

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

***Two Women* (La Ciociara [*The Woman from Ciociaria*]) 1960** Vittorio De Sica

OVERVIEW The events of World War Two influenced De Sica's work, and even his early acting career. However, those events were typically the background to the social themes in his films (poverty, unemployment, housing) and not the foreground, as in *Two Women*. The script, written by De Sica's long-term partner Cesare Zavattini, was based on a famous novel by Alberto Moravia (*La Ciociara*, or *The Woman From Ciociaria*). The book itself was based on the novelist's experiences as a soldier with the Italian army in the Second World War. The story follows the adventures of mother and daughter (two women) after they leave bombed-out Rome and take refuge in a mountain village. One important change from the book is that the film focuses on the rape of the daughter and not the mother, a decision that De Sica took to reflect the historical reality that most rape victims during the war were girls or young women. That horrific rape scene, in both book and film, was directly inspired by a real event that occurred in 1943, when Moroccan soldiers under French command committed numerous rapes and murders as the Allied forces moved up the Italian peninsula to free the country from Italian fascist and German armies. Today, the film is regarded as a powerful depiction of misogyny and a hopeful story of two women's strength. An Italian production, produced by the influential Carlo Ponti, and starring the young Sophia Loren (then Ponti's wife) and Jean-Paul Belmondo, the film won several major awards, including Best Film at the Golden Globes and Best Actress at the Oscars, Cannes, the BAFTAS and the New York Film Critics Circle.

SYNOPSIS After her shop is bombed in Rome, the widowed Cesira takes her daughter, Rosetta, and leaves the city by train. When the tracks are bombed, they get off and walk to Ciociaria, a mountainous village where Cesira was born. Joining other refugees from the war, mother and daughter settle down among the villagers. Their life there is punctuated by episodes that remind us of the war raging below in the valleys. Michelle, a young intellectual and anti-fascist, falls in love with Cesira, though she does not feel the same toward him. When the allied troops, led by the Americans, defeat the Germans, Cesira and Rosetta set off back to Rome. En route, they are both raped in a church by Moroccan soldiers under Allied command. Their trauma is compounded when they learn that Michelle has been murdered by the Germans. The film ends with the mother cradling and comforting her daughter, an image that echoes one at the beginning of the story of these two women.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Cesira	Young widow who owns a grocery shop in Rome.
Rosetta	Her twelve-year-old daughter.
Giovanni	A neighbour.
Michelle	A young man in the village where they take refuge from the war.

STORY

Bombed out The story begins in Rome in 1943 with a montage of images, showing daily life on the streets. Then a plane is heard overhead and everyone scatters for safety. Inside her grocery shop, a young widow, Cesira, comforts her daughter, Rosetta, who has been knocked unconscious in the attack. Having decided she must leave the city for Rosetta's sake, Cesira asks a neighbour, Giovanni, to look after the shop in her absence. He makes love to her, and though she is reluctant, she does not resist. He sees her and Rosetta off when they take the train to Parma.

Change of plan Halfway, they get off the train when the tracks ahead are bombed and they face a long delay. Balancing their suitcases on their heads, mother and daughter walk toward Ciociaria, the small town where Cesira was born.

War En route, they encounter retreating German and Italian soldiers searching for deserters, all of whom are optimistic that they will 'get the war over soon.' The fascist soldiers threaten Cesira if she doesn't help the war effort, but she stands strong. Next day, they resume their journey and are

strafed by low-flying planes. They are not hit, but an old man on the road with them is killed.

Ciociarìa After a long day, they reach Ciociarìa, a farming village in the mountains, where local people are having a wedding anniversary feast. It is a world away from the war in the cities and valleys below. Among those at the feast is Michelle, a political revolutionary who hates fascism. When an argument breaks out regarding the war and loyalty to Italy, singing and accordion music drown out the acrimony.

Revelations Cesira and Rosetta are given a weaving shed to live in. When Michelle accidentally sees Rosetta naked after her bath, he apologises, but she is deeply affected. Later, when the three of them go for a walk in the hills, Rosetta reveals her conservative religious outlook, Michelle explains his socialist vision and Cesira says that no one can live without love. Two Italian fascist soldiers, in retreat, appear and inform them that Mussolini has been imprisoned. One of them wants to shoot Michelle as a traitor, but the other says that the Germans will do that for them.

