

Witness for the Prosecution Film Summary

Witness for the Prosecution by Billy Wilder

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Context

Sir Wilfrid Robarts is finally going to retire after having a near-fatal heart attack. However, as soon as he returns to the office, Robarts receives a request from Leonard Stephen Vole to represent him in the murder case of Miss Emily French. Robarts believes he is innocent and agrees to the job.

The case is a difficult one, but Robarts finally wins with the help of a mysterious woman who was supposedly friends with Vole's cold wife, Christine. After the trial is over, though, Christine reveals that she and Vole tricked Robarts, and she was actually the mysterious woman.

When Vole tells Christine that he will be going away with another woman, she is extremely angry and murders him. Robarts feels that the murder was justified, and he and his nurse, Miss Plimson, go away to begin work on the defense of Christine Vole, the betrayed wife of Leonard.

Billy Wilder grew up in Germany and wrote films in his native country until Hitler came to power. At that time, the Jewish writer quickly fled the country and came to America. In 1938, Wilder partnered with Charles Brackett to begin producing such films as *Ball of Fire* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945).

Billy Wilder also created *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), one of the greatest films of all time. After this film, Brackett and Wilder stopped working together, and many of Wilder's later films were harsh and caustic like *Witness for the Prosecution*.

Tyrone Power was truly a ladies' man of the 1940s and 1950s. Power began in theater and became a major success there before making a name for himself in film as well. Before World War II, Power made many brilliant films, but afterwards only *Nightmare Alley* (1947) and *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) were remarkable. During the filming of *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), Power had a heart attack while performing in a dueling scene with George Sanders and died before reaching the hospital.

Josef von Sternberg helped bring Marlene Dietrich to the spotlight. He spotted her in a cabaret show, and she won a leading role in his 1930 film *Blaue Engel, Der* (1930). Then she was brought to Hollywood and introduced to the world. Her performance in *Morocco* (1930) let the world see her talent. She starred in many films over the years and toured Europe during World War II performing for the Allied effort.

Witness for the Prosecution was nominated for six Academy Awards but won none. Its nominations were: Best Actor in a Leading Role for Charles Laughton; Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Elsa Lanchester; Best Director for Billy Wilder; Best Film Editing for Daniel Mandell; Best Picture for Arthur Hornblow Jr.; and Best Sound for Gordon Sawyer (Samuel Goldwyn SSD).



The film did win a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress for Elsa Lanchester, while being nominated for four others: Best Motion Picture - Drama; Best Motion Picture Actor - Drama for Charles Laughton; Best Motion Picture Actress - Drama for Marlene Dietrich; and Best Motion Picture Director for Billy Wilder.



Summary and Analysis

As Witness for the Prosecution begins, the scene is a British courtroom. Then, the scene changes to a nurse talking to a gentleman in a car. He is tired of hearing Miss Plimson, the nurse, talk, since he just came out of a coma. They pull up to his law offices and go inside; everyone is excited to see Sir Wilfrid Robarts back in the office. He tells them to get back to work immediately.

Robarts and his assistant discuss Robarts' first case, and they are excited to be getting back to work. Robarts inspects his wig, and his assistant explains that there are many clients wanting to work with him. The assistant doesn't want to give him a criminal case, but Robarts wants to get back to heavy-duty work. Miss Plimsoll then tries to get Robarts to go upstairs for a nap, and he refuses. She then confiscates his cigars and orders him upstairs.

Robarts discovers that the firm has put in a lift on the stairs for him, and he loves it. He goes up and down the stairs playing like a child with a new toy. Mr. Mayhew, a colleague, then comes in with a serious criminal matter that he knows Robarts will be interested in. Mayhew introduces Robarts to Leonard Stephen Vole, a client in an upcoming criminal case. They ask for advice, and Mayhew wants Robarts to take the case. Miss Plimsoll yells down that Robarts needs a nap, and he tells her to shut up. Robarts refuses the case and rides back up the stairs.

Mayhew thanks Robarts and says goodbye. Before Mayhew and Vole get out the door, Robarts gets upset and calls Mayhew and Vole back inside. He brings Mayhew into the office so that they can talk. Vole tells the others in the outer office that he could be arrested for murder any minute.

Inside, Mayhew tells Robarts the story. Vole was with Emily French, a middle-aged, wealthy widow, and when the housekeeper came in later that day, French was found murdered. Thus, Vole is stuck in a web of circumstantial details. Mayhew asks for advice on the best approach to the case.

