

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE VANQUISHED (I Vinti) 1953

Michelangelo Antonioni

OVERVIEW

Antonioni's third feature-length film, *The Vanquished*, is a triptych of murder stories set in France, Italy and England. As the long prologue announces, the film is intended to reveal the shallow mentality of young people, the 'burnt-out generation', who grew up during the war years. Antonioni hoped his film would deconstruct the cult of amorality among young nurtured by the senseless violence of the war and the repressive governments that followed. With its stark depiction of senseless killings, the film was controversial and met with a storm of protest. The Italian episode, which originally had an overtly anti-fascist message, had to be modified. The entire film was denied a certificate by the British Board of Censors in 1954 and has never been released in the UK. One reason for refusal is that the English story resembles a real-life murder committed in England in 1951. A similar problem with the French episode delayed its release in France.

In presenting these stories of youthful crimes, Antonioni eschewed any sociological explanations. Rather, he said that he 'chose to examine the inner side of my characters instead of their life in society, the effects inside them of what was happening outside.' Today the film is highly regarded by critics, who point out its commonality with other films of the period, notably *Rebel Without a Cause* and Hitchcock's *Rope*.

PEOPLE

French story

Georges	Georges is the oldest member of the group.
Andre	Andre is his younger brother.
Simone	Simone is Andre's girlfriend.
Pierre	Pierre is a wealthy member of the group.

Italian story

Claudio	Claudio is the only son of a wealthy family.
Marina	Marina is his girlfriend.

English story

Hallan	Hallan is the protagonist and killer.
Wharton	Ken Wharton is a journalist.

SYNOPSIS

The first story, which takes place in France, concerns a group of teenagers who plan to murder one of their classmates. They invite him on an outing in the countryside, where they intend to shoot him and take his money, which they believe will finance their trip to Algiers. The killing is successful, but the money turns out to be counterfeit. The dead man has the last laugh.

In the Italian story, the parents of a college student notice that he isn't sleeping in his bed. In fact, he is masterminding a smuggling operation that goes wrong when the police show up. He escapes but sustains a bad injury before he goes to his girlfriend and tells her what has happened. They plan to run away but she takes him to a doctor first. Soon, though, the police close in and he dies of his injuries.

The only substantial character in the English story is a megalomaniac fantasist, also from a well-off background. He fancies himself a poet and lover, and kills a woman in order to report finding her body and claim a large reward offered by a newspaper for a sensational story. Having made one

small mistake when reporting the corpse to the police, he is eventually arrested, tried and sentenced to death.

SCENES

Prologue

After the credits, the front pages of newspapers in various languages appear on screen, with an extended voice-over that explains the intentions of the director. The three stories, he says, are the exploits of the ‘burnt-out’ generation...who grew up during the war.’ The narration goes on to explain that this youth culture glorifies violence, scorns responsibility and feeds on the media—films, newspapers and comic-books. ‘There are three stories, from three countries, different except in their sad cause.’

1. France

Simone An old and destitute man walks alone through dreary streets, singing a song of loss. A jump-cut takes us into the flat of a middle-class family, where a mother argues with her teenage daughter, Simone, about her school outing to the countryside. Suspicious of the way her daughter is dressed, she calls another mother to confirm that there really is a school event. When her parents leave the flat, Simone completes her outfit by putting on high heels and jewellery.

Two brothers In another part of the city, two brothers (Georges and Andre) are having a midday meal with their bickering parents. The boys are also going on a walk in the countryside. When the mother confronts Georges, the older brother, with a letter saying that he hasn’t been to school for a week, he blames the teachers for trying to trick him. As they leave the flat, the brothers take a gun from a wardrobe. ‘Be quick about it,’ Georges says to Andre. ‘Our plan is timed to the minute.’

Pierre In a third apartment, Pierre uses the intermediary of his little sister to get money from his father to pay for the outing. The father is a concern pianist, and Pierre’s family is clearly more wealthy and sophisticated than the other two families.

