

The Characters in Visconti's Films

Contents

Open or closed to new experiences
Agreeable or Disagreeable in social Relations
Conscientious or Unconscientious
Rational or Emotional in their psychological world

1. Open

a) Lietta (*Conversation Piece*) Daughter of the arrogant Bianca, Lietta displays some of her mother's disagreeable qualities. She can be manipulative and deceptive, but she is sweeter, less hardened and more congenial than the Marquise. Throughout the story, she plays the part of a go-between who soothes the ruffled feathers of the professor.

b) Gino (*Obsession*) Gino is a likable chap. Young, handsome and well-built, he has no obligations and no worries. He lives like a tramp, but he is, in fact, a semi-skilled labourer who moves from place to place, picking up jobs. Although he loves his life on the open road, he falls desperately in love with Giovanna. He is a dreamer, and he shows tenderness, too, but he is a doomed man.

c) Spaniard (*Obsession*) The Spaniard, so-called because he spent years in Spain, is a street-performer, who is a soulmate to Gino. Like him, he likes life on the open road, working here and there and moving on when it suits him. Consistent with that life-style, he is generous with his money and helps out strangers. He also has a philosophical streak to him, though it baffles Gino. He is a character not found in the source novel and was invented by the director to symbolise Gino's dream of a life without attachments in opposition to the settled life represented by Giovanna.

d) Rocco (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Rocco is the most complicated of the brothers. He is naïve and innocent at the beginning, a young man who becomes a soldier and finds love with Nadia. In some ways, he is a Christ-like figure who endures suffering as a sacrifice for others. He is person with empathy, but his loyalty to his family can also make him insensitive to others. In the end, Rocco is a disillusioned saint, as morally damaged as Simone.

e) Lucia (*The Earth Trembles*) Dark-haired and slim, Lucia is perhaps in her mid-teens. She is a hard worker, helping her mother and older sister with domestic chores. As a young girl, though, she has dreams that momentarily set her free from the misery all around her.

f) Tancredi (*The Leopard*) Tancredi is the handsome young nephew of Don Fabrizio, the prince. As such, his youth is set in direct contrast with the aging and experienced uncle. He is the symbol of the future, a man who becomes a politician in the new unified government in Turin. While he has the vigour of youth, he is also sharp in his understanding of the changing times. Ambitious and opportunistic, he is difficult to like but nevertheless wins the affection of a beautiful woman

2. Closed

a) Professor (*Conversation Piece*) The unnamed professor is a retired and aging man who prefers paintings to people. Inside his luxurious bunker, he has cut himself off from the chaos of the outside world, until it invades his privacy and he finds it not as distasteful as he feared. We know little about his past except that his marriage failed, that he was in the war and was a scientist who got disillusioned with progress and technology. Although serene on the outside, his inner emotions do erupt from time to time. He is polite, accommodating and considerate, yet he remains an enigma.

b) Tullio (*The Innocent*) Tullio is a wealthy, self-indulgent and egotistical aristocrat. His arrogance in his wilful mistreatment of his wife is unforgivable, but, to his credit, he is a liberal and an atheist in a deeply religious Italy in the 1890s. He strains our sympathy by his frequent bouts of tear-stained self-pity, and yet, it is possible to see him as a victim of the world around him. When his love for his wife is rekindled, albeit by jealousy, we almost feel that he has recovered his humanity. Nothing, however, can forgive his unbearable act of cruelty at the end.

c) Don Fabrizio (*The Leopard*) Don Fabrizio is an old man and a member of an old ruling class. He has great pride in his family history and the history of Sicily, but that does not prevent him from understanding and, to a limited extent, accepting the changes happening all around him. He is a liberal-minded and scientifically-orientated noble, who is candid and honest with everyone. Dignified, handsome and with a manly head of hair, he is the leopard.

3. Agreeable

a) Tazio (*Death in Venice*) Tazio is almost as enigmatic as Auschenbach, especially as he is given no backstory at all. He is a young boy, one of four children brought to the seaside by their mother and governess. The family are Polish but speak French, and perhaps English, too. But Tazio says little beyond a few words to his young friends. He is a mute character, who communicates through looks and actions.

b) Vincenzo (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Vincenzo, who was once a good boxer, is the oldest son and the one who settled first in Milan. He is a responsible person, who takes care of his family while also devoting himself to his fiancé, later his wife and their young baby. After the first segment of the story, carrying his name, he fades out of the picture simply because he has set up a separate household.

c) Cola (*The Earth Trembles*) The second brother, in terms of age, is Cola. Although he hangs back a little, letting Antonio lead the family, he is loyal to his brother and affectionate toward everyone. He is a little less cautious than Antonio, and, when provoked, he lashes out in anger. Precisely because he is not the oldest brother, he has the freedom to leave the family and seek his fortune abroad.

d) Angelica (*The Leopard*) Angelica is a young and ravishingly beautiful woman. As the daughter of the wealthy mayor, she commands a dowry that convinces Don Fabrizio that she is a suitable wife for Tancredi. Beyond her family wealth, she is also a spirited and intelligent young woman, someone who would be a suitable hostess at a party in Vienna or Paris. Beneath the splendid surface, she is also a modest person, sincere in her feelings and gracious in her speech.

