

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## **Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)** 1954

Robert Rossellini

### OVERVIEW

The basic plot of *Journey to Italy* is loosely based on *Duo*, a novel by the French writer Colette, and an incomplete filmscript by the Italian Antonio Pietrangeli. The production, like the story, itself was a desultory meandering around Naples and its environs. A married couple do very little, except react in their distinctively different ways to the sights, sounds and people they encounter in this foreign setting. The film was shot over the course of three quick months in the Spring of 1953, with Ingrid Bergman and George Saunders in the lead roles. It was often improvised and unscripted, as Rossellini tried to get at the reality of a marital breakup. Saunders complained that he had no idea what was happening, and perhaps neither did Rossellini until the miraculous ending occurred, as much a surprise to him as to his actors and later his viewers. Although the film did badly at the box office, it had a considerable influence on New Wave cinema, especially Michelangelo Antonioni. In 2012, it was listed 41<sup>st</sup> in an international survey of all-time best films by critics.

### SYNOPSIS

An English couple, middle-aged Katherine and Alex Joyce, drive to Naples to sell a house that Alex has inherited from his Uncle Homer. From the start, it is clear that they have a troubled relationship, and things get worse as their brief stay in Naples unfolds. Alex is bored and wants to return to his business in London, while Katherine remembers a poet friend with whom she shared a rapport. As the tension between them grows, Alex goes off to spend a few days with English friends on Capri. While staying in the house they intend to sell, Katherine takes in the cultural and historical sites of Naples and its environs. The couple's contrasting temperaments generate frustration, sarcasm and misunderstanding, plus a good dose of jealousy. After they agree to divorce, they are taken by a friend to watch the exhumation of skeletons at Pompeii, which affects them both. In the final scene, they are briefly separated and then brought closer together while observing a religious procession in Naples. They embrace and all is well.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Katherine	Katherine Joyce is married to Alex Joyce.
Alex	Alex is her husband.
Burton	Burton is a friend of Alex's dead uncle.
Natalie	Natalie is Burton's wife.

### STORY

*Far from home* A middle-aged English married couple, Alex and Katherine Joyce, speed along in a car, heading toward Naples. From their conversation, we gather that they are going to the city to 'dispose' of a property left to Alex by his recently deceased Uncle Homer. As they cruise along, dogging cattle and commenting on insects, it seems that Alex is preoccupied with his business back in London and Katherine is unhappy, too. She says, 'It's the first time we've really been alone ever since we were married.' Alex says, 'Yes, I suppose it is.'

*Hotel* After checking into their hotel and taking adjoining rooms, husband and wife admit that they don't really know each other. Eight years of marriage and they're like 'strangers,' Katherine says. Going down to the bar, they run into an English friend and her Italian friends. Having dinner together, Katherine is annoyed at Alex's attention to the woman friend.

*Villa* The next morning, Mr Burton, a friend of the deceased uncle, takes the couple to see the villa. Burton explains that he came upon the house during the war and requested it in order to prevent it from being looted and ruined. Then he met Homer, another Englishman, who spent the whole war in Capri. Later, still during the war, Burton was sent to Venice where he met his wife, Natalie. When they came to Naples, Homer let them stay in the house and Burton began to work as an archaeologist at nearby Pompeii. Natalie shows the couple around the spacious house, located outside Naples and built in a modern style, with a terrace and a magnificent view of Mt Vesuvius. At lunch, Alex tells his

hosts that they will only stay for a few days, during which they want to sell the house.

*Charles* Alex begins to relax and enjoy the food and wine. He gets into a comical scene of 'lost in translation' when he asks a house servant for some water. Sitting in the sun, Katherine remembers a friend called Charles, who was stationed in Naples during the war and who died recently. When Alex says he was a fool, she protests. 'He wasn't a fool! He was a poet.' 'What's the difference?' Alex scoffs. Katherine quotes some of Charles' poetry and reminisces about their platonic friendship. That afternoon, Katherine goes off to a museum, leaving Alex to show potential buyers around the house. Following Katherine, we are taken on a guided tour of stunning sculptures, many of them from Pompeii.

