



Tension Trauma and Transgression in a Psychoanalytic Reading of Hitchcock's *Rope*

¹Abirami Abi, ²Dr.Kavya Venkatraman, ³Depavath Balu Naik & ⁴Dr. Aujo Philip J M

¹ Assistant Professor, Jain Deemed to be University Bangalore, Karnataka Email ID: abirami.av@jainuniversity.ac.in,

² Assistant Professor, Jain Deemed to be University Bangalore, Karnataka

³ Assistant Professor, Jain Deemed to be University Bangalore, Karnataka

⁴ Assistant Professor, Jain Deemed to be University Bangalore, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a psychoanalytic reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), a psychological thriller grounded in themes of voyeurism, narcissism, repression, and moral transgression. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the analysis explores the film's psychological dimensions—particularly the implications of fetishism, the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, and Lacan's concept of the Master's Discourse. The paper also investigates the symbolic significance of the titular rope, the queer subtext of the protagonists Brandon and Phillip, and the dynamics of power and guilt as enacted through the film's setting and camera techniques. By interweaving psychoanalytic theory with cinematic narrative, the study uncovers the deeper unconscious forces at play in the film's characters and structure. It argues that *Rope* not only subverts traditional moral binaries but also reflects mid-20th-century anxieties surrounding sexuality, authority, and intellectual superiority.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, repression, fetishism, Oedipus complex, Master's Discourse, homosexuality in cinema, cinematic symbolism, film noir, voyeurism, castration anxiety

In the following paper my aim is to focus on a psychoanalytic study of Alfred Hitchcock's movie 'Rope'. Most of Hitchcock's film deals with themes such as voyeurism, anxiety, narcissism, obsession and the mysterious murder. I would refer to psychoanalyst's Sigmund Freud and his famous French disciple Jacques Lacan concept's in my study, widely used theoretical tools for examining the form and content of cinematic art.

Alfred Hitchcock was born on 13th August 1899. A British film director known as the 'Master of Suspense' within more than fifty movies. His films are popular in the genre of thriller and crime. Hitchcock's films have gained reputation over the world, also known for his camera techniques in his movies like (Dolly zoom in 1958 "Vertigo", Whirling camera in 1956 "The Wrong Man" and Editing in 1960 "Psycho" Shower scene) In 1934 he attained an international fame and achieved the pre-eminent director's place in England. Hitchcock is well aware of his audience's thoughts, opinions and he manipulates their feelings. However, the audience like to watch his movies.

Techniques used in Hitchcock's movie he once said "Blond makes the best Victim" there are 54% of heroines who have blond hair style in his movies. Most of his characters attain a Dying fall, often his characters are sent on a Long Journeys Marion Crane in Psycho. The Villain character portrayed in his movie are generally charming and initially trusted. Similarly, on the other hand there will be one Bad Mother character who is possessive, cunning, unstable and monstrous. In all most all his film most of the characters undergo an Abnormal Death for instance in "Rope" David's death.

Rope was released in 1948 based on Patrick and Hamilton's 1929 British play named the same. It took inspiration from real life incidents of Leopold and Loeb, two students who murdered a fourteen years old child to validate their intellect they were motivated by Nietzschean concept of "supermen". Hitchcock film was based on a play as he was fascinated by the Aristotelian Unities. Rope explored the relationship between time, space and action established with long takes.

Hitchcock's film Rope is an American psychological thriller it deals with the story of two young graduate students and a murder committed by them. The film opens with a murder and ends with a gunshot. A loud scream leads us into the Manhattan socialites in a swanky apartment. The entry with the help of the camera into the apartment perhaps takes us on a journey into the mind of human psyche. Where Brandon Shaw and Phillip Morgan strangle their former classmate David Kentley. They believe that their academic superiority will allow them to get away with the crime, thus they confidently hid David's body and arrange for a dinner party. Instead of hiding themselves or the evidence of their crime, they invite David's parents Mr. and Mrs. Kentley and his beloved Janet Walker also David's former best friend Lawrence and their Professor Cadell who joins the party. Even Though they try to remain calm in the presence of their professor who questions them, made them to break their calmness. In the end Professor will investigate their crime and will find what they have done.

