

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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La Strada 1954
Federico Fellini. 1920-1993

STORY

The simple narrative of this film—young girl sold to rough hewn circus guy, who buys her and forces her to travel into further and constantly more unfriendly personal situations, and who in the end abandons her to die—plays out against a landscape as dehumanized and scarred as the people who live in it. The *strada*, the anonymous highway leading through dusty, windblown, scarcely habitable suburbs of anonymous cities—this *strada* is a setting from hell, a transit through the dangerous and colorless breakdown of social order. Brief episodes of amusement—circus stops when the pair perform—of quasi-romantic encounter for the hopeless young girl—are the only touches of joy or sensuality to open humanity. Powerful and contemporary as it is, there is no doubting that this parable of our time, with which Fellini first broke through into public attention, remains one of his benchmark, and most popular, achievements.

Three characters dominate the simple but episodically multiple plot, which essentially concerns the passage of Gelsomina from impoverished ingenue through street entertainer, through pitiful victim abandoned to an early death by the indifference and insensitivity of her careless owner, Zampano. If there is a third person in this trinity it will be the wise and clownish tight-rope walker, the Fool, who has the sense to interact with Gelsomina, and in the end to prove himself, as he has understood that Gelsomina and Zampano ultimately long for meaning in their lives. The three characters interact through a random series of episodes, out of which will emerge a final resolution into the meaning of what is an almost plot.

Episodes. Episodes construct the plot, and not without ample allowance for the non-consecutive, intuitive, and half clear in human developmental experience. They string together like this: Zampano, a street performer, buys the innocent and inexperienced Gelsomina, whose family can no longer afford her, and who goes off clueless to live and road perform with Zampano; for some time the pair of them hold together from one street setting to another, Zampano regularly abandoning Gelsomina, to shack up with some roadside chick out of his past; the roadside entertainers encounter the Fool, amazing in his highwire act, who bonds quickly with Gelsomina, while Zampano and the guy revive their old enmity, and Zampano warns the fool to get out; in an altercation, farther down the road, Zampano accidentally kills the Fool—the one voice of wisdom for the girl, who is shattered; Zampano and Gelsomina grow apart—she is fixated on the death of the fool—and in short order, without notifying her, Zampano abandons his love for good; in a heart rending episode, years later, Zampano hears the news of Gelsomina's death, drinks himself senseless, and crawls away in a corner, to weep for his true love. Zampano and Gelsomina were meant for each other but they lacked a setting in which to discover that.

THEMES

Faith. The film as a whole is bathed in an atmosphere of 'popular street Catholicism,' religious parades, carnivals turning around the cult of the Virgin Mary, the faithful on their knees in the streets. Gelsomina herself is the natural and charmed heir of this kind of spirituality.

Brutality. Zampano enforces his own law of the jungle, treating Gelsomina as the love object she is. For a long time he treats her like trash—screws her at will, slaps and beats her, abandons her with no resources, though in the end he realizes what he has lost, and it kills him.

Clownishness Zampano, for all his roughness, is the master of street carnival and roadside shows, the ways he makes his living. Gelsomina, whether she likes it or not, slides into the life of the mime, while the

Fool, a tightrope walker, is happiest making a staring crowd breathless. All of them play the clown, in the mode of Pagliacci.

Desolation The urbanscapes through which this drama of sadness and remorse plays out are desolate, windy, dusty, and seem to play out in zones farther even than the suburbs from anything like the city itself. These zones are both magic and dreadful.

CHARACTERS

Zampano is the travelling street performance macho who buys Gelsomina from her parents, as he had once bought Gelsomina's sister. Zampano is brutal to Gelsomina, the consummate *fee ingenua*, screwing her when he likes, throwing and slapping her, but in the very end, when he has lost her, he weeps like a baby and dies.

