

Review #89 : *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

Farley Granger and Robert Walker

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1iSS5r0OVE>



SYNOPSIS

Tennis star Guy Haines (**Farley Granger**) wants to divorce his vulgar and promiscuous wife Miriam (**Laura Elliott**) so he can marry the elegant Anne Morton (**Ruth Roman**), the daughter of a senator, and hopefully have a career in politics. On a train, Haines accidentally meets Bruno Anthony (**Robert Walker**), who recognizes Guy. Bruno tells Guy about his **idea for the perfect murders** : Bruno will kill Miriam, and in exchange Guy will kill Bruno's father. **They have no identifiable motive for the crimes, and therefore they will not be suspects.** Guy hurriedly leaves, but Bruno mistakenly thinks he has agreed and pockets Guy's monogrammed cigarette lighter.

Guy meets up with Miriam, who is pregnant by someone else and now does not want a divorce. He calls Anne and tells her he wants to ‘strangle’ Miriam. Bruno follows Miriam and her two beaux to an amusement park, stalks her through various rides, and **strangles her to death on the Magic Isle**. Bruno waits for Guy and gives him Miriam's glasses, also reminding him that he is now obliged to kill his father.

Senator Morton (**Leo G. Carroll**) informs Guy that his wife has been murdered. The police question Guy ; his alibi fails when the drunken college professor he met on a train does not remember him. Guy is given a police escort who follows him. **Bruno also continues to stalk Guy** around the Jefferson Memorial, at the National Gallery of Art, and at his tennis match at Forest Hills. He introduces himself to Anne, and sees Barbara, Anne's younger sister (**Patricia Hitchcock**) who reminds him of Miriam. Soon afterwards, Bruno appears at a party at Senator Morton's house, much to Guy's apprehension and Anne's increasing suspicion. Using another guest, Bruno demonstrates how to strangle someone. He again sees Barbara ; her resemblance to Miriam triggers a flash-back, and he begins to really strangle the woman. He blacks out and Barbara tells her sister : ‘*His hands were on her throat, but he was strangling me.*’ Anne confronts Guy, who explains the truth about the crime.

According to Bruno's original plan, **Guy creeps into Bruno's home at night**. He reaches Bruno's father's room hoping to warn him, but Bruno is waiting for him and threatens to have him take responsibility for the murder.

Anne visits Bruno's house explaining to his mother (**Marion Lorne**) that her son is responsible for a murder, but she does not believe her. Bruno overhears the conversation and **lets Anne know that he will plant Guy's lighter at the scene of Miriam's murder...**

REVIEW

The abiding terror in Alfred Hitchcock's life was that he would be **accused of a crime he did not commit**. This fear is at the heart of many of his best films, including *Strangers on a Train* (1951), in which a man becomes the obvious suspect in the strangulation of his wife. He makes an excellent suspect because of the genius of the actual killer's original plan : two strangers ‘exchange’ murders, each killing the person the other wants dead. They would both have alibis for the time of the crime, and there would be no possible connection between killer and victim.

It is a plot made of ingenuity and amorality, based on a novel by **Patricia Highsmith** (1921-1995), who was fascinated by brainy criminals who functioned **not out of passion but from careful calculation**, and usually got away with their crimes. The ‘*criss-cross*’ murder deal in *Strangers on a Train* indeed would have worked perfectly – except for the detail that **only one of the strangers agrees** to it.

Bruno Anthony’s conversation shows a detailed knowledge of Guy’s private life. His manner is **pushy and insinuating**. Guy is offended by the references to his private life, but inexplicably doesn’t break off the conversation – which ends on an **ambiguous note**, with Bruno trying to get Guy to agree to the plan, and Guy trying to jolly him along and get rid of him — until Bruno does murder Guy’s wife, then demanding that Guy keep his half of the bargain. This plot has a neatness that Hitchcock must have found irresistible — especially since Guy **has a motive to murder his wife**, was seen in a **public fight** with her earlier on the day of her death, and even told his fiancée he would like to ‘*strangle*’ Miriam.

Strangers on a Train is not a psychological study, however, but a **first-rate thriller with odd little kinks now and then**. Hitchcock was above all the **master of great visual set pieces**, and there are several famous sequences in *Strangers on a Train*. Best known is the one where Guy scans the crowd at a **tennis match** and observes that all of the heads are swivelling back and forth to **follow the game – except for one head**, Bruno’s, which is looking straight ahead at Guy. The same technique was used in Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent*, where all the windmills rotate in the same direction – except one.

