

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Obsession (Obsessione)*** 1943

Luchino Visconti

### OVERVIEW

*Obsession*, which was Visconti's feature debut, is based on a French translation of *The Postman always Knocks Twice*, an American crime thriller by James M Cain. Visconti and his collaborators kept to the basic plot but shifted the emphasis from a 'crime-doesn't-pay' message to the interior lives of the lovers, highlighting their guilt and dreams. He also introduced the Spaniard, a character not found in the novel. When the film was released in 1943, Visconti was already under surveillance of Mussolini's fascist government, and the film, especially its portrayal of extra-marital sex, was denounced by censors as 'un-Italian' and prints were destroyed. Fortunately, Visconti had hidden one print, without which the film would not have survived the war. Its screening in the United States was delayed for thirty years because Visconti had not obtained the necessary rights to Cain's novel. In fact, MGM made and released another film based on the novel, using the same title, in 1946. No matter how the story is told, however, or when the film is viewed, its raw portrayal of dangerous desire, betrayal, murder and retribution is stunning. Sometimes called the first neo-realist film, it certainly confronts the realities of life for the working class and sets the story in an unromantic rural Italy.

### SYNOPSIS

When an itinerant worker, named Gino, shows up at a petrol station and restaurant, he attracts the eye of the owner's wife, Giovanna. They start a sexual affair and run off together, but a mile down the road, Giovanna turns around and returns to her husband because she doesn't want to live without security. Gino continues on and meets a Spaniard, who shares his love of the open road and tries to pull him away from Giovanna, whom Gino cannot forget. One day, Giovanna and her husband bump into Gino and the love affair is rekindled, only now Giovanna convinces Gino to get rid of her husband. They stage a fake accident, in which the husband is killed, and all seems to be well, except that Gino is burdened with grief. He has a brief encounter with a girl named Anita, but is tracked down by Giovanna and, after a heated argument, the two lovers plan to run away for good. They cruise along a road, happy as clams, when their car skids off the road and down a river bank. Giovanna is killed, and Gino is arrested by the police.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Giovanna	Giovanna is married to Giuseppe.
Giuseppe	Giuseppe owns a petrol station and restaurant.
Gino	Gino is an itinerant labourer.
Spaniard	The Spaniard is a street-performer.
Anita	Anita is a dance-hall girl.

### STORY

*Tramp* A lorry stops at a petrol station, owned by Giuseppe, on a deserted country road. A tramp, Gino, is found sleeping in the back and told to get out. He wanders into the restaurant, which is attached to the petrol station and run by Giuseppe's young wife, Giovanna. Gino flirts with her, and she responds in kind. Giuseppe is angry to find the tramp being served food by his wife and throws him out. He leaves, but only after giving her a knowing smile.

*Little lies* Giovanna lies to her husband about Gino not paying, prompting him to run after Gino and demand that he pays. Since he has no more cash, Gino proposes that he help Giuseppe by repairing

his van. Gino pretends to find a damaged part and sends the duped Giuseppe away to buy a replacement. 'You can fix the water pump while I'm gone,' Giuseppe says. The two men then discover that they served in the same army regiment during the war and share a happy moment singing an old song. When Giuseppe and a priest cycle off, the coast is clear.

*Love affair* Gino begins in earnest to repair the water pump but hears Giovanna singing a love song and changes his mind. He goes inside the restaurant, locks the door and approaches Giovanna. After they make love, he promises to stick around. In response to his question, Giovanna explains that she 'married the old man' because she had no money and nowhere to go. Now, though, she hates her marriage because 'it's so dirty, so false.' He says she 'deserves to be a lady' and proposes that they go away together, but she doesn't want to live a penniless life on the road. She'll put up with her marriage, 'until something happens,' she says with menace.

*Part of the family* Giuseppe returns with the missing part, which Gino puts into the van and everything's fine. The pump has been fixed, too. Gino asks if he can stay for a few more days, doing odd jobs as payment for food, and Giuseppe accepts, citing the brotherhood of their common regiment. Gino is now part of the household, using Giuseppe's razor, eating with him and sleeping with his wife. When they hear the news that a local man has been murdered by his wife's lover, Gino and Giovanna look at each other but say nothing.

*Lovers flee* The next morning, after Giuseppe has gone fishing, the two lovers run away together. Soon, though, Giovanna realises it's a mistake because she isn't ready to tramp around without any money. She goes back, and Gino goes ahead and boards a train without a ticket. Fortunately, another passenger, a Spanish street performer, pays his fare to Ancona, a seaport. Having left Giovanna, Gino realises that he is madly in love with her, while the Spaniard advises him to go far away, out to sea.

