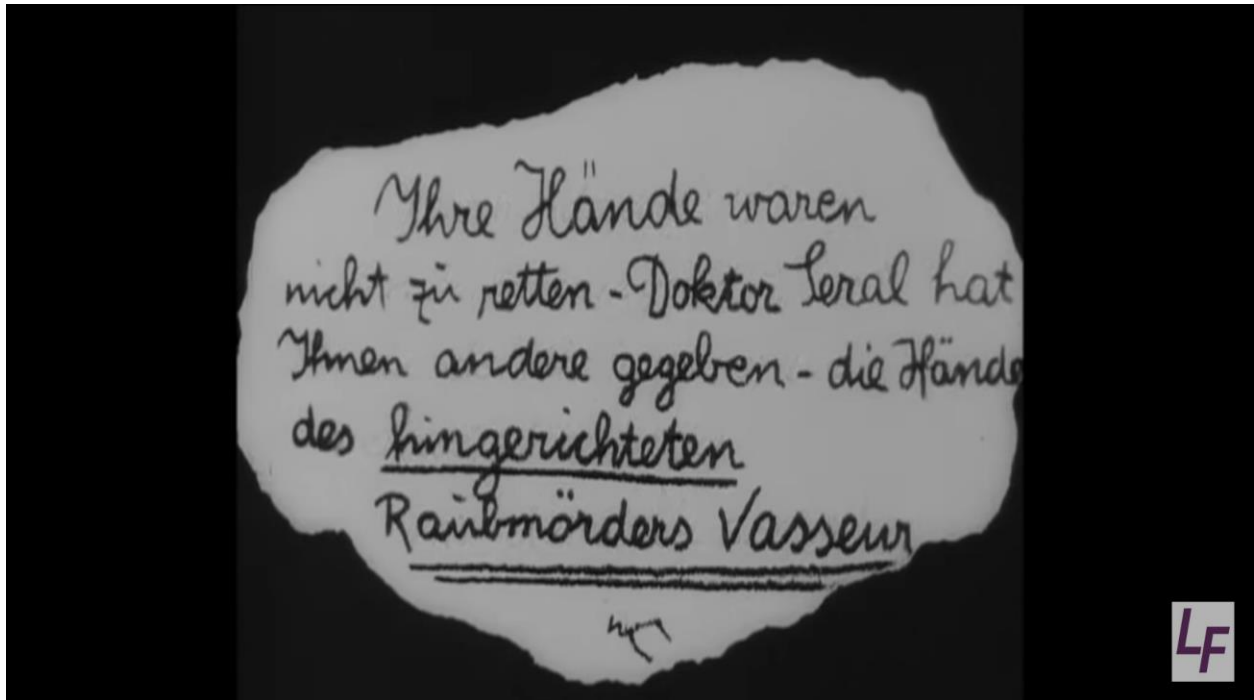
**Paul sees his new hands** Next, we see Paul resting on the balcony. The doctor comes to check up on him. Paul asks: 'Tell me...what's under these bandages? What kind of secret are they hiding?' The doctor then decides to 'reveal the secret', that is, he removes the bandages. Paul looks at his hands in a surprised way. He asks whether those hands will ever be able to play again. The doctor answers: 'The spirit rules the hand...nature and a strong will can overcome anything...'



**Paul has a nightmare** We get a flashback to the 'last night'. Paul is sleeping and dreaming in his hospital bed. He seems to be having a nightmare. We see a cloud filling up the room. Then a man's very big face appears in the room. Next, we see a big hand reaching out to Paul. Paul suddenly wakes up, he looks very frightened. However, he is soon relieved to have escaped the nightmare. Nevertheless, he cannot go back to sleep.



**A letter says Paul has the hands of a murderer** He finds a letter on his lap. On it, it is written: 'Your hands couldn't be saved...Dr. Serral gave you different hands...the hands of the *executed robber and murderer Vasseur!*' Paul is horrified to have learned this truth about himself. He collapses to the ground in horror.



