

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1956)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

Alfred Hitchcock was a prolific filmmaker who began his career in Britain before becoming one of Hollywood's most celebrated auteurs. By 1956, the year *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was released, Hitchcock had established himself as a prominent director in Hollywood with films such as *Dial M For Murder* and *Rear Window*, both of which appeared in 1954.

Hitchcock's source material for *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was his own film of the same title, which he directed in Great Britain in 1934. Hitchcock took the title from a collection of short stories by the crime writer G.K. Chesterton, but the story for the film is unrelated to any of Chesterton's work.

The two versions of the film, the UK version and the US remake, share a basic premise and many plot details. However, the 1956 version alters several elements from the original, including significant shifts in setting, characters, and resolution. Nevertheless, both films feature climactic scenes at the Royal Albert Hall, with the latter version filmed on location and the earlier version using a recreated stage setting. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was Hitchcock's third of four collaborations with actor James Stewart, a working relationship that began with 1948's *Rope* and would conclude with 1958's *Vertigo*. The film would be Doris Day's only collaboration with Hitchcock, but it is notable in her career for its introduction of the song "Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)"—a song that went on to achieve considerable commercial success and would be strongly associated with Day for the remainder of her career.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Dr. Benjamin "Ben" McKenna	Father of Hank and husband of Jo, Ben is a doctor from Indianapolis.
Josephine "Jo" McKenna	Mother of Hank and wife of Ben, Jo is a famous singer of the stage.
Hank McKenna	Son of Ben and Jo, kidnapped by the Drayton couple.
Louis Bernard	A mysterious man, spy, who befriends the McKennas.
Edward Drayton	Leads a clandestine political organization plotting an
Lucy Drayton	Wife and co-conspirator of Edward.
Inspector Buchanan	Member of Special Branch, Scotland Yard

SYNOPSIS

Husband and wife Benjamin and Joanna McKenna are on vacation with their son Hank in French Morocco, where they meet a mysterious man named Louis Bernard aboard a bus on the way to their hotel. After befriending Bernard and arranging dinner plans, the McKennas begin to observe Bernard acting strangely. After Bernard cancels their dinner plans, the McKennas dine alone that evening at a local restaurant where they meet a British couple named Edward and Lucy Drayton. The McKennas see Bernard at the restaurant with an unidentified woman, but he ignores them.

The next day, the McKennas honor plans made at dinner the following evening to attend the morning market with the Draytons. At the market, Ben notices a man dressed in local attire approach him. The man is mortally wounded by a knife in the back, and is revealed to be Louis Bernard in disguise. Dying, Bernard warns Ben of an assassination plot to take place imminently in London.

While the McKennas give a statement to the police, Ben receives an anonymous phone call informing him that should he reveal what he has learned, Ben will never see his son again. Returning to the hotel, Ben realizes the Draytons have kidnapped Hank.

The McKennas travel to London, where they eventually track the Draytons down. The Draytons are revealed to be involved in the conspiracy to assassinate a head of state that evening at a concert at the Royal Albert Hall. By chance, Jo Drayton attends the concert in order to locate a member of Scotland Yard who has taken an interest in their case. Recognizing a man from their Marrakech hotel, Jo feels uneasy, and notices that the man has a gun. Jo's scream distracts the gunman who only manages to strike his target on the arm.

The Draytons, realizing their plot has been foiled, take Hank to the embassy of the head of state they were targeting, where they meet with their co-conspirator from the unidentified nation's government. They hide Hank in a room upstairs and intend to kill him to cover their tracks. The McKennas attend an embassy dinner that evening on invitation from the grateful prime minister, and manage to finally rescue Hank from his kidnappers.

PLOT

Travel The story opens with an American family, the McKennas, on a bus to Marrakech. The McKennas' son Hank is walking up the bus aisle when he trips and actually removes the veil of a female passenger. The man accompanying the woman angrily confronts Hank until another man, wearing a suit and tie, speaks to the angered man in Arabic and calms him down. With the conflict resolved, the McKennas thank the man in the suit and tie, and learn that his name is Louis Bernard.



Spies (BERNARD AND THE DRAYTONS) Bernard is reluctant to divulge much information about himself, but is unfailingly friendly and polite with the McKennas, inviting them to cocktails and dinner that evening as they will be staying in the same hotel. After Bernard bids them farewell, Jo mentions to her husband Ben that she finds the former to be "mysterious." Ben dismisses her reservations. That evening, Bernard arrives, and he and the McKennas drink a cocktail when a knock at the door disturbs them and a man asks for a Mr Montgomery. Bernard notices the man and the two share a look of mutual, yet wary, recognition. When the man leaves, Bernard makes a phone call before announcing that he must leave and cancels their dinner plans. Forced to go to dinner alone, the McKennas bump into a British couple, the Draytons, who they end up dining with. During dinner, the McKennas notice Louis Bernard arriving at the restaurant with a female companion. Bernard does not acknowledge them. The Draytons, noticing the awkwardness, steer the conversation to their plans for the next day, and invite the McKennas to attend the morning market with them. The McKennas agree.