*Separation* Alex and Katherine visit an aristocratic Italian family who were close friends of Uncle Homer. With dukes and duchesses a dime a dozen, the men compliment Katherine on her beauty, which Alex notes with annoyance. Now, it's his turn to be jealous, lighting a spark that ignites an argument about who is to blame for the breakdown of their marriage. Slinging insults and accusations around, Alex decides to go stay on Capri with his English friends.

*Katherine* In his absence, an angry Katherine visits Naples, where she has glimpses of street life and visits cultural and historical sites. Listening to the stories told by guides and viewing the ruins, she is enthralled but also disturbed by the echoes of her own crumbling marriage. She marvels at the mysterious smoke issuing from small, bubbling craters. With anxiety, she watches lovers strolling and mothers pushing baby prams.

*Alex* Meanwhile, Alex enjoys the congenial company of his English friends on vacation in Capri and makes a special friend of a woman named Marie. Another woman seizes him up and says, 'You have a lot of things on your mind. It's because you love her [his wife] and you're jealous.' He goes out for a walk with Marie, who uses a cane but says her heart feels empty, the space left behind by a man. Mistaking that remark for flirtation, Alex begins to imagine an affair until she explains that she is missing her husband. Alex returns to Naples but samples the nightlife instead of going to the villa. He picks up a prostitute, who has just seen a young girlfriend die and is contemplating suicide. He loses interest and drops her off. When Alex sees Katherine at the villa, they have a frosty exchange.

*Catacombs* The next day, Katherine and Natalie drive into Naples, where Katherine comments on the many pregnant women and Madonna shrines. When asked, she says that she doesn't know if Alex is fond of children. Natalie takes Katherine to the catacombs beneath the city, where people were buried thousands of years ago. Out of pity for their loneliness, Natalie explains, people tend the graves and lay flowers. Katherine says she can't understand it. Katherine is disturbed by the skulls lined up along the walls and watches Natalie kneel down to pray for a relative who died abroad during the war. 'I also pray for a child,' she says.

*Divorce decision* Back at the villa, Alex and Katherine slide into another argument and decide to get a divorce. Burton interrupts to say that they must come with him to Pompeii to see an amazing recent discovery. On the site, the alienated couple watch as workers uncover two skeletons, a man and a woman, buried two thousand years ago. Katherine breaks down and begs Alex to take her home. As they leave, he says that he, too, was moved by the excavation. She apologises for her earlier anger, but he says 'our situation is quite clear. We've made a decision. You don't have to make any excuses.'

*Children* As they drive back to the villa, he talks about getting a lawyer and starting proceedings, while she reflects that their marriage failed because they had no children. He points out that she didn't want a child and that he agreed. He also says it would be worse if a child were involved in their divorce.

*Second thoughts* 'Will it [divorce] be painful?' she asks and he says 'no, just complicated.' Their car can't get through a large crowd gathered to watch a religious festival. Unable to move, they get out and watch people pray to an effigy of the Madonna. 'They're like a bunch of children,' he says, to which, she replies, 'Children are happy.' When she makes a last-ditch attempt to reconcile their differences, he won't listen.

*Miracle* Suddenly, someone screams, 'A miracle!' In the chaos, she is swept away by the onrushing crowd and calls out to him. He pushes through to get her and they embrace. 'I don't want to lose you,' she cries. He softens and says, 'Katherine, what's wrong with us?' She makes him say 'I love you' and they embrace. A miracle, indeed.