Mayhew feels that the defense should work on establishing an alibi. Robarts calls Vole inside in order to get a match from the man to light his cigar. Vole has a lighter and even locks the door so Miss Plimsoll won't find Robarts smoking a cigar.

Vole begins telling his story. He says that his wife, Christine, thought he might be implicated and would need a lawyer. Vole went to the police station to see them since the police had wanted to talk to him. Mayhew tries to explain that Vole is the principle suspect in the case. Vole can't believe that he could be put in jail for something he didn't do. The two attorneys calm Vole down, but Robarts still refuses the case.

Robarts then goes to tell his assistant to call another lawyer. Vole doesn't have a lot of money, so he's worried about the costs. He was a mechanic but had to quit because the man in charge was cruel to him. Vole served in the Army and met his wife while in



Germany, where she was an actress. He's trying to settle down and wants to get his eggbeater on the market. However, he doesn't have the money to promote it; that's what he hoped to get from Mrs. French.

Vole then tells the attorneys how he met Miss French. He was window shopping for his wife one day when he looked in a window and saw a woman getting a new hat. He shook his head to tell her to choose a different one, and then he kept giving her advice until she found the right one. She ran out and asked his opinion. He told her to buy it, and they became friends.

A few weeks later, Vole was trying to sell his eggbeaters. Since things were slow, he went to see a movie, and Miss French came and sat right in front of him with her rather large hat. He invited her to sit beside him so that he could see, and he told her what was going on. She'd already seen the film at least once. Vole didn't know she was rich yet.

Miss French later invited Vole over for tea. He showed her his wonderful eggbeater and provided one for her. Later, Miss French told Vole about her husband and their travels in Africa until Janet brought the tea out. After that, Vole went to visit her a couple of times a week.

Vole then begins to talk about the evening of the murder. He just went to see her for awhile and then went home. Robarts asks how much money Vole got from her, and Vole is upset at the accusation. Robarts knows that Vole got money because Miss French was in love with him. Vole also never took Christine over because Miss French believed the couple didn't get along. Vole hoped for a loan for his invention.

Robarts begins to question Vole. His eyepiece reflects light onto Vole's face. Vole continues to insist that Miss French was alive when he left. From the papers, Vole discovered that the house was ransacked, indicating that the crime was a robbery. Robarts finally admits to believing Vole now after this series of questions under the glare of the monocle.

Vole says that he walked home that night, and the only alibi he has is his wife. Suddenly, another lawyer walks in to meet them. Robarts makes the introductions and tells Mr. Brogan-Moore about the situation. Then, Brogan-Moore announces that Miss French left Vole 80,000 pounds, and Vole wants to tell Christine the good news. Vole realizes that things look even worse for him now. Robarts says he will be arrested any minute, and then the police arrive outside.

A few moments later, the police come in the office and arrest Vole. Robarts and Brogan-Moore talk about the situation. Since Vole passed the monocle test, they believe Vole to be innocent. Robarts is told that Miss Plimson is going to resign if he doesn't go to bed, and then the assistant threatens to leave as well.

Robarts begins to tell Brogan-Moore how to take care of Christine, and then she walks in and tells them she's not as fragile as they expect. She's not at all surprised at the turn



of events and asks what else will be happening. Christine wants to have Robarts represent Vole, but he refuses.

Brogan-Moore and Christine go inside to discuss the situation. Upstairs, Miss Plimson gets Robarts ready for bed. She keeps talking on and on, and she's driving him crazy. He then sneaks out of the room and is back downstairs before she realizes he's gone.

As Christine starts telling her story, Robarts walks in. She knew all about Miss French and says that Vole has a way with women. Christine is surprised to find out that Vole told them that he didn't know about the inheritance and that they believe Miss French was treating him like a son or brother.

Robarts then gets out his monocle and begins to question Christine. She puts down the shade, though, so that it will no longer reflect on her face. Christine doesn't think the police believed her earlier, and she seems only to say what her husband tells her. She knows that she will be under oath in court. Robarts asks if she loves her husband, and she says he thinks she does.

Robarts explains that under British law she can't give evidence that would damage her husband. Robarts also points out that they will try to hang her husband, to which she replies that he isn't her husband. The men are shocked; she pulls up the shade and begins to explain. By marrying Vole, she was able to escape from the rubble of East Germany, but their marriage isn't really official. She reassures them that she'll be crying when she gives the alibi, and then she leaves.