Secret: A dying Bernard gives his secret to Ben At the market the subsequent day, Ben McKenna is startled by a man staggering towards him with a knife in his back. Ben recognizes him as being Louis Bernard. Dying in his arms, Bernard informs Ben that there is a plot underway to assassinate a senior statesman in London. His final words are "Ambrose Chappell." Ben writes down what Bernard has told him. The police, arriving on the scene, ask the McKennas to come to the police station to make a statement. Lucy Drayton agrees to take Hank back to the hotel, and Edward offers to accompany the McKennas to the station to help with interpretation. At the station, Ben and Jo are interrogated by a senior officer who is disbelieving of their claim to have only just met the murdered man. During the conversation, Ben is informed of a phone call for him.



Kidnapping The anonymous caller threatens that should Ben reveal what he has learned from Bernard to the authorities then he will not see his son again. Alarmed, Ben tells Edward to call the hotel to check up on Lucy and Hank. When there is no answer, he sends Edward ahead to the hotel, before wrapping up the interview with the police. On the car back to the hotel, Ben shows Jo the note containing Bernard's last words, but does not mention the details of the phone call. Upon returning to the hotel, Ben cannot find Hank and learns that Edward and Lucy Drayton have checked out of the hotel. Ben gives his wife some pills to calm her down, before informing her of the details of the call and the missing Draytons. They decide to travel to London on the assumption that Hank's kidnapers would have taken him there.



Search In London, the McKennas are met by a member of Special Branch, Scotland Yard by the name of Inspector Buchanan who wants to be told Bernard's final words. Ben refuses, and the couple retire to their hotel room. Once there, Ben looks up the name "Ambrose Chappell" in the phone book and travels to the address while his wife entertains some London theatre friends who have come to visit her at the hotel. Ben arrives at the address and asks for Ambrose Chappell. After an altercation, Ben determines that the man at the address in fact has no involvement with his son's disappearance nor any assassination plot. He returns to the hotel.

Meanwhile, while entertaining her friends, Jo suddenly realises that "Chappell" may not refer to a surname at all, but a chapel. Consulting the phone book, one of her companions locates an Ambrose Chapel in London. Jo leaves to find the chapel, and Ben, returning to the hotel, is informed by Jo's friends of her plans. As Jo arrives at the chapel, the Draytons are shown to be holding Hank inside in the upper levels. The Draytons plan the assassination of a head of state with the man who had earlier knocked on the McKennas' hotel room door asking for a Mr Montgomery, and whom Bernard had recognized. It is revealed that this man will be carrying out the assassination at the Royal Albert Hall that evening, and will fire his gun during the performance of the orchestra at the moment of crescendo when the cymbals are played.

Ben follows Jo to the chapel and they both attend a service. The minister is Edward Drayton and the woman collecting church dues is Lucy Drayton. Lucy recognizes the McKennas, but not in time to prevent Jo from leaving. Realizing that they are at risk of being caught, Edward concludes the service abruptly. Ben stays behind and demands to know where Hank is. Hearing Hank call his name, Ben attempts to get to him, but is knocked out. Meanwhile, Jo calls the police, asking for Buchanan, the member of Special Branch who had earlier interviewed her and her husband upon their arrival to London. Buchanan is not available as he is attending a concert at the Royal Albert Hall, but police are sent to the chapel. Upon arrival, the police inform Jo that they cannot break into the chapel, which is now locked, without a warrant. Jo asks to be taken to the Royal Albert Hall to see Buchanan. Meanwhile, the Draytons arrive at the Royal Albert Hall with Hank.



Assassination At the Royal Albert Hall, Jo recognizes the assassin as the man from the hotel lobby. Seeing him later in the audience, she notices him pulling out a gun, and screams, distracting the assassin from his shot. The prime minister of an unidentified nation is the target, but he is only injured. Ben arrives at the Royal Albert Hall, and the McKennas, Ben having arrived at the Hall, are thanked profusely by the prime minister for saving his life. However, Buchanan announces that they are unable to locate the Draytons nor Hank.



