

SECRET AGENT (1936)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

Director Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) was a British filmmaker. He began his career making silent films in the 1920s before transitioning to sound with *Blackmail* in 1929. Following his success in the British film industry, Hitchcock began directing in Hollywood in 1940 with *Rebecca* and ended his long career with *Family Plot* in 1976. During this time, he established himself as one of the most revered directors in the world and was often referred to with the moniker “the master of suspense” owing to his films’ command of tension and intrigue.

Film *Secret Agent* (1936) is a thriller based on a play by Campbell Dixon, who modelled his dramatic work on the short fiction of W. Somerset Maugham. *Secret Agent* followed Hitchcock’s hugely successful *The 39 Steps*, released the previous year, although it was considerably less successful—both commercially and critically—than its immediate precursor. While *Secret Agent* is not generally considered to be a Hitchcock classic, it nevertheless provides those key Hitchcockian ingredients of suspense, unease, and ethical ambiguity that pervade the director’s work. Although Hitchcock himself was to remark that he was “sorry it wasn’t a success,” the film is nevertheless a significant moment in the director’s career, if only because, as the critic Maurice Yacowar has noted, it was the first time the director took significant liberties in adapting his source material. *Secret Agent* can thus be said to represent another step in the creative development of one of cinema’s most significant practitioners

Background The film is notable for being the second and final cinematic collaboration between Hitchcock and German actor Peter Lorre, although Lorre would go on to star in Hitchcock’s television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Lorre’s participation in the film was marred by his ongoing morphine addiction, which contributed to his being permitted to improvise in multiple scenes. While Lorre was given considerable license by Hitchcock (the two struck up a friendship based on their mutual fondness for practical jokes), his relationship with the other two stars of the film—John Gielgud and Madeleine Carroll—was markedly different and represented dynamics in the director’s relationship with actors that would continue throughout his career. Regarding Gielgud, biographer Peter Ackroyd notes that Hitchcock had little regard for the actor’s considerable theatrical experience. Hitchcock wanted his film actors to do less on camera, not more, and to use as little of their instinctive creativity as possible. With Carroll, Hitchcock showed signs of behaviour that would come to mark his relationship with his female blonde stars, oscillating, as biographer Donald Spoto notes, between adoration and cruelty.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Edgar Brodie a.k.a. “Richard Ashenden”	A captain in the British army recruited as a spy
Carrington a.k.a. “Mrs. Ashenden”	An enthusiastic spy to pose as Edgar’s wife
The General	An assassin recruited to assist Edgar in his espionage
Robert Marvin	An American guest at the Ashenden’s hotel in Switzerland
“R”	A man from British intelligence who recruits Edgar as a spy
Caypor	A British guest at the Ashenden’s hotel in Switzerland
Caypor	Mrs. Caypor’s German wife

SYNOPSIS

During World War I, Edgar Brodie, an army captain and novelist, is recruited by British intelligence to carry out an operation integral to the British war effort—he is to intercept a German agent in Switzerland who is traveling to the Middle East to incite conflict. Brodie's death is faked and he is given a new identity as Richard Ashenden. He has been assigned "The General", a skilled assassin from an unidentified Spanish-speaking country, to help him to take out the enemy agent. Upon traveling to Switzerland, Ashenden discovers at his hotel that he has also been assigned a fictional wife to complete his persona—a woman named Elsa Carrington. Elsa has met a flirtatious American man at the hotel named Richard Marvin, and the couple become friendly with Marvin.

Ashenden and the General identify a man they believe to be the German agent—Cayper, a British man at the hotel. They hatch a plan to assassinate Cayper by luring him to a mountaintop. However, they soon find out they targeted the wrong man.

Tortured by their murder of an innocent man, the Ashendens plan to abandon their roles as spies and start a new life. The General, though, receives a tip as to the whereabouts of the real German spy. Ashenden and the General discover the spy is Richard Marvin, their American acquaintance from the hotel. While Ashenden and the General were gone, Elsa had left with Marvin as she believed that Ashenden had reneged on their plans together.

