

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Antonioni's Films

Love

overview Love, or the failure of love, is a persistent theme in Antonioni's films. Some relationships are doomed by the past, some are plagued by social factors (class, gender inequality) and some are the victim of a pervading sense of isolation and alienation. Even those that promise a future are cut short by death. In all this director's films, there is only one relationship (Nenne and Lorenzo in *The Girlfriends*) that seems to survive the last scene, but we are not sure that even they will last.

The Adventure Sandro and Claudia, the main characters in this film, are trapped in a doomed love affair. Claudia feels guilty for starting an affair with Sandro, her best friend's fiancé (who she thinks might be dead). She knows it's 'not right,' but she cannot help but enjoy herself, throwing off her usual morose expression to smile and laugh. In the end, she, too, is betrayed by Sandro. The other two relationships in the film are marked by decadence (Patrizia and Raimondo) and infidelity (Guilia and Corrado).

The Cry Ill-fated love also dogs Aldo, the protagonist of *The Cry*. Once he loses his secure relationship with Irma (she has fallen in love with another man), he takes to the road seeking human comfort but only gets into a series of partial and disappointing encounters with women. His only consolation is his daughter, Rossina, but he loses her, as well. His suicide at the end is a cry for love.

The Story of a Love Affair The theme of doomed love pervades this film, too. Although Paola and Guido embark on a passionate illicit love affair, they cannot escape the shared guilt they feel for the death of a friend many years before. After they renew their liaison, they bicker about the future, Paola gets jealous and Guido is frustrated they cannot break free of Paola's husband. By the end, they are blaming each other for the friend's death, and their plan to murder the husband reveals their deep gulf. In the final scene, like other lovers in Antonioni's films, they separate without words.

The Eclipse Vittoria, the main character in *The Eclipse*, is similarly unable to find satisfaction in romance. For some unknown reason, she breaks off her engagement with Riccardo, and then falls into something like a love affair with Piero, the energetic stock broker. Although they enjoy each other's company, and make love, it is more like children at play than passionate love. At one point, Vittoria says, 'I wish I didn't love you. Or that I didn't love you at all.' In the final scene, they agree to meet up the next day, but neither of them shows up.

The Girlfriends While fate and boredom (*ennui*) ruin the relationships in many of Antonioni's films, it is class difference that prevents the lovers in *Girlfriends* from finding happiness. Clelia is a sophisticated woman who manages a fashionable clothes shop, which Carlo is employed as a workman. Despite that gap, Clelia finds him refreshing and reliable, while Carlo is struck by her beauty and kindness. In the end, she tells him, painfully, that they would never be happy because she couldn't conform to the expectations of a housewife. The other key relationship in the film (the love affair between Lorenzo and Rosetta) is more tragic and ends in her suicide. Nenne has a sincere love for Lorenzo, which appears strong enough to endure after the story ends, but given Lorenzo's arrogance and weak-ego, we cannot be sure.

The Lady without Camelias In this film, the love relationship breaks down because the husband (Gianni) manipulates his wife (Clara), a famous actress whom he 'discovered.' Their relationship is flawed from the beginning since he, and the rest of the male-dominated film industry, controls her: bringing her to the screen, directing her and choosing her roles, etc. When their marriage falls apart, Clara seeks support in an ill-judged love affair with Rusconi, who abandons her. Clara, once a glamorous star, is left loveless in the end.

Red Desert Giuliana, the main character in *Red Desert*, is one of Antonioni's great suffering heroines. Her hysterical psychological state baffles her husband and herself. She finds temporary rapport with Corrado, but even he cannot help her. She even feels deceived by her own son, who was the only support in her troubled life. She wants people to 'form a wall around' her, but her severe sense of

alienation drives them away. In the end, she drifts away from everyone, although there is a glimmer of hope with her son.

The Vanquished The young lovers portrayed in *The Vanquished* display both juvenile emotions, such as jealousy and vanity, and the more admirable bond of loyalty. Andre suffers from Simone's cruel indifference toward him, while Marina sticks by Claudio even after he has killed someone and is chased by the police. As with other Antonioni films (*Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger*), their young love had, at least, a chance at success, until it is cut off by death.

The Passenger and Zabriskie Point The love that develops in both these films is affecting but ultimately transient. Both involve people who meet while in transit, moving from one place to another and (in the case of *The Passenger*) from one identity to another. David, the journalist in *The Passenger*, meets the unnamed girl in Barcelona, where he is following the trail of the man whose identity he has assumed. The girl is similarly in transition, without a fixed identity and history. But, again, as in so much of this director's films, their strong attraction and then love, is doomed by events beyond their control. A similar story is told in *Zabriskie Point*, although the love that briefly flowers between Mark and Daria is promising at first. Expressing the spirit of the 1960s, they are free and experimental, revelling in the authenticity of the California desert. Once again, though, Mark's violent death eliminates any future for them.