

The Thin Man Film Summary

The Thin Man by Woody Van Dyke

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Context

Author Dashiell Hammett held many jobs during his life, including one as a railroad laborer, but the one that undoubtedly satisfied his quest for adventure more than any other was his position as a Pinkerton detective agent. Using knowledge obtained from that career experience, Hammett published his first mystery novel, *Red Harvest*, in 1929. By 1934, he had completed four more novels: *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Glass Key* and lastly and perhaps most memorably, *The Thin Man*. Hammett's final novel centers on the life of Nick and Nora Charles, a pair of stylish, wealthy partygoers with a yen for sleuthing and the couple's delightful dog, Asta. Nick and Nora's relationship was rumored to be based on the real thirty-year relationship between Hammett and playwright Lillian Hellman.

Metro Goldwyn Mayer snapped up the film rights for "The Thin Man," then delivered the screenplay into the capable hands of W. S. Van Dyke, the well known director of *Tarzan, the Ape Man*. For the starring roles in *The Thin Man*, Van Dyke chose William Powell and Myrna Loy, a couple he had worked with previously in the movie *Manhattan Melodrama*. Studio head Louis Mayer was in favor of Powell playing Nick Charles, but he did not think Loy was capable of pulling off the role of Nora. Van Dyke saw things differently, having witnessed the irresistible chemistry that Powell and Loy shared when working together. He believed the magnetic attraction between the two actors would emphasize Dashiell Hammett's witty dialogue and make *The Thin Man* a highly successful motion picture.

Van Dyke was correct. Even though *The Thin Man* was produced on a low budget and filmed in only fourteen days, the film earned over two million dollars when it opened. It also garnered four Academy Award nominations: Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay.

One often-confused detail about *The Thin Man* is the identity of the thin man himself. Despite popular belief, it is not Nick Charles; the thin man is actually a secondary character who dies in the movie. When a large number of fans started to associate the charismatic character Nick Charles with the thin man, MGM was reluctant to alter the title for the planned sequel to the film. They, too, were correct in their decision not to fix what was not broken. The original movie eventually shared its name with five sequels: *After the Thin Man* (which also earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture and was the first sequel ever nominated for an Academy Award), *Another Thin Man*, *Shadow of the Thin Man*, *The Thin Man Goes Home* and *The Song of the Thin Man*.

William Powell and Myrna Loy starred in all six films. Before their acting careers were over, the two screen legends would star in fourteen movies together. Their canine companion, Asta, would become one of the leading pet actors of the 1930s and 1940s, starring in such acclaimed films as *The Awful Truth* and *Bringing Up Baby*, with Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn.

Nick and Nora Charles became so well loved that their fictional lives also played successfully for years as a radio broadcast. Between 1941 and 1951, listeners were able to tune in to the ongoing saga of one of their favorite couples. In addition, for three seasons, *The Thin Man* ran as a television series starring Peter Lawford and Phyllis Kirk. Years later, Nick and Nora maintained their influence in Hollywood and inspired several television shows. These included ABC's popular *Hart to Hart*, starring Robert Wagner and Stephanie Powers, which aired from 1979 to 1984. Another imitator was NBC's *McMillan and Wife*, which aired from 1971 to 1978 and starred Rock Hudson and Susan St. James.

Recently, *The Thin Man* placed thirty-second in the American Film Institute's list of the top one hundred funniest movies in American film history. This accolade recognized both Dashiell Hammett's finely crafted writing and the powerful comedic acting skills of William Powell and Myrna Loy. That unbeatable combination has allowed *The Thin Man* to become one of the most beloved movies of all time.

Summary and Analysis

The Thin Man opens in the workshop of Clyde Wynant, a tall, thin, wealthy inventor and businessman. Wynant, the father of two adult children, Dorothy and Gilbert, has recently left his wife after having a relationship with his secretary, Julia Wolf.

Dorothy and her boyfriend, Tommy, appear in her father's laboratory. They announce that they are engaged and will be married after Christmas. At the same time, Wynant mentions that he is going into hiding so he will not be disturbed while working on a new invention. He promises to be back in time for the wedding. This promise to return on time foreshadows Wynant's disappearance.