English soldiers One night, Michelle asks the villagers to feed two English soldiers and give them shelter. But the locals are afraid that they would be shot if the Germans found out. Only Rosetta and Cesira agree to help them, an act of kindness that cements the friendship between Cesira, Rosetta and Michelle.

Confession On a Sunday morning, the villagers gather together and ask Michelle to read from the bible. His reading of the Lazarus story is interrupted by a man bringing food and mail from a nearby town. A letter from Giovanni informs Cesira that thieves tried to rob her store, but he caught them. This interruption angers Michelle, who accuses everyone of 'being worse than Lazarus' because of their selfish obsessions with love and food. Later, when he confesses his love for Cesira, she says that her daughter is enough for her.

Village life Snuggling together in bed, Rosetta asks her mother why she doesn't return Michelle's love since he's 'the nicest man' in the village. Cesira laughs and says that if Rosetta were a few years older, she'd let her marry him. The villagers scrape together a living harvesting crops from rocky soil, paying war-time prices for essential items like flour, but they also do their best to accommodate the city people who take refuge in their village.

Michelle selected On their way to the market town to buy sugar and food, Cesira and Michelle run into Russian deserters and German soldiers traumatising local people. In the town, Michelle brings Cesira to a friend's house, where a German officer is being entertained. While the men argue politics, Cesira borrows sugar, flour and coffee. During a bombing raid, Michelle and Cesira throw themselves to the ground and start to make love, only to be interrupted by their hosts. Back in Ciociarìa, a group of retreating German soldiers beg bread and water. They also demand, at gunpoint, that a local person show them the way to the next valley, and they select Michelle.

Back to Rome When the American army defeats the Germans and Italian fascists, Cesira, Rosetta and other refugees leave the mountains and begin the journey back to Rome. Michelle, however, has not returned from guiding the Germans to the next valley. The refugees greet the Americans as heroes and liberators, who protect them when their tank-mounted machine guns fire on German bombers. Rosetta doesn't want to go further until they find Michelle, but Cesira is anxious to get back to Rome.

Rape Travelling again on foot, Cesira and Rosetta come to a bombed-out church, where they lay down to sleep. Moroccan troops, part of the Allied forces, find and rape them both, leaving Rosetta traumatised and in pain. When they resume their journey, Cesira stops a jeep of Allied officers and rails against them for what their troops did to her daughter. They think she is mad and drive on. Cesira tries to tell Rosetta that they will get through the tragedy, but Rosetta doesn't want to hear anything about it. They hitch a ride in a lorry, whose driver tells them about other rapes committed by the Moroccans. 'If they had touched my sister,' he says, 'I would have killed them all.' He lets them spend the night in his mother's house in a village that celebrates the Allied victory.

Mother and daughter Waking in the middle of the night, Cesira sees that Rosetta is gone. She is told that Rosetta went to a party with a nice local boy. She also learns that Michelle was shot dead by the Germans he was guiding. When Rosetta returns in the morning, smartly dressed and with stockings given by the local boy, Cesira is furious. Then she tells her that Michelle is dead and Rosetta breaks down in tears. The film ends, with mother cradling her crying daughter in her arms.

THEMES

1. *Gender* This is the story of two women (the English title is more descriptive than the Italian), a mother and her daughter, in Italy during World War II. But it is also the story of many women in many times and places, who are mothers who fear for and protect their children. And the many women who endure sexism and, even, violent rape. All of this is dramatised through the experiences of Cesira, the young and sensual widow. When she asks Giovanni to look after her shop in her absence, he agrees but only after she submits to his love-making, despite the fact that he expresses contempt for women ('they're stupid'). He also implies that, as a widow of an old man, she is hungry for sex. That slow developing scene, in which a man takes advantage of her, is a microcosm of the entire film. Later, men ogle Cesira on the street and give wolf-whistles. The Italian fascist soldiers nearly force her to come with them to headquarters, 'to help' them. Then comes the rape in the church, with all its brutality and wild abandon. The soldiers chase Cesira and Rosetta like children laughing and screaming on the playground. But they are violent, knocking out Cesira and gang raping her and her daughter. Afterwards, no one seems to care, neither the army officers nor the others they meet on the road. At the end, when Rosetta comes back from a dance with a pair of stockings given to her by a boy, Cesira is furious, afraid Rosetta might become a prostitute. She is also saddened. 'Michelle was right,' she says, with a voice of defeat. 'Escape, escape. But you can't escape from yourself.' She might have said, escape from the plight of women. Cesira fears that her daughter, already traumatised by the rape, will imitate her mother and fall into the role assigned to her by society.