Another effective scene shows Guy floating in a little boat through the **Tunnel of Love** at a carnival ; Miriam and two boyfriends are in the boat ahead, and **shadows on the wall make it appear Bruno has overtaken them**. In a scene where Guy goes upstairs in the dark in Bruno’s house, Hitchcock told Truffaut, he hit on the inspiration of a **ferocious dog** to distract the audience from what he would probably find at the top.

Then there’s the famous sequence involving a **runaway merry-go-round**, on which Guy and Bruno struggle as a carnival worker crawls on his stomach under the revolving ride to get to the controls. This shot was famously **not faked**, and the stunt man could have been killed ; Hitchcock said he would never take such a chance again. Another great shot shows Bruno’s face in the shadow of his hat brim, only the whites of his eyes showing.

Hitchcock was a **classical technician in controlling his visuals**, and his use of **screen space underlined the tension** in ways the audience is not always aware of. He always used the convention that the left side of the screen is for evil or weaker characters, while the right is for characters who are either good, or temporarily dominant. Consider the scene where Guy is letting himself into his Georgetown house when Bruno whispers from across the street to summon him. Bruno is standing behind an iron gate, the bars casting symbolic shadows on his face, and Guy stands to his right, outside the gate. Then a police car pulls up in front of Guy's house, and he quickly moves behind the gate with Bruno ; they're now both behind bars as he says : *'You've got me acting like I'm a criminal.'*

The **Robert Walker** performance benefits from a subtle tense urgency that perhaps reflected events in his private life ; he had a **nervous break-down** shortly after filming was completed, was institutionalized for treatment, and died of an accidental (?) overdose of tranquilizers. His fate reminded me of the **Heath Ledger**'s after filming *Batman : The Dark Knight*.

The movie is ranked among Hitchcock's best, and its appeal is probably due to its **ingenious plot and masterly crafted visuals**.

THEMES AND MOTIFS

The film includes a number of **puns and visual metaphors** that demonstrate a running motif of criss-cross, double-crossing, and crossing one's double. Talking about the structure of the film, Hitchcock said to Truffaut : *'Isn't it a fascinating design? One could study it forever.'*

The two characters Guy and Bruno can be viewed as **doppelgängers**. The pair has what writer Peter Dellolio refers to as a *'dark symbiosis'*. **Bruno embodies Guy's dark desire to kill Miriam**. He is a 'real-life incarnation of Guy's wish-fulfilment fantasy'.

1 – **Doubles, doppelgängers and opposites**

- **The theme of doubles is the key element in the film's structure** and Hitchcock starts right off in his title sequence making this point : there are two taxicabs, two redcaps, two pairs of feet, two sets of train rails that cross twice. Once on the train, Walker orders a pair

of double drinks — ‘*The only kind of doubles I play*’, he says charmingly. In Hitchcock's cameo he carries a double bass. There are two respectable and influential fathers, two women with eye-glasses, and two women at a party who delight in thinking up ways of committing the perfect crime. There are two sets of two detectives in two cities, two little boys at the two trips to the fairground, two old men at the carousel, two boyfriends accompanying the woman about to be murdered, and two Hitchcocks in the film.

- Hitchcock carries the theme into his editing by **cross-cutting between Guy and Bruno with words and gestures** : one asks the time and the other, miles away, looks at his watch. One says in anger ‘*I could strangle her!*’ and the other, far distant, makes a choking gesture.

All this doubling has no precedent in the novel ; it was quite **deliberately added by Hitchcock**. It undergirds the whole film because it finally serves to **associate the world of light and order with the world of darkness and chaos — even lunacy and death**.

Guy and Bruno are in some ways *doubles*, but in many more ways, they are *opposites*. The two sets of feet in the title sequence match each other in motion and in cutting, but they establish immediately the contrast between the two men : the first shoes showy, vulgar brown-and-white brogues ; the second are plain, unadorned walking shoes. They also demonstrate Hitchcock's gift for **deft visual storytelling** : for most of the film, Bruno is the actor, Guy the re-actor, and Hitchcock always shows Bruno's feet first, then Guy's.

2 – **Light and Darkness : towards a *continuum***

It wasn't enough for Hitchcock to construct merely a world of doubles in a strict opposite structure. For Hitchcock, good and evil poles ‘*didn't have to be mutually exclusive*’. **Blurring the lines** puts Guy and Bruno on a good/evil *continuum*, and the infinite **shades of gray** in between become Hitchcock's canvas for telling the story and painting his characters.

