

Pygmalion Personas: Female Representation in *Vertigo*

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Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* is a visually fascinating story of a mentally unstable man becoming increasingly obsessed with a woman while simultaneously tangling himself in a murder plot. Scottie (played by James Stewart), a former member of the police force, has quit due to his crippling fear of heights and injuries sustained from the consequences of this fear interfering with his work. He appears to live a relatively normal life until an old acquaintance, Gavin Elster (played by Tom Helmore), assigns him one last job: Investigate Elster's wife, Madeleine, who he believes to be possessed by the spirit of one of her ancestors. This is later revealed to be part of a larger criminal scheme to kill Elster's wife and frame it as a suicide, with Judy (Kim Novak) impersonating Madeleine to create an alibi and Scottie acting as a witness. From the florist's shop to Judy's final transformation into Madeleine, the use of color and lighting is stunning. Unfortunately, despite all the praise one would hope to give *Vertigo* for its artistic aspects, the female representation of the film is less than extraordinary.

In discussion of this film, the point that its women are "throw-aways" is bound to arise, and with good reason. Every woman is thrown away by the men at some point or another. The real Madeleine is never seen on screen, except for a glimpse of her body falling past the clocktower window during her suicide scene. While it is said that Midge, Scottie's friend and former fiancée (played by Barbara Bel Geddes), broke things off with Scottie, she is shunted to the side as he becomes increasingly fixated on Fake-Madeleine. Judy has her brief affair with Gavin and assists him in the murder of his wife, but is immediately pushed away once the deed is done. At the end, she is startled by a nun and falls through the same bell tower window from which Madeleine was thrown.

It is safe to say *Vertigo* is not lacking female characters, as there are two named female leads (Judy and Midge), and two named male leads (Scottie and Gavin). None of these characters could be removed from the story without greatly altering it in some way. However, the two women never interact, and many of Judy's conversations with Scottie exclusively revolve around romance in one or another. Furthermore, it is arguable whether or not Midge's role in the film truly adds something to the overarching plot. It is of personal opinion that her lively personality serves as a stark contrast to "Madeleine"/Judy's cool façade. This contrast provides a vital display of what Scottie views as the "Perfect Woman."

"Let me take care of you, Judy," Scottie says after their first dinner together. Judy has attempted to protest meeting him earlier in the day by explaining she has work, but would be willing to go on a second date in the evening. She is a working woman, living independently after all. Scottie does not care; he wants to see more of her. He wants to be the responsible one. The one in control. Especially after witnessing Madeleine's supposed suicide, he wishes to play the hero more than ever. He is attracted to helpless women like Madeleine, who he still believes is possessed, or severely mentally ill. Starting with persuading Judy to stop going to work, Scottie begins recreating what he lost: That beautiful, otherworldly, and utterly-in-need-of-saving woman. Film critic, Roger Ebert, explained what follows in his review of *Vertigo* (1996):

When he cannot have [Madeleine], he finds another woman and tries to mold her, dress her, train her, change her makeup and her hair, until she looks like the woman he desires. He cares nothing about the clay he is shaping; he will gladly sacrifice her on the altar of his dreams.

Reading this, the film seems reminiscent of the Greek myth of Pygmalion, an infamous sculptor who could be attracted to no mortal woman. Frustrated, he built his ideal woman out of ivory and was overcome by her beauty. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, brought his creation to life under the name Galatea. Retellings vary on whether Pygmalion and Galatea had a genuinely happy relationship or if Pygmalion was immediately repulsed by her living form, implying that he could only ever love the mere illusion of a woman. When closely examining Midge, Judy, and Madeleine, the comparisons to this tale are obvious. Midge has a job, passions, hobbies, and lives by herself. She is spunky, creative, and humorous. Judy, outside her role of Madeleine, is emotional and craves love. Her offhand comments about men when she initially tries to deter Scottie imply a deeper, more complicated past. She, too, has a job, and mentions her family living several states over. Both women are lively, genuine, and independent individuals that exist outside of Scottie's fantasies. Madeleine, on the other hand, is mysterious, distant, and weak. She is beautiful in a cold, idyllic, ethereal kind of way. She is a statue of a woman, created to appeal specifically to Scottie's Pygmalion psyche. This does not appear to be an uncommon interpretation, as Agata Frymas from the UK feminist blog, *The F-Word*, wrote, "Indeed, [Madeleine] is not much more than a mere object to Scottie, who perceives her represented by artifacts such as blonde hair or a gray suit" (Frymas, 2012). The platinum blonde of Madeleine's hair and pale gray of her suit consistently make her appear washed out and dreamlike. Judy, with her heavier makeup and brighter wardrobe, is too real for Scottie. He, in a sense, disposes of Judy the same way Gavin disposed of Madeleine—and similarly to how Pygmalion disposed of Galatea—when it is revealed she is not the woman he thought she was.