*Reunion* Gino teams up with the Spaniard, carrying a sign board advertising the man's magic tricks. One day, by coincidence, the performer's audience includes Giuseppe and Giovanna. Giuseppe greets him cheerfully and the reunited trio go to a restaurant where an amateur opera singing contest is taking place. When Giuseppe takes the stage and sings an aria from La Traviata, Gino tells her that he can't live without her, but she again refuses to go away with him. Giuseppe's performance is well received and he buys drinks all around, getting drunk himself. He's also happy because Giovanna is pregnant. On their way back to the petrol station, guided by a silent look from Giovanna, Gino takes over the driving.

*Faked accident* In the next scene, police are investigating the car accident that killed Giuseppe. Gino, nursing fake injuries, explains that Giuseppe was drunk and lost control of the car, which rolled down the hill. The police want to know why his wife was unhurt. 'Maybe she jumped,' offers Gino. 'Jumped? With her hat and purse?' the officer says. Giovanna comes running up to them and explains that she found her purse and hat after the crash. The police inspector accepts, for the time being, that it was an 'accidental death' but says that further investigation may be necessary.

*Guilt* Returning to the petrol station, Giovanna says they must reopen the shop, but Gino is subdued. 'Yes, this is what we wanted,' he says, but he wants to leave because the shop reminds him of the man they killed. A customer comes and a moody Gino is forced into the role of serving him. Giovanna says they have no choice but to run the shop in order to earn money, but Gino wants to sell the place and go away.

*Another reunion* Giovanna organises an event with a band in order to attract customers to the restaurant, while Gino begins to drink too much. The Spaniard shows up, compliments him on his 'nice settled life' and then accuses him of being a 'coward'. Gino knocks him down in a burst of anger, and his violent action is witnessed by a man. Giovanna is happy with the profit from the party, but Gino is still burdened with guilt.

*Life insurance* While waiting in a nearby town one day, Gino flirts with a woman, Anita, who is a dancer with a touring company. After she goes to rehearsal, Giovanna comes out of an office and tells him that her husband had a life insurance policy worth 50,000 lira but the company asked her a

lot of questions. Gino says he doesn't want to touch the money and suspects Giovanna of using him to kill her husband just to get it. Enraged, he leaves her and goes to Anita's flat, where she is ready for sex but he is not.

*Confession* Giovanna follows him and waits in a café outside Anita's building. When Gino emerges with Anita, who is also a part-time prostitute, Giovanna confronts him on the street, causing Anita to run away. Giovanna tries to persuade Gino to come back to her, but he says no. She threatens to tell the police about what happened and he slaps her. Gino returns to Anita and confesses to the crime.

*Eye-witnesses* Two men who were first on the scene of the 'accident' tell the police inspector that they saw Gino and Giovanni climbing up the river bank as the car was still rolling down. The Spaniard also appears in the police station, but we are not sure what he tells them.

*Escape* Looking out of Anita's window, Gino sees an undercover policeman and assumes that Giovanni has told the police. He gets Anita to distract the man, while he escapes through the roof but then sees police looking for him at the train station. He reverts to old ways and jumps on the back of a truck and returns to the petrol station.

*Pregnant* At the station, Giovanna tells him that she didn't report him and that she is pregnant with his child. 'We stole one life,' she says to him, 'but we're giving one back.' Their conversation is overheard by a young boy who helps at the restaurant. When Gino asks if he thinks he is a bad man, the boy says no.

*New start* Gino leaves, and Giovanna finds him the next day on the beach. He says he's ready to put the past behind them and start a new life with her because he now knows that he really loves her and that he himself is a new person. They kiss and lie in the sand.

*Fatal crash* When they wake up, they realise that the police must still be looking for him and they must escape. They get in the truck from the petrol station and drive away, like two lovers eloping. Giovanna speaks with optimism about her future baby, but fear of the police lingers between them. When they try to overtake a truck, their car careens over a cliff and into the same river where Giuseppe died. This time, Giovanna dies. Gino drags her dead body from the water and up the bank, where the police arrest him.

