

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# Vertigo (1958)

Alfred Hitchcock

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## OVERVIEW

*Director* Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) is a household name and perhaps the best-known British filmmaker. With over 50 films to his credit, Hitchcock helped to shape the modern understanding of the thriller genre. His best-known films include *The Birds*, *Psycho*, *The 39 Steps*, and *Dial M for Murder*, all of which have earned accolades, including preservation by the US Film Registry. In 1960, Hitchcock was inducted into the Hollywood Walk of Fame with two stars for his work in both film and television. He was also the first recipient of the BAFTA Academy Fellowship Award.

*Film* Based upon the 1954 novel *D'entre les morts* (*From Among the Dead* or *The Living and The Dead*) by the writing duo known as Boileau-Narcejac. *Vertigo* was shot mostly on location in late 1957. Hitchcock was reported to go through three screenwriters to find a script that satisfied him. Similar issues (along with gallbladder illness) delayed casting, and Vera Mile's pregnancy opened up the role of Madeleine for Kim Novak. Notable locations in the film include San Francisco, Mission San Juan Bautista, Cypress Point, and the Muir Woods in Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

*Background* An interesting bit of trivia about *Vertigo* is the film's iconic bell tower at Mission San Juan Bautista. At the time of filming, the existing steeple had been demolished following a fire. Hitchcock resorted to building his own with matte paintings, scale models, and trick photography, making his tower even larger than the real one. The interior staircase was constructed full size at Paramount Studios. For a film that is often touted as the director's greatest, audiences were of two minds about *Vertigo* when it was first released. It was a slow burn to find acceptance, but by 1982, viewers and critics alike began listing the film among the top ten greatest films ever made. An alternative ending for the film exists and is available on all DVD and Blu-ray releases.

## CINEMATIC NARRATION

*Vertigo* is notable in the world of cinematography for being the first film to utilize dolly zoom, a camera effect that distorts perspective by shifting from a wide to a tight angle while the camera dollies away from the object, or vice versa to achieve an inverse effect. Some have described this choice as an incredibly accurate visual representation of the sensation that accompanies acrophobia. The experimental dream sequence is also notable: combining graphics, animation, and precision-cut film, Hitchcock creates a haunting vision of a nightmare that has stood the test of time.

## SYNOPSIS

John Ferguson is a retired detective, forced from the service after a traumatic incident leaves him with acrophobia and vertigo. His ex-fiancé, Midge, attempts to help him recover psychologically, but his fear is deep-seated. To make ends meet John takes on a private detective gig: John's friend, Gavin Elster, asks him to follow his wife, Madeleine, as she has been acting strange. John takes his job seriously, following Madeleine across San Francisco until she stops at an art museum. Inside, John sees Madeleine looking at a portrait that looks remarkably like her.

Intrigued, John asks Midge to set up a meeting with a local history expert who tells him the story of Carlotta Valdes, a rich woman who committed suicide in the 1800s. John begins to worry after seeing Madeleine visiting Carlotta's grave, and his fears become all too real when he follows her to a rocky point beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. There, Madeleine throws herself into the water, but John is able to save her. The two bond while Madeleine recovers at John's apartment, waiting for her clothes to dry, and the next day, she stops by the apartment once more to deliver a letter of thanks.

Accepting the letter in person, John offers to escort Madeleine for the day. They drive to the redwoods, then to a rugged coast, south of San Francisco, where Madeleine and John embrace before Madeleine describes a nightmare to him. John thinks the building in her dream is Mission San Juan Bautista, Carlotta's childhood home. He drives her there, where Madeleine begins speaking of suicide and rushes up the bell tower steps. Unable to follow because of his fear and vertigo, John is forced to watch as Madeleine's body plummets to the roof below.

After an inquest proves Madeleine's death a suicide, John becomes depressed, further traumatized by the experience. He is sent to a mental hospital, essentially unresponsive to outside stimuli. After treatment, John rejoins the world where he meets a woman that looks just like Madeleine. Obsessed, he tracks her down to her hotel and she introduces herself as Judy Barton. Judy resembles Madeleine because she was paid by Gavin Elster to impersonate her in the elaborate murder scheme, admitting her guilt in a letter to John she never gives him. Judy and John begin seeing each other and things seem to be going well until John notices something: Judy owns one of Madeleine's custom necklaces fabricated to resemble Carlotta's.

John begins demanding that Judy dress and style her hair and makeup like Madeleine's, promising to take her on an expensive and romantic date if she does. Judy reluctantly agrees, but instead of going on a dinner date one evening, John takes Madeleine to the Mission San Juan Bautista and tells her they must re-enact Madeleine's final moments to help him overcome his acrophobia. At the top of the tower, having beaten his fear, John accuses Madeleine of helping Gavin kill his real wife, and Judy confesses, begging his forgiveness. John embraces Judy in the first step towards their reconciliation when a nun emerges from the trap door below. This startles Judy, who jumps back and plummets to her death.

## CHARACTERS

*John "Scottie" Ferguson* – A former lawyer turned detective who quits the force after he develops vertigo  
*Judy Barton / Madeleine Elster* – A woman posing as Gavin Elster's wife to help him cover up a murder  
*Gavin Elster* – John's old friend who uses him as a "made-to-order witness" in his plot to murder his wife  
*Marjorie "Midge" Wood* – John's ex-fiancé, who dutifully cares for him despite his lack of romantic interest

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **John Ferguson**

John is a former police detective suffering from severe acrophobia and vertigo. A former lawyer seeking to become a police chief, he quits the force because of guilt over his role in a fellow officer's death that resulted in vertigo. However, with his keen observational skills and desire for knowledge, John can't keep away from detective work for long.