Judy and Midge are both wedged into roles of “The Perfect Woman,” voluntarily and not. Midge paints herself as Carlotta Valdes in an attempt to regain Scottie’s affections. Judy willingly impersonates Madeleine to continue her relationship with Gavin. After he leaves her, she is content leaving her past behind and becoming herself again. She hopes that Scottie will love her as such. Over time, it becomes obvious that Scottie is purely obsessed with her resemblance to Madeleine and could never love Judy. To appeal to his desires, she allows herself to become her previous form. Once he insists on changing her hair, it’s clear she no longer wants to continue this transformation, but gives in for a false love and possibly out of fear. In the scene where Scottie is searching for the same suit Madeleine wore, Judy is visibly upset and runs off in tears, proclaiming she will not go through with this. Scottie begs her to wear the clothes, believing it could not be of any true importance, and Judy crumbles under the pressure. Later, when Scottie tells her to change her hair, Judy is resistant once again until she admits, “I’ll do it. I don’t care about me anymore” (Hitchcock, 1959). Not only does this concept of a woman changing herself to become “perfect” in the eyes of someone she genuinely loves promote a negative stereotype about women— that they are passive, vain, and desperate —but it has deeper roots in this particular film than one would speculate, especially if they are unfamiliar with Hitchcock.

Hitchcock is known for casting stunningly beautiful blondes in his films, frequently as domineering mothers or cunning seductresses, with a couple exceptions. As Egbert stated in his review, “The female characters in his films reflected the same qualities over and over again: They were blond. They were icy and remote... They mesmerized the men, who often had physical or psychological handicaps. Sooner or later, every Hitchcock woman was humiliated”

(Egbert, 1996). Indeed, “Madeleine” tricks Scottie for the first half of the film, destroying his sanity. The second half is spent with Scottie deceiving “another” woman into becoming a ghost of what he thought he had, and then punishing her for her crimes and therefore restoring his sanity. This is viewed as something she deserves, and carries throughout Hitchcock films. Susan Jhirad, author of *Hitchcock’s Women* points out that Marion Crane from *Psycho* stole money from her company, Melanie Daniels from *The Birds* was considered a thief and compulsive liar, Judy is involved in a murder plot, and Lisa Fremont of *Rear Window* is spoiled by money (Jhirad, 1984, 32). It is one thing to have complex and morally grey characters. It is another to consistently paint women as malicious and have them atone for their crimes in increasingly horrible ways. “In *Psycho*, Tony Perkins must punish Janet Leigh for arousing him. We are appalled, but not really surprised... After all, didn’t she bring it upon herself by being so unconsciously seductive?” (Jhirad, 1984, 32). Comments float around the internet, claiming Judy got what she deserved in the end for what she did to Scottie. Similar mindsets permeate society’s views of women to this day. Victims of assault and violent crimes are portrayed as instigators for the abuse, and blame is frequently placed on women even when their own mistakes or wrongdoings are not connected to the torment they go through. Judy is far from a morally sound character, and when discussing *Vertigo* independently, her role as an accomplice to murder cannot be defended, but this does not justify Scottie’s mistreatment. Just as importantly, the repetitive themes in Hitchcock’s work must be examined as a whole to truly grasp his view of women.

