



Notorious
Feature Film (USA, 1946, 102 Minutes)
Filmmaker: Alfred Hitchcock
Study Guide

Synopsis

In *Notorious*, Hitchcock fuses two of his favorite elements: suspense and romance. Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman), a beautiful woman with a tainted past, is enlisted by American agent Devlin (Cary Grant) to spy on a ring of Nazis in post-war Rio. Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), the leader of the Nazi cell, is in love with Alicia. Alicia has fallen for Devlin, but goes through with the plan and marries Sebastian. The story plays with the audience's sympathies of the three complex main characters. The heroes are not completely clean, the villain not completely evil. Stunning performances, Ben Hecht's excellent script, and Hitchcock's direction at its best make *Notorious* a perfect film.

Themes in the Film

- Conflict between love and duty
- Uncertain morality
- Manipulation of the audience
- Deception vs. appearances

Study Questions

- It was once said of Hitchcock "Through the power of his consummate technique, he directs not actors, but the audience". In what ways do filmmakers "manipulate" their audiences? Why do you feel certain emotions when watching a film (such as empathy, anxiety)?
- What is a "McGuffin"? A term invented by Hitchcock, defined as: 'A device or plot element that catches the viewer's attention or drives the plot. It is generally something that every character is concerned with. The McGuffin is essentially something that the entire story is built around and yet has no real relevance such as stolen papers/documents jewels, microfilm, secret formulas, etc. Give some examples of "McGuffins" you know of from other films. Does the McGuffin propel the plot? If so, how? If not, what purpose does it serve?

Classroom exercise

- Hitchcock on designing a script: "When I am given a subject, probably a book, play, or an original story, I like to have the story, in its barest bones, just laid out on a sheet of paper. You might call it the steelwork...The particular reason why I prefer to do that is because I do not like to let myself think that there is more in it than there really is, because I believe that one should build up". Based on that idea, have the students take their

favorite novel, film or play and lay out the entire story on one sheet of paper. Then compare with their classmates and see whose was the most concise.

Discussion Questions

- How did you feel about the various characters in the film? Who did you feel the most sympathy for? Why?
- What betrayals can you name that took place in the film?
- How were you “directed” when watching the film?
- List the various objects you saw in the film that became ominous. How did they add to the feeling of anticipation or suspense?
- What was the McGuffin in Notorious? Was there more than one?