Plans The two brothers, Simone, another boy and another girl wait for Pierre in an outdoor café. From their conversation, it appears that Pierre is the target of their plot and that they plan to fly to Algiers, where they will live as a troupe of actors.

Bravado When Pierre arrives, he flashes his money, bragging that he has done some ‘big deals’ and might emigrate to Canada. The others remind him that he has promised to underwrite their trip to Algiers. He also brags about his sexual experiences with an older girlfriend.

Playacting Once in the countryside, Simone plays up to Pierre, which makes Andre jealous, but it’s all part of the mysterious plot. She begs him to take her with him to Canada. Suddenly, Pierre reveals that he has no money and no older girlfriend. It’s all an act.

Letter Simone asks Pierre to write her a letter saying that he’s going away and asks her to forgive him. She says that she’ll let her parents find the letter and believe that ‘it’s all over’ between them. After he writes the letter and hands it to her, she shows it secretly to the others. Now they can proceed with the plan.

Murder Andre and Pierre explore the ruins of the old castle. Pierre compliments Andre on his poetry writing and says he has a bright future. When he turns his back, Andre shoots him but finds only counterfeit money on his dead body. Hearing the shot, the others flee.

Police Back in the family apartment, Andre tells Georges that Pierre had no real money. ‘It’s over,’ he says dejectedly. ‘It’s all over now.’ On the telephone, the police inform the father that his sons’ classmate, Pierre, has been found dead. When the father confronts Georges, he says his brother did it. The father takes Andre to the police station.

2. Italy

Danger A fire engine speeds through the night, waking a woman in her expensive apartment. When she notices that their son, Claudio, is not at home, she wakes her husband. He is dismissive, while she is worried because ‘he’s so delicate.’ Looking in his untidy room, they find a photograph of him with a pretty young girl whom they don’t recognise. The father thinks he’s enjoying himself at a party,

while the mother is worried about him getting mixed up ‘with tarts.’

Smuggling That same night, a small boat glides to a river bank and men start to unload crates of black-market cigarettes. On the road above the river, a young man oversees loading the crates into the back of a lorry. Suddenly, custom officers pull up in jeeps and everyone flees, amid a volley of gunshots.

Murder The young man is about to cross a narrow suspension bridge when he sees another man blocking his way. When that man doesn’t move aside, he shoots him and makes it to the other side. Pursued by the officers, he falls down some scaffolding and injures himself but manages to escape.

Marina Wandering into the city, he buys a newspaper and reads about the ‘Bloody shootout with Customs Police. Later, he visits the flat of the girl in the photograph, whom his mother has been calling every half hour asking about him. The girl, Marina, is having a party with a dozen friends and is happy to see him.

Police Meanwhile, the father has gone to the police, who suspect that his son’s disappearance might be connected with the girl in the photograph. Two officers search the son’s room and find a notebook that records financial transactions. Soon, the police arrive at Marina’s building and take the elevator up to her flat.

Confession At that very moment, Claudio and Marina come down the interior stairs in order to have a private conversation. She is furious with him, suspecting that he’s been out with another girl, but he swears that he has no one. ‘I have only one secret,’ he says and asks her to go away with him. Afraid and desperate, he admits that his money has come from smuggling and that he has killed a man.

Caught While Marina drives him away in her car, he tells her she must say she knows nothing of his actions. When his injury becomes too painful, she drives him to a doctor’s clinic. After she parks and goes to request an appointment, he gets out and stumbles back to his family home. The parents’ joy at seeing their son is cut short when the police inform them that he is wanted for murder. Rushing into his room, they see that he has succumbed to his injuries and is dead.

3. England

Tip-off A journalist for a London newspaper receives a call from a man named Hallan saying he’s says he’s found the body of a murdered woman and wants to sell the story for 200 pounds (a lot of money in 1953). The journalist contacts the police, who pick up Hallan and are led to a secluded spot outside a suburban town.

