

# The Seventh Victim

USA | 1943 | 71 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Mark Robson
<b>Screenplay</b>	Charles O'Neal DeWitt Bodeen
<b>Photography</b>	Nicholas Musuraca
<b>Music</b>	Roy Webb

## Cast

<b>Doctor Louis Judd</b>	Tom Conway
<b>Jacqueline Gibson</b>	Jean Brooks
<b>Frances Fallon</b>	Isabel Jewell
<b>Mary Gibson</b>	Kim Hunter
<b>Natalie Cortez</b>	Evelyn Brent
<b>Jason Hoag, Poet</b>	Erford Gage

## In Brief

While very little in the way of horrific action takes place in *The Seventh Victim*, the film has a haunting, lyrical, overwhelming sense of melancholy and despair to it--death is looked upon as a sweet release from the oppression of a cold, meaningless existence. Kim Hunter makes her film debut as Mary Gibson, an orphan attending a gloomy Catholic boarding school. Informed by the nuns that her older sister, Jacqueline, has disappeared and stopped sending tuition money, Mary is forced to go to New York City and find her. With the help of Jacqueline's husband, Gregory, Mary discovers that her sister has fallen in with a group of satanists who meet in secret and virtually control the lives of their members.

No plot description can fully convey the uneasy sense of dread that pervades every frame of this film. Although Mark Robson, who made his directorial debut here, is no Jacques Tourneur, his direction is restrained and effective. Lewton ensured this by seeing to it that all the delicate nuances of mood and character were written into the screenplay. The film includes a number of unforgettable moments: including the film's final moment--without a doubt the bleakest ending to any film ever made in Hollywood.

The first of producer Val Lewton's films without director Jacques Tourneur at the helm essentially proves, as though there was any real doubt, that Lewton is the primary auteur of the string of Gothic horror B-movies he presided over. *The Seventh Victim*, despite the addition of director Mark Robson on his first Lewton project, picks up without interruption the shadowy atmosphere, tragic romanticism, and literary sensibility of the three Lewton/Tourneur masterworks that preceded it. It is a strange, unsettling film, not so much for its story as for the odd melange of tones and themes that it balances, sometimes awkwardly but always intriguingly. It is sometimes a noir-tinged mystery, complete with a smart-mouthed fedora-wearing detective, sometimes a creepy thriller about an underground cult of Satanists, sometimes a philosophical and poetic inquiry into the nature of creativity and the desire for life. The film's main thrust focuses on the young, innocent Mary (Kim Hunter), searching for her missing older sister Jacqueline (Jean Brooks). In the course of her quest, Mary falls in with Jacqueline's husband Gregory (Hugh Beaumont), her aloof psychiatrist Dr. Judd (Tom Conway), and the helpful poet Jason (Erford Gage) who falls in love with Mary as he joins the search.

Actually, though, Jacqueline's disappearance winds up being much less mysterious than it originally appeared; at times it seems like practically everyone who Mary runs into has seen Jacqueline only recently. This girl is both omnipresent and a ghost who haunts the film: she shows up briefly at the film's halfway point, wordlessly raising her fingers to her lips and then running away, before finally reappearing in the film's final act. Brooks is perfect for the role of the missing girl, and she brings a haunting gravity to her every appearance. With her straight bangs and severe black hair framing a delicate face, she's like a child dressing up for Halloween; her aura is both sinister and naïve. Her elusiveness only adds to her mystique. When she first appears to Mary, wide-eyed and unspeaking, she's like a lunatic holdover from the silent movies, her personality inscribed in her face and hairstyle, and in her deliberately exaggerated movements.

If the search for Jacqueline is the film's primary narrative, it is hardly the only subject that the filmmakers concern themselves with. It isn't even correct to say that Lewton and Robson make room for diversions and small asides, so much as they arrange the entire film around the principle of such diversions. There are numerous examples, such as the care that goes into establishing a local Italian restaurant as a central gathering point with several quickly sketched but compelling regulars, or the brief but clearly loving scenes at the school where Mary works, showing the children at play for no narrative purpose other than to create a light contrast to all the darkness. There is also, throughout the film, a running bit of business with a girl (Elizabeth Russell) living next door to Mary, who throughout the film is seen walking through the halls coughing. She seems like an extraneous character, just a bit of color on the sidelines of the plot, until at the end of the film she engages Jacqueline in a conversation, philosophically discussing mortality, illness, and what makes life worth living. It's a strangely moving moment, as surprising as it is beautiful, and the film's final image shows this previously anonymous woman dressing up for a night of fun, having decided to stop simply





waiting for death and go out and live, if only for a single night.

