

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in De Sica's Films

## FRIENDSHIP

**Introduction** When society fails to protect vulnerable people, and family support is either insufficient or absent, friends often provide the necessary assistance. Friendships are formed between two boys (*Shoeshine*), between two girls (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*), between an old man and a young girl (*Umberto D*) and between men (*Bicycle Thieves*).

**Bicycle Thieves** Although family is the central theme of this film, a parallel theme is that of friendship, or support given by people outside the family. When Antonio's spirits are at their lowest point, when his bicycle has been stolen and he has no clue about how to find it, he turns to his friend, Baiocco. Too ashamed to tell Maria or Bruno what has happened, he knows that Baiocco, his burly, gregarious friend will not judge him harshly. More than that, Baiocco, who works as a municipal garbage collector, knows the lay of the land when it comes to street crime in the city. He is able to point Antonio to the flea-markets where stolen bicycles (among other things) are bought and sold. Not only that, Baiocco enlists a few co-workers to help Antonio and Bruno comb the stalls to find the missing bicycle. Another, very different, example of friendship is the solidarity shown by the thief's neighbours. When Antonio confronts the young man with the German army hat, his friends gather around and stand up for him. In the world depicted in the film, people cannot rely on government institutions, not even the police, or political parties to solve their problems. The church and the clairvoyants are useful, but more fundamental support comes from their families and their friends.

**Umberto D** The poignancy in the film is created by balancing this isolation with brief and infrequent moments of friendship. Most of these scenes of friendship involve Maria, the young maid in the rooming house where Umberto rents a room. She, too, is isolated. Living in Rome, far from her village, she has become pregnant. She can't tell her landlady (who will fire her) and she can't go back home ('they'll beat me'), so she confides in the kind Umberto. She looks after him like a daughter, fetching a thermometer and hot water, visiting him in hospital and bringing him food. By the end, she has become very attached to the old man, who also gives her some good advice about her complicated situation with the unknown father of her unborn child. In the end, as he steals away in the early hours, suitcase in hand, she is sad and asks in a wistful voice, 'Can't we see each now and then, Mr Umberto?' An even deeper affection is evident between the old man and his dog. Flike has become his family, his constant companion, his only enduring bond with another being and his only source of dignity. Umberto's relationship with Flike reveals that isolation is the other side of the friendship coin. Without Flike, Umberto would have nothing and would probably have ended his life earlier.

**A Garibaldian in the Convent** One way to view this film is as a study in female friendship. Mariella and Caterinetta grow up as neighbours, separated only by the width of a street, but also by three years in age and by a deep gulf in class. Mariella's family is wealthy, whereas Caterinetta's family boasts an aristocratic heritage. At first, the relationship between the two young girls is defined by this social divide between their families, which generates bickering and mild insults. This changes when the girls are taken out of the family context and meet as students in a convent. Here, too, at first, they sneer at each other, and their enmity is sowed even deeper by the gossipy Gertrude, but eventually they form a strong bond of friendship. The shift occurs when Caterinetta lies to protect Mariella from the anger of the Mother Superior by claiming that the romantic novel in her possession was hers (it actually belonged to Mariella). Mariella is grateful for this act of kindness, but even then two girls pretend they still dislike each other. Their bond is finally sealed by their shared love/respect for the wounded soldier (Amidei) who takes refuge in the convent. A hiccup occurs when Caterinetta, who had fancied Amidei, discovers that he loves Mariella. But when Amidei is threatened with capture by the Royalist soldiers and Mariella desponds, Caterinetta rises above her jealousy and helps her to save his life. Strengthened by their bond, both girls show tremendous courage in the end. And the film ends when they meet, now as old women and still strong friends.

**Shoeshine** The key relationship in this film is the friendship between the two boys, Giuseppe and Pasquale. We see them in the opening scene, delighting in their horse ride, and we see them at the end, with one crying over the other's dead body, and in between, their friendship is subjected to many crises. Pasquale is the older boy who treats Giuseppe as his younger brother, although Pasquale is himself an orphan and lives with Giuseppe's family. Their close bond has its first challenge when the two boys are separated and put in different cells. From there, it is easy to see how the prison and legal systems prise the friends farther and farther apart. When Pasquale is tricked into betraying Giuseppe's older brother (Attilio), he does so only because he can't bear to see his friend suffer. Later, Giuseppe has a hard time believing that Pasquale actually betrayed him and tries to patch up their argument. More treachery, involving their beloved horse, separates the two boys again, but when Giuseppe accidentally dies at the end, Pasquale weeps over him as if they were as close as they had been while riding horses in the opening scene.