Gelsomina is a *fee*, and at the beginning virginal, daughter of deeply impoverished parents. She is given to Zampano, and he turns her into a street performer, a role she alternately hates and falls into. In the end she is left adrift by Zampano, and dies. But she is not forgotten, for Zampano cannot forget her, or survive her.

The Fool is a street actor and tightrope performer, who becomes the dominant inspiration for Gelsomina, advising her to hang in there, that everything in life has a purpose.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ZAMPANO

Character The rough hewn circus guy, Zampano, is strong, tough, weather beaten, without a setting in time or place, just a domineering and often abusive force, and yet there is a desperate self-awareness lurking around his smile. In the end, this tough victim of the hardscrabble sub-circus entertainment life—who lives off the dull fascinations of joy starved kids—is far from any enjoyment. Gelsomina, his bought wife, only makes his own loneliness sharper, for he cannot relate to her. Sex means tears for her, and he sleeps off their intercourse with the brute muscular indifference he brings with him, until pure exhaustion wears him out at the end of the film, and deadly remorse at the loss of Gelsomina gives him the true rest of sleep.

Parallels Zampano is from the start only interested in Gelsomina as an assistant for his circus act. (He takes sex as a simple blunt add-on, no preliminaries, no feeling.) It can well be imagined that the theme of domestic abuse, invoked here, is as widespread in our films as we know it is in our culture. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1983) was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985, and dwells in painful detail on the chauvinism, sexual sadism, incest to which Celia, an Afro American woman, is subjected by male abuse in the first forty years of this century. *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) presents in thriller form the nastiness imposed on a wife whose brutally abusive husband gives way to a lethal obsessive-compulsive disorder. Jennifer Lopez' film, *Enough* (2002), takes off from the fate of a cute waitress who is picked up and soon married by a handsome middle class gent, who shares with Zampano one thing, thoughtless narcissism and reckless indifference to his woman.

Illustrative moments

Cold We first study Zampano as he returns to the humble home of Gelsomina, whose sister he had bought as wife, but whom he now needs to replace. As the family arranges the sale of the girl, Zampano, with a crooked impatient smile, waits without involvement for the bitter transaction to be complete. His stocky impassive stance lightens only to allow the trace of a desire filled smile, as he leads the girl toward the battered circus van they will depart in. Tinny background circus music, and a dusty windblown sky lend a fearful depression to the vanishing circus cart, as it disappears down the highway.

Abuser Zampano comes to an off road opening, near the impoverished outskirts of a city, where he sets up his van and prepares to act for the locals, especially for the kids. He gives Gelsomina on the spot training, in beating the tambourine and dancing an invitation, but at the same time asserts his power over the unsure girl. He strips a branch, takes the withe in hand and slashes at his 'wife's' ankles to make her hop more smartly. She is hurt and offended, and in that small gesture he renders her submission and loneliness more painful than they need have been. He is brusque, on point, sexual, and abusive.

Abandoner Having at last recognized what harm he has done to Gelsomina, Zampano comes to the conclusion—we feel his brain thrashing—to send her home. When she refuses this proposal, insisting on remaining with him, he takes advantage of a moment of peace—she has just fallen asleep in a sunny corner—to leave some basic clothes and food with her, and to leave her to her fate. He drives away, as at the beginning of the film he drove down the *strada* taking her with him to her dreadful new life. His smile is still the same faint, wounded, desperate crease that it was when first we met him.

Negater Never is Zampano more brutally just what he looks like than at the end of the film, which finds him outstretched on the sand, his head buried both in his arms and in sand, weeping; while approaching him comes the in gathered tide we have to imagine, though it is not explicit, will sweep him out to sea and his death. His slight smile has now become the full faced rictus of despair, an anger toward life and others, with whom he was never strong enough to complete.

