

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI (1947)

Orson Welles

OVERVIEW

Auteur Orson Welles is one of the most important and influential filmmakers in American film history. After making a name for himself in theatre and radio, Welles signed with the RKO Pictures to write and direct two motion pictures, a deal that was unprecedented at the time in terms of the creative control Welles enjoyed. His directorial debut, *Citizen Kane*, would go on to become arguably the greatest film ever made thanks to its innovative techniques and unconventional narrative style. He quickly became a household name releasing a total of twelve movies that include critically-acclaimed films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). He won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Citizen Kane* with Herman J. Mankiewicz and *Othello* (1951) won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. Orson Welles died in 1985.

Film *The Lady from Shanghai* is a murder mystery film narrated by Michael O'Hara, an unkempt and unemployed seaman whose heroic act to save a rich woman from getting killed earns him a job. It is, however, only the beginning of his tragic and complicated story. What follows is an intriguing chain of events that involve back-stabbing, scheming, betrayal and multiple murders. Dubbed as one of "the weirdest great movie ever made," *The Lady from Shanghai* was a disaster at the box office when it was first released. Contemporary reviewers criticised its convoluted plot, bizarre scenes, and unconventional storytelling, the very features that have, in time, elevated the status of Welles' fourth feature. In 2018, it was selected for preservation in the US National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Background The movie is an adaptation of the novel *If I Die Before I Wake* [1938] by Sherwood King. At the time, Orson Welles was directing his musical stage adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* and needed funds. He asked Columbia Pictures president Harry Cohn for \$55,000. In return, he made *The Lady from Shanghai* for him at no extra fee. Production history of the movie is eerily similar to those films Welles ceded his creative control to the studio: long shots deemed spurious and ultimately cut by the producer; multiple re-shootings ordered by the producer that mutilated director's vision; and the original cut being destroyed and lost in time.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

One unique aspect of the film is that it is a re-telling of the events from the first-person point of view. Since the story is filtered through O'Hara, 1) we are never sure if the narrator is reliable, 2) we already know that the protagonist will survive, and 3) we constantly ask how he could narrate those moments in which he was not physically present? This back and forth between the voice-over and the action proper allows past and present to be interwoven in a way that we cannot separate fact from fancy. This element of the movie is also amplified by the famous hall of mirrors scene, a perfect culmination of the film's core tenets: people hiding behind façades, blurred lines between characters and personas, and the muddled investigation of what is real.



Foreshadowing: During the canoo ride, Elsa is at ease around a venomous snake while George is terrified of the alligator



At the aquarium: In the foreground, the plot is woven while the background provides the subtext of predator and its prey

Sea creatures in service of the story's allegorical power



Chinatown as the setting for movie's final act



Funhouse mirrors that reveal and conceal simultaneously

MAIN CHARACTERS

Elsa "Rosalie" Bannister She is the pretty blonde wife of a world-famous criminal lawyer and is trying to run off with Michael O'Hara.

Michael O'Hara After saving Elsa from getting killed, O'Hara is hired by Elsa's rich husband and falls

in love with Elsa.

Arthur Bannister A crippled, rich old man, he is also the best criminal lawyer and married to Elsa.

George Grisby He is Arthur Bannister's partner and joins the three on a boat journey to carry out a sinister plan.

Sidney Broome He appears to be the steward but is later revealed to be a detective hired by Arthur Bannister.

"Goldie" Goldfish He is Michael's sailor friend, who gets hired on the same boat and looks after his friend.

SYNOPSIS

Michael "Mike" O'Hara meets Elsa Bannister while the latter is on a joy ride around Central Park. After Mike saves Elsa from getting killed by a group of thugs, Elsa's rich lawyer husband, Arthur Bannister, offers him a job on his yacht. On the sea voyage, Elsa and Mike fall in love while Arthur's partner, George Grisby, follows them closely. George learns that Mike has killed someone before and offers him \$5,000 to pretend to kill him (George) so that he can fake his own death and collect insurance money. Mike accepts the offer, hoping that he and Elsa can run off. The plan is put in action; however, George is found truly dead and Mike gets arrested. Arthur becomes Mike's lawyer. During the trial, Mike's relationship with Elsa is revealed. Before the jury's decision is heard, Mike attempts suicide by swallowing pills. In the ensuing chaos, he manages to sneak out of the courthouse and ends up in Chinatown. Elsa begs him to take her away. Mike finds Elsa's gun and realizes that it was Elsa who killed George. Arthur corners them in the hall of mirrors. A shoot-out begins, killing both Arthur and Elsa. Mike walks out of the funhouse and towards the sea, hoping to forget Elsa.