Robarts and Brogan-Moore are concerned that Christine will break down in the box in front of the prosecution. Robarts asks Brogan-Moore about Vole's innocence, but he's just not sure Christine's story is true. Robarts decides to take the case from here. When Miss Plimson comes in, he demands a match to light his cigar, and she complies.

At the prison, Mayhew and Robarts visit with Vole. A photographer takes pictures of Vole so that they can look for someone to back up the alibi. Vole can't understand why Christine has not come to visit him. Then, Robarts reads from Janet's testimony that Vole helped Miss French fill out important paperwork and draft her new will. He realizes that Janet has always been against him.

Vole has an unusual cut, and Robarts questions him about it. Vole says that he cut himself with a knife while cutting bread a couple days before. He believes that Christine will stand up for him. Robarts then asks for the truth about the couple's meeting. Stationed outside Hamburg, Vole met Christine while he had a weekend pass. She was performing, and the soldiers came in as a big fight began. At the end of everything, Vole found Christine and helped her find her accordion.

Vole and Christine then went to her place, the next room, for some coffee. She told him that she wasn't married but wore a ring for a little protection from all the men. She kissed him on the cheek and asked if that's a fair rate of exchange for the coffee. He offered the whole tin. She took it, and then they kissed passionately. Vole kept offering more food so that he could get more kisses. He plopped down on the cot and knocked



down the ceiling. She tried to fix it for him. Vole says that the couple got married immediately, and then he brought her back to England.

Finally, Robarts tells Vole that he's not putting Christine in the box. He explains that since she doesn't know the language well, the prosecution could trip her up. Vole begs, but Robarts tells Vole to trust him. They wish one another luck as Robarts leaves. Vole calls back that he's sunk without Christine. Robarts tells Brogan-Moore that it's like a drowning man clutching a razor blade.

At the courthouse, Vole's trial begins. The judge explains to the jury that it is their job to try the case on the evidence. They should think only of what happens in the courtroom. Mr. Myers is with the prosecution. Robarts is not there yet, and the prosecution is disturbed. The judge tells the lawyer to proceed with his opening remarks, as the jury listens carefully. Vole tries to profess his innocence, but the court employees force him to sit down.

First, the prosecution calls Chief Inspector Hearne. In another room, a doctor is checking Robarts and says that he shouldn't be there at all. They give him an injection and send him in to the trial. Carter, Robarts' assistant, takes Robarts' cocoa for him, and they go into the courtroom.

The Inspector is saying that the time of death was between 9:30 and 10:00, around thirty minutes before Janet returned and found the body. They believe Miss French was killed by one blunt blow to the head. Robarts comes in just the nick of time to keep the prosecutor from questioning the witness about opinions rather than facts.

Miss Plimson then comes into the balcony to watch the proceedings. The Inspector says that he found only three sets of fingerprints: Emily's, Janet's and Vole's. Although they found the window broken, the fragments outside showed that the window was broken from the inside. Robarts objects once again. The Inspector says that there was nothing stolen. Then the Inspector displays the jacket they found in Vole's house. There were bloodstains of type O blood, the same as Miss French's.

Robarts then begins to question the Inspector. He asks whether a burglar would usually wear gloves, and the Inspector explains that they do usually wear gloves. Then, Robarts asks whether the Inspector was not told about Vole's cut by both Vole and Christine. The Inspector admits that the blade on the knife was sharp enough to cut through the skin. If Vole's blood is type O as well, the argument that the blood on the jacket was Miss French's will not hold up. The Inspector says they did not test the defendant's blood, but Robarts has a certificate from the blood donation center at the hospital saying that Vole's blood is type O as well.

Janet is called to the stand next. Miss Plimson's watch goes off, and she tells Robarts to take his medicine. The prosecutor questions Janet, who says that she moved in with Emily after her aunt died. She admits the two were on friendly terms, and she tells about that Friday night.



Janet went back to the house after dinner to get a pattern and heard Vole talking to Miss French at 9:25. At 10:40, she returned home and found Miss French dead. Janet also says she didn't know that Vole was married. She heard Miss French talking about giving Vole all the money in her will a week before the murder.

