

# ***The Americans:***

## **The Past and Subtext**

There's an episode of *The Americans* that I love called "The Oath," Season 1, Episode 12. Philip Jennings (Matthew Rhys), in addition to being an undercover KGB agent, has taken on the persona of a character named Clark. Clark had seduced and sweet-talked Martha, the secretary to the FBI boss, Frank Gaad (Richard Thomas), in order to gain access and information from her. But Martha is now at the point of wanting out of this relationship because Clark's not really available, and she feels like he has too many secrets.

In order to keep this covert situation going, Clark proposes to Martha. He basically says, "I do have secrets and I do have this other part of my life that I can't fully share with you, but I want to marry you so you can see how committed I am." And so Clark, who's really Philip, is marrying Martha (who has no idea that he's not even "Clark"). Because they're having a small ceremony in front of a justice of the peace and need witnesses, Philip's wife Elizabeth (Keri Russell) steps in, pretending to be his sister, wearing a frumpy wig and glasses. The KGB handler of both Elizabeth and Philip, Claudia (Margo Martindale), is also there as a witness, pretending to be Clark's mother.

[Philip, (masquerading as "Clark"), Martha, Claudia (posing as Clark's mother "Alexandra"), Elizabeth (as Clark's sister "Jennifer") and two other witnesses stand in the foyer of a church.]

PHILIP

Martha, Mr. And Mrs. Hanson, I'd like you to meet my mother, Alexandra, and my sister, Jennifer.

MARTHA

Is it okay if I hug you?

[Claudia accepts the hug.]

CLAUDIA (as Alexandra)

Oh, welcome to the family, Martha. You're exactly as Clark described.

MARTHA

Aww. Hi, there.

[Martha hugs Elizabeth as well.]

MARTHA

Nice to meet you.

ELIZABETH

Nice to meet you as well.

BILL

Hi. I'm Bill. This is my wife, Elaine.

MARTHA

Nice to meet you.

ELAINE

I can see the family resemblance.

CLAUDIA

That's what people say.

PHILIP

Yeah. Yeah, they do.

[The officiant, a clergyman, enters.]

CLERGYMAN

Clark Westerfeld and Martha Hanson? You ready?

PHILIP

Of course.

[Clark takes Martha's hand and they go into the church auditorium. Moments later...]

CLERGYMAN

An oath is both a statement for the present and a promise to the future. It is the means by which we humans tell each other, "I'm in this for the long haul." Martha Anne Hanson, Do you take this man, Clark Herbert Westerfeld, to be your husband and partner, in good times and bad, till death do you part?

MARTHA

Yes, I do.

CLERGYMAN

Clark Herbert Westerfeld, do you take this woman, Martha Anne Hanson, to be your wife and partner, in good times and bad, till death do you part?

PHILIP

I do.

CLERGYMAN

Please place the ring on the other's finger.

[They do so.]

CLERGYMAN

By the power vested in me by the state of Virginia, I pronounce you man and wife.

[Everyone hugs and congratulates them.]

ELIZABETH  
That was beautiful.

MARTHA  
Oh, thank you. Thank you.

[Later, Philip and Elizabeth stand in the foyer as the others chat inside.]

ELIZABETH  
(to Philip)  
Congratulations.

The scene is rich in subtext, because while Elizabeth/Keri Russell is watching her arranged-marriage-KGB-operative husband marry this woman to keep the ruse going, it stirs up a lot of emotion. She and Philip never really had a real marriage. And, over the years, even though they try to maintain this charade and façade of being a married couple, they do have real feelings for each other, and share a bed, a house and parental responsibilities. But in the scene, Elizabeth, gets very emotional while watching Philip marry another woman, even though it's all fake. Martha thinks Elizabeth's emotional because it's a wedding. But what we know as the audience and what Philip knows, is *why* she's getting emotional. And he's wondering, is this just Elizabeth doing a really great acting job, or is it something more?

Later in the episode, Elizabeth admits that seeing him marry this other woman made her feel very melancholy about their relationship, and wonder how much of what they've had has been real, and how much of it is not. We can see that from every character's point of view, there's a different agenda, a different emotion that comes up—in some cases, conflicting emotions all at the same time. And it's all based on the appearances of what this wedding ceremony is, versus reality.

As the audience, we know all the information. So we get to enjoy watching everything unfold, having full knowledge of all of the character dynamics. There's not only great subtext in the scene, but it's the subtext that's part of the sweet spot of the show, through every episode. These are characters with hidden identities and hidden agendas. In every scene, they have to play both the text of what they're pretending is really happening, and the reality of their ulterior motive and agenda.

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## Episode Cited

"The Oath," *The Americans*, written by Joshua Brand and Melissa James Gibson; DreamWorks Television/FX.