

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Rossellini's Films

LOVE

Introduction Psychological issues in Rossellini's films are often concentrated in the relationship between the central characters. An obvious example is love in the film with that title, while others include the damaged marriage in *Journey to Italy* and the variety of odd friendships in *Paisan*. Of course, nearly every one of his films has a key relationship, but only in a few is that bond the central theme.

Love This is a story about the power of love, in particular its power to destroy a woman who has lost her man (whether husband or lover, we don't know). From the opening shot of her pained face to the final shot of her hysterical, repeated cry ('I love you!'), the woman falls apart before our eyes. Throughout the conversation, she tells the man that she is calm, and at times she appears composed, but those moments are swept away by alternating torrents of profound grief and desperate hope. The power of her love is measured by the depth of her despair when that love is taken from her. She loves him so deeply that even now, when he is leaving her to marry another woman, she does not want to hurt him. She apologises for any misunderstanding, for any slight criticism he might detect in her words. She calls him 'sweet' for calling her back and tries to put on a brave front so that he will not feel guilty. Slowly, as the conversation progresses, she seems to disintegrate, to become more shrill, more pathetic and more unstable until the final moment when she collapses in grief because the sound she heard outside is not his footstep. Only then does she fully accept that he has left her, and she has nothing left to live for. We know that she considered taking too many sleeping pills, and now we fear that's what she'll do.

Journey to Italy This film presents the story of a marriage on the rocks that is saved by a miracle. Katherine and Alex have endured eight years of a loveless union, with no affinity, affection or children. The two are diametric opposites, the romantic woman with the workaholic male, though the scales of sympathy are heavily tipped toward poor Katherine. The journey to Italy to sell a house is an excuse, on her part, to rekindle their romance, but it only exposes and then enlarges the emotional gap between them. Cut off from their daily routines at home, in which they seemed 'perfectly happy,' they now have to confront each as individuals. They find that they are strangers and, worse, that they don't even like each other. They separate physically when he goes to Capri to flirt with women, while she buries her anxiety in the museums of Naples. The film unveils the breakdown of a marriage with precision, noting each little raised eyebrow or caustic remark that adds to a volcanic eruption that comes at the end when they declare that they want a divorce. There is no single reason, no infidelity (though Alex contemplated cheating on her), no revelation and no skeletons in the closet. That would have made the disintegration of their relationship more dramatic and more typical of other films about marital breakdown. Instead, Rossellini, the neo-realist, shows us how a series of ordinary moments and undramatic events can slowly accumulate and result in a sensational conclusion. Married life, the film reminds us, is often boring and frustrating; couples drift apart without knowing it, until it's too late. Only a miracle saved this banal marriage (and the film) from ending with pain.

Paisan Despite the wide range of stories in these six episodes, most focus on friendship. Some of these are predictable, such as men fighting on the same side, whether American, Italian or British. Or among men of the same profession, such as the chaplains and the monks. But the examples in the first two episodes stand out as unlikely pairings, especially because the language and culture gaps are so wide. Carmela and Joe are thrown together for the worst of reasons. She wants to use the Americans to get back to her family, and they want to use her as a guide. Neither trusts the other. But when Joe and Carmela are left together in the deserted castle, something miraculous happens. With little words and gestures, they come to understand something of the other, even if it is vague and fragmentary. Their disjointed conversation (if you can call it that) is framed by a view of the sea, a setting appropriate to a love story. When their language lesson reaches the point of a mutual understanding of their names, they shake hands. And when Joe dies, Carmela picks up his rifle to seek revenge. It is a beautiful and moving short story about friends. A similar emotion is evoked at the end of the next episode, in which another Joe, a black American soldier, gets similarly stuck with a little kid in the port of Naples. Joe is in his own

world, filled with nostalgia, anger and regret. The kid is just a nuisance, until he visits his neighbourhood and sees the kind of life the boy has. Now, the big man and the little boy share something special.