*Brave* Despite thinking himself cowardly and ill-suited to police work because of his medical conditions, John is incredibly brave in attempting to recover from his phobia and vertigo. There is a pervasive belief that if someone can't do something by themselves, they are weaker for needing assistance. This can't be further from the truth, as asking for help is a form of bravery in and of itself. John is very lucky to have Midge, his loyal ex-fiancé, who seeks to do anything she can to help him recover, catching him when he falls after stepping up a stepladder in an attempt to treat his vertigo. and visiting him at the mental hospital when he falls into despair after Madeleine's death. John's bravery continues after his recovery when he meets Judy and does anything he can to meet her, facing not only rejection but the truth when it is revealed. In an act of almost crazed bravery, he forces Judy to climb the bell tower dressed as Madeleine just like she did on the day of Madeleine's death, confronting the fearful scenario that caused him to be institutionalized. Pushing himself through his fear and vertigo, John eventually makes it to the top where he learns the truth. Despite everything, John commits yet another brave act: forgiving Judy as shown by their passionate kiss and embrace. When Judy is startled by the nun and falls to her death, John commits a final act of bravery, standing at the edge of the tower and looking down, seemingly cured of his phobia.

*Obsessed* In this trait, we see why John made such a good detective. He is incredibly good at getting just close enough to Madeleine to see what she is up to, and when he picks up on a clue, he doesn't let go until he begins to figure things out. His obsession with solving the mystery of Madeleine's strange behavior becomes a deep love for the married woman. This love shatters his psyche after her apparent suicide. Sometime after his recovery in a mental hospital, he begins seeing Madeleine everywhere he had seen her before: At the restaurant, in a crowd, at the art museum. None of these times is it her, just a woman who has blonde hair and a similar style of dress. His obsession rises to new levels when he sees Judy for the first time, following her home to her hotel and forcing a meeting with her. As they begin dating, he tries to transform her into Madeleine, and she grudgingly accepts this, hoping it will make him love her. When he notices that Judy owns one of Madeleine's prized possessions, a necklace made to look like the one in Carlotta's portrait, his obsession reaches a head. He forces Judy to reenact the day of Madeleine's death, confronting both his anger at her manipulation and his fear of heights in the process. This seems to bring him some resolution, as he is willing to accept Judy, even after all the lies.

## **Judy/Madeleine**

We are first introduced to this character as Madeline, Gavin Elster's wife, a delusional woman who believes she is Carlotta Valdes. In reality, she is a paid actress, manipulating John into believing she's suicidal so Gavin can kill his wife and get away with it. As Judy, she tries to rekindle the same love she and John felt while she was posing as Elster's wife.

*Manipulative* While it's not obvious to us at first, Judy is manipulating John by posing as Madeleine. We only learn this well into the film when Judy and John meet and John insists on taking her out on a date. After this moment, Judy begins packing her things before writing a letter admitting her role in Gavin's murder plot. Despite writing this letter, she decides to destroy it and try again with John because she loves him. A love based in deception isn't a solid foundation for a relationship, and we see this when John realizes that Madeleine and Judy are the same person. Judy drops her manipulations while John forces her to reenact their final day together when she was posing as Madeleine, and despite everything, John seems to forgive her. It's too little too late, however, when a nun startles Judy and she falls from the bell tower to her death, a sort of divine punishment for her wretched manipulations and role in killing the real Madeleine.

*Optimistic* We get a glimpse of Judy's optimism when she decides to start anew with John. Instead of confessing to her part in the plot and moving away, she decides to try again with John as Judy. They begin a new whirlwind romance, which suddenly stagnates when John can't get over his obsession with Madeleine. He forces Judy to dress and style herself into Madeleine, and she accepts, hoping it will make him love her more fully. Without thinking, she clues John into her part in Gavin's scheme by putting on Madeleine's prized necklace before their date. Even though John is acting strangely, she doesn't make a fuss. Even when John angrily forces her up the bell tower steps at the Mission, she simply begs for

forgiveness, knowing what she did was wrong. Her optimism proves fruitful, as at the top of the tower, John seems to forgive her.

**Guilt-ridden** We see Judy's guilt in full blossom when John forces his way back into her life after seeing her on the street. To him, she just looks like his dead love, Madeleine; but to her, he is both a threat to her freedom and a reminder of a love she could never have. After their first meeting since Madeleine's murder, Judy begins packing in a panic and sits down to write a letter to leave for him, explaining her part in Gavin's murder plot and apologizing for leading him on. She claims her love is real, and this admission forces her to tear up the note. Despite her guilt, she wants to try anew with John and destroys the letter. Her plan backfires quickly as John's obsession with making her look more like Madeleine makes her unable to ignore her guilt. At first, she tries to please John by accepting his request. However, she gets too deep into the role, forgetting herself and putting on Madeleine's distinct jewel necklace, a grisly keepsake from the murder. Putting two and two together, John confronts Judy about her role in Madeleine's murder and she confesses, her guilt overwhelming her.

