

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Les Diaboliques*** 1955

Henri-Georges Clouzot. 1907-1977

### STORY

The setting is a boy's boarding school in the suburbs of Paris; the headmaster, Michel, is cruel and insensitive toward the youngsters, indeed seems to delight in torturing them. His generally sadistic perspective starts, in fact, with his wife-- who is a rather timid seeming emigree from Venezuela--and extends readily to his mistress, who is a buxom, square jawed teacher in the school, and as it happens a close friend and ally of his wife. So close are the two women, that one suspects, from the outset, a homoerotic relationship. One suspects. Or is the mutual hatred for Michel, as it is felt by both women, sufficient to account for their closeness?

**Drivers.** It is Nicole, Michel Delassalle's mistress, who conceives a plan to break the stranglehold psychology Michel exercises. In order to carry out her plan, Nicole needs, and eventually wins, the cooperation of Christina, Delassalle's wife. Christina agrees to lure Delassalle to Nicole's apartment, in the city of Niort, two hundred kilometers distant from Paris; the pressure, which lures Michel, is Christina's threat to demand a divorce from Michel; at this rendez-vous, this divorce threat will be aired. Upon the arrival of Michel, at the dangerous meeting place, he finds a tempting bottle of liqueur—actually a liqueur laced with a powerful sedative—waiting for him on the sitting room table. The two women drag the drugged Michel to the bathroom, drown him in the bathtub, and transport the body back to the school in Paris. They toss the body into the unused swimming pool outside the main building of the school. Their thought is that when Michel's corpse floats to the surface it will be taken to be the victim of an accident. However, when the pool is drained no body emerges.

**Confusion.** Nicole sees in the newspaper that the corpse of the missing Michel has been found, but when Christine—Michel's wife—goes to the morgue she discovers that the corpse is not Michel. While Christine is at the morgue she meets a retired policeman, who involves himself in the case, interested in the puzzle uncovered by Christine at the morgue. This intervention opens up the gradual unravelling of the mystery of the missing Michel.

**Return.** When Christina and Alfred Fichet, the investigative detective, arrive at the school, one of the schoolboys is in process of being punished for breaking a window with his slingshot; to the surprise of the returnees, the boy claims that it is Michel who is punishing him! Nicole is terrified by this suggestion, and for a moment, against logic, believes that Michel must not be dead. This hallucinatory suspicion alerts us to the psychodrama which is raging in Christina's mind; the deep haunting which is eventually fatal to her. A school photo is soon published, in which a figure suspiciously resembling Michel appears: now Nicole is worried.

**Terror.** In great fear and confusion, Christina tells Alfred the whole story of the murder of Michel. That night she hears noises outside her window, goes out to investigate, and has the terrified sense that she is being pursued. Running back to her room, she finds Michel's corpse submerged in the filled bathtub, but rising up out of the water, as she stands watching. Horrified, she has a heart attack and dies.

**Meaning.** We learn that Nicole and Michel have set up this whole scenario, from the original 'drugging' on, as a way of getting rid of Christina. The detective hears the two plotters rejoicing, at the success of their scheme, and arrests them with the news of the prison terms they will be facing. A final anti-spoiler warning screen asks the audience not to reveal the conclusion of the plot.

## THEMES

**Guilt** Christina is the most guilt-prone figure in the film. Deeply Catholic, anxious for the fate of her immortal soul, she has only reluctantly been drawn into the scheme to 'murder' Michel. (It is of course Nicole who should feel guilty, though she does not.) Haunted by insecurity and guilt, Christina is a natural to die of the terror of seeing the corpse of Michel in her own bathtub.

**Sadism** The launching pad for the film's grim turns and twists is the cruelty of Michel toward the boys in his school; in fact toward his own wife, whom he seems to delight in torturing. He has no hesitation to shock his wife to death, with his corpse like return to her in her own bathtub.

**Sexuality.** There is a dark thread of cruel sexuality running through the film. The main theme involves the plot of Nicole and Michel, to get rid of Christina, in other words to destroy Christina's marriage. At the same time there appears to be a sexual bonding between Christina and Nicole, who love one another through their hatred of Michel.

**Guile.** Nicole and Michel are all about murdering Christina in the most inconspicuous fashion. That is why they devise the plot to scare Christina to death, by presenting her once again with the 'corpse' of Michel.

## CHARACTERS

**Nicole** is the hidden confidante of Michel, the headmaster of the boys' school; she is also a teacher in the school. She enters the plot through her collaboration with Christina, the wife of Michel, to drown Michel. It is not until the end of the film, and the death of Christina, that we see Nicole has been all along plotting with Michel against Christina.

**Christina** is the Venezuelan emigre wife of Michel, the original plotter, with Nicole, to get rid of Michel, and in the end victim of a fatal heart attack provoked by seeing the 'corpse' of Michel returned from the dead. She is also a teacher in the school.

**Michel** is the sadistic headmaster of the school. He is known for his harsh punishments of the students, and for his underhanded plot, together with Nicole, to get rid of his wife, Christina.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### NICOLE

**Character.** The main character is Nicole, the tall powerful mistress of Michel; she is a teacher in the school, a perhaps romantically inclined buddy to Christina, and in the end a brutal plotter of the death of Christina. Her driving fear, once her murder plot has been hatched, is that the true identity, of the body dumped in the swimming pool, will be revealed, as well as her own complicity in the fake murder of Michel.

**Parallels.** Lady Macbeth, driving her husband to the murder of the king comes to mind, as we see Nicole's plan, to get rid of her rival, Christina, unfold. Yet while Lady Macbeth is left, at the end, with an irremovable stain of sin on her hands, Nicole reaches film's end in the midst of a celebration, with her lover Michel, over the death of Christina. In the Biblical Book of *Mark*, in the Christian New Testament, Salome, the daughter of cruel king Herod and Herodias, asks for, and receives, the head of John the Baptist on a platter—a head which she hands over to her mother. In the literature of our time no fiction exceeds Francois Mauriac's *The Nest of Vipers* (1932) for its portrayal of evil and vengeance—and in the end conversion to a bitter theism.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Romantic.** Nicole seems drawn to Christina, the wife of Michel, from the outset. As the two women whisper together, in the schoolyard, we have a clear intuition that they are close buddies, perhaps lovers; united, in any case, in their intention to get rid of Michel.

**Conspiratorial.** It is Nicole's plan, to drown Michel, which drives the plot. Thanks to Nicole, Christina is talked into inviting Michel to Niort, on the pretext that she wants to get a divorce from him. Nicole is conspiring with Michel, all this time, to arrange the death of his wife, Christina.

**Executive.** It is Nicole who, in Niort, plans and executes the 'fake' murder of Michel. Christina remains reluctant, but Nicole is able and willing to lug Michel's body into the bathroom, and then back to the school in Paris.

**Celebratory.** After the death of Christina, who has a heart attack after viewing the 'corpse' of Michel, Michel and Nicole begin to celebrate their success in getting rid of Christina. The celebration is short lived, of course, for the detective interrupts their festivities with a brief discussion of the length of time the two plotters will be spending behind bars.

### **Discussion questions**

Is *Les Diaboliques* a horror/thriller pure and simple, or is it primarily a tale of guilt, in which the hyper sensitive Christina is haunted to her death, and Nicole becomes the only truly diabolical figure? Has Michel a human interior, which enables him truly to be evil?

How does the horror of Clouzot compare to that evoked by Alfred Hitchcock, in *Psycho*? Can you see how the Catholic tint of Clouzot's mind differentiates him from the secularism of Hitchcock?