## THEMES

1. *Sexual desire* The dominant theme of this film is the destructive nature of obsessive sexual desire. It seems that Visconti set out to attack the romanticised image of love as depicted in so many Italian films and novels. For instance, he juxtaposes Giuseppe's singing of love songs ('It's love that bears us toward heaven...') with a shot of Gino listening and being overcome with sexual passion. That passion leads him inside the restaurant, where he meets Giovanna, who says he's built 'like a horse.' They flirt and, when Giuseppe leaves, engage in love-making that is more animal lust than tender affection. The animal in heat image is also reinforced by the repeated references to the hot weather and the cats howling outside. Giovanna also describes her marital sex as 'dirty' and her husband's hand on her as 'fat'. The carnal nature of the love between the two main characters is later highlighted by the gentle way that Gino goes to bed with Anita, a casual acquaintance. The danger of obsessive desire is also driven home during the scene of the amateur singing contest. The arias we hear all speak of seduction, betrayal and deception, while at the same time we watch as Gino and Giovanna rekindle their lust for each other. She needs him, desperately, to lift her out of her unhappy, loveless marriage, and he cannot shake off the sexual desire that binds him to her. They are both doomed by their obsessive love, which began with a lie (Giovanna telling her husband that Gino had not paid) and developed into a noose around both their necks.

2. *Dreams* The second theme in this film, threaded into the first, is the power of dreams. Right after their first love-making session, the two main characters drift into imaginary worlds. Giovanna does not want to be married to the 'fat man' and yearns for a different life. She hates being a cook and smiles when Gino says she 'deserves to be a lady'. Earlier, Giuseppe mocked her, saying, 'Think you're a lady, painting her nails all day?' Speaking with Gino, she sighs and says that she 'not

a lady, just an unlucky woman.' As for Gino, right after having sex, while listening to her dreams of a better life, he picks up a seashell and listens to the sounds coming from inside. Then he puts the shell to her ear and proposes that they go away together. It is one of the few moments that he is happy, imagining a life inspired by the sounds of a seashell. Unfortunately, the sound of a seashell is not realistic enough for her, and he is too addicted to his 'tramping around' to settle down. Neither of their dreams is realisable because each dream requires the other, who cannot fulfil his or her role within the first person's vision of happiness.

**3. Guilt** A third theme in the film is the guilt that weighs heavily on Gino's mind. By nature, he is a cheerful and carefree person, who just happens to fall madly in love with a married woman. And, blinded by that lust, he goes along with an unspoken plan to do away with the obstacle of her husband. The problem is that he actually liked 'fat old' Giuseppe, who was very chummy and with whom he shared memories of the army. As soon as the deed is done, Gino wants to run away because he keeps seeing the image of the dead man around the petrol station. He becomes moody, drinks a lot and for the rest of the story looks for an escape. He does, briefly, separate himself from the guilt when he meets Anita, but it all floods back when he tells her what he did. Looking empty-eyed, he sighs and says, 'I'll never be my old self.' He is haunted by the murder he has committed, trapped as much by the crime as by his lust for Giovanna.

**4. Crime and Punishment** A more structural theme in the film is the inevitability of retribution and the inexorable punishment that follows after a crime. This inescapable consequence of the murder is signalled more explicitly in the title of the source novel (*The Postman Always Knocks Twice*), with its suggestion that 'the cops will get you in the end.' In the film, the self-destructive love between Gino and Giovanna was always doomed to end as tragedy. It was a curse whose predestination is dramatized in the numerous examples of repetition that occur in the story. For instance, Giovanna uses the same phrase ('It's like I don't exist') when speaking of Giuseppe's and then of Gino's indifference to her. Even more telling is the identical sentence spoken first by Giovanna and then by Anita: 'He didn't pay me.' In both cases, it is a lie, the first by Giovanna to make sure Gino doesn't leave the petrol station, and, second by Anita to ensure that he can escape from the police. And, finally, there is the repeated escape and car crash, the first planned to look like an accident, and the second a genuine accident. When Giovanna is killed and the police arrive on the scene, Gino says nothing. He is led away without a word of protest because this ending was foretold from the minute he laid lustful eyes on another man's wife. His punishment was built into the crimes of adultery and murder.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Gino** Gino is a likable chap. Young, handsome and well-built, he has no obligations and no worries. He lives like a tramp, but he is, in fact, a semi-skilled labourer who moves from place to place, picking up jobs. Although he loves his life on the open road, he falls desperately in love with Giovanna. He is a dreamer, and he shows tenderness, too, but he is a doomed man.

**Itinerant** Gino is happiest when on the road, tramping around the countryside, doing odd jobs. That carefree life is threatened when he develops an obsession for Giovanna. But still he wants to be free to roam, a desire that is expressed in the scene when they first make love. Although she makes him promise that he'll never leave her, 'not even to go back on the road,' his wanderlust emerges when he picks up a seashell and listens to its sound. Putting it to her ear, he smiles and says, 'Suppose we go away, you and me, together.' That is his dream, inspired by the imagined sound of the sea, to integrate Giovanna into his itinerant life, a dream he tries to make come true throughout the story.