Son is found Meanwhile, Buchanan reveals that he knows that the assassination plot came from within the government of the prime minister's country, and that therefore the Draytons may well have taken Hank to the embassy. Ben tells Jo to phone the embassy and ask to speak with the prime minister in order to secure an invite: the prime minister, as a means of thanking her for saving his life, invites the McKennas to join him for a dinner reception that evening. Ben tells Jo to accept the inevitable request to sing for the guests (owing to her fame as a singer and actress) and to sing a song that Hank will recognize. Jo performs "Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)", the song she had sung earlier with Hank in the hotel in Marrakech. Hank, in a room in the embassy being guarded by Jo, recognizes the music. Lucy, aware of the fate that awaits Hank, instructs him to whistle along, so that his parents can hear. Ben follows the sound, and bursts into the room Hank and Lucy are in. He is followed, though, by Edward, who threatens Ben and Hank with a gun, and attempts to escort them out of the embassy. Ben pushes Edward down the stairs as they leave, however, and Edward's plan is foiled. Hank is reunited with his parents.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

AGREEABLE

DR. BENJAMIN “BEN” McKENNA Conscientious (Irritable – Protective – Heroic)

Ben is introduced as an American everyman. He is a doctor from Indianapolis who is married to a successful singer and actress with whom he has a son. He is evidently established in his field since the McKennas are travelling in Marrakech as a result of Ben's attendance at a medical conference in France. Although prone to mild frustration and irritability (mostly for comic effect), Ben is by and large laidback and affable. Nevertheless, as events unfold he demonstrates himself to be capable of physical bravery and bouts of righteous anger. His primary motivation is not revenge or the foiling of the assassination plot, but the reuniting of his family.

Irritability In the early scenes of the film set in Marrakech, Ben is presented as a typical American tourist who is unable to adapt to the local culture. He is helpless to intervene as his son is berated on the bus as he does not speak the local language, he finds the customs around food and its consumption baffling, and his height produces great difficulty for him as he struggles to fit himself into restaurant seating. Ben takes all of this with an affable humour, but his helplessness in an alien culture is emphasized.

Protectiveness Upon learning of his son's kidnapping, Ben is reluctant to immediately inform Jo. When he eventually does so, he medicates her first so as to lessen the impact. His cautiousness with information is also apparent when being interviewed by Inspector Buchanan as he interrupts Jo when she nearly reveals the information given to Ben by Louis Bernard.

Heroism It is mentioned early in the film that Ben is a war hero, and it is Ben who largely takes command of the McKennas unofficial operation to retrieve Hank from his kidnappers. His first adventure in London, however, leads him to a taxidermist, where he falsely accuses the owner's son of involvement in the conspiracy, which culminates in a fight. Humbled, Ben is forced to keep looking. This early misguided attempt at heroism, though, is redeemed when Ben confronts the real kidnappers and, having been knocked out initially, escapes from the chapel by climbing onto its roof and ringing the bell. Later, at the embassy, it is Ben who rescues his son from near death, and stays cool when threatened by Edward Drayton before throwing Drayton down the stairs, disarming him.

AGREEABLE

JOSEPHINE “JO” McKENNA Conscientious (Perceptive – Protective)

Jo is a famous singer and actress who is semi-retired from the stage. She is happily married to Ben, with whom she has an affectionate relationship. Jo also has a close bond with her son as is emphasised by their shared fondness of the song “Que sera, sera.” Jo is perceptive and sensitive to danger, and, although initially frantic in response to her son's kidnapping, she plays a key role in his rescue.

Perceptive Jo's perceptiveness leads her to realize immediately that Louis Bernard is concealing his identity and likely implicated in dangerous activities. Her scepticism is contrasted with her husband's laidback nature, and she is ultimately proved right. This perceptiveness is further emphasized when it is she who later realizes that “Ambrose Chappell” is not a person's name, but a location, as in “Ambrose Chapel.” Additionally, her initiative to seek out Inspector Buchanan at the Royal Albert Hall facilitates the foiling of the assassination plot.

Motherly Jo is emphasized as an ideal mother who conforms to the ideals of the standard family household. She is semi-retired from her work as an actress and singer and lives happily in Indianapolis, far away from the world of the New York theatre. Her singing talents are now deployed in providing a comforting home environment for her son, who sings and whistles along with her as she prepares him for bed. This close bond between mother and son is further emphasized by the song's pivotal role in reuniting the separated family.

LOUIS BERNARD **Agreeable** (Mysterious – Charming)

Bernard, incidentally the only character name retained from the 1934 version, is introduced early in the film, and as such his death relatively early in the story comes as a shock. He is introduced as suave yet kind stranger to the McKennas who assists them when their son gets in trouble on a bus in French Morocco. A Frenchman, Bernard speaks fluent Arabic and English. Despite his friendliness, he remains formal, asking several questions of the McKennas but giving vague answers in response to theirs (for instance, answering merely “no” when asked if he lives in Morocco). His overall air is one of mystery, as remarked upon by Jo.