At first glance, Guy represents the ordered life where people stick to the rules, while Bruno comes from the world of chaos, where they get thrown out of multiple colleges for drinking and gambling. Yet both men, like so many of Hitchcock's protagonists, are **insecure and uncertain of their identity**. Guy is suspended between tennis and politics, between his tramp wife and his senator's daughter, and Bruno is seeking desperately to establish an identity through violent, *outré* actions and flamboyance : shoes, lobster-patterned tie, eccentric tiepin.

Bruno tells Guy early on that he admires him : ‘*I certainly admire **people who do things***’, he says : ‘*Me, I never do anything important.*’ When Bruno describes his murder theories over lunch, Guy is **tense but amused**. At this point, the blurring of good and evil accelerates : Guy **fails to repudiate** Bruno's suggestive statement about murdering Miriam **with any force or conviction**. It ratchets up a notch when Guy leaves Bruno's compartment forgetting his cigarette lighter, his link with Anne, his possibility of climbing into the ordered existence to which he aspires. Guy, then, **in a sense connives at the murder of his wife**, and the enigmatic link between him and Bruno becomes clear. Guy is not a clear-cut hero, Bruno not an all-black villain : a *continuum* has been established.

3 – **Light and darkness onscreen**

Having given his characters overlapping qualities of good and evil, Hitchcock then renders them on the screen according to a very strict template with which he sticks to a remarkable degree. After all, Hitchcock was a classical technician in terms of controlling his visuals. Hitchcock expresses the **interplay of light and dark throughout the film** : Guy's bright, light tennis attire, versus the ‘gothic’ gloominess of Bruno's mansion ; the cross-cutting between his game in the sunshine at Forest Hills while Bruno's arm stretches into the dark and debris of the storm drain trying to fish out the cigarette lighter ; even a single image where Walker is photographed in one visually stunning shot as a malignant stain on the purity of the white-marble Jefferson Memorial, as a blot on the order of things.

4 – **Circles : visualizing death and vertigo**

Le film contient des scènes célèbrissimes : outre le début, avec la rencontre des deux paires pieds, on se rappellera le **meurtre vu aux travers des lunettes**.

‘L'art d'Hitchcock est de nous faire participer par la fascination qu'exerce sur chacun de nous toute figure épurée, quasi géométrique, au vertige qu'éprouvent les personnages (Bruno parle lui-même du vertige de la vie moderne, de l'ivresse de la vitesse) et, au-delà du vertige nous faire découvrir la profondeur d'une idée morale. Le courant qui va du symbole à l'idée passe toujours par le condensateur de l'émotion.’

Claude Chabrol et Eric Rohmer, *Hitchcock* (1957) p. 110-111



Ces scènes distinguent deux figures symboliques : celles de la **droite/tangente** et du **cercle**.

- **La droite** symbolise l'échange, que ce soit dans le va-et-vient du match de tennis, les mouvements des pas en gros plan par lesquels débute le film, ou le mouvement du train.
- **Le cercle et le tournoiement** figurent le **vertige**, la **mort** mais aussi la **névrose** de Bruno.

Le film joue constamment sur la figure du cercle *d'après Chabrol et Rohmer* :

- La femme de Guy est vendeuse dans une boutique de *disques*.
- Croisant un enfant déguisé en cow-boy et qui s'amuse à braquer sur lui un revolver, Bruno fait éclater son *ballon* d'une brûlure de cigarette.
- Les amoureux de la foire s'embarquent sur un *lac* et sur une petite *île* et c'est au terminus du '*tunnel* de l'amour' que Bruno étrangle la femme de Guy.
- La scène est filmée dans les verres de ses *lunettes ovales* tombées dans l'herbe. Bruno poursuivra par la suite Guy comme sa propre image reflétée dans un miroir à peine déformant, comme son double maléfique.
- Mais ce parfait technicien du crime est en réalité un névrosé. Etrangler la femme de Guy fut pour lui un **plaisir autant qu'un calcul**. La haine qu'il porte à son père, le soin dont il entoure sa mère, son désir de destruction et sa frénésie machinatrice ne laissent aucun doute sur l'origine œdipienne de cette psychose. Il retrouvera une image de sa victime sous les espèces de la *rondeur* et des *lunettes* de la fille cadette du

sénateur. C'est celle-ci qu'il contempera en étrangeant par jeu l'une des invités de la soirée où il s'est glissé. La jeune femme est terrorisée, se découvrant **l'objet d'un désir dont une autre est victime**.

