The Psychological Makeup of Scottie's Character in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying the psychological makeup of Scottie's character in *Vertigo* (1958), a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock and usually considered one of his masterpieces. The paper emphasizes the importance of analyzing Scottie's character from a psychoanalytic point of view, especially the images, dreams, and schizophrenic duality of his personality. The significance of the study lies in its attempt to resolve the argument about Scottie's story. Some critics consider this story a fictional dream that resulted from the conflict that Scottie suffered from in the past in intense psychological trauma. On the other hand, the story is a complex murder story planned by an evil character called "Gavin." To resolve this conflict of opinion, this paper tries to explain the complexity of Scottie's surface and analyze it according to some psychoanalytic theories and concepts such as Freud's theory of the Unconscious, and the idea of fantasy, and the dream work. The researchers conclude that considering *Vertigo* a dream is one of the ways that help to resolve the conflict about Scottie's character and the film as a whole.

Key Words: agoraphobia, Alfred Hitchcock, fantasy, psychoanalysis, *Vertigo*

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Introduction

Vertigo (1958) is an American film directed and produced by Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980). It presents the dual personality of a police detective named Scottie. The psychological makeup of his character is very complicated, ambiguous, more importantly, misleading. After watching *Vertigo* several times, one can realize the importance of studying and analyzing Scottie's character. The perplexing and confusing duality of his personality makes him an intriguing and ambiguous character. Some critics, like Hopfl Heather, describe Scottie as a character falling from the sublime. Other critics, like Donald Spoto, compare the life of this character to the life of Hitchcock himself. So, Scottie's character is the driving force that keeps the audience haunted with obsession, curiosity, and fear. This paper is a critical study that seeks to understand the layers of his profound psychological makeup. The complexity of Scottie's psychological makeup lies in many elements that the researchers will explain depending on a very keen observation of his repeated behaviors, actions, dreams, and recurrent nightmares that appear several times in different scenes throughout the film.

Maxfield (1990) clarifies that:

[n]evertheless, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, *Vertigo* is best understood as a dreamlike representation of the inner conflicts of its protagonist: more specifically of the conflict within John "Scottie" Ferguson, between Eros and Thanatos, between his longing for love and sexual fulfillment, and an equally strong, if not stronger, death wish. (p.4)

Maxfield's view is reasonable in general. It is also reasonable regarding the psychological nature of Scottie's character in particular. Scottie's behaviors and actions come out of the deep conflicts he had in his past. These unconscious conflicts and traumas are kept repressed at some point until a later stage in his life. As a result, Scottie has undergone what Freud anticipated to be the problem of the century, repression, which leads to "a second self, a stranger within" (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998, p. 389).

To understand the complexity of Scottie's character, it is essential to consider that the repression process takes place in the unconscious part of the mental apparatus. Scottie had to repress some of his desires because of society's constraints. Since the id wishes are not fulfilled, the individual starts fantasizing. If the desire is not approved by the ego ideal, then the urge is repressed. This repression leads to an unhappy individual. This is an essential part of the repressed wishes and desires which Freud referred to as motive forces. He says, "the motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (Freud, 2000, p. 1924). So, the wish can be defined as a desire or need that is not yet met, hurting the individual. Once it is completed, it is no longer decisive, and it loses its negative effect on the individual.

It is essential to know that Freud divides these wishes into two main categories. The first category includes erotic wishes, while the second comprises ambitious wishes (Freud, 2000, p. 1924). This complies with the central character in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Scottie, who unconsciously showed his erotic wishes by his constant and continuous obsession with a dead female figure

named "Madeline." What complicates his problem is that Scottie envisions Madeline differently each time he sees or thinks of her, which reveals an instability in his personality.

Scottie's character can also be looked at as an imbalanced character. From the researchers' point of view, this character refers to the film's title "Vertigo" itself. Because of the instability and imbalance in his character, the viewers think of several possibilities and expectations attributed to him. One of the possibilities that can be assigned to his character is being a dreamy character on different levels. First, Scottie was obsessed with Madeline, however, his obsession with her is not erotic or sexual, but it is ideal and romantic in many ways. That obsession can be best envisioned when Scottie always imagines Madeline in his dreams and reality as well.

