

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Rome, Open City (Roma, citta aperta) 1946

Roberto Rossellini

Contents

Overview

Synopsis

Characters

Scenes

Themes (Politics – Religion – Gender)

Character Analysis (*Giorgio* – *Pina* - *Francesco* - *Don Pietro* – *Marina*)

OVERVIEW

This film, the first part of Rossellini's war trilogy, dramatises the heroism and suffering of Italian resistance to German occupation of Rome in the winter of 1943/1944. The story of its production, which began as soon as the defeated Germans left the city, is as remarkable as the film itself. At a time when there was little money, film stock or film-making, Rossellini found a patron who wanted to make two documentaries, one about a priest who was killed by the Germans for supporting the resistance, and another about a group of boys who fought with the partisans. Combining those two stories, and adding the character of Giorgio, Pina and others, Rossellini used his friend Federico Fellini to persuade film-star Aldo Fabrizi to play the priest. Later, when he had run out of money, Rossellini convinced a local merchant to invest in the venture. Finally, when he'd run out of film, he met an American soldier who had access to rolls that the army film unit discarded. Story, actors, money and film all came together to create what is considered not only one of finest neo-realist films but one of the best films ever made. It is hard to name another film that commands such authenticity in depicting such sensational historical events. Although the film did not go down well with Italian audiences, who were sick of seeing such events, it did win major awards, including Grand Prize at Cannes and Best Foreign Language Film at the New York Film Critics Circle. Today, it can be enjoyed not only as a slice of history but also as a gripping thriller pitting the Nazis against a resistance cell.

SYNOPSIS

In Rome, the Italian resistance movement is coming under increasing pressure from the Germans and their Italian fascist allies. The Germans hunt for Giorgio, who takes refuge in Francesco's apartment and enlists the priest Don Pietro in carrying out dangerous missions on behalf of the resistance. Francesco is soon arrested and his fiancé Pina is shot dead. Francesco escapes from prison and joins Giorgio, who is then betrayed to the Germans by Marina, Giorgio's girlfriend. Don Pietro is also arrested, but Francesco manages to escape. Giorgio is tortured to death, but does not divulge any information about the resistance. Don Pietro also refuses to cooperate and is executed.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Giorgio	Giorgio is a high-ranking member of the resistance.
Marina	Marina is his girlfriend.
Francesco	Francesco is another member of the resistance.
Pina	Pina is his fiancé.
Marcello	Marcello is her son.
Don Pietro	Don Pietro is a priest who supports the resistance.

SCENES

Escape In pre-dawn darkness, German SS troops come to arrest Giorgio Manfredi, but he escapes across a rooftop. The German men, who speak fluent Italian, enter the rooming house where he stays but find nothing. A young woman (whom we later learn is Marina) calls him on the telephone, but hangs up when she realizes she is talking to the Germans.

SS Commander The local SS commander looks at a huge map of Rome and says that his plan enables him to comb densely populated areas with few men. He then speaks to a colleague and explains that he identified Giorgio as a resistance fighter from photos sent to him from Berlin. He also knows that his girlfriend is Marina, a showgirl.

Pina A crowd of hungry people storm a bakery and grab loaves of bread. Among them is Pina, who is pregnant. A local policeman helps her with her heavy basket, and she is offered eggs on the black market. Inside her building, she sees Giorgio waiting outside Francesco's flat, which is next to hers. She is suspicious but then realises he must be a resistance fighter like Francesco. Once inside, Giorgio asks her to fetch Don Pietro, a priest. Giorgio talks to Pina's sister, Laura, and tells her to tell Marina that he won't be able to see her for a few days. He also tells Pina that he's known Marina for a few months but now 'things must end.' Pina says that she and Francesco are getting married the next day.

Don Pietro When Don Pietro arrives, Giorgio asks him to take money to a group of resistance fighters in the mountains. Giorgio can't go because the Gestapo are watching him. The priest agrees but first visits Francesco, who is hiding in an underground room, where the resistance prints anti-fascist pamphlets. The priest tells him about Giorgio and is given three books, the pages of which are actual bank notes, totalling one million lira.