Robarts then begins asking questions. In the last will, Janet was to receive almost everything that Miss French had, and now she gets hardly anything. Robarts believes Janet is angry toward the defendant because of the will. Although Janet only heard a murmur of voices, she is sure that she heard Vole's voice. Robarts asks if it is not possible that the television was actually tuned to a play and that she heard voices from the television. Janet says the television was away being repaired. Robarts sits down quickly and pours himself a drink. Miss Plimson is worried that it's not time for the next pill yet. Then Robarts asks Janet about being registered under the health insurance plan. Robarts points out that she recently applied for a hearing aide. She can't understand him, and then she admits she hasn't gotten her hearing aid yet. She then won't swear to knowing the voice. She asks the judge for his help.

Constable Jeffries is then called to the stand. As the trial continues, Robarts plays with his pills, moving them around. The audience sees a headline saying that the Vole trial is in its third day, and we see Robarts playing with only a few pills now. Myers is asked whether he's finished with the testimony, and he says that the last witness for the prosecution is Christine Helm. Vole looks shocked.

When Christine is sworn in, the questioning begins. Robarts objects because she is Vole's wife, but Myers points out that her real name is Helm. She has been living as Vole's wife, but she was married before the marriage took place. Myers has proof of the previous marriage. The judge allows her to give evidence against Vole.

Christine admits that Vole did not actually return at 9:26, but at 10:10. Vole yells out, and the judge asks him to be quiet. He was breathing very hard and examined his jacket sleeves. Christine washed the cuffs as asked. When Christine asked Vole what he did, he told her that he killed Miss Finch. In the balcony, Miss Plimson and another woman talk about how Christine is evil.

The prosecution continues with the questioning. Christine says she only changed her story because she didn't want to go on lying to save Vole. She was lying and helping him because she was grateful rather than out of love over the years. Also, she does not want to be an accomplice to the murder. Christine says all of this is the truth.

Robarts then begins to ask his questions. Christine admits to lying to Vole and the authorities about her marriage. Robarts points out a whole string of lies that she has told. Robarts calls her a chronic and habitual liar. Miss Plimson sends Carter up with a pill, but Robarts refuses it until he sits down.

The prosecutor then talks to Christine about perjury. He points out that the sentence for perjury is a long prison term, but she still promises that she has told the truth in court. A woman in the balcony begins to cry.



Robarts begins to talk to the jury about the circumstantial evidence. He points out that none of the witnesses are very reliable due to their own interests in the matter. Finally, he calls Vole to the stand. Vole says that he did not murder Emily. The judge cannot believe that they are finished with questioning. Robarts would prefer Vole not to be cross-examined. Vole claims that he didn't know he would be receiving money. The prosecution asks whether Vole was wearing a brown coat and hat, and he says yes.

The prosecution has found another witness at the last moment, one who saw Vole in the same brown hat and coat. Robarts is shocked. According to the prosecution witness, Vole was in a travel agency to ask about foreign cruises a week before the murder. According to Janet, Vole learned about the inheritance that day, and according to the prosecutor, Vole was already trying to figure out how to spend it when he went into the travel agency. Vole claims that that morning he met a girl in a pub, and they walked out together. They saw the posters at the travel agency and went in just for fun. Vole got irritated by the way the guy treated him, and he wanted to show him up by asking for the most expensive brochures. Vole refuses to admit that he killed Miss French.

Vole simply says that he doesn't understand why Christine would say that he was guilty. The prosecutor points out that it's Vole's word against everyone else's. Vole begins to cry and yell. He begs for them to believe him.

Robarts comes back to his office that night, and they have his shorts ready for a fitting so that he can go on his trip to Bermuda. He feels that the jury could be out for days, but no one else thinks it will take that long. No one else is sure whether Christine lied, and Robarts can't figure out why she would want to lie. Robarts knows this is his last case, and he insists on doing his best.

A moment later, a woman calls and demands to speak to Robarts about Vole. The woman wants to drop some information about Christine. She tells him to come see her before her train leaves so that he can get the information he needs, and she wants money for the information. Robarts jumps up to head out to the train station. Robarts must get his injection first, though, and then they leave.

Down at the station, Robarts and his colleagues find the woman who called. She orders whiskeys for the men and asks for money for letters written from Christine. They want to see the letters before giving her any money. They finally agree on forty pounds for the letters. The woman says she knows that Christine wrote them. The men look at the letters and realize that they will help get Vole off. The woman hates Christine because of a terrible scar on her face, given by a man she was dating who then went to Christine. The police would only listen to Christine and wouldn't believe this mysterious woman's story. The woman then leaves before the men can stop her.

