

SHADOW OF A DOUBT

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Produced by Jack H. Skirball
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1943

If a villain behaves villainously, he will be disliked and find his objectives more difficult to meet. Friends united by a mutual fascination with murder, Joe and Herb discuss the difference between an effective murder and an interesting murder. Basically, a murder involving no planning and leaving no clues makes for a poor story. In the same way, a villain with no redeeming characteristics can elicit little sympathy from the audience nor his fellow characters, who will quickly figure him out and will not hesitate to derail his plans. But if a villain has charm....

An unremarkable family living in Anytown, U.S.A. (here typified by Santa Rosa, California) welcomes a remarkable guest. It's the mother's youngest brother, Charles, visiting from Philadelphia. Emma is nuts for him, and together they reflect on the old times with detrimental nostalgia. Slowly the household, consisting of a father and two young children, cools to the interloper. The response of a third child, the eldest, is the basis for the story. She is Charlie, named after her esteemed uncle. Recently graduated, Charlie remains at home with nothing to do. She chafes at the dull routine. Nothing is terribly wrong; she just tires of the perpetual cycle—work and sleep punctuated by idle family talk. Speaking to her father about the family's need for a new future and for her mother to enjoy a respite from her unremitting toil, he promises he'll figure out some way to bring vitality to their family, but she ignores him, saying, "Oh...I don't believe in good intentions any more." Charlie resolves to telegram her uncle, inviting him to visit. But he has already invited himself and is on his way.

Because of their affinity for each other, Charlie's realization about what her uncle really is comes as a tragic blow. He is the Merry Widow Murderer, responsible for the deaths of three wealthy women back east. With aplomb, he almost persuades her of his innocence. When that fails, he tries to persuade her of his utter exhaustion, constantly running from the consequences of some "foolish" decisions. Finally he impresses on her the awful effect such a realization would have on her mother, who, as Charlie predicted, has reclaimed a youthful (almost juvenile) buoyancy since her brother's arrival.

Charles has taken a place as head of the household, dispensing gifts (to father Joe, included) like they're all children. He rips up the evening paper over the protests of the children, knowing that to be their father's. Charles even sits at the head of the table. Now they drink wine at the evening meal, each night dining a little later. Emma serves him breakfast in bed. Everything he wants, he gets. He has brought a remarkable change to the family. He has taken it over.

Charles resents the greedy ways of widows. He sees the hard work of their husbands squandered in gambling and boozing. He takes it upon himself to avenge these misdeeds by applying his charisma to the task of ensnaring and murdering women. Doing so three times, he has made himself very rich, adding to whatever ill-gotten gains he'd accrued before.

Even though the conduct of widows, especially as Charles frames it, is disagreeable, his actions are unconscionable. The men who left fortunes to their wives would have taken pride in the knowledge that they had provided for their spouses' security. Charles sees himself as an avenger, but he's taking the hard-earned money of dead men and just pampering himself. He doesn't work at all. So, his crimes are motivated by a germ of truth, but they can't be excused. The result is a complex villain—sophisticated, self-righteous, and longing for the past.

We learn from Emma that Charles fractured his skull by crashing his bicycle into a streetcar when he was very young. He may have sustained (undiagnosed) brain damage. After that he was no longer studious and contemplative. He became a hell-raiser, indulged by a family that refused to condemn his maleficence. He ran away. As he says later, to him the whole world is a joke. When Joe warns him not to throw his hat on the bed (it's bad luck), Charles goes ahead. Joe says he doesn't want to invite trouble. Of course, but that's what his daughter has done by inviting Charles, who has no problem supplying it. As intimidated in the film, if he had his way he'd rip the fronts off all the houses in town, expose hypocrisy and bellow that nobody is better than he is. He sees the Rot everywhere. But for those who are bad but strive to be good, Charles would wish them to be as repulsive as he, unrepentant, jaundiced, and desperate for distraction. Then all could suffer as he does for the guilt of many wrongs. He sees the world as a sty, but if it is, people like him make it that way.

As Charlie learns more about her uncle, she naively fosters a hope that his sinful days are behind him. She refuses to consider the thought of him carrying on with his crimes, indulged by another generation of family. She decides to give him ample time to make a dignified departure from Santa Rosa. This will disentangle her brood from his covert brutality, without causing grief for her mother, or placing her father in professional jeopardy at the bank. But Charles breaks his promise to leave, and tries to kill her twice.

An investigator who had been tailing Charles Oakley decides that this is not the man he's after. During the course of his search he tried to enlist Charlie's help. But she gave vague assurances without revealing a personal knowledge of her uncle's guilt. Jack, the investigator, falls for Charlie, but she remains uncertain. Maybe in time, once this mess is all cleared up she'll be able to entertain his proposal of marriage. Jack leaves, hoping to return. After her uncle makes two attempts on her life she desperately tries to reach him, but he's nowhere to be found. She brought this mess down on her family by wishing for something spectacular. No longer content with the simple life, she invited this menace, and she'll have to deal with it herself.