Marina At a cabaret, Laura passes Giorgio's message to Marina that he won't be able to see her for a while. She is disturbed, especially because he didn't give any reason for cutting off contact. We also see that she is desperate for a 'fix' and is given a drug by a lady called Ingrid.

Pina and the priest Just before Don Pietro sets off with the cash-filled books, Pina wants him to hear her confession, but there is no time. As they leave the church, an Austrian officer arrives. Because he has switched sides, he is given refuge in the church. As Don Pietro and Pina walk together, she expresses her shame at being pregnant before marriage. He reassures her that god is merciful, but that people must reflect on their sins. They separate, and Don Pietro continues to the rendezvous spot, where he hands over the books.

Young saboteurs Francesco sneaks back to his apartment and meets Giorgio. He shows him the new pamphlet and says they've printed 12,000 copies. Pina walks in, anxious that she can't find her son, Marcello. An explosion is heard, an act of sabotage carried out by Marcello and his friends. All the parents scold their children, all except Francesco who tells Marcello, his step-son, that he respects his secret work.

Manhunt The SS commander informs the police chief that Francesco was seen in a certain district that morning, where the bomb blew up a petrol tank in a railway yard. When the police chief gives him a photo of Giorgio (alias Luigi Ferralis), the SS man summons Ingrid (a friend of Laura's), who says that she 'will take care of it.'

Wedding day The next morning, as Francesco and Pina get dressed for their wedding, German soldiers surround their building. They order everyone into the courtyard and begin a room-by-room search, but Francesco hides in a secret basement. Marcello, who is at the church, informs Don Pietro that bombs are stored in the apartment of one of his friends. Don Pietro arrives and says he must tend to an old man who is too ill to leave his room. Don Pietro finds a bomb and a machine gun and hides them under the old man's blanket. Meanwhile, an Italian officer decides to have a look at the old man, but only finds Don Pietro saying the last rites at his bedside.

Shot dead When Francesco is captured and driven away, Pina breaks free of the soldiers and chases after the police van. She is shot dead. Outside the city, the van is attacked by resistance fighters and Francesco escapes. Back in Rome, he and Giorgio meet Marina, who takes them to her luxurious apartment. She takes a call from Ingrid, the woman working with the SS, but says she hasn't seen Giorgio. Giorgio finds a vial of drugs in her purse, but she claims it's for a toothache. They also argue about her selling sex to fund her luxury life-style.

Arrested Marina informs Ingrid about the men's movements in exchange for a fur coat and drugs, but she resists Ingrid's lesbian advances and feels guilty for betraying Giorgio. Meanwhile, Giorgio, the Austrian defector and the priest are arrested, but Francesco is not because he was saying goodbye to Marcello.

Tortured Giorgio is interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo, but he refuses to talk, citing other resistance men who have kept their silence and died for their loyalty. Don Pietro is also questioned but says he cannot divulge information given to him in confession. He is forced to watch Giorgio being tortured and told that his friend will be spared if he himself talks. Still the priest refuses, knowing that is what Giorgio would want. The Austrian defector hangs himself before he can be tortured.

German doubts In a room adjacent to the SS man's office, German officers enjoy music and drink with Ingrid and Marina. However, the SS man and his associates express doubts about Germans being the 'master race'. If Giorgio and the priest show courage by not talking, they reckon that they must be as courageous as the Germans. One half-drunk officer says, 'We Germans refuse to understand that people want to live free...All we do is kill, kill, kill...and it produces nothing but hatred.'

More torture When Giorgio passes out from his savage beating, the SS man wakes him up. He is in a hurry because he wants to get information before the resistance learns that Giorgio has been arrested and scatters. When the commander offers him amnesty for all his communist comrades if he speaks, Giorgio spits at him and receives even more torture, including being burnt with a blowtorch.

