

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## SHOESHINE (*Sciuscià*) 1946

Vittorio De Sica

**OVERVIEW** *Shoeshine*, one of the first neo-realist films, depicts the life of street children in post-war Rome. De Sica and his scriptwriter, Cesare Zavattini, did their own research on those children and found two, whose experiences became the basis for the story. Both roles were played by young boys who had never acted before; one of them was even taken off the street and into the studio. Theirs is a sad tale, beginning with the purity of a dream and ending with the tragedy of an accidental death. In between, the film depicts with vivid detail the reality of their lives and their companions on the street, trading on the black market, living in a lift shaft and, of course, shining shoes. In fact, the Italian title (*Sciuscià*) is the boys' rough approximation of the English 'shoeshine.' In other words, it is a linguistic mongrel which symbolises the broken nature of the society in which they try to make a living. The film carries social messages, but first and foremost it is a humane depiction of the loss of youthful innocence. Orson Welles famously said of the film: 'The camera disappeared, the screen disappeared; it was just life.' *Shoeshine* was not a financial success in Italy or America, where it was wrongly promoted as a 'social protest' film. It did, however, win an Oscar for the Best Foreign Film

**SYNOPSIS** Giuseppe and Pasquale are shoeshine boys on the streets of Rome in the hard times after the war. Needing money to buy the horse of their dreams, they get involved in selling stolen American army blankets. They sell the blankets and get the money to buy their horse, but they are arrested because they have unwittingly participated in a large-scale robbery. When they are sent to prison, their close bond breaks down because Pasquale is believed to have told the police about Giuseppe's older brother, who was involved in the robbery and is arrested. A partial reconciliation takes place, but the distrust continues when Giuseppe agrees to an escape plan, without telling Pasquale, that involves selling the boys' horse. Giuseppe escapes but is confronted by Pasquale, who has taken the police to the barn where they hope to find the escapees. Pasquale beats Giuseppe with his belt, accidentally causing him to fall off a bridge and die. The film ends with Pasquale mourning his dead friend.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Pasquale	An orphan who shines shoes.
Giuseppe	A younger boy and who also shines shoes.
Attilio	Giuseppe's older brother.
Arcangeli	An older boy, who is the leader of Giuseppe's prison cell.

### STORY

*Buying a horse* The story opens with two boys, ten-year-old Giuseppe and fifteen-year-old Pasquale, riding horses with great delight. They want to buy one of the horses, but as shoeshine boys they don't have enough money. They even struggle to pay the horses' owner 50 lira just for the privilege of a brief ride. As they leave the scene, they watch with sadness as a wealthy couple leave their nice car and go for a ride. The boys think of the horses as their own and regret that others ride them. They count their savings and reckon they need another 5,300 lira to buy the horse.

*Selling blankets* Wandering in town, they pass a line of boys shining the shoes of US soldiers and chat with other kids who are dealing in black market goods. They also talk over the plan to buy the horse and where to stable it. We learn that Pasquale, the older boy, is an orphan who lives with Giuseppe's family. Giuseppe has an older smartly-dressed brother, Attilio, who sets up a meeting between the boys and a man called Panza. Panza gives them two stolen American blankets and tells the boys to sell them to a lady at a certain address. They bargain about their commission and settle on 500 lira.

*Fake police* The boys go to the address and find a woman fortune-teller, who at first denies interest in the blankets. Then they haggle and settle on a modest price. They beg her to tell their fortune and she agrees. As she is dealing cards, Panza and Atillio arrive, pretending that they are police. They confiscate the black-market blankets and surreptitiously steal a large sum of money from the woman. From their haul, they give the boys a cut, which, added to the money they got for the blankets, means they can buy the horse. They proudly ride through the streets on their steed and keep it in a barn, where they also sleep.

*Arrested* The next day, they again ride into town, where they are identified by the fortune-teller and caught by the (genuine) police. It turns out that Panza and Atillio stole 700,000 lira from the lady. When questioned by an inspector, the boys lie about the blankets and pretend they know nothing about the men who took the money.