**The doctor remains silent about the truth** Before Paul leaves the hospital, he sees the doctor. He looks at the doctor with wide-open, frightened-looking eyes. He asks the doctor whether it is true that he has the hands of the robber and murderer Vasseur. The doctor does not answer him. The doctor's silence indicates the truth of what he has asked. He leaves the doctor in a state of shock and horror.





**Yvonne waits for Paul to come from the hospital** Yvonne has been waiting in her house for Paul to fully heal and come back home. She tells the servant that Paul is coming tomorrow: 'I will await him here...his first kiss, and the first stroking of his beloved hands.'



**Yvonne is preparing flowers** Meanwhile, Yvonne and the servant are preparing flowers for Paul's returning home. Yvonne asks how long will it take until Paul comes home and the servant gleefully says that only thirty minutes remain.



## PAUL'S PSYCHOLOGY

**Paul is sad** Paul prepares to leave the hospital. He looks inanimate and dead. He has an incredibly sad look on his face and says to himself: 'These hands will never be allowed to touch another person!' He tries to put his wedding ring on, but it does not fit his finger.



**Paul cannot play the piano anymore** Yvonne is impatiently waiting for Paul to arrive: 'How long now?' At that moment, a car comes to the front of the house and Paul arrives home. When Yvonne sees him, she tries to give Paul flowers. However, he cannot take them. Later, he goes to the piano room. He hugs and kisses his piano. Then he sits on the chair and tries to play the piano. Unfortunately, he sees that he cannot play anymore. Yvonne hugs him to console him. She tells him that she loves him. He wishes to caress her with his hands. Yet he cannot help thinking that these hands are the hands of a murderer.



**Paul listens to his old music** Paul is looking at one of his CDs. He plays the record and starts listening to his music. However, he cannot listen to it for long and throws the CD to the ground **The**



**Newspaper from January 15th** Paul leaves his house and goes to a newspaper store. He asks the girl working there whether she got the newspaper on January 15th. The girl nods and gives him the newspaper. Later, he goes to sit in a coffee shop and starts reading the newspaper. There he reads the heading: 'Murderer Vasseur goes to Court'. 'Vasseur pleads not guilty, but fingerprints, found everywhere, provide irrefutable proof the knife with which the old moneylender was stabbed in the heart bore the strange symbol 'X' on the handle. The handle also revealed the treacherous fingerprints of Vasseur. Thus was the truth revealed that the terrible killing was committed solely by Vasseur's murdering hands.' Paul has a mental image before him about the hands that are now his, might have murdered a man. He is horrified.



**Paul finds a knife with an 'X' symbol** He leaves the coffee shop and returns to his house. When he enters his house, he sees a knife on the wall with an 'X' symbol on its handle. He can barely stand straight, nevertheless, he takes the knife and enters the piano room. He puts the knife into the piano. He looks at his hands: 'I feel like it comes from you...along the arms...until it reaches the soul...cold, terrible, relentless...' 'Damned...cursed...hands!' He looks at his hands in horror and disgust.