- Le *disque* du soleil disparaît quand Bruno revient sur la scène du crime, appelant à une issue violente.
- Les images finales amplifient cette recherche visuelle du vertige : *manège* en marche, bagarre sauvage sur le plancher *tournant* d'un rythme accéléré, éclatement du manège, etc

De façon assez malsaine, Hitchcock lie la hantise de Bruno avec les plus ordinaires, les plus anodines des tendances de ses spectateurs. Qu'il s'agisse du vertige du meurtre, du goût de la machination, de la perversion sexuelle, de l'orgueil maladif, toutes ces tares sont dépeintes de façon assez abstraite, universelles, pour que le spectateur puisse établir entre les obsessions du héros et les siennes une **différence de degré, non de nature**. L'attitude criminelle de Bruno n'est que la **dégradation d'une attitude fondamentale de l'être humain**. Dans sa maladie, nous pouvons distinguer altéré, perverti sous une apparence de dignité esthétique, l'archétype même de tous les désirs humains les plus sombres. Le crime de Bruno n'est après tout que de **mettre à exécution**, d'une part les **désirs inavoués** de Guy, et d'autre part, les **jeux d'esprit** de la vieille dame qui lui offre imprudemment son cou.



Cela revient à nous poser deux questions philosophiques fondamentales : 1) *Que se passerait-il si nos désirs inavoués et nos rêves les plus malsains étaient exaucés ?* 2) *Pouvons-nous parler légèrement de / et 'jouer' à certaines situations graves, comme cette vieille hypocrite ?*

HOMOEROTIC SUBTONES AND MEN'S ENVY

IN *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN* AND SOME OTHER HITCHCOCK'S FILMS

Introduction

Political subtext is crucial to better understand Hitchcock, Cook, Ormonde and Keon's script for *Strangers on a Train*. Cook allegedly used Guy to make the film 'a parable quietly defiant of the Cold War hysteria sweeping America' — a hysteria targeting **homosexuals along with Communists as enemies of the State** (see **Robert Corber's** *In the Name of National Security : Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Post-war America* (1993) London). The U.S. Senate was busy investigating the suspicion that 'moral pervers' in the government were also undermining national security (*Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*).

Hitchcock, who had already used gay characters in *Rope* in 1948, 'drafted the left-leaning Cook expressly because he was comfortable with **sexually ambiguous** characters.' (Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock : A Life in Darkness and Light* (2004), NY : Harper Perennial, p. 442) Based on the Leopold-Loeb case, *Rope* is another story about a murder pact with a homosexual subtext : it involves a psychopathic murderer who **induces another young man to kill for thrills**.

The casting of **Farley Granger** as Guy, the **weak and terrified catspaw** (who plays as though he were constantly swallowing his tongue) and **Robert Walker** as the **evil yet suave** Bruno is crucial here. Hitchcock allegedly wanted William Holden for the role of Guy, but Holden would have been all wrong – too strong, too sturdy to be manipulated. Granger is **softer and elusive** as he tries to **slip out** of Bruno's web instead of flatly rejecting him. Walker plays Bruno as **flirtatious and seductive**, sitting too close during their first meeting, and then reclining at full length across from Guy in the private compartment. The meeting on the train, which was probably planned by Bruno, **plays more like a pick-up than a chance encounter**. The novelist of *Strangers on a Train*, **Patricia Highsmith**, was a lesbian, and her stories frequently use a buried subtext of **unstated gay attraction**. Although homosexuality still dared not speak its name very loudly in 1951, Hitchcock was quite aware of Bruno's orientation, and indeed edited separate American and British version of the film, cutting down the intensity of the 'seductiveness' in one of the prints.

1 – Mothers and weak sons

Bruno, eccentric and flamboyant as he is, has many of the cues traditionally associated with being gay. In particular, one notices the conspicuous **presence of his mother** throughout the film. Almost the first thing Bruno talks about is his mother and his mother's gift to him — a *tie* that he is thereby obliged to wear, like the proverbial *apron string*. Closeness to mother is a standard marker in the movies of the 1950s for **Something Wrong**. Association with mother does not necessarily denote homosexuality but rather **defectiveness**, serious if not fatal **male weakness**. Hitchcock had already used this motif in *Notorious* (1946) where the bad guy — superbly played by the great Claude Rains — is conspicuously linked with a mother who appears to control him. Male failure could hardly be more dramatic, underlined by the transfer of his wife to a younger, better-looking, and stronger male.

