

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Themes in Visconti's Films

# LOVE

**Introduction** Visconti's films explore love (and sexual desire) in a wide variety of forms, mostly negative. The danger of possessive love is evident in *Obsession*, his directorial debut, and in *The Innocent*. The precarious nature of innocent romance, which shifts with socio-economic circumstances, is a theme of *The Earth Trembles*. The sad situation of impossible homosexual love is the theme of *Death in Venice*.

**Obsession** The dominant theme of this film is the destructive nature of obsessive sexual desire. It seems that Visconti set out to attack the romanticised image of love as depicted in so many Italian films and novels. For instance, he juxtaposes Giuseppe's singing of love songs ('It's love that bears us toward heaven...') with a shot of Gino listening and being overcome with sexual passion. That passion leads him inside the restaurant, where he meets Giovanna, who says he's built 'like a horse.' They flirt and, when Giuseppe leaves, engage in love-making that is more animal lust than tender affection. The animal in heat image is also reinforced by the repeated references to the hot weather and the cats howling outside. Giovanna also describes her marital sex as 'dirty' and her husband's hand on her as 'fat'. The carnal nature of the love between the two main characters is later highlighted by the gentle way that Gino goes to bed with Anita, a casual acquaintance. The danger of obsessive desire is also driven home during the scene of the amateur singing contest. The arias we hear all speak of seduction, betrayal and deception, while at the same time we watch as Gino and Giovanna rekindle their lust for each other. She needs him, desperately, to lift her out of her unhappy, loveless marriage, and he cannot shake off the sexual desire that binds him to her. They are both doomed by their obsessive love, which began with a lie (Giovanna telling her husband that Gino had not paid) and developed into a noose around both their necks.

**The Earth Trembles** The political and economic forces highlighted in the film also shape the lives of the main characters, especially their love life. There are three distinct pairs of lovers or would-be lovers, whose romantic hopes are affected by the events depicted in the film. First, there is Antonio, who is love with Nedda, who returns his affection. As soon as Antonio gets the mortgage money and buys a boat, he floats in the air with visions of a marriage and happy future. That is all ruined by the tragic loss of boat and house, plus Antonio's decline into drink. Second, Mara and Nicola are also lovers and would have been planning marriage except that Nicola is slightly lower status and little money; any hope of love overcoming adversity is quelled by the complete loss of money in Mara's family. And third, there is the budding romance of Lucia and the policeman, who appears as her prince charming. He sweet talks her, and she blushes; he offers a silk scarf, which she must refuse, but only out of propriety. In a later scene, we watch as Lucia steals a look at a glittering necklace given to her (we assume) by the policeman. We wonder what he asked for in return. Using these three cases to enter into the inner lives of his characters, Visconti raises his story above the level of political propaganda.

**The Innocent** Within its broad theme of a dysfunctional society, the film pinpoints more specific problems, one being the strict control of sexuality within marriage. As Tullio explains to Guiliana, after some years of marriage, 'love is replaced by affection, friendship, common interests' And when his sexual desire for her is rekindled by jealousy, he explains his renewed passion by saying, 'You've been my wife, my sister, but never my lover.' Tullio is free, more or less, to take a lover, but Guiliana is constrained by her vow at the altar, a 'promise made to God.' At the same time, Tullio is angry that her bastard son will bear his family's name, something that should only be handed down through marriage. It is also significant that Teresa is the only truly 'free' actor because she is no longer married. Divorce had been legalised in Italy only in 1970, a few years before the film was made.

**Death in Venice** While focusing on a dying man's last days, this film highlights his desire or, more accurately, his pursuit of an impossible desire. Again, this theme exists on two levels: the aesthetic and the physical. Auschenbach's desire to achieve purity in art is paired with his desire to experience perfection in the world of the senses. The conflict between these two objectives is the subject of the heated discussions (shown in flashbacks) between the composer and his friend, Alfred. Auschenbach

believes that beauty is achieved through the spirit and not the senses. However, he struggles to realise that ideal, and, in one flashback, his 'beautiful' music is booed by the audience. His pursuit of Tadzio is another struggle. The boy is clearly flesh, as revealed by his bathing suit, but Auschenbach never has any direct physical contact with him. Instead, he contemplates the boy, as he might contemplate a painting. Perhaps there is a balance to be had between the spirit and the flesh, as Alfred once suggests. But Auschenbach's pursuit of perfection, whether spiritual or physical, fails every time. That is clearly the message of the final shot, when he stretches out a hand toward Tadzio, who remains distant and unobtainable.