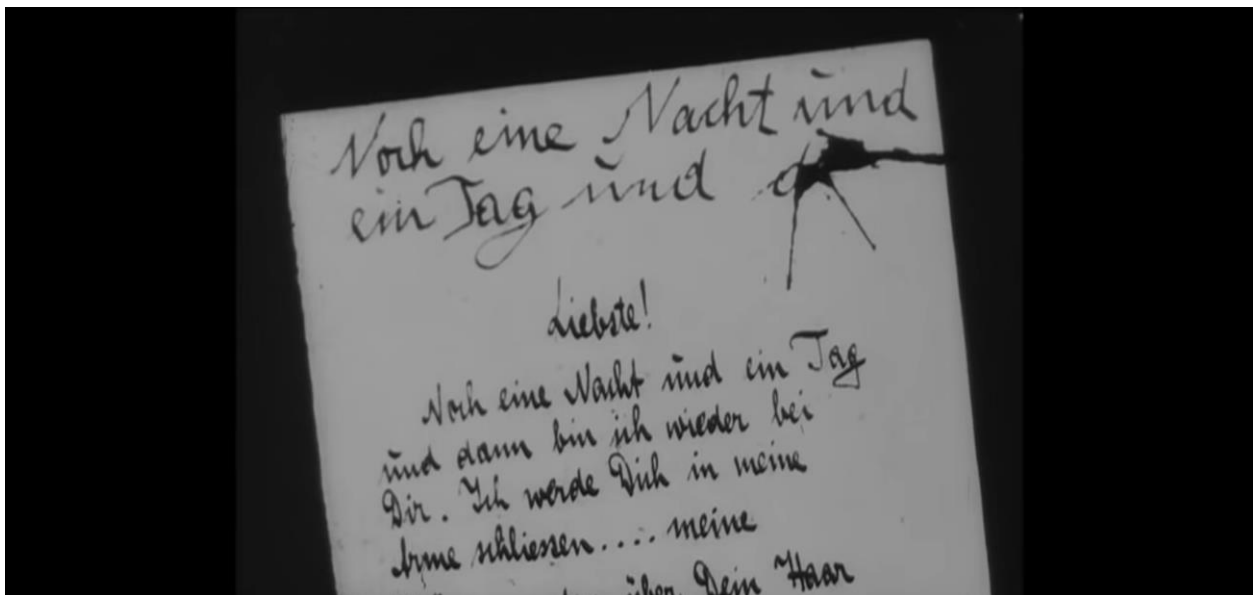
**Paul's inner demons do not let him go** Paul is walking with his hands forward. It seems as if the hands are directing him. He goes near his piano and takes the knife that he hid there. Yvonne wakes up with the sound coming from the piano. Paul pretends to be stabbing someone by stabbing in the air. When Yvonne sees him stabbing in the air, he quickly hides the knife behind himself. He says to Yvonne: 'Don't come near me...go!' Yvonne looks scared and she goes back into her room. Paul looks like he is going to stab his own hands, that is, the hands of the robber and murderer. But then he lets go of the knife. He collapses to the ground.



**The doctor tries to persuade Paul that hands do not guide acts** Paul leaves the house and runs to the doctor's office. 'Remove them now! I don't want them—these wretched things!' 'I am telling you...they demand blood...crimes...murder...' He tries to tear his hands. The doctor looks puzzled. He says: 'The hands don't rule the person...the head and the heart lead the body...and command the hands...' The doctor tries to assure Paul that everything is in order. He tries to shake hands. However, Paul does not want to. Then he leaves.



**Paul's handwriting** Paul reads the letter he had written to Yvonne before the accident happened. He looks at the way he had written and how once upon a time this was his handwriting. He tries to write again. Yet, his writing is so different now. He seems scared by the way he writes.



## SERVANT

**The strange man disturbs the servant** The servant is seen in the next scene. She says to a man with a coat and a hat: 'Leave...I don't want to obey you anymore.' The man turns out to be the same man who was looking at Paul in his operation room. The man says: 'Tomorrow I go to his father—if you cannot persuade him!' The servant looks hopeless and helpless. He tells her to seduce his hands. The servant does not say anything but leaves looking at the ground.



**The servant is conflicted** The servant is sitting. She looks very troubled and conflicted. She writes a note which goes as follows: 'I don't want to obey you...I don't want to...don't come again...never again...I can't take it anymore...you can kill me...but I will not comply with your terrible commands anymore...never...!'



**The servant talks to Paul** The servant goes near Paul. She crawls and kisses his hand. Paul smiles. He puts his hand on the head of the servant. The servant soon says: 'Don't touch me...your hands hurt...like the hands of a killer...' Paul runs out of the room. The servant collapses to the ground.