4. Disagreeable

a) Mayor (*The Leopard*) Don Calogero, the mayor, is the opposite of his pleasing daughter. The mayor is an ambitious man who rose in stature from peasant stock to become a figure of respect. He is obsequious to the prince and his family, bowing and cringing before them, unaware that he is being laughed at by his betters. The mayor takes great pleasure in the office he has gained and he has great pride in the wealth he has amassed, some of it, apparently, by devious means.

5. Conscientious

a) Ciro (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Ciro is a less important figure than Simone and Rocco. More like Vincenzo, he adapts to his new environment, finds a job and gets engaged to a local girl. He is more level-headed than his brothers and tries to avoid problems. At the same time, he is devoted to his family and is torn apart by Simone's behaviour. But his sense of justice is stronger than his loyalty to his brother.

b) Antonio (*The Earth Trembles*) Antonio is the central figure in the story. The initial success and then final defeat are both his. We know little of his background, before the story begins, except that he served in the army on the mainland, which might explain why he is more independent-minded than the other fishermen. Whatever the reason, he is a courageous young man, prepared to fight against the exploitation by the boat-owners and against the passivity in his own family and community. He is certainly an intelligent and proud young man, who shows affection to his younger brothers. Even in defeat, he shows dignity.

c) Mara (*The Earth Trembles*) Although only a few years older than her sister Lucia, Mara is more like a junior mother in the family. She is not as pretty as her younger sister, but she is also more cautious and pragmatic by nature. She has imbibed the values of her community, primarily those of personal modesty and resignation to one's fate.

d) Giuliana (*The Innocent*) As the neglected wife in a classic love triangle, and as a woman who is patient and loyal to her cheating husband, Giuliana has our sympathy from the outset. She is also a deeply religious person, who judges herself by the moral precepts of the church. Underneath

this mistreated and conventional woman, though, we also see strength and passion. She suffers a great deal, but she has reserves that ameliorate her pain.

6. Unconscientious

a) Konrad (*Conversation Piece*) Konrad is a young man who was once active in radical student politics and is now a professional gigolo. He considers himself a failure and appears to be at war with the world and everyone in it. Like the professor, with whom he shares an appreciation of art, Konrad is mysterious. At the end, it seems that he is still involved in underground radical politics, even spying on Bianca's fascist husband. He does open up to the professor, revealing some secrets of his past, but his death is unexplained.

b) Bianca (*Conversation Piece*) Bianca is a selfish and wealthy socialite, convinced that the world revolves around her and her needs. She pays a lot to keep Konrad as her toy boy, jets off to Paris and London on a whim and insults anyone who crosses her path. She is a portrait of decadent elegance and unearned arrogance, easy to dislike but hard to dismiss.

c) Giovanna (*Obsession*) Giovanna is a young woman who married for security rather than love. She feels she deserves more than to be a cook and help manage a petrol station owned by her old and unattractive husband. In fact, she is desperately unhappy, ready to do whatever it takes to change her life. At the same time, she is practical and will not return to a life of poverty. Of all the figures in the film, she is most tragic since her desire to be free leads to her death.

d) Simone (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Simone is a weak character who falls prey to the fleshpots of the big city. Both Rocco and Luca speak of him as a changed person, who forgot the good 'roots' of his upbringing in southern Italy. Once ensnared by the delightful Nadia, he is on a downward spiral of deceit, betrayal and murder. As a tough boxer, he has the physical strength to inflict pain on others, and, when fuelled by insane jealousy and hate, this is what he does.

e) Nadia (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Nadia is another complex character in this film. She is certainly the femme fatale who contributes to the ruin of Simone and, by extension, the whole family. She is a prostitute, she is flighty and she changes lovers like a new dress. So, it is easy to dislike her, but she is also an object of our sympathy. She does what many 'poor girls' do to make money, and she appears genuinely in love with Rocco, who gave her courage to believe in herself. She is also candid and confronts reality. She certainly does not deserve her tragic death.

7. Emotional

a) Auschenbach (*Death in Venice*) Gustav von Auschenbach is a German composer of classical music, or at least he was one. Through flashbacks, we know that he was married and had a daughter who died. We also see that he is an intense man, dedicated to his ideals of purity and beauty. In the present, he is ill and lonely, but derives pleasure by watching a beautiful young boy, who returns his glances.

b) Giuseppe (*Obsession*) Giuseppe is a barrel of a man, who laughs with his big belly. Older than his wife, he likes to control her, though he remains wilfully ignorant of her desire to leave him. He is outgoing and, after some initial suspicion, strikes up a friendship with Gino. Although likable, especially to men, one can appreciate why Giovanna is so unhappy with her marriage to him.

c) Rosaria (*Rocco and His Brothers*) Rosaria is a strong character, a grieving widow and a matriarchal support for her sons. She is a traditional woman from southern Italy, a pious Catholic and a social conservative, who is quick to condemn Nadia as a 'loose woman'. Rosaria is a proud woman who stands up for herself and her family, but she is also a woman with deep regrets.

8. Rational

a) Teresa (*The Innocent*) Teresa is the polar opposite of Giuliana, her love rival in this story. Most important, she is a widow and therefore a 'free' woman. More than that, she is haughty, wilful and seductive. She is also intelligent, able to articulate the complexities of the social world that controls her, Tullio and Giuliana. With her cold, austere personality, she is difficult to like, but we can also understand that she is shaped by social norms.