## THEMES

**Guilt** Guilt is a somewhat subdued theme in *Vertigo*, yet it drives much of the story. Guilt for his undiagnosed acrophobia leading to the death of a fellow officer is said by a doctor to have given John his vertigo. He hadn't experienced the condition before, but after the accident, it is so debilitating he gives up his job as a detective. We see this same pattern again when John develops a melancholy so severe he has to be hospitalized after Madeleine's death. In a similar fashion, Judy feels great guilt for manipulating John by pretending to be Madeleine for Gavin's scheme. During their time together, she genuinely began falling for John. Her guilt is so great that she almost confesses to John in a letter, but she tears it up instead. She hopes that she can keep up the charade that she never knew him and live a new life with him. Her guilt overcomes her when John forces her to reenact his last day with Madeleine, and she confesses. Despite everything, John and Madeleine kiss, showing that there is some hope for their love, but when the nun appears through the trap door and startles Madeleine, she plummets to her death. While the film ends here and we don't know for certain, John undoubtedly feels some guilt for helping to cause yet another falling death, though this one seems to have cured his acrophobia.

**Investigation** Investigation plays out mostly through the beginning of the story when John is hired by Gavin to follow Madeleine across San Francisco. Her movements are strange, and her actions are even more cryptic. John has to seek the help of a local historian, museum workers, and a hotel owner to figure out the strange history Madeleine is reenacting each day. Through his investigation, he learns the sad tale of Carlotta Valdes and observes that Madeleine is retracing some of Carlotta's final steps in a trance-like state. The investigative theme is eclipsed by the romantic ones after Madeleine's death, that is until John notices that Judy has Madeleine's necklace, which is identical to the one in Carlotta's painting. The retired detective can't ignore this clue to her true identity, taking her back to the Mission San Juan Bautista to force a confession out of her.

**Appearance vs. Reality** This is a major theme of *Vertigo*. Not only do Gavin and Judy manipulate John into being a "made-to-order witness" for the falsified death of the real Madeleine, but vertigo itself is also a discrepancy between perception and reality. John finds himself unable to climb even short stairwells because of the appearance of height to his warped senses. When we first meet Madeleine, she is obsessed with a portrait of a woman who looks very much like her, Carlotta Valdes. While we learn it is a ruse, and that Judy has played the part of Madeleine to trick John, she seems to believe that she is being possessed by the spirit of this long-dead, similar-looking woman. Her acting skill and Gavin's plot make Madeleine's death appear to be a suicide, even after investigation at the inquest. Judy so perfectly appears to be Madeleine in John's eyes that he never doubts the reality of his situation. This comes back to bite her while she is crafting a new romance with John: Not only does she *appear* like Madeleine, but she also owns several of Madeleine's prized possessions, such as her jewel necklace. This is the final straw for John who forces Judy to confess her part in Gavin's murder scheme at the Mission, leading to her untimely death.

**Nostalgia** We see this theme first through Madeleine's obsession with Carlotta Valdes. Not only does she look like the woman in the portrait, she seems to have her memories. Her feigned nostalgia turns deadly when she throws herself into the sea, and then again when she seems to throw herself off the bell tower at the Mission San Juan Bautista. John becomes trapped in his nostalgia for Madeleine after his recovery from his depression, seemingly seeing her everywhere. Unbeknownst to him, he actually does see her when he first sees Judy. Obsessed with meeting someone who looks so much like his dead love, he follows her to her hotel room and forces an interaction which eventually turns into a romance. He believes Judy to be just a stunning lookalike until he notices one key detail: she owns Madeleine's necklace. Nostalgia turns to anger as John drives Judy out to the mission to confront her. Judy tells John of her nostalgia for their time together and tries to apologize for manipulating him, and it seems to work, but tragedy strikes, tearing them apart for the final time.

**Crime** Crime is a central theme of *Vertigo*, although eclipsed by the film's drama and the deception plot revealed toward the film's end. At the story's heart is the discovery of a brutal crime: Gavin has hired John to act not as a private eye but instead as an unwitting lackey in a murder plot. Making John believe that Judy is actually his wife, Gavin takes his real wife up to the bell tower at the mission, where he breaks her neck. When Judy arrives at the top of the tower, Gavin throws the real, already deceased Madeleine to the roof below while Judy screams in fright, making John believe he has just witnessed a suicide. Because of this, the inquest uses John's testimony to find that Madeleine's death was self-inflicted, allowing Gavin to get away with murder as he planned.

**Love** Love is a minor theme in *Vertigo* that is often overshadowed by themes of intrigue and psychology. It is important to John and Madeleine/Judy's relationship, however, as John finds himself smitten by the woman he is supposed to be observing and protecting. After her apparent death, we learn the truth, that Judy was posing as Gavin's wife all along, but her love for John was real. In an attempt to experience a true romance, Judy begins a new relationship with John, hoping that they can love each other without Gavin's plot keeping them apart. John's obsession with Madeleine drives a wedge into their relationship quickly, pushing Judy into deep sorrow at his lack of acceptance for her as an individual. It is love that causes her to make her final mistake: excited about the prospect of John ceasing his obsession with Madeleine after their date that night, Judy puts on Madeleine's unique necklace. She faces John's anger in the bell tower, but despite this, she confesses her true love alongside her guilt. This proves to be enough for John, who kisses her passionately at the film's end, seeming to forgive her.

