

Review #92 : *I Confess* (1953)

Montgomery Clift and Anne Baxter

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0H43IqD7mEg>



SYNOPSIS

Father Michael Logan (**Montgomery Clift**) is a devout Catholic priest in Ste. Marie's Church in **Quebec City**. He employs German immigrants Otto Keller (**O. E. Hasse**) and his wife Alma (**Dolly Haas**) as caretaker and housekeeper. Otto also works part-time as a gardener for a shady lawyer called Villette.

The film begins late one evening, as a man wearing a priest's cassock walks away from Villette's house, where Villette lies dead on the floor. Shortly afterward, in the church confessional, Keller confesses to Father Logan that killed Villette. He also tells his wife about his deed and assures her that the priest will not say anything because he is **forbidden from revealing information acquired through confessions.**

The next morning, Keller reports Villette's death to the police. At the police station, two young girls tell Inspector Larrue (**Karl Malden**) they saw a priest leaving Villette's house. This prompts Larrue to call Father Logan in for questioning, but Logan refuses to provide any information about the murder. Now suspecting Logan, Larrue orders a detective to follow him and contacts Crown Prosecutor Robertson (**Brian Aherne**), who is attending a party hosted by Ruth Grandfort (**Anne Baxter**) and her husband Pierre, a member of the Quebec legislature. Ruth overhears Robertson discussing about Logan and meets with him to warn him that he is a suspect.



Larrue, who had them followed, immediately **calls Ruth and Logan in for questioning** about their relationship, and Ruth explains what happened, narrating a series of *flashbacks* : she and Logan fell in love when they were younger, but he went off to fight in World War II and eventually stopped writing to her. That's when Pierre proposed to here and they got engaged. The day after, Logan returned from the war. He and Ruth spent the day on a nearby island, reconnecting with their blissfully innocent romance. **A storm forced them to shelter in a gazebo, where they fell asleep, and Villette found them there in the morning.** Logan was ordained as a priest several years later, while Ruth married Pierre.

Well aware of her power and influence, Villette recently asked Ruth to persuade her husband to help him escape a tax scandal. When she refused, **he tried to blackmail her by threatening to publicize the night she spent with Logan.** She met with Logan on the night of the murder for advice, and they agreed to visit Villette in the morning.

Ruth's meeting with Father Logan almost provides him with an alibi, but Larrue has evidence showing that the murder occurred a little while after their meeting, and the blackmail suggests **a possible motive for Logan to have killed Villette.** Keller even plants the bloody cassock he used for the murder among Logan's belongings, and when Logan is tried in court, Keller testifies that he saw Logan enter the church after the murder, acting suspiciously...

REVIEW

A forgotten albeit flawed masterpiece, this thriller about a priest accused of murder smoulders gloriously. It's one of my favourite Hitchcock movies.

1 – Superb photography

I Confess is Hitchcock's most European film : continental art house with a dash of British humour, barely touching the American gothic that became Hitch's trademark later on.

Set in French-speaking Quebec City, it starts with a dramatic **collage of street signs** that would have pleased **Walter Benjamin**, culminating in a camera swoop through an open window : *a man lies murdered on the ground*. Next, a shot straight out of **Fritz Lang** : a shadowy figure in a cassock walking down old cobblestones. In the next scene we see the man in a church, his guilty face only illuminated by a candle. The **black and white photography is exceptional** from beginning to end, with wonderful close-ups of the characters' faces.

2 – Superb set

I Confess is filled with Quebec architecture and famous spots — *Vieux-Québec, the ferryboat between Québec and Lévis, the Château Frontenac, the Ile d'Orléans, the Basilica* — suggesting a **relationship between the timeless buildings and the infallibility of Logan's faith and the rightness of his Church.** Catholic services and the official functions of the priest are respectfully realistic and unadorned, but every time Logan steps out into the city streets he becomes a Catholic version of Will Kane, marching down lonely streets on his way to a High Noon showdown with destiny. He's a man alone, misunderstood by all ; he can only trust that greater powers — he's forever gazing up at skies and handsome stonework facades — are on his side.

3 – Superb Cast

Cahiers du Cinéma rated *I Confess* more than any of Hitchcock's other films ; **Eric Rohmer** called it '*a modern masterpiece*'. And indeed there's plenty to admire, although it would be absurd to pretend that *I Confess* can match *Strangers on a Train* for suspense or *North by Northwest* for wit. Yet Hitchcock is caught off-guard here, not so much confidently directing as being slowly **mesmerised by Father Logan's inner turmoil.** Hollywood's original method actor before Marlon Brando, **Montgomery Clift** filmed with his acting coach just out of shot, but his performance is a **master class in subtlety.** He interiorizes so much, you sometimes start to wonder if he's acting at all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzJcjW24bZA>

Clift's understated style is brought out even more by the contrast with **theatrically-trained Hasse as Keller**, who does more melodrama with his eyes in the first minute than Clift in the entire movie. When Keller overhears his name mentioned by police, he swooshes around like a camp Count Dracula doing a double take. Contrast that with Clift's character being declared innocent by the judge at the end of the movie : for a few seconds there's no reaction whatsoever, then Father Logan breathes the softest sigh of relief.