After placing his lawyer, Herbert MacCaulay, in charge of his affairs, Wynant discovers that fifty thousand dollars in government bonds is missing from his office. He had intended to give the bonds to Dorothy and Tommy for a wedding gift. Through questioning his bookkeeper, Tanner, Wynant decides that Julia is most likely the thief. When he angrily enters Julia's apartment, he finds another man there, Joe Morelli. Wynant accuses Julia of playing him for a fool and demands that she return the money, but Julia only has half of it, having given the rest to her partner. After threatening to turn her into the police, Wynant leaves the apartment, believing that he knows the identity of Julia's partner.

In the next scene, three months have passed and it is Christmas Eve. Dorothy and Tommy are out dancing and from across the room, Dorothy spots Nick Charles, a detective who once worked on a case for her father. Nick, in his own flamboyant way, is showing the bar staff how to correctly mix perfect martinis. After capturing his attention, Dorothy tells Nick that she has not heard from her father in months. Nick suggests that Dorothy contact MacCaulay to see if he knows anything about Wynant's disappearance.

Minutes later, Nora Charles, Nick's wife, makes an unforgettable entrance as she is dragged noisily into the restaurant by the couple's dog, Asta. After struggling with a large bundle of Christmas packages and the chaos of a dog gone wild, Nora ends up on the floor. When a waiter asks Nick to get the mess out of the restaurant, he laughingly responds, "The dog's well trained. He'll behave himself." As an afterthought, the playful Nick eventually acknowledges Nora's presence. This witty dialogue sets the tone for the relationship between the happy couple throughout the movie.

Before leaving the restaurant, Dorothy and Tommy meet Nora. Nick invites the young couple to visit them, as he and Nora will be staying in town for a while. After Dorothy and Tommy leave, Nora asks Nick how many drinks he has had. Nick replies, "This will make six." Nora then asks the waiter to bring her five more so that she can catch up to her husband.

Later, in their hotel room, where they are both suffering from hangovers, Nick and Nora are disturbed by the doorbell. MacCaulay enters and asks Nick about his investigation of Wynant's disappearance. Nick explains that he is no longer a detective, having retired

in order to manage the fortune Nora inherited. MacCaulay says that he has not heard from or seen Wynant in months. His only contact with Wynant is through the money he gives to Julia to give to Wynant. While at the hotel, MacCaulay receives a call from his secretary and is told that Wynant wants to see him. He leaves hurriedly. Nick calls Dorothy and tells her not to worry because her father is back in town.

Mimi, Dorothy's mother, overhears the phone conversation between her daughter and Nick. Even though she has married again, Mimi is still greatly attached to Wynant, or at least to his money. Mimi's new husband, Chris Jorgenson, is penniless and unemployed and Mimi has to pay all the bills. Hoping to get more money out of Wynant, Mimi goes to visit Julia. However, she finds Julia dead in her apartment, apparently the victim of foul play. To protect Wynant, Mimi removes his watch chain, which she finds clenched in Julia's hand. Later, when questioned by Lieutenant John Guild, Mimi denies removing anything from the crime scene. When the police officer leaves, Dorothy discovers Mimi putting Wynant's watch in the safe. Dorothy is traumatized by the idea that her father might be a murderer.

Meanwhile, it is announced at the Charles's Christmas party that Julia Wolf has been murdered and that Clyde Wynant, Julia's employer, is still missing. During the party, Nora tries to convince Nick to take the Wynant case, but he refuses. Dorothy soon arrives and in an attempt to save her father, she confesses to Julia's murder. Nick does not believe her. Shortly after, Mimi enters and begs Nick to help her find Wynant. Again, Nick refuses. Next, Gilbert shows up at the party and the entire Wynant clan (with the exception of Clyde) is in attendance.

While dealing with the sudden arrivals of the Wynants, a depressed partygoer who wants to talk to his mother and all the news reporters who are trying to get Nick's views on the murder case, Nick receives a phone call from Arthur Nunheim, a shady character who knows a great deal about Julia's death. Unfortunately, Nunheim says he is unable to discuss anything over the phone. Before arrangements can be made to set up a meeting, the phone line goes dead.

After the Christmas gathering, Nick and Nora are in bed when suddenly someone knocks on the door. The uninvited stranger follows Nora into the bedroom and points a gun at the couple. He is Joe Morelli, the fellow Wynant ran into at Julia's apartment. He is there to convince Nick that he did not kill Julia. To get Nora out of the line of fire, Nick punches her and she falls to the floor; Nick then attacks Morelli. The police barge in and assist Nick, who has suffered only a minor flesh wound.

