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Harry Sanderson

University of Western Australia, Perth, hps@outlook.com

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Misreading Hitchcock: Masked Signs in *Young and Innocent*

I. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie

Umberto Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*

The plot of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Young and Innocent* (1937) is familiar, and like its title it comes to us in well-delineated, straightforward parts.¹ A man is wrongly accused of a murder, and flees the authorities while trying to prove his innocence. Gradually he charms a female accomplice, and concludes by finding the true killer. Hitchcock had used this basic structure in his 1935 film *The 39 Steps*, and continued to develop it through to films such as *North by Northwest* (1959). In spite of its generic narrative and status as a minor work, however, *Young and Innocent* presents a deeply engaging play of signage and signification.

The film has a symmetrical structure, which will dictate the structure of my reading. There are two protagonists: Robert Tisdale and the Husband.² The film opens on the Husband in a tense argument with his wife, in a scene that lasts roughly five minutes. The Husband only reappears in another five-minute scene at the end of the film, where he is revealed as his wife’s killer. The middle section of the film, lasting one hour, features Robert Tisdale’s escape from the

¹ The work is based on the 1936 novel *A Shilling for Candles* by Josephine Tey, but I will deal with the film version independently. I am not concerned with the specific creative genesis of its themes, but rather with how they are presented to the viewer by Hitchcock.
² The character is not named in the film, and the actor George Curzon is credited only as ‘Guy’. For ease, I will refer to him as simply ‘the Husband’.
police, and his search for the true killer. The two appearances of the Husband therefore bookend the film, which centers on Tisdale’s escape.

I will draw on semiotic terminology to discuss the play of characterization within the film, employing Barbara Johnson’s framework of characters as motivated and unmotivated signs (573). I will first examine the character of Tisdale. I will argue Tisdale’s constant use of disguise and masking contributes to a destabilization of traditional concepts of signification and meaning. I will draw on post-structuralist discourse to argue he increasingly embodies a ‘baseless’ signifier. I will then turn to analyze the character of the Husband. I will draw on Freudian discourse in order to examine his hysteria as a product of the castration complex. In doing so, I will demonstrate he is congruous with Johnson’s framework, and thus a ‘readable’ character.

Though I will draw on structural discourse, my conclusions will not relate to how Young and Innocent exists within the structure of Hitchcock’s oeuvre, or film in general. Rather, I am concerned with the viewers’ ability to read the twin protagonists in terms of their individual character. My reading is therefore primarily psychoanalytical, as I consider Johnson’s to be.

II. SEMIOTIC CHARACTER

Barbara Johnson, in her essay on Herman Melville’s Billy Budd, develops a framework of character analysis in terms of the “separation between being and doing” (573). Her theory is grounded in Saussure’s development of the signifier and signified as the primary units of language. Saussure had observed that “there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever… the process which selects one particular sound-sequence to correspond to one particular idea is completely arbitrary” (111). Johnson uses the idea of arbitrary sign relations to examine potential incongruity between a character’s outside actions and their
internal nature. To Johnson, the inner self is the signified, and the outer self the signifier (573). Where a character’s external actions correspond with their internal being, the sign is ‘motivated’ because “the inner self (the signified) is considered transparently readable from… the outer self (the signifier)” (573). Where a character’s actions are contrary to their internal being, the signifier/signified relationship is more arbitrary, and they can be characterized as an ‘unmotivated sign’ (573-575).

Important to note is that in declaring the relation between signifier and signified arbitrary, Saussure did not declare signs were necessarily arbitrary. In fact, after making his declaration he stated: “applied without restriction, this principle would lead to utter chaos” (131). Johnson, in reading characters in terms of motivated and unmotivated signifiers, is in some sense charting how chaotic a character’s actions are. Given the protagonists of Young and Innocent increasingly exemplify arbitrary signifiers, their personal identities can be discussed in Johnson’s terms.

