

Psycho vs. santa sangr: a comparative analysis

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Compare/Contrast: Psycho and Santa Sangre

Throughout cinematic history, the horror genre has generally been well-received by audiences. Furthermore, in recent decades, psychological horror films, derived from the traditional horror genre where the “monster” has an actual physical body, have also been gradually popularized. In these psychological horror movies, instead of being a tangible source of evil, the “monster” becomes internalized, often morphing into a hallucinatory enemy that constantly haunts the mental state of its victims. While the internalized “monster” can possess any identity, mother as the source of horror has sparked widespread interests among film directors and audiences alike. In two such films, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *Santa Sangre*, the mothers in both narratives are similarly depicted as internalized “monsters” that, even after death, remain alive as hallucinations to their sons, causing pain to both their sons and to other people around them. And in spite of these many similarities in the two movies, there still exists a slight difference between how the sons react to their mothers’ growing control over their lives: whereas Fenix in *Santa Sangre* strongly desires to break free from his mother’s control of his hands, Norman Bates in *Psycho* does not, and instead vigorously tries to protect the illusion of his mother being alive from danger and threats. The simultaneous effort of these plot similarities and differences in the two movies therefore bring about a different ending to each story, attributable to the different reactions of Fenix and Norman Bates to their mother’s control.

The discussion of how the functions of mothers in Psycho and Santa Sangre are similar begins with the respective traumas experienced by Norman Bates and Fenix at young ages. In Psycho, the character of Norman Bates is shrouded in mystery. While everything about Marion Crane, whether it be her family, her job, her lover, or even her purpose of stealing the money, is introduced to the audience early on at the beginning of her appearance, nearly nothing is known about Norman, except that he works at the Bates Motel, and has a domineering “mother.” As the mystery unravels, only is it revealed that Norman has lived with his mother in solitary since he was five, and only until a few years ago from when the story of the movie begins, is there someone who comes in between his mother and him. The “someone” then becomes a target of Norman’s jealousy. Norman’s Oedipus complex that, according to Freudian analysis, should have ended at the age of five, thus defines him as a psychopath, and his psychotic behavior then kills both his mother and her lover. Unable to bear the guilt of matricide, Norman creates in his mind the hallucination that his mother is still alive, and lets her take control of half of him at times, and all of him at others, which gives the “mother,” also the monster, a motive to kill when Norman has a desire for other women, because Norman assumes “mother” would be jealous of other women who come in between the mother-son relationship as well. The function of mother in Psycho therefore not only provides a backstory for Norman’s character, but also creates both the “monster” and the victim in Norman, in the sense that Norman is the one who does the killing, but actually does not want to and yet cannot stop himself from doing so. Likewise, Fenix in Santa Sangre suffer from the trauma of seeing his beloved

mother being killed by his father in front of him at a young age, which is foreshadowed by the previous scene of watching his mother, under hypnosis, being raped by his father, and yet unable to do anything because he was locked up. Years later, living in a mental asylum, Fenix seemingly forgets his past and his human identity, adopting the behaviors of a bird, reinforced by the phoenix tattoo on his chest and his name Fenix that resembles the pronunciation of " phoenix." Only after seeing the tattooed woman does he regain a distorted memory of the past and starts seeing a hallucination of his mother, believing that his mother is still alive, but without her hands. From the perspective of Fenix, his " mother" then takes control of his hands to exact vengeance on the tattooed woman, as well as other women who are seen as a threat to her. Fenix himself, however, is revealed to be quite disturbed by his mother's use of his hands to commit these murders, being haunted by memories of all those whom he killed. Fenix, rendered both the " monster" and the victim by the presence of his mother, is put into the same position as Norman. Hence, the function of motherhood in Santa Sangre also creates a background for Fenix that explains his psychotic behaviors. In both Psycho and Santa Sangre, even though both Norman and Fenix are physically normal, they are psychologically deranged from the traumas of seeing their mothers killed in front of them at a young age. The " mothers" become the internalized " monsters" that lurk around in their lives, characterizing both Norman and Fenix as horrifying but at the same time pitiable.

But even though the two films share a lot of similarities with regard to the usage of motherhood, there are still some slight differences in the ways

Norman and Fenix each react to their mothers' control, which ultimately lead to opposite endings for the two characters. For Norman, his mother is the only person he has and needs, clearly shown in his dialogue with Marion Crane: " Friends? Who needs friends...A boy's best friend is his mother." He deeply treasures the relationship he has with his mother, reacting aggressively when anyone tries to threaten this relationship, which also allows his " mother" to take control over him when he shows a desire for other women, since he assumes that his mother also would not want their relationship to be intruded upon. In addition, Norman does everything to protect his mother, or to put it another way, he does everything to " keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive," and when other people question or threaten the existence of his mother, he becomes furious and responds with hostility. Hence, Norman's affection for his mother characterizes him as sometimes exhibiting reluctance to obey her demands, but not genuinely wanting to break free from her control. For this reason, the end of the movie where " mother" takes complete control over Norman also comes unsurprising to the audience. In contrast, as symbolized by the engraved phoenix on his chest and his name which resembles " phoenix," Fenix eagerly wants to break away and escape from his mother's control. For Fenix, his mother is not the only person he has. Growing up in the circus, he had both parents and circus friends, and even when he lived in the asylum, he was not alone. Fenix's upbringing thus teaches him the immorality of his " mother's" actions, and attempts to stop her from using his hands to kill even more innocent people, as shown when he wanted the Saint to break his arms. Fenix finally breaks away from his mother's control when Alma, the

only “ real” friend from his past, appears before him, and causes him to stab his “ mother” instead of Alma. Through Alma’s mime of a bird flying away from the phoenix tattoo on Fenix’s chest, his awakening from the hallucination is further emphasized. The reason for the different endings to the stories of Norman and Fenix is attributable to the differences in their upbringing, as well as their desires to break free from the mother’s control.

In conclusion, although the functions of motherhood in Psycho and Santa Sangre are similar, both of which internalize horror, create backstories for Norman Bates and Fenix, and provide motives for killing other people, the slight differences that still exist lead to the ultimate difference in the endings of the two stories. While Norman is completely taken over by his “ mother,” Fenix successfully breaks away from his mother’s control. Alejandro Jodorowsky’s Santa Sangre, a reimagination of Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho, offers an alternative vision into the lives of those who are haunted by past traumas and suffer from imagined horror. Through Santa Sangre, Jodorowsky depicts a more fulfilling and optimistic closure to the character of Fenix who takes control of his own hands in the end, which could have happened to Norman if he was raised under a different upbringing.