

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

Alfred Hitchcock was a prolific filmmaker who began his career in Britain before becoming one of Hollywood's most celebrated auteurs. Before working in the United States, Hitchcock directed a number of films in his country of birth, both prior to and after the transition to sound in British filmmaking. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) marks the midway point of Hitchcock's period of working on sound films in Britain, a period that began with *Blackmail* in 1929 and concluded with his move to Hollywood in 1939. In 1956, some twenty two years after the original, Hitchcock would direct another film with the title *The Man Who Knew Too Much* featuring a similar premise and set of characters.

Hitchcock took the title from a collection of short detective stories by the British crime writer G.K. Chesterton, to which the former held the film rights. However, despite this shared title, the film's plot bears no obvious relation to the content of any of Chesterton's stories. Indeed, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* fits more neatly into the category of political thriller than it does detective fiction, with the film weaving assassination and kidnapping plots into a brief, but tense, 76 minutes.

The film is notable for being the second film to introduce the celebrated German actor Peter Lorre to an English-speaking audience. Lorre had three years previously portrayed a child murderer to much critical acclaim in Fritz Lang's influential crime drama *M*. However, his English skills being limited, he required language lessons on a nightly basis during the filming of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Despite the language barrier, Hitchcock would recount the friendliness of their relationship, which included a respective penchant for practical jokes on set. Lorre would work with Hitchcock again on *The Secret Agent* (1936), and went on to a successful career in Hollywood much like the director.

As with the majority of his films, Hitchcock appears as an extra in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

The Man Who Knew Too Much tells its story by way of foreshadowing and the mirroring of events. Seemingly innocuous moments in the story, from the chiming of a character's watch, to the gift of a brooch from mother to daughter, and indeed the film's opening sequence in which a skier takes a tumble, are all mirrored later in the film by shots or sequences that have a much more dramatic significance to the plot. The film's tone moves between upbeat and occasionally comedic, to brooding and tense. This oscillation between lightheartedness and a sense of impending dread is most perfectly realized in the performance of Lorre, who portrays the menacing architect of an assassination attempt as an eloquent and good-humoured man who speaks English with a high-pitched monotone. It should be noted that the film is also marked by its utilization of point of view as it provides two mirrored shots of Jill's blurred or spinning vision.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Jill Lawrence—Mother of Betty, the kidnapped girl.

Bob Lawrence—Husband of Jill and father of Betty.

Betty Lawrence—Daughter of Jill and Bob, kidnapped by an organisation plotting an assassination.

Ramon Levine—Assassin and Jill's competitor in the clay pigeon shooting competition.

Abbott—Leader of the cult and architect of the assassination plot.

Louis Bernard—Friend of Jill and Bob who, leaves behind a note warning of a crime.

Clive—Bob's friend who assists him in his attempts to recover Betty from her kidnappers.

SYNOPSIS

On a trip to Switzerland to participate in a clay pigeon shooting contest, Jill Lawrence, along with her husband and daughter Bob and Betty, befriends a Frenchman named Louis Bernard. Also on this trip is Abbott, an associate of Jill's competitor in the contest, Ramon Levine. At an evening dance, Bernard is shot and killed. As he dies, Bernard informs Jill that in his hotel room there is information regarding an imminent international crime. Bob locates a note containing the information in Bernard's room, beating the police and the perpetrators to the scene. However, the organization who murdered Bernard learn of the Lawrences' knowledge of this crime, and kidnap their daughter as ransom to secure their silence. The Lawrences return to London, where the British security services attempt to convince the Lawrences to tell them what they know, warning that the plot underway may be of equal significance to the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. However, the Lawrences, owing to Betty's kidnapping, find themselves unable to part with the information. Betty's parents soon learn of her location, and Bob, along with his friend Clive, attempt to retrieve her from the criminal organisation's hideaway in the city. Bob is captured by the organisation, led by Abbott, but he learns of their plan to have Ramon Levine assassinate an important political figure at a concert that evening at the Royal Albert Hall. Bob manages to inform Jill of this plan, who attends the performance and produces a distraction at the crucial moment—the target of the assassination is merely wounded as a result. The police follow Ramon back to the organisation's hideout, where a shootout ensues. Abbott is killed, and Jill shoots Ramon as he chases Betty onto the roof. The Lawrences are reunited with their daughter.