2. *Desire* The film also depicts various forms of male sexual desire, all of them directed toward Cesira. The first and most complex is the early scene when her friend Giovanni makes love to her after she asks him to look after her shop in her absence. The setting is secretive, a dark, enclosed workshop space, inhabited only by Giovanni, who prowls around like a predator. He doesn't proposition her, but for the entire scene we can see his eyes fill with desire; and his words are suggestive, too, leading her into a trap about her own frustrated desire as a young and sensual widow. More obvious and unsuccessful expressions of desire are seen on the faces of men who watch Cesira on the street and on the train. A second complex scene occurs with Michelle, the rebel intellectual she meets in the mountain village where she and Rosetta have taken refuge. Michelle is attracted to her, but he is afraid and unable to express his feelings. Finally, he blurts it out and she is flattered but uninterested in love-making. Later, when they are lying down in the grass during a bombing raid, we see desire take hold of him. He is close to her and gently puts his hand on her dress. When he kisses it, she asks him what he's doing. Without speaking, he kisses her and she does not resist, but their coupling is interrupted by the all-clear siren, and the moment is lost. Desire is everywhere beneath the surface of this gripping film.

3. *Family* The film focuses on the key relationship of a mother and her daughter. The story begins with Cesira fearing that twelve-year-old Rosetta has died in a bombing raid which hits her shop. She cradles her young daughter and says, 'Look at me, look at mama.' Rosetta's face is expressionless from the shock. This scene is then repeated at the very end, when she cuddles her and murmurs, 'My angel, my angel.' Both are crying. Both have been raped and both mourn the death of Michelle. In between those two carefully choreographed identical images, the mother and daughter enjoy happy moments and endure long arduous journeys with their suitcases on their heads. Their emotional intimacy is revealed in their triangular relationship with Michelle, the idealist rebel. Michelle loves Cesira, while Rosetta is infatuated with Michelle. Once, Michelle accidentally sees Rosetta naked, but Cesira laughs it off, while Rosetta is embarrassed. Lying together in bed one night, Cesira jokes that she might even let Rosetta marry Michelle, if she were a little older. In other words, the two women are only older and younger versions of the same person. The fact that there is no father-husband (he died some years before) intensifies the bond between the two women. In fact, there seems to be only a porous membrane separating their two bodies, so that whatever one feels, the other feels it, too.

4. *Politics* All of the above—the brutal sexism, the furtive desire and the tender maternalism—is intensified by the historical context of the story. In 1943, Allied troops invaded Italy and began to sweep north up the peninsula, unleashing a chaotic series of events. Mussolini was arrested and then freed by the Germans, who continued to fight alongside Italian fascist troops, who did not accept Italy's surrender. This political and military confusion is shown in some detail in the film by including vignettes of Italian fascist, German, British, Russian and Moroccan troops. The fast-breaking news about Mussolini and the Pope is relayed through newspaper headlines and radio

announcers. Political arguments are carried on between Michelle and anyone he meets, vowing to kill himself if the Germans win. Most of the rural population are apolitical, only wanting peace and safety. They cheer the arrival of the Americans, but only because that means a halt to the war, the bombing and high food prices. The hardship of war is dramatised also by the refugees, like Cesira and Rosetta, who flee to the countryside. Some of them are children; many are desperate, undernourished and terrified. The film does not focus on the fighting itself, and we don't see any of the more than two hundred thousand soldiers killed in Italy. Instead, we see the war as experienced by the general population, some of whom also died. A young mother is so traumatised after the soldiers killed her baby that she wanders around offering to 'sell' her breastmilk. And the scene when an old man on his bicycle is riddled with machine-gun fire from a plane is unforgettable.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Cesira The Italian title of the film identifies Cesira as 'the woman from Ciociaria'. Later, she goes to Rome, but she is still a product of that isolated village in the mountains, with its peasant-based cooperative spirit, lack of pretension and resignation to hardship. Cesira is, however, somewhat unusual in that she is a fiery and sensual woman, outspoken and fiercely maternal. She is a very powerful presence that dominates the film.