Charming Bernard’s suave, charming exterior reveals itself in the ease with which he deals with stressful situations, such as the cultural miscommunication between the McKennas and a Moroccan man regarding his wife’s veil. He is clearly a cosmopolitan man, as he promises to show the McKennas the local culture. His charming exterior is only heightened by the sense of unease that is produced when he is revealed to be ruffled, such as when he recognizes the man at the McKennas hotel room door or, more dramatically, in the scene of his murder where his physical transformation and look of desperation on his face is mirrored by Ben’s distress.

Mysterious Bernard is unknowable to the McKennas, who never do learn the specifics of his reason for being in Marrakech. Indeed, Jo remarks to her husband early in the film that Bernard is a “very mysterious man,” a suspicion that proves to be right. The exact reasons for Bernard’s actions throughout the film—his snubbing of the McKennas at the restaurant, his apparent friendliness with the man who scolded Hank, and his sudden change in attire and appearance—are only hinted at, never fully explained.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Cultures)

Cultural difference The 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* moves the initial action of the story from Switzerland to French Morocco. The effect of this relocation is negligible on the plot itself, since French Morocco and Marrakech do not play a significant role in determining the nature of the assassination plot nor the unfolding of the kidnapping. However, the cultural differences between Americans and Europeans and the Muslim culture of Marrakech is repeatedly emphasized. The opening scene on the bus, which at the level of the plot facilitates the encounter between the McKennas and Bernard, establishes French Morocco as a bewildering and even hostile environment for the American tourists, and by implication the audience’s American audience. Indeed, the film exploits Islamophobic sentiment to achieve this effect, with Bernard explaining to the McKennas that “the muslim religion allows for few accidents.” Jo later notices that Bernard is in fact friendly with the man who berated Hank, which is used as evidence of his suspicious nature.

The scene on the bus establishes a trend for the opening scenes of the film, notably the restaurant scene in which James Stewart’s performance becomes largely comic as he struggles to fit in the low seating, and struggles with the local custom of eating with one’s hands. However, this foregrounding of cultural difference takes a more sinister tone in the following market scene in which Bernard approaches him dressed in local attire (as opposed to his usual suit and tie), and wearing garish dark makeup which rubs itself off onto Ben’s hands. The emphasis on skin tone, and the sense of horror evoked by the blurring of racial boundaries in the smudging of the makeup, has no purpose at the level of the story, but merely seems designed to establish an air of confusion and menace.

RELATIONSHIP (Family)

Family values *The Man Who Knew Too Much* embodies traditional American family values by staging a threat to the nuclear family’s stability from alien cultural forces. Ben is a doctor who, having fought on the African continent during WWII, has since established a medical practice in Indianapolis and has married and had a child and is planning to have another with his wife. In returning to Africa and Europe, however, Ben is thrown back into an instability reminiscent of a war situation (if the spectre of WWI looms large in the original version of the film, then in its remake is WWII that is in the background). Ultimately,

Ben is able to reestablish the family unit and significantly, again like the original, the film's final shot is of parents and child reunited.

If Ben is the symbol of an ideal American postwar masculinity, then Jo is that of femininity and motherhood. A glamorous singer and actress, she has nevertheless sacrificed her career to have a family. Indeed, rather than returning to the stage, she wants to have another child. Her ability to aid in the rescue of her son hinges on a secret code between the two, indicating that it is this maternal warmth that ultimately secures the family unit.

APPEARANCE

Appearance versus reality Much like the original version of the film, the American remake is greatly concerned with the contrast between the outward appearance of its characters, and the revelation of their real motives and characteristics. Edward Drayton, for example, presents himself as a harmless farmer who is in French Morocco working for the UN. We later learn that he had told the hotel that he was a college professor, and later he is shown posing as a chaplain. In reality, of course, Drayton is working for an unidentified state official plotting the assassination of a prime minister. Similarly, Bernard, although ostensibly a mere good samaritan, takes on a disguise at the time of his murder, and seems to almost change personality at other moments. This theme is established early in the film as Hank's indiscretion is to accidentally remove the veil of a woman. While this incident has many clumsy cultural undertones, in relation to the theme of appearance versus reality it immediately establishes the theme of the concealment of identities. Ironically, it is Jo, a performer by trade, and her family who stand in for honesty and dependability in the film. And yet even Ben, the film's unquestionable hero, becomes swept up in the paranoia of shifting identities when he physically confronts the innocent Ambrose Chappell in the latter's taxidermist office. Indeed, this theme is present not just at the level of characterization but also in more subtle ways: the stuffed animals in the taxidermist office foreground the idea of uncanny appearances, and the choice of chapel as setting for the assassination plotters (a detail that was retained from the original) emphasizes the falsity of outward appearances once more.