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Hitch's *Psycho* stripped down:
The stuff your parents didn't want you to know

The greatness of *Psycho* lies in its ability, not merely to *tell* us this, but to make us experience it. It is this that makes a satisfactory analysis of a Hitchcock film on paper so difficult; it also ensures that no analysis, however detailed, can ever become a substitute for the film itself, since the direct emotional experience survives any amount of explanatory justification (Wood 148).

I could not describe a Hitchcock movie or the difficulty in analyzing one as effectively as the quote above. I only needed to see *Psycho* once to become absolutely fascinated by the film and the many viewings that followed only intensified my interest. I jumped at the chance to delve deeper into this extraordinary film. I soon realized, as the author above states, that no amount of discussion, analysis, or explanation could ever do *Psycho* justice. With this paper I hope to share insights and viewpoints I have collected in my research and as a student of literature and a devoted fan of the movie itself, provide my own opinions. I will be focusing on the theme of sexuality in the character of Marion Crane by describing and exploring two significant scenes in the movie: the opening hotel scene and the shower murder scene. Following my analysis is an *Appendix* which provides a summary of the movie for both experienced and new viewers.

At the very start of the movie the audience is taken into a small hotel room in the middle of the afternoon. The camera focuses on Marion, dressed in nothing but a white bra and slip, lying on a bed. She looks up at Sam, her lover, who is wiping off his chest with a towel. The two kiss and caress each other throughout the scene while talking about their current relationship and possible future plans. Sam is being forced to pay off his father's debts and alimony to his ex-wife, and as a result, cannot afford a real commitment to Marion. Marion, on the other hand, expresses her desire for a "real" and "proper" relationship and assures Sam that living in poverty with him until his financial burdens are lifted is acceptable to her, but Sam refuses. Marion, rather upset at his refusal, states that she must return to work.

This scene is full of images of sexuality. To begin with, let us look at what these images imply about the characters and their relationship. Both characters are in a state of half-dress, Sam is mopping his chest with a towel, Marion is lying invitingly on the bed. From these clues we can deduce that the couple has just engaged in some sort of sexual activity. Clearly, from their conversation about their relationship, the audience can tell that the sexual affair between these two characters has continued for some time now, and that sexual escapades during their lunch breaks, such as the one we have just witnessed, are common occurrences.

The revealing attire modeled by Sam and Marion is also worth noting because such clothing was not common on the big screen during the 1950s. Pre-*Psycho*, “all female stars wore full slips over their bra” (Durnat 26). However, Hitchcock faced resistance from critics for showing Marion in this way mainly because of the context of the setting. According to Raymond Durnat in his book *A Long Hard Look at Psycho*, certain rules regarding sex scenes were expected to be followed by filmmakers, and one such rule was that, “given two lovers embracing on or about a bed, each must keep one foot on the floor. Hitchcock breaks it right away, with Marion’s upper body flat out on the bed as if she’d just been pressed right down onto it” (26). Many theories exist regarding Hitchcock’s purpose in portraying the scene as explicitly as he does. Some of the most common are to identify with a younger audience, to emphasize the closeness between Marion and Sam, and to set up for the “punishment” scene later on.

First, let us look at the motivation to identify with the younger audience. Although pre-marital sex was becoming more common at this time the greater society still frowned upon the practice. Durnat suggests that the “line” between “heavy petting” and “going all the way” was becoming “famously thin and many teenagers were crossing it” (27). While the exact details of Marion and Sam’s sexual encounter are unspecified, the moral question of sexual activity out of wedlock remains. As long as sex was portrayed (discreetly) as a means of procreation in movies it was generally accepted by society. However, Hitchcock focuses on the sensual pleasure of sex in this scene; through the use of close up shots and the urgent tenderness between the lovers, he presents the scene in a very suggestive and provocative manner, which is the root of all the controversy. “This shift in social attitude [anti-pre-marital relations to the acceptance of them] was creating tension because it threatened the basis of the family... women who were sexually active outside marriage were seen as particular threats because they might end up as unmarried mothers and thus they were labeled by society as loose and morally reprehensible” (Wells 72). The “wrongness” of their relationship to older audiences emphasizes the social transgressions Marion and Sam have committed. On the contrary, with teenagers participating in acts similar to what we witness between Marion and Sam, I think Hitchcock knew that simple, innocent kissing would not convey the strong passion between the two lovers to the younger audience. I think Hitchcock’s goal may have been to reach both audiences; which he does by stressing the “crime” aspect of the affair to engage the emotions of the older audience, while also presenting the physical connection between the characters to excite the younger audience.