Independent Cesira's strong sense of self (and other qualities, as well) is dramatised in the early scene between her and Giovanni. When she decides to leave Rome and asks him to look after her shop, she reluctantly gives in to his sexual advances. Later, she tells him firmly that for her 'nothing at all happened.' And when he smiles and pats her on the backside, she turns on him. 'You think you can treat me like that!' she cries. 'Nobody can treat me like that. I'm nobody's property.' With rage on her face, she empties a bucket of coal at his feet. Cesira is from a peasant background, which often produces women of independence like her. She is not educated or sophisticated, but she knows that no one has the right to control her. Part of her rage is directed at herself, at her dependency on a man, whom she has to trust. It is a subtle scene, which contains hints of what happens later to her daughter.

Sensual Despite her anger and reluctance with Giovanni, she has an undeniable sensuality, which is obvious throughout the film. Perhaps the most revealing scene occurs when she and Rosetta go walking with Michelle in the hills. Cesira throws herself down in the grass and sighs that she wants to be in Rome. Then she questions Michelle about his love life. Does he have a girl? No, he doesn't. In fact, he's never had a woman. 'But how could you be without a woman?' she asks dumbfounded. When he gives his political-correct answer about self-sacrifice, she dismisses that and says, 'You can do without a lot of things, but not love.' Lying relaxed among wild mountain flowers, her hair blowing in the wind, her well-formed body on display, Cesira is clearly a person who cannot live without love.

Practical There are several scenes in which we see that Cesira is a practical person. She may be sensual, but she is level-headed, too. A good example is the conversation she has with a shepherd who sells cheese. Cesira is working in the fields with the other local people. She sees a shepherd pass by and runs after him, asking him to sell her cheese. The man is reluctant, vague and mysterious, but she persists until he shows her a block of cheese, which represents a small luxury during the war. Cesira, dressed in rural working clothes, with a bandana covering her head, knows how to bargain. 'Oh,' she cries in disappointment, 'such a small one.' He names a price and she waves her hand in dismissal. 'Oh, it's gold!' she says sarcastically. Eventually, she hands over the cash. We don't know who got the best of the transaction, but it is clear that Cesira drives a hard bargain.

Protective More important than all these traits, however, is her protective instinct toward her daughter. Again, this quality is illustrated at various points in the story, but the most affecting example occurs after the rape. Mother and dazed daughter walk along the road. A jeep passes with army officers, who refuse to help and Cesira curses them. Then, she follows her daughter down to a stream, where she washes her under her dress. 'Are you in pain, my daughter?' she asks, with her own face etched in pain. Cesira tries to reassure Rosetta that things will get better, that they can get through this together. Rosetta is unresponsive, and Cesira can only glare into the near distance, with defeat on her face. Then, she coaxes Rosetta to resume their journey. 'Come, my sweet angel,' she whispers, 'Come. Come.' With a hand gently guiding her, Cesira leads her daughter back to the road, where life will continue. She will protect her daughter, as best she can, from the awful memory of what happened to her in the church.

Rosetta Rosetta is a sweet young girl, devoted to her mother and to the church. She shows kindness to everyone, even soldiers in the dangerous atmosphere of the war. Her life is changed when she is subjected to a brutal rape, which leaves her numb and speechless. Whether she has the inner strength, like her mother, to survive is left uncertain.

Religious We are given signs of Rosetta's religious faith at various points in the story. She crosses herself, she prays and she listens hard when Michelle reads from the bible. But a more memorable illustration occurs one night when the locals and refugees are eating dinner. Suddenly, children burst inside and scream, 'The lights! The lights!' Everyone hurries outside to watch the night flares burn bright in the dark sky. They are tracer lights, used by airplanes to track troop and vehicle movements below. But to Rosetta, they represent a manifestation of divinity, like the star of Bethlehem. Instinctively, she kneels down and begins to pray: 'Hail Mary, full of grace...' Unlike her mother, who is too clear-headed and practical, young Rosetta is swept up in the mysteries of religion. At least, it gives her solace.