## POVERTY

**Creditors ask for money** The creditors come to ask for money from Yvonne. She says: 'Give us just a little longer...a month...' The creditors shake their heads in disapproval. She then asks for a week. But



the creditors say no once again.

**Yvonne has decided to see Paul's father** Next, we see Yvonne. She speaks to the servant: 'Hat and coat...I'm going to Paul's father. He's wealthy...he can help...if he wants to...' The servant runs near her and says: 'Don't go there...he is an evil man...he hates all people...most of all our master...' However, Yvonne has made up her mind.



**Paul's father does not want to help with** She starts speaking: 'Mr. Orlac, you know about the accident that occurred...' 'Mr. Orlac, now Paul can't play. Because of this, we've become poor. help us!' Paul's father does not reply. He has a stoic-looking face and does not seem to be interested in what she has to say. Yvonne continues: 'He is your son...your flesh and blood...would you let him become destitute?' The father replies hatefully: 'Yes, I want to! I hate him...!' Yvonne is shocked at this statement.



**The servant tells Yvonne that Paul must visit his father** The servant tells Yvonne that Paul Orlic must go to his father himself that day. Yvonne is horrified and does not want Paul to go see his hateful father. However, the servant insists: 'How does madam expect to pay?' Yvonne is about to cry out of despair.



**Yvonne asks Paul to go to his father** Paul goes near Yvonne who has been sleeping on the chair. She wakes up and tells him to go to his father: 'He must help us...things can't go like this...' 'He refused to help me...and I begged him so...he's not a good person, your father...he's evil. I'm afraid of him...' She cries in despair.





**Paul's father is dead** Paul goes to see his father. He opens the entrance door and enters the building. He enters a room and sees his father lying on the ground with a knife stabbed to his heart. Paul is shocked. There is an 'X' symbol on the handle of the dagger. Paul runs out of the building.



**The police find fingerprints Vasseur's at the crime scene** He goes to the police and shouts: 'Murder!' The police come to the house of Paul's father to investigate the scene. The police officer recognizes the peculiar symbol: 'The knife of the killer, Vasseur?!' Paul gets very nervous when he hears Vasseur's name. The police officer investigates the fingerprints which turn out to be identical to those of executed Vasseur. Next, the strange man, the servant of the father, comes to the building. He is devastated that his master is dead. He takes out a letter that says: 'Your sister is deathly ill. If you want to see her while she's still alive — come today!' The handwriting in the letter is that of Vasseur's. The police officers are all puzzled. The officer says: 'I don't know what kind of mystery surrounds us—Vasseur has been dead for years, but his hands are alive!' Paul hides his hands behind him in fear and horror. He then leaves the building.



**The strange man claims to be Vasseur**     Someone on the street seems to be following him. The man is the same person who had looked at him in the operating room years ago. He and Paul go to sit in a coffee shop. The mysterious man tells Paul: 'You are your father's heir. Tomorrow you will bring me a million francs. At this time, here!' Paul laughs neurotically: 'Money...?! For this reason, you pursue me while awake and in my dreams...?!' He laughs and asks why. The mysterious man says: 'For my hands...!' Paul looks puzzled. He looks at his hands. The mysterious man has only prosthetic hands. Paul asks him who he is. The man says: 'I am Vasseur, executed on the 13th of July...' Paul starts laughing again. The man goes on: 'The same experiment Professor Serial did with your hands...his assistant did with my head...' He shows his throat which has an operation scar.



**The strange man threatens Paul** He goes on speaking: 'If I don't have the million francs by this time tomorrow...the day after tomorrow the prosecutor will learn who the killer of your father is...' Paul asks who the killer is. The mysterious man says: 'You...Paul Orlac!' Paul cannot believe what he has heard. He is shocked and scared. However, the man has no mercy: 'The fingerprints that are clearly visible everywhere are the prints of the fingers of Vasseur, and who has these fingers now? YOU! Paul Orlac!' 'The letter through which the old servant was lured away from the house, was written by Vasseur's hand. And this hand is now...YOUR hand...!' 'And the dagger with which the murder was committed is Vasseur's dagger with the X. Your wife's maid will testify that she saw it...in YOUR hands...!' When Paul hears all this, he faints for a few moments. He tries to gather himself. At that point, the mysterious man says that maybe he did not commit the murder but would not be able to prove it. Paul leaves the place while the man is smiling.