III. ROBERT TISDALE

There can be no kernel in this light nut; the soul of this man is his clothes

Lafeu in All’s Well that Ends Well (2.5.6-7)

Robert Tisdale’s narrative revolves around his escape from the police. In order to remain at large, Tisdale is constantly disguising himself. Scene-by-scene, we see him present himself as a different personage to the various characters he interacts with. As a result, the film’s universe becomes the chaos Saussure prophesied, where traditional sign associations break down.

An example comes early, when Tisdale steals his attorney’s spectacles in order to escape the courthouse. The signifier ‘learned bystander’ masks his
true signified ‘accused’, allowing him to slip out of the courthouse unmolested. In this early instance, we see hints at a discontinuity between outward action and inward character.

A more striking example comes later, while Tisdale searches for the tramp. He dresses himself in the cap and jacket of a railyard worker, again arbitrarily switching his outward signifier. In his disguise, he walks into a hotel under a wooden sign that reads ‘Nobby’s Lodging House’. He leans against the counter and addresses the clerk: “evening Nobby”. The clerk replies: “I ain’t Nobby, he’s been dead since before the war”. Tisdale barely registers his response, and asks if there is a bed free. The episode illustrates the total Saussurean chaos of the film: one masked signified (Tisdale) addresses another (the Clerk), respectively presenting themselves under the unmotivated signs of a railyard worker and the hotel proprietor ‘Nobby’. It is exactly this warped principle of signification which has allowed Tisdale to shift through the different scenarios of the film. The characters he encounters are increasingly willing to trust the signifier he offers them as dictating a corresponding character, and his true identity is never examined.

This is illustrated most powerfully in the party scene. Tisdale attends a birthday celebration, and introduces himself with the pseudonym ‘Beechcroft Manningtree’. The false name is readily accepted, illustrating the meaninglessness of a label intended to signify him. No one questions whether it is motivated by a valid personage. Minutes later, when Tisdale is asked to remind the host of his name, he unconsciously supplies the reversed version, ‘Beechtree Manningcroft’, without anyone noticing. This is perhaps the most interesting instance of chaos in the film, because it is an example of not only an unmotivated sign, but an unmotivated sign that is not internally consistent. Saussure stated: “The individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in the linguistic community” (68), but again we see
his limits rebutted. Tisdale in fact can change his signifier without consequence, because its consistency is of no concern to those reading it.

Semiotician C.S Pierce wrote extensively on the idea of personal identity in the semiotic framework, famously stating “man is a sign” (313). Pierce followed Saussure’s notion that signs were arbitrary. However, like Saussure, he held on to the idea that in any functional system of meaning, there must be some connection between signifier and signified (296-304). Using semiotic terms to discuss personal identity, he wrote:

Some element of existence which, not merely by the likeness between its different apparitions, but by an inward force of identity, manifesting itself in the continuity of its apparitions throughout time and in space, is distinct from everything else, and is thus fit to receive a proper name or to be indicated as this or that. (290)

Here he expounds a conception of internal personhood that is continuous, and indexical to its outward signifier. In some respect, this is a conservative viewpoint, which asserts a metaphysical connection between the thing named and the name itself. As has been demonstrated, Tisdale constantly refutes this connection, by descending into Saussure’s chaos of arbitrary signs. He is able to switch his name and appearance regularly, with no concern for his internal ‘nature’.

IV. POST-STRUCTURALISM

To assert that Tisdale refutes Pierce and Saussure by masking his identity, however, presupposes a stable core signified that exists within him. When Johnson discusses the Guilt and Innocence of Billy and Claggart, she is able to portray their acts as either motivated or unmotivated by their nature, because Melville has given the reader a portrait of who they are (571-3).
Hitchcock never offers the viewer such expositional insight: we do not know who Tisdale is, where he has come from, or what his motivations are. In his first moments on screen he is accused of murder, and from there we only see only a linking chain of disguises. His character can be discussed in terms of Johnson’s framework in that his actions are unmotivated by any clear internal signified (574). However, he does not fit completely, because we are given no clear idea of what that internal signified actually is. The structure is invalidated, like so:

Billy  ___________________________  Innocence
Claggart  ___________________________  Guilt
Tisdale  ________________________________   ?

