

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## UMBERTO D. 1952

Vittorio De Sica

**OVERVIEW** *Umberto D* is both a continuation and a departure from De Sica's earlier films. Although, like them, it focuses on a desperate man let down by society, unlike them, its protagonist, the titular Umberto D, is middle-class and has neither a family (as in *Bicycle Thieves*) nor group solidarity (as in *Miracle in Milan*). Despite this departure from the director's earlier works, the film is firmly in the neo-realist mode, using non-professional actors, authentic sets and a story that is a collection of events from real-life. The film presents a few days in Umberto's lonely life when he faces eviction and struggles to find enough money to pay off his debts. Grim and unsparing in showing the depths of Umberto's despair, it also includes moments of happiness and ends on an ambiguous note.

*Umberto D* was the fourth film that De Sica made with his scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini, and it was the first to fail. Some audiences and critics found it too bleak, especially in the immediate post-war period when Italy was struggling to get back on its feet. Politicians of all stripes, even the Communist Party, said it was too pessimistic and accused it of 'slandering Italy abroad.' Nevertheless, it proved popular on the international circuit and won Best Foreign Film from the New York Film Critics Circle. It was also a film that De Sica himself valued highly and the only one he dedicated to anyone, in this case, to his father.

**SYNOPSIS** A retired civil servant on a meagre pension in Rome, Umberto is a lonely man living in a rooming house. His only companion is his dog, Flike, although he does strike up a valuable friendship with Maria, the maid. His problems kick off when his landlady raises the rent and threatens to evict him. Umberto struggles to get enough money to pay his rent arrears. He then becomes ill and goes to hospital, only to return and find that his beloved dog is lost. Although he recovers his dog, he discovers that his room has been half-demolished in order to make an enlarged sitting room. He realises that he will be evicted, but his self-respect won't allow him to live on the street, so he plans to find someone to look after his dog and then kill himself. This plan comes close to completion, but his love for his dog prevents him from taking the final step.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Umberto	Umberto D Ferrari is a retired civil servant.
Maria	The maid in his rooming house.
Landlady	She owns the building in which Umberto rents a room.
Flike	Umberto's dog.

### STORY

*Pensioners' demonstration* The opening shot of a church bell tolling is ominous. The credits then roll as we watch retired men march down a street in Rome. They are demanding an increase in their government pension, chanting 'Old people have to eat, too'. Among the demonstrators is Umberto. When the angry protest reaches a government building, they are told that they don't have a permit and must disperse. When they refuse, the police move in and disperse them like cattle.

*Selling a watch* As Umberto walks home, with his dog Flike at his side, he lays out the details of his financial predicament to another demonstrator. Most of his pension is eaten up by his greedy landlady. He tries to sell his watch to his companion but is rebuffed. Downhearted, he goes to have lunch in a canteen, where he again tries to flog his watch. He also feeds Flike surreptitiously, for which he is scolded and told he won't be served again. He walks on, with another old man, who buys the watch at a knockdown price. When they part, the old man begs for a handout from passers-by.

*Home* Back in the rooming house, Umberto opens the door to his own room and finds a young couple in bed. His landlady explains that 'they'll only need it for an hour and that anyway she's throwing him out because he hasn't cleared his debt. He got 3,000 for his watch, but he owes another 15,000.

*Maria* Waiting for his room to be free, he sits in the kitchen, where Maria, the young maid, explains that the landlady charges 1,000 an hour for lovers to use his room. She then confides in him, saying

she's pregnant but doesn't know who the father is. 'It could be the tall soldier from Naples or the short one from Florence,' she says, 'but both deny it.'

*Insufficient cash* The lovers gone, Umberto enters his room and makes himself at home with Flike. The landlady refuses to take his 3,000, saying 'it's all or nothing.' He sells a few old books for another 2,000 and tries to give 5,000 to the landlady. That sum is also rejected.

*Hospital* He feels ill and goes to bed with a temperature and sore throat. But he can't sleep because the landlady and her fancy friends are practicing their singing in the parlour. He is taken to hospital in the morning but distracts Flike so that it doesn't realise he's going. At the hospital, a doctor diagnoses tonsillitis and tells him he can go home the following day. Umberto tries to extend his stay in hospital, as a way of avoiding the landlady. Maria visits him in hospital and brings Flike, though he can only view him outside in the courtyard. He also learns that his landlady is getting married and plans to throw him out.