The next day, the final proceedings begin. Myers begins his final address to the jury before Mayhew and Robarts arrive. Robarts announces that the case needs to be reopened because of new evidence discovered last night. The judge agrees, and Robarts then calls Christine back to the stand.



When the defense begins to ask about a man named Max, Christine says that she doesn't know such a man. Robarts tells her that he has a letter from October 20 that she wrote to a man named Max. She says that he's lying, and Robarts says that, according to the letter, Christine and Max were quite intimate. Robarts then begins to read the letter. Christine says that her letters are on blue paper, and he tells her that he was just looking at a bill and then shows her the letters. She tries to run out, and Vole tells them to leave her alone.

The men stop Christine, and Robarts begins to read the letter. In it, Christine suggests that she could make all their problems go away by testifying against Vole. The judge then orders her back to the witness box. The judge reminds Christine that she may have already committed perjury and should not make her crime worse. She admits that she wrote the letter, and Robarts sits down as Vole stares at Christine. The jury leaves to make their decision.

In another room, the doctor lectures Robarts. Robarts is not convinced that everything should be so easy; he feels that he may have made a bad judgment. The jury finally comes back in to deliver their verdict of not guilty as Christine watches from the door. Robarts watches through his monocle as Christine begins to cry. Vole is then released.

Vole goes over and thanks Robarts for all his help. When everyone leaves, Robarts remains seated and is congratulated by Mr. Mayhew. A moment later, there is commotion outside the door, and some men bring Christine in after she was almost trampled. Robarts decides to take a few minutes to finish his cocoa.

Christine talks to Robarts about her treatment. Robarts reminds her that she will be in prison soon because of the charge for perjury. She tells him that she only did things with help. Christine explains that she got the idea from Robarts to testify against Vole in order to make sure he was set free. She then begins to speak like the woman from the night before, revealing that she played both roles to engineer her husband's escape from conviction. Robarts never imagined something so terrible. Christine says that this was her most important role ever; she saved her husband.

Robarts asks why Christine couldn't just work with him honestly if she knew Vole was innocent. She realized, though, that Vole knew she was innocent, and she, on the other hand, knew he was guilty. Robarts yells at her, and she admits that she saved Vole because she loves him. Vole listens from elsewhere in the court and says that he knew she would do something to help him. She runs to him and embraces him.

Vole asks Robarts to remain calm so that they both get through all this alive. Robarts says that Vole will pay for this someday. Vole offers to pay an even larger fee for Christine's defense. A moment later, Miss Plimson and a young woman come in. The woman runs to Vole and embraces him. She's been worried about him. Christine is angry, and the girl explains that she and Vole are together now. The couple is planning to go away on a cruise.



Vole tries to walk away with the young girl, Diana, and tells Christine that they are even now. She begins to scream, picks up a knife and attacks Vole. He falls to the ground, dead, as Diana cries. A group of men walk into the room, and Carter runs in. Robarts says that Christine executed Vole as she is carried out.

Robarts is impressed with Christine, and he wants to defend her. Miss Plimson dismisses the cab so that they can begin work on the defense. Miss Plimson then reminds Robarts that he forgot his brandy, hidden in the cocoa bottle, and they walk out together.

As the credits role, viewers are asked not to divulge the ending of the film so that their friends will enjoy it more.



Characters

Leonard Stephen Vole, played by Tyrone Power

Description

Leonard Stephen Vole comes to Sir Wilfrid Robarts seeking help when he goes to trial for murder. He was friends with a rich single woman, Miss Emily French, and when she was murdered he received 80,000 British pounds from her will.

Vole convinces Robarts that he is innocent, even passing the famous monocle test that Robarts gives everyone. At the trial, he is shocked to learn that the prosecution has one last witness: Christine, Leonard Vole's wife. Through a complicated scheme, she is the one who gets her husband off the hook in the end.

After the trial is over, Christine and Vole reveal that she deceived Robarts to free Vole, who is actually guilty. When Vole decides to go off with another woman, though, Christine is livid and murders him in her anger. Vole's terrible trail of actions finally comes to an end.

Analysis

Leonard Vole is a cruel man, an expert deceiver and a consummate womanizer. Out of work, this young inventor decides to find a different way to make money. He meets Miss Emily French and becomes close friends with her. He visits her all the time while his wife waits on him at home.

When Emily is murdered, Vole is the number one suspect. Although he convinces Robarts of his innocence, he actually killed her. He convinced her that she should change her will to make him the primary recipient of her money. After all the paperwork went through, Vole killed her in cold blood.