**Yvonne consoles Paul** We see Paul in the house, in the piano room. He looks for the knife that he had hidden there but cannot find it. Then he collapses on the sofa. His wife Yvonne comes and takes care of him. Paul asks in a bewildered way: 'What is happening to me? Am I crazy?' His wife asks him what it is that is tormenting him. Paul explains what happened. Meanwhile, their servant is secretly listening to the conversation. Paul says: 'I knew it, I felt it...that these hands were driving me—to crime...' He looks wretched and scared. Then he stands up and tells his wife that he has to bring him the money. Yvonne looks suspicious. She asks him to tell everything to the prosecutor. Paul asks: 'Who will believe me?' Yvonne gets up, holds his hand, and tells him that people will believe him—just like she believes him.



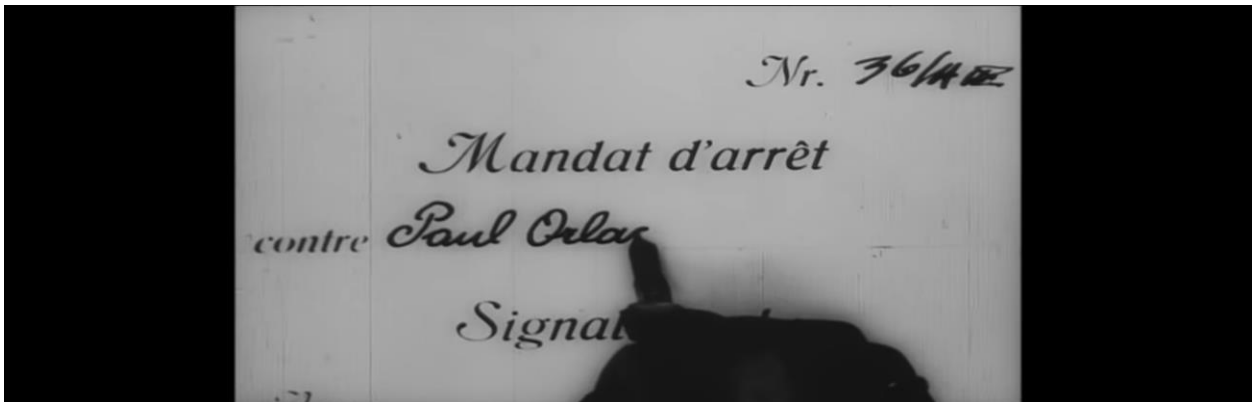
**Journalists gather around the prosecution room** Next, we see the prosecutor and other officers. Before Paul enters the room, he says to Yvonne that he is going in here still a free man. There are a lot of journalists waiting around. One of the officers tells them to stick around because they may have some news for the evening paper.



**Paul's explanation** Paul explains everything he knows to the prosecutor: 'A strange encounter, so peculiar that I myself don't know whether it is truth or a dream...' 'A stranger...it was he...the one who was executed...I saw with my own eyes the mark of the guillotine on his throat...'



**Will Paul be arrested?** The prosecutor signs the warrant for the arrest of Paul Orloc. At that moment, another officer comes in and thanks Paul for his statement: 'Go there this evening. Take the money to the stranger—we'll take care of everything else...'



**The strange man is the well-known con man Nera** Next, the strange man waits at the coffee shop. Paul gives him the money. At that very moment, the police come and hold their guns to the strange man. The police officer says: 'An old acquaintance—Mr. Nera, last seen as the hospital assistant of Dr. Serral...one of the most talented crooks in the world!' He takes off the fake prosthesis on his hands and the fake throat operation mark. The man looks unashamed: 'So I'm a blackmailer...! But you're looking for a murderer...!' 'Haven't you established that the murder was committed by the hands of Vasseur...?' under arrest.



