

## SHADOW OF A DOUBT (1943)

### major credits:

director: Alfred Hitchcock  
screenplay: Thornton Wilder, Alma Reville, and Sally Benson  
music: Dimitri Tiomkin, directed by Charles Prévin  
cast: Joseph Cotten (Charles Oakley), Teresa Wright (Charlie Newton),  
MacDonald Carey (Jack Graham), Patricia Collinge (Emma),  
Henry Travers (Joe), Hume Cronyn (Herb)

### stylistic qualities:

Hitchcock is a favorite director for those who practice auteur criticism because of the recurrent stylistic touches and thematic concerns his films display. Although Shadow of a Doubt employs the seamless editing style and narrative conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema, it nevertheless manages some of the expressionistic touches for which its director is so celebrated. In fact, William Rothman describes it as "Hitchcock's first American film that is the equal of his greatest and most ambitious British films" (Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze).

1. setting - Hitchcock was extremely fond of employing familiar, natural settings as the background for bizarre events or predicaments. Much of the film was shot away from Universal Studios in Santa Rosa, California.

2. According to Rothman, "this film contains no line of dialogue that is merely conventional or 'ordinary'." Hitchcock personally selected Thornton Wilder (author of Our Town) to write the screenplay. Note how often the dialogue reverberates with double meanings: "Heaven takes care of fools and scoundrels," "Average families are the best," "I'd die for a ring like that."

3. tone, mood - Befitting the doppelganger motif, the film continually and boldly switches mood from the shadowy world of the film noir to the bright, innocent milieu of domestic comedy. Nowhere is this tendency more obvious than in the opening pair of matched ("doubled") scenes.

4. camera angles - Hitchcock employs an unusual number of oblique angles for a classical Hollywood film, especially for shots involving the stairways. Note too the tilt shot depicting Uncle Charlie in his room near the end of the film.

5. moving camera - The most expressive shot in the film may be the crane shot following Charlie's discovery in the library. See Rothman's elaborate and insightful analysis in The Murderous Gaze, p. 211.

### topics for discussion:

1. The film's title seems particularly suggestive. Which version of "reality"--Uncle Charlie's or Santa Rosa's--does Hitchcock apparently endorse? Does a film like Shadow of a Doubt convey a philosophy about human experience at the same time it entertains and creates suspense?

2. Consider the film from an historical perspective, taking into account both how it appears to a modern viewer and also what it may be saying about America in 1943.

3. Compare the film's perspective on the American family with the recent revival of interest in family-centered movies such as Fatal Attraction. Concentrate your discussion on the role played by either the mother (Emma) or father (Joe).

4. A feminist critic, mindful of the misogyny that runs through so many of Hitchcock's movies, has argued that "the entrapping, nightmare world of Shadow of a Doubt... offers two options: either the destruction and elimination or the territorialization and pacification of women" (Diane Carson). Do the female characters manage to escape the patriarchal stereotypes we have come to recognize in classical Hollywood cinema?

5. The decidedly downbeat ending appears to subvert the usual sense of closure found in classical Hollywood cinema. Certainly the character of Graham seems a dull, unfulfilling substitute for the promise Uncle Charlie represented. Hitchcock himself said, "The girl will be in love with her uncle for the rest of her life."