Rupert Cadell's arrival for the party made Phillip uncomfortable. During a short discussion, Brandon said "Nobody commits murder just for the experiment of murder.... Nobody expect us" Meanwhile Rupert notice Phillip's face reaction and was suspicious about David's absence.

Rope's suspense mechanism is the dinner party in which the guest eat over, near and around David's coffin. Brandon and Phillip decided to serve the meal on the long rectangular chest in which David's dead body lies rather than the table that has already been set by the housekeeper Mrs. Wilson. In the end he exposes their crime returning to their apartment after the other guests have left flinging open the chest-coffin, seeing David's body there, condemning the killers by shouting a gun shot outside the window alerting the authorities.

Hitchcock had his own way with the camera, capturing Phillip's emotions by Generating terrific tension among the spectator's. In using this "Suspense technique" yet noticing this Brandon daringly had ignored the truth with the usage of humour. Brandon considered himself as Nietzschean concept of "Supermen" who's superiority of intellect excuses them from laws that govern the rest of us. "Good and evil, right and wrong were invented for the ordinary average man, because he needs them" Brandon and Philip believe that David is inferior to them and they can murder him without repercussions. This exemplifies their misapplication of Nietzsche flows from their obsession with Rupert Cadell, who schooled them in his version of Nietzschean theory.

A psychoanalytic reading of this film will help us widen our understanding of Hitchcock's 'Rope'.

A piece of Rope plays a vital role in the film, it was used as a weapon to strangle David. Rope resembles the phallic symbol. According to Freud during this stage boys develop an unconscious sexual desire for their mother's and fear that because of this their father figure will punish them by castration. During the phallic stage the child's pleasure move to the genitals at the age from three to six.

Similarly, in the movie Phillip was more conscious in the presence of the rope. For instance "when the rope was given to tie the books" Phillip felt very uncomfortable and worried that someone will find the truth about it. He develops an unconscious fear and threat of castration in Freud's words. Brandon on the other hand pretends to be comfortable and articulates that 'it's just a kitchen stuff'

Sigmund Freud's 1927 essay "Fetishism" concept of the fetish begins in the phenomenon of substitution. According to him fetish is a special form of penis substitute. For the boy who apprehends his mother's "lack" of penis as the representation of his own possible castration, the women's genitalia generate a "fright". A Fetish can be a variety of things yet three basic types are: An Inanimate object like (women's clothing, shoes, underwear and gloves), A part of human body like (hand, hair, leg, foot and breasts) some fetish may not even be visible to the other person.

In most of his films Hitchcock's fetishism is openly sexual and naturally focuses on the heroine. In the film there is a lack of heroine, there are women presented in the movie who are aged, unsexy appearance and full figured they do not come under the concept of fetishism. Instead of the usual hero and heroine there is a pair of homosexual couple Brandon and Philli. Lacking a heroine in this film, one can perhaps substitute a different kind of fetish for this pair. Both Brandon and Phillip have a substitute of 'An inanimate object' for the lack of penis, such as cigarettes and alcohol. Whenever Phillip is nervous he reaches out to Alcohol to avoid conversation. Similarly, on the other hand, Brandon inhale the puff often and tries to be bold. This shows the lack of heroine's fetish is been substituting with Alcohol and cigarettes instead of a female sexual organ.

According to the theory of the Unconscious, "Freud believed that the answers to what controlled daily actions resided in the unconscious mind despite alternative views that all our behaviours were conscious. He felt that religion is an illusion based on human values that are created by the mind to overcome inner psychological conflict."

Repression is defined as "forgetting or ejection from consciousness of memories of threat and especially the ejection from awareness of impulses in oneself that might have objectionable consequences" In other words a memory the brain takes what we see, hear and feel fills in the blank spaces with information that we have perceived from common knowledge and stores it as a memory. At times when something is so shocking that the mind grabs hold of the memory and pushes it underground into some inaccessible corner of the unconscious.

