

Psycho – Alfred Hitchcock (1960)

A key **theme** of Alfred Hitchcock's films:

Voyeurism: the act of viewing the activities of other people without them knowing. A voyeur gets pleasure from watching people in secret

Why is the film *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock considered such a great horror movie?

When you think about horror films, you are more than likely thinking about films that have scary monsters or evil villains. This idea was true in classic cinema until the release of 1960's *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock. *Psycho* is considered to most to be a horror film, but the film itself redefined what can actually be called a monster/horror flick. This film brought the so-called psychological monster into mainstream cinema and created a new type of thrill. No longer did people need to be afraid of the supernatural, they also needed to be afraid of the everyday people they could encounter throughout their daily lives.

Alfred Hitchcock is a director who tends to push the limits of one's thought process. One of the ways he does this in *Psycho* is through **Voyeurism**. The audience can first see the sight of voyeurism when Norman Bates looks through a peephole in his office that shows Marion Crane undressing. This action makes the audience not only wonder why Norman is doing this, but what is his possible plan for Marion. At the end of the movie, the audience learns that Norman is mentally ill his action of looking through the peephole could be related to him possibly witnessing his mother undressing or some other sexual activity that took place in his life at an early age.

Norman Bates could very well be a man who is lonely. His character states many times that his motel doesn't get as many customers as it used to because of the creation of a new highway. This event could have made him less social and do things normal people would not do. Norman Bates' psychological act of voyeurism shows that something isn't right with this man, who is at first shown to be a clean cut individual.

Psycho shows great examples of how one can interpret Norman's killing of women with that of an **Oedipal Complex**, this is proven correct through the actions of his character. Yes, Norman Bates kills people with a **phallic** object that can be related to an experience in his childhood, but the audience is never shown a flashback scene to fully see if this is correct. Norman could simply be killing women over the jealousy of just wanting to have only one feminine figure in his life, his mother.

Notice how Norman peeks through a hole to secretly watch Marion undressing. What is to say he didn't also do the same thing to his mother when he was a young boy? In his mind, he kills as if his mother is the jealous person, when really it is Norman who can't stand not to be the center of his mother's life. He kills his mother's lover because he is mentally ill and realistically he thinks that he is in love with his mother.

There is a psychological mystery here that can't be explained, it can only be assumed through interpretations of his actions. The story of Norman Bates' life could be called sympathetic, but

his behavior and actions are disturbing and can make audience members show less support for his character. At first and audience member might feel sympathy for him, yet once he is shown to be the killer and mentally ill they turn their backs on him.

The 1960's version *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock is simply one of best horror films, when dealing with the subject of the *human psyche*. You never really see what's coming next, and this was definitely a rare feature for a film being seen by a modern audience today.

Questions:

1. The opening moments of *Psycho* suggest a documentary, with exact time and place indicated. What might be a viewer's expectations after such an opening?
2. The early parts of *Psycho* encourage the audience to identify with Marion (Janet Leigh). With whom do we identify in the rest of the film? How does Hitchcock encourage this identification?
3. Hitchcock filmed *Psycho* on a fairly low budget and in black and white (even though six of his previous seven films had been in color). Does the somewhat tacky look of the film add to or detract from your enjoyment of *Psycho*? Why?
4. Although Marion Crane is a thief, she seems sympathetic to us. Why? What is it about the nature of her crime and/or her personality that makes her seem relatively innocent?
5. *Psycho* works in part by fooling the audience a good deal of the time, and some of the best moments in the film are complete surprises. Does Hitchcock cheat too much in order to fool his audience? Hitchcock often claims that suspense is more effective than surprise. Does he violate that concept here?
6. Many people think that Bernard Herrmann's music contributes mightily to this film's effect. In what ways is the music particularly effective?
7. Some viewers have disliked the last part of *Psycho*, where the psychiatrist explains what really happened. What is your reaction to this scene? Why do you think Hitchcock included it? Does it serve to explain the film's meaning? What does it leave out of consideration?
8. *Psycho* might be described as a film built around the number 2, a film of doublings and reflections. What doubles, repetitions, contrasts, and substitutions do you find in the film?
9. Alfred Hitchcock's films show an interesting tendency towards recurring **themes** and **plot** devices. There are **images** of birds in nearly all of Hitchcock's films. What is the significance of the **images** of birds in the film *Psycho*?