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Meaning and Malfunction: How Books in *Rope* Reveal Murder as the Most Customary,  
Unimaginative Reason for Murder

At the climax of Hitchcock's 1948 crime drama, *Rope*, Rupert Cadell accuses Brandon of giving his words "a meaning that [he] never dreamed of!" This accusation is hardly uncharacteristic of *Rope*, as an accurate understanding of the murder's meaning proves to be a more elusive party guest than David Kentley. The film is chock-full of double entendres, moral ambiguity, and MacGuffins, with both the characters and audience unsure of whether or not Rupert is serious about his theory on intellectual superiority for most of the film. This uncertainty ends at the film's climax, when Rupert challenges Brandon, and therefore his own logic, by asking, "By what right did you dare decide that that boy...was inferior and therefore could be killed? Did you think you were God...? Well, I don't know what you thought...but I know what you've done. You've murdered!" The plot of *Rope* illuminates how the separation of thought and action, of philosophy and, quite literally, the execution of that philosophy, may expose a supposed meaning's actual meaninglessness. Hitchcock reinforces this notion by employing the presence of one particular object, placing it over the heads, in the hands, and under the noses of his characters and audiences alike: the book.

Conventionally, books symbolize literacy, intellectualism, and the exchange of ideas, and Brandon and Phillip surround themselves with this symbol to bolster their sense of intellectual superiority. Their apartment is brimming with various forms of literature, such as the thick,

academic books on the living room shelves, the books behind glass in the dining room, the first editions by the cassone, the novels on the desk, the sheet music on the piano, and even a few magazines and a folded-up newspaper on the couch. Hitchcock provides this pervasive presence of literature to emphasize Brandon and Phillip's subscription to the aesthetic and intellectual movements. However, Hitchcock simultaneously undermines their affiliation to these movements through his technical portrayal of the literature. Although the books are infused in almost every shot of the film and frequently the topic of discussion, Hitchcock's camera never shows them being opened or read. Even when most of the characters take Mr. Kentley to "see the books," Hitchcock evades showing the open books on screen by keeping the camera in the living room on Janet and Kenneth. In effect, Hitchcock makes the books in *Rope* hollow symbols, because they are unable to convey their conventional meaning. While this subversion of meaning is interesting enough on its own, what is even more interesting is how and why Hitchcock then puts these hollow symbols at the forefront of David Kentley's murder.

Hitchcock first implicates the books in Brandon and Phillip's scheme as an "excuse for the others" to explain why dinner will be served from the cassone. "After all," Brandon states, slyly, "Mr. Kentley's coming mainly to look at these books. Now what could be better than to have them laid out neatly on the dining room table where the poor old man can get at them?" Within the first 12 minutes of the film, the books operate as two explicit MacGuffins in Brandon and Phillip's conspiracy: first, to lure David's parents to the post-mortem ceremony, and second, to explain why dinner is served from the cassone instead of the dining room table. Hitchcock further connects the books to David's murder by physically placing them near the two other objects most associated with the murder, the rope and the cassone. Brandon secures the first editions he gives to Mr. Kentley with the rope used to strangle David, literally tying the books to

the murder. Additionally, the first editions are frequently near the cassone. We later learn that the first editions used to be stored in the cassone, but were moved to make room for David's body when Mrs. Wilson complains, "I have to clear all those books off the dining room table, bring them here, and put them back in the chest, which is where they were in the first place." One of the most suspenseful scenes of the film, in fact, is when Mrs. Wilson risks discovering David's body as she cleans up after dinner, stacking the books on and around the cassone while the rest of the guests theorize where David might be. Except for the very beginning of the film, we do not see David's body, as it is soon hidden in the chest. As a result, the first editions that have been taken out of the cassone become signifiers of David's corpse and thus the murder. In the twisted intellectual world of Brandon and Phillip, books are meant for anything but reading.

Hitchcock complicates the books' meaning in *Rope* by diverging from their traditional purpose, which is to be read. Because the books' significance cannot emanate from their interiors, Brandon and Phillip impose significance onto their exteriors, using the books as indicators of their intelligence, an excuse for the party, and the reason why they serve dinner from the cassone. Brandon and Phillip impose this same kind of external meaning onto the murder of David Kentley. Typically, people are known to commit murder in the name of self-defense, greed, revenge, or war, in the hopes that it will bring them safety, money, retribution, or victory. Brandon and Phillip, however, kill merely "for the sake of killing," with Brandon proudly stating at the start of the film, "Nobody commits a murder just for the experiment of committing it. Nobody except us." For Brandon and Phillip, the act of murder is both the cause and the result of murder, which leaves the whole operation without meaning. It is only through the discernment of who kills and who is killed that they can reinforce their conviction of superiority and thus attribute meaning to their crime, and they accomplish this with the help of

Rupert's theory. Meaning is utterly lost among superficial displays of intellectual superiority, where intrinsic value goes unrecognized, and extrinsic value is imposed, accepted, and celebrated by the arbitrary powers that be: Brandon and Phillip. For Brandon and Phillip, owning books is just as good as reading them, but Hitchcock resists this sentiment and emphasizes the importance of reading through his remaining resources: the other characters and the audience.