## SCENES

**Rooftop chase-** Tense music plays while blackness dominates the screen. Suddenly, a man's hand comes into view, grasping at the metal wrung of a ladder before the camera pulls back. We watch as he scampers across a rooftop out of view. A policeman follows him, his gun drawn. He takes several shots while chasing after the criminal. A plainclothes detective follows behind him. One by one, they jump a gap between buildings, but the detective loses his grip on the roof tiles and goes sliding down. He clutches the gutter in desperation while the policeman turns around, trying to pull him up. "Give me your hand!" the policeman cries before his own grip on the steeply sloped roof gives way, and he plummets to the pavement below. Still clinging to the gutter, the detective peers down with a frightened look, seeing several passersby rush into the alley to look at the policeman splayed dead on the ground.

**"Tomorrow will be the day"**- Sometime later, the same detective sits in an apartment, balancing his cane in the palm of his hand. "Ouch!" he cries out when he jerks forward to catch the cane as it falls. "I thought you said 'no more aches or pains'?" the bespectacled blonde behind a drafting board says to him with a wry smile. "It's this darn corset," the detective replies. "It binds." She makes a joke about how unfashionable his medical corset must be, the camera glancing at the brassiere she is drawing on the drafting board. "Well, anyway," the detective says, "tomorrow will be the day," explaining that he can stop wearing the medical corset the next day and asking if other men wear corsets often. The woman asks him what he plans to do after tomorrow, and he says he can't go back to the police force with his acrophobia. The woman says he could work at a desk, but the detective disagrees, making up a bizarre scenario about watching a pencil rolling off his desk triggering his acrophobia.



**Shared history-** Laughing, the woman calls the detective 'Johnny-O,' and asks him what he plans to do about his phobia and his joblessness. "I'm not gonna do anything for a while," John says, calling the woman 'Midge' when she suggests that he take a vacation. He tells her not to be so 'motherly' before asking about the strange brassiere she's sketching. Midge says it was designed by an aircraft engineer on the same principles as the cantilever bridge and John seems impressed before asking about her love life and mentioning they had once been engaged, saying he's still open to the idea. He then mentions Gavin Elster, an old school chum, whom he plans to meet later that day. He invites Midge out for a beer, but she declines, having to finish her work.



**Small steps-** On his way out, John stops mid-step, asking Midge, “What’d you mean there’s no losing it... the acrophobia.” She replies that it would take another emotional shock to cancel it out when John proposes a theory that small steps could lead him to recovery: first a stool, then a chair, then a ladder until he can climb stairs again without getting dizzy. He shows Midge, who is standing on a stool near her drafting table. Midge joins in, fetching the step stool from her kitchen. He seems to be making good progress until he looks out of Midge’s high-rise window and collapses. Midge catches him, holding him protectively while the scene fades out.



**Shipbuilding business-** Deep in the San Francisco dockyards, the camera finds John asking for directions from a worker. Soon thereafter, the camera jumps to the ostentatious office of a shipbuilding company owner. John leans against a wing-back chair, asking, “How did you get in the shipbuilding business, Gavin?” “I married into it,” Gavin replies plainly before discussing the company’s structure and his responsibilities. “The things that spell San Francisco to me are disappearing fast,” Gavin sighs when John asks if he’s glad to be back. They then discuss the incident that left John injured and exposed his phobia, before Gavin makes a bizarre and lengthy request. Worried about his wife, Madeleine, Gavin asks the retired detective to get to the bottom of her strange and possibly paranormal behavior, saying she’s possessed. Even if she isn’t, Gavin wants more information about her day-to-day movements before having her committed to a sanitarium for treatment. While John isn’t convinced that the problem is otherworldly, he eventually accepts the job.



**Tailing Madeleine-** After a short scene where John observes the Elsters at a restaurant and sees Madeleine for the first time, we see John seated in a white Chrysler. He watches as Madeleine exits her apartment and enters her green car before following her on her daily errands. She drives until she reaches an alley, John stopping just behind her. She quickly enters a building and John follows her inside cautiously. It’s the rear entrance to a flower shop, where Madeleine purchases a small bouquet before returning to her car. Sometime later, Madeleine stops outside an old Spanish mission. John follows her inside, finding her staring at an old grave out in the adjoining graveyard. After she leaves, he takes a moment to look at the headstone. It bears the name ‘Carlotta Valdes,’ saying she died in 1857. Following Madeleine once more, John crosses San Francisco until the camera finds her car parked in front of an ornate archway. John crosses the shot and enters the building.



**Art museum-** Inside the art museum, John spots Madeleine seated in front of a portrait, looking at it intently. He walks up behind Madeleine to get a closer look and is shocked to see that the woman in the painting looks just like Madeleine, down to the style of her hair and the bouquet she bought earlier that day. Not wanting to be seen and seeking more information, John flags down a passing docent, who informs him that the portrait is of Carlotta Valdes before handing him a catalog to answer any other questions he may have. Back outside the museum, John waits in his car for Madeleine to appear. He follows her down the road when she hops into her car and drives away.



**McKittrick Hotel-** Madeleine's car finally pulls to a stop in front of a quaint little building with a sign reading "McKittrick Hotel." Madeleine enters quickly, and John hesitates. When he sees her parting blinds upstairs, he decides to go in after her. The woman at the front desk is unhelpful until John flashes his police identification; then she explains that the woman renting the room calls herself 'Carlotta Valdes,' but that she hasn't seen her in a few days. "I just saw her come in five minutes ago," John says, unable to contain his expression of disbelief when the hotel manager points to the room's key sitting on the rack. John convinces her to go up and look at the room. She reports that it's empty and invites John in to look around. John runs up the stairs and enters the little room. Looking out the window, John notices Madeleine's car missing. Sometime later, John pulls to a stop in front of Madeleine's apartment. There, he sees her car sitting out front, the bouquet of flowers sitting on the dashboard.