PLOT

Luxury Travel Prior to the title credits, a short sequence presents a hand perusing various travel brochures advertising skiing trips to Switzerland, accompanied by dramatic music.

Accident A man skiing is watched by a crowd. Among them, a young girl breaks with the crowd chasing a dog, causing the skiing man to crash. He knocks over a man with a Germanic accent, who is good humored about the incident in response to the girl's father's apologies. However, the skier and the man he knocks down seem to recognize one another, and exchange concerned, knowing glances.

Broach Jill Lawrence gives her daughter Betty a broach as a gift. She is delighted with the gift and tells her father about it, but he is distracted and ignores her.

Shooting contest Jill Lawrence engages in a clay pigeon shooting contest (the final of a competition) against a man named Ramon, who is mentioned to be a rival of Jill's at the sport. As Jill shoots, she is distracted by the man with the Germanic accent's deliberate chiming of his pocket watch, which he ostensibly does as an attempt to entertain Betty, Jill's daughter. Jill misses, and Ramon goes on to win the competition.

Assasination At an evening gala, Louis Bernard dances with Jill. Louis is distracted by a fellow dancer drawing his attention to a piece of yarn that is wrapping itself around the legs of the dancers, a practical joke played by Bill. At that moment, a gun is fired through a window and strikes Louis, who responds stoically to his imminent death and imparts crucial information to Jill.

News of kidnapping With Betty missing, Jill receives a note warning her and her husband to "say nothing of what you found or you will never see your child again." The camera provides Jill's point of view as she faints.

A visit to the dentist In London, Bill, accompanied by his associate Clive, visit a dentist who works out of dingy offices—offices that Bob believes to be the operating centre of the organisation that have kidnapped Betty. Abbott appears, and Bob overhears him telling Ramon that his "genius" will be required once again that evening.

The Tabernacle of the Sun Bob and Clive visit a chapel, where the organisation—now revealed to be a cult of sorts—are conducting a service. Bob and Clive fail to blend in, and they too are captured by the cult. Bob overhears plans to carry out an assassination at the Royal Albert Hall that evening during an opera performance. Abbott instructs Ramon on the precise moment in the score during which he should shoot in order to have maximum noise cover.

The brooch returns Jill attends the opera, and encounters Ramon, who gives her Betty's brooch with a knowing look. It is clear that this is meant as a warning, and it is a moment of shock for Jill, who realises that her adversary in the shooting competition is in fact her daughter's abductor.

At the opera In a scene of mounting tension, Jill waits for the moment in the performance at which to produce her distraction. The shot goes off and the target is hit, but it is not clear if the wound is fatal, although the statesman collapses to much alarm from his entourage.

Shootout In a climactic scene, the police engage in a bloody shootout with the organisation at their headquarters. Betty, with help from her father, manages to escape onto the roof. Ramon follows her, however. Watching from the street, Jill, despite the need for extreme precision in order not to harm her own daughter, shoots Ramon, who falls from the roof and dies.

Reunited In the film's closing sequence, Bob and Jill are reunited with their daughter Betty, who is visibly shaken. Stirring music accompanies the final shot of the film, before the screen fades to black.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

BOB LAWRENCE **Conscientious** (Humorous)

Bob is an affable figure, who is introduced to the audience as a loving father and devoted husband—he happily accompanies his wife on a trip during which he takes a backseat to her activities. He is frequently joking with, and showing affection to, his daughter. His mannerisms mark him as a member of the British upper-class, and the Lawrences' life of leisure affords him an air of being intensely at ease with himself and others. His cavalier attitude to life would seem to be belied by his bravery, however, as he undertakes a rescue mission to retrieve his daughter from kidnappers. And yet even as he is involved in high stakes situations of life and death, he retains his composure and, at times, an almost ironic detachment.

Affable, with a sense of humour A key scene in the film introduces Bob's playful sense of humour, in addition to his close bond with his daughter. As he sits at a dinner table, Jill approaches, dancing with Louis. They exchange light hearted banter about the difference between French and English men, and following this exchange Bob, with a cheeky glance at his daughter, attaches a loose thread from a knitted jumper to the back of Louis' jacket. As the thread unspools, it winds its way around the legs of the dancers until Louis is notified of the practical joke by a stranger. While distracted by the piece of string, Louis is fatally shot by an assassin. It is at this moment in the film that the joviality of the opening scenes are finally punctured by a tangible shock. While Bob is not responsible for the murder of his friend, or at least the film never explicitly refers to any sense of guilt, nevertheless there is a stark contrast drawn between the laidback jokes of Bob's early scenes and the dramatic demonstrations of bravery he will be required to carry out as he is thrust into a series of unforeseen events.

