

The Bridesmaid (2004) Explained

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Most of the reviews of this film I've read don't really seem to be interpreting this film as I am. A few do clearly hint at it. So let me tackle it head-on. Major spoilers alert, of course. View the film first.

Much like a David Lynch or Hitchcock film (the latter being Chabrol's major muse), there's a lot going on here beyond the literal level. In fact, much of what the audience sees here is occurring only in the imagination of the protagonist Philippe. Chabrol has left the audience some anachronistic clues to that fact:

- The "new Girard House" from which Philippe steals the bust is not the same "new Girard house" where the audience later sees Girard & Philippe meet & chat. The former house has a small walk-in gate, is numbered 12, only has a single mailslot and has a Hertz van parked out front given the homeowner is said to work for a moving company. The latter house has a large automatic gate for Girard's Jaguar, is numbered 26. and has a different mailslot arrangement. And Philippe happens on the new Girard home from which he steals the bust of Flora when visiting a client next door, a coincidence that doesn't seem very likely.
- At the end of the film, when Senta wants to stash the upstairs body, she says the tango couple won't be back until late. Even though Philippe has just seen them dancing downstairs.
- Even though the mother and daughters continually speculate that Philippe has a new girlfriend stashed somewhere, they draw no conclusion from Senta's bridesmaid dress being found on the floor of Philippe's bedroom, nor does the mother seem to connect-the-dots when Senta appears unexpectedly at the front door.
- Senta says she's killed the upstairs woman because her high-school boyfriend was fixated on her. That would have been about five years ago. Has she been toting around this not-very-decomposed body ever since?
- At the wedding reception, Senta is quite cool toward Philippe, preferring her own way home, no thank you. Yet within the hour, she turns up at his front door, soaking wet from walking in the pouring rain to find him, bed him, and proclaim eternal love-at-first-site.
- The stone bust of Flora is said to look like both the mother and Senta. A bit much to attribute as factual coincidence. Because it is not. Maybe Flora resembles the mother. But Senta, from the moment of her arrival at that front door, is nothing more than the product of Philippe's defensive imagination.

What's really happened is that it is Philippe who has murdered three people: the missing woman on the news report, the homeless man ... and Girard. At points in the film, Philippe's mind attempts to obscure the truth from itself. In his imagination, Philippe meets the homeless man, alive, his death has just been an identity mix-up. He imagines Girard is not dead either, having chatted him up at his front gate. And Senta has killed the wrong person anyway, a cousin of Girard's, yet another identity mix-up. And the upstairs body that is the missing news-report woman? Killed by his imaginary Senta, not by him.

Chabrol is well on-record that he views the family as an unnatural and dysfunctional unit; it is a recurring theme in his films. And he's given us a doozy of a family here; despite all their bourgeois face-time chatter, they are all choking to death inside a home stifling them with claustrophobic wallpaper.

Philippe is clearly in an Oedipal relationship with his mother. Not sexually, perhaps, but emotionally and romantically surely. Somewhere along the way, Philippe has stepped into the role the ex-husband has abandoned, perhaps motivated by his mother's struggles to maintain the household. Overt innocuous examples are his offering to pay more bills and to manage the precocious younger sister Patricia. Perhaps even more surprising is that sharp observation of the mother suggests that she perceives, and is not entirely opposed to, Philippe's Oedipal advances, in that they are filling the emotional void caused by her lack of partner. But she is conflicted; her other actions imply she is hoping that Philippe will move on emotionally. The mother's fixation on whether or not the son has taken a new lover can be read as covering both of those bases. The situation is not lost on the two daughters either; though nothing is said, they still speak. The older daughter is onto a marriage that may not be especially promising—their short honeymoon being cut even shorter, and her rejection of his advances seen upon their return, being but two hints—but at least it gets her out of that dysfunctional house. The younger daughter keeps saying she doesn't care whether or not Philippe has a new girlfriend. She's just dodging the truth, she knows who Philippe's real girlfriend is: Mother. And she's beginning to realize the distinct possibility that she, being too young to leave, may soon enough be stuck alone in the house with troubled Philippe in charge. That being why she begins to act-out in various ways: stealing, drugs & alcohol, staying out all night who-knows-where, rebelling against Philippe's assuming paternal authority. Somehow trying to escape.

Here's just the kind of family that Chabrol enjoys exploring.

Philippe too, of course, is conflicted, knowing his affection for his mother is forbidden. So at some point in the past, his mind began to project that affection upon the stone bust of Flora that resembles his mother. The audience sees him kissing it, sleeping with it, as substitute for his mother. This projection is also not lost upon the mother; somewhere along the way in the past she has discovered it. This is why she is eager to make the odd gift of it, to the man she will soon live with, away from Philippe. The simultaneous actions are intended to prod Philippe to let go. But that's not an option for Philippe; he retrieves the bust to his bedroom. Eventually though, a stone carving becomes as inadequate as substitute as it was for Pygmalion.