Still, Hitchcock’s fans argue against the notion of his negative female representation.

Anne Bilson, a writer for *The Guardian* released an article titled “Vertigo is not the Last Word in

Misogyny, but a Feminist Deconstruction of it.” Bilson argues that since Hitchcock actively collaborated with powerful, hard-working women, he was not sexist at heart. Besides, spectators are placed in Scottie’s perspective, whose worldview is warped by delusions and mental illness (Bilson, 2018). Judgment cannot be passed on a director based on their character’s views. However, the opposite can still be argued. If recurring mindsets and beliefs are being used, if specific character archetypes are making consistent reappearances, then that begins to reflect upon the creator for better or worse.

Bilson’s sentiment is shared by Amy Roberts from *Film Daily*, who ranked Hitchcock’s films for female representation to prove that his women are not the passive, ditzzy, and emotional variety many think of when considering the stereotypical woman. Unfortunately for Roberts, her list is far from reassuring. Hitchcock’s women are marked by their inherent “sensuality,” scheming, and often cruel or deceiving traits. As previously mentioned, with only a few exceptions, many women are described as having only a “sliver” of their personalities revealed, and others are criminals. Madeleine is referred to as a fetish doll for Scottie. While the women on that list may be complex and intelligent, there is still a pattern of Hitchcock’s female characters being villainous in some way or another. Robert Egbert wrote, “Over and over in his films, Hitchcock took delight in literally and figuratively dragging his women through the mud--humiliating them, spoiling their hair and clothes as if lashing at his own fetishes” (Egbert, 1996). This belief that Hitchcock was projecting his own mentalities through the character of Scottie is not uncommon, and considering how controlling of his actresses he was, it is baffling that viewers don’t connect the dots between Hitchcock’s own toxic views and the common traits in his work.

As was mentioned several times prior, Alfred Hitchcock was known for being incredibly controlling of, not only his films, but his actresses. He had a “type” when it came to casting, and Kim Novak is no different. If anything, she is the quintessential Hitchcock woman. It is theorized by Virginia Wexman, author of *The Critic as Consumer: Film Study in the University, "Vertigo", and the Film Canon*, that James Stewart, Kim Novak, and San Francisco were crucial elements of the film due to their commercial power (Wexman, 1986, 3). Novak especially garnered attention because of her appearance and fell into the selection of female stars that indirectly promoted a sort of cult following “the mystification of female beauty” (Wexman, 1986, 3). The character Judy, according to Wexman, is based on Novak, using certain aspects of her personality and preferences (for example, Judy’s lavender evening gown was supposedly selected because Novak was fond of the color). Madeleine, in comparison, was an exaggeration of Novak’s refined beauty. Hitchcock in a sense is playing that same role of Pygmalion. He chooses his actresses based on physical traits and shapes them into exactly what he wants. Wexman says, “The story of an ordinary young woman who is transformed into a celestial beauty by a controlling man recreates the director’s relationships with his female stars” (Wexman, 1986, 3). Just like Scottie forcing Judy to assume the role of Madeleine, Hitchcock forced Novak into roles centered around otherworldly beauty, driving the objectification of both the female characters in *Vertigo*, and of Novak herself. Madeleine, Judy, and Novak are not the only ones who faced this objectification and control from men. The sexual assault of Tippi Hendren committed by Alfred Hitchcock is well known and thoroughly documented. It is odd that people are so willing to say the director and his work are not connected in values and mentalities, when Hitchcock himself is

guilty of abusing and manipulating women. The artist directly controls the art after all. Fantasies and worldviews tend to leak into one's work.

Had it not been for Hitchcock's past abuse of actress Tippi Hedren, and recurring themes of women being murdered, humiliated, and otherwise punished, the film could be viewed as depicting women's struggles in abusive and controlling relationships. However, due to the fascinating connections between *Pygmalion* and *Scottie*, as well as Hitchcock's own history, it only further emphasizes the objectification of women and is a projection of the director's darker views.

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