Denunciation Don Pietro is brought face to face with the dead body of Giorgio and blesses him. Then he turns on the commander and Ingrid, and denounces them. 'You tried to kill his soul. All you killed was his body. Damn you! You will be trodden into the dust like worms!' Marina also sees the dead Giorgio and faints. Ingrid takes the fur coat from her prostate body and tells the guard to lock her up.

Firing squad In an open field, outside the city, a firing squad lines up as a police van approaches. Don Pietro steps out and is led by another priest, who chants a prayer as they walk toward a chair placed in the field. All of a sudden, Marcello and his little gang of young resistance fighters gather at a fence to watch. As they whistle a popular resistance song, the Italian soldiers fire but deliberately miss. Don Pietro prays for the forgiveness of his murderers. The SS man kills the priest with his revolver.

THEMES

1. Politics The most prominent subject matter of this film is the German occupation of Rome. With semi-documentary authenticity, it tells the story of how the Germans and their Italian fascist hosts hunted down, tortured and executed members of the resistance movement and their supporters. Although the film includes some elements of ambiguity (the compromised position of Marina, who betrays Giorgio, and the German officer who questions the self-image of Nazis as the 'master race'), it is a wholehearted valorisation of the resistance and condemnation of the fascists. The political message is clear even before the story even begins, when we read on screen that 'this film is based on the heroism and the tragedy of the nine-month occupation of Rome by the Germans.' The Germans, especially the Italian-speaking SS Commander, are ruthless if not always effective. Nearly every Italian, even a gang of little boys, is either a supporter of the resistance or an active fighter against occupation. When everyone is evicted from Pina's building, the women and children struggle with the soldiers and hit them with their fists. There is an underground printing press, a more than sympathetic priest and an army of 500 waiting in the mountains. There are also mini-cases of mutiny, when, for example, the Italian guard at the building persuades the German officers to let Don Pietro in. Even more dramatic is the refusal of the Italian soldiers in the firing squad to shoot a priest. While that sentiment is plausible, the film does present a somewhat false picture of an alliance between the church and the resistance. Don Pietro is as much a hero as Giorgio, and the final image of the Vatican in the distance suggests that the Catholic church blesses the spirit of resistance. In fact, however, the Vatican made a pact with Mussolini, cloaking it as a necessary stance of neutrality. When interrogating Don Pietro, the SS Commander tries to drive a wedge between the church and the resistance, whereas, in fact, the church never supported the active resistance. Despite this misleading element, the film does faithfully represent the anger and humiliation of Rome, when (in

August 1943) the King declared it an 'open city,' meaning that it would not resist occupation. Rossellini's film shows just how strong and widespread the resistance actually was.

2. Religion The role of the church has already been mentioned as part of the political message, but it exists as a theme in its own right, too. Although the little boy Marcello, who is part of the resistance, expresses the opinion that the church 'is a waste of time these days,' for the most part religion is seen as a positive force in fighting the occupiers. That force is personified in the figure of Don Pietro, who is an active supporter and also a voice for Christian teachings. He speaks of the need for mercy, courage, endurance, sacrifice and self-reflection. When Pina, a pious woman, complains that she can't take the war any longer, he counsels her (and, by extension, others) to reflect on their individual lives and pray for forgiveness for their sins. At the point of death, Don Pietro himself asks God to forgive his executioners for 'they know not what they do.' His faith is contrasted with the atheism of the SS commander. During his interrogation of the priest, the German man is bothered by Don Pietro's religious comments about mercy and God's will. At one point, he orders him 'not to preach.' When Don Pietro refuses to cooperate and halt Giorgio's torture, the German shows him the mutilated body of his friend. Then he mocks the priest's faith, saying, 'Is this your Christian charity? Your love for your brother in Christ?' Later, the SS man admits that he was rattled by the priest, whose belief in Christ is as firm as his own atheist ideology. Finally, the influence of religion on the story is illustrated by the scene in which Giorgio is tortured to death. When the camera closes in on his bowed and bloodied face, it has a deliberate resemblance to the crucified Christ. It cannot be lost on the Italian cinema-goers of that era that Christ was also a political rebel who died for his cause.