**An authority on local history-** John enters Midge's apartment. She sits working on some task by the window. "Midge," John asks loudly, "who do you know that's an authority on San Francisco history?" "That's the kind of greeting a girl likes," Midge jokes. John begins pouring himself a drink, asking again who she knows. "Professor Saunders," Midge answers, "over in Berkeley." John says he means someone local who knows the "people you never heard of." She has an answer for that too, recommending Pop Leibel, who owns a nearby bookshop. When John evades her questions about why he wants to know, Midge jumps up and leaves, saying she's going to figure out what he's doing by introducing John to the bookseller post-haste. In Pop Leibel's downtown bookstore, John and Midge speak with the proprietor about Carlotta. "It's not an unusual story," the old historian says, lighting a cigarette before he tells them about Carlotta's younger days working in a cabaret. Leibel tells them about her young marriage to a rich man. Their life had been happy until Carlotta bore the man a child and, like the kings of yore, the man took Carlotta's child and "threw her away."





**“Told you enough”**- Leibel continues, saying Carlotta was sad and through her sadness, she went mad. “And she died,” he concludes. “By her own hand.” Hearing this, John quickly thanks Pop Leibel and leaves, Midge scampering after him. She stops him on the street and demands that he “pay” her. “For what?” John says indignantly. “For bringing you here,” Midge replies. “Come on, tell.” When John refuses to explain what he’s doing, Midge threatens to put him “back in that corset.” “No,” John says dismissively, “I’ve told you enough.” It’s growing dark by the time John’s car pulls to a stop in front of Midge’s apartment. She demands to know what he’s up to one more time, but John refuses to say more. Midge mockingly recants the supernatural explanation behind Gavin’s request to have his wife followed before being offended when John admits that he finds Mrs. Elster attractive and running from the car. John sighs in frustration before looking at Carlotta’s portrait in the museum catalog, his mind’s eye conjuring an image of Madeleine. Later that evening, John meets with Gavin to tell him what he’s found over drinks.

**Attempted suicide**- The following day, John follows Madeleine back to the art museum. Inside, she goes through the same routine of staring at Carlotta’s portrait when she suddenly gets up and walks outside, nearly laying eyes on John. The former detective quickly follows her, taking a long drive down by the bay that ends at Fort Point near the Golden Gate Bridge. Madeleine stops her car and walks to the edge of the bay. John watches her pluck petals from her bouquet and throw them into the water before she suddenly throws herself into the ocean. Dramatic music plays while John dives in after her, dragging Madeleine back to the rocky shore. He places her in the passenger seat of her car, trying to rouse her to no avail.



**Warming up**- Later that night, Madeleine’s car sits outside of John’s apartment building. Inside, John stokes a roaring fire while tender music plays: his concern for Madeleine is obvious. Her clothes dry above the stove in the kitchen while she sleeps in John’s bed. The phone rings, and John enters the bedroom to answer it, startling Madeleine, who rolls over to stare at him. John tells Gavin that everything is alright and promises to call him back before turning his attention to Madeleine who seems confused as to what is going on. He closes the door and allows her to put on a robe before inviting her over to the fire to warm up. Gently, John tells Madeleine what happened to her at Fort Point, and after a few minutes, she seems to start opening up. John is shocked to hear that she believes she's never been inside the art museum, but he almost forgets this when they start a conversation about marriage and living alone.



**Telephone-** John accidentally touches Madeleine's hand while offering to pour her a new cup of coffee when the phone rings. The spark between them is obvious, but John rushes off to answer the telephone. It's Gavin on the other end, worried about Madeleine. John promises to have her home just as soon as her clothes have dried out, explaining the circumstances that occurred at Fort Point. Gavin worries about his wife's suicidal behavior before John puts down the phone to check on Madeleine. A dramatic chord rings out when he realizes she's gone and her clothes are missing. Outside, Madeleine quickly gets into her car and drives away just as Midge pulls up to check in on John. "Well now, Johnny-O," Midge says sadly, "was it a ghost? Was it fun?" She watches John step outside before zooming off down the street.



**"Letter for me?"**- The next morning, John watches Madeleine hop into her car outside her apartment building. As he continues tailing her, he becomes more and more agitated: none of Madeleine's turns seem to be taking her anywhere. After several minutes of driving, she pulls to a stop in front of a familiar-looking building, John's apartment. Acting like he's just coming home after some errands, John intercepts Madeleine after she places something through his letter slot. He opens the door and reads her thank-you note before offering to drive her around for the day. It takes a little persuasion, but Madeleine agrees. John is so excited that he forgets to close his front door at first.



**Redwoods-** Madeleine drives her car down a long stretch of road. The scene fades into the great trunks of the famous California redwoods before finding John and Madeleine among them. They walk up to the large cross-section of one of the felled trees, looking at all the dates highlighted among its numerous rings. As if in a trance, Madeleine picks out a ring marking the signing of the Declaration of Independence, saying, "Somewhere in here, I was born, and there I died. It was only a moment for you. You took no notice." John reacts with concern as she wanders off among the trees. John follows when she doesn't reappear on the other side of the trunk, finding her leaning against the tree. He begins questioning her about when she was born and what makes her "go away." Madeleine struggles, not wanting to talk about her suicide attempt near the Golden Gate Bridge. She eventually runs off, seeking to be alone.