**The maid tells the truth** At that very moment, Yvonne and her maid come in: 'Mr. Orlac is not guilty—the murderer is Nera!' The maid starts telling the truth. The prosecutor asks her to speak about where the executed Vasseur's fingerprints came from. She says: 'Nera was friends with Vasseur...secretly he made casts of Masseur's fingertips...and afterwards he made rubber gloves...with the fingerprints of Vasseur...' She gives the gloves to the prosecutor. Everybody looks shocked. Nera tries to escape but the officers arrest him. She continues: 'So he killed Old Orlac...and he also killed the old moneylender and cast the suspicion on Vasseur...Vasseur died innocent.'



**Paul is innocent** Paul looks pleasantly surprised. He looks at his hands with happiness: 'If Vasseur was innocent...then my hands are clean...' Yvonne faints out of happiness. Paul takes Yvonne outside. Then he hugs her.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Paul Orlac** (*Artistic, Delusional, Loving*)

Paul Orlac is a famous concert pianist whose life becomes upside down because of an unfortunate train accident he has. He loses his hands in the accident and gets transplanted new hands from an executed murderer. He is married to Yvonne Orlac who always supports him.

*Artistic:* Paul is a musician. He is a concert pianist. He is thus an inspired, sensitive, and perceptive person who has an individual aesthetic sensibility. His artistic side is shown to the viewers not only through his profession but also through his hand and body gestures. He tries to play the piano even after his operation which shows his passion for his occupation. He listens to his CDs although he cannot play the piano anymore.

*Delusional:* Paul is delusional. He is convinced that he is a bad person and has the proclivities of a criminal only because he was transplanted the hands of an executed murderer, who as the viewers of the film know, turns out to be innocent at the end of the film. He even goes to the doctor to ask him to remove his hands. The doctor tries to instill in him some common sense and logic. But Paul, perhaps as a result of being a musician, thus an artist who deals with intense emotions, cannot think logically. Thus, he deludes himself into being a criminal. He even goes so far as to think that he may be the murderer of his father even though he has no recollection of the event.

*Loving:* Paul is a loving person. He is loving in particular towards his wife Yvonne. He loves her deeply as can be seen in his behavior toward her and his gestures. He is thus affectionate and kind towards her. He also behaves in a polite and classy toward other people, including the police officers. His sensitive, polite, and loving nature makes it impossible for him to be a murderer. However, as explained before, he deludes himself to such an extent that he comes to believe that he is capable of such immoral and horrific acts.

### **Yvonne Orlac** (*Passionate, Loving*)

Yvonne is the wife of Paul Orlac. We see her first when she reads the letter that Paul had sent her. She is deeply in love with Paul. She is devastated when she receives the news of the train accident. Throughout the story, we become witnesses to her passion and love for Paul Orlac.

*Passionate:* Yvonne is a passionate person. When she hears the news of the train, she immediately finds a taxi driver to go to the accident scene and she does everything she can to find Paul. Moreover, she pleads with the surgeon so that he saves Paul's hands. Her passion for Paul is visible in her mimics and gestures throughout the film.

*Loving:* Yvonne is a loving wife. She cares very much for Paul and is always there for him, even at his worst. She even goes to Paul's father to ask him for money even though she knows how much hateful and callous he is. Her sole aim is to help Paul and save their family. So, there is nothing she cannot do for her family. She believes in Paul's innocence and encourages him to tell the whole story to the prosecutors. She is confident that people will believe him as she does believe in him.

### **The servant** (*Manipulable*)

The servant is Yvonne Orlac's maid. Her relationship with Yvonne, however, is more than the relationship between a master and servant. She is almost like a friend to her who advises her to take certain actions and not take certain other actions. It turns out at the end of the film that she knows the secrets about Vasseur and Nera. Nevertheless, she does not tell these secrets until the events almost lead to Paul being arrested.

