

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in De Sica's Films

LOSS

Introduction As we can see from the themes described above, many characters in De Sica's films suffer from loss, loss of money, jobs and homes. An equally poignant in three very different films is the loss of youth. The hopes of the young can be ruined by a mixture of political and characters in personal factors (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), or by an indifferent adult society (*Shoeshine*) or by death (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*). Those who suffer this loss can come from any strata of society, from the wealthy on an estate to waifs on the street.

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis While the plot of this late film focuses on the rise of fascism, a deeper psychological theme is the loss of youth. Depicting events that occurred three decades before it was made, the film is bathed in the soft colours of nostalgia. The key relationship between Giorgio and Micol is further distanced in time through the use of flashbacks into their teenage years. All the characters experience loss of one kind or another. For Giorgio, it is the loss of his childhood infatuation with Micol, which began in fairy tale fashion when he glimpsed the golden-haired damsel kept behind castle walls. Young love is transient and so it proves for Giorgio when Micol is attracted to a stranger. She doesn't want to remain a girl any more; she wants to feel herself to be a woman. Giorgio also loses his childhood friend Alberto to illness and his more recent friend Giampiero to gunfire. Micol wants to grow up and leave the garden of her youth. She does lose her sexual innocence but still retreats into her pre-fascist youth through her memories, which are visualised on screen. It is Giorgio's father who articulates the film's underlying elegy for the past when he comforts his son for the loss of Micol's love. 'In order to really understand the world,' he says, 'you must die at least once. So, it's better to die young, when there's time to recover and live again.' As a middle-aged man, he regrets the mistakes he and his generation made because now he has no time to recover. This theme of loss—of love, innocence and youth—is captured brilliantly by the tennis party, which both begins and ends the story. Those young and beautiful faces symbolise a carefree time before the horrors of fascism and war ruined their hopes.

Shoeshine An important theme of the film is the destruction of the dreams of youth. That dream is made flesh in the opening scene when the two boys experience pure joy as they gallop along on horses. They are thrilled to be so free, to be able to move so effortlessly and to be close to such a beautiful animal. When the ride is over, they are still ecstatic and run toward each other, claiming that the horse called Bersagliere ('Sharp-shooter') is the 'best in the world.' Their dream to own the horse comes true when they buy it and ride triumphantly down the street like military heroes on parade. Even in prison, their first thoughts are for their horse, not Giuseppe's family. That horse is the only thing in their world that is not broken, sullied or compromised. And at the very end, when their entanglements in crime and prison lead to one boy accidentally killing the other, the horse trots away and out of sight: the dream that appeared in the first scene has been destroyed. The horse even figures prominently in the boy's trial. A lawyer points out that 'a Roman Emperor made his horse a senator...so why be surprised when two poor kids put all their love in a horse?' Later, in a fiery speech, he says, 'This [love of a horse] is no crime. If you think they are guilty, then this court must condemn all of us, too, the people who in pursuit of our passions abandon our children to fend for themselves.' In that speech, De Sica seems to express his own views.

A Garibaldian in the Convent

In this very early film, the theme of loss is found more in the storytelling technique than in the story itself. While the plot centres on a love triangle, involving two young convent girls and a soldier, it is told by one of those girls, Caterinetta, when she is an old lady. Introducing her tale to her granddaughters, she describes it 'as a beautiful love story.' Thus, the entire film is suffused with the remembrance of love, the recollection of tender feelings that were frustrated and ended in tragedy for the soldier and for the other girl whom he loved. The old lady, who also loved the soldier but was not his choice, weeps at the end when she tells her granddaughters that the soldier died before he could marry his fiancé, the other girl.

Everything is made material when she shows them the soldier's uniform, with the hole made by the lethal bullet. The film ends when the fiancé, Mariella, now also a grandmother, enters the room and joins Caterinetta. Two old ladies can now reminisce about the loss of love in their past.