

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Gelsomina (in Fellini's *La Strada*) agreeable/ trusting

Overview *La Strada* (1969) builds on poverty and poetry equally. We open on Gelsomina's home on the outskirts of a totally anonymous Italian city, and see with her eyes that even being purchased by a harsh and life-beaten roadside circus hack must be better than continuing to live as she does. Gelsomina is whored, or wifed, to Zampano, traveling with him from circus to circus, and learning elementary tricks—drumming, bell ringing, gentle circus barking—with which to draw public attention. In the end Gelsomina abandons her life, she mourns for everything, and her death, eaten up by the lonely shadow of the road, is a foregone conclusion.

Character **Gelsomina** is richly hued, for a child of poverty and pure survival; gentle and tough at the same time. She passes from one man to another—Zampano to the Fool—with little guidance or love. If there is a passageway, through which she can see any light of meaning, it will come from her attentiveness to Il Matto, The Fool. This happy go lucky, and cynical high wire walker tells her his philosophy of life, that everyone's life has a purpose, and Gelsomina listens to him, as she does to the nun who crosses her path, especially when the nun tells her that they two, these two women, have comparable paths. Gelsomina has neither the strength nor inner vision, to make a reality of that prediction, but her tenacious and occasionally antic personality keeps her hanging in there, until the global condition of absolute indifference to her prevails. She remains in our minds, though, as the presence of magic where life is at its most unsparing.

Parallels Gelsomina appears from the start as an ingénue, who knows little about life beyond her immediate impoverished life, and who is taken without discussion by Zampano. The almost unrelieved brutality, to which she is subjected from early on, on the road, mirrors itself in repeated film efforts of our time. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1983) was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985, and dwells in painful detail on the chauvinism, sexual sadism, incest to which Celia, an Afro American woman, is subjected by male abuse in the first forty years of this century. *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) presents in thriller form the nastiness imposed on a wife whose brutally abusive husband gives way to a lethal obsessive-compulsive disorder. Jennifer Lopez' film, *Enough* (2002), takes off from the fate of a cute waitress who is picked up and soon married by a handsome middle class gent, who shares with Zampano one thing, thoughtless narcissism and reckless indifference to his woman.

Illustrative moments

Innocent Gelsomina is sold to Zampano, just as her sister (now dead) had been sold. We see the young lady, with her mom and surrounding family, chattering nervously as Zampano waits on the sidelines, ready to leave with his prey. The film's most touching moment may well be the shots of Gelsomina waving to her family from the back of Zampano's rickety van, as she (presumably) leaves them forever. She knows neither her destination nor her expected role, only that her mother is now substantially richer, with the money that Zampano has paid for her.

Antic Shortly after departing with Zampano, on their search for roadside circus audiences, Gelsomina finds herself conscripted to beat the tambourine and announce the Zampano act—breaking steel bands with his pectoral muscles—to the scruffy gathering of locals who have come out to watch. Gelsomina, in a rare antic mood, jazzes up her performance, hops and skips, and for a short while shows us the lively person usually buried inside her. Her personality flares into a joyful moment of life, and yet we know that with the hard bitten and abusive Zampano beside her, she will never flower.

Buoyed For a short time, after she has linked up with The Fool, an inspiring circus high walker, Gelsomina is stimulated to think of possibilities for her life. The Fool urges her to think that every life has a purpose. The nun urges her to think that she, Gelsomina, is also on a kind of sacred path. We see faint rays of hope and joy in Gelsomina, as we had seen them when she first joined Zampano. But her life resources are too fragile, and when Zampano returns from prison, and carries her off with him, she is on a downward path from which she will never recover.

Remembered Never is Gelsomina more present to us than in the moments when her death and fading away are recalled, from five years earlier, by a woman hanging out her laundry. Zampano, who has ultimately abandoned Gelsomina, has asked the laundry-hanging woman for news of his long lost 'wife,' and upon hearing this distant account of Gelsomina's death, he is overwhelmed by what he has lost, and killed. He buries himself, weeping, in the sand on the shore, and gives his life to her memory. Gelsomina pulses at the center of the film, as her death is recalled, and she becomes fully alive again.

Discussion questions

Is the desolate landscape of *La Strada* a commentary on the realities of modern desolation, or is it a mythological-poetic landscape, which reflects only Fellini's mind?

The auteur film makers of the mid 20th century were sure of their filmic imaginations, as were their literary contemporaries like Mann and Proust. Can you see traits in common to these two types of imagination, filmic and literary?

Is narrative or character more determinant in shaping *La Strada*? Is any character 'developed' or multi-sided? Are there any enriching complexities in the development of the narrative?