*Manipulable:* The servant can be considered to be a weak and manipulable character. The reason for this is she is manipulated and directed by Nera. Nera makes her hide the secrets about Vasseur and

himself. Nera is the actual murderer of the old moneylender and Paul's father. However, she cannot talk about these truths to the others because Nera threatens her and gives her commands to comply. At the very end of the film she does gather her courage to speak against the injustices, reveal the truth about Nera, and prove Paul's innocence.

**Dr. Serra:** (*Rational, Helpful*)

Dr. Serra is the doctor who operates on Paul and gives him new hands. He is the sound of common sense and rationality throughout the film.

*Rational:* Dr. Serra is an applied scientist and a very rational man. When Paul comes to him to ask him to remove his hands, he tries to explain to Paul that hands do not guide the acts. Rather it is the head and the heart that do. No matter how much Dr. Serra tries to explain that having the hands of a murderer does not mean one is so himself, Paul is delusional and thus cannot be helped.

*Helpful:* Being a helpful person is another characteristic of Dr. Serra. He tries to heal Paul, operates on him, and gives him his hands back. He also tries to give practical advice to Paul about his condition.

**Nera** (*Deceitful*)

Nera is the mysterious man who first appears outside the operation room where Paul was operated on. Next, we see him near the maid of Yvonne Orlac, apparently giving her commands and forcing her to do things. Later on in the film, he meets Paul and claims to be Vasseur himself, which turns out to be a lie. He turns out to be the murderer of both the moneylender and Paul's father.

*Deceitful:* Nera is a deceitful person. He is a con man who is well-known to the police. He plays mind games with Paul, certainly aware of his sensitive and artistic nature. He gaslights him into thinking that he might have killed his father. He further lies when he claims to be Vasseur. He makes Paul believe his lies as he shows Paul his fake, prosthetic hands and fake operation scar on his throat. Overall, he is a vicious criminal who is responsible for at least two murders. He gets arrested at the end of the film and Paul's innocence gets thus proven.

**Paul's father** (*Hateful*)

Paul's father lives with his faithful servant. He is an old man who has a stoic appearance. He does not like his son nor does he want to help him regarding financial matters.

*Hateful:* Even though we do not get to know much about Paul's father, we find out that he is a hateful person as he says that he hates his son. He is indifferent to the suffering Paul is going through. Therefore, he does not help.

**The servant of Paul's father** (*Faithful*)

He is a strange-looking man who serves Paul's father. He has a sister and is a faithful servant.

*Faithful:* Although we do not learn many things about the servant's personality or past, we see that he is a faithful servant as he always acts in accordance with his master's orders. He is also devastated about the unexpected murder of his master. The reason he could not save his master is he has been deceived by a letter in which it was written that his sister was sick.

## THEMES

### CRIME (Injustice, Punishment, Guilt)

**Injustice** What kind of unjust actions are done in the film and to whom are these acts of injustice done? The first possibility that comes to mind is Paul as he loses his hands in a tragic railway accident. Nevertheless, this is a rather natural/mechanical event that does not include any part of criminal activity, except the mechanics who could not properly calculate when to switch tracks and so on. It is not until the very end of the film that we learn who innocent and who guilty were. It turns out that the biggest acts of injustice were done against Vasseur as he had not killed the old money lender. The murderer was Nera after all. So, he was executed for nothing and the real criminals did not get the punishment they deserved. This injustice can be partly a fault of the police and partly a fault of the justice system as a whole.

**Punishment** As said in the previous section, Vasseur was wrongly punished, that is, executed. Paul Orlac is another one who inflicts punishment on himself. As he believes his new hands belong to a murderer, he thinks he has gotten a new tendency to hurt people, which is only a delusion created by his imagination. Thus, he torments himself thinking he is a wretched being because of his new hands. His punishment is of a psychological nature. But he also almost gets arrested on the grounds that he killed his father. In the end, his innocence is proven and the truly guilty person Nera is arrested. Nera's punishment and the proof of his innocence balance the scales of justice.

