

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Themes in Rossellini's Films

# GENDER

**Introduction** Women play central roles in several Rossellini films, but the specific theme of gender (including gender inequality and gender stereotypes) is prominent in only two. *Rome, Open City* has been controversial because the female characters are either the conventional maternal martyr or the femme fatale. Gender stereotypes also feature in *Fear*, but a stronger theme is the misogyny suffered by the wife.

**Rome, Open City** This film appears to present a heroine, but a closer look suggests that the female characters as a whole reinforce gender stereotypes. For example, the two key women in the story, Pina and Marina, are pitted against each other as polar opposites. Pina is the heroine, the pious woman and pregnant widow, who is loyal to the cause and to her fiancé, Francesco. She takes part in a bread riot, she is concerned about her son, Marcello, and she is deeply in love with Francesco. Most important, she dies in an attempt to prevent him being taken away by the Germans. In contrast to her as the female martyr, Marina is the femme fatale. She is weak, superficial and unstable. Interested in drugs and luxury, she betrays the cause and gives information that leads to the arrest and, later, the deaths of Giorgio and Don Pietro. A third woman is Ingrid, the evil traitor who is also a lesbian. Unlike Marina, she is a strong person and does not have the excuse of poverty to explain away her behaviour. Instead, she is a calculating opportunist, whose commitment to the 'master race' ideology is firm. What these portraits of female characters show is that a woman cannot be both independent and virtuous. Pina is controlled by her love and her role as a mother; Marina wants to be independent but is too weak to shake off her addictions; Ingrid, the mannish non-woman, is simply too vicious to earn our sympathy. In the end, these women are either powerless mothers who die, weak addicts who betray or powerful women who are not feminine. Perhaps the film's attitude toward women, reflecting society's view, is best expressed by little Marcello. As he goes to bed one night, his sister complains she he never takes her with him on his sabotage missions. He says he can't because she's a girl. 'Can't women be heroes?' the sister asks. 'Sure,' Marcello says, 'but women always mean more trouble.'

**Fear** The theme of gender is present in this story, though not prominently. For example, there are a few obvious instances of gender stereotyping, such as the gifts given by the parents to their children. The boy gets an air rifle and the girl gets a doll. She wants a rifle, too, but is told by her father that 'little girls shouldn't play with rifles.' Irene, on the other hand, is not a typical passive woman. It is noteworthy that the family car is always driven by Irene and not her scientist husband. Also, she is the one who runs the factory, having done so in his absence during the war. Albert, however, is uncomfortable with this role reversal and suggests that she could step down from her managerial role and become more of a mother. But a more sinister element of the misogyny is the psychological abuse that Irene suffers at the hands of her husband. Once the revelation is made that he is behind the blackmail plot, we see that Irene is being tested like a lab rat. Her reactions are observed by the dispassionate scientist in order to determine just how much emotional stress she can take before she confesses to her crime. Albert subjected his daughter to the same kind of test during the incident of the missing air rifle. He bullied her until she cracked. This theme of experimenting with Irene's mental health is made explicit in the final scene, when she goes into the laboratory and stares at the rats and rabbits in their cages. She identifies with them because she is one of them.