A man should stand on his own and not be close to his mother : this formula was deeply ingrained in the pop psychology of the post-war years. Under the influence of **Freud**, the idea that **domination by the mother caused the son to be homosexual** was widespread, and it was assumed that close association with Mama had the effect of emasculating the male. The break with mother was absolutely essential for a male. Even in Disney's *Bambi* (1942) this point is emphatic — no matter how traumatic. Better for the mother to be dead, as far as the son is concerned, than too close. When Norman Bates fervently tells Marion in *Psycho* that '*a boy's best friend is his mother*', you know everything you need to know about Norman. Keep away from this guy ! The next thing you know, he'll be dressing up in mama's clothes. And if he does something like that, you know he is capable of anything : murder, necrophilia, *etc.*

Clearly, Bruno's mother is the dangerous kind of female. Her closeness to Bruno is probably the real cause for Bruno's **bizarre personality and ultimately murderous actions** — as in *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1948) by **Fritz Lang**. Most of all, the mother is hostile to the father. The grotesque portrait she paints is an **artistic murder** that adumbrates *actual* murder and encourages her son's own conspiracy against the father. Mother and son are **oedipal allies in their hatred of the father**. The father, a man of wealth and position, comes across as hopelessly unequal to the task of taming and controlling his bent son, who is evidently in need of straightening. The father's weakness, in turn, predicts the son's weakness, weirdness — if not repressed homosexuality.

2 – Homoerotic subtext in *Strangers on a Train*

Homosexuality is a peculiarly anxiety-arousing topic and is rarely discussed, let alone openly admitted, being deeply taboo. Yet it did affect movies in the past as well, not only in the **plot construction**, but also, I would argue, in more technical aspects such as **cinematography**.

New codes were created in Hitchcock's films :

A) Initiation : The 'pick-up' scene in the train

The opening shots of the men's legs approaching the station and in the train car are significant here — those shots being more commonly used with a man's **and a woman's** legs to suggest a secret or even random *rendez-vous*. It is as if some secret affinity draws the two men together, allowing the meeting to be both an accident and purposeful. This is in a sense the logic of the 'pick up' situation itself, with its attendant emphasis on alcohol.



Later on, we feel there is definitely something more happening between the scary yet strangely appealing bad guy, Bruno, and the *boy-next-door* type, Guy, the clean-cut protagonist of the movie. Bruno is acting **flirtatious and seductive**, sitting too close during their first meeting, and then reclining at full length across from Guy in the private compartment. And Guy seems more attracted to Bruno than he knows or would admit.

B) The climax : How *love-making* and *killing* look strangely alike in Hitchcock

The amazing final sequence of the movie is surely one of the most memorable episodes in the Hitchcock oeuvre, because it is a **visual and technical *tour de force***. But there is something definitely deranging about it as well. The more you learn to know Hitchcock, from his own words in interviews or else, the more you see !

What strikes the viewer now is that the scene of Guy and Bruno on top of each other locked in furious physical contact may suggest something more than just two men trying to kill each other — some critics even found the desperate whirling of the horses on the machine they are on even suggests mounting orgasmic excitement. **Scenes of killing and death struggle which could almost be viewed as ‘love-making’ are not uncommon in Hitchcock** — for example the scene in *Topaz* (1969) in which the Cuban commander shoots the woman he loves — a scene shot with virtuosic camera work from above looking down. What is unfamiliar is that it is **two men locked in an embrace**, and not a man and a woman, as elsewhere in his *films noirs*. After reading Hitchcock’s own reading of some scenes in *Vertigo*, I wouldn’t be surprised !

3 – Men’s envy toward other men

Personally, although I think Hitchcock *did* intend to show some disturbing sexual ambiguity, the real issue is not in homosexuality but **male ambition**. *Strangers on a Train* is a complex of male behaviours and motivations that make up a sort of code of male envy, where the crucial force is **hostility** between men – certainly not attraction !

The general cultural assumption is that **males are fundamentally hostile to other males** : all men are really enviously competing and in conflict with all other men, apart from tactical alliances. The primacy of hostility between men, in turn, defines female roles, and is in practice, it is a determining **force in constructing a plot**. Winning seems to be everything in this atheistic world, and winning means beating other men of course.

While the plot device of the **criss-cross murder** hardly makes for realism, it is a brilliant one, especially when combined with the further plot device that one stranger takes it **as a joke**, **while the other takes it seriously** and expects the exchange to be taken seriously.

A) **Guy Haines** : **Climbing the social ladder. About winning and losing.** The spectacle of masculinity and the performance of virility in *Strangers on a Train*

The key change that Hitchcock made to the book was to the family of Ann Morton who is Guy's girlfriend. It may seem odd to say so, but everything follows from this one *seemingly minor* alteration. It gives the story a totally different orientation from the somber, homoerotic and colourless Highsmith novel. In Highsmith's novel, the family are well off, but in no way distinguished. In the movie, by contrast, **Ann's family is powerful and prominent.** They are also powerful *dramatically*, as the father is a United States Senator. The action is thus shifted to Washington DC, the acme of political power, rather than, as in the novel, somewhere in Texas. As a U.S. Senator, Ann's father is one of 96 members of what was the most powerful political body in history at that point. **This change alters, even redefines, the motivation of Guy Haines.** In the Highsmith novel, Haines is simply in love with another woman than his wife — Ann Morton. In the movie, Guy Haines is in love with a *Senator's daughter*, the daughter of a *very important man*. This then leads to another interesting transformation Hitchcock made. In the novel, Haines is a young architect dedicated to his calling. He is an earnest professional seeking to practice his craft. In the movie, Guy has no profession, really, apart from his being in the tennis circuit. He is what Truffaut called an '*opportunistic playboy*'. Contrarily to the novel, what Haines wants is to *be a politician*.

