"Gender and Power in 'Psycho'"

by Matthew Cohen

Gender and Power in Psycho

Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller Psycho (1960) is not simply a story of murder and mental illness, but also of gender and power. At the outset of the film, the protagonist Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and the villain Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) are both "trapped" (to use Norman's phrasing) as subordinate partners in their respective male-female relationships. Marion is desperately stuck in a dead-end romantic entanglement with her non-committal boyfriend Sam Loomis (John Gavin), while Norman appears to be ensnared in an unusually crippling relationship with his overbearing Mother. Marion and Norman's dissatisfaction with their respective relationships mobilizes an internal conflict within each character in which both must struggle with the implications of gender and power in their personal lives. Hitchcock utilizes the Bates Motel as an experimental setting in which the traditional gender roles of the outside world may be challenged, thereby providing Marion and Norman with an environment where they are able to play out their internal conflicts using each other as test subjects.

The themes of gender and power are clearly palpable right at the outset of the film. In the very first shot we see of Marion, she is lying on a bed in a submissive position with Sam looming above her as the dominant male. We are immediately aware of the conventional gender-power structure. Despite Marion's obvious post-coital state, she appears deeply distressed at having breached her own sense of female propriety. She tells her lover, Sam, that she hates seeing him "in a place like this", referring to a seedy by-the-hour hotel. Although the sexually aggressive Sam begs her to stay, Marion initiates the process of restoring her modesty by getting dressed. She then vows that she will only see him from then on under proper circumstances: "We can see each other. We can even have dinner, but respectably. In my house with my mother's picture on the mantel and my sister helping me broil a big steak for three." Hitchcock provides a contrast to the pure female in the deeply lustful Sam who replies: "And after the steak, we can send sister to the movies, turn Mama's picture to the wall..." Marion expresses just the right amount of feminine dismay at Sam's lewd comment. The conversation then turns towards marriage as Marion expresses her typically female desire to settle into domestic life, while Sam articulates his aversion to the idea. In this scene, Marion is portrayed as a paragon of female virtue: submissive, yet eager to protect her modesty; playful, yet stern when she needs to be.

Hitchcock's imagery in this scene also serves to emphasize Marion and Sam's traditional gender roles. The very fact that the first scene in the film takes place in a hotel bedroom -- a location where gender roles are maximally exaggerated by the very implication of sex - is indicative of the larger gender themes which Hitchcock plays with throughout the rest of the film. The partial nudity of both Sam and Marion also serves to heighten the audience's awareness of the strictly defined gender roles of the two characters. Sam's bare-chestedness emphasizes his masculinity, while Marion's lacy lingerie draws our attention to her femininity. Furthermore, the whiteness of Marion's underwear and clothing is representative of her supposed female purity. Ultimately, however, Hitchcock illustrates in this scene that traditional gender roles are not as harmonious as they are often assumed to be. Marion's typical female desire to marry stands in conflict with Sam's male tendency to avoid commitment. Thus the scene ends unhappily with Marion leaving Sam behind at the hotel. In this opening, Hitchcock establishes Phoenix, which is representative of the larger world outside of the Bates Motel, as a place where men and women are expected to adhere to the conventions of stereotypical gender roles.

The traditional gender hierarchy continues to be emphasized in the next scene at Marion's place of work. Aside from the fact that Marion and her co-worker Caroline work under a male boss, this scene also features an aggressive male, Mr. Cassidy, attempting to flirt with Marion in a rather patronizing way. Mr. Cassidy's flirtation is significant in that rather than complimenting Marion, he attempts to woo her by demonstrating his financial superiority and power. Marion plays her predetermined female part well, acting shy and demure. However, in Janet Leigh's performance, we can detect Marion's growing annoyance at yet
another demonstration of her subordination to a more powerful male. This flirtation is Marion's breaking point.

Adhering to the traditional female role has not worked out well for Marion. While her feminine demeanor attracts unwanted advances from men like Mr. Cassidy, Marion has been unable to convince Sam to marry her. Frustrated with the lack of success she has enjoyed, Marion attempts to shed her feminine persona and adopt a more assertive, male-like character. This transformation occurs in the following scene in which Marion packs her bags and steals Mr. Cassidy's money. The fact that it is the act of stealing money which signals Marion's gender role shift is noteworthy because of what money represents. In the previous scene, Mr. Cassidy attempted to demonstrate his power by discussing his immense wealth. Hitchcock thereby establishes a direct link between masculinity and money.

Hitchcock once again uses imagery in order to underscore the underlying gender issues in this scene. In The Making of Psycho documentary, actress Janet Leigh notes that Hitchcock intentionally featured Marion wearing a black bra in this scene, in order to contrast between the period before she steals the money (white bra) and the period after (black bra.) Additionally, Marion's dark dress and black purse in this scene contrast with her earlier white wardrobe. Not only does this change in color represent an alteration in Marion's morality, but it also symbolizes Marion's loss of female purity and her assumption of a more masculine character.

In the following scenes, the audience learns that Marion is not quite so comfortable in her new persona. Hitchcock captures Marion's distress at the sight of her boss with the rapid onset of Psycho's suspenseful theme music. Furthermore, she is visibly jittery in her interactions with the authoritative police officer who begins to follow her, as well as with the voluble used car salesman. These dominant men present a challenge to Marion as she desperately attempts to be assertive with them. Hitchcock conveys Marion's anxiety by allowing the audience to hear the voices in Marion's imagination as she drives. She appears extremely nervous as she imagines what everyone will say when they realize what she has done. However, her look of concern slowly shifts into an ever so slight smirk as she imagines Mr. Cassidy's shock when he discovers that she has taken his money. The thought that she has made a fool of the man who flirted with her so patronizingly appears to somewhat restore Marion's faith in her ability to embody the new role she has chosen for herself.