*Flike missing* Returning home, he sees that the entire building is being remodelled and that his room is to become part of an expanded sitting room. Flike is also missing. Running out to find his dog, Umberto sees Maria with one of the possible fathers. She tells the soldier she's pregnant, but he turns on his heel and leaves. Then, she explains to Umberto that the landlady left the kitchen door open and Flike escaped.

*Flike found* Not sparing his limited cash, he takes a taxi to the dog pound and, after a frantic search, finds Flike and goes home. At the entrance, he meets the landlady with her fiancé and they have an angry exchange. He is to be thrown out the following day. He approaches a friend, still in employment and explains his plight, but the friend shrugs and jumps on his bus.

*Despair* With no other option, he practices begging by putting out a hand. But when a passer-by is about to give him money, he pretends that he was only checking for rain. Next, he hides behind a pillar while Flike holds his hat in its mouth like a beggar. Then he runs into another salaried friend but refrains from asking for money. Mounting the stairs to his room, he is passed by his landlady's wealthy friends, who look at him with contempt. Inside his room, he sees that the builders have knocked a huge hole in one wall, as part of the enlargement.

*Departure* Maria brings him some of the cake she served to the wealthy guests, but he turns it down. Without privacy, without money and facing eviction, he considers throwing himself out of his window but stops when he looks at Flike. He packs his bag and leaves in the morning, but Maria sees him on the stairs. He lies and says he has a place to go to. When she asks if they can meet up from time to time, he doesn't answer, though he does advise her to forget about her boyfriends.

*Final task* His task now is to find someone to take care of Flike after he is dead. He visits a couple who take in dogs but decides against it because he fears Flike might not be looked after when the money he has given them runs out. In a park, he sees a young girl and asks her to take Flike. She is willing, but her nanny is not. When he sees some children playing with Flike, he walks away, hoping that they will adopt it, but Flike follows him to a railway crossing.

*Uncertain future* Cradling the dog in his arms, he is about to commit suicide before an onrushing train, when Flike squirms away and runs back into the park. Scared, the little dog refuses to come to its master, but Umberto coaxes it back, using a pine cone as a ball. In the last shot, he and Flike frolic through the park, heading toward an uncertain future.

## THEMES

1. *Society* As with his other early great films, the central theme here is money. Whereas *Miracle in Milan* featured the destitute poor and *Bicycle Thieves* focused on a jobless man, *Umberto D* tells the story of a retired middle-class man whose pension is not enough to cover his rent. The problem of a stingy post-war government is compounded by a greedy landlady. The film opens with a demonstration of retirees, including Umberto, demanding an increase in their meagre monthly allowance. Then, in the first five minutes, we get the financial details of his problem. He owes money to his landlady. 'With only a 20% increase, I could clear my debts,' he says to a fellow retiree. His pension is 18,000 per month, of which 10,000 goes on rent for his single room. And now the landlady is putting up the rent. Having said all this, he tries in vain to sell a watch to his companion. Later, he does get 3,000 for the watch and another 2,000 for some books. But his landlady is adamant that she wants the entire 15,000 that he owes her. Otherwise, he'll be evicted. These numbers tell the story.

Umberto is up against a wall. He simply cannot get enough money to avoid eviction and he is too proud to live on the street. There is only one solution.

**2. Isolation** The psychological component of his financial situation is loneliness. When he provides details of his money problem, he also says, 'I have no family or friends left to help me.' Umberto's isolation is evident from the beginning, but a close look at the film reveals that this theme is everywhere. Again, the opening scene of the demonstration seems to display solidarity, but the protest is quickly broken up by the police, and the individual men are scattered. A similar spatial separation occurs when Umberto approaches his old friends, who then leave him, getting on a bus or just walking away. In the boarding house, also, people pass each other on the stairway, often without speaking. Everyone in the building has his or her own room, and we never see Umberto interact with any fellow resident. Instead, we often see him walking alone down an empty hallway. And when he is outside, he is usually alone, walking down a deserted street or standing in an empty piazza, with no one else nearby. He sits next to a man on a streetcar, but there is no interaction between them. There is even a shot of a solitary cat crossing a skylight. Through these images, as well as through the plot itself, the film depicts the deathly loneliness of the protagonist.

