

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **INDISCRETION OF AN AMERICAN WIFE** (aka *Terminal Station; Stazione Termini*) 1953 Vittorio De Sica

**OVERVIEW** *Indiscretion of an American Wife* marked a turning point in De Sica's career. Having gained international recognition with his neo-realist films (especially *Bicycle Thieves*), this was the Italian director's first collaboration with Hollywood. Commissioned by David O. Selznick (whose wife played the leading lady), it starred big Hollywood names and was partly scripted by Truman Capote. Still largely written by De Sica's long-time partner Cesare Zavattini, the film does display some of the neo-realists' approach by setting it in a train station and populating it with a cross-section of figures, from soldiers to poor peasants to the president, who add authenticity to the drama. The production ran into trouble when Selznick and De Sica disagreed about almost everything, a stand-off not improved by the fact that they did not share a common language. After unfavourable reviews, Selznick re-edited, retitled and cut the film without De Sica's permission. As a result, two versions of the film are in circulation (this essay is based on De Sica's preferred version, which includes the first scene, cut by Selznick). The film was nominated for the Grand Prix (now Palme d'Or) at Cannes.

**SYNOPSIS** Mrs Mary Forbes, an American on holiday alone in Rome, has had an affair with Giovanni, an Italian professor. Their story unfolds, in real time, over the course of about two hours one evening in a train station in the city. Reluctantly, Mary has decided to end the affair and return home. She wants to tell Giovanni in person but doesn't, probably because she fears that she would be persuaded to remain in Rome. When Giovanni finds her in the station, he is angry and she is apologetic. She delays her departure to a later train in order to be with him for a while. As they trade reminiscences and recriminations, dreams and regrets, Mary's young cousin, Paul, appears and reminds her of her family back home. Mary swings back and forth between her love for Giovanni and her obligation to her family. In quick succession, three events move the story toward its fast-approaching conclusion. Giovanni slaps her out of anger, he proves his love by dashing across train tracks to embrace her and they are almost charged with public indecency. When they do separate at the end, she is overcome with regret and he accepts the inevitable with good grace.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Mary	Mrs Mary Forbes is an American housewife visiting Rome.
Giovanni	Giovanni is her Italian-American lover.
Paul	Paul is her young nephew.

### STORY

**Indecision** The credits roll over dark shots of a train station in the near distance. The words 'Rome- Eternal city of culture, of legend... and of love' appear on screen. Next, we see a letter to 'Giovanni darling', saying that 'a few minutes ago' the writer went to his apartment where happiness waited for her. Then, in a flashback, Mrs Mary Forbes walks up a stairway and stops before a door with Giovanni's nameplate. She reaches out to press the bell, hesitates, withdraws, and hurries away. Switch back to the letter, which explains that she ran away and begs him to understand and forgive her. Suddenly, she crumples up the letter.

**Rushed journey** Mary enters the station and goes to the ticket counter, where she enquires about the next train to Milan. Although she is on her way to Paris, en route back to America, she wants to leave Rome as quickly as possible. She calls her sister's house in Rome and tells her nephew, Paul, to pack her suitcase and bring it to the station. Having made those arrangements, she buys a dress for her seven-year-old daughter back home. Her train is announced and she gets on board, but it is very crowded. A man offers her a seat in a compartment with several young children and adults. When the man ogles her, she steps out to the aisle and looks through the window, hoping to see her nephew with her suitcase. Instead, she sees Giovanni.

*Giovanni* She gets down and meets him on the platform. He is upset and angry that she is leaving without even a goodbye. She tries to explain and hands him the crumpled letter she wrote. But he waves it away and asks why she didn't tell him in person. Suddenly, her nephew, Paul, rushes up to her with her suitcase and wonders what is happening. When she tells him that 'everything is fine', Paul leaves. Mary and Giovanni face each other again just as the loud speaker announces the departure of her train. His voice choked with emotion, Giovanni wishes her a good trip and says, 'It's been wonderful for me.'

*Delayed departure* The train chugs out of the station, but she stands on the platform and looks at him with a fixed smile. He picks up her suitcase and guides her toward the exit. She tells him that they can't go far because she will take another train that leaves in an hour and a half. Giovanni is disappointed but accepts her decision.

*Guilt and pain* They sit in the station restaurant and talk, shifting back and forth between reliving their joyous love affair and the confusion and guilt they now feel. He is hurt and wants to know why she is leaving him so suddenly. She reminds him of how they met and fell in love. He takes her hand and kisses it. She says she can't leave her daughter and feels guilty about deceiving her husband back home. She may not love him, but he needs her.