Compassionate Rosetta is also a kind-hearted person. On three separate occasions, she offers bread to strangers: to English soldiers, to German soldiers and to refugees. The first of these examples is perhaps the most dramatic. Michelle comes inside the house with two English soldiers, who are hiding from the Germans. When they ask for food and shelter, the villagers explain that they cannot give them help because, if caught by the Germans, they would all be shot. 'We have to think of our families,' one man says. Michelle looks around the room, searching for a sympathetic face. There is none and he turns to lead the soldiers away. Then, Rosetta calls out, 'We could give them a piece of bread.' Cesira agrees and invites the men into her little house, where she treats them to a full meal and glasses of wine. However, it was not Cesira who broke ranks and offered them food in the first place. That honour goes to Rosetta.

Michele Young rebel Michelle stands out among the villagers as an intellectual, or at least a literate person. He is also thoughtful, opinionated, idealistic and honest. Although crystal clear about his political principles, he is confused about romance. Throughout the story, he shows tenderness to both Cesira and Rosetta. And in the end, he makes a decision that protect others and costs him his life.

Idealistic Our first glimpse of Michelle is during the feast when Cesira and Rosetta have reached Ciocriaria in the mountains. While the villagers are enjoying a feast, one of them says they hope for peace, 'whichever side wins. The others nod their heads, but Michelle says, 'If the Germans win, I will kill myself.' He explains that the Germans have done nothing to him personally, but he hates their fascist ideology. When the others dismiss politics and take refuge in food and music, Michelle fumes. And when they condemn the Germans for bombing a man to death, he explodes. 'Don't our bombs kill?' he asks rhetorically. 'We do nothing while people are dying, but we sit here stuffing ourselves. We are pigs!' he says, rising from the table. This is quintessential Michelle, committed anti-fascist, advocate of peace and his own severest critic. After this outburst of condemnation, we are not surprised when later he criticises religion, convent schools and capitalism, while extolling the intrinsic virtues of the peasants.

Honesty Michelle, someone says, is the victim of his own thoughts. He has many thoughts, and feelings, and is open enough to try to express them. That honesty is revealed in a scene with Cesira. Michelle ridicules the passivity of the people gathered to hear him read from the bible, saying they are worse than Lazarus. When he stomps off outside, Cesira follows and asks what he means. 'Nothing,' he says. 'At least you say what you think, whether it's right or wrong. I don't anymore. I don't have the courage.' Cesira says that his problem is being too honest, and he agrees. 'I haven't been honest with you,' he says, with a sigh. 'I love you.' She dismisses his declaration, but he says, 'I had to say it...because it's true.' They trudge back to their houses in the rain, but we see that Michelle doesn't have a dishonest bone in his body. If he thinks something is true—whether in politics or romance—he must say it.

Dogmatic Honesty, when combined with commitment, can lead to dogmatism. That quality is evident in Michelle in the scene just before the one described in the previous paragraph. It is a Sunday morning and the villagers have gathered in a hall to hear Michelle read from the bible. He reads extracts from the story of Lazarus, the man whom Christ restores to life four days after his death. Michelle is interrupted by Cesira reading news in a letter she has received. Jealous and enraged, he stands up and declares the people to be 'dead,' worse than Lazarus, obsessed with food and petty possessions. His fierce condemnation seems to come from nowhere until we remember

that he wanted to become a priest and only later turned to revolutionary politics. We can then appreciate that those two callings share a dogmatism, a rigid adherence to a set of principles.

Brave Michelle's strength of belief also underlies the bravery he shows toward the end of the story. One day, a group of retreating Germans arrive in the village and demand food and water. Frightened, the villagers comply, but when the soldiers also demand that someone guide them to the next valley, everyone has an excuse. 'I'm not from here,' one says. 'I'm too old,' another says. Pointing his gun at Michelle, the German officer says that he must come. 'But he's only a student,' his father pleads. 'He only knows how to read.' His mother also begs for mercy because he is her 'only son.' When his father offers to take his place and act as the guide, Michelle won't hear of it. 'I'll go, mama,' he says softly. 'Don't worry. I'll be back before tonight.' But that is the last we see of Michelle. He went in order to spare his father or someone else acting as a guide. He went knowing full well that he was putting his life in danger. But he went, and he died.



(Mother and daughter snuggling up in bed)



(Mother protecting daughter)



(Michelle and Cesira)