

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in De Sica's Films

GENDER

Introduction In some of his later films, De Sica takes aim at traditional Italian views of gender. The satire is sometimes light-hearted, with its barbs blunted by comic exaggeration, but the sting is felt, nevertheless. He is especially good at ridiculing men's delusions about themselves, while also exposing their mistreatment of women. There is the double-standard, for example, that men can have mistresses and guilt-free sex because 'boys will be boys.' Women, on the other hand, are either wives or prostitutes. At the same time, De Sica also makes fun of the stereotype of the Italian 'mama', the sensual mother of the earth figure.

Marriage Italian Style Threaded through these somewhat comical shenanigans about marriage is a sharp satire on conventional Italian attitudes about women and sex. At the time of the film, and to a certain extent now, a clear double-standard existed: men could enjoy guilt-free sex with any woman, whereas respectable women should be virgins until marriage and remain faithful to her husband afterward. In this respect, the film enlarges on a similar theme in the third segment of De Sica's previous film (*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*). Domenico takes his sexual pleasure with Filumena but does not allow her to enter his public or family life. She does move up the ladder from whore to mistress to nurse and manager, but, for him, she remains a woman whom you pay for services. After she pulls off the first marriage by deceit, she explains his sexist behaviour to him. Widespread sexist attitudes have branded her immoral, while he escaped all social ostracism. Sex-workers are tolerated but not acknowledged in upper-class society, which has meant that she couldn't tell her sons that she was their mother. What son would want to know that his mother was a prostitute? She fell into prostitution as a young girl in the slums, with no other way to make money. In this largely light-hearted film, De Sica asks Italians to look at themselves in the mirror and own up to their deeply rooted sexist attitudes.

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow The only theme that runs through all three episodes of the film is that of gender. Overall, the film satirises, very gently, the cult of Italian macho men, unmasking them as ineffectual (episode 1), dispensable (episode 2) and childish (episode 3). In each case, moreover, the man is dominated by a woman (Sophia Loren), who is either stronger, more confident or more mature, or all three. Poor Carmine, the exhausted husband of Adelina who cannot cope with her energy and sexual power, has to resort to medicine to fire up his depleted libido, and even that fails. He is a good parent to the brood of kids, but seems more like a mother than a masculine father. Renzo, the equally effeminate writer in tow to Anna, shows some independent thinking, but his inferior class and financial position means that he is (literally) left behind to lick his wounds. Augusto, the client in the last section, has enough sexual energy, all right, but he is exposed as a childish prat, who answers to 'Daddy' and prays piously with Mara. Although the brunt of the satire is aimed at men, the women do not escape unscathed. Adelina, for example, is a caricature of the Italian 'earth mother,' whose fecundity is celebrated even by schoolchildren dancing in the streets. She is the goddess whose maternal and sexual powers are unlimited. Anna is pilloried as a selfish, upper-class hypocrite whom Renzo should be glad to see the back of. Mara, perhaps the most well-rounded of the female characters, is defensive and too much in thrall to her ritual candles. As a romantic comedy, the film mocks Italian stereotypes of both men and women.

The Indiscretion of an American Wife Mary suffers because she is unable to reconcile her conflicting roles as wife and lover. She is caught in this conflict because she is a woman; by contrast, a married man in Italy would not be tormented by the guilt that torments her from beginning to end. In fact, she feels guilt toward both the men in her romantic triangle, toward her lover, Giovanni, and her husband, Howard. Her regret toward her lover is shown in the first shots when we read her letter to Giovanni asking him to 'forgive' her for not saying goodbye and running off at the last moment. And when they meet for the first time (in the film), she says she's sorry for mistreating him. Later, when they talk in the restaurant, she feels her love for Giovanni return, only to remember what she thought about the night before: the face of her young daughter, 'her sweet neck, and most of all her eyes.' Her roller coaster of emotions trundles on

throughout the film as she is torn between family and lover, and feeling guilt on both accounts. In fact, guilt turns from an internal indictment to a potential public humiliation when she and Giovanni are caught kissing in an empty compartment in a standing train. Now, she is disgraced as well as guilty, although the police commissioner shows compassion and releases her without a trial. Still, she has been condemned in her own mind, especially when she encounters the sick woman who is presented as a model mother. She knows that she is not that woman, even if her husband does not. While she does, in the end, return to her husband, she will live with her guilt forever.

Two Women This is the story of two women (the English title is more descriptive than the Italian), a mother and her daughter, in Italy during World War II. But it is also the story of many women in many times and places, who are mothers who fear for and protect their children. And the many women who endure sexism and, even, violent rape. All of this is dramatised through the experiences of Cesira, the young and sensual widow. When she asks Giovanni to look after her shop in her absence, he agrees but only after she submits to his love-making, despite the fact that he expresses contempt for women ('they're stupid'). He also implies that, as a widow of an old man, she is hungry for sex. That slow developing scene, in which a man takes advantage of her, is a microcosm of the entire film. Later, men ogle Cesira on the street and give wolf-whistles. The Italian fascist soldiers nearly force her to come with them to headquarters, 'to help' them. Then comes the rape in the church, with all its brutality and wild abandon. The soldiers chase Cesira and Rosetta like children laughing and screaming on the playground. But they are violent, knocking out Cesira and gang raping her and her daughter. Afterwards, no one seems to care, neither the army officers nor the others they meet on the road. At the end, when Rosetta comes back from a dance with a pair of stockings given to her by a boy, Cesira is furious, afraid Rosetta might become a prostitute. She is also saddened. 'Michelle was right,' she says, with a voice of defeat. 'Escape, escape. But you can't escape from yourself.' She might have said, escape from the plight of women. Cesira fears that her daughter, already traumatised by the rape, will imitate her mother and fall into the role assigned to her by society.