

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Bride Wore Black 1968

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

The Bride wore Black is a murder thriller in which Truffaut pays tribute to the work of Alfred Hitchcock, his master of suspense, and to a novel by William Irish, of the same title as the film, from which Truffaut adapted the present narrative. Truffaut may seem bewilderingly versatile, even a cinematic jack of all skills, when you look at the range of films he created: *sociological* (Day for Night; Fahrenheit 451; The Wild Child); *romantic* (Jules and Jim; Adele H; Stolen Kisses); *crime, thriller, underworld* (Shoot the Piano Player; Mississippi Mermaid; The Bride wore Black; *autobiographical* (The 400 Blows; The Soft Skin; Bed and Board). Into this porridge of skills, of course, we must Truffaut's powers as a writer and a reader. Like Shakespeare, Truffaut wrote (a lot of) his scripts, and acted in them. (Did both guys fall in love with their leading actors, or was that only Truffaut, Shakespeare having been too busy cutting business deals?) It followed from the ground thinking of *Les cahiers du cinéma*, Truffaut's youthful theorist-editor writings, that the camera had best be thought of as a writing instrument in motion, a device for conveying the texture of the lived world, and in that way a means of doing far more with one's experience and expression than could be accomplished by static camera shots.

SYNOPSIS

A young woman in the French provinces threatens to throw herself off the balcony of her parental home, and is just barely stopped by her mother. The girl, who is crying and distraught, has recently lost her fiancé to a gunshot, and just at the moment, on the church steps, when the ceremony has been completed. Barely able to compose herself, in the wake of this tragic loss, she is still dressed in black—the color (occasionally mixed with white) she has continued to wear since the murder. She still seems overwrought, but is able at least to communicate her plans to her mother. She lays out five piles of bills, packs her suitcase, and tells her mother she is going on a long trip. She goes down to the train station, gets on the train at the platform nearest her, then walks directly across the train and down the stairs and out of the train on the far side. The next time we see her she is wearing a white gown, and looking for a man named Bliss—who is just then hosting a party, as he is celebrating the eve of his marriage. The remainder of this savage film is occupied with the obsessive moves Julie (the bereaved young woman) undertakes, to kill the five men from whose hunting party had come the bullet fatal to her husband.

CHARACTERS

Julie Kohler, the bereaved bride
Bliss, one of the 'five huntsmen'
Corey, one of the 'five huntsmen'
Morane, one of the 'five huntsmen'
Delvaux, one of the 'five huntsmen'
Fergus, one of the 'five huntsmen'
'Cookie,' son of Morane

STORY

Husband is killed The Bride at the center of this revenge drama has recently lost her new husband—on the steps of the church no less, right after the ceremony—to a bullet fired from among a group of five members of a hunting club. (As we see the scene in flashback, we incline to think the killing an accident. A crazy byproduct of male camaraderie, at the least.) When we first see her, Julie by name, she is broken hearted, dressed in black, and

weeping. Her mother has to restrain her, from jumping off the balcony of her house. After a while we see that Julie has recovered somewhat; she packs her bags, which include five separate packets of five hundred dollar bills, and informs her mother that she is going on a long trip. Then she goes down to the train station, enters the train at the platform, but exits by the opposite stairs, with her baggage, and for a while disappears.

Bliss When next we see her she has changed her outfit and her hair, and is looking for what will be her first victim, Bliss. An attractive ladies man, Bliss is charmed by Julie—at least until she tells him her name, and pushes him off the balcony of his house, to his death.

Coral Her second victim is Coral, whom Julie joins for a date, then later returning with him to his house, where she gives him a drink of arak, laced with the syringe of poison she has brought with her. He dies in agony, begging her to believe that what had happened with the shooting was a pure accident.

Moraine The third victim of revenge is Morane, a would-be politician. Julie follows Morane's wife and young son home, then rids herself of the wife, by showing her a fake telegram; *your mother is ill, hurry to see her!* When Morane gets home he is given the explanation, and agrees to Julie's offer to help prepare a supper for the small child, Cookie. In the course of playing with the child, Julie coaxes Dad to play along too: she traps him in a small utilities cabinet, under the stairs, slams the door on it, seals the door tightly and leaves Morane to suffocate.

Delvaux Another flashback illuminates victim four. This time we are able to know the de facto culprit, in the killing of Julie's husband. (We are also learning that the fatal shot was in fact accidental, in the sense that the irresponsible guys were simply horsing around. It could have been anyone of the huntsmen.) Before Julie has had a chance to kill Delvaux, he has been arrested by the cops, and she will have to wait for a final assault on him, at the end of the film.