Crime scene Hallan says he was reading when he noticed a necklace glittering in the grass. Looking closer, he saw the body. When the police ask why he didn’t contact them immediately, he has not good answer. ‘Things like this are such a nuisance,’ he says. The journalist joins them at the murder scene and invites Hallan to come to London with his eye-witness story.

Fame In the newspaper office, Hallan dictates his article to a typist using a pompous style, which suits his self-declared status as a poet. He is fastidious about punctuation and demands to choose which photo of himself will be published alongside the headline: ‘Murder of Mrs Pinkerton.’

Races With the money for his article, Hallan goes to the dog races, accompanied by the journalist. As they watch the race, Hallan suggests that he write could another article since it was ‘the perfect crime. No clues, no motives.’

At home Hallan lives with his father and grandmother in a very modest house in the suburbs. The father is critical of his lazy ways, while the grandmother admires his photo in the paper. Out on the street, Hallan runs into a shop girl whom he has been pestering for sometime. He boasts about his article, but she tells him to buzz off.

Confession He travels up to London and ‘runs’ into the journalist, to whom he offers another sensational story. The journalist is not interested but mentions that the autopsy showed that Mrs Pinkerton died four days before she was found. Unwilling to be brushed off, Hallan offers more information until he blurts out, ‘Suppose I told you I killed her.’ The police will never be able to prove it, he says, because ‘it’s the perfect crime.’ The journalist challenges him to talk to the police and takes him to the station.

Investigation Meanwhile, the police discover that Hallan went to the movies with Mrs Pinkerton and that he made one mistake. When showing the officers the corpse, he had said it was 'chalky white,' which it would have been at the time she was strangled, but not four days later when he claimed to have found her.

Courtroom The case against Hallan goes to court, where the defence lawyer presents his arguments. Hallan's father, he says, worked hard to give him a good life, but Hallan had no intention of working for a living and used the discovery of the body to make himself famous. The confession of murder is absurd and childish, the lawyer argues. It is the invention of avid readers of thrillers. Mr Hallan, the lawyer concludes, is a poet, but the killer was a sadist.

Hallan's confession The prosecution lawyer reads Hallam's confession as the screen dramatises what actually happened. The older, unattractive Mrs Pinkerton flirts with Hallan outside the cinema. At first, he is reluctant but gets an idea and goes with her to an isolated spot. He has realised that this is the chance to commit the perfect murder, the secret of success being the choice of a victim. It should be a person you have no reason to kill. And that made Mrs Pinkerton the ideal victim. No one would ever connect him, a nice-looking young man, with an older woman, who only recently began selling sex.

Murder As they walk along, Mrs Pinkerton says, 'You're just a boy, really. But my husband's in prison and I've got my youngest girl to keep. I've got to make a living somehow.' He puts his coat over when she feels cold lying on the ground. 'Thank you, dear,' she says just before he strangles her.

Scoop After the jury returns a verdict of murder, the journalist leaves quickly. Although he wonders if his paper's offer to pay for a sensational story contributed to the crime, he rushes off to the nearest phone booth to call in the verdict in time for the morning edition.

THEMES

1. Society

youth The common link between these otherwise distinct stories is the youth culture that underlies them. As the prologue explains, these young people came of age during the war and the years immediately after. No wonder they have contempt for their parents, disdain responsibility and just want to live their lives as freely as possible. Their pointless crimes are all caused by their desperate desire to escape, to get out, go anywhere and find happiness. The cause of the murders cannot be found in social deprivation or broken homes, but rather in the warped minds of the characters themselves. They are the vanquished.

