

SUSPICION

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures
Released in 1941

The controversy as to whether Alfred Hitchcock intended for Cary Grant to be a murderer is almost as interesting as *Suspicion*, itself.

What's more demeaning to the female sex? The story as it stands features a woman who lets reality run away from her, only to be saved from death by her gallant rogue.

That's not great.

The abandoned alternative was for Lina to accept the milk, knowing it was poison, committing suicide because she could not bear to live in a world where her romantic delusions about her husband were dashed, but still ensuring that he be punished for his crime by informing her mother in a letter the unwitting Johnnie dutifully mails.

That's worse. Not only does this scenario make her out to be a ninny, he'd only be guilty of *attempted* murder; she dies, but by her own hand!

What is more interesting than rehashing musty scuttlebutt about what Hitchcock really wanted for his film is to consider the ending of *Suspicion* in light of the power of the passive female. Lina is almost a caricature of the dutiful spouse (almost dutiful unto death!), and Johnnie Aysgarth, for all his charm, is unsavory and callous. She, being from a repressed background, finds his debonair charms irresistible. He misleads her about his finances, gets fired for embezzlement, castigates her for intruding in his affairs, hawks family heirlooms, dodges a murder charge, and lies about his reckless forays to the track. She doesn't fight back, doesn't engage in Princess Diana-esque passive-aggressive behavior like half-hearted suicide attempts or dalliances with the country gentry. She is quiet, she is loyal. But, really, she has every reason to doubt his veracity. Sure she loves him, but she's not stupid enough to trust him. And her fears become plain to Johnnie.

Perhaps that is why many people are upset with the film's denouement—they can't accept that Johnnie would be ashamed of his treatment of Lina. While it should be admitted that the unwavering kindness of a put-upon spouse can prick the conscience, more realistically, Lina's extreme beauty may weigh on Johnnie. He has to please her; he's in thrall to her. So when he decides that she's finally had enough of him, this makes her *more* desirable. She can't be rattled, she doesn't care, and she can take him or leave him. To accept that Cary Grant's character would take the extreme preparations revealed at the film's conclusion it helps to consider how beautiful his wife truly is, how desperate a man can be to possess a beautiful woman. (*Gone With The Wind* addresses this Achilles Heel of men with devastating honesty.)

So he decides to commit suicide. This way, at least, she can pay off his debts.

He's the weak one—not her.

During their climactic confrontation on the cliff top Lina reproves herself for being obtuse. But this doesn't wash. Johnnie lied to her about the chairs, horse races, his trip to Liverpool, losing his job, and everything else. Why should she marvel that she neglected *his* feelings? (And, no, Johnnie buying back the chairs and saving Beaky's life when his car almost

went over the cliff are not enough to cement her forever-devotion—with Johnnie there's always an angle.) Moreover, by fessing up and admitting his willingness to commit suicide, Johnnie loses his implacable elan-facade. Might she no longer find him attractive when he's vulnerable and repentant? And yet she begs him to make another go of it.

Isn't that what attracted her in the first place, the fact that he doesn't care, and she was tired of being 'proper'?

This is where the film gets into trouble. The story would have us consider Joan Fontaine as a dowdy bookworm plucked from English-manor obscurity. She has no beaux and, according to her own father, no prospects for marriage. But she's gorgeous!

Somehow we are asked to accept that Lina has no chance of a suitor and is thus willing to take the risk of marrying Johnnie. Interestingly, the 1949 movie *The Heiress*, featuring Joan Fontaine's sister Olivia de Havilland, has the same problem—we're supposed to marvel that a man as handsome as Montgomery Clift would be interested in a washed-up spinster. Her father is suspicious, and it turns out the suitor is just after her fortune. Director William Wyler tries to de-glamorize the actress by foregoing makeup and having her act in a stilted, shy manner, but it's not convincing. She's still too pretty. (Bette Davis, though she probably wouldn't be pleased by this compliment, fared much better in *Now, Voyager* [1942] where she played a dowdy girl brought out of her shell after a stint in a sanitarium. Davis had bulbous eyes that, if not photographed carefully, made her look awkward, so cameraman Sol Polito had more to work with going from Before to After.)

Perhaps it would have been better to have Lina still be beautiful (after all, it's much easier to watch a movie populated with attractive people), but poor. She's in awe that a sophisticate like Johnnie would want her (this is a lot like *Rebecca* so far), but gets bored, tiring of his spendthrift ways, and imagines that he wants to kill her for life insurance. She expresses her fears to Beaky and he (not a good guy in this version) undertakes to do the very thing she suspects her husband of! Johnnie uncovers the plot in the nick of time, really does push Beaky off a cliff, and their marriage is saved. This version would add justification to the Beaky character (he's just a big red herring in the film we know), but it would undercut one of the few rays of sunshine in a bleak story—he's a splendid chap.

So this plot reconstruction solves some problems and creates others. Indeed, making a movie is ludicrously difficult. It takes piles of money, creative headwinds less reliant on talent than luck, and pinpoint-accurate logistics akin to this passage from Louis Joseph Vance's novel *Nobody*: "Astonishing feats of preparation were consummated as if by legerdemain." *That's* the magic of a good Hollywood crew.

At its best, analysis reveals the unseen genius of a great film. When it's adequate, analysis reveals the reason behind a gut feeling. At its worst, analysis ruins that which was otherwise perfectly enjoyable in a mechanically unsound, but moral, film.

Only if a movie is morally repulsive (especially if subtly so) does it deserve outright condemnation. Artistic failings are inevitable. *Suspicion* gets a lot right. It's not perfect, and neither are we.