SCENES

Wife Mike and Elsa meet during Elsa's evening ride in Central Park. He becomes infatuated with her but is disappointed to learn she is married. When Elsa is attacked by a couple of hoodlums, Mike saves her from getting killed. She offers him a job on her husband's boat, but he refuses.



Husband Mike and his other sailor friends are waiting to be employed. A crippled man asks for Mike. He is Arthur Bannister, Elsa's husband. He takes Mike and his friends out for a drink. Mike refuses his job offer. When Arthur passes out, Mike and his friends carry him over to his yacht. Elsa begs him to accept the job. Mike finally relents.



Law Partner A man with binoculars spies on Elsa while she is sunbathing. He is George Grisby, Arthur's law partner. He asks Mike if he has really murdered someone because he is interested in murders. Their conversation is interrupted by Elsa's calling for Mike. George, before leaving, insinuates that Elsa will soon ask Mike to go swimming together.



Seduction Elsa returns to the boat and asks for a cigarette. Mike is not happy about a rich woman playing a game with him. Elsa attempts to kiss him, but Mike slaps her. When they eventually do kiss each other, George sees them and lets them know. Elsa tells Mike that George now knows about the two of them.



Money George joins them on the boat and tells Arthur that Mike is considering quitting. Arthur belittles Mike's wish to be independent, arguing that money is what they all have in common. Mike goes below deck while Elsa sings a love song. The maid, Bessie, tells Mike that she is working for Arthur just because someone must protect that poor child, meaning Elsa.



Love Another day, Elsa and Mike discuss love while Elsa steers the boat. Mike has decided to stay. She quotes a Chinese proverb about love being short-lived and about humans following their original nature. Their merry chat is interrupted by Arthur.



Picnic Arthur suggests they go out on a picnic when they land. The steward, Broome, is revealed to be a detective, informing Arthur about the potential plot to kill him. Arthur doesn't seem to care. Elsa tells Mike about Broome's real identity while George watches them through his binoculars.



Sharks George, Arthur and Elsa sit around, drinking. Arthur tells Elsa that Mike may have fallen for her. When Mike joins them, Arthur insinuates that he married Elsa because he may know something incriminating about her. Mike tells them a parable about sharks eating themselves, a clear dig at the three of them. Arthur mocks George, saying that he would have been flattered by being called a shark if he were a good lawyer.



Proposal George offers Mike \$5,000 to pretend to kill him, so that he can fake his own death and collect insurance money. Mike tells Elsa that they should run off together. He believes \$5,000 would get them started. George repeats his offer and Mike finally relents. George has Mike sign a letter of confession and gives him the first half of the murder money. Else is suspicious of George's motives. She advises Mike not to keep him out of his sight from now on.



Murders George is confronted by Broome, who knows about the fake murder plan. George shoots him and hides the gun in Mike's car. Elsa finds Broome bleeding to death. He warns her that Arthur is going to get killed. After Mike does what George tells him to do based on their plan, he calls Bannister's house. Broome answers the phone and tells him that he was being framed by George. Mike immediately runs off to the office to find Arthur alive and George truly dead. The police take Mike into custody.



Court Elsa tries to convince Mike to accept Arthur as his lawyer. During the trial, the district attorney puts Elsa on the witness stand and uncovers her illicit relationship with Mike. After a long intermission, the jury returns to announce their decision. Mike attempts suicide by swallowing Arthur's pills. Chaos ensues. Mike escapes from the courthouse and hides in Chinatown.



