

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS** (*I giardino dei Finzi-Contini*) 1970 Vittorio De Sica

**OVERVIEW** *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* was De Sica's second film about World War II. However, in marked contrast with *Two Women*, this later film tells its story from a distance, as an elegy to the past, symbolised by the walled garden of a wealthy Jewish family in Italy. It is also focused not on the war but on the political situation on the home front, in the town of Ferrara, where two Jewish families react to the increasing number of racial laws enacted by Mussolini's government. It is a story of lost love and lost lives, of youthful innocence and sexuality, of political expediency and political passivity. De Sica based his film on the 1962 novel of the same title by Giorgio Bassani, although the author disliked the adaptation. The film won prestigious awards, including the Golden Bear (Best Film) at Berlin and Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards).

**SYNOPSIS** In the town of Ferrara, young people gather to play tennis in the garden of the Finzi-Continis. Because they are (mostly) Jewish, they have been expelled from the Tennis Club. Young Micol and Alberto are the daughter and son of the family, who have invited their friends, including Giorgio, who is in love with Micol, and Giampiero, a non-Jew, who becomes her lover. These romances are played out as fascist laws restrict the lives of Jews and the drum roll of war grows louder. The Finzi-Continis can shelter behind their estate walls, while families like Giorgio's must engage with the political reality on the streets. Giorgio is rejected by Micol because he is too much like her, and too much part of her past. Alberto contracts a serious illness and dies. Giampiero is conscripted and is killed in battle on the Russian front. Slowly, the net closes in on everyone else, and both Giorgio's family and Micol's family (minus Alberto) are rounded up for deportation to the camps. Only Giorgio escapes, with his mother and two siblings.

### **MAIN CHARACTERS**

Micol	The daughter in the Finzi-Contini family.
Alberto	Her brother.
Giorgio	Her childhood friend, who still loves her.
Father	Giorgio's father is unnamed.
Giampiero	Giampiero is a non-Jew who is Alberto's friend and Micol's lover.

### **STORY**

*Italy 1930s* It is 1938 in Ferrara, a prosperous town in northern Italy. A group of young people in tennis clothes pedal their bicycles up to a walled compound. Inside, they ride some distance across parkland to a tennis court, where they join Alberto Finzi-Contini and his sister Micol, who have invited them for a tournament. As Jews, the Finzi-Continis and some of their guests have been barred from entering the club where they had been members before the rise of Mussolini. While they play tennis or watch others play, their conversation is littered with negative comments about the fascists. Alberto confesses that he doesn't go out much because he knows he will encounter fascists on the street and feels spied on.

*Giorgio* In a flashback, a teenage Micol speaks to a teenage Giorgio over the high wall of the Finzi-Contini estate. She invites him to climb over, but their meeting is broken up by a family servant. Giorgio remains outside the garden until, ten years later, in the present, he joins the tennis tournament. It is clear that he still loves Micol, who is vague in her responses to him.

*Giorgio's father* At home, Giorgio has a heated argument with his father (who is Jewish but belongs to the ruling fascist party) when the older man makes insinuations about the Finzi-Continis. Giorgio throws the day's newspaper at him and rushes from the room. The headline is that Jews are no longer allowed to marry non-Jews or attend state schools, thus preventing Giorgio from earning his degree at university. In addition, Jews can no longer hire Aryan servants. 'How can we cope?' asks Giorgio's mother.

*Attempt at reconciliation* Giorgio's father seeks out his son and tries to explain that things 'aren't that

bad.' After listing all the things that they as Jews are no longer permitted to enjoy, he says that 'we can still live, move about, own property.' Giorgio, however, is not persuaded.

*Back to the tennis tournament* Micol is in conversation with Giampiero, one of the tennis players who doesn't play much and isn't Jewish. He taunts her, and she insults him by saying he's too much a 'business type' (i.e., not from an intellectual family like hers). Mr and Mrs Finzi-Contini, and various aunts and uncles, wander through the garden and say hello to the young guests. When a rain shower drives Micol and Giorgio into an empty building, they reminisce about their childhood friendship and she flirts with him. But when he attempts to embrace her, she rejects him.

*Micol missing* Inside the big house, Alberto and Giampiero talk over a game of chess. Micol joins them and takes a telephone call from Giorgio. When Giampiero overhears her say she will see him the next day, he gets upset and abruptly leaves the house. But when Giorgio calls at the house in the morning, he is told that Alberto is ill and that Micol has left for Venice with her uncles, without leaving him a message.

*Library* Giorgio is furious when he is thrown out of the university library because he is Jewish. The director is apologetic, but 'there are rules,' he says. Fortunately, Giorgio is allowed to use the extensive library in the Finzi-Continis' mansion, where he continues his studies into Italian poetry. Meanwhile, Alberto remains ill in bed, though he often telephones and speaks to Micol in Venice, where she is completing her thesis.