How then can we read Tisdale? Post-structuralist philosopher Jean Baudrillard, building on Jacques Lacan, developed a theory of ‘hyperreality’, in which outward signifiers are increasingly accepted without any question of their relation to a core signified (4-7). To Baudrillard, the increased proliferation of images in post-industrial society means that objects are increasingly judged on their fleeting appearance. The outward signifier becomes “prime”, to the extent that it alone constitutes reality (6). Jackson and Hogg build on this theory in regards to identity, arguing individuals can “appropriate simulated identities provided by signs and images, becoming completely influenced and determined by outside sources. Identity disappears just like reality does” (341).

This applies to Tisdale’s escapades. The policeman at the beginning of the film accept his status as a bystander when he escape the courtroom. Nobby accepts his worker’s costume, and Tisdale’s insouciance towards the shifting identity of the clerk indicates he doesn’t care who the name truly signifies in any depth. To him, the primary reality is the signifier of Nobby, who he continues to engage with. The party scene further entrenches the Baudrillardian primacy of the signifier. Tisdale can change his signifier without consequence,
because it has ceased to refer to anything other than itself. His personal identity has become a sort of arbitrary, shapeshifting sign, which is reformulated every time he chooses to re-present it.

This consideration of Tisdale as a post-structuralist ‘hyper-individual’ profoundly complicates how he can be read as a character. Jacques Lacan conceived of a poststructuralist framework in which the connected signifiers of the individual embody the subconscious. Ghosh summarises:

Lacan did not analyse the subject as having neuroses but as being spoken by a disturbed unconscious…The unconscious speaks the subject. This is where his theory has the greatest indebtedness to post-Saussurean linguistics (87).

Under this theory Tisdale can be read as the unconscious speaking, but his character cannot be read in terms of internal motivations. Johnson’s reading of *Billy Budd* rests on the basic assumption that the relationship between inward and outward character, even if abstracted, can be read in terms of a broadly Freudian link between ‘being’ and ‘doing’ (579-580). If we remove any consideration of being, however, that reading is no longer possible. Tisdale’s character is constituted by ‘doing’ alone. For all his play of signage, he therefore becomes unreadable in Johnson’s framework.
VI. the HUSBAND

For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.

Iago in Othello (1.1.61-71)

It is in the character of the Husband that we see a more traditional psychological symbiosis of inward and outward character. Unlike Tisdale, we are given a better idea of the signified that lies beneath the Husband’s outward appearance, which I will argue is best understood in terms of Sigmund Freud’s ‘castration complex’.

The film revolves around the Husband’s murder of his wife. In order to understand his character, we must understand his motivation for the killing. Donald Grieg writes:

Films in the Hitchcock text are all ordered by a logic of masculine desire, and that pleasure within this system is to be found only at the expense of the woman… (Grieg 32)

Central to this theory is the male gaze. Structuralist critic Raymond Bellour demonstrates that the continuous subjection of women to the male gaze in Hitchcock’s films is a tool to emphasize their powerlessness (81). Further, any reversed female empowerment over a male will result in the female’s death, since “the look of the woman at the man is a reversal that cannot be tolerated” (72). Bellour doesn’t draw this structural reading back to Freud, but the link is clear. Bellour is speaking in the same terms as Freudian Luce Irigaray, who argues the fundamental castration anxiety of the hysterics is that they “did not get enough love” and so “experience themselves as marked by the sign of
incompleteness and rejection” (51). Critics have repeatedly invoked Othello as an archetype of the castration complex in the domestic context (Neimneh 25-28; Langis 64). Othello’s suspicion and murder of Desdemona exemplifies the anxiety of rejection, and the violent reversal it can provoke.

We see this play out through the Husband in *Young and Innocent*. In the opening argument, he confronts the wife about her infidelity. Like Othello, his complex is aroused when he suspects she has been unfaithful. His fear of rejection makes him anxious and unstable. The wife, however, does not submit to his abuse, but responds offensively, staring him in the eye and slapping him three times across the face. This contradicts a central code of Hitchcock’s films, and only deepens the Husband’s shame (Bellour 74). His castration is given physical embodiment by her gaze and assault. According to Bellour, the Husband’s response must be to reverse the offence, and disempower the offending female (72). This establishes the internal character of the husband: it is his nature to murder his wife.

