

The 39 Steps [1935]

by

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It is amazing how a movie over 65 years old can be so entertaining and feel so complete in a very contemporary way. When asked what drama is, Alfred Hitchcock replied, “life with the dull bits cut out.” And this certainly describes the experiences of Richard Hannay, the central character of *The 39 Steps*.

This film uses one of Hitchcock’s favorite devices to get the audience involved in the protagonist’s journey. Hannay gets sucked into a spy drama completely by accident – it could happen to any of us. He is ordinary; he has no outstanding qualities. This is one reason we so strongly identify with him.

The 39 Steps is Hitchcock’s first widely recognized masterpiece and marks a major shift in his career. Throughout his previous 17 films that we can now watch as a group, it is clear he was seeking a vision uniquely his own. With *The 39 Steps* he found it.

Based on a very convoluted spy novel by John Buchan, Hitchcock and his co-screenwriter, Charles Bennett (and, apparently, his wife Alma Reville), simplify and humanize the spy game, an idea he introduced in (the first version of) *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1934] previous year.

In *The 39-Steps* we see elements that, as a conglomeration, are purely Hitchcockian and would serve him well for decades: An innocent man must prove himself innocent of a crime in which all the evidence points to him. The murder is by knife or other personal contact – never at a distance. He is helped by a woman who first distrusts and hates him, but not only learns to trust him, but falls in love with him. And there is the McGuffin – the thing everyone is so concerned with but really has nothing to do with the film. In the case of *The 39 Steps*, it is the military secret. All these elements add up to a journey both tension-filled and joyous, the odyssey to prove innocence is really a journey of self-discovery and building a love relation.

Like many of Hitchcock’s films, *The 39 Steps* is filled with theatrical references. The film begins at the Music Hall in London. Many characters play roles, act as actors,

use false names, are assumed to be someone else, or prevaricate. Hannay disguises himself as a milkman, a mechanic, a politician, and a newlywed.

Hitchcock has never shied away from folding political and social commentary into his films. Respectable people in power are villains. The police cannot be trusted. They are either fake or naïve. Political doubletalk brings cheers from enthusiastic constituency. Religion is ambiguous. On one side, a religious fanatic is foul-minded. On the other, a book of hymns saves Hannay's life.

Trust and betrayal are central to Hitchcock's oeuvre. Shifting identities are emblematic of the disparity between appearance and reality. The nature of relationships is unpredictable. The necessity of trust is always precarious. Marriage and relations are also ambiguous. In the final scene of *The 39 Steps*, simple hand holding is the sign of real love. However, Hannay is still wearing the handcuffs – is marriage is prison?

Compared to the filmmakers of the day, Hitchcock's women characters were relatively strong. Consider the crofter's wife and the innkeeper's wife. And Annabella Smith – gives life to protect country.

One aspect of the unique vision Hitchcock was seeking (and developing) for himself is a very inventive technical vocabulary. Some of these devices are obvious, as when a scream turns into a train whistle. Some are more subtle as when, at the beginning of the film, Hannay buys a theater ticket and we move down the aisle with him following his feet but never see him from the front – not showing the star actor from the front for the audience's delectation was considered, up to that time, a cinematic sin. Hitchcock even uses the editing: when Hannay and Annabella get on an elevator and close the doors behind them, they next appear going into Hannay's room – with a vertical wipe between the two scenes imitating the elevator's movement!

This technical vocabulary, which is vast, includes various aspects of symmetry. For instance, Hannay prepares a fish dinner to Annabella – later offered the same by Crofter's wife. Initial act of kindness repaid twice (sandwiches in Inn).

And Hitchcock was certainly aware of Sigmund Freud, even in 1935. And it goes far beyond the simply sexual repression of crofter, or the castration symbol associated with the Professor. Just before Hannay kisses Annabella, the train enters a tunnel-like arch of the bridge. Not as obvious as in the in the final scene of *North by Northwest* [1959], but the meaning is the same. (It is not only *The Man Who Knew Too Much* that Hitchcock remade, *North by Northwest* is a remake of *The 39 Steps*.)

Humor, ironies, and puns are always woven into a Hitchcock film, *The 39 Steps* no less. An audience member at the Music Hall confuses “feets” with “feats.” When Pamela brazenly asks to go home with Hannay, he says “It's your funeral.” In the context of a Hitchcock film, this almost-prescience gets a laugh. Visual incongruity also has its place in Hitchcock's sense of humor: a chorus line dances gayly while Mr. Memory dies. And, of course, there must be a conflation of the two areas which Hitchcock loves to jab

at: religion and sex. A salesman of kinky lingerie, who loves to talk about corsets and brassieres, does so in front of a very uncomfortable priest.

While it is one of many, the Music Hall scene deserves a closer look. In most films, the introductory scene is used only to set the time and place. Hitchcock goes much further spinning a complex web to sophisticated filmmaking. For instance, once we are inside the music hall, the music and the camera work together – using diegetic music like others use exegetic music. There are three levels of action in the music hall: There is the physical fight that the police are unable to control (which is never really explained but makes for some wonderful camerawork). There is the lightness of the reaction of the public to Mr. Memory – rather than taking him seriously, they make fun of him Leaving his brain to the British Museum, to which the Music Hall audience gives a hearty laugh, marks Memory for death. And there is the woman's hand with her gun, a deadly serious gambit that causes panic in the crowd and brings the other two actions to a quick close. At the other end of the filmic spectrum Hannay asks his question of Mr. Memory three times – a reference to innumerable fairy tales.

Still in the Music Hall, the romantic aspect of the film is introduced almost immediately as the panicking and pushing crowd force Hannay and Annabella not only together, but into an embrace. The high angle shot looking down on them is Hitchcock's symbolization of impending doom or fate – perhaps from his religious background with the camera adopting the omniscient position of an ever-present God.

Visual symbolism is rife throughout Hitchcock's films. For instance, the door Hannay and Annaabella pass through to get to his apartment is covered with a grill that is a clutching, entrapping tangled web of loops and veritably yells warning Hannay to pay attention to what is going on.

A complex, multi-layered mini-drama takes place in Hannay's apartment. First, it makes no sense that a visiting Canadian would have everything in his apartment covered in sheets . . . except symbolically. Both representing mourning and hiding. Here Hitchcock introduces another trope that continues through his whole career: right versus left. When Annabella challenges Hannay to look out of the window as proof that gunmen are following her, he crosses the frame from left to right – from the side of evil to the side of good – he looks out of the window, and we see the gunmen on the left side of the frame – the side of evil – counterbalanced by Hannay on the right. Once convinced to Annabella's veracity, he crosses from right to left, thus entering the world of evil a few moments before he didn't know existed. Instantly gone now is his cavalier attitude toward Annabella's story of spies and intrigue. In the next shot, a statue that was first seen as simply a bit of decoration now is pointing out of the window where we last saw the two men waiting to kill Annabella. It points, we quickly learn, to where the murderer escaped out of the window. And we will learn later that it is also gesturing for Hannay to follow and solve the mystery of *The 39 Steps*.

In Hitchcock's world a good deed may not be repaid in kind. Hannay's being sucked into the world of spies, mystery, and murder is triggered by an act of kindness to

Annabella. In later films, the world becomes colder and more brutal as people do less and less to become involved. Even the negative repayment of kindness is gone – the world of *North by Northwest*, for instance, becomes completely random – Roger Thornhill does nothing to fall into the same world as does Hannay.

In *The 39 Steps* we see the first mature work of a master filmmaker. Here we can see him building a foundation upon which he will construct a series of masterpieces unlike any other filmmaker of his day.