GELSOMINA

Character Gelsomina is richly hued, for a child of poverty and pure survival; gentle and tough at the same time. She passes from one man to another—Zampano to the Fool—with little guidance or love. If there is a passageway, through which she can see any light of meaning, it will come from her attentiveness to Il Matto, The Fool. This happy go lucky and cynical high wire walker tells her his philosophy of life, that everyone's life has a purpose, and Gelsomina listens to him, as she does to the nun who crosses her path, especially when the nun tells her that they two, these two women, have comparable paths. Gelsomina has neither the strength nor inner vision, to make a reality of that prediction, but her tenacious and occasionally antic personality keeps her hanging in there, until the global condition of absolute indifference to her prevails. She remains in our minds, though, as the presence of magic where life is at its most unsparing.

Parallels Gelsomina appears from the start as an ingénue, who knows little about life beyond her immediate impoverished life, and who is taken without discussion by Zampano. The almost unrelieved brutality, to which she is subjected from early on, on the road, mirrors itself in repeated film efforts of our time. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1983) was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985, and dwells in painful detail on the chauvinism, sexual sadism, incest to which Celia, an Afro American woman, is subjected by male abuse in the first forty years of this century. *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) presents in thriller form the nastiness imposed on a wife whose brutally abusive husband gives way to a lethal obsessive-compulsive disorder. Jennifer Lopez' film, *Enough* (2002), takes off from the fate of a cute waitress who is picked up and soon married by a handsome middle class gent, who shares with Zampano one thing, thoughtless narcissism and reckless indifference to his woman.

Illustrative moments

Innocent Gelsomina is sold to Zampano, just as her sister (now dead) had been sold. We see the young lady, with her mom and surrounding family, chattering nervously as Zampany waits on the sidelines, ready to leave with his prey. The film's most touching moment may well be the shots of Gelsomina waving to her family from the back of Zampano's rickety van, as she (presumably) leaves them forever. She knows neither her destination nor her expected role, only that her mother is now substantially richer, with the money that Zampano has paid for her.

Antic Shortly after departing with Zampano, on their search for roadside circus audiences, Gelsomina finds herself conscripted to beat the tambourine and announce the Zampano act—breaking steel bands with his pectoral muscles—to the scruffy gathering of locals who have come out to watch. Gelsomina, in a

rare antic mood, jazzes up her performance, hops and skips, and for a short while shows us the lively person usually buried inside her. Her personality flares into a joyful moment of life, and yet we know that with the hard bitten and abusive Zampano beside her, she will never flower.

Buoyed For a short time, after she has linked up with The Fool, an inspiring circus high walker, Gelsomina is stimulated to think of possibilities for her life. The Fool urges her to think that every life has a purpose. The nun urges her to think that she, Gelsomina, is also on a kind of sacred path. We see faint rays of hope and joy in Gelsomina, as we had seen them when she first joined Zampano. But her life resources are too fragile, and when Zampano returns from prison, and carries her off with him, she is on a downward path from which she will never recover.

Remembered Never is Gelsomina more present to us than in the moments when her death and fading away are recalled, from five years earlier, by a woman hanging out her laundry. Zampano, who has ultimately abandoned Gelsomina, has asked the laundry-hanging woman for news of his long lost 'wife,' and upon hearing this distant account of Gelsomina's death, he is overwhelmed by what he has lost, and killed. He buries himself, weeping, in the sand on the shore, and gives his life to her memory. Gelsomina pulses at the center of the film, as her death is recalled, and she becomes fully alive again.

Discussion questions

Is the desolate landscape of *La Strada* a commentary on the realities of modern breakdown, or is it a mythological-poetic landscape, which reflects only Fellini's mind? Does Zampano seem to you to be Fellini talking about himself?

The *auteur* film makers of the mid 20th century were sure of their filmic imaginations, as were their literary contemporaries like Mann, Joyce, and Proust. Can you see traits in common to these two types of imagination, filmic and literary? Is *La Strada* at all like a work of fiction or poetry? How?

Is narrative or character more determinant in shaping *La Strada*? Is any character 'developed' or multi-sided? Are there any enriching complexities in the development of the narrative?