Vole brings his cruelty to the highest degree when he decides to leave his wife for a younger woman after Christine has saved him from life in prison or death by putting herself in danger of prosecution for perjury. Finally, Vole gets what he deserves when Christine murders him.

Christine Helm Vole, played by Marlene Dietrich

Description

Christine Helm Vole is Leonard's wife. They met while he was on duty in Germany, and he rescued her and brought her back to England after they fell madly in love. When



Leonard is accused of murdering an old woman, Christine creates a crazy plan to defend him in court.

Christine ends up being a witness for the prosecution after she gives proof that she was already married when she married Leonard. She seems like a cold, hard woman who cares nothing for Leonard, and she gives testimony that he is guilty.

Then, Christine creates a fake lover to explain why she testified against her husband. She dresses up in a costume and delivers letters explaining that she plans to convict her husband by lying on the stand to Robarts. He falls for the plot, which helps Leonard get off scot-free. When Christine finally reveals the truth of the plot, Robarts is shocked. After Leonard announces that Christine has finally repaid her debt and that he's leaving her, she murders him. Although she is taken away by the police, Robarts is already planning her defense.

Analysis

Christine is a passionate woman who is willing to do anything for the love of a man who doesn't deserve her help. She does her best to protect her husband, even though that means being prosecuted for perjury. After first talking to Robarts, Christine realizes that a loving wife can't help Leonard by defending him on the stand, so she creates an extravagant plan to save him from death. She actually tells the complete truth on the stand in court, but she creates a complex fiction to make it appear that she is lying and therefore save her husband. She is intelligent as well as passionate, and she puts all of her wits and will to work for her beloved.

Christine's feelings when Leonard decides to leave her are the universal feelings of pain and dismay. The phrase "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" describes her reaction. She can hardly believe that Vole would betray her so terribly, and she simply lashes out at him with all her wrath.

Sir Wilfrid Robarts, played by Charles Laughton

Description

Sir Wilfrid Robarts is an aging barrister who is about to retire as the result of an almost-deadly heart attack. He doesn't plan to take on anymore cases, but when Mr. Mayhew tells him Vole's story, Robarts simply can't resist.

Robarts uses a monocle test, shining light in a person's eyes while he questions them, to try to learn whether people are telling the truth. He uses it on both Vole and Christine, but he honestly believes them both. Because of his belief, he works hard to protect Vole, and Christine engineers the situation so that he finds evidence to set Vole free.

Robarts is shocked when he discovers that both Vole and Christine deceived him successfully. He is terribly angry with them both and appalled that Vole would then leave



Christine. When Christine murders Vole, Robarts decides that he must go prepare her defense, since he believes the killing was justified.

Analysis

Robarts is a brilliant lawyer. He is one of the most respected men in the business, and he can't resist a challenge. Thus, he agrees to represent Vole because all the circumstantial evidence is against him.

Robarts is also very stubborn. Once he makes a decision, he refuses to change his mind. He refuses to give up cigars and brandy, even at the risk of his health. He decides to take on Vole's case and will not give it up despite the pleas of Carter and Miss Plimsoll. Additionally, he refuses to change his mind on Vole's innocence until Christine and Vole prove that the case is different from what they at first led Robarts to believe.

Miss Plimsoll, played by Elsa Lanchester

Description

Miss Plimsoll is Robarts' nurse. She becomes extremely frustrated when he refuses to rest after returning home from the hospital. Miss Plimsoll is after him for the entire course of the film. In the end, though, she reveals that she knows he is drinking brandy rather than cocoa, and she offers to help Robarts get things together for Christine's defense instead of pushing him to go on vacation.

Analysis

Miss Plimsoll is a complaining, bossy woman who tries her best to take care of Robarts. She finally discovers that she can't beat him, so she joins him and helps oversee his activities that way.

Emily Jane French, played by Norma Varden

Description

Emily French is the woman that Vole befriended and is accused of murdering. The audience sees her as Vole recalls his story for Robarts and Mayhew. After Miss French's death, Vole receives a large amount of money from her will.

Analysis

Emily seems to be a naive and silly woman. She is very concerned with her looks and is thrilled to have a younger admirer. She goes along with what Vole wants and eventually is murdered for her guilelessness.