3. Courage Both the political and the religious figures in the story, both the fighters and the priest, embody its central theme of courage. The priest shows bravery when he agrees to take the money (hidden in a book) to a resistance fighter outside the city and also when he goes into the building to hide the bombs. These are dangerous undertakings; if caught, he would be shot. The same goes for little Marcello and his gang of boys, who actually blow up a storage tank in a railway yard. Other smaller acts of bravery are scattered throughout the story, but the most sensational occurs at the end, when Giorgio is tortured and Don Pietro is made to watch. Even for us, viewing the film in our peaceful homes, these scenes are visceral and horrific. Giorgio is slowly beaten and burnt to death, but he refuses to divulge any information about the resistance. The ordeal for Don Pietro is, if anything, even more terrifying for he has the power to stop the torture and release his friend. But he, too, will not talk. Somewhere, deep inside themselves, they both find the strength to endure the terrible physical and psychological suffering. That courage is the backbone of the resistance movement.

4. Gender The film appears to present a heroine, but a closer look suggests that the female characters as a whole reinforce gender stereotypes. For example, the two key women in the story, Pina and Marina, are pitted against each other as polar opposites. Pina is the heroine, the pious woman and pregnant widow, who is loyal to the cause and to her fiancé, Francesco. She takes part in a bread riot, she is concerned about her son, Marcello, and she is deeply in love with Francesco. Most important, she dies in an attempt to prevent him being taken away by the Germans. In contrast to her as the female martyr, Marina is the femme fatale. She is weak, superficial and unstable. Interested in drugs and luxury, she betrays the cause and gives information that leads to the arrest and, later, the deaths of Giorgio and Don Pietro. A third woman is Ingrid, the evil traitor who is also a lesbian. Unlike Marina, she is a strong person and does not have the excuse of poverty to explain away her behaviour. Instead, she is a calculating opportunist, whose commitment to the 'master race' ideology is firm. What these portraits of female characters show is that a woman cannot be both independent and virtuous. Pina is controlled by her love and her role as a mother; Marina wants to be independent but is too weak to shake off her addictions; Ingrid, the mannish non-woman, is simply too vicious to earn our sympathy. In the end, these women are either powerless mothers who die, weak addicts who betray or powerful women who are not feminine. Perhaps the film's attitude toward women, reflecting society's view, is best expressed by little Marcello. As he goes to bed one night, his sister complains she he never takes her with him on his sabotage missions. He says he can't because she's a girl. 'Can't women be heroes?' the sister asks. 'Sure,' Marcello says, 'but women always mean more trouble.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Giorgio Giorgio is a severe man. He is a committed resistance fighter and a difficult man to love. He rarely smiles and usually wears a sceptical look on his weary face. Even at the end, when he is tortured, and that face is battered beyond recognition, he seems to be scowling at the world.

Not much of a lover, he is an inspirational and courageous member of the resistance movement.

Censorious Giorgio has little time for human weakness or petty desires. He has his eyes on a political goal that requires conviction and courage. That critical outlook is illustrated in a scene with Marina, the woman he fell in love with by 'mistake.' He has just discovered her drug habit, which she denies. When she explains that she used prostitution to lift her out of poverty and that she knows what suffering is, he simply mocks her. 'Poor Marina,' he says, sarcastically, 'do you think that happiness is an elegant apartment, nice clothes, a maid and rich lovers?' She turns on him and says that he's worse than her other lovers, who at least 'didn't preach.' Marina's accusation is spot-on. Giorgio is our hero, but he has a streak of puritanism in him.

Courageous That same stoicism, though, has a positive side. It provides him with a strength that enables him to endure the savage beating he receives at the end of the film. His performance in that scene is mute, except for the cries of pain, but it speaks of an intrepid commitment to the cause of Italian freedom. As we watch him suffer, it is clear that his courage is not physical, for his body has been already defeated. It must come from inside his mind, which is steadfast and will not betray the cause. He, like Francesco and the others, has a deep-rooted belief in the resistance, a belief that cannot be touched by physical pain. Even in the midst of this terrible suffering, he has the mental fortitude to reply to the SS commander's offer of an amnesty if he reveals the secrets of the resistance. He doesn't reply in words; he simply spits at the man.