He wants to climb the ladder of power. This fact puts a new light on his love for Ann. Ann has great charm and poise. But for an aspiring politician, what makes Ann truly irresistible is *who her father is*. A standard way to steal a march on one's competitors is to **connect with the daughter of an important man already higher up the ladder.** It is interesting that Bruno grasps this point at once. He voices it as no one else in the film does : '*Marrying the boss's daughter*', he says, '*that makes a nice shortcut to a career, doesn't it ?*'

Guy's love for Ann isn't separated from self-interest. Compare this situation to Martha's in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* (1964) as she punctures the pretensions of the junior male professor : '*You didn't chase me ... out of mad, driven passion, did you now? You were thinking a little bit about your career, weren't you ?*' A woman such as Ann would bring Guy not only valuable contacts and introductions but the poise, charm, and looks that, in the form of an attractive and dedicated wife, comprise an essential asset for a politician. As the saying goes, *behind every successful man, there's a woman.*

The obvious contrast to Ann in the movie is Miriam. She wears glasses, gloats loudly and rudely over her husband's 'swanky' new friends and political connections. Totally unsuitable as consort of a successful politician, she's not only irredeemably vulgar, pushy, demanding, and immature ; she's blatantly sexual and flirtatious. She would be utterly impossible cast in the role of VIP wife. No wonder Guy is desperate. His identity as successful competitor and climber would be sunk forever. He would be consigned to that **most dreaded of all male identities, that of loser.**

The emphasis on tennis is also very important here because it is all about competition, about winning and losing, with crowds watching and prizes hanging on the outcome. The use of tennis also discloses much about the protagonist and in a sense **constructs that character.** Tennis **is the game of the upper class** — *not* of Miriam's working-class milieu, the milieu that Guy must dissociate himself from. It corresponds to Guy's ambitiousness.

Furthermore, the career as tennis player is perfect training for politics. One is always on stage. One competes openly. One has to deal with the press — and with intrigued spectators and members of the public. One accumulates a following of loyal fans — if successful. Above all, the tennis matches are a superb means of **ego gratification, personal display and attention-getting.** Our only understanding of Guy as politician is of **someone who wants to climb the ladder of power and prestige.**

It goes without saying, too, that the tennis circuit is an invaluable means of **getting in touch with the wealthy and powerful elite** who favour tennis with their **attendance and patronage.** The kind of tennis Guy plays is a **single's sport**, not a team sport : it singles him out for maximum attention, and it is no doubt his sport that has put him in contact with the Senator's daughter in the first place. Nothing conveys more precisely and forcefully the winner / loser axis, with its mentality, its demands, its obsessions, not to say its ruthlessness

Guy's somewhat colourless presence masks his ambition — he is very modest, *modest seeming* that is, and his physical presence express his being unexpectedly fragile, even weak and dependent. **The ambitious man cannot admit to being ambitious, any more than a man can admit to envy and envious hostility toward another man.** That is what *losers* do.

B) **Women** : caught in the fight of between *power males* and *losers*. How the competitive struggle between males has traditionally dictated the role of women

One can get a sense of the importance of these issues in *Strangers on a Train* by comparing them with a more serious and far more sinister expression of the same concerns : *Psycho*. If we look at it from the point of view of **competitive male aggressiveness toward other males**, the centre of attention *does* shift from Norman to Marion Crane's lover, Sam :

- Sam : The loser

Sam is an ineffectual man, one who cannot provide for his lover what she desires or requires ; more important, he is not there for her when she really needs him. Sam is, to put it in the blunt terminology of male competition, a '*flop*'. In movies and books, standard markers of being a *loser* are (1) **inability to make money** and (2) **preoccupation with some failure from the past** that paralyzes the ability to act in the present. Sam's debts, his career as clerk in a hardware store (compare to Miriam in *Strangers*), his preoccupation with paying off his first wife from a failed marriage — all are significant indicators from a dramatic point of view. Sam is going nowhere, and Marion knows it : that is why she gives him an ultimatum in the scene that opens the movie : *find a way or it's over*.

