

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CHAMPAGNE (1928)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

Champagne is an early silent film by British director Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980). It is the fifth of nine silent films Hitchcock made prior to the transition to sound and one of three films the director made in the year 1928 alone.

Hitchcock directed the film during a period in which the British film industry was booming. However, unlike other films from the director's early period, *Champagne* was not well received by critics, one of whom described the film as being like "champagne that had been left in the rain all night."

Hitchcock himself was very unhappy with the film. As with *Downhill*, another silent film directed by Hitchcock the previous year, Hitchcock later blamed the film's perceived failure on its source material, in this case the script, rather than his own direction. According to Peter Ackroyd, Hitchcock had hoped to be able to tell "a more serious story of exploitation" but had, in the director's own words, "ended up with a hodge-podge of a story that was written as we went through the film and I thought it was dreadful."

Hitchcock grew disillusioned with the film's star Betty Balfour, a leading actress of the silent period in British film. He similarly fell out with the film's stills photographer Michael Powell who himself would go on to be one of British cinema's major directors. *Champagne* is remembered by both its makers and its audience as at best a minor oddity in the oeuvre of one of cinema's undisputed masters.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

Essentially a romantic comedy, *Champagne* is, generically speaking, relatively unique in Hitchcock's career. Famous as the "master of suspense", the conventional traits of a Hitchcock film are a pervading sense of tension, anxiety and paranoia, alongside the presentation of themes of social and sexual abnormality or deviance. *Champagne*, with its flippant protagonist and comparatively light treatment of its subject matter, thus sits awkwardly in Hitchcock's filmography. Nevertheless, there are cinematic qualities to the film that do mark it as definitively Hitchcockian, even if its content is breezier than one might expect from the director. For example, its utilization of POV shots to convey the disorientation of a character is a technique that would be used in subsequent Hitchcock films, notably *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934). Additionally, the film begins and ends with a close-up of the interior of a champagne glass, through which the viewer can perceive distorted figures dancing. Finally, in one striking moment, the camera itself tilts from side to side, replicating the queasy rocking of the ocean liner. As in so many of his films, then, Hitchcock uses his camera in this film to convey the distortion of the social world he is presenting and the fundamental unease of his characters within it. Yet, for all the technical brilliance of the film, these techniques are somewhat wasted on what is ultimately a superficial plot. There are hints of discomfort or anxiety throughout, but the tension never rises above these mere hints before the film seems compelled to remind itself that it is, in fact, supposed to be a romantic comedy. In other words, the cinematic qualities of the film do not always fit comfortably with its generic content.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Betty	Daughter and heiress to a champagne magnate
The Boy	Boyfriend of Betty
The Man	A mysterious man who Betty meets aboard an ocean liner
The Father	Betty's father and Wall Street magnate.

SYNOPSIS

Betty is the daughter of a Wall Street magnate, and her life is one of luxury and carefree adventure. The men in her life—her father and boyfriend—disapprove of her lifestyle. Following a spontaneous proposal of marriage aboard an ocean liner traveling from the USA to France, her boyfriend falls out with her. Meanwhile, she is being pursued by a mysterious older man on board.

In Paris, her father reveals to Betty that he has lost his fortune on the stock market. Forced to fend for herself and support her destitute father, Betty takes a job as a flower girl at a cabaret. While working, she encounters her former boyfriend and the mysterious man from the ocean liner. Once again, her boyfriend expresses his dissatisfaction with her perceived licentiousness. Her father appears and confesses that he had lied about his lost fortune in order to teach her a lesson about self-reliance. Upset, Betty runs away, back to the United States, with the mysterious man. However, the man reveals himself to be a friend of her father's assigned by the latter to keep an eye on her. Betty returns to her former life and resumes her relationship with her boyfriend with her father's blessing.

SCENES

Reading the newspaper Sitting in his office, a wealthy man reads about his “headstrong” daughter's love affair in the newspaper, much to his shock and dismay.



Emergency landing A plane makes an emergency landing in the Atlantic Ocean and is discovered by an ocean liner making the voyage between the United States and France. Piloting the plane is Betty, the daughter of a Wall Street magnate. She is rescued by the boat's crew, who help her on board.