In a film that's barely over an hour long, such diversions quickly cease to be simple asides and soon irrevocably alter the film's entire character. The result is a film that often feels awkwardly paced, somehow off-kilter, because its horror/mystery plot keeps getting sidetracked into irrelevant but often interesting material. The film is somewhat unbalanced because it was originally intended to be an A-picture with a bigger budget and a longer running length. When the film was cut, several narrative scenes were hacked out, including presumably all of the material that might've explained the otherwise baffling romance that abruptly develops between Mary and Gregory. But Lewton seems to have made sure that all of the philosophical and non-narrative asides were preserved. This pacing is sometimes disruptive — as when Robson interrupts the climax of Jacqueline's confrontation with the Satanists for a pointless scene between Jason and Dr. Judd, resolving some unexplained business from their pasts — but more often the film's disjunctive storytelling is satisfying in its own peculiar way. It's hard to quibble about the often blunt editing or the uneasy transitions from one narrative beat to the next when the overall effect of the film is so haunting and strange.

As with all of Lewton's films, shadows and expressive camera angles enhance the eerie quality of the story, even when, as in this film, there is virtually no overt violence, let alone horror. The scene where the Satanists attempt to taunt and cajole Jacqueline into committing suicide is a case in point. The scene is shot with Jacqueline looking lost and small within an oppressively big armchair, with the cult members amassed as a threatening bulk on the other side of a table from her, looming over her. Between them, a wine glass sits on the table, seemingly glowing with significance, filled with poison for

Jacqueline to drink. As the night wears on and she still resists taking a drink, the shadows begin to cloak her face, wrapping around her and causing her jet coat and hair to blend into the darkness. Only her pale face continues to float in the black surroundings, along with the glass, reflecting light from some unseen source. It was for moments like this that Lewton staged entire films: beautiful dramas acted out in the dark, moral and philosophical conflicts between the urge to live and the knowledge of the evil and sadness that comes with life. Lewton was asked to deliver nothing more than a lurid slasher flick with an exploitative Satanist subtext, and instead he and Robson crafted a sensitive, potent film about the nature of good and evil, and the struggle to create happiness and light in a world of darkness.

- Ed Howard

## Tom Conway (1904 – 1967)

Conway was born to English parents as Thomas Charles Sanders in St. Petersburg, Russia; his younger brother was actor George Sanders, whom Conway strongly resembled, especially in his speaking voice. At the outbreak of the Revolution, the family moved back to England, where both brothers were educated at Brighton College. The brothers tossed a coin to decide which would change his surname to avoid any confusion with each other.

Conway is remembered today for playing "The Falcon" in ten of that series' entries, taking over from his brother in *The Falcon's Brother*, in which they both star. Conway also starred in three of film producer Val Lewton's horror films while a contract actor for RKO Pictures, twice playing Dr. Louis Judd in two otherwise unrelated films—*Cat People* (1942) and *The Seventh Victim* a year later—even though the character was killed in the first film. The third Val Lewton film in which he starred was *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). His screen career diminished in the 1950s, but he appeared in a number of English films, on radio, and on television. In 1951, Conway replaced Vincent Price as the star of the radio mystery series *The Saint*, taking on a role that his brother, Sanders, had played on film a decade earlier. In October, 1957, Conway performed as Max Collodi in Alfred Hitchcock Presents episode "The Glass Eye" to critical praise.

Despite making over \$1 million in his twenty-four year film career, Conway later struggled to make ends meet. Failing eyesight and prolonged bouts with alcohol took their toll on Conway in his last years. His second wife, Queenie Leonard divorced him in 1963, due to his drinking problem, and George Sanders also broke off all contact with him because of it. In September 1965, Tom briefly returned to the headlines when he was discovered living in a \$2-a-day room in a Venice, California flophouse. Gifts, contributions and offers of aid poured in - for a time. Conway, still standing tall and trim, his hair now white, peered owl-like through thick-lensed glasses at the newspaper cameras. His last years were marked with further visits to the hospital. It was there that former sister-in-law Zsa Zsa Gabor visited him one day and gave him \$200. "Tip the nurses a little bit so they'll be good to you," she told him. The following day, the hospital called her to say that Conway had left with the \$200, gone to his girlfriend's and died in her bed. Conway died from cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 62.

- wikipedia



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