Recovering a ring that Charles had given her, an inscribed ring that had belonged to one of his victims, Charles sees the writing on the wall and prepares to leave. By this time all of Santa Rosa seems held in thrall of him, seduced by his eloquence and eager to accept bribes passed off as charity. For example, Charles scoffs at Christianity, but the priest blesses him before he gets on a train. (Charles was shrewd enough to make a large donation to the children's hospital.)

Charles finally consents to leave, but Charlie has still failed. Her uncle vows to return. And Mrs. Potter, a wealthy widow enamored with Charles, is riding on the train with him. We

know he will continue his assault on humanity, but when he attempts to silence Charlie permanently (for old times' sake), she throws him off the train instead. This completes a series of duplications between the two Charlies—both are first seen supine, both become desperate (Charles is ready for suicide, Charlie is ready to "give up"), each in turn feels the weight of the other's oppressive gaze. Charles tries to kill his niece, and Charlie threatens to kill her uncle. And they are the only ones to use the back staircase. Only they know the true nature of this household, the staircase representing its true condition—rickety. (This is matched by Emma's admission that they don't own the house, it owns them—always falling apart, always needing fixing.)

When Charlie tried to convince her uncle to leave, he told her that he wasn't afraid of her; nobody would believe her story. With Charles finally dead, all of Santa Rosa gives him a hero's send-off. Jack is back, forgiving and kind, but Charlie takes no interest in him. She only wants him around because nobody else knows the awful truth. Jack didn't want to be associated with Charles and the awful mess of the manhunt. He just wanted to be a young kid from a similar family eager to love her. But it seems his fears have come true. Their relationship is doomed. She hasn't told anyone how Charles really died. She is afraid nobody would believe her, or she still can't bear the thought of her mother suffering. Thus, she allows a bloodthirsty rogue to be lionized and applauded. She tries to convince Jack that she couldn't reveal all she knew. There's no point now; Jack says he understands.

When Charles first arrives, Ann says she remembers Charles "sort of," but that he looks different. Charlie mistakes him for being sick, which Charles laughs off. Jack says at the film's end that the world, like Charles, goes a little crazy sometimes. It may not be that simple. The world is made up of people, and it is people whose behavior is not as much crazy as depraved. And it is these people who poison society. Some, like Jack and Ann and Charlie, know better. But most are duped, like the doctor and porter on the train, like the landlady at the opening of the story, and like the citizens of Santa Rosa.

The queer insouciance of Santa Rosa is best exemplified by the traffic cop, Mr. Norton. He jovially oversees the interchange of pedestrian and automobile in the chipper city center. People dutifully wait their turn to be directed across the road. When Charlie jumps the gun, he really leans on her. The next night she crosses his way again, chased by her uncle. The cop chastises Charlie once more, finding her hurrying suspicious. (*Things are supposed to be friendly and calm here, so stop that running!*) Her real fault is not staying with the crowd, standing singular in her knowledge that her town is no paradise. (She was hurrying to the library to confirm her suspicions about Santa Rosa's new favorite son.) Mr. Norton asks to be introduced to the man he's heard so much about. In a brief exchange, the cop tells Charles to look after his niece. (But we know she's got to look after *him*.) Charles replies, "Hear that, Charlie? Don't want to break the law." So the cop cares more about petty traffic transgressions than he does her uncle, the real criminal, a murderer waiting to prey on their cherished hometown. It's a very sad joke.

Charlie's ongoing crisis of conscience is the final double. Just as Charles won't admit to his guilt, Charlie won't dismantle his reputation. He remains The Prince among men. They really are much more than uncle and niece. The mystery of their relationship lay in the spiritual

realm of feeling, not the physical; they hardly ever see each other but reunite like the greatest of friends.

Incest is the obscure subtext of the film. Emma worships Charles, but dismisses her husband as inconsequential. Charles, in giving the ring to his niece, seems to be taking her hand in marriage. By entering this home, Charles has perverted it, Joe's acquiescence allowing the seeds of destruction to be sewn. Even with Uncle Charlie dead, a slow annihilation seems inevitable.

It was the stultifying routine of the household that depressed Charlie. But more troubling was the lack of love. Father didn't love Mother. Children fought and bickered. Conversation went nowhere, and each person took the others for granted. Joe found more satisfaction discussing the murder of his best friend than enjoying the company of his family at dinner. Ann was left to be a reclusive bookworm whose keen mind was dismissed as a repository of foolishness. Roger was simply ignored. (When Emma says on the phone how the youngest child is always spoiled, we see Roger, crestfallen. He wishes he was spoiled; the poor boy gets nothing from his parents.)

Charlie thought her uncle would change all this, but he was just a dangerous distraction, spreading malice. She wouldn't do the heavy lifting herself, but called in her uncle instead. She wouldn't model appreciation and kindness, wouldn't sacrifice for her family, but left the job to Uncle Charlie, the smiling creep who fixed nothing, who thrived on deception, who scoffed at beauty, who only made matters worse. Young Charlie's crimes are less insidious, but her uncle's are better motivated.