freedom Another key feature of the youth culture in all three stories is the desire for freedom, as illustrated in a key moment in the Italian episode. Claudio is on the run from the police after killing a man on a suspension bridge. Standing with Marina near her car, he tells her that he loves her and wants her to flee with him. Frightened and angry, he says, 'I must go away. We'll go together. See faraway places. Leave when and if we want and return when we like. That would be a great life. It's the only way to be happy...Because I want to live life while I'm young. At 20!' Then he mocks his father for stupidly working long hours to earn little and admits that he gets easy money. 'But no one has the right to take my freedom away!' he screams. That last statement is made with a clenched fist and blazing eyes. As a whole, his speech could be the anthem of the 'burnt-out generation of post-war Italy. They want to escape from their parents' generation and conventional society. They want money to travel. And they want it now.

fantasy The English story dramatises the role that fantasy plays in the 'burnt-out generation.' Hallan, like Claudio, shows contempt for anyone who works in a mundane job. And like the gang in the French story, he is a performer. But Hallan is a complete fantasist, whose feet rarely touch the dirty surface of reality. He fancies himself as a poet and imagines girls are infatuated with him, but we see his ego in full flow also in the newspaper office when he is dictating his eye-witness account of finding the body of the woman (whom he killed). He enjoys his power to order people around, telling the news editor's secretary to put in a comma here and add this word there. He also demands the right to select which photo to print next to his story. 'Not the one in profile, unless it's touched up,' he says. The editors are flabbergasted at this suggestion, but Hallan repeats that the photo should take up three whole columns on the front page. Here, then, is another key feature of the youth culture of the 1950s. Frustrated by a restrictive society, young people fantasised about their importance and were preoccupied with fame.

play-acting The young people in the French story try to escape by playing roles, even devising a murder mystery plot. This is best illustrated in the scene when they wait for Pierre in a café. Although still in their teens, the men swagger about, smoking cigarettes and trying to look tough, while the girls, or dames, present hard exteriors as they order scotch whisky. All of them are nervous and talk about ‘tailing him’ and ‘snitches’ and ‘the dough.’ When nerves begin to fray from the tension, Andre bursts out with what could be their rallying cry: ‘We’ll be free [when we kill Pierre, take his money and skip the country]. That’ll be the life.’ Excited by that hopeless expectation, another boy shouts that he has an idea for the first night of their performance in Algiers. He uses the French word *tabarin*, which is a comic, often farcical, form of street theatre. Nothing could describe their own play-acting in the café more accurately. Bold, frustrated and bursting with energy, they seem to be acting in a crime thriller. Their excitement is only deflated when Georges calls them ‘amateurs,’ which is what they are, as the play they are about to enact ends in tragedy.

2. Love

overview Although the working title of the film was ‘Without Love’, which signals the lack of remorse in the killers, several kinds of love are dramatised in the stories. Being young, mostly teenagers, the characters’ romances are driven by extreme emotions of both jealousy and loyalty.

teenage jealousy Andre is tormented by jealousy when Simone throws herself at Pierre. It doesn’t matter that her flirting is part of the plot. It still pains Andre, who says to Simone, ‘Do you want to drive me mad?’ She acts the coquette, playing with her hair, tossing her head and asking blithely what he could possibly mean. Andre is serious and says, ‘Do you know what’s at the bottom of my heart?’ Again, she affects indifference and says, ‘Yes, a volcano.’ Then she sticks in the knife and adds, ‘At your age, all boys have a volcano at the bottom of their heart.’ Undeterred, Andre declares that he must kiss her. ‘You’re so beautiful!’ he cries. ‘I’m jealous of everyone who looks at you.’ Andre’s torment is intense because his love is genuine and because she increases his pain by feigning indifference. The scene demonstrates how cruel young love can be. Jealousy is just another word for love.

teenage loyalty A very different aspect of teenage love is illustrated in the Italian story, in which Claudio and Marina are boyfriend and girlfriend. Marina is having a party with lots of friends in her parent’s house, but Claudio hasn’t arrived (we know he’s just killed a man, is injured and fleeing the police). Marina is distraught, especially when someone casually mentions that Claudio is probably ‘with some blonde.’ She pretends not to mind and is propositioned by another boy, whom she rebuffs. When Claudio arrives, she is concerned that he looks terrible and follows him outside where he reveals what has happened—the smuggling and the shooting. She was suspicious that he was cheating on her, but now she comforts him. When he asks her to drive him away, she agrees without even thinking what that means. At first, she was jealous, but the stronger emotion is loyalty. She does not desert him even after what he has done.