## THEMES

1. *Marriage* This is the story of a marriage on the rocks that is saved by a miracle. Katherine and Alex have endured eight years of a loveless union, with no affinity, affection or children. The two are diametric opposites, the romantic woman with the workaholic male, though the scales of sympathy are heavily tipped toward poor Katherine. The journey to Italy to sell a house is an excuse, on her part, to rekindle their romance, but it only exposes and then enlarges the emotional gap between them. Cut off from their daily routines at home, in which they seemed 'perfectly happy,' they now have to confront each as individuals. They find that they are strangers and, worse, that they don't even like each other. They separate physically when he goes to Capri to flirt with women, while she buries her anxiety in the museums of Naples. The film unveils the breakdown of a marriage with precision, noting each little raised eyebrow or caustic remark that adds to a volcanic eruption that comes at the end when they declare that they want a divorce. There is no single reason, no infidelity (though Alex contemplated cheating on her), no revelation and no skeletons in the closet. That would have made the disintegration of their relationship more dramatic and more typical of other films about marital breakdown. Instead, Rossellini, the neo-realist, shows us how a series of ordinary moments and undramatic events can slowly accumulate and result in a sensational conclusion. Married life, the film reminds us, is often boring and frustrating; couples drift apart without knowing it, until it's too late. Only a miracle saved this banal marriage (and the film) from ending with pain.

2. *Jealousy* If we had to single out one factor that poisons their marriage more than others, it would be jealousy. Both partners fall prey to this corrosive emotion, and more than once. First, when they bump into Alex's friends in their hotel in Naples, Katherine takes note of his more than polite attention to a particularly attractive woman. When she asks if he knows her well, his curt answer is 'yes.' Similarly, he is annoyed when she dazzles the men at a gathering in a rich family's house where they go for dinner. 'Jealous?' she asks him, and he brushed it aside, but we know that he was jealous. When Alex separates himself from Katherine and enjoys a few days on Capri, a perceptive woman tells him that he is jealous about his wife. That makes us think back to an earlier scene, when Katherine told him about Charles, her poet friend before their marriage. Piqued, he demanded to know if she had been in love with him. She said no, convincingly, but added that they had a great rapport. From then on, Charles and his poetry becomes a sore point with Alex. Somehow, he can't forget the passion with which Katherine described her last meeting with Charles, before the marriage. Once that worm of jealousy has burrowed into his thick skull, it torments him. As for Katherine, she is mildly annoyed at Alex's debonair behaviour with other women, but she would have been shocked by his near-infidelity with a prostitute he picked up on the streets of Naples and extremely angry at his serious flirtation with a young woman who turned out to be missing her husband. The jealousy that each feels is both a symptom of their lack of rapport and a cause of their breakdown.

3. *Culture* It is also important that this is a journey to Italy, not to some dreary English seaside town. All the drama takes place in a country famed for its romance, art, history and religion, and under the shadow of the fiery and volatile Mt Vesuvius. From the beginning, Italy itself becomes part of the story. The place is noisy, there are too many insects, the wine is good, the food spicy and the people relaxed. Alex notes that it's a good country to sleep in and begins to relax himself. Katherine becomes more immersed in history and culture, through the museums and her drives into Naples, where she sees Madonna shrines and pregnant women. While workaholic Alex is bored, she is charmed by an Italian phrase (*dolce far niente*), which roughly means: 'how sweet it is to do nothing.' Three cultural experiences play a more direct role in the story. First, Katherine visits the catacombs with its thousands of disinterred skulls and where Natalie prays for a child, which sets a train of thought in her about her own childlessness. Then comes their visit to Pompeii where they witness the discovery of two skeletons buried two thousand years ago. 'Perhaps husband and wife,' their archaeologist friend Burton says. Deeply affected, Katherine has Alex take her home, and he also admits to have been moved by the experience. Lastly, they get caught up in the religious devotion of a saint's procession. Briefly separated, they find each other and embrace. Skulls in the catacombs, skeletons in Pompeii and a religious festival—together they create an unexpected shift in their hearts and they are reunited.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Alex** Alex is a dour business man, who nearly always wears an expression of disapproval, of Italy and of his wife. He is querulous, sarcastic and downright hostile to Katherine. A workaholic, Alex finds Italy a curious mixture of noise, boredom and insects, and he can't stop thinking about the

business deals back home in London. Cold, distant and complacent, he has an epiphany at the end and finds a hidden source of compassion.