Some critics argue that this passionate connection between Marion and Sam is Hitchcock’s main reason for filming the scene so provocatively. He needed to show how badly Marion wanted a proper relationship and marriage with Sam so that the audience can share in her desire to steal the money later on in the film. Contradictory to the previous theory, this one focuses on the emotions behind the physical act. “Even while sensually enlaced and kissing, Marion expresses discontent [with their current arrangement]” (Durnat 30), proving perhaps that they are together for love, not merely sex. Her demands for a socially acceptable relationship demonstrate that she has feelings for Sam beyond just physical attraction. And Sam’s desire to protect her from his own financial burdens suggests he cares deeply for her as well. I feel this theory holds

considerable merit; however, I do not think it more significant than the previous or the following speculations.

Regardless of whether Hitchcock chose to shoot this scene as a means for identifying with young and older audiences through the provocative actions of the characters or to emphasize the close relationship between the characters through their conversation, the fact remains that the scene is very sexual in content. Some believe the sensuality of this scene was to set up for Marion's "punishment" later on. Of course I am referring to the shower scene in which Marion is murdered by what appears to be Norman Bates' mother. This idea is popular among "Brand X feminists" who, according to Durgnat, believe "Marion's murder was in some poetic way 'punishment' for her sexual goings-on with Sam" (32). In addition to her "inappropriate" relations with Sam, her manner of dress was also unacceptable to feminists, "Not only is she engaged in a sexual relationship outside of marriage, but her visual appearance is coded as extremely sexual. She is seen in her brassiere and slip twice and all of her clothes are figure-hugging..." (Wells 72). If the shower scene was indeed meant as a consequential punishment for Marion, then Hitchcock needed to create a need for such a consequence—Marion's enjoyment of her sexual relations with Sam. Hitchcock could not justify the shower murder as a punishment (if this was indeed what he intended), had he not filmed the opening hotel scene with Marion and Sam as provocatively as he did. Thus, according to feminist critics, was Hitchcock's reason for filming the scene in this way.

I do not pretend to be an expert on the sexual implications of *Psycho*, however, based on my extensive research and personal attachment to the film, I offer my own interpretation of the hotel scene. I think Hitchcock's main purpose in this scene is to engage his audience. He knows how appealing sex is to both the younger crowd, who is beginning to have sexual experiences of their own, and to the older crowd who is trying to prevent them from doing so.

Concerning the younger crowd, Hitchcock is teasing us. He shows us Marion and Sam at the *end* of their love-making instead of *during* it. The most sexual activity we witness is only kissing and caressing. Although there is the implication that more has occurred between the lovers, the exact details of that are left to our imaginations. Further, we only see Marion in her bra and slip, yet we see Sam entirely naked from the waist up, which leaves the male half of the audience unsatisfied (Durgnat 27). Yet everyone's sexual interest has been stirred. We hear about Marion's desire for a change of pace, implying these stolen lunch hours have been going on for some time now. This is also arousing to an audience staring at two attractive, half-naked actors. Even more intriguing and perhaps exciting is the notion that what they are doing is morally wrong by society's standards. This is especially appealing to a teenage audience who is at the height of their rebellious stage in life. Even though Marion talks of wanting a respectable relationship we know that she has led a socially unacceptable one thus far, part of which we have just witnessed. This adds to the overflow of sexual emotions entering our brains at this point and causes us to focus more on their physical relationship rather than their emotional attachment. By the end of the scene we share in Marion's frustration, though hers is a result of Sam's lack of commitment and ours is sexually based. Still, we are immediately and deeply connected with Marion from this point on (until she dies), "spectators of all sexes and genders would, I think, take Marion as their principal identification figure"

(Durgnat 33). This strong identification with Marion is exactly what Hitchcock wants so that the shock of her death is even more shattering.