Pina Pina, the nominal heroine of the story, is a middle-aged woman who used to work in a factory until the Germans arrived. Now, she is widowed with a young boy and has lost her looks. But she is a sympathetic character, deeply in love with her fiancé, a worried mother, a pious Catholic and a loyal supporter of the resistance.

Romantic In the middle of the occupation and the dangers faced by the resistance, Pina remains deeply in love with Francesco. Her inner world is revealed in a brief scene at the beginning of the film. The two lovers are about to enter her apartment, when she asks him to sit down with her on the outside staircase. 'It's a long time since we had a quiet talk together,' she says, longingly. Sitting close, she recalls their first meeting, two years earlier, when she knocked on his door to tell him to stop all the hammering that was so noisy. Now, her voice trails off and her eyes turn dreamy as she tries to recapture that happy moment. It is a fleeting recollection but it opens up a window into her feelings. She is not a spring chicken, but she is still capable of romantic reminiscences.

Pious Pina is a typically religious woman of her times, who looks forward to her (second) church wedding. But she is also ashamed that she will get married while visibly pregnant. Walking with Don Pietro, she speaks of her regret. 'It's so long since I've been to confession,' she says. 'I'm ashamed. The priest begins to speak but she cuts him off. 'I've done a lot of things I shouldn't,' she says. 'Don't you think I'm ashamed of going to the altar like this?' Pina speaks with sadness in her voice. She loves Francesco and he loves her, and it is the middle of a war, but still she feels shame for having sex with him before marriage. She has imbibed the teachings of the Catholic church.

Francesco Francesco is a tall, handsome man. Unlike his fiancé, he is not religious, though he is tender toward her and her son. His commitment to the cause of resistance is unconditional and his confidence in its righteousness is unwavering. Of the major characters, only he survives until the end, though we do not know what happens to him afterward.

Optimistic Even in the depths of despair, when the grip of the Germans was tightening on the lives of ordinary people in Rome, the resistance did not give in to pessimism. That exemplary optimism is displayed by Francesco, the fiancé of Pina. He doesn't appear in many scenes, but there is one that stands out. He is listening to Pina voice her pessimism that the war will never stop and that she can't hold out much longer. He caresses her hand and says, 'Spring will come again and it will be the best ever because we'll be free. We must believe that.' Then he adds that they should never be frightened, 'not now or in the future because we're in the right. It might be a long haul, but we'll get there and see a better world.' His confidence is infectious and soothes Pina's weariness. Francesco has a vision of a future that keeps them both going.

Affectionate Francesco is tender not only with Pina, but also with Marcello, her son. After he is scolded by his mother for vanishing without telling anyone (to carry out an act of sabotage), he is sent to bed early. Francesco steals in, sits on the bed and ruffles the boy's hair. 'Still awake?' he asks gently. When Marcello sits up, Francesco suspects he has been acting for the resistance and asks him where he went with the other boys. Told it's a secret, Francesco brushes his cheek with his hand

and says, 'You're right, then. You mustn't tell anybody.' Hearing those words, which validate his role in the resistance, Marcello beams a bright smile. Francesco could have tried to force the information from him, but he is sensitive enough to the young boy's pride not to do so.

Don Pietro The character of Don Pietro is based on an historical priest who supported the partisans in Rome and was executed for his resistance to German occupation. The character in the film is exactly that kind of man, deeply religious but also deeply sympathetic to the suffering of others. He justifies his political actions by saying that he helps those in need, but there is no doubt that he shares the ideals of the anti-fascist movement. Throughout the film, in which he is the real star, he shows forbearance, charity and bravery. A remarkable man.