Mr. Mayhew, played by Henry Daniell

Description

Mr. Mayhew is the first lawyer Leonard goes to for his case. Mayhew then suggests getting Robarts to defend him.

Analysis

Mayhew helps bring Robarts and Vole together so that the action in the film can actually happen.

Mr. Carter, played by Ian Wolfe

Description

Mr. Carter is Robarts' assistant. He has been working for Robarts for years, and he knows just what Robarts needs. Carter helps Miss Plimsoll and the others keep Robarts in order throughout the film.

Analysis

Carter is a great assistant who is completely loyal to Robarts. Although he wants Robarts to rest, he also helps take care of him when he does decide to go out.

Mr. Myers, played by Torin Thatcher

Description

Mr. Myers is the lead man for the prosecution. He is convinced that Vole is guilty and sets up a good case against him. Christine even gets on the stand for him after revealing that she and Leonard are not really married. Myers is shocked by the news he discovers from Robarts in the last moments of the trial and is angry when he loses his case.

Analysis

Myers is a tough prosecutor who reads people well. He is convinced that Vole is guilty, and although Robarts "proves" him innocent, Myers's instincts are ultimately proved correct.



Themes

Love of Lies

Some people live their lives full of lies. Leonard and Christine are hiding their own secrets from each other and the rest of the world. When they begin lying to the judge and jury, they put their lives on the line to protect each other.

After the trial is finally done, Christine and Leonard begin to tell the truth. Christine talks to Robarts and tells him that she created the story of Max so that she could protect Leonard. Although the lies are finally out, Christine receives a surprise as Leonard reveals secrets of his own.

Leonard comes in, and a girl runs in behind him and embraces him. Leonard then announces that he has been lying to Christine the whole time. He had no plans to stay with her but simply wanted her to repay her debt to him for bringing her to England. She is angry about his lie and murders him. Ultimately, deceit has led to nothing but death and pain.

Dedication to a Job

Sir Wilfrid Robarts knows all about dedication to his job. He has been a barrister for years and is considered the best in the business by all his colleagues. After a heart attack, he is supposed to be quitting work for a while, but he decides to keep working instead when he hears Vole's story.

Robarts spends all his time when he returns home focusing on Vole's case. He interviews both Vole and Christine and realizes that this will be a difficult case to win. Nonetheless, he continues working on the case and finally helps Vole go free.

When Robarts then finds out that Vole is guilty, he decides to represent Christine in the murder case of Leonard Vole. He feels that since Leonard lied to the jury and to her, and since he was guilty of murder, the murder was justified. Robarts refuses to quit his job no matter what happens.

Justified Murder

Most people would say that murder is never justified; however, Robarts would disagree. When Christine realizes that she must play a role in order to save Leonard, she does what it takes so that he will be set free. The jury frees him, but then the betrayal happens.

As Christine embraces Leonard after the ordeal, a young girl rushes in and jumps into his arms. Christine is shocked by this display, and she begs Leonard to tell her that this



is not true. Leonard tells her that she owed him for bringing her to England, but now that they are even, they are over forever.

Christine then grabs a knife and stabs Leonard. Robarts feels that Christine is justified in murdering Leonard since she was punishing a guilty man. Robarts makes plans to defend Christine since he thinks he can convince the jury that the murder was completely justified.

Style and Cinematography

Witness for the Prosecution is a classic Billy Wilder film. The drama builds up until it finally climaxes in the final courtroom scene between Christine, Roberts and Leonard. Up to that point, viewers are left guessing at the truth but aren't at all surprised by the final outcome.

The use of flashbacks in this film is especially important. These scenes help viewers come to terms with the previous events. We are able to develop sympathy for Miss Emily French while also realizing that she was a very silly woman. We don't get just other people's opinions of her, but we are able to see a little of her for ourselves.

An important point also is that the flashbacks always come from the point of view of the teller of the tale. We may see the characters and see things they actually did, but the events always happen from the point of view of the person telling the story. Thus, when Leonard tells his story, we receive some of the truth but not all the facts. Since it's easy to forget that the flashbacks aren't objective, viewers are sucked even more into the world of lies and are then able to enjoy the surprise ending.

Motifs

Interruptions

Throughout the film, there are always interruptions. The first comes while Robarts is talking with his nurse and servant. Mayhew knocks on the door and demands to see Robarts concerning a murder case. All the drama and action in the film begins because of one simple knock on the door, one interruption.