**Trapped** The essential problem for Gino is that his passionate love for Giovanna is not compatible with that carefree life on the road. He feels trapped by those conflicting desires, as illustrated in a scene with the Spaniard when they check into a hotel. He has just left Giovanna, who wasn't ready to go on the road with him. Now, talking with the Spaniard, he realises how unfree he is. 'Never before have I met a woman like her,' he reflects. He also says that the Spaniard's ideas about the virtues of generosity and movement are beyond him. There's only one thing he understands: 'I'll never be happy without her.' He explains that he didn't bring her with him because 'she's not like us'. He is right. She is not like him, yet he cannot let her go. He is trapped.

**Contrite** Trapped by those two desires, Gino is drawn into a plan to murder Giuseppe. The plan is never put into words, but he is guided by Giovanna's eyes and their shared desire to be rid of her husband. After they kill him in the faked accident, they return to the petrol station, where Giovanna is

full of optimism for the future, while Gino is haunted by what he has done. When he enters the restaurant, it is deep in shadows, like those in his mind. He goes to the calendar hanging on the wall and begins to tear off the days, as if he were trying to wipe out the past. She speaks of opening the business and of their happy future, but he is disturbed and says little. Suddenly, he bursts out. 'We must leave this place,' he cries, 'because I'll always see him.' She says they are finally alone, but for him, there will always be that third person, the one he murdered. Perhaps because he was the passive one in the crime that now he is conscience-stricken and will never forget.

**Affectionate** Gino is basically a kind person, which makes his part in the murder so out of character. He is affectionate toward Giovanna, although that tenderness fades as the tragedy of their love affair develops. His affectionate nature also emerges in his brief acquaintance with Anita, the dance-hall girl he picks up on the street. He likes her, but does not desire her as he does Giovanna. That difference, it seems, enables him to show real tenderness toward Anita. He flirts with her, buys her an ice cream and later visits her apartment, where she starts to undress (she's a part-time prostitute). But he isn't interested in sex. He pats her hair like a little girl and sits down without speaking. She prepares some tea and they share a little food. Now, he is smiling, without regrets, without worries. This scene illustrated the person Gino was before he met Giovanna.

**Giovanna** Giovanna is a young woman who married for security rather than love. She feels she deserves more than to be a cook and help manage a petrol station owned by her old and unattractive husband. In fact, she is desperately unhappy, ready to do whatever it takes to change her life. At the same time, she is practical and will not return to a life of poverty. Of all the figures in the film, she is most tragic since her desire to be free leads to her death.

**Unhappy** When we first meet Giovanna, she is miserable. Married to an older man for practical reasons, she loathes his pawing of her and her role as his cook. Her deep unhappiness is revealed in the scene after she first makes love with Gino. She explains that she married Giuseppe because she was penniless and he bought her a meal. But being married to him, she says to Gino, is even worse than being poor. Slumping down on a chair, she says, 'Every time he touches me with those fat hands, I want to scream.' Gino has said she deserves to 'be a lady', but she does not hide from the reality of her life. 'I'm not a lady,' she laments. 'I'm just an unlucky woman.'

**Pragmatic** Despite her desperate love for Gino, Giovanna remains a practical person. She knows that a life on the road would simply be a return to her previous penniless existence, which was the reason she got married to old Giuseppe in the first place. Her level-headed nature is revealed in the early scene when Gino convinces her to run away with him. They are walking down a deserted country road, Gino carrying a suitcase and playing a harmonica, with Giovanna trailing behind on her high heels. 'Wait,' she cries. 'I can't go on.' He urges her to hurry, so they can get to the station and catch a train. 'And then what?' she asks, wearily. 'No,' she adds, shaking her head. 'It's impossible. It won't work.' She isn't cut out for the itinerant life. When he continues on, leaving her by the roadside, she is crestfallen, but she is also sensible enough to know what she wants and doesn't want.

**Ruthless** Giovanna wants both Gino and a secure income, which is why she is desperate to get rid of Giuseppe and have Gino take his place running the business with her. If that means killing her husband, so be it. Her decision to kill him is never spoken aloud to Gino, her accomplice, but it is clear, nevertheless, especially in a scene that begins during the operatic singing contest. As the singers lament a lover's betrayal, she looks at Gino with wide eyes that say 'ok, we know what to do.' When they reach the garage with their car, she pulls him aside and kisses him with passion. 'Now! Understand? Now!' Gino looks scared, unsure and passive, but Giovanna has made her decision. They will kill.