The next morning, Nick and Nora receive a telegram from Clyde Wynant, requesting that Nick work on the Julia Wolf case and communicate with MacCaulay. Nora, who believes that Wynant would not ask for help if he were guilty, once again pleads with Nick to take on the case. As before, he declines. Later, after MacCaulay makes another visit, Nick decides to take the case, because he has a hunch that Wynant is being framed.



On their way out for a walk with Asta, Nick and Nora meet up with Lieutenant Guild and Nick agrees to work with him. He and Lieutenant Guild make a visit to Nunheim, but to protect Nora, Nick dupes her into not coming with them. Rather than admit to Nick and Guild what he knows, Nunheim exits the apartment via the fire escape. While attempting to collect blackmail money from the murderer, Nunheim is shot with the same gun that killed Julia. Now, Wynant is wanted for two murders.

The climax of the story occurs when Nick and Asta discover a badly decomposed body buried in Wynant's workshop. The large suit of a fat man is buried with the body, but what stands out to Nick is an old shrapnel wound in the corpse's leg. As a result of the third body, there is a nationwide hunt for Wynant, who is now suspected of three murders.

Because of the shrapnel wound, Nick knows that the thin, buried body is actually Wynant's. He just needs to bring all the usual suspects together. In the tradition of the great murder mysteries, Nick throws a formal dinner party and invites everyone associated with Wynant, including the real wife of Chris Jorgenson, who had actually been married to another woman when he married Mimi. By using Mimi and this revelation as a kind of bait, Nick manages to reveal that the real murderer is Herbert MacCaulay, Wynant's trusted attorney.

In the final act of the movie, Nick and Nora are on their way home to California. They are sharing an adjacent cabin with newlyweds Dorothy and Tommy. After a fun evening, the couples happily return to their respective rooms. Nora asks Nick to put Asta in the lower bunk with her. Instead, Nick drops Asta onto the top bunk and crawls into bed with Nora. Up above, the dog covers its eyes with its paw.

Characters

Nick Charles, played by William Powell

Description

Nick is a former detective, well respected by both criminals and law enforcement, who is now living the free and easy life with his newlywed heiress wife, Nora. Nick drinks a great deal, almost to the point of being a friendly, functional alcoholic. Even so, he also manages to be the hero of the film. Nick has considerable skills of perception and is extremely intelligent, two qualities that make him an exceptional investigator. In his first screen appearance, Nick is characteristically dancing to his own beat as he shows members of a bar staff how to make perfect martinis. As the lives of others unravel around him, Nick does not let it destroy his hedonistic lifestyle one bit.

Even after a fight for his life with a dangerous criminal, Nick cheerfully voices a witty remark while reaching for a stiff drink. His consistently cheerful disposition displays itself through a childlike innocence. On Christmas morning, Nick is so excited about the toy gun he receives from Nora that he takes aim at several items in the hotel room. Even when he breaks a window, he shrugs it off as if it were nothing but a jolly good time.

Analysis

Despite his calm demeanor, his exaggerated pretense of indifference and an inordinate fondness for alcohol, Nick is actually a good man who is both caring and brilliant. Evidence of this is seen throughout the movie, especially in his interactions with Nora and his caring behavior toward Dorothy. Notably, he is always willing to place his life in jeopardy, but never Nora's.

Although Nick has enjoyed his detective work in the past, he is also somewhat happy to be free of it, as evidenced by the number of times he declines to work on Wynant's case. Still, this does not represent a lack of concern on Nick's part, but rather his own reluctance to give up his carefree existence. In his view, after working diligently as a detective for so long, it is only fair that he now gets to take a much needed vacation.

Even though Nick drinks excessively, his drinking does serve some useful purpose. For one thing, it is a disguise that makes him seem less of a coldly objective and analytical private eye and more of a warm and sympathetic friend. It also allows him to get close to people and discern small, important things about them that others cannot see.



