

Shadow of a Doubt (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943)



Source: Screenplay by Thornton Wilder

Hitchcock admired Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town" so much that he asked Wilder to write a script for "Shadow of a Doubt," affording the famed playwright an opportunity to continue his exploration of small-town life. It was "gratifying to me," Hitchcock said, "to find out that one of America's most eminent playwrights was willing to work with me and, indeed, that he took the whole thing quite seriously." Hitchcock acknowledged his gratitude to Wilder in the credits, an unusual tribute and "emotional gesture," because he was "touched by his qualities."

What is the film about?

A young woman, who regards herself as her uncle's "twin," in facing the evil in him, discovers the darker side of the world and herself.

How do you know that this is what it is about?

"a young woman"

Charlie Newton is around eighteen or nineteen years old. "I've become a nagging old maid," she says, probably thinking about her mother's life.

"who regards herself as her uncle's 'twin'"

Charlie has always been proud that she was named after her uncle Charles, and considers that she has a special bond with him, a belief supported by the opening of the film, in which she is about to send a telegram inviting him to visit at the same moment that he sends a telegram announcing a visit.

"in facing the evil in him"

Charlie at first refuses to believe that her uncle could be the subject of a criminal investigation, but when the initials on a ring he has given her match the names in an account of a strangler, the so-called Merry Widow murderer, she must acknowledge the truth.

"discovers the darker side of the world"

Charlie's innocence ends when she learns about evil, symbolized by her first visit to a bar. She repeatedly tells the detectives that she doesn't want to know the details of Charles's crimes.

"and herself"

Charlie's complicity begins when she has a sympathetic detective agree not to arrest Charles until he has left the family's town. When the detectives announce—incorrectly—that they have located the murderer elsewhere, Charlie must decide between accepting moral responsibility for her uncle's future victims or taking action to stop him herself.

How does the director tell the story in cinematic terms?

1. Links between a psychopathic killer and his innocent niece

Charles	Charlie
Window at a canted angle	Window at a canted angle
First seen lying on a bed	First seen lying on a bed
Reverie interrupted by landlady, concerned about loose cash	Reverie interrupted by father who mentions his raise; Charlie uninterested in money
Sends telegram announcing arrival	Sends telegram inviting a visit
Has secrets	Has secrets
Newspaper: Uncle Charlie carefully folds and pockets the torn excerpt	Newspaper: "If I fold it carefully, he won't notice"
"We're like twins, you said so yourself."	"We're sort of like twins, don't you see?"

2. Doubling of Scenes

Uncle introduced by images of decay: homeless people, junkyard with wrecked cars	Niece introduced by images of health: pleasant town, pretty street
Uncle's money spilling from table	Policeman in front of Bank of America
Two pursuing detectives in the East	Two pursuing detectives in California
Uncle Charlie arrives at railway station	Uncle Charlie departs from railway station
Graham takes Charlie to a brightly-lighted grill	Uncle takes Charlie to a dark bar, "Till Two," where he orders two double brandies
Graham proposes in the garage	Uncle tries to kill Charlie in the garage

3. The Power of Charles's Hands

- When Charlie pulls the newspaper page from his pocket, Charles violently seizes her wrist. Later, when she says to Graham, "Are you trying to tell me that I shouldn't think he's so wonderful?", she will look at her hands and rub her wrist.
- When Emma mentions Graham (who turns out to be a detective), Charlie tears the piece of toast he holds in his hand.
- Charles, who refuses to be photographed, holds out his hand and demands the roll of film from the detective (posing as a photographer).
- At the bar, Charles tells Charlie, "I've done some pretty foolish things," as he twists a napkin in a strangling gesture.
- After Graham's proposal in the garage, Charles frames Charlie's face with his hand, suggesting affection but also strangling, and says "She's the thing I love most in the world."
- As Charles advances in the final scene, Charlie stares down in horror and says "Your hands!"

