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CHAPLIN

by Emily Sieger

Critics commonly treat the films of Charles Chaplin as a virtual biography of the Tramp, Charlie, that ends with MODERN TIMES, as he walks with the orphan girl down the road he had so often walked alone. Indeed, this happy ending is a wonderful place to say farewell to Charlie, for often before he had been left in uncertain or unhappy solitude. Although always ready for what lay beyond the next bend, the obstacles Chaplin placed in his way seemed to be getting larger. The entire course of Charlie's "life" was shaped by such conflicts between his resiliency and Chaplin's increasing sense of despair. This marvelous character, who was as gentle, innocent and kind as he was cruel, vulgar, and careless, was constantly being kicked in the rear by his creator. If Charlie was taught to feel true love in THE TRAMP, it was only so Chaplin could make him experience rejection; if he was taught the magic of dreaming in THE BANK, it was only to be brought to disillusionment. Yet once taught, Charlie could defy his creator and, dreaming of fauns and fairies in SUNNYSIDE, still wake up an ever-faithful Edna. Almost in spite of Chaplin, Charlie was able to shrug off his disappointments and retain his joy and freedom. While Chaplin made us laugh at Charlie's idiotic gallantries and silly attempts at conformity, Charlie made us laugh with him, as he need only tip his hat to make idiots of those who thought they could oppress him. We loved him, of course, because he made us laugh--and because he remained all that is both ridiculous and wonderful in man. It would be marvelous if we could forget the darker side of Charlie, if we could remember only the pure fun of Chaplin's early films, or the innocent joy of SUNNYSIDE, and finally the relative optimism of MODERN TIMES. It would be marvelous, but it would be neither correct nor honest. The films in which Charlie's despair was profound cannot be ignored, and the films which Chaplin made after MODERN TIMES cannot be discounted.

For Chaplin had more to say on the subject of Charlie. He does not finish his life in MODERN TIMES. Those who love Chaplin and his creation must, however reluctantly, face the Charlie of MONSIEUR VERDOUX, the bitterest of all of Chaplin's bitter films. Charlie's life had begun in simple joy and the ecstasy of freedom, but it ends, with MONSIEUR VERDOUX, in deep despair and a most terrifying view of human nature.

Many critics have seen parts of Charlie in the character of Henri Verdoux; yet none, it seems, is willing to see how much there really is. With any kind of knowledge of Chaplin's films, the only conclusion that can and must be reached is that Verdoux is not Charlie's cousin, uncle, brother, reincarnation, or mirror-image, but simply and horrifyingly, Charlie himself. The signs that point to Charlie are so numerous and so obvious that, even if unintended, they cannot be ignored or denigrated. Everything Verdoux does--every gesture, every mannerism, every action--proclaims him to be Charlie, but a Charlie with such hideous differences that make him as much Caliban as he had been Ariel.

Henri Verdoux and Charlie are both, of course, really Charles Chaplin the actor. Yet this similarity is trivial, for Chaplin never looked very much like Charlie, anyway. More important than the physical person of Chaplin is the way he chose to dress and act.

We are presented with a man who has curly hair and a mustache, dresses carefully in a vested suit, wears a hat, carries a cane. That is a description of both Charlie and Henri Verdoux. Does the fact that Verdoux's clothes happen to fit him perfectly while Charlie's were cast-offs make any real difference? Not at all, especially when we consider that Verdoux wears exactly the same style of clothes Charlie tried to wear. For Charlie, the hat and cane were symbols of attempted elegance and he was always very careful not to let go of either one. For Verdoux, the hat and cane seem to be the casual symbols of achieved elegance, yet he too is almost neurotically careful about them. When Verdoux has finally managed to convince Lydia to take her money out of the bank, despite his rush he cannot leave until he has looked for and found his hat amid his agitation. And during the scene in which Verdoux, attempting to drown Annabella, falls into the water, his last line is: "Where's my hat?"

The second striking similarity between Charlie and Verdoux is their love of flowers, particularly roses. From the earliest Keystone shorts through CITY LIGHTS (and beyond), the rose is, after the hat and the cane, the most significant unifying symbol of Chaplin's films. How many times did Charlie throw a rose at the feet of the girl he admired, then hide in shyness? How many times did a rose stand for all that Charlie could not say? How, in contrast and dreadful similarity, does Verdoux use flowers? We first see Verdoux in his rose garden. He too gives flowers to the woman he admires, but where Charlie gave to reveal a love he could not express, Verdoux gives to support a seduction he is quite able to articulate. Verdoux's seduction of Madame Grosnay ultimately succeeds not because of words but apparently because he keeps sending her flowers. The difference between Charlie and Verdoux thus becomes one not of methods, but of intentions and attitudes. Charlie's gestures were those of a child who acted never knowing or caring exactly what he was doing. Verdoux's gestures are those of a man who does know exactly what he is doing, as well as why and how--all three things which, in fact, Charlie never knew before he became Henri Verdoux.