*Dreams* A waiter tells them they must move because the restaurant isn't open yet, so they go to a noisy café in the station concourse. He tells her how he had imagined their life together, including her daughter, living in a family house in Pisa. They joke about how they would have had marital rows and made up. Caught up in this dream world, he invites her back to his apartment for a last taste of romance before her train.

*A hard slap* On their way out of the station, she bumps into Paul, who is hanging around. She offers to buy him a chocolate, and the opportunity for last-minute intimacy is lost. Reminded of her family obligations, she tells Giovanni that they had better face reality and forget their romance. Hurt by this rejection, he slaps her and walks away. Paul comforts her and says it is wrong 'to hit a woman.'

*A good mother* Mary and Paul enter a third-class waiting room, where they find a poor, sick woman and take her to the first-aid office. She needs to sleep but faces three days in a crowded train. She won't take a hotel room, she says, because she wants to save money for her baby. The woman's husband says she is a 'good mother, always thinks of her family and never herself,' which makes Mary reflect on her own actions. She buys sweets for the poor woman's three children and tells Paul to go back home because she wants to be alone.

*Forgiven* On his way out of the station, Paul is spotted by Giovanni, who, overcome by guilt, has been searching for Mary. Giovanni begs Paul to tell him where Mary is, but he refuses. Giovanni continues his search and sees her on a platform. Oblivious of an onrushing train, he runs across the tracks to her in an expression of reckless love that moves her to tears. He is forgiven and they seek privacy in a stationary train, where they kiss passionately and Mary admits that she needs him.

*Criminals* When they are discovered in the darkened train compartment, an official informs them that they have broken the law and must accompany him to the police commissioner's office. As they are paraded down the platform by the official, other men whistle at her and photographers snap their picture.

*Clemency* As they wait for the commissioner, Giovanni pleads with his assistant to let Mary go and catch her train, which will depart in fifteen minutes. When they are finally interviewed by the commissioner, he tells them that a public trial would be in order but, considering the repercussions for her and her family, he will ignore the crime.

*Goodbye for good* Rescued from public disgrace, she collects her suitcase from a porter and they hurry to the platform for the Paris train. As the minutes tick away, he asks her to contact her on arrival, but she says 'no cables, no letters.' Then she agrees to send a short message only: 'arrived safely.' On board, they look lovingly at each other but dare not kiss in the crowd. She says that she will think about him for the rest of her life. He jumps off the train at the last moment and lands face down on the platform. In the final scene, he is helped to feet and walks away.

## THEMES

1. *Gender* Mary suffers because she is unable to reconcile her conflicting roles as wife and lover. She is caught in this conflict because she is a woman; by contrast, a married man in Italy would not be tormented by the guilt that torments her from beginning to end. In fact, she feels guilt toward both the men in her romantic triangle, toward her lover, Giovanni, and her husband, Howard. Her regret toward her lover is shown in the first shots when we read her letter to Giovanni asking him to 'forgive' her for not saying goodbye and running off at the last moment. And when they meet for the first time (in the film), she says she's sorry for mistreating him. Later, when they talk in the restaurant, she feels her love for Giovanni return, only to remember what she thought about the night before: the face of her young daughter, 'her sweet neck, and most of all her eyes.' Her roller coaster of emotions trundles on throughout the film as she is torn between family and lover, and feeling guilt on both accounts. In fact, guilt turns from an internal indictment to a potential public humiliation when she and Giovanni are caught kissing in an empty compartment in a standing train. Now, she is disgraced as well as guilty, although the police commissioner shows compassion and releases her without a trial. Still, she has been condemned in her own mind, especially when she encounters the sick woman who is presented as a model mother. She knows that she is not that woman, even if her husband does not. While she does, in the end, return to her husband, she will live with her guilt forever.

2. *Family* As already suggested, the chief source of Mary's turmoil is not that she had sex with a man who isn't her husband, but that she was a wife and mother when she had that sexual affair. Mary's family—her husband, Howard, and her daughter, Cathy—thus represent obligation battling against desire. Family and lover cannot, it seems, occupy the same conceptual or emotional space. For example, she buys a dress for Cathy at the station, but when she is swept away again with feelings for Giovanni, she leaves it on the train. As a physical reminder of her family, Paul plays a pivotal role in the struggle between her two worlds. When he appears, any emotional movement toward Giovanni is halted. And Paul literally keeps them apart when he refuses to tell Giovanni where Mary is in the station. Paul's presence is a constant reminder of the pull of her distant family. Another and even more painful reminder is the family of the 'good mother,' the woman whom she helps to find a doctor. In trying to reconcile their situation with her family, Giovanni says that he used to dream of living with her and her daughter, Cathy, in a family house by the sea. 'I would teach Cathy how to sail,' he says. Mary is almost persuaded it would work, but Philadelphia is a long way away, and Howard would be crushed if she left him. In the end, family wins out and she returns to America.

