

A SIMPLE PLAN [1998]

by

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A Simple Plan. Directed by Sam Raimi. Written by Scott B. Smith. Based on the novel by Scott B. Smith. Cinematography by Alar Kivilo. Music by Danny Elfman. Distributed by Paramount Pictures, 1998.

In contemporary small-town Minnesota, Hank (Bill Paxton) chafes under the burden of an unfulfilling working-class life. While out chasing a fox with his slightly dim and unemployed brother Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton) and Jacob's best friend, the alcoholic and boorish Lou (Brent Briscoe), they discover a crashed airplane with over \$4 million in a duffel bag. They decide to keep the money hidden until they feel no one will come looking for it and then split it three ways. Hank's pregnant wife Sarah (Bridget Fonda) encourages Hank and helps him make plans to keep the money. However, things begin going wrong. When they attempt to return some of the money to the plane, an innocent farmer discovers them. Jacob attacks him and Hank kills him, making it look like an accident. Lou threatens Hank; Hank tries to entrap Lou. Lou and his wife are killed. A criminal posing as an FBI agent comes looking for the plane, Sarah discovers the ruse and send Jacob to save Hank. The thief kills kindly and trusting sheriff Carl (Chelcie Ross). Hank kills the thief. Jacob, dispirited by the disintegration of the world, his friends and his own psyche by both greed and murder, begs Hank to kill him. Hank finds out that the money is marked and must burn it. He returns to his old life, now however permanently and deeply scarred. (Rated R).

America's appetite for *film noir* seems insatiable. The need to stare into that dark pit of our everyday evil possibilities seems as strong now as it was in the good times after WWII and into the affluent 1950's when *film noir* reflected the dark side of the American success wonder machine. And now again in the '90s, it seems that the good times need a compensating influence.

The film opens with a close-up of a large black crow. Clearly a death symbol. "Those [birds] are always waiting for something to die so they can eat it," says Jacob. "What a weird job." And in no time at all, Jacob, his brother Hank and Jacob's friend Lou will be "eating" the money that has resulted from a man's death. But not only are the birds waiting to get back to their meal of the dead pilot's eyes (a clear metaphor for the blindness that will cause the trio to crash their psychic airplane escape out of their problems), but the birds peck at each other in another metaphor for what will soon take place among the trio. This is typical of the brilliant, almost Hitchcockian complexity of this film.

We next see a winter landscape so white we think the camera has gone snow blind. The coldness of the Minnesota winter reflects the coldness within the psyches of the characters (much as in *Fargo* [1996]). Snow-encrusted branches from a web of frost are ready to ensnare anyone foolish enough to transgress into this winter wonderland of negativity. The all-enveloping snowdrifts seem to be covering something up. The bleak and featureless winter landscape is a multiple metaphor for the characters' state of mind and the simplistic way in which they view the world – in the clean, simple demarcations of black and white.

Yet the film is anything but simplistic and linear. It exhibits a complex, web-like structure (making a linear commentary very difficult). For instance, Jacob was to inherit the parents' farm – in fact, one of his major drives to keep the money is to buy back the family farm. In essence, Jacob was gypped out of the farm by his father's misplaced confidence in Hank. Does this story ring a bell, a Biblical bell perhaps? Only thinly disguised, this is the story of Jacob and Esau. And what more appropriate (and ironic) geography could there be than to place a modernization of a Bible story than in the mid-Western Bible Belt?

But more than mid-Western society takes in on the psychic chin, nature itself is taken to symbolic task. Early in the film a beautiful reddish-brown fox hustles along the snow in the glory of winter, photographed with the awe of an Animal Channel program or the reverence of a Disney nature documentary. The fox steals a chicken – thus greedily intruding on domesticity much as the men's greed will intrude on theirs – and heads out over the snow. Were this not a *film noir*, the chicken would be a meal for the fox's young and nature would be doing the natural thing. Here, however, the fox is a symbol of greed, and its "natural" act is soon enlarged into three men stealing \$4 million dollars. While we don't know what happens to the fox, we follow the lives of these men over the course of their downward spiral into disaster. So much for the wisdom of nature.

And so much for the wisdom of "man." A lifetime of moral education and living changes in a snap after the appearance of the money. Its lure causes each of them to do things they would never have even contemplated without its siren call. Each of them sees the money as a means of changing his life, which, interestingly they are all perceptive enough to see as flawed. Lou, for instance, simply wants to be left alone by his shrewish wife, hang out with his friend Jacob, get drunk and make it to the next day. Sarah wants enough money to buy dinner fixin's without clipping coupons. Each of the characters' complex psychology is worked out carefully.

The film begins with Hank's narration about his father's happiness, "A wife he loves. A decent job. Friends and neighbors that like and respect him." Being the opening statement, we soon forget it as simply scene setting, until we (and Hank) find out that his father hocked the farm to buy Hank a college education (to work in a feed store?) and ultimately committed suicide in a desperate effort to save the farm with a meager \$8,000 life insurance policy. The film goes so far into the Collective American shadow as to even attack the concept of fatherhood.