Later, viewers also see numerous other interruptions that introduce us to new characters or prepare us for a later event. For example, when Christine interrupts Robarts's conversation at his office, we are suddenly thrown for a loop as we see her cold disdain for her husband. Because we are set up to dislike her, the ending comes as an even greater shock for the viewers.

Flashbacks

Much of the story is told through flashbacks. While Leonard tells his story, viewers are actually able to see the events occurring as he describes them. Because we see Miss Emily French and his friendship with her, we, like Robarts, are inclined to believe that he's telling the truth. The flashbacks are deceitful, because they are from the point of view of the person telling the tale.

Flashbacks also help the audience learn more about Christine. Viewers are easily able to see how she and Leonard got together, although we can't understand her cold feelings. Realizing that she was an actress also helps us when the truth comes out and we realize, as Robarts does, that he has been tricked.

The flashbacks bring the events and characters to life. Wilder actually lets the audience see the characters who are now dead. Since we do see Emily French, we feel pity for her and are also more likely to believe Leonard and Christine's lies.

Courtroom Scenes

After Robarts finally agrees to represent Vole, the audience is then transported to the trial. These courtroom scenes are somewhat set apart from the rest of the film. Although the lines of questioning are important, the events between times in the courtroom are even more impressive.

These courtroom scenes allow viewers to begin working through the mystery along with Robarts and the prosecutor. Although we have heard Leonard's side of the story, we now hear the testimony of everyone else, including Christine.

Despite hearing a lot of testimony, the truth doesn't come out until the final courtroom scene after Leonard is acquitted. As we watch, Christine tells the truth, and viewers and Robarts are shocked that they haven't already realized the truth. Christine finally acts as judge, jury and executioner to Leonard herself, and we realize that the story has finally come full circle.



Symbols

The Monocle Test

Sir Robarts performs the monocle test on everyone who comes into his office. He stares at them and questions them while looking through his small glass monocle, which shines light on their faces like an inquisitor's light. If the people being questioned flinch, then they are usually lying.

The monocle test is symbolic simply because it doesn't work. It's ostensibly the symbol for truth, but ultimately it symbolizes the idea that there is no certainty about the truth. The characters don't seem to have the necessary conscience to fail the test.

Additionally, Christine's movement to close the blinds and stop the test should immediately clue viewers into the fact that something suspicious is going on with her. She realizes that although she loves Leonard, she could easily give them away with that type of "truth serum" and puts a stop to the test. Both viewers and Robarts completely misinterpret the movement, so the audience is left clueless until the end of the film.

The Cocoa

Robarts is constantly drinking cocoa that he says is good for his health. Although Miss Plimsoll once catches him with brandy in the cup, he seems to learn his lesson and quit. However, at the end of the film, she points out that brandy is what he's been drinking the entire time.

The cocoa/brandy is symbolic of Robarts's demand for independence. Although he has been terribly sick, near death in fact, he still wants to retain his old way of life. By drinking his brandy in his office and during the trial, he is able to prove to himself and others not only that he has what it takes to be a lawyer (proved by Leonard being acquitted) but also that despite his illness, he is still the same strong man he's always been.

Leonard's Death

After the trial is over, Christine comes to Robarts in the courtroom and tells him the truth. She explains that she and Vole have tricked the lawyer and everyone else into believing in Vole's innocence. Leonard finally comes in and verifies her story.

A moment later, though, a young girl runs into Leonard's arms. She expresses her love, and Christine is shocked by the turn of events. She confronts Leonard, who says that he believes Christine has finally paid her debt to him for bringing her to England. Now, he is leaving her. In shock and anger, Christine stabs Leonard to death.



Leonard's death is symbolic of justice. Although the court system reached the wrong conclusion and set a murderer free, fate did not. Instead, Christine, who helped Vole with his lie, is now the one to murder him and punish him for being a liar, a cheat and a murderer.



Essay Questions

Why is Sir Robarts attended by a nurse? How does his health help build characterization?

What has Leonard Vole been charged with? Why?

Describe Christine Helm Vole. How does the audience's perception of her change throughout the film?

What is the monocle test, and how reliable is it?

Why does Leonard want Robarts to defend him?

Who was Miss Emily French? Describe her character, especially how her character traits led to her death.

Who gives Robarts the last information he needs?

What is the jury's verdict? Do you think this verdict is fair and justified, based on the trial?

What does Robarts discover after the trial?

Why is Robarts getting ready to defend Christine at the end of the film? Do you think Robarts is right to defend her?