Ashenden and the General track down Marvin and Elsa at the local train station. They attempt to kill Marvin but Elsa threatens them with a gun to prevent them from doing so. "R", however, has ordered an air attack on the train. In the wreckage, Marvin dies, but he shoots and kills the General beforehand. The Ashendens abandon their lives as spies.

SCENES

A funeral It is 1916, and a funeral is being held for Capt. Edgar Brodie, who has been killed in combat. Mourners pay their respects. Once they have left, the coffin is revealed to be empty.



“Ashenden” is given his assignment Edgar Brodie, very much alive, is summoned to the offices of a man named “R”, a representative of British Intelligence. R reveals that Brodie’s death was faked so that he could be assigned a new identity—“Ashenden”—in order to pursue an enemy agent in Switzerland. The agent intends to travel to the Middle East to incite conflict in the region and destabilize the British war effort. Ashenden’s task is to intercept and assassinate the agent before he leaves Switzerland.



Meeting “the General” Ashenden is introduced to his partner for the assignment, an eccentric man referred to as both “the General” and “the hairless Mexican.” The man, who is neither a General nor Mexican (nor hairless), is revealed to be a trained killer.



The hotel lobby Ashenden arrives at the Excelsior Hotel in Switzerland to check-in to his room. Much to his surprise, he is informed that his wife has already checked-in.



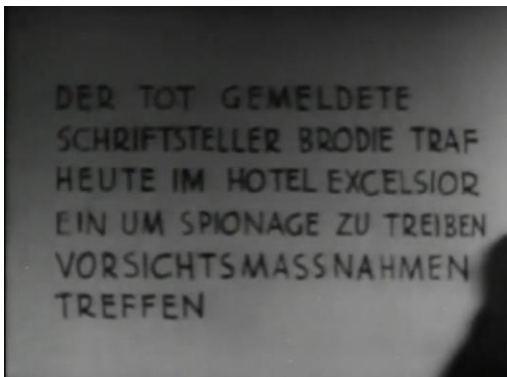
Ashenden meets his wife and her admirer Ashenden finds his wife, a woman named Elsa Carrington posing as “Mrs. Ashenden,” in their shared room with an American man named Robert Marvin. Marvin is flirtatious and charming and has been pursuing Elsa. The Ashendens have a private conversation about their assignment in which Elsa reveals her enthusiasm for espionage and assassination, much to Edgar’s chagrin, who is more somber about their assignment.



Ashenden and the General learn of a double agent The General visits the Ashendens’ room and is infatuated with Elsa. He expresses his outrage at not being assigned his own fictional wife. After he calms down, Ashenden and the General discuss a tip they have received that a double agent with information for them is an organist at a local church.



Edgar Brodie is exposed Meanwhile, a letter is shown being read by an unidentified man. The letter reveals that Edgar Brodie is still alive and staying at the Hotel Excelsior.



A visit to a church The General and Ashenden visit the church only to find that the organist has been murdered. He is found clutching a button in his hand and the two spies deduce that the button must belong to the murderer and became detached during a struggle.



Marvin and Elsa take a coach ride While Ashenden and the General are visiting the church, Elsa goes on a coach ride with Marvin. Marvin continues his flirtation with her.



The button is reunited with its owner Returning to the hotel, Ashenden intentionally plays the button as a chip during a casino game. The dealer asks the assembled gamblers if the button belongs to any of them. An older British man volunteers that it matches the buttons on his jacket.



Ashenden and the General hatch a plan Assuming this man to be the enemy agent who murdered the organist, Ashenden and the General befriend him. The man, named Caypor, is a hiking enthusiast. The General expresses his and Ashenden's desire to explore the surrounding mountains and Caypor offers to accompany them. Privately, Ashenden and the General plan to murder Caypor during the hike.