3. Parent-child relationships

lack of communication All three stories involve the lack of communication between the youths and their parents. In the French story, the mother chastises the older brother about delinquency from school, and when the murder is revealed, both the parents are shocked. In the Italian story, the mother indulges her young son, while the father is too lax with him: neither understand him. And in the English story, Hallan (the young fantasist) is criticised by his father, and doted on by his grandmother (there is no mother). None of these parent-child relationships is grounded in understanding.

maternal love Whereas the father tends to be strict, the mothers are more indulgent. And in the Italian story, the mother is defined by her extreme maternal love. The story begins when the mother discovers her son’s absence in the early hours of the morning. She is anxious because, she says, ‘he is so delicate’. When the father tells her that Claudio is not a child anymore, she replies, ‘With all those tarts around! Let’s hope he’s okay.’ The mother becomes more disturbed when the police search her son’s room, but soon Claudio appears and she is overcome with joy. Seeing his physical condition, though, she sends the maid to call a doctor, but it is too late. She cradles his lifeless body in her arms, screaming, ‘What have they done to you?’ In her mind, her son could do nothing wrong. He is not to blame.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Georges Georges is one of those young men who 'act big.' Given that the story is punctuated with references to crime movies, it's not unreasonable to suppose that he models himself after an American gangster actor of the 1950s, like Edward G. Robinson. Georges likes being in control of the somewhat anarchic gang, but he shows his true colours at the end when he disowns any responsibility for the murder of Pierre.

Controlling Georges is the head of the gang, in control (he hopes) of their plan to kill Pierre and constantly on the alert for problems. We get a good picture of his dominating character in the scene when the young people are sitting in the café waiting for poor Pierre to show up. Georges looks around and wonders if anyone has ratted and told Pierre about their plan. When one of the girls is upset that another girl has brought her little sister, Georges says, 'No. Now Pierre won't suspect anything.' After the victim does arrive, Georges whispers to Simone and Andre, 'Be careful. No stupid moves.' Just before they board the bus, he turns to Simone and says, 'The letter for the alibi. It must be clever.' Every step of the way, George is in control, informing, advising and warning.

Coward Georges also cleverly arranges for his brother, Andre, to do the killing. At the end of the story, Georges is able to tell the truth and say that he wasn't the one who fired the gun. The scene takes place in the family apartment, where the father has already been told by the police of his sons' involvement in the crime. Andre looks at his mother and lays down the pistol. Georges screams at his brother to tell their father that he [Georges] didn't do it. Andre is silent, so Georges turns to their father and yells, 'He's the culprit. He fired the shot! I didn't shoot.' He grows hysterical as he points the finger of blame at his brother and shouts, 'Papa, he alone fired the gun.' It is a sordid display of cowardice and betrayal. Georges did not fire the gun, but he did everything else except pull the trigger.

Claudio Claudio is the most sympathetic of the main characters in the three stories. Son of a wealthy father and doting mother, a good student and sincere boyfriend, he is a victim of the *zeitgeist* that sweeps him into the world of petty crime. The action that dooms him—shooting a man on a bridge—is spontaneous, unlike the other murders in the film, which are premeditated. Claudio's crime is a moment of madness that leads to his own sad end.

Without remorse Claudio's scene with Marina toward the end of the Italian story reveals several aspects of his character. His love for her and his desire for freedom are evident, but he also shows that he feels no remorse for what he has done. After saying that he wants to live life while he is young, he becomes agitated and explains how he gets his money. He is almost hysterical and cries, 'I want to save myself. I don't feel guilty!' He refuses to give himself up and spend half his life in prison. Despite what he's done, he believes that he 'has a right' to his youth. He isn't proud, he doesn't brag about it and his only regret is that it threatens to spoil his life. He has no remorse that he has taken another's life.