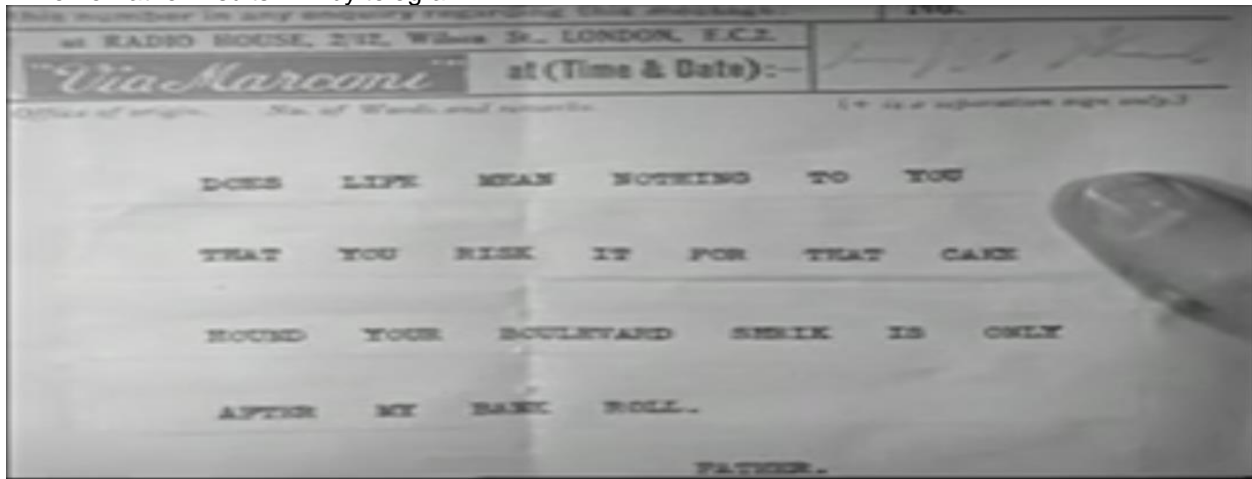
Reunited Betty is shown to her quarters aboard the boat. She secretly reunites with her boyfriend, a wealthy, handsome young man, who she knew would be on board. However, they are followed by an older, mysterious man with a menacing air. He is affluently dressed and is an imposing figure.



Dinner At dinner, the mysterious man strikes up a conversation with Betty. Her boyfriend arrives and witnesses them talking, much to his displeasure. Seasick, he retires to his room. His disorientation is reflected in the rocking of the boat.



Argument Betty receives a telegram from her father criticizing her relationship with her boyfriend. Undeterred, she informs her boyfriend that she has made arrangements for them to be married on board the boat. Her boyfriend is angry at this, accusing of her using her financial status to exert control over him while her father insults him by telegram.



Paris When the boat arrives in Cherbourg, Betty takes the train to Paris where she entertains a crowd of friends at an apartment. Her boyfriend visits her and criticizes her flamboyant lifestyle as she tries on expensive dresses in front of him. Mocking him, Betty dresses in modest clothing and portrays herself as a humble village girl.



Financial ruin Betty's father visits her at the party she is hosting and reveals that he has been ruined financially. Betty is shocked and asks her friends to leave. She suggests to her boyfriend that this is what he wanted to happen and the two argue.



Domesticity With her father no longer able to provide for her, Betty turns to caring for him. She makes the beds, cooks, and bakes, although she proves to be less than competent at all these tasks. Unbeknownst to her, her father sneaks away to enjoy a lavish meal, surrounded by servants who bring him wine, suggesting his claim of bankruptcy was a lie.





The boyfriend reappears Betty's boyfriend visits her and declares his intention to rescue her from her newfound poverty. Horrified at the insinuation that she abandon her father in his time of need, Betty rejects his offer and vows to get a job to support the family home.



Cabaret After at first struggling to find employment, Betty is given a recommendation to work as a flower girl at a cabaret. She approaches the maître d'hotel who agrees to give her a job. Betty takes to it immediately, flirting with the orchestra (much to her boss's irritation) and befriending the barman.