Nora Charles, played by Myrna Loy

Description

Nora is a wealthy heiress who is happily married to Nick Charles. Although she and Nick exchange playful insults at every opportunity, Nora loves her husband deeply. She equally matches Nick's prodigious ability to drink alcohol and serve up cutting verbal jabs. In fact, she is likely so tolerant of his outrageous behavior precisely because it is so reminiscent of her own. Although she can prance and shop with the best of them, Nora is also a brave, assertive and feisty person. When she wakes up after being knocked out by Nick, she chastises him for making her miss the action.

Analysis

Despite her immense wealth, Nora is bored with incessant parties and shopping and longs for adventure. This perhaps explains why she pressures Nick to take on the Wynant case. In fact, she urges him to do so on several occasions. After the Christmas party, when Nora again asks Nick to investigate Wynant's failure to return to town, Asta is playing with a balloon and the balloon pops. Nora asks Asta if his balloon has burst, then comments that hers has also burst because Nick is refusing to take part in the investigation.

In reality, Nora is like a little child who is dying to own a particular toy, but has never actually played with it. She begs Nick to take the case, but when he does, she worries about him and is reluctant to see him do any real investigating.

Dorothy Wynant, played by Maureen O'Sullivan

Description

Dorothy is the kindhearted daughter of Clyde Wynant and Mimi Jorgenson. She is engaged to her boyfriend, Tommy. Their wedding plans are temporarily derailed when she fails to make contact with her father close to the wedding date. When Clyde Wynant is accused of murder, Dorothy is devastated and seeks help from Nick Charles.

Analysis

Dorothy adores her father. In order to protect him, she quickly assumes the role of the murderer, even obtaining a gun to substantiate her story, but to no avail. With her gentle heart and kind spirit, she is the most unlikely murder suspect one could imagine.

Dorothy acts mature on the outside, but seems to inwardly question her own worth. After she begins to doubt Clyde's innocence, she breaks off her relationship with Tommy because she believes that she, being her father's child, will one day be a criminal. She fears that she might pass those traits down to her own children if she gets married. After

giving up Tommy, a man who clearly worships her, Dorothy hides from her pain by starting a new life as a party girl and flitting from one good time to another. It is not until the real murderer is revealed that Dorothy becomes capable of listening to her heart and resuming her life with Tommy.

Mimi Jorgenson, played by Minna Gombell

Description

The former wife of Clyde Wynant, Mimi Jorgenson, has rebounded from her marriage to Clyde quite quickly by marrying Chris Jorgenson, a man younger than herself. Even though Chris is not the best of husbands, Mimi loves him dearly. Because of this love, she overlooks the fact that he seems to care much more for her money than anything else about her. When she and Chris exhaust her large divorce settlement from Clyde, Mimi finds herself in dire straits because Chris will leave her if she does not have money to care for him. Mimi will do anything to keep Chris, even visiting her ex-husband's mistress and disturbing a crime scene by removing evidence.

Analysis

Tolerated by her son, Gilbert and somewhat loathed by her daughter, Dorothy, Mimi is practically alone in the world except for her unhappy marriage to Chris. She has always been a woman of expensive tastes, but her marriage to Chris has only increased her financial needs. The desire to feel loved after Clyde's affair with his secretary has made Mimi very insecure. Rather than be alone, she essentially buys Chris to keep him around. Even when Chris disappears for days and finally shows up with a woman claiming to be his real wife, Mimi still has feelings for him. Although she is portrayed as a greedy, scheming person in the movie, she actually deserves some pity, because she is left with nothing in the end.

Herbert MacCaulay, played by Porter Hall

Description

Herbert MacCaulay is a relatively quiet person who acts as Clyde Wynant's attorney and official man of business. He is Julia's partner in crime, as the two of them steal money from Wynant. To save himself from being persecuted, he kills Wynant, Julia and Nunheim.

Analysis

Behind Herbert MacCaulay's quiet exterior lurks a devious man who has grown weary of being in the shadow of the thin man, Clyde Wynant. He is tired of working so hard without receiving what he considers his just reward. His frustration and anger lead him

to first steal from Wynant (a man who trusts him) and then kill him. His strong desire to avoid prison then compels him to kill Julia and Nunheim. Had Nick not stopped him at the final dinner party, it is evident that MacCaulay would have killed Mimi and anyone else in his way.