**"The Chinese say"**- On a cliff overlooking the sea, John finds Madeleine sitting on a small old tree. "Why did you run?" She asks him, wondering why he followed her so quickly. "I'm responsible for you now," John replies, romantic music swelling. "You know, the Chinese say that once you've saved a person's life, you're responsible for it forever." Finally, Madeleine opens up about her mental state, comparing her life to a long hallway with a gaping darkness at the end. "And I know that when I walk into the darkness," she concludes, "that I'll die." John asks to know what fragments of memories she can remember, and she says she can remember sitting alone in a room and standing before an open grave, her own grave. "If I could just find the key," John says, "and put it together..." Madeleine is upset at the implication that she is insane, and she rushes away toward the sea. John grabs her and pulls her into an embrace. Madeleine says she's scared and doesn't want to die, begging John to stay with her. "All the time," John says as waves crash behind them. Romantic music swells while they kiss passionately.



**Painting**- Midge stands before a canvas on an easel, hard at work painting something. The city lights shine through the night behind her. Soon, John enters and greets her, saying that he got her message. "Since when do you go around slipping notes under men's doors?" John asks while Midge pours him a drink. "Since I stopped being able to get them on the phone," she quips back, asking where he's been the past few days. "Just wandering," John says evasively. Midge can't get a straight answer out of him and changes the topic to her goals for the evening, saying she hoped John would take her to a movie as thanks for making him dinner. Eventually, John asks what Midge has been doing, and she says she's been painting. She says she was thinking of giving the painting to John and invites him to look at it. Crossing the room, the camera cuts away, panning up the fresh oil painting of Midge as Carlotta Valdes. "That's not funny, Midge," John says before excusing himself and leaving. Midge tugs at her hair, heartbroken, chastising herself for her foolishness as the scene fades out.



**Doorbell**- A figure walks along the fog-soaked streets of San Francisco in the predawn. As the sun rises, we see John sleeping on the couch in his apartment when the doorbell rings, stirring him. After wiping his eyes groggily, he walks to the door and opens it, finding Madeleine on the other side. This surprises him, especially when she tells him, "I wanted to see you and be with you." She then says she had "the dream" again, and John asks if she can remember it. Madeleine tells him about a bell tower in an old Spanish village, describing the structure and the town in detail. John realizes that she's not describing a Spanish village, but a California heritage site, Mission San Juan Bautista. He promises to take her there that afternoon to prove to her that she's not possessed by Carlotta and that she's just remembering things she's seen before. John hopes this will stop her dreams, inviting her back around noon.



**Stables-** John drives Madeleine's car along a long, tree-lined road somewhere south of San Francisco. Eventually, they pull into the drive for the Mission San Juan Bautista. There, among the Spanish arches and expertly preserved gardens, the camera finds the buildings Madeleine mentioned in her dream, settling on the stable where John and Madeleine speak to each other. John begs Madeleine to remember when she's been here before, but she keeps 'flashing back' to Carlotta's time. Making no headway, John becomes desperate, begging Madeleine to try harder to remember before pulling her into a passionate kiss. Madeleine's attention is elsewhere: she keeps looking outside while John tries to kiss her. They say that they love each other, but Madeleine insists that it's too late. After a final kiss, she pushes John away and runs off. John follows, trying to stop her while romantic music swells, but she pushes him away once more, running inside the chapel. John looks up at the bell tower and a dramatic chord rings out. He's realized what Madeleine plans to do, and he rushes after her.



**Bell tower-** Stressful music plays while John runs after Madeleine, shouting her name as he runs up the wooden stairs of the bell tower. Each time he looks down, a fearful chord plays while the ground seems to sink away beneath him. Now clutching the inner wall of the tower, John continues after Madeleine, but his fear keeps him from moving any quicker. Once again, he looks down and his vertigo strikes, keeping him from moving any further up the stairs. Just then, Madeleine enters the top of the bell tower, slamming the trap door shut behind her. Then, a woman screams. John looks out the window to see Madeleine plummet past. When John gathers the courage to look out the window, he sees Madeleine lying face down on the roof tiles below, dead. Soaked with sweat and breathing heavily, John watches two nuns come running to see what's happened. In a panic, he descends the stairs as quickly as he can before running out of the building and away from the scene.

**Inquest-** The camera repeats the same shot from when John and Madeleine first arrived at the mission, but this time a good dozen cars and people line the historic streets. Something is going on in the old hotel. The camera zooms in, and we see policemen and reporters gathered around outside the old building. Inside, a judge speaks, giving those gathered there his final remarks. It is an inquest into Madeleine's death. The judge explains that Mr. Elster hired John in an attempt to protect her before having her institutionalized. After a lot of discussion about where to place the blame, mentioning John's vertigo condition multiple times, it's decided that Madeleine's actions were her own, and her death is ruled a suicide by the jury after mere moments of deliberation. Gavin pulls John aside to apologize to him afterward. He tells John that he's pulling up roots and moving away to Europe, asking if there's anything he can do for John before he leaves. John says nothing, and Gavin leaves. Sometime later, somber music plays while John visits Madeleine's grave.