Invigorated by this newfound confidence, Marion stumbles upon the Bates Motel, where she meets Norman Bates. At first Marion is quite reserved in her interactions with Norman, cognizant of her previous rather paltry attempts to be assertive with other men on her road trip. However, when she overhears Norman's mother berate Norman in a rather cruel andemasculating tone, Marion realizes that the Bates Motel does not abide by the gender role conventions of the outside world. Here, women are able to be dominant in their relationships with men. Additionally, Marion discovers that Norman is not the same type of assertive male she has encountered thus far. This realization causes a change in Marion's demeanor as she comes to understand that Norman and the Bates Motel provide her with an opportunity in which she can better experiment with her nascent, more masculine character.

However, Marion is not the only one who realizes that her stay at the Bates Motel is a unique occasion. Norman has some gender-power issues of his own. Constantly at the behest of his domineering mother, Norman does not regularly encounter women with whom he is permitted to be dominant. Norman is very literally disconnected from the practices of the outside world as a result of his seclusion in the motel and is, therefore, not used to operating within the conventional male-female power structure. Ironically for Marion, her arrival at the Bates Motel presents Norman with an opportunity to experiment with his own inner masculine persona.

When Norman returns to Marion's room with a dinner tray (after Marion has overheard his mother's tirade), Marion begins to act more confident and forward. Whereas earlier Norman invited Marion to a meal in his house, now Marion invites Norman to join her in her room. Norman, however, realizing that Marion has discovered his subordination to his Mother, does not agree to her suggestion and instead suggests that they
dine in the office and then in the parlor. The decision of where to eat signals the start of a subtle struggle for dominance in Marion and Norman's relationship which will play out in the rest of the "date" scene.

Early on in the "date", Norman likens Marion to a bird. This leads to a discussion of Norman's taxidermy hobby. Norman explains that he likes the look of stuffed birds because birds have a passive nature, but he hates the look of stuffed beasts. This expression of Norman's preferences can also be understood metaphorically as a statement on gender: Women, like birds, are meant to be passive creatures, whereas men, like beasts, are meant to be dominant and active. Norman's comparison of Marion to a bird, particularly in the context of a room filled with stuffed birds, appears to be a subtle attempt to place Marion in a subordinate position.

Later as the conversation turns towards Norman's Mother, Marion takes the opportunity to re-establish her dominance. She tells Norman, "You know, if anyone ever talked to me the way I heard -- the way she spoke to you...", implying that Marion would have had a more reactionary (more male-like) response than Norman. At this comment, Norman immediately stops smiling, seeing Marion's comment as a challenge to his masculinity. He attempts to defend himself against this insult to his manhood by telling her of what he sometimes desires to do to his mother: curse her, defy her, abandon her. But, he says, he doesn't because she is ill. Norman, therefore, defends his honor by presenting his domination by Mother not as evidence of his inferiority but as evidence of his compassion despite his powerful masculine wrath; he chooses to let his Mother treat him badly because he feels sympathy for her. Norman subsequently subjects Marion to experience his inner male rage when she suggests placing his Mother in an institution. He becomes accusatory and quite frightening, causing Marion to feel threatened and retreat somewhat. The "date", however, ends with Marion in the position of power. By standing to leave, Marion restores her control of the situation. Norman tries to convince her to stay, but she insists, securing her position of power.

Dissatisfied with Marion's resumption of dominance, Norman consoles himself by watching Marion undress through a hole in the parlor wall. This instance of voyeurism, a common theme in Hitchcock's films, allows Norman to once again feel like the dominant partner in his relationship with Marion; in a voyeuristic interaction, the watcher is made to feel that he holds more power than the person being objectified.

Ultimately, however, Norman exerts total power over Marion as he (in the form of Mother) stabs her to death in the infamous shower scene. Because of the topsy-turvy nature of the Bates Motel environment in which women are more powerful than men, Norman must call upon Mother -- the more aggressive side of his personality -- in order to kill Marion. Marion's total nakedness in this scene echoes her partial nudity in the opening scene of the film. Here, as in the bedroom scene, Marion's nudity emphasizes her femininity and symbolizes a return to her traditional submissive female role. However, in contrast to the implied consensual sex of the earlier scene, the shower scene can be understood as a symbolic rape, the ultimate and most brutal assertion of power. By violating Marion in the shower, at her most vulnerable moment, Norman establishes his dominance over her. Once Marion is dead, he continues to exert power over her as he wraps Marion in a shower curtain and packs her into the trunk of her own car. The sinking of Marion's car is also symbolically significant. Like the stolen money, the car is a symbol of Marion's attempt to assume a less feminine and more masculine persona. (She had to be assertive with the used car salesman in order to obtain the car, and she is the only female in the film who drives.) By sinking Marion's car, Norman not only establishes his dominance over her but also shames her attempt to challenge her traditional gender role.

Although Marion and Norman's conflict ends at this point, Hitchcock continues to toy with gender-power issues right through to the end of the film. When Mother (as manifested in Norman) is removed from the isolated, backwards world that is the Bates Motel, her demeanor changes greatly. She recognizes that she must assume a more placid, ladylike role in order to survive in the outside world, which is bound by strict gender role conventions. In the final scene, we hear Mother compare herself to Norman's stuff birds, once again alluding to the view of women as passive creatures. She consciously assumes a more passive role in order to protect herself against the policemen's suspicions. However, through Mother's skeletal smile at the end of the film, Hitchcock reveals that appearances in the outside world often belie the inner truth. As the
case of Mother illustrates, our naïve assumptions regarding issues of gender and power can be particularly dangerous.