*Danger and surprise* Giorgio's brother, Ernesto, is sent to Grenoble, France, to study and to remove him from fascist danger. During a family Passover feast, Giorgio answers the telephone but no one is on the other end. Ominously, this happens twice, creating fear among the guests. A third caller turns out to be Alberto. He tells Giorgio to come over because he has a surprise for him. That surprise turns out to be Micol, who has returned from Venice with her university degree. He kisses her, but again there is no response. They join Alberto, now recovered, and the adult Finzi-Continis. A special Venetian glass brought back by Micol is said to predict the future: Alberto will not get his degree; Micol may marry; a terrible war is coming.

*Final rejection* That evening, Giorgio visits Micol in her room, where she is reading in bed. She says she doesn't want to hurt him and doesn't want to ruin their childhood memories, but she has noticed something 'fake' in their relationship and that's why she stayed in Venice so long. He tries to kiss her, but she pushes him away and says it's best if they never meet again.

*Dachau* Later, at home that evening, Giorgio's father asks him to go to Grenoble to take money to his brother. With the war looming, they both know that it's best if he goes right away. Visiting his brother in Grenoble, Giorgio meets another Italian student who has been to Dachau concentration camp. 'I got out alive because I'm a coward,' he says to the astonished Giorgio. 'I told them I'd become a Nazi.'

*Back to Ferrara* When he returns to Ferrara and finds that Micol has become close to Giampiero, Giorgio stays away from the garden. Still, he and Giampiero become friends. When they go to a cinema and see footage of Nazi rallies, Giorgio makes fun of the Nazis and others in the audience turn on him. Giorgio goes to see Micol, against her wishes, and declares his love. She explains that they are too much alike and lack the spark for true love. He leaves, saying, 'I'll never come to this garden again.'

*Giampiero* Returning home, he runs into an excited crowd of fascists celebrating the declaration of war by Italy. He meets up with Giampiero, who has been drafted into the army. Giorgio explains that he no longer goes to the Finzi-Continis' house because he loves Micol too much. He and Giampiero have a heart-to-heart talk about his friendship with Micol, and then Giampiero is off to war.

*Lost love* Cycling home, he passes the garden wall and notices someone else's bike left on the outside. He climbs over, wanders into the garden and sees a light in a small building. Peering through a window, he sees Micol naked in bed after having sex with Giampiero. She sees him watching her and they lock eyes for a long minute until he skulks away. Back home, he has another intimate talk with his father, who consoles him about Micol, saying he'll get over it and that 'in order to really understand the world, you must die at least once.'

*Events* Alberto's condition has worsened and the doctor says he will not last long. His funeral procession, observed from a distance by Giorgio, is interrupted by an air raid. Giorgio learns that

Giampiero has been killed fighting on the Russian front. In cinemas, audiences watch more newsreels of the Allied bombing. A young man, who had been at the tennis party, is taken away by the secret police. All the Finzi-Continis, including an elderly woman and young Micol, are then herded into black cars and taken to an empty school building where they join other Jewish families. Inside, Micol sees Giorgio's father, who tells her that his wife and Giorgio escaped. They embrace in the hope that Giorgio will live.

*Finale* The film ends where it began, with a montage of the young people playing tennis in the garden.

## THEMES

*1. Politics* The film depicts the destruction of the sizable Jewish community in Ferrara during World War Two. Although Italian Jews did not die in the same numbers that Jews did in other parts of Europe, they suffered the same intimidation, discrimination and humiliation. And thousands died in the concentration camps. The film focuses on two, very different families. Micol and Alberto's family, the Finzi-Continis, are wealthy intellectuals who live on a vast estate, behind walls, inside their garden. Giorgio's family are also well-off, but they are forced to engage with the world and the political reality of the rise of fascism. Giorgio's father has even become a member of Mussolini's ruling party, a sort of pact with the devil. When the anti-Jewish laws are passed, one after the other, the Finzi-Continis take no notice, whereas Giorgio's family have to adjust. When it is forbidden to have non-Jewish house servants, for example, they do so in secret. The difference between the two families is summed up by Giorgio's father when he says, 'They're different. They don't even seem to be Jewish.'

The gradual rise of fascism in Ferrara underlies the personal dramas shown in the film. Civil rights of Jews are taken away, one by one. They can't marry 'Aryans', they can't go to university, they can't use the library and, of course, they can't play at the tennis club, which is the reason the film begins with the tennis tournament in the garden of the Finzi-Continis' estate. Also, scattered throughout the film are glimpses of newspaper headlines, political meetings, flags of Mussolini's political party and cinema newsreels of German Nazi rallies. People react differently to the political situation. Alberto and Micol are indifferent. Giorgio is angry. His father looks for accommodation. Other family members try to hide their fear. Giampiero, who is not Jewish, accepts his fate when he is conscripted.