- Tom : The power male

The contrasting figure to Sam in this regard is Tom Cassidy, the boastful older man whom we see at the beginning of the movie entering the office where Marion works ; a man who in every way is **Sam's opposite**. He is a classic winner here, a '*power male*', a man of material success whose confidence and wealth he puts deliberately on display. He sits on Marion's desk, invading her space, and he invades her personal life with rude questions, then waves a bundle of bills in her face, tormenting her with the financial lack that has made her life visibly unhappy. He tells her that **he buys happiness**. This is what the other secretary in the office, played by Hitchcock's daughter Patricia, calls '*flirting*'.

This act — a male 'winner' boasting and flaunting his power in the face of her frustration — is what incites Marion to steal the man's cash and run away : **it is her way of doing what her boyfriend Sam cannot do, that is to provide the material means for their union**.

- Their common point : *boasting*

Marion's lover, Sam, shows surprising weakness in his dealing with the disappearance of his beloved. This weakness is evident in the scene where Sam and the intrepid Lila — **Marion's bold and determined sister** — go to the Bates Motel with the intention of investigating the scary mystery house behind the motel. Lila instructs Sam to keep Norman busy so that *she can slip off to investigate the house*. After all, Sam is, as the opening love-making shots in the movie emphasize, muscular and macho, so he should be able to handle a wimp like Norman with ease. Sam naturally interprets this meeting with Norman as **an opportunity for bullying and in effect showing off his power**, instead of insinuating himself into Norman's confidence and getting information out of him. This is typical of male envy : in the culture of *male envy*, a **man's need to boast** — like Tom with his money in the opening —, his **need to act aggressively** is a kind of categorical imperative, something he cannot resist in order to prove himself and most of all, prove the others.

Norman Bates and Sam are not alike, except in one crucial respect : they are both *losers* in the male competitive struggle. The difference is that Norman has found a way of soothing the offended *ego* : **murder**, like Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). Traditionally, **male winning is marked by possession of a desirable woman**, just as attacking another male is often accomplished by stealing or damaging his woman — the transfer of a woman from one man to another being a familiar sign of the defeat of the first man by the second. Norman has found that spying on desirable women and killing them is a satisfying way of solving his *loser* anxieties. What better way to demonstrate possession of something than by destroying it ?

- Reversal of gender roles

It's no accident that it is Marion's sister, Lila, who instructs Sam to keep Norman busy, so that *she can slip off to investigate the mysterious house*. Nor is it pure coincidence that *she* finds the necessary evidence to take Norman down — not the loser Sam. This is actual rewriting of the tale of *Bluebeard* : the sister, not *the knight in shining armour*, comes to the rescue. Sam never shows the same determination to find and avenge Marion that Lila does. The reversal of gender roles here is striking. It's actually Sam's *lack of devotion*, his weakness and inability to provide what Marion needed, as symbolized by his unwillingness to marry her, that **initiates the action of the movie** and ends up with Marion's violent death.

- Women in *Strangers on a Train*

Both films are very different, but the framework assumption is shared. The **pressures exerted by the competitive struggle between males** — the need to win against other males and to control objects that yield power and prestige — have traditionally **dictated the role of women**, the way women are viewed, evaluated, and scripted, so to speak.

The male competitive struggle as shown in almost all *Films Noirs* requires that women perform two key functions :

- **First, they provide significant emotional and material resources to their man :** *husband, father or brother*. They must offer emotional cushioning plus energy for the man, thus enabling him to pursue success in the struggle against other male competitors.
- **Second, women furnish a kind of ‘male display’ to mark winning and to symbolize status** in the eyes of other people. That is, a rich or beautiful woman is a prize to be won, and possessing such a woman is a victory over other male competitors. Possession of a desirable woman — the trophy wife — signifies winning over other men and is perceived that way by them. This is one reason why rape is used in warfare : it is less about sex than about humiliating and damaging the enemy males.

Now consider Miriam in *Strangers on a Train*. Not only does Miriam *not* perform the two vital functions of providing material and emotional resources to her man and of signifying his winning status, she is a disastrous liability in this regard. By having sex with other men, she is sabotaging her husband's power position. Furthermore, as the opening scene makes plain, Miriam is willing to make scenes, publicly humiliating Guy, openly disobeying him and expressing her dissatisfaction : an **impossible liability for an ambitious male**. If he has any hope of being a winner, Guy *must get rid of Miriam*. She is a continuing threat to his ambition and hence to his very identity.