Stiff upper lip Bob's character is notable for the continued presence of his nonchalant charm alongside more dramatic, yet barely perceptible, expressions of emotion. For example, while captured by the organisation Bob is reunited with Betty, who is also being held by his captors. While the relief on his face is palpable, his response is muted compared to the sobs of his daughter. As he comforts her, he remarks, with a brief clearing of the throat, "I say darling, this is an awfully smart dressing gown. Where did you get it?"

JILL LAWRENCE **Agreeable** (Free-spirited – Heroic)

Jill, far from the meek housewife, is in many ways the head of the Lawrence household since it is her status as a clay pigeon shooter that brings the family to Switzerland in the first place, with Bob and Betty accompanying her. Good natured and affable like her husband, she is a warm mother to Betty, giving her a brooch as a gift. As the film progresses, however, she becomes more distressed and reliant on her husband to carry out the task of rescuing their daughter from her kidnappers. And yet, by the film's end, she is restored at its central hero, as she both provides the key distraction that forces Ramon to miss his target, as well as finally shooting Ramon in a situation that requires intense focus and calm, threatened as her daughter's life would be should she miss.

Free-spirited In the film's opening scene, Jill is witnessed clay pigeon shooting, and openly joking with her husband about committing adultery with their mutual friend Louis: "I'm just going off with another man." She is dressed in an athletic garb, and she slings her arms in a relaxed manner over Louis' shoulder. Her relaxed rapport with her husband marks them as equals in marriage.

Disorientation With the kidnapping of her daughter, and the threat she receives from her kidnappers, Jill's earlier composure transforms into a frantic discomposure. As she reads the kidnapper's threatening note her gaze extends into the distance and her eyes widen: her point of view is shown as a spinning shot of a blurred background before she faints in dramatic style. Jill is the only character whose immediate point of view is shown in the film. This point of view recurs in the opera scene, where she saves the day by portraying a "damsel in distress" figure, screaming in a fur coat at the precise moment that the assassin is poised to shoot.

Heroism Jill's character comes full circle in the film. After transitioning into a more feminised role, in the film's final sequence she is restored as the film's definitive hero. She saves her daughter's life by shooting Ramon from a significant distance. Still dressed in her fur coat, she is standing by a police officer who is pointing a rifle at Ramon (who is pursuing Betty on a rooftop). The officer hesitates and finally gives up, telling his superior "I daren't sir, I might hit the kiddy." Jill snatches the rifle from the officer and, without hesitation, fires the shot that saves her daughter's life and rids the world of a heartless assassin.

ABBOTT Unconscientious (Friendly – Maniacal – Eloquent)

The leader of the organisation that is plotting an assassination of international political significance, Abbott is a man of uncertain origin with an air of mystery as to his precise motives. He is simultaneously laidback and affable, much like Bill, but conveys menace in his slow, deliberate way of speaking from the very start of the film. While his precise motivations for orchestrating the murders are unclear, he is unwavering in his determination to carry them out. Indeed, he loses his life doing so. He seems to take pleasure in tormenting his victims, and regularly speaks in coded language that belies the viciousness of his intentions.

Friendly exterior When first introduced, Abbott is knocked over by a skier. Upon being picked up by Bill, who happens to be standing next to him, Abbott laughs the incident off, chuckling long after he is helped upright. He catches a glance of Louis, the skier who has knocked him over, and for a brief moment his face transforms from a beaming smile to a look of intense severity, before returning to its default jolly expression. Similarly, in a subsequent scene, Abbott attempts to show his pocket watch to Betty, who protests that she is too old for such amusements. Abbott too laughs this off. The chiming of the watch distracts Betty's mother from her participation in the shooting contest.

Maniacal Abbott's friendly exterior appears at other moments almost maniacal. As one of the women in his organisation is forced to strip off to her stockings, and delivers his meal barefoot, Abbott laughs for an unusually long time and with an unusual intensity, displaying a mocking cruelty. This moment is followed by Abbott's blunt orders to shoot Bob should he try to escape. This oscillation between a friendly and relaxed manner, and an intensity and cruelty, in addition to Lorre's wide-eyed portrayal, suggests a maniacal quality to Abbott.