The mysterious man and the boyfriend The mysterious man appears at the cabaret, where he sits and talks with Betty. Her boyfriend arrives and finds the two together. The man departs, leaving Betty a note telling her to call on him should she ever find herself in need. Betty's boyfriend, upon learning about her new job, is irked that she seems to be enjoying it so much.



The truth is revealed Betty's father learns of her employment and appears at the cabaret to scold her for her choice of work. She sees a newspaper headline that exposes her father's ruse of being bankrupt. Her father admits his lie. Angry with her father and her boyfriend, Betty leaves them both.



Back onboard the boat Betty runs away and finds the mysterious man who left her the note offering his help. She agrees to travel with him back to the United States. In his luxurious cabin on board the ocean liner, he locks her in a room.



Explanation When she is finally let out, she finds that her father and boyfriend are both there. Her father reveals that the mysterious man was a friend of his that he had tasked with keeping an eye on her. Betty and her boyfriend rekindle their romance. Satisfied that Betty has learned the necessary life lessons, the father and his friend raise a toast to the happy couple.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Betty

As an heiress to a fortune, Betty displays many conventional character traits of such a woman: she is spoiled and impulsive, living a life without fear of consequences. At the same time, she is also brave and adventurous and without snobbery or airs. She upends the social expectations of feminine behavior, most notably by flying her own plane across the Atlantic but also by seeking to arrange a spontaneous marriage on board an ocean liner. Her resistance to social conformity leads to a concerted effort by the men in her life to force her into a more conventional form of womanhood. Her father's pretense of financial ruin is designed to lead her in this direction, but how successful this really is remains ambiguous, partly as a result of the film's rather rushed ending.

Spoiled Betty's introduction reveals her to be a stereotypically spoiled daughter of a wealthy father. As she crash-lands her plane in the Atlantic and is being rescued by an ocean liner's crew, she seems relaxed and indifferent to the obvious danger of the situation. A visual joke ensues in which Betty hands a seemingly endless amount of luggage to the crew who are ostensibly in a rush to save her life. She is obviously aware of her privileged position allowing her to demand things of others that most people would not dare to demand. She declares to her boyfriend, for example, that she will have the captain of the boat marry them.

Subversive Another way of looking at Betty's behavior, other than dismissing her as spoiled, is to emphasize her subversion of gender norms. The first shot of Betty introduces her wearing a pilot's uniform and smiling with great pleasure despite having just landed her plane in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Betty approaches everything she does seemingly without a hint of self-consciousness. Arriving on the boat, her pilot's goggles have left an unflattering imprint over her eyes where the goggles once were, but she carries on chatting with her many admirers quite happily despite her comical appearance. In Paris, when her boyfriend arrives to chastise her for her decadence, she is shown inventing a new cocktail at a party and trying on an array of dresses. In response to her boyfriend's chastisement, she mocks him by dressing up in an excessively humble and modest outfit, in the style of a villager. All these moments convey her refusal to take social expectations of feminine propriety seriously.

Adaptable Despite her affluent upbringing, when forced by circumstance to adapt her behavior Betty demonstrates an ability to rise to the occasion. After her father informs her of his financial ruin, she takes to caring for him (albeit to comic effect as her domestic abilities leave much to be desired). When her boyfriend reappears seeking to renew their relationship, Betty insists on fulfilling her duties to her (apparently) struggling father.

Forced to get a job, she quickly establishes herself as a flower girl at a hotel bar. Her social mores are not so rigid as to prevent her from mixing with social classes previously beneath her station—she chats happily, for example, with the barman about the drink he has invented. This easy mixing across gendered and classed boundaries contributes to her continued scolding from the men in her life.

The Boy

Betty's boyfriend, named only "the Boy" in the title credits, is an ambiguous figure. Handsome and smartly dressed, he appears to belong to a similar social class as Betty, even if his wealth may not be as excessive as that to which she is able to lay claim. Unlike Betty he is rather uptight and struggles to adjust himself to her lifestyle.