*Prison* While the case is investigated, they are sent to a juvenile prison, where the cramped cells are full of lice and the 'soup is rubbish.' On the outside, Panza is tucking into a huge juicy steak. When he hears that the boys haven't squealed, he decides to send them a package to keep them 'sweet.' In their holding cell, they agree never to betray Panza or Atillio. 'When we get out, we'll reckon with them,' Pasquale says. They dream of seeing their horse, which, in their absence, is not well fed and is used to pull heavy loads.

*Separation* After they are 'processed,' the boys are put in different cells. Not wanting to be separated from Pasquale, Giuseppe struggles with a guard and is roughed up. In protest, the whole prison makes an awful racket, which is punished by suspending exercise in the courtyard. The older boys in Giuseppe's cell torment him by saying he won't get out for years.

*Police tricks* Giuseppe receives Panza's package, which contains loaves of bread and fruit. Inside one loaf is a cryptic note extolling the virtues of silence. When the boys are summoned to the inspector's office, they admit that they bought their horse after visiting the fortune-teller but claim that they earned the money from shining shoes. The inspector threatens them with a beating, but still they refuse to talk. Giuseppe is taken to a side room, where Pasquale thinks he is being beaten badly and crying with pain. But we see that the belt is only striking a sack of grain and that another boy is screaming though he is not hit, like an actor. Thinking Giuseppe is in great pain, Pasquale breaks down and gives the inspector the names of Panza and Atillio. Later, when he sees Giuseppe, he lies and says he didn't squeal.

*Betrayal* Giuseppe finds out, though, when his mother visits him and blames him for betraying his brother, Atillio, who has been arrested. Hurt and angry, Giuseppe calls Pasquale a 'grass' in front of the other boys and starts to hit him. To punish Pasquale, a file is planted in his cell and the inspector is informed. When the file is found, Pasquale is beaten with a belt. Hearing his cries of pain, Giuseppe calls for it to stop, prompting another mini riot.

*Escape plan* Eventually, Giuseppe accepts that Pasquale was fooled into confessing, but Arcangeli, who arranged for the file to be planted, does not. Pasquale defeats him in a fist fight and is confined to isolation for violent behaviour. The disgraced Arcangeli then unveils an escape plan.

*Court hearing* A lawyer hired by Giuseppe's family visits him and explains that he must tell the court that Pasquale (and not Atillio) planned everything. During the trial, the question of their horse becomes paramount, and the boy's street friends gather at the doors of the court and watch the proceedings. The lawyer hired to defend Giuseppe places all the blame on Pasquale, and the public lawyer for Pasquale merely asks for a light sentence. Giuseppe is sentenced to one year in prison, Pasquale to two and a half years and Atillio to an unknown number.

*Plan* Back in prison, Giuseppe prepares to execute Arcangeli's escape plan. A hitch occurs when Arcangeli's mother doesn't bring him the money they need to live on after the escape. Giuseppe says he has a lot of money, kept secret on the outside (i.e., the horse). The plan is to escape during a movie shown to the boys in the prison.

*Escape* In the dark, with all eyes on the screen, Arcangeli sneaks into the infirmary and tries to pry open a window. He is discovered and the prison officials try to break into the room and put on the lights in the make-shift cinema hall. But the boys switch off the electrical circuits and the projector catches fire. In the chaos, Arcangeli, Giuseppe and a few others escape, but Pasquale stays behind to care for a boy ill with pneumonia. When that boy dies, the assistant warden quits because he can no longer tolerate the inhumane conditions in the prison. Outside, the guards chase and capture all of the boys, except Arcangeli and Giuseppe.

*Hiding place* When Pasquale hears that the escape plan involved a horse waiting for them outside the prison, he is shocked. He tells the director that he can lead him to the place where Arcangeli and Giuseppe will be hiding. But when they reach the barn, the horse is gone. Pasquale flees from the barn, grabs a metal pipe and hunts down his friend and Arcangeli, who are on the horse. After Arcangeli runs off in fear, Pasquale takes off his belt and beats Giuseppe. The little boy backs away, falls over a low bridge, strikes his head on rocks and dies. Pasquale is overcome with remorse. As he sobs over his friend's body, the director and the police arrive. In the final shot, the horse trots off into the night. Pasquale's fate is left uncertain.

