

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Zampano (in Fellini's *La Strada*) disagreeable/ selfish

Overview The simple narrative of this film—young girl sold to rough hewn circus guy, who buys her and forces her to travel into further and constantly more unfriendly personal situations, and who in the end abandons her to die—plays out against a landscape as dehumanized and scarred as the people who live in it. The *strada*, the anonymous highway leading through dusty, windblown, scarcely habitable suburbs of anonymous cities—this *strada* is a setting from hell, a transit through the dangerous and colorless breakdown of social order. Brief episodes of amusement—circus stops when the pair perform—of quasi-romantic encounter for the hopeless young girl—are the only touches of joy or sensuality to open humanity.

Character The rough hewn circus guy above, Zampano, is strong, tough, weather beaten, without a setting in time or place, just a domineering and often abusive force, and yet there is a desperate self-awareness lurking around his smile. In the end, this tough victim of the hardscrabble sub-circus entertainment life—who lives off the dull fascinations of joy starved kids—is far from any enjoyment. Gelsomina, his bought wife, only makes his own loneliness sharper, for he cannot relate to her. Sex means tears for her, and he sleeps off their intercourse with the brute muscular indifference he brings with him, until pure exhaustion wears him out at the end of the film, and deadly remorse at the loss of Gelsomina gives him the true rest of sleep.

Parallels Zampano is from the start only interested in Gelsomina as an assistant for his circus act. (He takes sex as a simple blunt add-on, no preliminaries, no feeling.) It can well be imagined that the theme of domestic abuse, invoked here, is as widespread in our films as we know it is in our culture. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1983) was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985, and dwells in painful detail on the chauvinism, sexual sadism, incest to which Celia, an Afro American woman, is subjected by male abuse in the first forty years of this century. *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) presents in thriller form the nastiness imposed on a wife whose brutally abusive husband gives way to a lethal obsessive-compulsive disorder. Jennifer Lopez' film, *Enough* (2002), takes off from the fate of a cute waitress who is picked up and soon married by a handsome middle class gent, who shares with Zampano one thing, thoughtless narcissism and reckless indifference to his woman.

Illustrative moments

Cold We first study Zampano as he returns to the humble home of Gelsomina, whose sister he had bought as wife, but whom he now needs to replace. As the family arranges the sale of the girl, Zampano, with a crooked impatient smile, waits without involvement for the bitter transaction to be complete. His stocky impassive stance lightens only to allow the trace of a desire filled smile, as he leads the girl toward the battered circus van they will depart in. Tinny background circus music, and a dusty windblown sky lend a fearful depression to the vanishing circus cart, as it disappears down the lifeless highway.

Abuser Zampano comes to an off road opening, near the impoverished outskirts of a city, where he sets up his van and prepares to act for the locals, especially for the kids. He gives Gelsomina on the spot training, in beating the tambourine and dancing an invitation, but at the same time asserts his power over the unsure girl. He strips a branch, takes the withe in hand and slashes at his 'wife's' ankles to make her hop more smartly. She is hurt and offended, and in that small gesture he renders her submission and loneliness more painful than they need have been. He is brusque, on point, sexual, and abusive.

Abandoner Having at last recognized what harm he has done to Gelsomina, Zampano comes to the conclusion—we feel his brain thrashing—to send her home. When she refuses this proposal, insisting on remaining with him, he takes advantage of a moment of peace—she has just fallen asleep in a sunny corner—to leave some basic clothes and food with her, and to leave her, to her fate. He drives away, as at the beginning of the film he drove down the *strada* taking her with him to her dreadful new life. His smile is still the same faint, wounded, desperate crease that it was when first we met him.

Negater Never is Zampano more brutally just what he looks like than at the end of the film, which finds him outstretched on the sand, his head buried both in his arms and in sand, weeping; while approaching him comes the in gathered tide we have to imagine, though it is not explicit, will sweep him out to sea and his death. His slight smile, has now become the full faced rictus of despair, an anger toward life and others, with whom he was never strong enough to complete.

Discussion questions

Is the desolate landscape of *La Strada* a commentary on the realities of modern desolation, or is it a mythological-poetic landscape, which reflects only Fellini's mind? Does Zampano seem to you to be Fellini talking about himself?

The auteur film makers of the mid 20th century were sure of their filmic imaginations, as were their literary contemporaries like Mann, Joyce, and Proust. Can you see traits in common to these two types of imagination, filmic and literary? Is *La Strada* at all like a work of fiction or poetry? How?

Is narrative or character more determinant in shaping *La Strada*? Is any character 'developed' or multi-sided? Are there any enriching complexities in the development of the narrative?