

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Bertolucci's Films

PAUL (in "The Last Tango in Paris") Disagreeable

Character Paul has travelled the world before settling in Paris, although we know little about his recent past. He had an unhappy upbringing, with irresponsible parents, although he has pleasant memories of the countryside. Paul is a moody and withdrawn person, psychically crippled by his wife's suicide. He can be both violent and tender, angry and playful, and his mood swings are unpredictable and sudden. He is a fierce critic of religious humbug and social convention.

Secretive Paul is a mystery from the very first scenes of the film, when Jeanne finds him inside the flat that she has come to see about renting. He is hidden in a corner. 'Who are you?' she asks, but he only gives a cryptic answer. He wanders ghost-like about the deserted flat, brooding in silence. Jeanne guesses, from his accent, that he is American, but she learns nothing more. He offers little comment on the flat, except to suggest that the armchair should be placed not beside the fireplace but in front of the window. At one point, he hides under a sheet, draped over some furniture, and appears to be hunting for something. If she asks a question, he answers with another question. The telephone rings and he picks it up. 'There's no one here,' he says in his flat-toned voice. 'I don't know,' he says and then hangs up. In fact, he lays the receiver on the table, as if to cut off any future communication. Nothing is divulged, nothing is explained. Something is bothering him, but we can't guess what it is.

Nostalgic In one of their rare moments of verbal intimacy, Paul lies on the bed, after sex with Jeanne, and plays a harmonica. An American sound and a sad tune of loss. She asks why he doesn't go back to America and he begins to open up. 'I don't know. Bad memories, I guess,' he begins. Then he describes his parents. His father was 'tough,' his mother was 'poetical' and both were drunks. He remembers his drunk and half-naked mother being arrested one night. Another time, his father forced him to milk the cow before going on a date which meant that his shoes were covered with manure that stank in the car. 'I can't remember very many good things,' he says, almost in tears. 'Not one?' she asks. Then he remembers open fields with wild flowers, a dog and rabbits. 'Very beautiful,' he says and closes his eyes. Paul does not want to live in the past, with his unloving parents and his dead wife, but that one moment of beauty breaks through his denial and gives him a moment of pleasurable recollection.

Cynical Paul, who has been damaged by his childhood and by his wife's death, is cynical about love and happiness. He has an existential belief in our loneliness, which he articulates in a famous scene that takes place in the bathroom when Paul dries Jeanne's wet, nude body. She tells him that she has found a man whom she loves, someone who will give her security and comfort. Paul mocks her, saying that her idea is to hide in a 'fortress of pretended love, where you don't have to feel afraid and lonely.' She says that is exactly what she wants, but he then speaks in an angrier tone and explains that this 'perfect man' will soon possess her like his own fortress, wanting to own her. She protests that she will find this man, but he tells her that is impossible. 'You are alone. All alone. And you won't be able to get rid of that feeling until you look death right in the face.'

Sexuality Similar to Marcello in *The Conformist*, Paul's sexuality is defined by his past, especially the recent suicide of his wife, who, we learn, was also unfaithful to him. Unlike the normality-obsessed Marcello, however, Paul seeks relief from his unpleasant memories through sex, often unconventional sex, including violent sodomy. But the key to his sexuality is his insistence that sex be anonymous, an emotional shutdown that is not unlike Marcello's retreat into obscurity. Paul's sex with Jeanne is not always violent or unorthodox—he is sometimes playful and gentle—but he is always the one in control.

Energy Paul's brooding presence suggests a powerful and pent-up energy, which is displayed in the first scene, when he meets Jeanne in the unoccupied apartment. Having talked about the apartment and

who will 'take it,' he then suddenly takes her. There is no foreplay, no hesitation and no words. Instead, he walks up to her, throws away her hat and carries her to the window sill, where he rips off her tights and penetrates her. She responds with equal passion and the sex act is punctuated by his groans and her cries of delight. Losing themselves, they slump to the floor, where he continues his thrusts, and they both have an orgasm. Then, they roll off each other and lie separated, like two tigers in a zoo cage. Paul is still panting heavily, like a sated beast. The scene reveals his raw energy, his deep need to express himself sexually. He doesn't need words, and he doesn't need a bed. He speaks with his libido. This is a key scene because it challenges sexual norms: one shouldn't make love to a total stranger; one shouldn't just give in to sexual desire; we shouldn't have intercourse like animals because then society would break down. Paul's magnetism has swept all those injunctions aside and let him enjoy unconscious sensual pleasure.

Humiliation Paul and Jeanne are in the bathroom, where Jeanne has a towel only half covering her wet body. When she tells Paul that he is the man she loves, the one who can save her from emptiness and with whom she can recover her bourgeois life-style, he humiliates her sexually. First, he tells her to cut the fingernails on her right hand. Then he orders her to stick her fingers up his ass. At first, she doesn't understand, or pretends not to, so he screams at her in anger. He faces the wall and pulls down his trousers and tells her, 'Go on.' As she does what he demands, he says, 'I'm gonna get a pig and have it fuck you and vomit in your face and you have to swallow the vomit. You gonna do that for me?' Jeanne slaps his back but says she will do it. He continues: 'I want the pig to die while you're fucking and you have to go behind it and smell the guts of the pig.' Jeanne, who is still pushing her fingers up his backside, is almost in tears, but Paul does not relent. 'You gonna do all that for me?' Paul does not put her through this ordeal for his own sexual pleasure; he doesn't find her anal penetration stimulating at all. Rather, he uses it and his description of her fucking the pig to degrade her and heap abuse on the bourgeois values that she represents. Here, Paul employs sex as a tool to humiliate and revile.

Rape In this scene, perhaps the most famous scene in this sensational film, Paul is on the floor of the flat, propped up on one elbow. As soon as Jeanne enters, he orders her to 'go get some butter.' She angrily flings the butter on the floor and speaks of his arrogance. Sitting on the floor, she knocks on a board that sounds hollow. 'Maybe there's something hidden there,' she says. Paul crawls over to her and strokes her thigh. 'Maybe there's something in here, too,' he says. 'Jewels, gold.' He looks at her with a hardened face and asks 'You afraid?' She says no, but he replies, 'You're always afraid.' Then he turns her on her stomach, rips down her trousers and applies the butter to her ass. He climbs on, eases himself into her and demands that she repeat his words, which denounce the church as an 'institution that tries to make civilised people out of savages.' At first, she struggles and refuses to obey him, but he becomes more insistent, pins back her arms and continues to thrust into her backside. She repeats his words through sobs until he has an orgasm. This infamous scene (whose controversy has only increased over time) is the reverse of the Jeanne's digital anal penetration of Paul (see the previous 'sexual scene'). Although Paul is in control in both scenes, in this 'butter scene', as it is called, he is the physical aggressor. The scene also corroborates the fact that rape is often driven by motives other than sexual desire. Paul does get some pleasure from his act, but his primary satisfaction derives from hearing his denunciation of the church repeated by Jeanne.