## THEMES

1. *Youth* An important theme of the film is the destruction of the dreams of youth. That dream is made flesh in the opening scene when the two boys experience pure joy as they gallop along on horses. They are thrilled to be so free, to be able to move so effortlessly and to be close to such a beautiful animal. When the ride is over, they are still ecstatic and run toward each other, claiming that the horse called Bersagliere ('Sharp-shooter') is the 'best in the world.' Their dream to own the horse comes true when they buy it and ride triumphantly down the street like military heroes on parade. Even in prison, their first thoughts are for their horse, not Giuseppe's family. That horse is the only thing in their world that is not broken, sullied or compromised. And at the very end, when their entanglements in crime and prison lead to one boy accidentally killing the other, the horse trots away and out of sight: the dream that appeared in the first scene has been destroyed. The horse even figures prominently in the boy's trial. A lawyer points out that 'a Roman Emperor made his horse a senator...so why be surprised when two poor kids put all their love in a horse?' Later, in a fiery speech, he says, 'This [love of a horse] is no crime. If you think they are guilty, then this court must condemn all of us, too, the people who in pursuit of our passions abandon our children to fend for themselves.' In that speech, De Sica seems to express his own views.

2. *Society* The innocence of youth, symbolised by the horse, is crushed by the social institutions and economic conditions of immediate post-war Italy. Although De Sica's film is far from polemical, it does expose the factors that contributed to the creation of a large cohort of street children, particularly in Rome. Immediately after the first scene showing the purity of the horse, the film takes us into the reality of street life for the shoeshine boys. When Giuseppe's mother needs more money, Giuseppe says money has lost its value, a reference to the inflation of the time. Having to make money, both for the horse and themselves, the boys get entangled in crime and end up in prison. The prison is overcrowded and infected with lice; the food is poor and the guards are corrupt. The boys are held for months, while the wheels of justice grind on, and they do not receive adequate medical care. It is not that the prison system is evil or cruel. In fact, the boys are taught rudimentary maths, allowed to exercise and entertained with movies. Instead, it is indifference and lack of compassion that destroys the boys. The director dismisses the unhygienic cell conditions by saying that the boys 'are always complaining.' He then reviews the case of a boy who committed armed robbery because his father is still a POW in Germany and he has younger siblings to feed. 'No doubt, he'll start complaining, too,' the director says and moves on to the next case.

3. *Legal system* The legal system is similarly indifferent. The judge wants to know if the boys have a written document to cover potential disputes concerning the 'ownership' of the horse. Pasquale is dumbfounded by this legalistic question, which demonstrates that society is unable to understand the lives of the shoeshine boys. That gap is then highlighted visually when a group of the street children enter the enormous building that houses the courtroom. They stand and gape at the huge statues and high walls that surround them. Measured by those monumental, cold marble surfaces, their lives are negligible. Then the scruffy gang of kids forces its way to the door of the court itself, where the justice system is determining the fate of the two boys. The lawyer hired by Giuseppe's family says

some impressive things in court but ultimately blames Pasquale for the crime. Pasquale's court-appointed lawyer can't even be bothered to argue a case and says he will rely on the mercy of the court. When the sentences are announced, a little girl, who is a friend of the boys, denounces the court. 'Bastards! Villains!' she cries. If her verdict is extreme, it only reflects the anger and distrust that society's indifference has bred in the street children.

4. *Friendship* The key relationship in this film is the friendship between the two boys, Giuseppe and Pasquale. We see them in the opening scene, delighting in their horse ride, and we see them at the end, with one crying over the other's dead body, and in between, their friendship is subjected to many crises. Pasquale is the older boy who treats Giuseppe as his younger brother, although Pasquale is himself an orphan and lives with Giuseppe's family. Their close bond has its first challenge when the two boys are separated and put in different cells. From there, it is easy to see how the prison and legal systems prise the friends farther and farther apart. When Pasquale is tricked into betraying Giuseppe's older brother (Attilio), he does so only because he can't bear to see his friend suffer. Later, Giuseppe has a hard time believing that Pasquale actually betrayed him and tries to patch up their argument. More treachery, involving their beloved horse, separates the two boys again, but when Giuseppe accidentally dies at the end, Pasquale weeps over him as if they were as close as they had been while riding horses in the opening scene.