The Real Killer Elsa finds Mike at the opera house in Chinatown. While they discuss what they will do next, Mike notices Elsa's gun and surmises that it was she who killed George. Feeling dizzy because of the pills he took, Mike passes out at the opera house. A group of Chinese men who work for Elsa carry Mike to the amusement park, where Arthur joins them in a house of mirrors. After a shoot-out, both Elsa and Arthur die. Mike leaves the building and walks towards the sea..



CHARACTERS

Elsa "Rosalie" Bannister She plays the quintessential *femme fatale* character who is manipulative, mysterious, intelligent and ruthless in order to get what she wants. It is difficult to decode her motives at first because she is so very good at hiding behind her façade, through which she runs her elaborate plan masterfully.

Controlling The moment she learns that Mike has killed someone in the past, she picks him as the fall guy in her plan. She exploits his infatuation with her by pretending to be a damsel in distress, needing to be rescued, so that he will become her knight. Once he is on the boat, she starts playing the fake romance to keep him on the hook and makes sure that not only they are seen, but that Mike *knows* that they are seen. After their first kiss is witnessed by Grisby—probably arranged by Elsa—she immediately lets Mike know that “now he knows about us.” Even Bessie tells Mike that she has to stay only because “[t]hat poor little child he married. Somebody's got to take care of her.” We can also infer that she told George about Mike's previous murder even though George says he learned it from Mr. Bannister. By extrapolation and relying on what Broome said before he was killed—“Nobody else seems to guess you're sweet on her” —we can safely assume that Elsa had been manipulating George as well with the same promise of love and lust.

Mysterious We don't know much about Elsa. Considering that this is a story told from Mike's perspective, it is understandable that she appears mysterious and enigmatic because that's how she hides: in plain sight. She claims to be from Zhifu, China, but we don't much about her background. She can speak Chinese and seems to have a connection with Chinese underworld in San Francisco, which creates more questions than answers. During their picnic, Arthur insinuates that he was able to marry a woman like Elsa only because he had something incriminating on Elsa. What that is we don't know. The fact that she sets out to kill Arthur gives us a clue to her mindset, albeit a small one: there is something in her past, probably in connection with her life in China, that Arthur holds against her. She does not want it to be unearthed. Arthur's letter to the DA that “tells all about you, Lover...” confirms the dark past of this character.

Michael O'Hara He is an adventurous and simple-minded sailor who has been to many countries and met numerous people. He's also a hopeless romantic, a gullible fool and a small fish trying to fit in among the bickering sharks. He enters the lives of these rich, troubled, back-stabbing people as a fall guy and watches them fall one by one with him, emerging as the only surviving soul. He might be a fool, but in the end, he proves to be resilient and tough.

Gullible For a cunning, intelligent and attractive *femme fatale* like Elsa, Mike is an easy target. He is a man of desire, so she immediately turns herself into an object of his desire. Lust makes Mike vulnerable and open to suggestion. As soon as he enters Elsa's orbit, his trajectory is on a downward spiral. Under the spell of promised love and flesh, his only option is to do her bidding. At no point in film can Mike see past his desire, which renders him as the perfect fall guy. Among the sharks, he is the natural prey. And he admits it both at the beginning ("When I start out to make a fool of myself, there's very little can stop me") and at the end ("I'd be innocent officially. But that's a big word, innocent. Stupid is more like it").

Resilient While he is gullible and susceptible, his saving grace is that he is at least aware of his resilient nature, which turns out to be his main source of strength. When he realizes that he's been used as a pawn in Elsa's elaborate plan, he turns his passivity into a weapon. He pretends to attempt suicide and manages to escape by hiding among the members of another jury. At the opera house in Chinatown, he hugs Elsa only to look for the gun that killed George. His confronting Elsa is his culminating moment of victory that reveals his determination. He has managed to get to the bottom of this plot, and this will be his 'get out of jail free card'—literally. Those people might be dangerous sharks in search of prey, but their evil nature ultimately brings about their end. Mike's "innocent" and "foolish" nature, however, ensures his survival because he stays true.