Scottie envisioned Madeline three times as representing three different figures. The first one is Judy, who played the role of Madeline to whom he was ideally, not sexually, attracted. The second one is Judy as the one who was also envisioned as Madeline by Scottie. The third time when he sees a woman in the restaurant while Judy is with him and imagines her as Madeline. So, this obsession was haunting him, but it is also possible to observe his dreams and nightmares in which Scottie's dreams of Madeline can also be seen, such as Madeline with open grave with Carlotta, a dead friend of her, in one of his nightmares as one of the scenes shows us. Scottie imagines Madeline as both a real Madeline whom he thought of as an honest one and a fictional Madeline who sees her in his night dreams. Scottie, then, becomes a very complex character simply because there are always double images of his fictional world.

Scottie's complicated psychological makeup ensnares the viewers' conception of reality. Hitchcock creates that turmoil and conflict in the viewers' minds. The viewers can also see and imagine what Scottie can see and imagine. Such elusive images can elude the viewers' conceptions of things, which will add more to their confusion. Illusions are not only deceptive in their visual structure, but also their confusing conception about the mixed reality.

One can argue that the audience is tricked by the techniques that Hitchcock uses to trap their thinking of reality to the extent that they do not discover what is happening until the very end of the film. They are tricked by Judy as being false Madeline, and they are tricked into believing that she is Madeline the same way Scottie was. They do not discover that until they see a reminiscence of a flashback that also appeared as a dream. West (1990) says:

Palmer hypothesizes that Hitchcock films such as *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, *The Birds*, and *Vertigo* are metafictional works because they are not only a form of traditional realist fiction but also a form of deconstruction, that is, statements about the ways that genre affects the expectations of the spectators and about the process of the construction of the illusion. I believe that Hitchcock specifically employed the concept of the fantastic for metafictional purposes to call attention to realist fictional conventions and to subvert generic formulas. (p. 164)

This passage shows that Hitchcock's astute construction of the illusion in this film affects the spectators' conception of reality, as they become tricked by those well-constructed allusions.

Since Madeline is a deluding character in the film, and since Scottie and the viewers are tricked by the manipulating actions and realities in the movie, the viewers find themselves in a difficult situation. They are trapped between reality and imagination, as they get confused in the same way Scottie did. So, the critical question to be raised here is: "Is *Vertigo*'s story a dream that resulted from the conflict within Scottie's character?" or is it a "real murder story" created by Gavin? The researchers think that the answer remains ambiguous, and the answer is no more than a possibility that can be either way. The issue of the overlapped imagination makes Scottie's character much more a sophisticated character as it opens many possibilities and entails many interpretations. However, dreams and vision remain the most potent elements that control the whole film.

In his famous book *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (2008) talks about dreams in general, the method of interpreting them, and wish fulfillment. He links dreams and nightmares with the psychological makeup of human beings. He says that one of the main aims of the book is to:

Demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique, every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state. (2008, p. 10)

Depending on this assumption, one can argue that Scottie's unstable psychological state leads him to fabricate things that are not real at all. Scottie's vast imagination made him contrive a murder story with complete perfection, precisely like the nature of nightmares, which are perfect and well-organized but remain far from reality in form and content. That's the case with Scottie; he can invent a murder story in his mind, and make it look like a perfect simulation of reality. Even Scottie's dream was done according to the techniques of place and time that one can see in daily goals. Scottie's unconscious mind created the sequence of events and classes in a way that made them seem to be accurate.

The vital thing to find out here is how Scottie can deal with such a contrived story according to his obsession with something, which leads him to deal with his dilemma of fear and agoraphobia gradually. In other words, Scottie's dream was a self-centered approach that his subconscious created to find a solution or a cure to his worries. The researchers argue that Scottie's dream results from his fears and obsessions, which finally lead him to create a dreamlike story in his unconscious mind, which leads him to the resolution at the end. This is obvious in the final scene of the film when Scottie overcomes his obsessions and fear and succeeds in looking down from the top of the tower bell without any sense of dread.