Julia Wolf, played by Natalie Moorhead

Description

Julia Wolf is Wynant's secretary and mistress; she is a major contributing factor in the breakup of Wynant's marriage to Mimi. Although she may have had feelings for Wynant at one time, she has grown weary of him and his compulsive work habits. She feels that she deserves more than she is getting from him, so she starts taking money from him in small amounts.

Analysis

Julia's greed eventually causes her to make a costly mistake: stealing a large amount of money at one time. Although Wynant had known she was stealing a bit here and there, it had never been enough to bother him. However, once Julia steals a large amount, Wynant can no longer force himself to look away. Julia's greed becomes her great weakness and, literally, her fatal flaw.

Clyde Wynant, played by Edward Ellis

Description

Clyde Wynant is a rich, eccentric inventor who is more likely to pay attention to the lightning in his laboratory than to the world that exists outside his workshop. The one exception to this would be the great affection Wynant feels for his daughter, Dorothy. Because of his slim size, he is actually the thin man of the film's title.

Analysis

Wynant is chronically unable to live outside his work; as a result, he is unaware both of the failures of all his relationships and of the attendant personal and professional repercussions. This ignorance results in the loss of both his finances and his life.



Joe Morelli, played by Edward Brophy

Description

Joe Morelli is a gangster who once had a relationship with Julia Wolf. Although the two are no longer hot and heavy, Morelli is still present in her life, especially since Julia has been in the possession of so much money (Wynant's).

Analysis

Morelli is representative of the old adage that one should never judge a book by its cover. Although he is not always on the right side of the law, he is not a murderer in this case and he wants the truth to be known. Morelli's method of revealing this fact, by cornering Nick and Nora with a gun, is probably not the smartest way to go about setting the record straight. However, he does make a strong effort to establish his innocence.

Gilbert Wynant, played by William Henry

Description

The son of Clyde Wynant and Mimi Jorgenson, Gilbert Wynant is an extremely intelligent young man with poor social skills. Having no real life of his own, he spends his free time observing others and analyzing their behavior.

Analysis

It is apparent that Gilbert lacks companionship in any form except for books. When he finally gets someone to pay attention to him, he speaks in such scholarly terms that the words fly right over the listener's head. Sometimes Gilbert's thought processes are so far off the beaten path that he exudes an air of insanity. The only people interested in Gilbert's rantings are journalists in search of good copy.

Lt. John Guild, played by Nat Pendleton

Description

Police Lieutenant John Guild is the typical hard-boiled detective who is eager to solve his cases as quickly as possible. He shows remarkable intelligence and insight when he decides to cooperate with Nick Charles on the case rather than work against him.



Analysis

Arthur Nunheim, played by Harold Huber

Description

Arthur Nunheim is the petty thug who knows the identity of Julia Wolf's killer. Rather than go to the police and admit what he knows, Nunheim tries to blackmail the murderer; a hail of bullets becomes his reward.

Analysis

Chris Jorgenson, played by Cesar Romero

Description

Chris Jorgenson is Mimi's second husband after her divorce from Wynant, or so she thinks. In actuality, Jorgenson is still married to his first wife. When he disappears for a few days, he is temporarily a murder suspect, but is later revealed to be merely a bigamist and a con man trying to trick Mimi out of as much money as he can.

Analysis

Tanner, played by Cyril Thornton

Description

Thanks to his connection with Julia, Tanner works as a bookkeeper for Clyde Wynant. Although he has previously served time in jail, he is not involved in the murders. Tanner assists Julia in stealing money from Wynant. As the number of deaths increase, he tries to erase all evidence of his partnership with Julia so that he will not become the killer's next victim.

Analysis

Asta, played by Asta, formerly known as "Skippy"

Description

Asta, a wirehaired terrier, is the Charles's pet and undoubtedly the most levelheaded member of the Charles family. Asta is Nick and Nora's constant companion. Although

the dog definitely has a nose for sleuthing and enjoys adventure just as much as its family members, it is also a bit cowardly, hiding at the first sign of trouble.

Analysis

Themes

Not Everyone Suffers During a Depression

Despite the fact that *The Thin Man* is set during the Great Depression, when millions throughout the country are fighting for survival, many of the characters in *The Thin Man* know nothing of this struggle. While other Americans are stealing just to stay alive, Nick and Nora can afford to travel on a whim, spend large amounts of money on gifts and alcohol and throw lavish parties. Mimi Jorgenson, whose cash is supposedly running low, still manages to live in luxurious accommodations. Even the criminals in the movie are not foraging for food. They all have an income and are not starving; they simply want more than they already have. Meanwhile, the many people across the country who feel lucky to get a loaf of bread are completely ignored in the movie's lavish salute to wealth and extravagance.