Arthur Bannister He is the most famous criminal lawyer of the country. Rich, crippled, and old, Arthur is also married to an extremely beautiful woman who is much younger than he. We get the impression that he carries around secrets about his wife, his work and his life. We don't know about them, but we can see the impact they have had on his life through his demeanor.

Tortured Though rich and incredibly successful, Arthur is not a soul at peace. His constant drinking to the point of passing out points to a deep-seated disquiet. He is indeed a tortured man, suspicious of everyone around him, including his wife and his partner. In a way, he wants *out*, but he is so deep in that his survival depends on the survival of others, especially his wife. When his detective tells him about the plot to kill him, he doesn't seem to be bothered. It's almost like an opportunity of escape for him. He clearly knows something incriminating about her. Whatever it is, he is aware that it will also bring about the end for him. The secret both makes and unmakes the couple. "Of course, killing you is killing myself," Arthur says in the famous hall of mirrors scene. "It's the same thing."

Powerful Power is what makes Arthur Bannister tick. It's his ability to shape not only his life, but the lives of people around him through the use of his fortune, status, and information. He has never lost a case. His marriage is based on blackmail. He mocks and bullies his partner, George, which probably forces the latter to join forces with Elsa in a plot to kill him. Like most dominant men, his power originates from his weakness. He is insecure about the class his mother, and by extension he, was born into. He can't change that, but he can hurt the man who kept him out of his club due to his mother being "a Manchester Greek." That is power for Arthur. Power gives him the right and agency to erase the past and repackage himself with an upper-class façade as well as to exploit the past so he can carry around a trophy wife who bestows upon him that upper-class status.

George Grisby Even though he is Arthur's partner, theirs is a hierarchal relationship where George is constantly mocked, insulted and gaslighted. This probably contributes to his paranoia and restlessness. He chooses to team up with Elsa to kill Arthur so that he can be alone on an island and find some peace. He is a schemer, but not of the superior kind.

Schemer The image that introduces the character George Grisby is that of him peeping through binoculars. Another scene shows Grisby killing Broome in the yard. Again, Mike is not there to witness this, but he surmises it based on what he knows about George. And this is very indicative of the way George's character is developed. What we know about him is always that image of him, either behind

binoculars, hiding somewhere, watching everyone's move. George always ends up being the one who "happens to be there" to witness Elsa and Mike kissing, or Elsa and Mike discussing their plans. He's been made into a schemer by Elsa and he plays his part perfectly. He's not the mastermind Elsa is: he's the enforcer. He's a useful idiot Elsa utilizes to make her schemes work. Mike's memory of George as a "voyeur" confirms this for us as well: George is always in the act of scheming. That's who he is. Nothing he says can be trusted. There is always another rationale or an ulterior motive behind every one of his moves.

Paranoid Immediately after WWII, George seems to be disquieted by the potential annihilation created by another atomic bomb. He is operating under the impression that the world is going to end in a nuclear war, and he wants to be as far away from the US as possible. "I don't want to be within 1,000 miles of that city or any other city when they start dropping those bombs," he tells Mike. His paranoia is so strong that he accepts the role of Elsa's accomplice to kill Arthur. "It's just got to come," he says of the world's end. It's difficult to ascertain if what he's saying is part of the scheme, but the way Glenn Anders plays the character in an over-the-top frenzied manner gives the sense that George is almost paralyzed by fear of nuclear destruction.

Sidney Broome Like most characters in the movie, Broome, too, hides behind a façade: he is a detective pretending to be the boat's steward. He spies on everyone who is not Arthur and gathers information however he can. He's so resourceful that he ends up everywhere he should be. And once he collects information on anyone, he knows how to get the best return for himself.

Resourceful He is the only party who knows about all the plots and schemes other than the plotters and schemers themselves. We don't know if he's employing his own minions to tail people, but it seems like he intuitively knows where he is supposed to be. He knows about the plot to kill Arthur, which means he must have spied on Elsa and George; he knows about the fake murder plot, which means he managed to follow George and Mike without being seen; he also materializes almost out of thin air in any scene between Mike and Elsa. Mike notices this about Broome at the very beginning. "I saw you last night at the garage, it was," he tells Broome who replies: "Somebody else, Danny-boy, not me." He's the perfect spy for Arthur.