At the beginning of the film is the news report of the missing woman. It is Philippe who has killed her. At the end of the film imaginary Senta speaks, on behalf of Philippe's mind, as to why. Senta says her boyfriend became fixated on her. In truth, it was Philippe (who IS Senta's boyfriend) who became fixated on her. Likely because she bore resemblance to his mother. Philippe had found a living woman upon whom he could project his forbidden emotions. After likely stalking her, and perhaps being rejected by her, Philippe eventually lured her to the abandoned house that he (alone) has been squatting, as a home apart from Mother. He used the manner Senta confesses on his behalf, a phony phone call from her real boyfriend, the phone call mentioned in the news report. There at the abandoned home he killed her, so that he could keep her, as legitimate substitute for his mother, for his new family in his new home, free of Oedipal guilt. To his mother and sisters, Philippe has been representing her as "Marion," a girlfriend whom they've apparently never met. When the older daughter asks that Marion be a bridesmaid, possibly to force Philippe to present her, he sheepishly claims they have broken up, as cover. At the wedding, Philippe sees (or imagines) a maternal resemblance in the bridesmaid Senta; there his imagination captures Senta to fill the role vacated by Marion. At some point, Philippe dresses the upstairs body of the missing woman in the blue bridesmaid dress to complete the continuity; she was Marion, she was the bridesmaid and she was Senta.

The dual loss of his mother and his Flora is too much for Philippe to bear. Accordingly at some point after the family dines with Girard at the Italian restaurant, before Girard leaves for Italy, Philippe kills Girard ... and retrieves the bust of Flora. This is why he has hidden Flora in his bedroom, instead of mounting her back in the garden, declaring the theft as victory over that jilting creep Girard. To do so would reveal he had subsequent contact with Girard, exposing him to being suspect of the foul play. His imagination disconnects the retrieval from the murder by concocting his happening upon it by chance and stealing it under cover of darkness. When Senta speaks of proving one's love by killing, this is Philippe's mind speaking out, that he has killed to defend his Oedipal love for his mother. Girard's death is the real reason why the mother has never heard from him again, not that she's been dumped. The Italian postcard was fabricated by Philippe, him slipping it in with the rest of the mail he carried in that day. Better that people think that Girard did go to Italy.

The most chilling aspect of this entire film is that close inspection of the mother's reactions whenever the topic of Girard's disappearance is raised strongly suggests that she well knows *exactly* what her son has done ... and has *accepted it* in silence, is resigned to the hold her son has put upon her, due to her love for him as his mother. As example, the mother barely glances at the postcard; she knows the truth of all of it already.

Philippe is free to continue his imaginary household with Senta for a bit; in the short-run Girard's absence is unnoticed, given his expected trip to Italy. And there's nothing known—outside this dysfunctional household—to make him suspect. The couple in constantly sensual tango tension, also born of Philippe's imagination, is a manifestation of his relationship with his mother, a relationship that is competing to also live in Philippe's new household. One hint: the tango mother chiding her younger partner for having a wandering eye toward other women ... is Philippe's mind chiding him for trying to abandon his Oedipal love for another woman his own age. Somewhere along the way, Philippe murders the homeless man and dumps the body down by the docks, away so as to not draw attention to the abandoned house. Perhaps he has done so to prove his love to his imaginary Senta (though his imagination also tries to deny his guilt) as he did for Mother ... or perhaps because the homeless man was getting just a bit too nosy about Philippe's comings-and-goings. Either way, someone cleared out the cardboard boxes and garbage in which the homeless man had lived, that someone surely being Philippe.

The screws start to tighten when Girard's absence eventually becomes conspicuous and the police begin to look into the matter. Meanwhile, Philippe's ever-more twisted mind begins to struggle to reconcile the truth about Girard, one part telling him (via Senta's voice) that Girard is dead, the other part in denial (it is really Girard's *cousin* who is dead). The mental conflict ultimately drives Philippe to start nosing around Girard's house for the truth. The police pick up on it and he's brought in for questioning (though his mind tries to deny it as coincidental to an investigation of Patricia) then let go, presumably so they can tail him. Along the way, his mind tries to vindicate him from the murder of the homeless man by running into him by chance. And at the abandoned house his mind tries to vindicate him from the murders of the missing woman and Girard (or his cousin or whatever) by letting imaginary Senta take the blame.

But, by this point, there's no way out of this duplicitous mind-trap for Philippe. No amount of imagination can stitch all the patchwork together into one neat cloth. Something's got to give. In the end, Philippe calls the police to tell the story (as he said he did). Whether he tells that he killed Girard or whether he tells that his imaginary Senta killed Girard (with a—what—Venetian glass dagger) makes no difference. They've got their man. And he's been tailed to the abandoned house, where the police are gathering to grab him. And they are going to be quite surprised to find the body of the missing woman upstairs. That, for some reason they won't be able to fathom, is wearing a blue bridesmaid dress.