Besides this repetition of the two most important physical symbols of Chaplin's films, there are an endless smaller ways in which Verdoux, a man who takes obvious pride in his charm, grace, and poise, reveals a more gauche, less secure Charlie in his past. The instances of seemingly incongruous slapstick--Verdoux falling out of a window or out of a boat--are one example. The scene in which Verdoux loses control and throws himself at Mme. Grosnay yet manages to keep his teacup perfectly level recalls many a sea voyage in which Charlie displayed similar balancing skill.

Charlie's coy, innocent, obsequious smile with which he attempted to appease angry wives, irate bosses, and nasty bullies, shows up on Verdoux in the boat scene where Annabella turns around and almost catches him pouring chloroform on his handkerchief. All these, which might seem to have little business being in MONSIEUR VERDOUX, actually have a clear purpose and meaning. Throughout the film, whenever Verdoux is not completely in control of himself and his situation, his carefully maintained facade of gentility and confidence cracks, however slightly, to reveal the Charlie inside.

If physical, gestural and sartorial similarities were all that existed between Charlie and Verdoux, it might still be possible to dismiss the case for their oneness. Yet much more remains. Accept Chaplin's films as a sort of biography and the question still arises: "What happens to Charlie after MODERN TIMES, or rather when he grows up?"

What was Charlie's situation at the end of MODERN TIMES? He was no longer alone and presumably he had found love and happiness. But since he was no longer alone, he was no longer free: he had a serious responsibility. Obviously, he and the orphan girl--who would undoubtedly become his wife--could not forever wander carelessly around, stealing their food where they could find it, living in broken-down shacks and pretending they were beautiful homes. Especially if there were any children. It is very apparent that Charlie, with a family to support, would have to settle down and find a job. The eternal tramp-child who had always aspired to membership in a society to which he could never adjust, but who could always behave as he pleased would now, in short, have to grow up. If society refused to accept him as he was, he would have to change himself, for Charlie's entire life had shown how little he was able to affect society. The creature whose non-conformity delighted us would have to conform.

Now consider what Chaplin tells us of Henri Verdoux's situation. He had worked in a bank for thirty years supporting his invalid wife and child. Charlie too had worked in banks before, and it is possible to imagine that the wife he acquired in MODERN TIMES might become an invalid, thus making his need to adjust even greater. After working faithfully for so long, Verdoux is the first to be let go when the depression comes. Imagine Charlie thinking that he had finally found a place in society, managing his quiet existence contentedly, though not gloriously--and then getting tossed out on his rear-end the first time society finds him in the way. Perhaps Charlie should have known from experience what would happen. But he wanted so much to belong that he could hardly be expected to foresee that were only waiting for the right opportunity to kick him out. For Charlie, that was undoubtedly the last straw. He had been driven mad once before, and it hadn't taken much--only a machine that could not accomodate individuals. This time all it took was the realization that he had never been needed or wanted at all. If he had forgotten all those kicks in the pants while he earned a small but happy living, he would avenge himself now and make a fortune. In Charlie's life this is the crucial point, the first moment that he succumbs to the evil he had fought all his life. If his wife suggests that they were happier when they were poor, that is the price Verdoux has paid to gamble with gaining good from evil, for the (false) security of using the money he gains to buy his house so "they can't they can't take it away" as they took everything else, including Charlie's soul.

Perhaps surprisingly, Verdoux's relations with women is another area that reveal his roots in Charlie. Who could seem to have more divergent attitudes toward women than Charlie and Henri Verdoux? Verdoux, who reveres "life" by protecting caterpillars and cats, doesn't believe in love and murders women for their money. Charlie would probably never have gone out of his way to avoid stepping on insects, but loved women with an idolatry that continually poised him on the brink of despair. Charlie was constantly being rejected by the women he admired. How many times can a man be rejected without coming either to believe himself unloveable or else women incapable of loving? If he is free from self-pity and has any kind of self-respect, he can only choose the latter. Is it too much to suggest that he must have come to hate them enough to be able to murder them coldly for their money? Can Verdoux's wife be free from what he must feel about women? In the discussion with the girl Verdoux picks up to try the poison, love is described as "what a mother feels for her children." Verdoux's love for his wife probably consists largely of pity for weakness that he must protect. How many times did Charlie mistake pity for love? Verdoux is making the same mistake he always made, though the recipient is different, and with results as tragic as ever. When Verdoux succumbs to cynicism about life and love, he must become incapable of love. When he pretends to feel or thinks he feels can only be pity and the shadow of what he once felt.

So Charlie, who had a family and was refused the means to support them, found illegal means which are the horrifyingly logical outcome of the way he had been treated. Charlie had been a trickster, a pixie, a child with the charm of an angel. He became a murderer, a monster, a man with the charm of the devil. Yet we admire and almost like Verdoux. In our interest and involvement in his actions, we forget the consequences of those actions. We cheer Verdoux as he

shakes the police off his track, somehow able to ignore that the way he does it is to murder the detective. Perhaps we still think this is Mack Sennett's Keystone world in which death is only the most hyberbolic expression of the wild violence that caused no more pain than a tickle. But it is not. This strangely attractive evil and casually irrevocable killing is a new and frightening dimension to Charlie's familiar conflict with the police and his relations with the world. Yet, it must never be denied that Charlie had always the potential to become Henri Verdoux and that with the course Chaplin set for his life, it was probably inevitable that he should.