Opportunist When he learns about the plot to kill Arthur, Broome says: "We've worked a lot of cases together. I'll be sorry if we make this the last." We get the impression that he's sorry because he cares for Arthur, but the truth is that he'll lose a great source of income once Arthur dies. While information means power for Arthur, it means money for Broome. And money means Arthur. "When you hear what I got for you, you'll say you bought it cheap," Broome says before revealing the plot. Information can be bought and sold. As such, it doesn't really matter where the money comes from. As soon as he figures out that George likes Elsa, he considers that as another valuable information to sell. "That ought to be worth extra, but I'll throw it in for the same price," Broome tells George, insinuating that Arthur would like to pay for it. George is not dumb about whom he is talking to: "What are you selling?" he asks immediately. "I can shut up, that's what I'm selling," Broome answers. Broome is not a detective, per se. He's an opportunist entrepreneur operating in information business, and he sells what he knows to the highest bidder.

THEMES

1. **Romantic love** The movie's take on romantic love is as cynical as it is circular, perfectly crystallized in the Chinese proverb Elsa quotes: "It is difficult for love to last long. Therefore, one who loves passionately is cured of love in the end." This fatalistic nature of love is in line with the movie's circular narrative: "One who follows his nature keeps his original nature," Mike says after he learns about Elsa's true identity. Nobody changes because everybody already *is*. Love is only a bi-product of human nature, which is the real engine behind people's schemes and plans. Love is a nuisance for Arthur, but an efficient tool for Elsa and perhaps a fatal mistake for the other men. Whoever is in love in the movie is doomed: Arthur's hopeless connection to Elsa means that killing her will mean killing himself as well. Mike is so foolishly full of lust that he cannot see past his desire; George, too, fancies Elsa and perhaps hopes to run off with her. *The Lady from Shanghai* represents the *femme fatale* who controls men with the promise of lust that will never be satisfied.

2. **Class** Class plays an intriguing role in the film. On the surface, Arthur and Elsa represent the cold upper-class, while Mike is the down-to-earth member of middle-class. Mike's characterization

of them as “sharks eating at themselves” conforms to the image of the rich as predators and the poor as their prey. Welles’ classism is subtler and more sophisticated than the Rich-Poor binary opposition as we learn that Arthur actually comes from a low socio-economic background. “The great Bachrach, who kept me out of his club, because my mother was a Manchester Greek,” Arthur says. His vertical migration through class lines represents an uncomfortable truth: His money keeps him there, not his blood or status. For him, money has become the measure of life. The Rich use money, but the Poor need it. And Arthur needs money to hold onto his power. As he boasts about getting Bachrach on perjury, he says: “He died bankrupt. And here I am.” As he talks about his maid, Bessy, he equates her happiness with her salary. In a way, Arthur has bought his way into the upper-class and he will stay there so long as he is rich. Elsa is not immune to this, either. We are not told about her background, but she admits she’d be penniless if Arthur divorced him. The threat of losing money, hence her hard-earned status in society, is enough reason to kill Arthur. In a rather twisted irony, all these powerful, rich, upper-class individuals die, while only the poor member of middle-class survives.

3. Orientalism Played by a blonde Rita Hayworth, Elsa’s identity as a Chinese woman is complicated. It is similar to the construction of Arthur’s upper-class status: In their core, they are not what they pretend to be. Elsa is not Chinese, and Arthur does not come from an upper-class background, but they choose to wrap themselves in these cloaks for protection and influence. The reason Welles may have chosen to associate Elsa with an Asian identity is a more complicated question. There is a deep literature of Western fascination with the exotic East, which manifests itself in movies of this ilk as either sexual threat from Asian men or sexual fascination with Asian women. In Elsa’s case, however, the so-called sexual threat is inverted. Instead of being the target of sexually devious Asian men, Elsa becomes the sexual threat who lures a white man into her trap as a white woman with an Asian heritage. The stereotypical expectations are, thus, subverted in the eyes of the film viewer. Yes, she’s the *femme fatale*, but an orientalised version of it. As the scholar and poet Michael Davidson argues, Elsa’s layered identity is still the product of Western fear *vis-à-vis* “yellow threat” as “Caucasian woman is ruined not by villainous Asians but by associating *with* them.”