3. *Love* Her love for Giovanni, and his for her are powerful forces in this emotional battle for supremacy. From the opening scene, when she writes him a letter, to the final scene, when she says, through tears, that she will never forget him, Mary's love is ever-present. It is covered up, from time to time, by marital obligation, but it is never extinguished. She is passionate in romantic scenes and tender during their many conversations. For his part, Giovanni is equally consumed by love for her. The depth of his infatuation is measured by the hurt he feels when she is leaving him, by his anger at her inconsiderate behaviour and by his desperate attempts to keep hold of her. When he dashes recklessly across the tracks in front of a moving train, just to be with her, we have no doubt about the sincerity of his feelings. In the end, when they part, never to see each other again, it is difficult to say who is sadder. But a case can be made for Giovanni. She carried on a sexual affair with him for a month, but he had pictured a future for them, living together by the sea.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Mary** Mild and middle-class, Mary is married to Howard, who is back in Philadelphia. She is attractive in a quiet sort of way, but she is deeply in love with Giovanni. Or is she? Should she forget her family back home and live out a dream in Rome? Or should she renounce her love and scuttle back to Howard, who, she says, needs her? This dilemma defines Mary's character during the two hours we see her. She is conflicted. She is torn by guilt and, yet, she is passionately in love. At one point, she says she had thoughts 'all in separate pieces like a puzzle I couldn't put together.'

**Conflicted** Mrs Mary Forbes is caught in a dilemma of her own making. While visiting her sister in Rome, she has fallen in love with Giovanni. She doesn't want it to end but she knows she must go back to Philadelphia and her husband. Her embattled mind, which is the dramatic energy that drives the story, is brilliantly exposed in the opening scene of the film. First, she is writing a letter to Giovanni, explaining that she went to his apartment to say goodbye but couldn't. Next, we see that moment of her indecision. Well-dressed but tense, she mounts the stairs to his apartment and puts out a finger to press the door bell. She hesitates, and the finger shakes. It is withdrawn and, with

anxiety creasing her face, she turns and descends the stairs. Finally, we see her completing her letter, saying that she 'could not take those last steps' and asking for Giovanni to forgive her. 'I am heartsick, but...' Those are the last words she writes before crumpling up the letter. In less than one minute of screen time, we understand that Mary is conflicted and confused, unable to do what she wants or say what she feels.

**Passionate** At one point in a long conversation with Giovanni, Mary says that she's 'not an imaginative person', just a middle-class housewife. But beneath that façade of ordinariness, lies a smouldering fire of passion. Perhaps it is Rome, 'the city of love', as claimed at the beginning of the film. Perhaps it is Giovanni, the darkly handsome Italian, or Italian-American, man whom she meets in that city. But her desire for him comes also from inside herself. Although it takes a while for her passion to be revealed, for she is not brazen, it does blaze forth with intensity in the scene when they are alone (finally!) in an empty train standing in the station. He kisses her and she responds by kissing him, writhing in his arms and holding him tight. During kisses, she nuzzles up to him and says, dreamily, 'I could fall asleep, with the warmth of you near me.' This was as close as De Sica (and the censors) would go in revealing the sexual desire harboured by a respectable American housewife. She was indiscreet, as the title tells us, and not libidinous. Still, her performance in this scene, her words and actions, suggest that her indiscretion was passionate.

**Sad** At the end of this story of a doomed love affair, Mary is left with one overriding emotion. She is desperately sad that she must leave Giovanni and return home. The final scenes come after she and Giovanni have narrowly avoided a scandal when the police commissioner decides not to charge them with public indecency. Relieved, now they hurry toward Mary's train, with the clock ticking above them. Mary says she won't write to him but she will send a cable to say she's arrived safely. She asks, wistfully, if he will live in that house by the sea, which he had described to her earlier. The train will leave in two minutes. She clutches nervously at her coat collar and looks longingly at him. They exchange meaningless comments about the food and seating on the train, anything to distract them from the fact that they are about to be separated forever. Together, they climb aboard the crowded train. She looks at him with tears forming in her eyes. He says he better get off. 'Not yet!' she cries. 'It will begin soon enough. All my life, I'll wonder—where is he?' She has made the decision to leave and return home, but her sadness is overwhelming.

**Giovanni** Giovanni is a handsome and unmarried Italian-American professor in Rome. His emotions run deep. When he is heartbroken by Mary's departure, he gets very angry and hits her. He loves her and nearly kills himself to be with her by rushing across train tracks. At other moments, he is more serene, dreaming of their future that can never be. He is a man of passion, yet he cannot help but think that Mary did the right thing in returning to dull, old Howard.