**Sarcastic** Alex has perfected the art of sarcasm, a weapon he frequently uses to belittle his wife. Among the many examples is a conversation between them shortly after they have arrived and settled into the villa. It opens with a relaxing shot of them soaking up the sun on the terrace, though, being English in the 1950s, Alex is still wearing a tweed coat and tie. Katherine reminisces about her recently deceased friend Charles, who was in Naples during the war. But sourpuss Alex remembers his cough. 'That young man starting me thinking that you could learn more about a man from the way he coughs than from the way he speaks.' His tone is insolent, and she asks what he learned from Charles' cough. 'That he was a fool,' he answers. Katherine protests that he was not a fool because he was a poet. 'What's the difference?' Alex replies with a little chuckle. Throughout this scene, Alex keeps his eyes closed and enjoys the sun, as if his wife's words don't interest him. His comment that poets are fools not only insults his wife's dead friend but also typifies his flippant disregard of culture.

**Censorious** Another weapon in Alex's ongoing battle with his wife is his criticism of her. An illustrative scene arrives when the couple arrive home after going to a dinner party. Annoyed by the male attention she attracted, Alex begins with an ordinary question ('Have a good time?'), but he makes it sound like an accusation. When Katherine says he has ruined their marriage, he hits back. 'You haven't said a word or made a gesture to save what little is left of our marriage!' When she asks why she should make an effort, he lashes out again, 'Because it's all your fault! The whole thing is your fault.' When Katherine says that he has always criticised her, he dismisses this as 'nonsense' but goes on to list the 'few things' he doesn't like about her—including her 'ridiculous romanticism and lack of a sense of humour.' This is Alex at his most disagreeable. Blaming his wife for their marital breakdown (surely a shared responsibility) is just part of his constant criticism of her and her behaviour.

**Transformed** The smug and sneering Alex undergoes a change in the final section of the film, which begins when the couple witness the exhumation of skeletons at Pompeii. Watching the unearthing of two long dead bodies, possibly husband and wife, he seems to reflect on his own life with Katherine. Together, they walk back through the empty streets of the ancient town, and for once, he says nothing. He helps her down the awkward stone steps. 'I understand how you feel,' he says. 'I was pretty moved myself.' It is the first time they share their feelings and, more important, that they find that they are in harmony. He does throw out a mildly sarcastic remark, but he is unusually thoughtful as they exit from the ruins. His transformation is completed a few minutes later when their car gets stuck in the crowd attending a street procession for a saint. He admits that the divorce will be painful, but rebuffs her last-minute attempt at reconciliation. Then, he gets out of the car, stands with the crowd and watches the religious spectacle. For the first time, he lets himself go and is swept away by the rhythms of local life. Still, he refuses to listen to Katherine's regrets until she is lost to him in the crowd. It is only for a few seconds, but in that flash of time, he realises what she means to him. He fights through the crowd, grabs her and asks, "Katherine, what's wrong with us? Why do we torture one another?" They stand together and watch a cured cripple wave his crutches in the air. It is his epiphany, a moment of revelation.

**Katherine** Katherine is the weaker one in the conflict, a wife whose husband belittles and blames her. She has a distracted air, partly caused by her marital trouble, and partly by her romantic temperament. Although lost and lonely, she does fight back in the marital slanging matches and gets a few good punches in. Mostly, though, she is both hurt and angered by her husband's behaviour. 'You don't realise how mean you can be sometimes. It's more than anyone could stand,' she tells him. That is Katherine, outspoken yet forgiving at the same time.