Humble In the first scene in which he appears, Don Pietro displays the lighter side of his character. When the scene opens, it seems that he is supervising a game of football in the courtyard of his church. Then, we see that he is actually playing alongside the boys. He misses a kick and throws his hands up in the air in disappointment, like any ten-year old. Around and around, they go, chasing the ball, until it lands on his head in a moment of farce. Seconds later, he is drawn into a dangerous mission on behalf of the resistance, but first we see that he is truly 'a man of the people.' He is not only playful, he is also humble, without pretension or ego.

Clever Don Pietro is also a clever man. This quality is displayed on a dangerous mission when he goes into a building, just emptied by the Germans who are looking for Giorgio. He goes in because he knows that one of the boys keeps a bomb in his apartment and that if the Germans find it, the boy and his family will suffer. He pretends that he is going in to comfort a sick man. Once inside, he finds the bomb and is trying to leave when the soldiers come looking for the ill man. Don Pietro quickly ducks into the man's room, and hides the bomb and a machine-gun (which he also took from the young boy). At that moment, the old man wakes up—he's not ill at all—and Don Pietro tells him to pretend to be ill, but the old man doesn't understand. With no other choice, the priest knocks him out cold, and when the soldiers finally find him, he is standing at the bedside reading the last rites to a dying man. The Italian soldiers are fascists but also Catholics, so they leave him alone. Don Pietro, the pious priest, knows when deception is permissible.

Humane Throughout the story, Don Pietro is under control and doesn't show anger. He is always charitable, even to his executioners at the end. But there is one scene in which his anger sweeps aside his Christian teachings about forgiveness. The SS commander brings him face to face with the half-bloodied body of Giorgio. Realising that his friend is dead, he blesses him. Then, with tears in his eyes, he turns to the Commander. 'You tried to kill his soul. All you killed was his body,' he screams. 'Damn you! You will be trodden into the dust like worms!' Feeling remorse for his angry words, he asks God for mercy. As a priest, he should not have damned anyone—that is blasphemy. But as a man, he could not hold back his condemnation of such barbarity. His humanity overcame his piety.

Marina Marina is a young woman who works as a showgirl, and an occasional prostitute, and has a drug habit. She grew up the hard way and had to look after herself. Rather than make her self-reliant, though, she turned out to be weak and superficial. The Germans, through the evil Ingrid, prey on her weakness and she succumbs although she has pangs of conscience at the end.

Cynical Marina was brought up in poverty and did 'what any girl would do,' as she says. That admission comes during a heated argument with Giorgio, who has been her boyfriend for a while. When he says we can shape our own lives, she hits back and says, 'That's make-believe. Life is mean and dirty. I know what poverty is and it scares me.' He scoffs at her excuses, but she goes on. 'If I'd done different,' she points out, 'I'd have married a tram driver and we'd all be starving by now. Me, the children and him.' Marina is not a sympathetic character, given what happens later, but here we must appreciate that she has been forced to make her own way in a cruel world. She is not sweet or pious, and she has no illusions about herself or the world around her. She sees life as a struggle and she is ready for it. She is cynical.

Compromised Marina gets her drugs from Ingrid, the traitor who works for the Germans. And Ingrid manipulates the weak Marina into betraying Giorgio and Francesco by telling Ingrid where the men are hiding. When Giorgio is arrested (Francesco fortunately escapes), she is rewarded by Ingrid. As Marina sits in Ingrid's sumptuous apartment, she is told that her 'information was correct' and is given a full-length fur coat. Ingrid pats her forehead like a child, tells her she looks wonderful in the coat and leads her in front of a mirror. This is when Marina first speaks. Her face expressionless, she

says, 'Have they arrested him?' She knows what might happen to Giorgio, but she doesn't want to admit that she knows. Ingrid asks if she loves him and she replies, 'I don't love anyone.' Marina is twisted inside. She knows she has betrayed Giorgio and yet she loves the fur coat. She is compromised and hates herself.



(Pina runs after Francesco just before she is shot)



(Don Pietro about to be executed)



(Pina shielding a woman from a German soldier)



(the SS commander)