**Nightmare-** In the dark of the night, the camera looks over San Francisco. It soon finds John tossing and turning in his bed. The scene starts flashing dazzling blue and purple when John looks up at the ceiling and opens his eyes. Above him is Madeleine's bouquet, which bursts into colors and psychedelic shapes. Gavin stands with Madeleine dressed as Carlotta in the hotel outside the mission, the camera zooms in on her distinct necklace while stressful music plays and the scene flashes between normal colors and deep red. John walks through a dark corridor, his eyes set on something behind the camera. Suddenly, he's at Carlotta's grave. He looks down to find an empty hole ready for a coffin. When he looks down, the camera doesn't stop, plunging into a bottomless pit, with John's face in the center of the screen locked in a frightened expression. The tiles of the mission roof appear below him as he falls. As a dramatic chord rings out, John jerks awake in his bed, his face panicked and brow sweaty.



**"Mozart's the boy for you"**- Somewhere in San Francisco, the camera watches several nurses enter a building. Inside, John sits in a room, motionless, while Midge operates a record player. "I just had a long talk with that lady in musical therapy, Johnny," she says, turning to face him, "and she says that Mozart's the boy for you, the broom that sweeps the cobwebs away." John looks up at her, but he doesn't say anything and soon returns to staring across the room with no expression on his face. Midge keeps talking, trying to get some recognition out of him before stooping beside him and pleading for him to try to escape the prison of his mind, much like John did for Madeleine in the stable some days before. A nurse enters and tells Midge that her visiting time is over. Midge crosses to the record player and shuts it off before kissing John and telling him she's there for him. On her way out of the building, Midge stops to talk to the doctor, having an outburst about how ineffective the treatment is before somberly trotting away.



**Seeing Madeleine everywhere-** Months, perhaps more than a year later, the camera finds Madeleine's car outside her apartment. John stands on the street nearby, staring. He sees Madeleine exit the building and rushes over to the car to confront her, but he finds an elderly woman instead who says she bought the car from Gavin earlier that year. Sometime later, John enters the restaurant where he first saw Madeleine. Inside, he sits at the bar as he once did, looking over his shoulder to see Madeleine among the diners. As she walks toward him, John realizes it's a different woman. Back at the art museum, John watches a blonde woman seated in front of the portrait of Carlotta. He approaches her and sees that she too isn't Madeleine.



**Doppelganger-** Sometime later, the camera finds John standing outside the florist where Madeleine bought her bouquets, staring at an identical one in the window. He looks up from the window to see a woman approaching with a group of friends who is the spitting image of Madeleine, though her hair and style of dress are very different. Curious, John tails her to the Empire Hotel, where he sees her open an upstairs window. Entering the building, John makes his way upstairs where he knocks on the woman's door, clutching his hat in his hand nervously. She answers impatiently, and John asks if he could speak to her for a moment. After a minute or so of discussion, she reluctantly lets John into her apartment. She introduces herself as Judy Barton and tells John about her life before showing him her identification to prove she is who she says she is. She realizes that John must be pining after a dead woman who resembles her and becomes more sympathetic. John leaves, but only after asking Judy to dinner. She agrees, asking for an hour to get changed.



**A letter for John-** With John gone, Judy looks mournfully out the window, remembering something. We watch the scene in her mind's eye, John chasing Madeleine up the bell tower, and Madeleine reaching the top. This time, however, we see inside the bell chamber where Gavin stands with real Madeleine already dead in his arms. Gavin throws the dead woman out the nearby arch and clasps his hand threateningly over the false Madeleine's mouth. The scene fades back in. It was Judy who was pretending to be Madeleine this whole time. Judy decides to begin packing, starting to empty her closet when she reveals one of Madeleine's dresses still hanging in her closet. Suddenly, she stops packing and sits to write a letter where she confesses everything to John, saying that her love for him is true and explaining Gavin's scheme. After writing the letter, she stands and tears it up, changing her mind. She's going to try again with John because she loves him and wants to be with him.



**Return to the Empire Hotel-** Judy dines with John at the restaurant from before. She notices when John looks at a woman who dresses like Madeleine and looks down at her plate with a sorrowful expression. Later, John escorts Judy into the hotel and up to her room. Judy bids him goodnight, but John insists on seeing her the next morning. She doesn't want to, but John insists, hoping that they can see more of each other. Despite feeling a little let down because he's only interested in her for her similar appearance to another woman, Judy decides that she can see John the next day.



**Romance-** This sequence plays out rapidly without a real sense of time. The camera finds Judy and John walking through an idyllic park on a sunny day. Later, they're seen dancing closely in a ballroom. They seem to be enjoying themselves, but the look fades on John's face as the song begins to fade out. Sometime later, the camera catches John buying Judy a flower from a stand before they walk into the department store across the street. Inside the department store, a worker models a suit similar to Madeleine's before Judy and John. "No, that's not it," says John. "Nothing like it." Despite coaxing from Judy and the saleswoman, John insists that they look at further gray suit dresses. "The gentleman seems to know what he wants," the saleswoman says in a civil tone before sending the models to the back of the store to dig through the older versions of the outfit. Judy confronts John, realizing he wants to dress her up as Madeleine. She storms away after he confirms this, and John walks after her. A model returns with the same gray dress Madeleine wore, and John says he'd like it altered by the evening for their night on the town.



**"What good will it do?"**- Later, in John's apartment, Judy sits slumped over a desk while John pours her a stiff drink. He gives it to her, calling it "medicine." Judy turns around to face him, asking, "Why are you doing this? What good will it do?" "I don't know," John replies. "No good, I guess." Judy is distraught that their romance is based on her resemblance to Madeleine, wishing they could share their love on equal footing. "Judy," John says, caressing her face, "it's you too. There's something in you that..." "You don't even want to touch me," Judy says as he pulls away. "I'll wear the darned clothes if you want me to, if you'll just like me." John stares at the top of her head before asking her to bleach her hair. "If I do what you tell me," Judy asks, tears in her eyes, "will you love me?" John replies, "Yes," and Judy agrees before they kiss and embrace.