Shadow of a Doubt

1. A "Normal" American Family

Father, is sweet but ineffectual (can't drive a car), amuses himself plotting murders with a neighbour

Mother, a housewife, has never had a life of her own, lives in the past. "You get married. You sort of forget you're you. You're your husband's wife."

Younger daughter, obsessed with reading, more concerned with the quantity of books she reads than their content

Younger son obsessed with numbers ("do you know how many steps I have to take to get from here to the drugstore? 649")

Nobody ever listens to anyone else—they just talk over each other (overlapping dialogue)

Setting: "normal house"

The movie was shot in Santa Rosa, chosen by Hitchcock and Wilder after careful consideration of other towns. The house owner was so pleased that his house had been chosen that he painted it (to look better, reflecting his and the public's image of small towns as clean, neat, and beautiful. Amused by it, Hitchcock insisted on repainting the house "dirty" all over again.

*The most interesting aspect of *Shadow of a Doubt* is its image of the nuclear family, in ideology and practice. Seeking information to incriminate Uncle Charlie, detective Jack Graham (Macdonald Carey) arrives in the house under the excuse of wanting to interview a "representative American family." But no one likes the idea of being a member of an "average" family; Emma protests that they are not a typical family. Throughout the film, the words typical, average, ordinary, and representative abound, reflecting the inherent tension between living a quiet, ordinary, but fulfilling middle-class life, and one that's just ordinary and bland. Most of the characters are associated with bland ordinariness.*

2. The Shadow Self

a. Jungian psychology

The shadow is that part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weaknesses or deficiencies. Becoming a mature adult requires acknowledging the shadow self, or the darker aspects of one's personality.

b. Charlie's shadow self

- *Young Charlie says, "Go away or I'll kill you myself."*
- *Young Charlie is finally called upon to perform an act of killing with her own hands.*
- *When Charlie comes downstairs wearing Charles's ring, she appears to "vow her faithfulness to him, on the condition that he depart." But Mrs. Potter will be on the same train as Charles. "Charlie's agreement with Charles makes her party to the murder of all the future Mrs. Potters." [Rothman, p.233]*
- *In the final scene, "what completes Charlie's education is her discovery of Charles's longing for death, of her desire for his death, and of her own capacity for killing." [Rothman, p.241]*

c. Shadow images

- *Great shadow as Charles gets off the train*
- *Charlie says "I don't want another thing," and a shadow passes over her*
- *When Charlie discovers the truth about the ring in the library, she is framed in the shadows from a great height, suggesting how small she feels. The camera announces Charlie's coming to self-consciousness by pulling away from the newspaper article in a kind of visual gasp*
- *After Graham, telling about the man in Maine, closes the case, Charlie is shown in the doorway, doubled by her shadow.*
- *After Graham proposes to Charlie, a shadow advances and the garage door slams shut.*
- *When Charlie says, "Go away or I'll kill you myself," she and Charles are framed in silhouettes, like lovers' silhouettes on a window shade.*
- *At the doorway of the bedroom, before Charlie searches for the ring, she is doubled by her own shadow.*

3. Aspects of Evil

a. Murder

Uncle Charlie charms and then murders wealthy widows, for whom he has only contempt (“Fat, wheezing animals. And what do we do to such animals when they get too lazy and too fat?”). We (and Charlie) learn the truth from the newspaper article about the Merry Widow murderer, whose latest victim was Thelma Schenley, married to Bruce Matthewson. Charlie looks at the inscription on the ring from her uncle: “TS FROM BM”.

b. Incest theme

Uncle Charlie greets his sister in an image that recalls the reunion of lovers; Uncle Charlie displaces his sister’s husband (takes his place at the head of the table, assumes his prerogative with the newspaper). When Ann wants to sit away from Charles, he says “Have I lost my little girl?”, casting himself as Ann’s father.