Uptight Betty's boyfriend, in addition to providing the romantic element of the film's plot, serves as a contrast to Betty's carefree and adventurous spirit. At several points in the film, he rages against what he perceives as recklessness on Betty's part, whether it be her partying or her spontaneous decision to marry onboard the ocean liner. One suspects that beneath these outbursts lies a particularly masculine anxiety at being in the shadow of a personality as extroverted and compelling as Betty's.

Emasculated From the opening scenes at sea until the end of the film, the Boy is engaged in an ongoing rivalry with “the Man”, the latter appearing to pursue Betty and entice her away from their relationship. The Man is a particularly threatening love rival since he is older, carries himself with an air of imposing masculine authority, and has a menacing glare that is emphasized by several close ups of his face staring into the camera’s line of vision with a smirk. The Boy, on the other hand, is boyishly good-looking, and, in a particularly notable scene, unable to carry himself with the same authority, getting seasick and unsteady on his feet just as the Man is ramping up his apparent seduction of Betty. When the Boy finally confronts the Man in the final scene and physically attacks him, his anger is immediately exposed as misplaced with Betty’s father revelation that the Man was in fact never a genuine love rival, but rather a stand-in for the father to keep an eye on the Boy’s relationship with Betty. Throughout the film, then, the Boy’s attempts at asserting himself, be they with Betty or other men, are continually met with indifference.

The Father

Betty’s father is an ambivalent character, since he is both a demanding and controlling patriarch and a benevolent figure whose concern for his daughter is ultimately shown to be genuine. It is ultimately unclear how the audience are supposed to perceive him, since at various moments in the film we are drawn to sympathize with Betty’s manipulation by her father, while also accepting the film’s ending as ultimately a conventionally happy one.

Manipulative From the very first scene of the film, we see Betty’s father enraged by her behaviour and determined to intervene in her affairs. His telegram to her that she receives at sea is full of emotive language appealing to her sense of daughterly responsibility. When this attempt fails, he resorts to lying to her about his lost fortune. He subsequently plays the part of the ailing, impoverished father to force Betty into a domestic role in which she cares for him and abandons her relationship with her boyfriend. Meanwhile, behind her back, he continues his luxurious lifestyle by continuing to dine in splendour with servants at his beck and call.

Benevolent? In addition to his manipulative behaviour, by the film’s conclusion the father is presented as a possibly benevolent figure whose primary interest seems to be his daughter’s happiness, rather than her subservience to him. However, he reaches this point only after Betty has been deemed to have been sufficiently taught a lesson—in other words, his benevolence is always on his terms. Whether Betty is genuinely happy or not by the film’s conclusion remains unclear. While she declares with enthusiasm that, upon returning home, she and her boyfriend will “have an airplane to meet us outside New York, *won’t* we, daddy?”, she also appears to be made uneasy by the continued menacing stares of the Man, now revealed to be a close acquaintance of her father. In this uncanny closing moment, the Man appears to symbolize the continued monitoring of her by male authority. Insofar as the Man’s function in the film is to provide a physical embodiment of her father’s manipulative qualities, since it was ultimately her father who sent the Man to surveil Betty, this closing scene suggests the father’s benevolence may ultimately be a guise for his fundamentally coercive character.

THEMES

Social class The plot of *Champagne* makes clear the film’s interest in social class. It explores the common narrative trope of an individual forced by circumstance to abandon their wealth and test themselves among ordinary members of society to ascertain their human value beyond their class position. This situation is imposed on Betty by her father, who fears that her access to his wealth has made her feckless and morally bankrupt. A central scene in the film portrays her life in Paris before she learns of her father’s fictional ruin. We see her try on multiple luxurious fashion items and invent her own cocktail. She is surrounded by a hoard of admirers, who seem to be living off her generosity.

However, Betty’s circumstances are changed dramatically by her father’s ruse. She is forced to care for him in a dilapidated house. She does the cooking and cleans. Despite her comic incompetency at these domestic tasks, she takes them seriously—her response to her father’s apparent ruin is one of immediate industry and care. At this point in the film, Betty’s social class does indeed determine her moral

worth. Without the corrupting influence of money and prestige she demonstrates conventional moral qualities that were seemingly lacking beforehand.