Vertigo is the story of Scottie and a depiction of his agony and suffering from psychological problems. Thinking of the story as an organized crime, it is essential to know that the only thing seen is a little flashback from Judy's perspective, which can't be proof of an actual crime. The flashback is not a decisive factor that can be counted on to consider the film a murder story. In other words, one cannot find any actual evidence to support this view. This is different from all Hitchcock's films that deal with detective crimes. Hitchcock uses violence and crime implications

in his movies, but they always occur naturally, not as a reminiscence or flashback. It is crucial to consider imagination and dreams in *Vertigo* because they give a much clearer picture of what can be regarded as reality. Jung says, "It will be clear from all I have said that we cannot lay down general rules for interpreting dreams. When I suggested earlier that the overall function of dreams seems to be to compensate for deficiencies or distortions in the conscious mind" (1964, p. 62). Jung's view explains the nightmares that Scottie used to see daily, which represent the curbed wishes and desires repressed in his unconscious mind.

The Complexity of Scottie's Character

One of the things contributing to the complexity of the psychological makeup of Scottie's character is his fear and conflict that divides him into two characters or duplicities. The schizophrenic split is embodied by the concept of duality that can be seen clearly in the film. Viewers can always see two sides of Scottie's character and their shadows as well. For example, Scottie has got another name which is "John," and sometimes Johnny, and Madeline has another identity name which is Judy.

So, the element of schizophrenia (personality split) is a prominent issue when analyzing Scottie's character. Scottie is lost between reality and imagination, and he is constantly caught between the visible and the invisible world. Viewers can also notice that Scottie's character is lost between Judy and Madeline, the past and the present, fear and falling. So, the loss of his character is apparent if what happens to him is regarded as a traumatic psychotic experience. Scottie's character is schizophrenic in many aspects. First, throughout the whole film, Scottie imagines and sees things that never happened before, like when he comes to the Mettrick Hotel when he sees Madeline (Judy) entering Mettrick Hotel. The receptionist confirms that she has not seen anybody coming in. In his dreams, Scottie always imagines things that do not exist, like when he sees Carlotta going back again to life and wearing a necklace that he once saw on the wall picture. Scottie transforms ideas into images and dreams unconsciously. Therefore, it is possible to consider his agoraphobia as a driving force that stimulates and triggers the very negative thoughts and obsessions in his mind.

The questions that the researchers might raise here are: why falling, in particular, constitutes a profound psychological phobia for Scottie? What makes it different from other murder stories that are usually seen in Hitchcock's films? The answer is that it is falling because it is all a work of Scottie's mind. His aversion controls every move, every sense of his body. In addition, his phobia vitalizes his imagination and creates unreal images. West (1991) states that "Hitchcock compels the viewer constantly to experience doubt and to reevaluate whether Madeleine's wanderings to such places are guided by the supernatural, by excessive sentimentality, or by a mental disturbance of some sort" (p. 166). Hitchcock is aware that fear is a powerful emotion that stimulates horrible feelings—a natural phenomenon that all human beings share. That is one of the things that distinguishes Hitchcock's style, which permanently deals with universal issues that touch humanity. Fear, in Scottie's case, instigates obsession, and more particularly, the obsession with the unreal. This obsession starts in Scottie's mind, making him think Madeline is strange, eccentric, and obsessed. He envisions Madeline many times as part of his mental sickness and unstable psychological state of mind. Simon (1983) says, "Hitchcock's

project is to impress upon his audience the nature and centrality of madness, as well as the possibility of madness in all of us" (p. 133).

So, it is possible to apply the projection theory to Scottie's case since he always tries to project his feelings on Madeline's figure (Judy). By doing so, it is possible to understand his relationship with Midge, another female figure whose relationship with her is based on friendship and not love. He always shares his feelings with Midge; she has been a source of psychological comfort and relief. Midge makes Scottie's story much more complex. Her interest in art and expressionism is something within the framework of Scottie's dream. One of the things to wonder about is how Midge can draw Carlotta's picture. Questions like Where does Midge see that picture? And why does she remove it? It might show us more details about the dreamlike story invented and contrived by Scottie.