I find the implications of this scene in regards to the older audience, even more fascinating. This is the part of society who views this scene as inappropriate because of its suggestive nature. Yet I believe this generation is also remembering when they were young and in love and perhaps gave into the temptations of their own sexual desires. So while their minds are reeling with frustration because this scene reminds them of what their children may be doing with their boyfriends and girlfriends, they are also becoming more attracted to the scene because, try as they might to bury it within themselves, their sexual interest has also been awakened. The older audience is now also being teased by Hitchcock because they are so torn between these strong conflicting emotions. The end result is the same though; they are inevitably attached to Marion because her frustration reflects their own.

As I stated earlier, this connection to Marion is essential in preparing the audience for the shower scene. From the time she leaves the hotel until the time of her death Marion is the character that we follow, “she’s the protagonist and our primary ... dramatic concern” (Durgnat 33). Let us now look at the details of the shower scene. We see Marion in her hotel room undressing, preparing to shower. This time she is wearing a black bra and slip to reflect how she has temporarily become a “bad girl” in her decision to steal the money. At this point however, she has denounced her previous decision and we are to assume that she plans to abandon her idea and return the money the following morning. Thus she enters the shower to “cleanse” herself of her wrong-doings.

Once again our sexual interest is stirred, this time with the knowledge that Marion is naked and from her satisfied expressions, enjoying herself, “‘unabashed pleasure’ strikes me as the dominant mood” (Durgnat 114). Even before she enters the shower we are slightly aroused because we witness her undressing, “tilt downs to a disrobing woman’s feet were a stock device, sometimes suggestive...” (Durgnat 114). In the midst of her enjoyment a dark, womanly figure enters the bathroom, rips the curtain aside and sinks a large knife into the stomach of our protagonist. Marion screams and tries to ward off the blows but cannot and after several more fatal stabs to her chest, her attacker runs off. Marion sways, grabs hold of the curtain for support, but falls forward taking the curtain with her. She lies dead on the floor, head next to the toilet, eyes open and staring across the room.

This scene is utterly shocking and disturbing to the audience. Many aspects demand attention, first let us examine the physical effect on the audience. At the start of the scene we have once again returned to this enhanced state of interest, perhaps this time hoping to glimpse more of Marion. Once the curtain is ripped aside, however, we are faced with a new, uncomfortable emotion: vulnerability. Just how defenseless one is while taking a shower becomes crystal clear to us in this scene. “How soft, how incredibly vulnerable she is now; how squeamish one becomes at the thought of a knife. We see a close-up of her legs ... with mounting uneasiness, we note how defenseless she is in that position, how insecure the footing must be in there” (Naremore 55). From this point on we are torn between fear for our protagonist, whom we have become so attached to, and our desire to see her naked. Even when she has fallen to the ground dead, as the

camera pans back to the shower drain we are still hoping to catch a glance of some part of her desirable body. “It should make the male audience even more uncomfortable to reflect that even while they watched the stabbing...they were hoping to catch a glimpse of a naked body” (Naremore 59). We realize how morally wrong our thoughts are, yet we cannot help ourselves. This adds to the shock value of the scene. Hitchcock was well aware of our shameful, prying eyes though, and took special care to prevent us from ever viewing what we so strongly desire. He took over 70 shots to film this scene and as the audience is well aware of, we see no body parts that critics would object to.

In addition to our nerve-rattling, physical disappointment, Hitchcock has played another trick on us, this time with our emotions. By choosing Janet Leigh, a popular actor during this time, to play the main character of Marion, the audience is not expecting her death this early in the film. Hitchcock stated this was in fact part of his plan, “in the average production, Janet Leigh would have been given the other role. She would have played the sister who’s investigating. It’s rather unusual to kill the star in the first third of the film. I purposely killed the star so as to make the killing even more unexpected” (Wells 34). Name-actors have not been known, even in modern times, to be killed in the first third of the film. The reality of her murder doesn’t even sink in until we see her lifeless body being stuffed into the trunk of her car by Norman.