c. Sexual subtext between uncle and niece

- phallic implications of the uncle’s ever-present cigar; bent over leaving the train (his pose as a cripple), becomes erect upon seeing his niece
- uncle takes over his niece’s bedroom and plucks a rose for his buttonhole (image of “deflowering”), tosses his hat on the bed (flouting the father’s superstition)
- he acts like a suitor and places a wedding ring on her finger in a “perverse parody of a wedding scene” [Spoto, p.121]
- in the garage, the exhaust pipe, spewing forth poison, recalls Charles’s ever-present cigar
- Charles proposes a toast, as at a wedding, and Charlie descends the stairs like a promised bride, wearing the ring.
- Seeing her uncle off on the train, Charlie is dressed in black, like a widow.
- In the final struggle, Charlie and Charles are photographed as if in the “conventional Hollywood image of a lovers’ clinch” [Rothman, p.238]

d. Vampire references

- uncle sleeps during the day: a “dormant creature waiting to come alive” [Sterritt, p.54]
- magically seems to fly away from pursuing detectives
- “telepathic” connection with young Charlie
- refusal to be photographed
- Ann tells Dracula story to detective
- Charlie says she and uncle “have the same blood.” He says “The same blood flows through our veins.”

4. Ambiguous Ending

“We cannot say whether, when she turns away and pushes Charles to his death, Charlie asserts her power over him or, acknowledging his power over her, fulfills his secret wish. ... We cannot say whether by her act she exorcises Charles or accepts him into her heart. ... A part of Charlie that Graham does not know, but which Hitchcock has allowed us to share, dies with Charles; and a part of Charles lives on within Charlie, and within us. [Rothman, p.242, 244]

Clips

Clip 1 (Main Titles, 1:30)

Dancing Viennese waltz, “The Merry Widow”

Thornton Wilder

Clip 2 (Mr. Spencer’s Friends, 5:30)

Canted angle of window; shadow over Charles’s face reinforces vampire associations

Shattered glass—first indication that something is strange

Mysterious escape from the men following him; telegram

Clip 3 (One Man’s Family, 4:30)

Policeman in front of Bank of America; contrast with decay of Philadelphia scenes

Parallel scene—Charles and Charlie; lying on bed; both uninterested in money

Clip 4 (Uncle Charlie, 4:15)

Black smoke from train, shadow as Charles descends

The entourage, then Charles alone, self-satisfied, takes out cigar

Charles and Emma, photographed like reuniting lovers

Plucked flower, hat on bed; looks out window to see two harmless women, in contrast to the two detectives in Philadelphia

Clip 5 (Gifts, 5:00)

Age-inappropriate gifts for children, first wristwatch for Tom, fur for Emma that her husband couldn't give her, wedding ring for Charlie. Twins theme. Mysterious initials followed by Merry Widow dancers.

Clip 6 (That Tune, 4:00)

Not the Blue Danube. Emma gives Charles Tom's chair and newspaper and the cushion on which Herb was about to sit. Introduces Herb Hawkins, comic relief: murder as a game.

Clip 7 (Newspaper, 4:30)

Simultaneous folding, Charlie to repair newspaper, Charles to hide clipping. First violence against Charlie. Cigar and smoke ring—sexual reference.

Clip 8 (The Need to Know, 3:00)

Charlie's entrance into darkness, near-accident, policeman. Learning the truth—initials in ring match names in newspaper. Camera cranes up to show Charlie as small and powerless.

Clip 9 (Fair Warning, 7:00)

Charlie promises to get Charles to leave, to avoid an arrest in town. Then shocking news—the case is closed. Charlie, doubled by shadow—she knows the truth. Charles drops cigar, hands in strangling gesture. Graham proposes in garage, separated from Charlie by shadow.

Clip 10 (The Last Waltz, 13:00)

Charlie dressed in black to see Charles off. Charles greets Mrs. Potter, his next victim. Ambiguity: violence and sexuality—"Let it get a little faster"—does Charles want to die at Charlie's hand, does she want to kill him, or is it purely another "accident"?