To suggest the morality of the characters in *Rope*, Hitchcock contrasts readings books with merely owning books. Brandon and Phillip are the most immoral characters of the film based off their abuse of David's life and books alike. The most antagonizing characters for Brandon and Phillip, and the most moral, are frequently characterized by their inclination to read. Mrs. Wilson, for example, wears a pair of thick glasses, an apparatus used for reading, and frequently questions Brandon and Phillip about the changes they make to the party. She thinks that serving dinner from the chest is "downright peculiar," and that it is a "crazy idea, if you ask [her]," to lie the books out on the dining room table. Mr. Kentley also dons glasses and is known for "cataloguing his library" and, on occasion, even "[reading] one of [his] books." Mr. Kentley finds Rupert's theory on superior beings disturbing, and is the first to ask, "Who is to decide if a human being is inferior, and therefore a suitable victim for murder?" Mr. Kentley is a precursor for Rupert, who is the most antagonizing figure for Brandon and Phillip, as he is the one to suspect, discover, and expose their scheme. This is no surprise, as Rupert is first introduced as a publisher who "selects his books on the assumption that people not only can read but actually can think." Rupert reads situations just as much as books, however, which Hitchcock portrays through editing. For example, when Phillip lashes out at Brandon during the chicken story, Hitchcock utilizes one of the few cuts of the film to cut to Rupert standing in front of the bookcase as he turns his head and narrows his eyes, becoming aware that something strange is

going on. Hitchcock signals to the audience that Rupert is reading their discussion and trying to figure out why Phillip is lying, while the likes of Janet might just laugh about them being “so intense about an old, dead chicken.” Brandon finds Rupert “curious,” and Janet diminishes his interest in philosophy books to “Small print. Big words. No sales,” but as the most literate of the bunch, it is no surprise that it is Rupert who uncovers the truth about David Kentley’s murder.

Hitchcock prompts the audience to read just as much as Rupert, taking a few carefully curated opportunities throughout the film to emphasize Brandon and Phillip’s perversion of meaning. The monogrammed “D K” in David’s hat leads Rupert to suspect the awful truth about Brandon and Phillip, as well as informs the audience of Rupert’s suspicions. This moment is pivotal in Rupert’s uncovering of the murder, and its focus on letters attests to Hitchcock’s regard for reading. When Phillip stacks the first editions on top of the cassone after David’s murder, the only book title that the audience can make out is *The Complete Life* by John Erskine. The title relates to how David Kentley’s life is literally complete, as in finished, but it also ironically alludes to how his life is *incomplete*, as in cut short. The title may also refer to the book itself, which is complete in the sense that it is a finished work of literature, but also incomplete in the sense that its contents have been disregarded by Brandon and Phillip. In the context of Brandon and Phillip’s perverted space, the title of the book takes on meanings that are entirely unrelated to the original understanding. A similar instance happens when Rupert takes the rope out of his coat pocket and states, “You were right, Phillip. Those books were tied clumsily,” as a large neon sign that says “Storage” begins flashing outside the far-right window. The word “Storage” recalls the cassone and the books, whose contents are stripped of meaning and replaced with hollow representations of intellectual superiority. Additionally, the flashing words urge the audience to pay attention to words and their meanings, for it is the corruption of

words and their meanings that Rupert accuses Brandon of, of twisting his words “into a cold, logical excuse for [his] ugly murder.”

In *Rope*, Hitchcock indicates that reading and thinking critically are effective tools for exposing meaninglessness. Challenging and questioning thought, instead of merely subscribing to it, keeps what we value, such as words, in check. Rupert only realizes the nastiness of his superior being theory when he sees the physical result of his way of thought, which he achieves by way of reading throughout the film. When Rupert defiantly lifts the cover of the cassone to see David’s body, he sends the 16 first editions resting on top tumbling to the ground. In the final shot of the film, however, the camera pans out to show seven neatly fallen, unopened books in the immediate foreground. Given how forcefully Rupert opens the lid of the cassone, one would expect to see at least some of the books opened from the fall. Hitchcock clearly manipulates the scene so that the books remain closed, and as a result suggests that David’s murder is as hollow a result as an unopened book. By imbuing nearly every shot and most conversations in *Rope* with literature, Hitchcock draws attention to the importance of reading to combat the mere appearance of intellectualism and the subsequent violence done in its name. Hitchcock values reading and conscious analyzation so much so that he equates being neglectful of reading to being neglectful of the human experience. His characters and audience must be active readers of the situations and value systems around them, for if they aren’t, they risk becoming complacent, or, in the case of Brandon and Phillip, becoming completely corrupted.