4. Justice The courtroom scene plays out like a caricaturized version of a trial bordering on self-parody. The “trial by ambush” practice, which is rarely if ever seen in real-life cases, is stretched to its almost absolute limit in order to make the process absurd. Nothing that happens in that courtroom resembles a proper trial. The defense attorney on the witness stand cross-examining himself looks like something out of a Groucho Marx routine than a criminal trial. And all this is relevant and functional considering the movie’s intention. In Welles’ world, justice for the little man will never come out of a courtroom as the law and justice system are stacked against people like Mike. As the fall guy, he has been played, manipulated and controlled by everyone. His place in the defendant chair has been engineered by the sharks who will never let him off the hook because that’s not in the nature of a predator—hence the flaw in the justice system: That it does not always protect the innocent. Justice is found outside the courthouse. Through a rather cheeky closure, the movie insists that it is actually found in the funhouse.

5. Sea as allegory The sea is an interesting context for the movie as it provides many allegories through sea creatures. Mike uses sharks as a metaphor to describe the predatory and self-consuming nature of upper-class and rich people. As they sail through a small river full of snakes, crocodiles, and other predatory animals, the camera shows the reaction of every character: Elsa is at ease, Mike is uncomfortable, and George is scared. These venomous and apex predators symbolize the world Mike has entered. The scene between Mike and Elsa at the aquarium perfectly highlights the inevitable connection between them and their aquatic counterparts: while we watch the predator and her prey discuss the murder plot in the foreground, the sea predators and their prey swim in the background in a symbolic juxtaposition. The movie strengthens the metaphor by beginning and ending with images of the sea. It is not necessarily a peaceful or happy ending, though. Mike is seen walking towards the sea, but is he returning to a site of peace or is he returning to a place where there is always a predator lurking in the depths?

6. Intrigue As a narrative tool, the voice-over signals to us that the story we are about to watch has already ended and that characters have experienced the consequences of their actions. On one level, it takes the “fun” out of watching a story unfold as we know the narrator, Mike, has survived. On another level, though, this choice turns this *whodunit* story into a *whydunit*, which creates intrigue and suspense. The movie begins with Mike announcing that “If [he]’d known where it would end, [he]’d have never let anything start,” an ominous sign of what is to come: fake murder plot, real murders, plot twists and four mysterious characters whose stories are never fully revealed. The element of

suspense as well as mystery and intrigue are baked into the story thanks to the use of first-person, retrospective narration. We are invited on a journey of exploration. Part of the appeal is that, since we can only know what Mike knows, we may never learn the truth. The famous hall of mirrors scene symbolizes not only the many identities of these flawed characters but also the complicated and sophisticated nature of the story, almost impossible to untangle.

7. **Marriage** The movie portrays marriage not as a peaceful and happy institution between two people who love each other, but as a trap that people find themselves boxed inside. In the case of Elsa, she was forced into marriage because she is being blackmailed by Arthur. In the case of George, marriage acts like a prison that he wants to escape by murdering Arthur. Though we later learn that George lies about him being married, the overall point stands: Marriage, in the lives of these crooked people, represents a broken contract between somewhat unwilling participants. It is the antithesis of freedom. Even Arthur, after marrying Elsa by blackmailing her, realizes that he, too, is trapped in it because killing Elsa would mean killing himself as well.

8. **Greed** Mike's parable about sharks reveals the nature of the upper-class, rich people Mike resents. Their true nature that they follow to the bitter end is driven by greed and gluttony. They want more because they have more. Arthur has Elsa followed because she is just like him: She wants more by getting rid of Arthur. Elsa's plot to kill Arthur will ultimately give her the control of Arthur's fortune. It's not enough that she lives in luxury: she wants to own luxury. George agrees to be her accomplice because he wants the insurance money. All these sharks want so much more of everything that they eventually eat themselves.

ⁱ David Kehr, <https://chicagoreader.com/film/the-lady-from-shanghai/>