The Structure of the Unconscious Fear in Scottie's Character

Throughout his dream of Madeline and obsession with her, Scottie tries to recover from his psychological problems. This is obvious in the final scene of the film when Scottie tries to climb up the stairs saying, "I did it." He pushed Madeline to climb with him without any palpable fear, but with reluctance and fear on Judy's part on the other hand. At that point, Scottie wants to overcome his fear, and that fear might be from the ghost of Madeleine herself.

Madeline represents Scottie's unconscious dream, which is the source of his haunting fear and phobia. The scene of dragging and pushing Judy up to climb the stairs challenges his subconscious fear. This scene is a victory against his profound anxiety and dread. Wood (2002) says, "the vertigo of the title, then, expands from the man's fear of heights into a metaphysical principle, and the metaphysic of the film is 'peculiarly terrifying'" (p. 123). Scottie's situation with phobia looks precisely like a dream in which the viewers see themselves agonized and suffering because of specific fears. Still, some plans can lead to an outlet or solution, as in Scottie's case. From this perspective, Scottie's phobia has a horrible nightmare, but that nightmare has a plot, a climax, and a solution which are all fabricated in his subconscious. For Fabe (2009):

Scottie's behavior is likened to that of a child who has suffered an insecure attachment to a "dead" (depressed and therefore inattentive) mother and, as a result, never develops the capacity to love truly or mourn successfully. By leaving the viewer in a painful state of unresolved suspense about Scottie's fate at the end of the film, Hitchcock reveals his inability to resolve his own issues around fear of loss and aggression toward desirable women. Those who seek out the locations of *Vertigo* continue Scottie's doomed quest to make a fantasy real, to diminish the gap between representation and reality, and thereby cling to an illusory means by which to overcome loss. (p. 343)

So, in the flashback from Judy's perspective, Madeleine is not more than a character that does not exist. Viewers rather do not see her throughout the whole film. The false Madeline, whom Scottie falls in love with, is only a fabrication made by Gavin to manipulate Scottie and kill his real wife "Madeleine." Viewers cannot understand this idea until they see the flashback. However, this is the story that many viewers see and argue about.

However, the researchers think that this opinion is not convincing enough for a persuasive argument and analysis because the tactics and the techniques that Hitchcock uses indicate that the whole thing is no more than a dream--taking into consideration the timing of the crime and the procedures and the assumptions taken by Gavin. From the researchers' points of view, 'Gavin' is like the mastermind who has precise timing and accurate calculations. How can Gavin know that Scottie will not climb up the stairs? How could he make sure that Scottie's phobia would stand in his way and paralyze him at that moment, at that place? Then, how did Gavin know that Scottie would not go down and see what happened to Madeline (the honest Madeline) when she fell? If Scottie went down and saw her, he would discover the truth. However, the techniques that Hitchcock uses are very professional and tricky to most viewers. This is undoubtedly the trap that Hitchcock perfectly uses to capture the audience's imagination and make them caught with fear and confusion. Ann West says, "Vertigo is a notable example of Hitchcock's use of the fantastic to call attention to and subvert traditional genres. The film is a reflexive statement about how the film is a contrived illusion designed to manipulate audience reaction. Hitchcock creates the illusion during the first half of the film" (1991, p. 165).

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the thing that makes Scottie's character much more complex and sophisticated is his tricky imagination. All the characters in the film suffer from psychological disorders or mental sicknesses. Delusions and allusions are the most prominent techniques that Hitchcock uses to refer to the complexity of the psychological condition that Scottie suffers from. Hitchcock uses different colors and visual tricks represented by the quick disappearance of Madeline. This technique makes viewers follow Madeline and thus creates doubt of what can be seen as a real character. West (1991) refers to Hitchcock, who says that "editing allows such acts of the imagination to occur and affords to the director the freedom to create illusions" (167).

Finally, from the researchers' point of view, Hitchcock's masterpiece film *Vertigo* is open for a lot of speculation and discussion. The possibility of seeing *Vertigo* as a dream might not apply to other films. However, this is one of the interpretations that the researchers consider to be the most logical after careful investigation of every aspect, including the style and the montage of the film. Indeed, further and deeper analysis of this possibility might reveal more essential facts about *Vertigo*. The researchers believe that Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is one of the best films that explain the nature of psychological problems and phobias, such as the fear of death, the complexity of nightmares and insomnia, and the duality of personality.

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