There's also this wonderful sequence — with absolutely no dialogue — where Logan **walks up the street in the background**, and the shot emphasizes his isolation : it's a striking side

high angle shot with a *Carrying of the Cross* scene in the foreground, in high contrast. And then immediately after he stumbles and there's a close-up when he puts his face in his hands.



In the work of someone so exhaustively appreciated as Hitchcock, you wouldn't expect to find **forgotten masterpieces** but *I Confess* is one.

DEEPER ANALYSIS

In *I Confess*, the Macguffin of the **sanctity of a Priest's confessional** — an absolute rule of the Catholic faith — is the focus of the film. Hitchcock is fond of mocking most institutions but not here. Hitchcock plays it straight, creating a movie about faith that's not totally exclusive of a romantic murder thriller. **That's where the film's flaws are harder to ignore.**

1 – The seriousness of Holy Commitment vs. immature Romance and Fantasies

I have to think that Hitchcock saw Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, as Father Logan has a lot in common with Bresson's sad priest. *I Confess* is arguably one Clift's best performances,

as he successfully **communicates almost everything through facial mannerisms**. He's the best and most believable tortured priest even seen in a movie. Hitchcock doubtlessly was impressed. In both stories, the priests' silent suffering cuts them off from communication ; both are diagnosed by people as being **foolish, stubborn and guilty of something**. Even the sympathetic police chief played by **Karl Malden** interprets Logan's lack of cooperation as hidden guilt. He even suspects him of a love affair with Ruth (**Anne Baxter**).

Hitchcock makes it clear that *nothing happened*, even before Logan became a priest. Ruth's deliriously beautiful romantic flash-backs are not the truth, but a **subjective fantasy about the past**. The flash-backs begin with an **impossibly idealized love image** : the gauzy perfection of youthful Ruth descending the stairs to her fiancé — which thus clue us in to the unreliability of the rest of her testimony.



Ruth is obviously operating under romantic delusions. She thinks of herself and Michael Logan as lovers torn apart by war. But then the story goes to pieces when Ruth comes back to reality and offhandedly tells us that after a few missed letters, she married another man. **The only problem is that it happens across about 10 seconds of screen time, and it frequently**

makes audiences laugh out loud. The Anne Baxter character suffers a lot in this aspect, as she seems to have nursed exaggerated fantasies of a gloriously tragic love ‘affair’ — an affair now rekindled with the notion that her dream lover might have killed on her behalf. During the investigation and the trial, she’s actually **indulging herself in dramatics while further implicating Father Logan.**

Anne Baxter's opportunity to star opposite Clift turns out to be a pitfall when the movie makes her character **look like a ninny**. After a while she seems like a **dippy ingénue enraptured by her own romantic imagination.**

In the end, *I Confess* says that romance is immature nonsense compared to Logan's holy commitment. Logan's loyalty to the cloth is the only real value here, and it's indeed very strong and beautifully rendered but the subplot concerning Ruth therefore fails to convince us.

2 – Alma's death

Alma's death is one of the most poignant moments in the entire film. *Ironically*, being the **most innocent member of the cast**, Mrs. Keller is the one **who pays the most dearly**. As we maintain a hierarchy of concern with Logan's problem on top, followed by Anne Baxter's, her death is most unexpected and comes quite as a shock.



Poor Alma is a footnote victim, **collateral damage** under the onslaught of everyone else's **collective sins** : her husband's greed and cowardice, Ruth's selfish vanity, the crowd's hatred towards Father Logan. Look at the fat woman *on the left of one shot*, disgustingly eating an apple while watching the crowd starting to attack Logan as he gets out of Court !

Alma takes a bullet for Logan, and in an instant achieves **martyrdom**. Logan is the Christ figure here, but as you know, **women played a very important part during the Passion**. Isn't it significant than only Ruth and Alma are on Logan's side, just as near the end, *only women remained at the foot of the Cross* ?

Alma's death also makes the crowd change sides, and eventually brings back the murderer's humanity. It's a key scene, and could have been handled with even greater depth. It's a pity the whole thing happens so fast. Another great yet flawed idea !

NOTES

1 – The music

The real victim in this film is also **Dimitri Tiomkin**'s superb music, which in the main title of the VHS sounded muddy and indistinct. This strange and flowery melody **mixes romance with a delicate ode to higher virtue**. It's one of my favourite Tiomkin scores :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVaLeI99pV4>

2 – Cover Art



Compare :

The DVD Cover is from shows Clift holding Baxter in a hammerlock that matches James Cagney's grip on his blondie Virginia Mayo in *White Heat*. It misrepresents the film... in the best way possible. What *where* they thinking ? Did they only watch it ?