Hitchcock further deceives us by distracting us with what he called “MacGuffins” (information that appears to be central to the plot but is actually irrelevant to the ultimate outcome) so as to lead the audiences astray from what was to actually occur. Hitchcock distracts the audience from predicting the murder of Marion by focusing on the issue of the stolen money and the relationship of Marion and Sam. This way the audience thinks they will be following Marion in her decisions about handling this situation and through the traditional path of conflict/resolution. We are especially convinced of this when we see that Marion has decided to return the money and enters the shower as if to “cleanse” herself of her sinister plan she has now abandoned. Since this character has redeemed herself there is no reason for any harm to come to her. And just as we have contented ourselves with this thought the curtain is ripped aside and the stabbing begins.

Another aspect of this scene is the symbolism. Many critics believe the murder of Marion Crane doubles as the “raping” of Marion Crane. The knife is viewed as a phallic symbol and some even suggest Marion’s screaming, open, wet mouth is the “vaginal counterpart” to the knife (Naremore 56). Also, Marion is naked, vulnerable, overpowered, and taken advantage of both physically and emotionally. As one author describes the scene, “the cuts between shots of gushing water and Marion’s ecstatic face, the connotations are also of sexual enjoyment. The stabbing that follows can be read as a ...symbolic rape by the penetrative knife, which takes on the form of the phallus for the sexually deviant Norman” (Wells 73).

A psychological dimension to the “rape” is also worth noting. We know that Norman is sexually attracted to Marion from his boyish flirtations and more so when he spies on her as she undresses for the shower. So if he desired her so strongly, why not commit the sexual act of rape instead of killing (or metaphorically “raping”) her? The answer lies in the psychoanalysis of Norman’s mental state and the few facts we know about his past. We are told that Norman committed the unthinkable crime of matricide, and murdered three other people (not including Marion): his mother’s lover and two

female guests at the hotel. Our liking for Norman's character prior to the murder of Marion makes it difficult to blame him entirely for the murder of Marion especially since we are told how his mother's controlling personality has now fully consumed him. However, we must also consider Norman's feelings towards his mother,

Norman was obsessively jealous of his mother, and so he naturally assumed that she was jealous of him. As a result, he created a version of Mrs. Bates, a figure who would seek violent revenge whenever 'she' felt Norman was aroused by another woman. He sought to make his mother share in his crimes, he had murdered her lover, so she was made to murder his (Naremore 69).

In other words, Norman's guilt for murdering his mother has manifested into guilt for any sexual attraction he feels toward any other woman because he thinks this would have upset his mother. And the only way he can overcome this guilt is to kill the woman he desires. Killing the woman also prevents him from having any sexual relations with anyone, leading to his extreme sexual frustration, however Hitchcock chooses to leave this to the thoughts of his audience, "the psychiatrist does not try to explain Norman's sexual frustrations, and the extraordinary fusion of revenge and rape in the shower murder is allowed to speak for itself" (Naremore 69).

Finally, the murder of Marion is also interpreted as punishment for her sexual transgressions with Sam. This is, as stated earlier, the view taken on by most feminist critics. Regardless of the fact that she has changed her mind about stealing the money, she still deserves consequences for having sexual relations outside of wedlock. I would think that murder is a rather harsh punishment, but then I was brought up in a culture and society that accepted pre-marital sex and generally speaking, did not consider it morally wrong; these women obviously were taught differently.

Now, I will once again offer my opinion on the subject of Marion's murder. I think more than anything the murder was meant to shock the audience and as a crucial part of the plot in Norman's transformation into "Mother". The selection of a name-actor, the "MacGuffins", the "cleansing" leading us to believe she is out of harms way, and our attachment to her, all contribute to the shock value of the scene. As if that weren't enough evidence, Hitchcock states himself that he wanted to shock the audience. Also, it is this murder that initiates a series of events that lead Norman to become "Mother". Arbogast comes to investigate and his murder leads to the attempted murder of Lila, which was apparently the breaking point for Norman, since after this scene he has taken on the personality of "Mother".