The visual metaphor that best describes Hank is the result of his multiple entries into the airplane. First, here is something that should fly freely about the sky and is now earthbound, going nowhere (like Hank himself, of course). And second, every time he enters the plane, it becomes unstable and shifts its position – instead of rocking the boat, he rocks the plane.

Toward the end of the story, Hank is in such desperate psychic straits that paranoia and common-sense blend frighteningly into one state of despair. At the end, Hank suffers the ultimate punishment: he returns to his small-town, dead-end life, scarred, sorrier, and, perhaps, wiser. A life sentence indeed.

By contrast, Jacob's psychic progress (here a downward slide) can be documented by the state of his glasses. He is near-sighted – both physically and in thought. Hank watches in frustration as he and Lou, a loose cannon if there ever was one, make blunder after blunder. After the farmer's murder, Jacob's glasses hang broken around his neck like an albatross. After the fake accident seems to be fooling the town, the glasses are back on his nose, clumsily mended with tape. After the killing of Lou and his wife, the glasses are nowhere to be seen. Does this mean that Jacob can now see clearly the horror of what is happening around him or that he has given up trying to "see" at all? It works both ways.

Jacob is a life-long loser who believes, as all America is led to believe, that money will change his life. In one of the film's most poignant moments, Jacob recollects how he once dated a girl for a whole month. His elation at normality came crashing down, apparently to be never again recovered, when he learned she'd done it for a \$100 bet. It seems that money, even in small amounts, can lead to the moral destruction of self and others.

But despite his simple mind, Jacob is the film's moral compass and calamitous center. A tragic, self-aware through saintly simpleton who has a clearer knowledge of who he is – and more importantly who he cannot be – than any of the other characters in the film. That the slowest should turn out to be the wisest of the "three brothers" should surprise no one interested in Archetypal psychology for our cultural history is filled with stories, myths and fairy tales reiterating just this point.

As complex as are the individuals, so are their interactions. Class boundary, for example, is established early in life and, according to the film, cannot be crossed. Hank's education has divorced him from Jacob. At one point Jacob says that Lou is only friend, that the only thing he has in common with Hank is his last name. However, this is not quite true; Jacob still has an unbridled ambition for something better, an upward striving into an imagined life of fulfillment. In film noir, of course, such an upward striving can only lead to an even greater fall.

The character that most shocks and horrifies is Sarah. Our first view of her is nude and very pregnant just leaving a bathtub. She radiates purity, innocence, and maternity. Thus, her fall into greed right along with the men is so much more shocking. In film, we

have come to expect the women to be the moral strongholds, often preventing the men from doing ill. While greed twists the three men into hateful and distrusting one-man factions, it perverts Sarah's librarian, mother, and wife into something unrecognizable.

The film's most grotesque scene is dedicated to Sarah – the ultimate in *femme fatales* of all *film noir*, she plans murder and betrayal while nursing her newborn daughter. Like the goddess Kali, she gives birth while dancing on the skulls of those she has destroyed. She goes further than most of the traditional *femme fatales* of *film noir* because she is so ordinary and because she is so driven by concern about her husband and child spending a life without money. The film claims that the evil *femme fatale* is an only slightly repressed aspect of all good women.

Lady MacBeth-like, Sarah is the smartest of the lot. She plots and schemes – and every time Hank follows her very logical advice, she unwittingly gets him deeper and deeper into trouble. It is as if the film were saying that being smart and thinking a problem through is a sure way to screw it, yourself, and everyone else up.

This is a film that gives you all the pieces, but mercifully doesn't put them together for you. For instance, they talk about the American Dream. "This is the American Dream," says Lou finding the \$4.4 million. Hank replies, "The American Dream is something you work for. You don't steal it." And then the film proceeds to show how Hank indeed works for this money, sacrificing everything. And it attacks other aspects of the "American Dream." For instance, only in the inverted world of *film noir* could the birth of a baby be a signal of impending doom. And New Year's Eve is no longer a symbol of new beginnings, but just another downward descent into the winter of the soul.

All the actors' performances are flawless in their portrayal of very ordinary people who are capable of and act out monstrous deeds, trapped in a downward cycle of greed, paranoia, deception, guilt, and murder. The direction makes us feel the weight of every bad choice, we labor at every life-threatening turning point.

A Simple Plan documents a long and twisting road of an ordinary man using ordinary logic that delivers him into an extra-ordinarily evil place. In addition to an elegant *film noir*, which documents the downward spiral of a small group of greed-and-ambition-driven people, it is a cry for the need of emotions and feelings to counterbalance cold, hard logic. What is unusual from the psychological view is the film posits that the most potent tool of the Shadow (or Freud's Id) with which it can dismember the ego is logic. Scary, indeed.

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