**Insecure** Katherine is often denigrated by Alex, who belittles her friends and undermines her confidence. She does sometimes retaliate, but she is always on the defensive. A good example occurs during a furious exchange with Alex, when he lists the things he dislikes about her. Listening to him, she says that he has 'crushed' her with his criticism and says she was 'reduced in rank from a wife to a mere hostess' for his business friends and assistant to handle his 'public relations.' These words are spoken in anger and refer to the past, but they are consistent with what we have seen in the story to this point. Katherine is not appreciated by her husband, which is evident in her increasingly painful facial expressions. She fights back but always with regret, not wanting to hurt him. The marriage is falling apart, and she feels insecure.

**Sharp-tongued** The battle between the sexes is not completely one-sided, however. At rare but

telling moments, Katherine does hit back with mockery of her own. In the argument described above, for example, after she has absorbed a heavy load of her husband's criticism, blaming her for the marital breakdown, she strikes at him. When he complains about lazy Italy and wanting to get back to work, she exclaims, 'Oh! At last, that big word. I haven't heard you mention it for a while. Work? I suppose you'll be talking about duty next.' She enjoys this little moment of mocking him, throwing back her head, smiling to herself and sipping her cocktail. What we learn from this example is that Katherine is not completely a doormat. She has spirit and a sharp-tongue.

**Romantic** Alex 'accuses' her of being a romantic, a description that is accurate and flattering, despite his intended criticism. The most explicit example of her romanticism is the scene where the couple are relaxing in the sun on their terrace. With Vesuvius looming behind them, Katherine closes her eyes and remembers her dead poet friend Charles. 'He was thin, tall, fair,' she says, with misty eyes. 'So pale and spiritual.' Then she recites some of his poetry: 'Temple of the spirit. No longer bodies, but pure aesthetic images, compared to which mere thoughts seem flesh.' They were not lovers, that would have been too physical, but they shared a spiritual rapport. Her description of the poet is ethereal, like his poetry. In another story, we might say this is a parody of the dead poet, but here it reveals Katherine's longing for a side of life outside Alex's obsession with work.

**Burton** Mr Burton is not a major character, but he does play an important role in the drama. An Englishman who married an Italian and lives in Naples, Burton is an affable person, full of warm thoughts and memories, presenting a contrast with the irascible Alex. Burton is also an archaeologist who works at Pompeii, just outside Naples.

**Warm-hearted** We gain a sense of Mr Burton in this first appearance, when he guides the couple to the villa outside Naples. 'Too bad you want to sell it,' he says. 'It's such a beautiful place.' Then, he goes on to explain how he protected it from theft and neglect during the war. He next describes how Uncle Homer came into the picture, stayed in Capri and then took over the villa. 'Homer was the kind of man you couldn't help liking,' he says with fondness for his now deceased friend. Burton continues to tell his story, adding that he went to Venice, got engaged and returned to Naples with his wife, where Homer welcomed them as part of his family. 'Homer became just like a father to us,' he says wistfully. In this brief scene, we see that Burton is warm-hearted and generous, a stark contrast with Alex, who is listening without speaking.

**Enthusiastic** Burton is also a man of passion about his work as an archaeologist at Pompeii. That quality is revealed in an important scene, toward the end of the story. Katherine and Alex have just decided to get a divorce when Burton comes bounding up to them and says he wants to take them to Pompeii, immediately! When they try to back out, he won't hear it. 'But you've got to come,' he cries, 'It's a special occasion.' He describes the recent discovery of bodies at the site. 'Imagine. To actually see the shape of a man just as he was then. The moment you are surprised by death. It's an extraordinary experience!' Burton is proved right. After viewing the bodies, the couple began to warm toward each other and eventually are reconciled. And it all began because Burton's enthusiasm brought them to Pompeii.



(The couple together, yet apart, in the car)



(The estranged couple brought together in the crowd)



(Relaxing with Vesuvius in the background)