This concludes my analysis of Marion and the sexual implications, connotations, symbols, and purposes concerning her role in the film. My goal is to have enlightened experienced viewers to aspects of the movie they had not previously considered, and also to have sparked an interest for the film in first-time viewers and encourage them to become multiple-time viewers. I would like to remind my readers that this analysis is merely meant to provide additional information and enhance the experience of watching this intriguing film, however, to actually have a true appreciation for this movie, one needs to watch Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Appendix

This *Appendix* is meant to summarize the movie for those who have not seen it and to refresh the minds of those who have. A warning to those who have not seen the movie: the ending is discussed in the paper so it is necessary for me to include it in this summary, if you do not wish to have it ruined then read no more.

The start of the film opens on a warm, sunny day in Phoenix, the time is 2:43 P.M. We are taken inside the window of a hotel room, where we find two lovers, Marion and Sam, just finishing up what appears to be their usual hour of love-making. Marion expresses her desire to change the circumstances of their relationship because she feels it is inappropriate and wants something more committed and proper with Sam. However, Sam is in a financial bind and cannot support Marion at the present time so he refuses to change anything.

We then follow Marion as she returns to work as a secretary. Here she is presented with the opportunity to steal \$40,000 from her bosses' client, and she takes it. She feigns a headache and leaves work early and goes home to pack. She plans to meet Sam in California (where he lives) but she becomes tired while driving and after a close call with a police officer she decides to spend the night at the Bates Motel.

Here she meets Norman Bates, who runs the hotel and lives with his mother in a large, threatening mansion next door to the hotel. He invites Marion to dine with him in the parlor, which turns out to be a small room filled with many stuffed birds. We learn that Norman has given up his life to take care of his handicapped mother, he enjoys taxidermy, and appears to have the "boy-next-door" type of personality. Through talking to Norman and realizing that his hardships surpass her own, Marion decides to return the money the following morning.

Unfortunately for Marion, while she is taking a "cleansing" shower a dark figure, appearing to be Norman's mother comes in and brutally attacks her with a knife. Marion is left to die rather dramatically. This scene is one of the most shocking murder scenes in the history of film.

Norman, having learned of what his mother has done, comes rushing in only to find Marion slumped rather awkwardly over the bathtub, dead. He gets over his initial shock and disgust and begins to clean up the mess. He throws Marion's body and her belongings (including the newspaper in which she has hidden-unknown to Norman-the \$40,000) into her car and sinks it in a nearby swamp.

After several days Marion's sister, Lila becomes suspicious about Marion's sudden disappearance. She goes to consult Sam and the two of them are confronted by a private detective, Arbogast, sent by Marion's boss to investigate Marion's disappearance as well as the missing \$40,000.

The detective stumbles upon the Bates motel and questions Norman who claims ignorance on the subject. Arbogast reports back to Lila and Sam, but decides to return later to question the mother. When he returns he too is murdered by Norman's mother. When Norman discovers this, he seems to sense others will be arriving soon so he hides her in the cellar.

After several more days, with no word from Arbogast, Lila and Sam decide to investigate themselves. Sam questions Norman while Lila sneaks to the mansion to talk with Norman's mother. She eventually makes her way down to the cellar where she finds that Norman's "mother" is nothing more than a perfectly preserved corpse. Just as she stumbles upon the skeleton, Norman runs in, disguised as his mother with a wig and dress. Knife in hand he lunges for Lila but Sam manages to get to the scene just in time to hold Norman back.

The next scene is at a police station and a psychiatrist is explaining Norman's condition to Lila, Sam, and other officers. We learn that Norman was overly protective and jealous of his mother and killed her and her lover over ten years ago. His guilt had made him preserve her body all this time. He felt that she would not have approved of his sexual lust toward women so he had to kill them for her. Since he had killed her lover he needed to believe that she killed his as well, explaining why he dressed as her when he committed the murders.

We are then taken into a white room where Norman now awaits his fate. The psychiatrist has informed us that the "mother" half of him has completely taken over him. And sure enough he speaks to us in the same voice we heard "Mother" speak in during earlier parts of the film. The scene ends with a horribly disturbing smile from Norman with the skull of Mother half-way superimposed over his face. The credits roll over a picture of the Marion's car being pulled up from the swamp.