For along with Charlie's great strength in maintaining his personal reality, he had very human weaknesses, very human mixtures of joy and sorrow, good and evil. Though Chaplin never abandoned Charlie to total despair before MONSIEUR VERDOUX, he was constantly putting him in danger of realizing his own inadequacies, and rescuing him with ending that at least twice (in THE VAGABOND and THE GOLD RUSH) conflicted so preposterously with what had come before that, though Charlie was saved, we were left in worse despair than a more appropriate, "unhappy" ending would have caused. Certainly Charlie was never purely good. He had a careless cruelty and opportunistically variable morality that, although it was marvelously childlike, was not excusable. Loving anything that caused chaos, he delighted in tripping people with his cane, throwing bricks, stealing hot dogs from babies and kicking children. Remember his delight in crunching Eric Campbell's gouty foot in THE CURE? Is it terribly different from his callousness about trying to murder Martha Raye in MONSIEUR VERDOUX?

One of Charlie's chief triumphs had been that he remained a figure essentially good despite his evils; and since he is, in a sense, a symbol of man, the same was true of mankind.

But the evil did exist and could not be ignored. Chaplin dealt tentatively with Charlie's good and evil in THE GREAT DICTATOR when he split Charlie into the barber, the figure of good, and Hynkel, a figure of evil; but tentatively because Chaplin seemed unaware that the message of hope the barber-as-Hynkel expounded was undermined by the suggestion of his being corrupted by the position of power in which he found himself. If Charlie had a kind of existence independent of his creator, in which he tried to remain comic while Chaplin pushed him towards an expression of his own increasingly embittered view of mankind, his very "life" came to depend on that independence. But Charlie is, after all, a creature of Chaplin's imagination and he could not forever maintain joy while his creator insisted on sorrow, nor good while he pushed him toward evil. By the time Chaplin subjected him to the trial of surviving MONSIEUR VERDOUX, Charlie no longer had the strength to kick away his disappointments nor the conviction to resist corruption. Chaplin had made him too complex, too human, too weak to do more than accept his fate, for the first time in his life. And as MONSIEUR VERDOUX is framed in death and filled with despair, the fate that Charlie had always fought and Verdoux accepts is never in doubt.

If any doubt remains, could anything tie Verdoux to Charlie more irrevocably than his end? MONSIEUR VERDOUX ends, as so many Chaplin films, with Charlie walking towards the horizon. But before, Charlie walked hopefully toward an unknown future of new adventures and potentially better days, and Charlie's future is no longer unknown. This road down which he now shuffles ends very shortly at the guillotine.

In the world he leaves behind, nearly all of the other characters are essentially worthless--either completely ineffectual, stupid and insipid, dull and stultified, or old, silly, and embittered. The only one who approaches Verdoux's spirit and vitality is Annabella, who is also amazingly crude, vulgar and obnoxious. The only one who approaches his significance is the girl, who doesn't even have his cynicism about the evil of the world. If the best of Verdoux's world is spirited boorishness and destructive opportunism, there is little wonder the charm and poise of Henri Verdoux are so seductive. And if vulgarity, which cares nothing for itself, and opportunism, which cares for nothing (and which by accepting evil and munitions manufacturers will help destroy the world), if these are all that can survive Verdoux, clearly nothing of worth remains.

Those characters which represent good are almost decadent in their ineffectuality. Verdoux's family is kept completely innocent of the burgeoning evil outside the garden walls and as a result, when it is forced out of seclusion into the world, it cannot with the evil it finds and is destroyed. The priest, for all his dignity and the ready answers to Verdoux's ironic blasphemies which suggest he has heard it all before, scarcely makes any real attempt to convince Verdoux to pray, perhaps because he realizes the uselessness of his efforts. Verdoux allows the priest the final gesture of praying for his soul both because he knows that praying is useless and because he appreciates the importance of gestures, especially final, futile ones--for Verdoux's tasting of rum will be no more than his last futile grasp at the life he has already given up.

Although it is only one facet of a complex work, accepting that Verdoux is Charlie begins to explain the film's profound emotional impact. It helps solve the singular feeling of both emptiness and triumph when Verdoux is executed. Verdoux commits suicide after his final meeting with the girl because only then does he understand what has happened to himself and to everyone else--all that was good is dead or dying

and all that remains is evil (or at the least, as in the case of Annabella, aesthetically appalling). For this understanding, Chaplin grants him Charlie's old triumphant ending. For us, Chaplin has no answer--for perhaps the first time in any of his films--to the questions he has constantly been raising about man's conflicting impulses toward good and evil. When they have wiped away their tears, those who have first realized out of whose ingenuous soul a murderer has grown may then proceed to see clearly the full implications of the absolute despair with which Chaplin ends MONSIEUR VERDOUX. ■