The contrast is marked at every point with the upper-class Ann, who is never loud, immature, nor flirtatious. Ann is a woman who knows her place, acting as an enhancer of aspiring men and trained under the expert tutelage of a strict man who has proved himself successful : her Senator father.



C) **Bruno** : Desiring to go straight and having difficulties to do so. *Hitchcock's obsession with Jack the Ripper and Superbitches*

As noted earlier, Bruno has many of the stereotypic markers of being gay. Yet to explain Bruno essentially in terms of his sexual orientation is to miss the point : it oversimplifies this **beautifully constructed, and psychologically complex film**. One interesting indicator is Bruno's physical strength. He is hardly the limp-wristed or mincing creature of gay stereotypes of the 1950s, despite his effeminate manner. On the contrary, Bruno is powerful and muscular. He has a shapeless hulking appearance in his large overcoat. **He is powerful physically but also in terms of personality**. He is persistent, daring, and capable of ruthless action — he explicitly tells Guy he is willing to do anything — in addition to his verbal facility, wit, and proclivity to speak his mind. He is also crazy. That is, he is unpredictable, uninhibited, murderous, obsessive, unrestrained, and just plain weird, a '*psychopathic Peter Pan*' according to **Raymond Durnat** (p. 228).

Bruno's interest in Guy may be sexual, but it is, again, more complicated than that. In fact, **Guy is everything Bruno is not and wishes he could be :**

- Guy is handsome, successful, poised, independent, industrious. He has social finesse and knows how to get along with people and how to be liked by people. He has a goal and direction in life. Above all, he is *normal* ; everything, in short, that Bruno is not. Actually one definitely gets the sense that he **condescendingly enjoys doing Guy a big favour** by removing the one block to Guy's desire, namely the existence of Miriam.



In the case of Bruno, the **lighter** is also an interesting symbol : it's a gift from a rich woman (**Ann to Guy**), the kind of thing Bruno would never have, not only in terms of man/woman relationship, but most of all as a *social* symbol. By the end of the film, Bruno loses it in a storm drain, and cannot exactly *put his hand on it* — quite clever, huh ?

- Bruno by contrast is a monster, and he knows it. **He wishes he were Guy.** This yearning identification is a kind of envy, a possessiveness on the verge of crazed mania : Bruno wishes to enclose Guy's identity within his own control, like a prized object. **He even acts in his place.** This is Bruno.

It should be noted that in the novel, **Guy actually does murder Bruno's father**. Hitchcock's change here is dramatic, and introduces a sense of infidelity. Bruno 'stalks' Guy in the sense that he wants to **absorb Guy's identity into his own**. He wants to *be* Guy — the scenario suggests a male version of *All about Eve* (1950). Bruno's feeling of being a failure and an outcast suggests a motivation ironically close to that of Guy, who wishes above all to shed his *loser* identity in the social class and culture of Miriam, and become one of the power elite of society through Ann. **Each wants what the other has because each wants to be in his own way a winner** — not a loser.

In fact, Bruno is a kind of parody of Guy. He does everything Guy does but grotesquely, clumsily, murderously, absurdly. One notices how much he attracts attention to himself — an essential skill and *desideratum* of the male competitor — but he does so in a way that turns people off, as when he goes berserk at the high class party and almost strangles a matronly lady. His competitive ruthlessness is evident in his grotesque act of popping the little boy's balloon when the boy 'shoots' him with his toy gun. No one is going to beat *him* ! He shows off his athletic ability by winning with the strength-testing hammer at the fair, like Guy winning tennis matches. But whereas Guy's competition is the delicate and refined game of tennis, which women also excel at, Bruno's athletic skill is demonstrated as **pure macho strength** — Bruno the Bear. Bruno has the capacity to charm and entertain, but not quite like Guy, as when he absurdly talks about smelling flowers on Mars with the Senator. He is rather **ruthless and determined** : when he thinks of a plan, he carries it out.

What is it that motivates Bruno ?

- **Hatred of the father** — in an oedipal sense of way. No doubt this hostility is sick and reprehensible in every way. But symbolically, hostility to the father also suggests :
- **Hostility to normality** — and to the very loser / winner system that Guy embodies.

Robert Walker's *playing* of an evil *Homme Fatal* is thus a *tour de force*, because of its complexity. He is a dastardly villain, and his murder of Miriam is utterly horrifying : '*She felt no pain,*' he tells Guy consolingly. Because of its pervasive amorality and implicit subplot, I wouldn't recommend this film below the age of 15. Generally speaking, Hitchcock's later films all deal with **pervert violence made on women**. Young girls especially might be shocked or feel uncomfortable because of this recurrent underlying theme.