Repression is caused because of the childhood trauma faced by one which affects them in their adulthood. In Rope Phillip avoid his attempt to answer why he did not eat chicken, he becomes more anxious when Janet Walker questions him. According to Freud the concept of Repression is caused because of one's childhood memories. In Phillips childhood he has strangled a chicken in Shaw's backyard and he wanted to erase this incident unfortunately this affects him in his adulthood.

In contrast to this Brandon use to narrate bedtime stories where he never fails to mention about the chest in those stories. This perhaps could be the reason why Brandon choose to keep David's body in the chest instead off the dinner table. As it is believed Repression is stored in the unconscious state without conscious. Repression here serves as a clue for the missing David, the importance of chest in the living room and why Phillip is anxious about the chicken strangling.

The Oedipus complex is a term used by Freud in his theory of "Psychosexual stages of development" to describe a child's feelings of desire for his or her opposite sex parent, be jealousy and anger toward his or her same sex parent. For instance a boy feels that he is competing with his father for possession of his mother this is also applied for girls. According to Freud, child view their same sex parent as a rival for the opposite sex parent's attention and affections.

This concept can be related with both Brandon and Phillip who perhaps consider Rupert Cadell a substitute father and wanted to get rid of him. When Cadell left the party it was first Brandon and Phillip who were excited and happy. At the same time when he came back to collect his hat

Phillip was nervous with Cadell's presence. In relation to Oedipus complex a boy wanted to get rid of his father. There is a threat of castration on the other hand the boys are afraid when they heard Cadell's name.

From the beginnings of American cinematography, homosexual audiences had to face two fundamental problems when they came to the cinema: either the homosexual characters could not be seen in the motion pictures, or they were depicted in various stereotypical ways. This is a difficult to characterize, as there were strict codes that prevented a more explicit depiction of homosexuality at the time, but the film's two murderers, Brandon and Phillip, are implied to be homosexual.

The Historical development of America was greatly influenced by the conservative and religious English nation. The role of heterosexuality was further strengthened in contrast to this heterosexuality have no proper name it became a sin as well as a criminal act. Homosexuality was presented earlier but became a taboo which people failed to notice.

Post world war II movie subtle queer character's. It is the time of film noir, a stylistic theme with the mood of war and post war disillusionment. The characters both Brandon and Phillip are homosexual this has been openly acknowledge by Hitchcock. Brandon and Phillip's special bond is apparent visible only to a limited audience. As the movie opens, Brandon, who easily dominates his homosexual lover, Philip, is in the process of strangling the unfortunate David with a piece of ordinary clothesline. Brandon, Philip, and Rupert take turns as leads in Hitchcock's movie. They play hide-and-seek with a homosexuality that in the middle of the 20th century was still forbidden.

This is discourse ruled by the master signifier. The master must be obeyed there is no justification given for his or her power. The master must show no weakness and therefore hides the fact that he or she likes everyone, is a being of language and has succumbed to symbolic castration. The split between conscious and unconscious brought on by the signifier is veiled in the master's discourse.

In the film Brandon holds the position of being the master on the other hand, Phillip who just obey what Brandon says without any abjection. In the dinner party Brandon tries to be normal, confident, bold and a man without fear. Thus Lacan's Master's Discourse is applicable in the movie.

The most obvious symbol in the film is surely the title rope. The rope is the weapon that the two murderers use to kill David. Ropes are household items used to tie things together, but here the rope becomes a murder weapon, inextricably binding the two men together. It symbolizes the violence of which both Phillip and Brandon are capable. The fact that they can take a normal and innocuous object and turn it into a violent weapon shows the extent to which they will go to establish their superiority.

Hitchcock's unique style and breakthrough ideas will stand for all time, and he will always be remembered as one of the greatest directors of all time.

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