

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Themes in Visconti's Films

# FAMILY

**Introduction** Before the fundamental social changes of the 1960s and later, the Italian working-class family was typically large and provided an individual with both strength and conflict. That dual-nature of the working-class family is dramatised in *Rocco and His Brothers* and in *The Earth Trembles*. When he came to make *Conversation Piece* in 1975, however, Visconti chose a main character who had no family and then found that he acquired one by mistake.

**Rocco and His Brothers** As the title announces, this is a story about a family, comprised of five brothers and a widowed mother. Although the family is poor, they have the strength of familial cohesion. We see how close they are on the morning when they wake up and see snow—which means work. They all bustle around in cramped rooms, dressing, eating and laughing with each other before setting out. Leading this coordinated effort is Rosaria, the matriarch, who calls herself the 'hand with five fingers' (sons). In the early sections of the film, the family survives the hardships of city life by pulling together. But even at the beginning, cracks appear. Vincenzo, the oldest, has already separated himself by becoming engaged to a Milanese girl, and he doesn't wear traditional mourning clothes to honour his dead father. Soon, Nadia, the femme fatale, enters the family home and Simone is caught in her wicked web. The familial fabric begins to fray and is slowly torn apart so that, eventually, only *Ciro* and little *Luca* are living with *mamma*. Brother turns on brother, nearly killing each other in a fist-fight and betraying each other to the police. The original family cohesion has been smashed, but it remains a dream, inspiring *Rocco* to say that he wants to return to the family roots in the south. Moments later, when *Simone* confesses to murder, the family start to scream and accuse each other. Again, *Rocco* sums it up: 'We're no longer in God's grace. We've become our own enemies.' The family that began the film has vanished. *Vincenzo* is living apart with his own family. *Simone* is a murderer and 'lives with a whore'. *Rocco* is about to sign a contract that will take him to far away place. *Ciro* is about to marry and move out. This once-cohesive southern family has been reduced to little *Luca* and his unhappy mother.

**The Earth Trembles** As the film makes clear, the wholesalers are not the only enemy. There is also the older generation of the fishermen community who are opposed to change. This generational conflict is dramatized primarily within the *Valestro* family, between *Antonio* and his grandfather. When *Antonio* first outlines his plan to the family, the 70-year-old grandfather counsels his grandsons to listen to their elders. 'Strength of youth, wisdom of age,' he says, quoting a proverb. Again, after the boat is destroyed, and *Antonio* proposes to mortgage the house, the old man counsels caution, reminding him that such a debt is dangerous. He proves right in the end, which prompts another old man to say, 'The poor always pay.' The inbred passivity of the older generation is then summed up when the grandfather cites another proverb: 'Change old for new, you will rue.' His conservative outlook is the result of centuries of suffering and adapting to survive against a bitter sea and an unjust economic situation. If you can't win over the older generation, the young rebels will never succeed.

**Conversation Piece** An important theme in this film is the importance of family. The professor has none, only memories of a wife and mother, and a housekeeper. He has no pet, either, until the strangers present him with a bird that proves to be as raucous as themselves. The first outline of a family appears with the group of four strangers, who form a kind of kin group—mother, daughter and lovers. The whole arc of the story is to move from the professor as a lonely old man to a person who has a makeshift family. In one of lighter scenes, *Lietta* suggests that he could adopt *Konrad* as his son, and by extension the whole group of four as a family. This is, in effect, what happens. In a valediction at the end of the film, the professor speaks of his impending death (though he looks quite robust). Addressing the foursome, he says that they have been 'impossible tenants' but now he thinks of them as his 'family.' Then, surveying the paintings on the wall that show family groups (the genre of 'conversation piece'), he says solemnly, 'Your presence upstairs woke me up again, roughly, from a very deep sleep.' The professor and his 'guests' may be incompatible in social and cultural terms, and they rarely understand each other, but their proximity, arguments and shared dramas, have all shaped them all into a fictional family. For the poor

professor, these awful people are the only family he has