Having established his internal nature as a killer, his external actions become central to placing him within Johnson’s framework. After he has been slapped, the camera focuses tightly on his face. He does not react violently, or attempt to immediately reverse the striking. Rather, he lowers his head from the wife, averting his eyes, and walks into the shadows where he cannot be seen. His internal hysteria is actively severed from his external appearance, which
affect a composed demeanour. The signifier is altered in order to mask the signified, and he becomes an unmotivated sign.

In this same moment, a close-up shot focuses on his eyes, which portray an erratic twitching. This is an example of Freudian conversion, where “hysterical symptoms are the suits of an excitation transposed from the sphere of the mental to the physical” (Freud 46). His shame and anger, centered around his wife’s gaze, manifest in an excitation around his own gaze. We see his efforts to suppress the twitch, to again remove any traces of his nature from his actions.

The film comes to revolve around this very sign, since Tisdale soon discovers that the killer has a twitch. The signifier ‘twitch’ is thus solidified as indexical to the signified ‘killer’. To paraphrase Johnson, the plot thus takes place between the postulate of continuity between signifier and signified (the husband’s psychosomatic twitch manifesting itself) and the postulate of their discontinuity (the husband suppressing his twitch and appearing innocent) (575).
When we see him at the end of the film, the Husband is dressed as a minstrel in blackface, calmly performing in the band at a cabaret show. His twitch is not showing, indicating his signified of killer is masked between the unmotivated signifier of a composed entertainer. When he sees the female protagonist Erica, however, his anxiety is aroused. Erica knows of his rejection, and her own gaze evokes his castration. His eye begins to twitch, reforming the indexical chain between signifier and signified. He tries desperately to sever this link; he covers his face with his hands, ducks behind his drums, and turns around to mask his face against the wall.

![Figure 2. Young and Innocent](image)

It is here, however, that we see his anxieties overpower his attempts to repress them. He begins to twitch uncontrollably, and finally erupts with a declaration of his own guilt. This is what psychoanalyst Arthur Janov would call a ‘primal scream’, where the hysterical anxiety manifests an honest expression of neurosis (9-11). Again we see a parallel to Othello, in his primal scream: “She's like a liar gone to burning hell! 'Twas I that killed her”, which has been read as an honest admission of Freudian anxiety (Neimneh 29). With his confession, the Husband becomes an entirely motivated sign in Johnson’s structure.

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3 I won’t deal with the implications of the costume in this paper, especially since they have been noted elsewhere. Needless to say, it is an ugly reflection of the society that produced the film.
VII. CONCLUSION

How well he's read, to reason against reading!

Ferdinand in Love’s Labour’s Lost (1.1.94)

I have attempted to map the twin protagonists of Young and Innocent onto Barbara Johnson’s structuralist framework of characters as motivated and unmotivated signs. In doing so, I have uncovered a more serious opposition. Tisdale is a ‘hypersign’, constituted entirely by a signifier with no stable connection to a signified. The Husband, conversely, engages in a more Melvillian attempt to mask his castration anxiety as an unmotivated sign, though eventually reveals a direct link between his nature and actions. His play of masking is entirely readable within Johnson’s structure.

The difference in semiotic ‘readability’ embodied by the two characters to some degree allegorises the rift between structuralism and post-structuralism. One sign has a signified, one does not. This reveals a consequent paradox in the film’s plot: Tisdale’s quest is based on his ability to perceive the twitch of the killer, but he is only able to avoid the police as long as he can re-present his own identity at will. The means contradict the end: he relies on a traditional reading of the husband, but must destabilise the process of reading for others.

This tension between reading practices emphasises the inability of a work of art to command one reading itself. Borges wrote “a text is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships” (208). Young and Innocent is such an axis. Threads of psychoanalysis, structuralism and post-structuralism can all be traced within it, at times indistinguishable, at times in opposition. The work engages us not because the elements can be read clearly, but because they can barely be read at all.
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