5. *Betrayal* A final theme is betrayal, the flip side of friendship. The tragedy of the story is not just the hardships endured by the boys, and the street children in general. It is that the affectionate friendship between Giuseppe and Pasquale is corroded by betrayals, partly of their own making, but largely engineered by others. The first betrayal is that Pasquale tells the authorities the truth about the robbery, including the role played by Attilio, Giuseppe's brother. The cruel irony is that Pasquale has been tricked into that confession by his love for Giuseppe, and now his perceived betrayal destroys their bond. Everything bad leads from that initial betrayal. Next, in order to punish Pasquale, Giuseppe and Arcangeli arrange for a file to be planted and discovered in Pasquale's cell, which leads to his savage beating. There is a temporary reconciliation between the two boys, but Giuseppe then betrays his friend again when he offers to sell their horse in order to get money after he and Arcangeli escape. Pasquale, in turn, reveals their hiding place to the police and then administers a savage beating of his own to Giuseppe when he finds him with Arcangeli and their horse. This is why the sad end is so tragic. They boys have destroyed themselves. Yes, society plays a large part, but they also bear some responsibility for their betrayals.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Giuseppe** Giuseppe is a young boy, full of bubbly enthusiasm and the capacity to dream. Less mature, and less able to control his emotions, he is more vulnerable than Pasquale and more likely to worry about possible problems. In short, he is a sweet, delicate boy, which makes his loss of innocence all the more tragic.

**Anxious** The two boys have been sent to prison, where at first they are kept in the same cell. As they lie half asleep, Giuseppe is being bitten by bugs. He says he isn't hungry but is worried that his father knows what has happened to them. He asks Pasquale when they will be released and reflects that it's all the fault of his brother. Then he smiles wide and mentions the horse. He wants to know if it will get fed properly. 'I can't wait to see him,' he says, with a dreamy look on his face and lies down, perhaps to dream. During this conversation, while Pasquale is being practical and giving sound advice, little Giuseppe is anxious about everything and only finds solace when he thinks about the horse.

**Vulnerable** Giuseppe is not as strong or reliant as Pasquale, upon whom he relies for almost everything. His vulnerability is illustrated when he is separated from his friend and put in a different cell. He has never before been apart from the older boy and even now he clings to Pasquale's hand when Pasquale is pushed into a cell without him. When the door is slammed shut, Giuseppe struggles with the guard, who has to pick him up and force him into another cell. Inside, Giuseppe turns to the cold wall and begins to weep. Then he goes to the single, barred window and calls out for his friend, but gets no response. He is alone, without his companion, and he is miserable.

**Hurt** When Giuseppe finds out, from his mother, that Attilio has been arrested because Pasquale confessed, he is not only angry. He feels sick to his stomach that his friend has squealed. He feels humiliated, hurt and betrayed. All these emotions play on his face when he hears the news from his mother in the visiting room. He doesn't speak, but his lips tremble and his eyes narrow. A moment later, he marches out to the courtyard with a stern look and confronts Pasquale. 'You grassed,' he screams and starts to hit him. All his pent-up emotions—disillusion, frustration and abandonment—are expressed in his painful cry.

**Pasquale** At twelve years old, Pasquale is somewhat older than Giuseppe, and taller, as well. He acts in the role of an older brother, advising and guiding the younger boy, until they enter prison and their bond is broken. He is also a character with principles, who is adamant that they should never snitch on the others (Panza and Attilio) involved in the robbery. Ironically, though, it is he who is tricked into confessing and earns the disrespect among his fellow-prisoners, especially Giuseppe, as a 'grass.'