**Hurt** Giovanni is the wounded one, the one who is going to be left behind. And even more galling, she didn't even have the courtesy to inform him of her decision to leave. This is how we first meet Giovanni, when he tracks down her in the train station. They sit down in a restaurant and talk. He tries to find the words to express himself, poking at the tablecloth, stammering and then asking how she could leave him without a word 'after yesterday,' implying that they had made love. 'Or don't you remember yesterday?' he asks in a snide tone. 'What did you say to me then?' She answers 'that I love you. But that was cruel of me.' 'Why?' he cries. 'Because you didn't love me. You had bought a ticket. You had it in your pocket...What am I to you, now? An old guidebook that you don't want anymore?' We can understand why he says this. She has had a fling with him in exotic Rome and decides to leave without even telling him. Giovanni feels discarded, like that guidebook.

**Angry** Giovanni is angry, too, and that anger turns violent in one of the key scenes in the film. Following their initial awkward conversation, they rekindle their love and are heading to his apartment for a final moment of romance when she spots her cousin, Paul. This reminder of her family cools her desire, and Giovanni knows the opportunity is lost. He glares and says nothing when he is introduced to the boy. When Paul leaves, Giovanni is seething with anger. And when she says it's all over, he slaps her hard. No cut, but still a powerful blow, causing people in the station to notice. His moment of violence had been foreshadowed when he jokingly said he would 'beat' her if she didn't behave when they were married. Giovanni is embarrassed by his angry slap and runs away in shame, but the fact is that he has a streak of violence in him.

**Passionate** The film suggests that Giovanni is a typical Italian man, controlled by strong emotions, by love as well as anger, and probably jealousy if given the chance. If his display of anger makes him unsympathetic, the very next scene, in which he demonstrates his passion, tips the balance back

toward sympathy. Having slapped her and run away, he is now desperate to find her again. When he finally sees her, she is on a platform separated from him by train tracks. He calls out and runs toward her, ignoring a train speeding down the tracks. She is alarmed, onlookers scream and the train whistle blows, but he leaps in front of the engine and into her arms. Even Mary, whom he had slapped hard, cannot fail to be moved by his reckless act. He doesn't just love her, he is madly in love.

**Protective** Another positive trait in Giovanni's character is his concern for Mary's welfare. This is not sexual desire or love, but simply a protective instinct toward her. His concern is illustrated best in the scene that occurs when he and Mary have been 'caught' making love (in the old sense of the term) in an empty train compartment. They face a major public scandal if charged with public indecency. She is distraught, but Giovanni tells her not to worry, 'Nothing's going to happen.' His tender words soothe her. Then, as they are being led by two policemen to the office of the commissioner, he pleads with them. 'I'll go with you,' he says. 'She has a train to catch. Let her go.' A moment later, when they walk through an underground passage, and the policemen are distracted, he urges her to escape. She doesn't act quickly enough, and they are marched forward. Giovanni is aware that she would be harmed by the scandalous news of her affair in Rome. He is not worried about himself, only about her and her family. It is perhaps his finest moment.

**Paul** Young Paul is Mary's sister's son. He is a polite and well-dressed young man, probably in his early teens. Despite his young years, he shows a manly character towards his aunt, instinctively suspicious of the strange man she is with in the station. He is also courageous in standing up to Giovanni when he refuses to help him find his aunt.

**Suspicious** Paul is a well-behaved youngster, but he is not completely naïve. His caniness is illustrated in the scene when he is introduced to Giovanni. Previously, when bringing Mary's suitcase to her on the platform, Paul saw Giovanni, but now, the three of them are together in the station concourse. He is not sure what is going on, but he has his suspicions. She explains that she didn't miss her train, that she is simply taking a later one, but Paul glances at Giovanni as if to say, 'he's part of your decision, isn't he?' He is introduced to Giovanni and then leaves them. Throughout this brief scene, however, his face registers confusion and doubt. What is going on here? he wonders. And when he does leave them, he stops after a few feet and looks back, still trying to understand why his aunt is with this man.

**Loyal** Paul is deeply attached to his aunt and shows his loyalty to her after he witnesses Giovanni slap her. He runs to her and comforts her. She says he doesn't understand what happened, but he's seen enough to know that he doesn't like Giovanni. She tells him to leave her and go home, but he hangs around the station and is spotted by Giovanni, who asks him where Mary is. No matter how forcefully he asks, Paul will not reveal her whereabouts. 'I'm not going to tell you anything!' he says with determination. He knows that this man is potentially harmful to his aunt, and despite their age difference and the man's pleading, he will do nothing to help him. His loyalty to Mary is unshakeable.



(Giovanni and Mary)



(a poster and image of them in the empty train compartment)



(The lovers near the end)



(In the police commissioner's office)