Identity

Everyone wears a disguise sometimes. The removal of such masks often represents a breakdown of true identities, which is a prominent theme in *The Thin Man*. Nick is not the dysfunctional alcoholic that he seems; he is a brilliant man who is currently making the most of a long vacation. MacCaulay is not the concerned, obsequious employee he pretends to be and Julia Wolf is far from being a loving mistress. Chris Jorgenson acts the part of an adoring husband; in reality, he is nothing more than a schemer after Mimi's money. Although he is not on the straight and narrow path, Tanner the bookkeeper plays the role of an honest man. Joe Morelli and Clyde Wynant, the two people assumed guilty of murder in the film, are actually innocent.

When it comes to identity, the fact is that external appearances can either be real, misleading, or just plain false. Often, the reality behind them cannot be judged merely on the basis of a person's appearance or observed behavior. True identity is usually revealed by actions committed only when no one is (obviously) watching.

Guilty Before Innocent

Because of the argument he had with Julia regarding the missing bonds, Clyde Wynant is almost immediately accused of her murder. He has not been in direct communication with anyone for over three months and this only adds further suspicion to his name. Not for one second does anyone assume that he is failing to return to town because he is hurt or in danger. When other people are murdered and Wynant still does not make an appearance to clear his name, he is considered the primary suspect in these cases as well. He is judged not only by the police and the media, but also by his family members. Mimi, his ex-wife, even removes critical evidence from a crime scene to protect him. When Wynant's loyal daughter, Dorothy, reaches the premature conclusion that her

father is a killer, she goes as far as to confess to a felony she did not commit. Nick and Nora are the only two people who reserve their judgment of Wynant.

Style and Cinematography

In retrospect, W. S. Van Dyke can be considered a minimalist director. There are very few sets in the movie and the props are also kept to a minimum. Unlike most murder mysteries, the action element is sparse, but there is a reason for this. Van Dyke's intention was not to create a film that flies from one explosive scene to another. Rather, he intended to make a movie in which William Powell and Myrna Loy could showcase Hammett's elegantly clever writing while displaying the undeniable electricity they produce together on screen.

Another factor that might have played a role in the film's relative sparseness was the low budget and strict time schedule allocated to the movie. Metro Goldwyn Mayer only allotted Van Dyke enough money to film *The Thin Man* as a B movie and the entire film was completed in two weeks. As with many so-called sleeper films that succeed despite low budgets, the sets, costumes, cinematography and other components of *The Thin Man* seem to work extraordinary well together and are considered aesthetically pleasing.

Motifs

Self-Sacrifice

The issue of self-sacrifice is a recurring motif in *The Thin Man*. Without a moment's hesitation, Nick readily places himself in danger to save Nora from Morelli. In order to get money to keep Chris satisfied, Mimi sacrifices her pride enough to call Julia and arrange a meeting. Certainly it must have taken a good deal of effort on Mimi's part to have a polite conversation with the woman who stole her husband from her. By taking the blame for a crime she did not commit, Dorothy shows she is willing to give up her freedom and her life. All of these characters are willing to make extreme sacrifices because of love.

View of Money

The characters in *The Thin Man* view wealth in a variety of ways. Those who have a surplus of money treat it carelessly and with little regard for its value. Without a hint of reluctance, Nick and Nora spend their funds on ephemeral pleasures. Clyde Wynant is unconcerned when Julia steals small amounts of money from him; he considers it only a trivial matter that he is willing to overlook. He only acknowledges the theft when he is unable to locate a full fifty thousand dollars in bonds that he plans on giving to his daughter as a wedding present. Fifty thousand dollars is a great deal of money, especially in the time period in which the movie is set, but Wynant is willing to give it to his daughter just as easily as one might give away a candy bar.

Other characters exaggerate and distort the importance of money. Julia sees Wynant's money as her due reward for putting up with him. When the money stops flowing to her satisfaction, her response is to steal it. MacCaulay feels the same way and finally resorts to murder to conceal his greed. It appears that Chris Jorgenson values money so much that he has no trouble breaking laws or a woman's heart to get it.