Ashenden has doubts As the evening continues, Ashenden and Elsa dance together and discuss the plan to assassinate Caypor. Ashenden expresses his struggle to balance his moral reservations with his sense of patriotic duty.



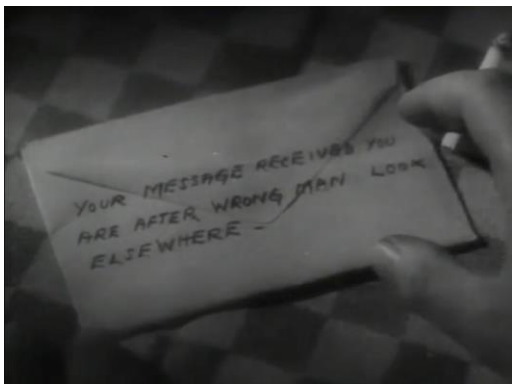
The assassination The next day, Ashenden, the General, and Caypor embark on a hike. Halfway through, Ashenden declares that he will rest at a lookout spot while Caypor and the General climb to the peak. Ashenden looks through a telescope and witnesses the General push Caypor to his death.



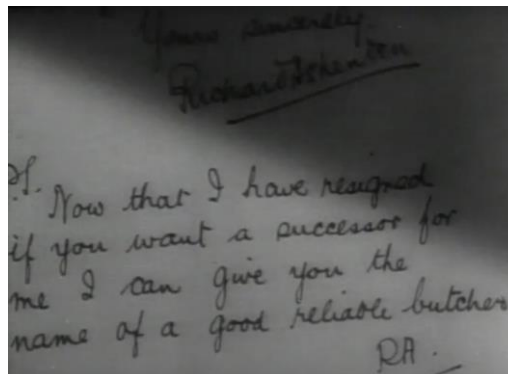
A German lesson Meanwhile, at the very moment that the assassination is taking place, Elsa and Marvin are with Caypor's German-speaking wife in her room. Mrs. Caypor gives the pair a German lesson, but she is unimpressed with their language skills. Caypor's dog scrambles agitatedly at the door, and Elsa is perturbed by the dog's whining.



The wrong man Returning to the hotel, Ashenden and the General receive a message from British intelligence informing them that they have the wrong man in Caypor. Ashenden informs Elsa, who is distraught at the news. The General, however, finds the confusion amusing.



Resignation letter Ashenden and Elsa discuss their future. Elsa announces that she is in love with Ashenden, and wants them to abandon their morally compromising lives as spies to be together. Ashenden drafts a resignation letter to send to R.



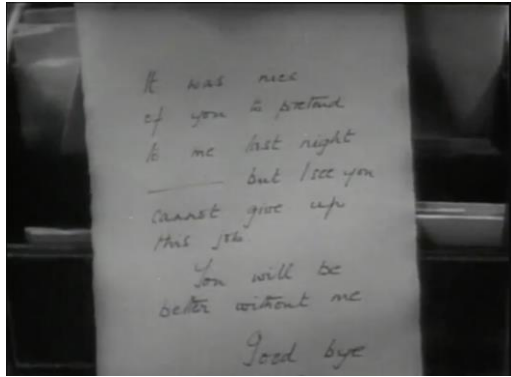
The General has a lead Ashenden and Elsa inform the General of their plans. The General is unhappy with their decision. He later telephones Ashenden to inform him of a lead he has received. A woman he is having an affair with at the hotel has a boyfriend at a local factory who promises information in exchange for money.



Ashenden and the General learn the truth Ashenden informs Elsa that he must follow the lead with the General but promises to return. Ashenden and the General visit the factory and receive the information just in time before their cover is blown. They learn that the enemy agent is Robert Marvin.



Marvin and Elsa depart Crestfallen at Ashenden's resumption of his espionage duties, Elsa leaves him a note informing him that she is leaving. As she prepares to depart, she encounters Marvin and suggests to him that they leave together.



