

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Themes in De Sica's Films

FAMILY

Introduction The theme of family is closely related to that of social inequality: when society fails to provide a safety net for the unfortunate, the family steps in. The 'family' in De Sica's films can take various forms. The traditional family can be large, with married siblings and their children (*The Roof*). It can be nuclear (*Bicycle Thieves*). And relatives can be replaced by friends (*Miracle in Milan*). These families, whatever their composition, can both create and solve problems.

The Roof In a traditional society such as 1950s Italy, marriage did not just bind two individuals together; it merged two whole families, often with friction. The family problem is presented early on in the film, when someone notes the conspicuous absence of the bride's father at the wedding. Later, we hear that he is angry, and we watch as Luisa tries in vain to communicate with him. The reason for his anger is never clarified, but it appears that he disapproves of his son-in-law. Another kind of problem emerges when the couple move in with his parents, his younger brother, his sister and her husband and their several children. Cesare, the sister's husband, resents the extra burden on the family budget, the longer wait to use the toilet and the threat to his authority over the household. His resentment boils over into an argument that prompts Natale and Luisa to leave. Cesare appears to be the main cause that this joint-family arrangement broke down. At the end, though, he becomes the hero, riding (on his bicycle) to the rescue when he gets the shack (nearly) completed before the police arrive. Although the family set-up caused the problem in the first place, it was a family member who solved it in the end.

Bicycle Thieves Support for Antonio does not come from society but from his family. His wife Maria is not only understanding but also practical. At the crucial moment when he is about to lose his job opportunity because he has no bicycle, she marches off to the pawn shop with her good quality bed sheets, given to her as a wedding gift. She also alters the size of his company cap so that it fits ('You look like a cop' she jokes). In that scene, before his first day on the new job, husband and wife revel in marital bliss. Their young son, Bruno, who works at a petrol station, is also part of the family team. In that same early morning scene, he oils his father's bicycle, sees that the window in the baby's room is shut and departs with his father. Later, Bruno will prove invaluable in catching the thief by jumping the queue at the clairvoyant's place and spotting the man on the street. Antonio's family is all that stand between him and the destitute men around him. That is why, at the end, his humiliation in front of his son is so shattering. Yet, little Bruno will not desert his father. In the final shot, he takes the hand of his tearful father and offers his support.

Miracle in Milan The most destitute people, such as orphans and the homeless, often have no family. As this delightful film illustrates, however, they can get support from groups who form themselves in order to provide that cohesion and strength. For example, Toto, the hero, is found in a cabbage patch (a concept similar to the stork who brings babies) and has no biological family. But no mother could love him more than Lolotta, the old woman who raises him. When she dies, Toto is taken into an orphanage, an institution of the state, and when he emerges as a young man, he has no one. Then the first miracle happens: he makes friends with an old man, who takes him into his shelter in the shantytown. From that moment onward, Toto creates his family by helping others and ends up with an enormous extended family. The same could be said for most of the other occupants of the shantytown. Most are single, and only a few have a proper family, but they all derive support from the community at large. This assortment of the dispossessed rabble form a family that is more cohesive than most biological groups.