Fergus Julie's final victim, in the course of her work, is Fergus, an artist specializing in female nudes. Julie models for him, in the guise of the huntress goddess Diana, which gives her the perfect opportunity to shoot him dead with her arrow.

Prison At Fergus' funeral she is herself caught by the police and arrested. As a prisoner in the women's wing of the central prison, she is charged with delivering meals to the prisoners, and while serving Delvaux, the original shooter, she disappears from our and the camera's sight. A heavy fatal scream is heard, as Julie completes her vengeance list.

THEMES

Vengeance. It seems integral to Julie's mindset that she should avenge herself on all those who belonged to the huntsman's group. Julie is working below the level of hatred. Her desire for vengeance is deeper than scorn or even loathing. Her very existence is postulated on the eradication of five vile beings. From a juridical standpoint, there was only one killer of Julie's husband, but in fact it was the result of. group horsing around folly. From Julie's standpoint, it was clearly a collective murder. She simply had the good luck to be able to kill Delvaux last.

Trauma. The wound inflicted on Julie, by the murder of her husband, cuts a swathe of pain through the nervous system, and cannot be assuaged by any vengeance. Julie cancels out the five huntsmen with her own life. None of them exist after the vicious mathematical null the film's events portray.

Weapons. The theme of reckless weaponry, and of the reckless weapon, spreads like a bloodstain through the entire film. The controversial adage that weapons do not kill people, but people with weapons kill people, is laid out for close inspection in this film. Had weapons not been available, of course, nothing like the private huntsman club would even have existed.

Fury Hatred is one thing, so is vengeance. Neither is the same as fury, which, even though it can be cold, as surely it is in Julie, is arguably more dangerous and extreme than vengeance. Julie will not burn down the city; she will target methodically, like a serial killer; and when she is done she will exist no more.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

JULIE Julie is clearly the main character, although she is not particularly ‘interesting,’ dimensional, or instructive. She could have been interesting, but then, of course she would not have exhibited the remorseless, monomaniacal traits that define her. For example, she never turns back from her desire for revenge. One turns to the example of the suffocation of Morane. Truffaut She rarely interacts with others, along the path of revenge. She never turns to question her strategy of serial revenge.

Planner Julie makes out to be the teacher of the young son of Morane, one of the infamous five. In that role Julie prepares to help out the family, in Mom’s absence, so prepares a dinner for them all—dad, son, and herself. Afterwards she sustains the mood by game playing. In the course of the hide and seek she induces Morane to hide in a narrow closet, under the stairs, where she locks him in. He is too tightly confined to move. He is in darkness, screams for mercy, roaring that the shooting was an accident. In the midst of this chaos, Julie adds duct tape to the seams of the imprisonment closet, takes the arm of Cookie and turns off the light—it is evening—and walks away from the house, having bolted all the doors behind her. Why is the scene harrowing, and all Julie?

Secrecy Julie plans her journey of revenge, taking just the right amount of money, for the five guys, and giving no hint of her destination. Her only indication is the few words she says to her mother, on the day of departure. She will be on a long trip, but she will be in touch. The characterization of Julie is shadowy. What does she intend to do with the money she has initially set aside in five piles? To where does she disappear after she enters then leaves the train she has gone to take? What are the flashbacks—for instance of the original gunshot-- that fill In the history of the narrative? This web of mysteries surrounds the ‘bride’ wherever she goes.

Conniving Julie takes special pleasure in modeling for Fergus, for she knows that in the office is an upcoming occasion to fire one of Diana’s arrows through the skull of this mediocrity. To kill him in an aroused state is just fine.

Parallels Medea (in Euripides) has much in common with Julie. (Both are figures of imagination, workings out of possible outcomes in society.) Euripides fancies the kind of barbarian queen, dramatic and impulsive, whom the Greeks both dreaded and found fascinating. It was inevitable that this dangerous beauty would come into conflict with a square, local, and cheating regional king. When Medea realized that she had been taken back to Greece only to be dumped for someone younger and prettier, she decided to take the ultimate revenge, to kill two of her own children and to incinerate Jason’s new bride and Creon, with poisoned gifts. Medea’s departure by fiery chariot puts the stamp PAID on her entire relation to Jason. It no longer exists. Was it inevitable that Julie would react as she did, as a serial killer? Spectacular damage seems compensatory, to those wounded by having their agency removed from them. They are left on their own with their losses. The inflicting of indescribable pain on their supposed oppressors would serve as a release from their own intolerable pain.