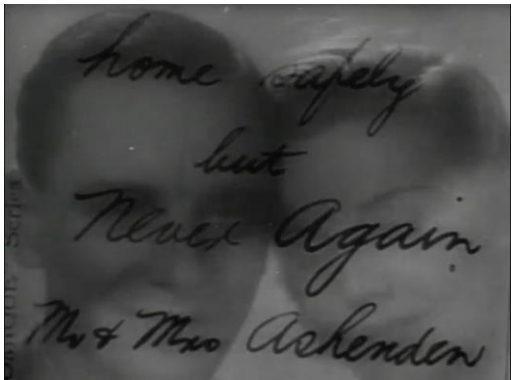
A struggle on the train Elsa and Marvin leave the hotel for the local train station. At the station, Marvin prepares to board a train for Constantinople and Elsa accompanies him, having nowhere else to go. Marvin becomes suspicious. Having learned that Elsa left the hotel with Marvin, Ashenden and the General follow the pair onto the train. Ashenden informs Elsa of Marvin's real identity. Elsa refuses to let Ashenden carry out the assassination.



Derailed As Elsa is intervening to stop the killing, war planes attack the train. The train is derailed. Marvin is trapped in the resulting wreckage, but shoots and kills the General before he dies.



Happily ever after Having carried out their mission, Ashenden and Elsa leave the spy business to be together.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Edgar Brodie/Richard Ashenden

As the hero of the film, Ashenden embodies many conventional attributes: he is calm and collected under duress, loyal to the British war effort, yet simultaneously able to cultivate his own moral code. Despite being swept up in events, Ashenden is ultimately able to overcome adversity and reestablish a sense of order to the world, as all good heroes must. And yet, he is a strange kind of hero because, ultimately, he does not carry out any of the deeds that actually move the plot forward.

Detached Edgar Brodie becomes Ashenden through an act of extreme self-sacrifice—he dies for his country in a very unusual way. The decision to abandon his former identity, however, is made for him. Ashenden accepts his new identity with a minimum amount of fuss. His approach to his espionage duties is detached but determined. In direct contrast to The General, he is not governed by his passions. His reaction to his discovery of a fictional wife is one of wry amusement, as against The General's sexual lust. His detachment from his activities is best represented in the scene in which he and The General carry out the murder of Caypor: Ashenden watches the murder through a telescope, and as such his involvement with the killing is indirect. He is powerless to stop it, but nor is he actively involved in it. It is worth pointing out that this position of the voyeur is one that many of Hitchcock's characters occupy (most notably in *Rear Window*) and all act with the same sense of unease and discomfort that Ashenden does. Of course, the position of the voyeur is also the position of a cinemagoer, and it is worth mentioning that Ashenden is the character that an audience (at least a British audience at the time of the film's release) would be expected to identify with most.

Ambivalent As the film progresses, Ashenden's relationship with his espionage activities grows increasingly ambivalent, as opposed to merely detached. The killing of Caypor, even before the revelation of the latter's innocence, deeply troubles Ashenden. However, his misgivings never quite reach the level of outright moral condemnation of, or resignation from, his duties. While Ashenden does make a move to resign his position, the mere hint of a lead to the whereabouts of the real enemy agent coaxes him back into the moral quagmire he had come so close to exiting altogether. Ashenden's ambivalence towards his role is never fully resolved: he does not have to carry out the direct killing of the enemy agent because the train crash renders it unnecessary. His decision to leave the life of a spy comes only after the completion of his mission, and as such it is not an action that resolves for the audience his ultimate moral relationship with his activities.

Elsa Carrington/Mrs. Ashenden

Elsa's character trajectory takes her from an initially naïve and excitable woman, who treats espionage as merely an engaging pastime, to the film's most morally uncompromising character. She also transitions from becoming a fictional wife to a real love interest, a development that coincides with her moral journey.

