

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Michelangelo Antonioni's Films

GIULIANA (in "Red Desert") Emotional

Character Giuliana is a young mother and the wife of a factory manager. From the first scene, she is disturbed, fearful and possibly psychotic, and it is later revealed that she tried to commit suicide. She has little or no support from her husband and gravitates toward Corrado, who shows an ability to understand her. Throughout the story, she is erratic and impulsive, though briefly happy and able to laugh. She is alone, without love and without the ability to love.

Disturbed Giuliana's psychotic state is dramatised in the opening sequence of the film. As she walks toward the factory, she seems out of place. Her bright green coat stands out against the ubiquitous grey of the sky, land and buildings. Her high heels sink into the wet ground. She has to pause as a stream of striking workers and their supporters block her way. When she sees a man eating a sandwich, she starts toward him, stops, turns and turns again. She asks where he got the sandwich, and he says the corner shop. When she asks him to sell it to her, he points out that it's half-eaten, but she doesn't care. She pays him a large amount and retreats. Throughout this exchange, with the roar of the factory in the background, she is nervous, her voice breaking and her eyes darting around like a frightened animal. The short scene is as effective as it is bizarre in showing us that she is disturbed and without revealing any obvious cause.

Panic Another illustration of her condition reveals a primal fear. She and several others, including Ugo and Corrado, are enjoying themselves during a party in the dilapidated shack by the polluted estuary. Outside, through the smudgy window, she sees a docked ship and watches as a doctor climbs aboard. Moments before, she'd heard a man cry and now the yellow distress flag is raised on the ship. When the others casually mention leprosy, malaria and smallpox, she panics and flees. Outside, she stops and stares at the others who stand like lifeless statues in the fog, with their faces blurred. She jumps in a car and drives it to the edge of the pier. When the others reach her, she starts to scream that she 'made a mistake because of the fog' and turns on one of the women. 'Why are you crying?' she demands in a hoarse voice. The answer, of course, is that she and everyone else is sad to see Giuliana so fearful and irrational.

Happy While Giuliana is afraid and lonely throughout the film, there is one sequence in which she is happy. This is the story, a sort of fable, that she tells to her son (while it is also depicted on screen). The story is a miniature film itself, inserted in the main film, about a young girl who is another externalisation of Giuliana. The young girl lives alone on an island and revels in the warm waters, the fish and the birds around her. A strange boat appears and disappears. She hears an unidentified voice singing and realises that the rocks are like human flesh. Everything is singing to her; everything is sweet. The story has the concise beauty and mystery of a fairy tale, but we can assume it depicts Giuliana on the brink of womanhood, love and sexual experience. There are unexplained phenomena (the boat, the voice, the rocks), and something vaguely sinister, but she is curious and she is happy.