Simone Simone is a shallow but pretty girl, who embodies many of the negative character traits identified in the prologue as defining the 'burnt-out generation.' She has only contempt for her hard-working father, brags about her loss of sexual innocence and coolly goes about seducing Pierre as part of the plan to murder him.

Cruel Simone, the pretty girl loved by Andre, reveals her total lack of empathy for others in a scene with Pierre. Having just kissed him, she asks him to take her away with him (the constant refrain in all three stories). She wants to escape from her family, whom she mocks by saying that her parents think the 'ideal thing is marriage and a savings book.' She smiles viciously and adds, 'If I didn't hate them so much, I'd find them funny. My father's worked his whole life to become the co-owner of a shop.' Then she calls him an idiot for only cheating a little bit—selling a yard of cloth that's actually an inch shorter. That makes her laugh and say, 'He should steal millions, then it would be worth it! I want a brilliant life. I like American cars. Not for the money itself, but to be able to humiliate others.' Even the nonchalant Pierre can only manage a tiny smile at her nasty desire to hurt others.

Vain Not surprisingly, Simone is also vain. Her haughty nature is illustrated in an earlier conversation with Andre, the only 'nice kid' in the group, who loves her. He pours out his heart, saying he can bear it when other people look at her. Hearing that confession, she turns suddenly and says, 'Let them look! I like being looked at.' A moment later, she is reassuring Andre that she will stick with him, but there is no disguising the pure pleasure in her voice when she spoke about others admiring her.

Hallan Aubrey Hallan is a forceful character. Confident and happy-go-lucky, a nice-looking man who writes poetry, he could be a charmer. But he is asocial, completely self-absorbed and vain, so much so that he commits a murder simply to prove that he can devise a perfect crime.

Confident Hallan is convinced that he is a genius, a superior poet, a matinee idol and a master criminal. This overweening confidence is evident in a scene at the dog races with the much more sober journalist. When Hallan bets 80 pounds on a winner, the journalist is shocked at his reckless action. 'You must be mad,' he says, but Hallan replies, 'I do certain things to get certain results. And I don't make mistakes.' As it turns out, he was right about the bet—he doubled his money—but wrong about not making mistakes. His throwaway remark that when he found the dead woman her 'face was chalky white' proves that he must have seen her days earlier, when she was strangled. His high opinion of himself proves to be his downfall, as in so many crime stories.

Loner Despite his confidence, Hallan is a loner. At one point, he tells the journalist: 'I never mix with people. I hate them. I don't want to be part of the crowd.' He lives with his mother and grandfather, spending hours in his room, reading and writing poetry. He fantasises about girls but is rejected by them. In one scene, he is alone in his room, whose walls are covered by sheets of paper with his poems and a cutting of his newspaper story with his photograph. He takes down one of the poems and reads it aloud. 'Your name is a murmur, Sally. Your name is a sigh, Sally. Your name is my victory, Sally.' At that moment, his grandmother walks in and hands him half a dozen of his letters addressed to Sally and returned to sender. His romance exists only in his head, and on paper, where he can believe what he likes. Alone, he is in control.

Delusional Hallan is also delusional, not only about Sally but about his own talents and future. This characteristic is portrayed in a brief scene when he stops the real-life Sally on the street and tries to make a date with her. She brushes him off, but he is deaf to anything that doesn't accord with his image of himself. His self-delusion reaches comic proportions when he notices the passers-by on the busy street and says, 'I hope you don't mind people staring at you just because you're with a celebrity.' That otherworldly quality of Hallan, his disregard for reality, almost makes him sympathetic.



(Simone and Andre in the French story)



(Marina and Claudio in the Italian story)



(Hallan with the woman he murders in the English story)