Naïve Elsa is introduced as a naïve, if enthusiastic spy. She is enticed by the glamorous prospects of espionage and implies that the possibility of violence excites her. Ultimately, this naivety leads to her inability to deal with the reality of espionage. She is left deeply troubled by the killing of Caypor, and, even when she learns the truth about Marvin, she refuses to allow Ashenden to assassinate him. While these acts are not in themselves evidence of naivety, the degree of shock she feels at the assassination plots carried by her fellow spies suggests that she entered into the world of espionage with only a dim understanding of the reality of what is involved.

Her naivety is further emphasized by Marvin's targeting of her from the beginning of the film. While none of the other characters are aware of his being the double agent either, it is through his befriending of Elsa that he can present himself as merely an affable flirt, rather than the threat to world peace that he is later revealed to be. Indeed, Elsa even decides to abandon her relationship with Ashenden in favour of Marvin. The degree of naivety involved in deciding to run away with a man she has just met leads Ashenden and the General to assume that Elsa is aware of Marvin's real identity and even Marvin himself believes that she has an ulterior motive. The truth is that she is in over her head in the world of espionage, as revealed by the degree of trust she places in Marvin.

Principled Despite her initial enthusiasm for espionage and for the violence involved, Elsa becomes the film's most morally uncompromising character. She is unrelenting in her eventual opposition to assassination of Marvin after his true identity is revealed. Unlike Ashenden, who sees this assassination as a necessary evil in the context of world war, Elsa is unmoved by this appeal to a larger, more complex moral terrain.

Elsa's moral journey coincides with the film's romance plot. She begins the film merely pretending to be a wife, when in reality she is a single woman seeking adventure. As her moral relationship to assassination changes, so does her relationship with Ashenden—she goes from merely pretending to love him, to genuinely falling in love with him. Thus, her personal relationship to morality is presented as part of her general development into a conventionally "moral" woman.

The General

The General is a character with no moral scruples, whether in matters of violence or sex. His motivations (stereotypical of conventional British understandings of Latin men at the time of the film's production) are a thirst for blood and a passion for romance. His function in the film is to serve as the foil to the British cautiousness and reserve embodied in Ashenden.

Lascivious The General provides the majority of the film's comic relief, despite there being darker elements to his character. His overt desire for the company of "beautiful women" stands in stark contrast to the propriety of his British counterpart Ashenden. Upon meeting Elsa, the General flies into a rage because he feels cheated that he has not himself been assigned a fictional wife by British intelligence. His references to his sexual desire for Elsa serve as a comic refrain throughout the film. His lasciviousness eventually takes on a darker role in the plot when a young woman with whom he has started a relationship (the woman in question has a boyfriend, further emphasizing the General's indifference to conventional sexual morality) provides Ashenden and the General with a key piece of information in their pursuit of the double agent.

Bloodthirsty In contrast to Ashenden and Elsa, The General has no moral qualms about the murkier side of espionage. Indeed, he carries out his killings with a disturbing degree of indifference, and at times outright enthusiasm. His self-identification as a "bloodhound" suggests that his aptitude for violence is innate, rather than learned, adding to the character's construction as a racial caricature. This quality is most evident in the marked contrast between Ashenden's and Elsa's pained reaction to the revelation of Caypor's innocence and The General's amusement. For the latter, there is no moral purpose to murder—it is done for its own sake. Of course, one could argue that this makes The General the most morally consistent of all the film's characters: he draws no distinction between the "right" and the "wrong" kind of murder.

THEMES

Appearance versus reality From the opening scene of *Secret Agent*, in which a coffin supposedly containing the corpse of a deceased army captain is revealed to be empty, we are introduced to a world in which appearance and reality are repeatedly confused. In the following scene, the man whose body is assumed to be occupying the coffin appears on screen alive and well. This relationship between the dead and the living is confused still further when Ashenden and the General discover an organist who appears to be playing his instrument—they discover, though, that the upright body that from behind appears to be engaged in a musical performance is in fact a corpse.