Eloquent Abbott, despite his criminality, carries out his atrocities with a persistent eloquence. He regularly speaks in euphemisms, such as when he tells Ramon that his "genius" will be required at the opera that evening. He is also learned and cultured, quoting Shakespeare as he describes his murderous intentions: "Tell her they may be soon be leaving us, leaving us for a long, long journey. How is it that Shakespeare says? 'From which no traveller returns.'" He similarly demonstrates his culturedness when ordering the assassination to take place at a moment of crescendo during the cantata that will be performed at the Royal Albert Hall. He plays the cantata on a record player for Ramon, the assassin, directing the latter's attention to the crucial moment in the score.

THEMES

Appearance versus reality *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is first and foremost a thriller, designed to shock and entertain. The film is masterful at producing such shocks and thrills, and in doing so it brings out a key theme: that of the tension between a surface innocence and an underlying constant threat of violence and instability. This theme is visible in almost any scene, but is perhaps

best emphasised by the film's earliest scenes. For example, when introducing Abbott, his cheery demeanour sits uncomfortably alongside his brief but intense stare upon recognizing Louis. Similarly Ramon, following his victory over Jill in the clay pigeon shoot, is polite and jolly, laughing at the mannerisms of the "comical" Brits with whom he is conversing. Of course, Ramon will later terrorize British society in one of its most treasured institutions: the Royal Albert Hall. Notably, this scene at the clay pigeon shoot follows a previous scene in which Betty tells her father that he dislikes Ramon, but she cannot quite put her finger on why. As the film continues, this theme is strengthened by recurring depictions of otherwise respectable or admirable figures and institutions revealing themselves to be fronts for violent schemes. For example, the dentist who Bob and Clive visit turns out to work for the kidnapers. Similarly, the chapel that Bob and Clive subsequently stumble upon, despite its attendees' claims to worship "light" in the form of the sun, are in fact conspiring towards very "dark" ends indeed.

Fate and chance There is a preoccupation in the film with fate and chance, and more particularly with how seemingly innocuous acts can produce a devastating chain reaction. For example, the film's opening scene, in which Louis falls into a crowd of bystanders as he skis the Swiss slopes, results in Abbott and Louis recognizing one another. This in turn leads to Louis' assassination, and thereby Bob and Jill's unwitting involvement in the affairs of international espionage and political intrigue. This theme is further intensified when it is revealed that the chain of events that ensue from that initial chance encounter on the Swiss ski slopes are ultimately threatening to lead to an international calamity on the scale of WWI.

Civic and Familial Responsibility Bob and Jill are presented as a set of ideal British archetypes: morally upstanding in their perfect nuclear family, wryly humorous, and self-assured. And yet, as they are flung into an international conspiracy, they are forced to balance commitment to country and commitment to family. They are forcefully reminded of their responsibility at the civic level by a member of the British security services who visits them following Betty's abduction. The latter warns that their refusal to part with the information they are withholding will have consequences far beyond their understanding, equating the current assassination plot to that which instigated WWI: "In a month's time, because a man you'd never heard of killed a man you'd never heard of in a place you'd never heard of, this country was at war." Jill, interrupting Bob when he begins to respond, replies: "What you told us may be true, but our child's in danger. That comes first, that must come first." Ultimately, though, the film resolves this tension by having Bob and Jill's determination to rescue their daughter lead to their simultaneous thwarting of the assassination attempt. The final scene, in which the family is joyously reunited, would seem to imply that the aims of national security and that of the private household are, in the final instance, one and the same.

Political instability While the film has several more existential themes, it is ultimately a political thriller that draws its energy from the world of international conspiracy and intrigue. The mix of nationalities on display in the opening scenes in Switzerland immediately presents a complicated web of connections that the audience can only obliquely grasp. Indeed, through the course of the film, there is little clarity given as to the precise nature of the assassination plot, from who, exactly, is carrying it out, to who, exactly, is the target. The threat that the film draws its audience attention to is less a precise, identifiable one than a vague, overarching fear of shadowy forces who seek to disrupt an apparently fragile international peace, as is clearly conveyed by the aforementioned British security official who not-so-subtly warns of impending war. This idea is further reinforced by the scene in the cult's chapel, in which the gathered members sing an ominous hymn-like song containing the words "there's trouble coming soon."

