

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Cabiria (in Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, 1957) stable, happy

Overview Released in 1957, *Nights of Cabiria* rings in themes and moods familiar from the growing opus of this filmmaker, who once observed that he always made the same film. This film features a hard luck kid, a prostitute from the inner darkness of post-war Rome, and her adventures with complex high rollers, abusive and cynical boyfriends, scenarios of the Eternal City and the salvation it promises, and even a saintly figure carrying out nocturnal rounds, in support of the city's poorest. In the course of some rich nights in her hand to mouth existence, she reminds us of the fake glitter of the nocturnal city, the sadnesses and distortions of personality that ride its streets, and the spirit of sassy joy which preserves the right to survive it all.

Character Cabiria (played by Giulietta Masina, the Gelsomina of *La Strada*, and incidentally Fellini's wife) is a prostitute living off her boyfriends and her nocturnal earnings, in the lowest streets of Rome. When we first see her she is being robbed by her fleeing boyfriend, who has just pushed her into the river, where she is close to being drowned. (Little boys pull her out.) When we last see her she is being robbed by a new boyfriend, who has deceived her into thinking he loves her. She survives both near fatal experiences, thanks to her resilience and her joie de vivre. Stable and happy she remains, though sorely tested, and in the end, as a person of faith and trust, she emerges victor over her setbacks.

Parallels The theme of the irrepressible 'girl of the streets,' 'flower-girl,' or loveable whore is of constant appeal, for the wide register of basic human feelings it arouses: sympathy, humor, faith in the indomitably human. An early example of this theme in English literature is the film *Pygmalion* (released 1938), based on the play by George Bernard Shaw, and dramatizing the efforts of a donnish Professor of Phonetics, to train a street girl to speak the Queen's English. The film, *Never on Sunday* (1960), starred the sexy but street smart actress Melina Mercouri, who knew how to live her sensuous life, and made it a point to come out on top of her various opponents. *Sweet Charity* (film release 1969) was written by Neil Simon, on the model of Fellini's *Cabiria*, and gives us an American template for the inwardly happy street walker of our culture.

Illustrative moments

Resilient

We first meet Cabiria as she barely escapes drowning, then returns to her small house, furious with her robber boyfriend. She does not sulk that long. Soon we see her out on the streets with her girlfriends, hustling. Open to what comes, she gets herself picked up by a rich movie director, who takes her home for the night. While he ends up sleeping with his own girl, whom he fought with earlier, the director opens his mansion to Cabiria, who wanders in excited absorption through the corridors of the rich and famous.

Credent Cabiria is a believing Catholic—takes buoyancy and confidence from this belief—and on a central occasion follows a crowd of devotees, through the streets of Rome, to an altar where the faithful are expressing their devotion to the Virgin Mary. Timidly at first, then more ardently, Cabiria commits herself to the passionate mood of the moment, which sweeps her up, brings praises of belief from her. We see the intensity of her search for meaning, and the distinctive way it gives her pleasure. She is open to whatever raises her spirits and gives her a sense of the value of her life.

Joyful Cabiria's openness to goodness and purity, even in the midst of her own bottom feeding career life, takes a fascinating turn when she meets a saintly stranger, out in the fields beyond the city, who is taking a regular consignment (his own initiative) of foodstuffs, to residents

of the caves outside the city. These marginalized semi-homeless have made their living in the sides of hills, and are pitifully grateful to the salvation-bringing gent, whom Cabiria follows on his rounds, astonished by the power of goodness, and made joyful by it. This mystery man remains with her, as part of her inner life-power.

Triumphant At the end of the film Cabiria is once again betrayed by a boyfriend, this time for all the money she has in the world, her only security. She returns toward the city alone, along the path she had taken through the woods with her guy, shortly before he abandoned her. Out of the thickets, before her, emerges a small but growing band of high spirited young people, riding bikes, singing, horsing around, and as Cabiria joins them her spirits rise and she melts into the joviality of the scene, with the same kind of 'going beyond it all' she had shown at the beginning of the film, when she overcame her near drowning to hit the streets.

Discussion questions

Do we assume, at the end of the film, that Cabiria has learned her lesson, discovered why she keeps being taken, or is she impervious to that kind of learning, and true to her own basic optimism and hope?

Fellini writes regularly about the poorest of the poor in Italy. Is he a social critic? A friend of the marginalized? Is there any political tenor to Fellini's thinking?

What seems to be Fellini's own attitude toward the 'religious scenes' he introduces in *Cabiria*? Is he mocking? Credent? Or simply nodding toward the obvious psychological health to be derived from attributing meaning to your world?