As a film about espionage, *Secret Agent* conforms to its genre through its invoking of a paranoia about real and false identities. None of the characters are operating in the world under their real names, except for Caypor, whose truthfulness about himself results in his murder. The Ashendens' marriage is a front, Marvin is only pretending not to speak German, and the General, a.k.a. the "hairless Mexican" is neither a general, Mexican, or without hair.

As the film progresses, the appearance of being real begins to impact upon and shape what is actually real. Caypor's recognition of the button on the casino table as *appearing* to belong to his jacket sets off a chain of events in which he suffers the fate of the *real* owner of the button. Similarly, the Ashendens' appearance of being a married couple in love morphs into their falling in love for real. Finally,

Elsa's authentic affection for Marvin leads her to follow him on his journey to Constantinople out of a genuine desire for his company following her heartbreak over Ashenden. Marvin, however, mistakes this real intent for an apparent ploy to foil his plans and his suspicion leads to the fight to the death with Ashenden and the General. Meanwhile, Ashenden and the General similarly misinterpret Elsa's decision to leave with Marvin as an act of espionage as opposed to the impulsive decision that it in fact is. In short, throughout *Secret Agent* what is real and what merely appears to be real are not just confused for one another but the confusion between them actually begins to shape the reality of the fictional world itself.

Moral conflict The messy business of espionage produces multiple moral conflicts for the characters of *Secret Agent*. Integral to this conflict is the distinction between normative morality and the state of exception to such moral codes that war provides. Ostensibly, the killing of Caypor is justified by the necessity of war. However, as Ashenden remarks to Elsa, the actions of himself and the General boil down to "murder, simple murder." In Ashenden's case, there is the added layer of the extent of his direct involvement in the murder. Since it was in fact the General who pushed Caypor off the cliff, while Ashenden watched through a telescope, his degree of culpability is not as clear as the General's. Elsa puts this point to Ashenden, but the latter replies: "long range assassins. . . that doesn't make it any better, does it?" As with so many Hitchcock thrillers, to be an observer is to be implicated in what is observed.

This moral conflict is of course intensified by the revelation that Caypor was not in fact an enemy agent but simply an innocent man. While this revelation is the catalyst for Ashenden's decision to resign from his espionage duties, as soon as the opportunity arrives to pursue the real enemy agent, he takes it. Thus, clearly there is, ultimately, a distinction to be made in Ashenden's world between "murder, simple murder" and the "murder" committed in the name of a war effort. Indeed, Ashenden makes this point to Elsa as she confronts him about his intention to kill Marvin: as he puts it, it is "his [Marvin's] life against the life of thousands" since Marvin's death would potentially annul the Germans' plans to escalate the war. Nevertheless, Elsa refuses to allow him to carry out the execution. As it happens, the decision is made for Ashenden—Marvin is killed by the train wreck brought on by the British airstrike. That the film ends with a more obviously war-like form of killing, and that this reduces the moral complexity of Marvin's death, only further emphasizes for the viewer that espionage, since it is not a direct part of the war effort but rather an indirect one, is an inherently morally murky world—and thus perfect subject matter for the generating of dramatic tension.

Love and Desire *Secret Agent's* interest in deception, betrayal, and moral ambiguity does not preclude it from being interested in their opposites, namely, the more "authentic" love and desire. It is no coincidence that the Ashendens' transition from a fake marriage to a genuine loving relationship coincides with their moral crisis over their roles as spies. Their love and desire for one another is threatened, ultimately, by their commitment and loyalty to a larger cause—the war effort. These two areas of competing loyalty are constantly in conflict. This is nowhere more evident than in Elsa's abrupt decision to attach herself to Marvin as a result of her heartbreak over Ashenden's perceived betrayal of their romantic intentions. Elsa, in giving in to these feelings of love for Ashenden, nearly compromises a mission that is vital to the national interest, for which she has presumably sworn to work. *Secret Agent* is thus both a spy tale and a love story at one and the same time, and these competing interests provide the narrative's central conflict.