In the end, the political reality of fascism breaks down the garden walls. Even the Finzi-Continis cannot remain separate from the world outside. They, too, are rounded up and await transit to a concentration camp. It is a grim ending that is only softened by the final shots of the young people enjoying themselves at the tennis party, oblivious of what is to come. The film offers no judgement, no message, because none is necessary. There is only a depiction of the political reality in one town, the dilemmas faced and the choices made by two families.

*2. Loss* Running in parallel with the rise of fascism, and partly caused by it, is the theme of loss. Depicting events that occurred three decades before it was made, the film is bathed in the soft colours of nostalgia. The key relationship between Giorgio and Micol is further distanced in time through the use of flashbacks into their teenage years. All the characters experience loss of one kind or another. For Giorgio, it is the loss of his childhood infatuation with Micol, which began in fairy tale fashion when he glimpsed the golden-haired damsel kept behind castle walls. Young love is transient and so it proves for Giorgio when Micol is attracted to a stranger. She doesn't want to remain a girl any more; she wants to feel herself to be a woman. Giorgio also loses his childhood friend Alberto to illness and his more recent friend Giampiero to gunfire. Micol wants to grow up and leave the garden of her youth. She does lose her sexual innocence but still retreats into her pre-fascist youth through her memories, which are visualised on screen. It is Giorgio's father who articulates the film's underlying elegy for the past when he comforts his son for the loss of Micol's love. 'In order to really understand the world,' he says, 'you must die at least once. So, it's better to die young, when there's time to recover and live again.' As a middle-aged man, he regrets the mistakes he and his generation made because now he has no time to recover. This theme of loss—of love, innocence and youth—is captured brilliantly by the tennis party, which both begins and ends the story. Those young and beautiful faces symbolise a carefree time before the horrors of fascism and war ruined their hopes.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Micol** Micol, the beautiful daughter, is an independent-minded character, both as a child and a young woman. When one young man is asked about her, he says, 'Very beautiful. She's tall and blond. But unpredictable.' That is an apt description of the young woman who is also well-educated; she is writing a thesis on Emily Dickinson, which is appropriate given that the American poet's verse explores intense feelings of love and pain. Micol loves her brother and she loves her garden especially the tall, exotic palms. She is ambiguous, difficult to read at times, but in the end shows her loyalty to Giorgio.

**Independent** As a young girl, Micol is already an independent-minded person, as illustrated in a flashback to childhood. She has climbed up a ladder to the top of the garden wall, from where she sees a young boy sleeping in the grass on the other side. Even without introducing herself, she tells him not to worry about flunking an exam. How does she know that? 'We have our ways to get information,' she says, nonchalantly. Then she invites him to climb over the wall, but he hesitates. 'C'mon,' she urges. 'I'll show you.' He says it's too high, but she points to the nails she's driven into the wall. Again, he hesitates. Then one of the house servants calls to her to get down because it's too dangerous. She tells him to stop shouting at her, but then relents and climbs down. This is a spirited young girl, not exactly a tom-boy, but one with her own mind. Bold as well as beautiful, she has intoxicated young Giorgio.

**Derisive** Micol can also be sharp-tongued when she wants. A good example is the mildly flirtatious exchange she has with Giampiero during the tennis party. Shown in a flashback halfway through the story, he begins by saying that she doesn't seem to like men. 'That's true,' she says, 'at least in your case.' When he wants to know why she doesn't like him and encourages her to speak frankly, she does. 'The first thing is you're too frank and, therefore, rude. Second, you're too much the industrious Lombard [i.e., not an intellectual like me]. Too much a communist, and lastly, too hairy.' All those attributes are accurate, especially the visible hair, which is consistent with his evident masculinity and which eventually attracts her. For now, though, she has sparred with him beside the tennis court and won 40-love.

**Perceptive** At first, as in the scene just described, Micol might seem superficial, the rich girl who coolly displays her obvious beauty. But as the film unfolds, we see hidden depths in her character. One such scene occurs when, defying Micol's wishes not to see her, Giorgio visits her again. He has come to tell her that he loves her, but she explains why she cannot return his romantic love. 'Love is for two people who overwhelm each other,' she says. 'But we are as alike as two drops of water. How could we ever overwhelm or tear each other apart? It would be like making love with a brother. We are not like ordinary people. For us material possessions don't count. For us, it's the remembrance of things.' Micol does not want to hurt Giorgio, for whom she has great affection, but she is forced to explain her feelings. Her painful explanation is perceptive and heartfelt.