While performing the duties of a middle-class woman in looking after her home Betty is, in the eyes of her father, surely admirable. Yet she takes the pretense of her father's financial collapse to its logical conclusion and seeks employment. Suddenly, she is brought down to the level of the working classes. She takes a job as a flower girl at a nightclub, one she ends up enjoying with the kind of reckless abandon she exhibited in her life as a rich young girl. She befriends a bartender, flirts, and dances. Notably, this is the first point in the film that the audience sees the world of labour underpinning the glamorous lifestyle presented thus far with a cutaway to the kitchen workers going about their tasks. Her boyfriend's chastisement upon seeing her in her new role ("It's bad enough to find you here, but worse to find you enjoying it") suggests that Betty is too cavalier about her new social position: the working class are supposed to suffer, and she is not suffering. Significantly, it is at this moment, when Betty threatens to move from one extreme of the social order to the other and become a "working girl", that her father intervenes and reveals the trick he has played on her. With her class status restored, she is able to marry her boyfriend with her father's approval.

Culture: Excess

Champagne precedes the financial crash of 1929 by a year, but nevertheless there is a clear engagement with the world of finance, which Betty, with her reckless abandon and fondness for ostentatious displays of wealth, symbolizes. The film's title suggests the culture of excess, and the film serves as a visual record of the "roaring twenties" reaching their peak. Betty's styling as a stereotypical "flapper" conveys a moral looseness that suggests a social order, from the point of view of conventional bourgeois morality, spiraling out of control.

The opening and closing shots, filtered through a champagne glass to create a woozy effect, reinforce this recurring motif of excess. While this is primarily concentrated on the character of Betty through the film's plot, multiple scenes portray her as the subject of rapturous fascination from gathering crowds, most notably upon her arrival aboard the ocean liner, but also on a smaller scale at her apartment in France, where she is the host of a raucous social gathering. The film suggests that this is a society attracted to displays of excess, as also evidenced by the newspaper headlines used as plot exposition, all of which show the life of Betty to be a subject of repeated media attention.

Patriarchy While Betty is the protagonist of *Champagne*, she is also the film's only major female character. The opening credits provide a list of four major characters, one of whom is Betty (listed as "the Girl") while the others are "the Father", "the Boy", and "the Man." In not providing names for these characters, the film suggests that the gendered social roles these characters fill are near-universal ones. It is immediately clear that Betty's life as a "girl" is going to be dominated by her relations with these three men.

Betty is styled in the fashion of a "flapper", a new social type that emerged in the 1920s, and she exhibits the qualities of independence and extroversion that came to be associated with this type. She thus threatens a patriarchal social order in which women were expected to demur to the initiative of men in relations between the sexes. This is clear from the scene early in the film in which it is Betty who proposes marriage and takes the initiative in making arrangements for a rushed wedding, much to the displeasure of her boyfriend.

The narrative engine of *Champagne* is ultimately the desire of three men to exert control over Betty's behavior and disposition. The boyfriend attempts to reign in her hedonistic lifestyle with the aim of making her a more dependable wife. Her father pretends to be financially ruined in order to teach her a lesson about self-reliance but also to force her back into the family home to care for him in his supposed hour of need. Finally, and most interestingly, there is the third man, a mysterious figure who lurks in the background wherever Betty and her boyfriend find themselves. Throughout the film, the audience is led to assume that this man is pursuing Betty and is entering into a sexual rivalry with the younger boyfriend. In one scene, the two men stare menacingly at one another, suggesting the beginning of a classic love-triangle plot in which Betty will have to choose between the mysterious older man and the cleaner, more conventionally handsome boyfriend. Curiously, though, Betty seems almost indifferent to this rivalry that appears to be occurring around her. At the conclusion of the film, it is revealed that the mysterious man was in fact a friend of Betty's father assigned to keep watch over her and foil her burgeoning relationship with her boyfriend. The mysterious man and the father are revealed, then, to have been two parts of a

single patriarchal figure. The real father, whose demeanour is by and large kind and gentle if disapproving, serves as the benevolent side of the patriarchy, while the mysterious man, with his brooding and menacing aura, represents the coercive, sexually domineering side of patriarchal authority. Ultimately, the interests of three men align in forcing Betty into a more deferent form of womanhood.