Media Influence

Before the police can even announce the crimes and make an official statement, the newspapers and radio stations discuss the murders and link them to suspects. Whether or not the information is true or complete is never a consideration to the press. The only requirement is that it sells.

The downside of the media influence is that people believe what they see and hear, even when the details are unsubstantiated. After a radio broadcast linking him to Julia's murder, Morelli becomes extremely panicked that the police will think he is guilty. His anxiety even causes him to pull a gun on Nick and Nora. Wynant becomes the subject of a nationwide search because of the sensational speculation propagated by the local

newspapers. Until Nick takes the case, everyone is so obsessed with the idea that Wynant is the murderer that they forget to consider the idea that he might be the victim.

Symbols

Balloon

The balloon represents fun, adventure and hope, a departure from all that is boring. Asta gets a great deal of enjoyment by playing with the balloon. Chasing it with the innocent delight of a puppy, the dog runs around the room in circles. For Asta, the balloon represents a diverting alternative to lazing around the room and watching the humans. When the balloon bursts, Asta looks around longingly for a moment and then returns to normal everyday life.

Nora sympathizes with Asta because she has also taken a fancy to an invisible balloon of sorts: her hope that Nick will carry her away from her boring life of endless shops and parties and show her some real adventure. When Nick continues to deny her requests to work on Wynant's case, Nora feels that her balloon has been burst as well. All she can do is sit around and enjoy her routine life.

The Fat Suit

The fat man's suit symbolizes errors in judgment. Throughout the movie, false assumptions are made about several characters. These beliefs lead to severe and sometimes deadly consequences. The judgment errors that take place within the world of the film begin with Wynant's choice of Julia as a girlfriend, which sets a horrible chain of events in motion. She steals from him and ultimately leads him to his death.

Mimi also commits an error in judgment by getting involved with Chris. Despite the fact that she is on the rebound, Mimi should be able to see Chris for the manipulator he clearly is. However, she is so eager to be loved again that she never really looks beyond the surface to examine his character. Her unfortunate commitment to him ends up costing her the respect of those around her.

Another blunder in judgment rests with the police. Instead of immediately labeling Wynant as the murderer, they should have spent some time considering alternate suspects. If they had explored other options, MacCaulay might have been revealed as the killer before Nunheim was murdered. When the fat man's suit is found with Wynant's body, it contrasts harshly and shockingly with the thin body in the grave. For Nick, the large suit is a piece of evidence screaming that everyone has been looking all over the place in search of something that never existed. At this point, Lieutenant Guild is still stuck in the mud of his own assumptions and cannot see the truth. However, Nick realizes that, for quite some time, they have all been running around in circles simply because of an error in judgment.

Alcohol

In *The Thin Man*, alcohol represents Nick and Nora's carefree approach to life. They are happy and wealthy and have no worries about anything at all. To them, every occasion, whether a brawl or a wedding, is an event worthy of a drink. Nick and Nora even make jokes about drinking and compete to see who can drink more than the other. At their Christmas party, they spend more time handing drinks to their guests than they do talking with them. Even when their guests become tipsy, Nick and Nora make no attempt to sober them up. In the wonderful world of Nick and Nora Charles, life should always be lighthearted, untroubled and poured straight from the bottle.

Essay Questions

Explain how greed can destroy relationships, both professionally and personally.

How is the issue of size often used as a way of defining a character's personality?

Discuss the implications of using the suit of a "fat man" to camouflage Wynant's body.

How does Nick's exaggerated nonchalance about life enable him to be a more effective detective?

Compare Nick's attitude towards detective work with that of one of Hammett's other notable characters, Sam Spade.

Movie watchers often consider Nick Charles to be the film's titular thin man; however, the thin man is actually Clyde Wynant. Give reasons explaining why this mistaken assumption is often made.

Although the movie takes place during the Great Depression, Nick and Nora Charles still manage to enjoy a gay and carefree existence because of Nora's wealth. Compare their lifestyle to the average American's lifestyle at that time.

An old adage, "Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it," is a recurring idea in the movie. Discuss some of the instances in which this concept is most evident.

How is humor used in the movie to make the truth a little less frightening? Give examples.

Explain a few of the methods Van Dyke uses to tell the story without employing an excessive number of scenes.