**Sincere** Throughout the story, Micol behaves somewhat ambiguously with Giorgio. She loves him like a brother, but at times seems to encourage his romantic love. Does she lead him on? Does she misuse him? These questions are answered in the negative in the very last scene, when she and the others have been rounded up by the secret police. As she comforts her elderly grandmother, she looks up and sees Giorgio's father. Her first thought is for Giorgio. When the father tells her that Giorgio left the day before and might escape, she cries, 'Thank God!' and embraces him. Here, at the end, we see that, despite her blasé demeanour and her elitist attitudes, Micol is a sincere person.

**Giorgio** As the boy and woman who loves Micol, Giorgio is easily hurt. As a lover, he is somewhat passive and adoring rather than active and sexual. He has a poetic nature, quiet, contemplative and deeply emotional in matter of romance. As regards politics, he shows more awareness and is angered by the rise of fascism and his father's passive acceptance. Throughout, he is a sensitive and kind person.

**Naïve** Giorgio spends the entire film trying to recapture the teenage bond he shared with Micol, but he is unable, or unwilling, to take the many hints that she drops. His naivete regarding Micol is revealed in a scene during the tennis party, when it rains and they take shelter in a large, empty building. She invites him to sit beside her inside an old carriage. He looks at her with eyes glistening with a mixture of love, admiration and longing. When she returns his gaze, he says, 'It feels like it was only yesterday that you came to the synagogue in it [the carriage].' A flashback shows them smiling at each with puppy love in the synagogue. Then, in the present, she says that it's better now

that they are adults on their own. After a flirtatious gesture from her, he puts a hand on hers, which is resting on her bare thigh. It's now or never, you sense, but he continues to stare at her, waiting. He waits too long, and she shrugs herself free. Here, we see that he is naïve, hoping that Micol will reciprocate his feelings. That innocence also prevents him from taking the chance when she offered it to him.

*Aware* Unlike the Finzi-Continis, Giorgio does not live inside a walled garden. He is out on the streets, where he encounters fascist flags and rallies. His disapproval of fascism is expressed during a midday family meal, when he gets into a heated argument with his father. His father, who has made his peace with the new ruling party by joining it, claims that Italian fascism is not as bad as the German variety. His father also believes that Jews are still citizens. Giorgio listens calmly and says, 'A third class citizen.' His father points out that they still enjoy certain rights, but Giorgio asks, 'Such as?' His sarcasm masks his anger, and then says that others came before them in the persecution queue and yet they kept quiet. A similar political awareness is displayed in his talk with the director of the university library when he is expelled. Despite his naivete regarding romance, and despite his ignorance of the concentration camps until someone told him, Giorgio is well-informed. And that knowledge makes him angry.

*Giorgio's father* Giorgio's father remains unnamed and his profession unidentified. However, we know that he is a pragmatic person who attempts to shield himself and his family from the worst of the worsening political situation. He doesn't have a walled garden, like the Finzi-Continis, so he arms himself with justifications and keeps his head down. Whatever his shortcomings, possibly too passive in his accommodation with fascism, he proves his worth in the final act of the story.

*Pragmatic* Rather than fight them, Giorgio's father has made an accommodation with the fascists and actually joined their political party. He explains the rationale for that decision during an argument he has with his son at the dinner table. He believes that Italian fascism is better than German fascism, that Mussolini is better than Hitler. A few minutes later, he tries to mollify his son by saying that 'things aren't so bad.' He admits that the recent laws are not good—a ban on mixed-marriages, expulsion of Jews from public schools, names removed from the telephone book and no obituaries in the papers. But he argues that 'at least we still can live, move around and own property.' It is a desperate attempt to justify his accommodation to the ugly political reality that surrounds him. Better to keep your head down and get on with things than to stand up and be knocked down. It is a sensible, pragmatic argument. Unfortunately, it does not spare him from death.

*Affectionate* In another scene with his son, the father displays deep affection and understanding, not about politics but about life in general. Heartbroken by Micol's rejection, Giorgio returns home late at night and finds his father also still up. When he admits that his relationship with Micol is over, his father nods sagely and says, 'It's painful, I know, but in the long run, it's for the best.' He goes on to say that the pain will pass and that he is lucky he is so young because he will have time to heal and learn from the experience. It is a conventional piece of fatherly advice, but it is spoken sincerely and with affection.

*Heroic* If we thought that Giorgio's father was a flawed character because of his failure to denounce fascism, we have to reassess him after the film is over. In that final, brief scene, when everyone has been rounded up for deportation, he tells Micol that Giorgio, his wife and the two other children left the night before. What this implies is that they were able to escape because he offered himself to the fascists. He was the bait that they took. That was an act of heroic self-sacrifice.



(The tennis party in the garden)



(Micol and Giorgio)



(Giorgio's father and Micol at the end)