**Mature** As the older and bigger boy, Pasquale behaves like an older brother toward the shorter and younger Giuseppe. This much is clear in the early scenes, especially those following the opening shots of the boys on the horses. When they return to their life on the streets, it is Pasquale who conducts their black-market business. He asks another shoeshine boy when 'the stuff' will arrive, and he rejects the offer to buy stolen sunglasses because they break and can't be hidden easily. Next, he makes a plan to stable and feed their horse. The scene concludes when he tells Giuseppe that they need to focus on 'making some more money.' Here, we see that Pasquale is the one who makes the decisions. He is the more mature boy, the one who organises and plans their future.

**Proud** Pasquale is determined to discover who put the file in his cell and to clear his name as a 'grass.' When he finds out that it was Arcangeli, he confronts him in a scene in the shower room. Giuseppe, who realises that Pasquale was tricked into betraying his brother, is ready to make up with him, but Arcangeli taunts him and physically pushes him away from Pasquale. Now Pasquale faces up to the bully, who is sneering at him. Giuseppe steps in between the two, but Pasquale pushes him aside and begins to fight Arcangeli. He knocks him out, in effect, cancelling his undeserved reputation as a snitch. Pasquale is not an aggressive boy, but he is too proud to let his name be sullied by lies.

**Compassionate** Pasquale is never anything less than kind to everyone, except perhaps the bully. This quality is displayed in prison when, separated from Giuseppe, he finds another boy to take under his wing. That boy is Rafaele, who has tuberculosis. Pasquale looks out for the sick boy throughout the prison scenes, but one in particular stands out. There is stampede by the boys and guards when the lights are cut and a fire starts during the movie showing. In the dark and confusion, little Rafaele is trampled. Pasquale finds him lying on the floor and cries out for help. When his body is carried to the infirmary, Pasquale tries to follow, but he is sent back to his cell. Even in the chaos, when everyone is looking out for themselves, Pasquale shows compassion toward the boy who is weak and vulnerable.

**Arcangeli** The leader of the boys in Giuseppe's cell is named Arcangeli. He is a taller and older boy, a bully with a smirk, who manipulates others to satisfy his needs. It is he who organises planting the file in Pasquale's cell to make sure he is punished by the guards. And it is he who plans their escape. He is a cocky and devious character, who shows his true colours when, in the final scene, he runs away.

**Intimidating** Arcangeli's intimidating character is on display even before he is visible. When Giuseppe is put into a cell with three others, Arcangeli is absent. Giuseppe goes to sit down and claim his place but is told 'that's Arcangeli's place. If he finds you, you're in trouble.' When Arcangeli appears, he glares at Giuseppe and demands to know who he is. Then he pushes Giuseppe off a seat and, without asking, reaches into his food packed and takes the bread saved for Pasquale. Next, he trades a cigarette for three matches from a corrupt guard. In these two minutes, he demonstrates to Giuseppe (and to the viewers) his dominance in the micro-society of the cell.

**Manipulative** Arcangeli also manipulates Giuseppe's need for a friend by turning him against Pasquale after it is thought that Pasquale ratted on his brother. He has controlled him so effectively

that Giuseppe is afraid to cross him. His influence is clearly illustrated in a scene when Rafaele asks Giuseppe to talk with Pasquale (who wants to explain that he only told the truth about the robbery because he thought it would halt Giuseppe's beating). When Arcangeli butts in, Rafaele tells him to bugged off, but Arcangeli warns him that he better watch out with his weak lungs. Then, Giuseppe glances up at Arcangeli and tells Rafaele to get lost. Again Giuseppe looks to Arcangeli for approval, and the bully ruffles his hair with affection. 'Good answer,' he says, as if he's a mentor to the little boy.

*Resourceful* Arcangeli loses some of his authority when Pasquale beats him in a fistfight, but he does not waste his time in the infirmary. Back in his cell, he announces that he has an escape plan. Now, the boys look up to him with admiration. 'Tell us,' they urge him, and he explains how they can get out through a window in the infirmary. He's already cut through the bolts and all they need to do is shake it loose. Despite some unforeseen problems, the plan works and Giuseppe and Arcangeli both escape. Arcangeli, however, is the only one to survive to the end. He is devious and belligerent, but he is also intelligent and practical.



(The boys in prison)



(The boys on their horse)



(Other boys in prison)



(The prison, which used to be a convent)