**Waiting-** The next day, John stands in the reception area of a beauty parlor when a hairdresser approaches him, apologizing for the long time required to bleach and style Judy's hair. He asks her to tell Judy that he'll be waiting in her room in the Empire before leaving. A montage of beauty treatments passes across the screen with suspenseful music playing. Soon, the camera finds John reading a newspaper in Judy's room. He looks out the window for her, impatient. Hearing something, he crosses to the door and opens it. After waiting for a moment, Judy appears, looking much more like Madeleine, her hair dyed a platinum blonde. John comments that they didn't do her hair right, insisting that Judy put it up like Madeleine wore hers. After a little arguing, she agrees, retreating to the bathroom to pin her hair up. Again, John waits impatiently, staring out the window.



**“Too late. I’ve got my face on.”**- Soon, the bathroom door opens, and John turns around to see Judy looking identical to Madeleine, glowing like a spirit in the green neon light cast by the hotel’s sign through the window. Romantic music swells while she walks toward him. Judy smiles nervously as John pulls her into a long, passionate kiss. A bit later, Judy emerges from the bathroom once more, this time in Madeleine’s black evening dress. John tells her to “come here,” but she grins coquettishly, saying he’ll “muss” her. “Well, that’s what I had in mind,” John jokes. “It’s too late,” Judy says. “I’ve got my face on, and I’m suddenly hungry.” John offers to take her wherever she wants to go when he notices the necklace she’s putting on: It’s the same as Madeleine’s and Carlotta’s. Before they leave, Judy asks John to “muss me a little,” and he obliges, kissing her dispassionately.



**Long ride-** A car winds down a quickly-darkening highway. Inside, Judy shifts uncomfortably before mentioning to John that they’re “driving awfully far.” He apologizes, asking if she’s terribly hungry, to which she says she isn’t. After a few more moments, she asks where they are going. “One final thing I have to do,” John says as if in a trance, “and then I’ll be free of the past.” The music grows more stressful as Judy looks confused and frightened. The music changes while the car winds up the road to the Mission San Juan Bautista.



**Facing the past-** “Scottie,” Judy asks while the car pulls to a stop outside the mission, “why are we here?” “I told you,” John says, stepping out of the car. “I have to go back into the past once more. Just once more, for the last time... Madeleine died here, Judy.” Judy says she’d rather wait in the car, but John says he needs her if he’s to succeed. “I need you to be Madeleine for a while, and when it’s done, we’ll both be free!” Despite her protests, John leads her from the car and into the church, explaining what happened all the way to the bell tower. Judy struggles, but John grabs and pushes her, urging her to reenact the chase up the stairs. Step by step, they ascend to strangely romantic, tense music. Despite his vertigo, John continues, following close to Judy, who has to be pushed up the final few steps. “This was as far as I could get,” he says, looking up at her, “but you went on, remember?” Judy looks at him, dumbfounded. “The necklace, Madeleine,” John says calmly. “That was the slip. I remembered the necklace.”





**“Apt pupil”**- Judy tries to force her way back down the stairs, but John pushes her up toward the ladder. “We’re going up the tower, Madeleine... This is my second chance... But you knew that day that I wouldn’t be able to follow you, didn’t you?” He accuses her of working with Gavin to cover up the murder of his real wife: “You were a copy, You were counterfeit, weren’t you? Was she dead or alive when...” “DEAD!” Judy cries in a panic. “He’d broken her neck!” He realizes it was Judy who screamed, and she pleads with him that she was trying to stop Gavin’s plot, but John doesn’t buy it, accosting her about all the training Gavin must have put her through to play a perfect replica of his wife. “You were a very apt pupil, too, weren’t you?” John laments that he didn’t see it sooner, saying, “I was the setup. I was the made-to-order witness.” With that, he pulls Judy through the trap door and into the bell tower’s uppermost level, saying, “We’re going to look at the scene of the crime.”

**Scene of the crime**- Tense music plays and calms when John begins laying out how he thinks she and Gavin got away with their part in the murder. “And then?” John says, menacingly stepping toward Judy. “You were his girl? What happened to you? Did he ditch you? What a shame.” He then asks Judy what Gavin gave to her for her help. “Some money,” Judy replies breathlessly. “And the necklace,” John adds. “And there was where you made your mistake, Judy. You shouldn’t keep souvenirs of a killing. You shouldn’t have been that sentimental.” Judy cowers. “When I saw you again, I couldn’t run away,” Judy pleads. “I loved you so. I walked into danger and let you change me because I loved you, and I wanted you.” John says, “There’s no bringing her back.” But Judy’s admission seems to have worked and they begin kissing passionately. Suddenly, a nun appears from below, investigating John’s shouting. This scares Judy so much that she tumbles from the bell tower to her death, mirroring the real Madeleine’s fake murder. John, suddenly cured of his acrophobia, stands near the edge, looking at Judy’s body on the roof below.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How do the film’s romantic elements play into its tragic ending?

Where do most of the film’s noir themes appear during the film?

How do mental health treatment and insanity function in *Vertigo*’s plot?

Did you spot Hitchcock’s cameo?

Do you think Judy’s fate would have turned out differently if she had delivered the letter admitting her role in Gavin’s plot to John?