**Guilt** Paul has extreme guilt throughout the film. He believes that he is a bad person and has acquired the criminal proclivities of his donor via his hands. He is even led by Nera to believe he has killed his father even though he has no recollection of the event. It is the guilt that he has for the crimes he did not commit that causes him to be deluded in his mind. He is also suspected of being guilty by police officers because of certain pieces of evidence. However, with the maid's explanation, the truth comes to light and Paul's feelings of guilt are absolved.

### RELATIONSHIP (Marriage)

**Marriage** Paul and Yvonne's marriage is an ideal one. Yvonne always supports her husband and they love each other. Yvonne pleads with the doctor to save his husband's hands as his 'hands are his life'. Thus, Yvonne knows what matters to her husband the most and she is always there to be with him, on bad and good days. Their caring for each other and trust in one another shine like a bright light among all the criminalities and the foggy mystery surrounding the murder events.

### PSYCHOLOGY (Sadness, fear, Loss)

**Sadness** Yvonne is deeply saddened by the train accident and her husband's grave condition as he has fractures in his skull and lost his hands. Her pleading with the doctor as she is desperate for a solution reveals to us not only how much she cares about her husband but also how distressed and sad she is because of his condition. Secondly, Paul is both scared and sad after he finds out to whom once upon a time his new hands belonged. Because he has the hands of a criminal, he believes that the burden of the crimes committed is now on his shoulders.

**Fear** Paul fears that he might murder someone with his new hands as these hands once belonged to a murderer. He fears that he might have killed his father. He further fears being arrested and perhaps executed. Paul's fears are irrational, but they dominate his actions. He gets rid of his fears only at the very end of the film when his innocence is finally proven.

**Loss** Paul loses his hands. This tragic loss not only leads to mental disturbances on his part but he also loses his job. He cannot play the piano anymore. Because of his job loss, the family eventually runs out of money. Therefore, Yvonne goes to Paul's father to ask for financial help. However, Paul soon loses his father too. After all these losses, however, his innocence gets proven as the criminal acts of Nera come to light thanks to Yvonne's maid. It turns out that his new hands belong to an innocent man. Thus,



Paul never lost his innocence and good-heartedness, only he held on to the delusional belief that he might do so.

**QUEST** (Investigation)

**Investigation** The police investigate the murder cases. Vasseur, even though, he is taken to be guilty, is proven innocent later on. Nevertheless, it is too late as he had already been executed. The con man Nera tricks the police into believing falsities. However, the maid's explanation about Nera reveals the truth and causes the investigation to have true success as Paul's innocence is finally proven and the guilty is found.

**APPEARANCE vs. REALITY** (Secrets, Self-delusion)

**Secrets** Yvonne's maid holds many secrets and because she is threatened by Nera she cannot tell these secrets, that is hidden pieces of truth to anyone. However, because Yvonne and the maid are also friends, she finally explains everything to Yvonne. And they finally come to the coffee shop to explain all that occurred. Telling the secrets reveals the truth and the innocents who are Vasseur and Paul.

**Self-delusion** Paul has a tendency to have delusional beliefs. A delusion is a false fixed belief. Paul's belief that he might eventually kill someone with his new hands is the most delusional one in the story. Because of this belief, he is easily deceived by Nera to come to the conclusion that he killed his father even though Nera is the real murderer. His self-delusion seems to be fueled by his artistic nature. Having an artistic, perceptive nature may have inclined him to imagine things that are not real. Therefore, he believes that having the hands of a murderer might cause him to commit a crime despite the doctor having talked to him about how absurd this is. The hands are guided by the head and the heart and not vice versa, however, Paul's delusion stops him from seeing the truth.