The 39 Steps, Hitchcock Essay, Research Paper

Throughout the film The Thirty-Nine Steps, there are many symbols and parallels between outside forces in the world. There were also many firsts for Hitchcock as a filmmaker which paved the way for his illustrious career. Among these symbols and themes are spies, marriage and religion. We see spies throughout the movie, very possibly symbolizing the growing power of Nazi Germany. We see the illness of an arranged marriage, and also a pretend marriage between the male and female stars. A man torn between religion and greed furthers Hitchcock s symbolism.

The Thirty-Nine Steps seems to have been heralded as Hitchcock s first real masterpiece, bringing acclaim to Hitchcock for the first time from audiences in the United States. Robert Donat, our protagonist, appears as a man who cannot fully understand his position, yet is caught on the run for his life after being framed for murder with no eyewitness. He runs from citizens, police, and a group of spies, not knowing whom he can trust in any situation. Madeleine Carroll stars his opposite, who would prove to be the first in a long succession of classic, cool and icy, intelligent blonde maidens (Dirks, 1). Yet, this cool blonde is not introduced at the beginning of the film; we first meet the starkly contrasting Anabella Smith. Rather than the straightforward blonde, she is the dark and mysterious brunette. She tells Hannay in his dark and dreary apartment that she fired the shots in the theater to divert attention so she could make a getaway. Hannay coyly quips, beautiful and mysterious woman pursued by gunmen. Sounds like a spy story. Little did he know that this foreshadowed the next 4 days of his life. Hannay thinks her crazy when she tells him of the 39 Steps, a spy organization, but believes her when he sees the two agents outside on the street. Smith tells Hannay, I m going to tell you something which is not very healthy to know, but now that they have followed me here, you are in it as much as I am. She explains that she is a mercenary counterspy from an unnamed country helping the British against her own people. Although which country she works for is not acknowledged, it is presumably Nazi Germany (Dirks, 1).

Having a spy working for Nazi Germany in his film, makes all too much sense for Hitchcock in 1935. In 1932, a few years after Hitler s prison sentence and the publishing of his Nazi ideology, Mein Kampf, Adolph Hitler narrowly lost the presidential election in Germany, yet still the Nazis won 196 out of 584 seats in new elections. In 1933, as Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected President of the United States, Hitler assumed the office of Chancellor and headed a coalition ministry. Unfortunately for the world the president of Germany died in 1934, which paved the way for combining the office of the President and the Chancellor, and Hitler became popularly known by the title of Fuhrer. This unfortunately led to the dissolvement of other parties, and Hitler became a dictator. Hitler possessed supreme legislative, executive and judicial powers (Textbook). Hitler controlled all foreign affairs and Nazified all aspects of human life. Most of the world was letting Hitler s actions at the time go by without protest. Britain considered Germany to be ‘Right’ on moral grounds (Textbook). Western powers did not interfere with Hitler until his advancements came strongly. Winston Churchill said that these Western powers came closer at the last possible moment on the worst possible ground (Textbook).

All of this must have been intriguing to a filmmaker, especially one that was accustomed (or growing accustomed) to making spy films in Europe. Symbolically, it seems that it would make sense for Hitchcock to put a German defector into a short but utterly important role in the movie. While the country was not at war, it was in a deep depression. The film is based on a spy organization who surround the actors, looking the same, acting the same, yet on a different level with a different agenda than anyone around them. It is the man with the nationalistic pride for Britain that acts as protagonist and conquers all in the end. In this way the film acted as a social commentary as well as entertaining with twists and plot turns, with little to no down time.

Not only is this social commentary about wartime, but one scene in particular, and even one camera shot in particular, symbolize the entrapments of women, religion, and the wrongly accused at the same time. After a struggle on the train to Scotland, Hannay escapes to the countryside and finds a cottage with an older man and his much younger wife whom Hannay at first mistakes for his daughter. He pays them to stay the night. The man, John, becomes convinced that his young wife Margaret and Hannay have romantic, sexual inclinations. This is merely his insecurity with the handsome newcomer (except for the final kiss goodbye). John is deeply religious, and seemingly very bitter about this state. This religious state may have also been a facade, as it seems that money is more important to him than anything else, asking Hannay if he will pay to stay, then taking his five pounds to not rat him out, and then turning on him and questioning the police in order to find out if they offered a reward that was larger. His wife feels disdain for her much older husband and longs for the days of her youth in Glasgow, shopping in town centers and going to the cinema. Hannay is still on the run and in the final scene involving these three characters, is momentarily trapped. This was well symbolized by Hitchcock. The final shot of them together is taken through the bars of the back of a wooden chair, symbolizing their three entrapments. Yet this is another entrapment that our protagonist will endure and survive, while the married couple must face a dreary life in the country.

Overall, this film marked very strong symbolism within itself and in social contexts. In viewing this film it marks no surprise and gives substantial evidence towards Hitchcock being the outstanding maker of films filled with mystery and suspense. The Thirty-Nine Steps is a wonderful film that well marks its era and flows endlessly from start to finish. Being that Hitler had just come to power as a dictator, the Fuhrer of Germany, it is fitting that Hitchcock would use a spy that would seem to defect from Germany. This is well marked because of the time period in which people were starting to notice Hitler clashing with different states and the rest of the world. Hitchcock goes on to show prevalence in his protagonist against this foreign ring of spies. He must stand as victor because of the time it was filmed. It says much of marriage at the time, particularly relating to the arranged marriage which didn t seem to be working out for either John or Margaret, he having to deal with a wife who did not love him, she a husband she did not love, and a new life that took her away from all that she knew. Hitchcock used an outstanding shot to show the three characters imprisoned in free lives, through the use of the back of the chair as a symbolic cage. The Thirty-Nine Steps is an outstanding ride of suspense with few letdowns, foreshadowing an outstanding and unique career for the master, Alfred Hitchcock.