**Happy** Giuseppe's death finally brings her happiness, a release from the torment that she described to Gino when they first made love, so long ago. After she finds Gino on the beach and they make up, they finally go away together. As they cruise down the open road, Giovanna is bursting with hope. She is pregnant and looks forward to her 'breasts filling with milk' for her baby. 'You don't know what it's like with a baby inside you,' she says. 'I don't care if I look ugly. Just the opposite. I want everyone to see.' This is Giovanna's dream come true at last. At the beginning of the story, she'd told Gino that she was an 'unlucky woman', and now she's the happiest woman on earth. It lasts for only a few moments, but her joy is genuine.

**Giuseppe** Giuseppe is a barrel of a man, who laughs with his big belly. Older than his wife, he likes to control her, though he remains wilfully ignorant of her desire to leave him. He is outgoing and, after some initial suspicion, strikes up a friendship with Gino. Although likable, especially to men, one can appreciate why Giovanna is so unhappy with her marriage to him.

**Gregarious** One of Giuseppe's admirable traits is his affability. Although he was at first suspicious of Gino, he is basically a congenial person, as illustrated in the scene of the operatic singing contest. He treats Gino and Giovanna to food and drinks, while he sits on stage waiting for his turn to perform. When he sings, it is a full rich baritone, blending in with the convivial atmosphere of the tavern, its cheerful audience and their full glasses. After the performance, the half-drunk Giuseppe bubbles on about how he paid for the drinks, how he makes money and how he will have a son with Giovanna. He is full of beans, laughing at his own poor jokes and slapping his wife on her behind. Poor Giuseppe. He is vulnerable to those who want to take advantage of his unguarded, gregarious nature.

**Bossy** Although companionable, Giuseppe is a mini dictator when it comes to his wife and their roles. He criticises her for paying attention to her appearance ('Think you're a lady? Painting your nails all day.') and treats her like a cook who should also produce a child. A good illustration of this attitude occurs in an early scene in the restaurant. He has hired Gino to repair his truck and is about to leave with the priest. He orders Giovanna to get his hat and coat, and then to fetch his bicycle, which is only a few feet from him. As he leaves, Giovanna asks him about Gino and he says that Gino is a mechanic who will stay to fix the truck. When Giovanna sneers at this, Giuseppe takes offence. 'It's my house,' he says in a stern voice. 'I'm the boss.' The bossy husband is quick to put his wife in her place, especially in front of guests.

**Naïve** Although Giuseppe is initially suspicious of the 'tramp,' his outgoing personality leaves him open to deception. And while he likes to think he controls his wife, he is naïve in not realising her pent-up sexual desire. All this is illustrated in the opening scenes, when Gino arrives and doesn't leave. First, Giuseppe falls prey to Giovanna's little ruse about Gino not paying, which leads him to arrange for the tramp to stay around while he goes fishing. He is similarly deceived by Gino when the 'mechanic' fools him into thinking that he needs to replace a damaged part for his truck, which leaves the young wife and young tramp alone together. A more worldly-wise man, one less given to trusting others, would have realised that he was being duped. But he cycles off with the priest, without a hint of doubt concerning Giovanna's desires or Gino's intentions.

**Spaniard** The Spaniard, so-called because he spent years in Spain, is a street-performer, who is a soulmate to Gino. Like him, he likes life on the open road, working here and there and moving on when it suits him. Consistent with that life-style, he is generous with his money and helps out strangers. He also has a philosophical streak to him, though it baffles Gino. He is a character not found in the source novel and was invented by the director to symbolise Gino's dream of a life without attachments in opposition to the settled life represented by Giovanna.

**Generous** The Spaniard is, above all else, a generous person. That quality is displayed in his first scene, when Gino boards the train without a ticket or any money. As soon as the conductor orders Gino to get off, a voice is heard. 'What's this? Pushing a gentleman off a train?' The Spaniard then offers to pay Gino's fare, plus the fine, which adds up to a considerable amount. Gino goes over and thanks the man, who shrugs and says, 'Forget it. We have to help each other.' After a few more words, the stranger tells Gino that he can work with him if he likes because 'two are better than one.' This is the Spaniard's natural inclination, to help someone in need.

**Philosophical** His generosity has a layer of philosophy, too, as the Spaniard explains to Gino when they take a room together in Ancona, the port town at the end of the railway line. After he pays for their shared room, he says, 'You see, Gino, money has legs and should always be on the move. Otherwise it gets mouldy in your pocket...Money made in Rome helps people in Torino, Palermo...' Gino looks bewildered and later says that he doesn't understand what he has said. The Spaniard's idea is that people and money should not be stagnant because they are healthiest when in motion. It is an intriguing point of view, a little like free-market economics mixed with hygiene and a love of the open road.



(Giovanna)



(Giuseppe, right, confronts Gino at the beginning)



(Gino and Giovanna after love-making)



(The lovers' first attempt to flee)