**3. Friendship** The poignancy in the film is created by balancing this isolation with brief and infrequent moments of friendship. Most of these scenes of friendship involve Maria, the young maid in the rooming house where Umberto rents a room. She, too, is isolated. Living in Rome, far from her village, she has become pregnant. She can't tell her landlady (who will fire her) and she can't go back home ('they'll beat me'), so she confides in the kind Umberto. She looks after him like a daughter, fetching a thermometer and hot water, visiting him in hospital and bringing him food. By the end, she has become very attached to the old man, who also gives her some good advice about her complicated situation with the unknown father of her unborn child. In the end, as he steals away in the early hours, suitcase in hand, she is sad and asks in a wistful voice, 'Can't we see each other now and then, Mr Umberto?' An even deeper affection is evident between the old man and his dog. Flike has become his family, his constant companion, his only enduring bond with another being and his only source of dignity. Umberto's relationship with Flike reveals that isolation is the other side of the friendship coin. Without Flike, Umberto would have nothing and would probably have ended his life earlier.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Umberto** Umberto D Ferrari is an educated man who spent thirty years working in the civil service. Now retired, he faces eviction because his pension will not cover his rising rent. He is a small, white-haired person, with alert eyes and a rabbit face. He is also a little fussy, and likes things to be in order, like a professor (he is played by a non-professional actor, who was a professor of linguistics). Most of all, he is kind-hearted, though does not hesitate to call a spade a spade when it comes to greedy landladies and indifferent governments.

**Dignified** The single most important element of Umberto's character is his self-respect. No matter how dire his situation, he will not, under any circumstances, allow himself to lose respectability. His desperate attempts to retain his dignity provide the continuity of the story, from the demonstration at the beginning to his suicidal thoughts at the end. He won't beg on the street and he won't go to the homeless shelter, either. A good example of his refusal to maintain dignity is the scene in which he confronts his landlady on the pavement at the entrance to the rooming house. As they argue about his rent arrears, a crowd gathers. She calls him a scoundrel and tells him to pay his debts or get thrown out. He replies that she wants him out 'for other reasons' (to make money from renting his rooms to illicit lovers). As she walks away, he says, 'I'll pay. I'll pay. I worked for 30 years at the department of public works.' When a middle-class woman in the crowd looks askance at him, he addresses her and says, 'I've always paid.' This is his mantra of self-respect. He is not profligate (though one wonders why he is in debt when other retirees are not). He is not a beggar. He is educated and respectable.

**Kind-hearted** Whether rich or poor, Umberto is a sympathetic character, not only in his love of Flike but also in his concern for Maria. In fact, although they occupy opposite ends of the age and social status spectrums, the young maid and the old man are mirror images of each other. His deep affection for her is vividly illustrated when he leaves the rooming house for good. It is early morning.

He has told no one, not even her, that he is leaving. He goes as quietly as he can, but she hears him and rushes to the landing. When she asks if he has found another place, he lies and says he has because he does not want to cause her distress on his account. He looks at her with his sad, defeated eyes and says that she, too, should leave the disreputable rooming house and its immoral landlady. He walks further down the stairs, stops, looks up and speaks for the last time to her. 'Leave the one [soldier] from Florence,' he says and manages a weak smile. Even as he is contemplating suicide, he is concerned with Maria's situation.

*Vulnerable* In the 1950s, when the film was made, we would have said 'depression' or 'loneliness.' Today, we use the term 'vulnerable' to express the fragility that afflicts Umberto. Weak, isolated, frail, and without any obvious source of comfort, he is likely to succumb to terrible thoughts, including suicide. He is at his most vulnerable when he returns from hospital and finds that his room is being eliminated and expanded to join the sitting room. Now, quite literally, he has no place in the world. Sweet Maria brings him a piece of cake, but he refuses to touch it. She leaves, and he wanders to the window and looks out. In the darkness, lit only by a single street lamp, a tram rattles by. Agitated and perspiring, he opens the window and peers down with a fixed gaze at the black stones below. Suddenly, the camera goes closer to the hard stones, as if he is falling. He looks back inside at Flike and decides against it. But, in that moment of indecision, we sense how fragile he is.

*Joyful* Happy is not a word that immediately springs to mind when thinking about Umberto, but he does have his moments of joy. The most significant comes at the very end of the film. Umberto has decided to kill himself, but he cannot find a home for Flike. A child's nanny refuses to take him in, and in any case the dog itself finds Umberto when he is about to throw himself under a train. Then, cradling Flike, he seems to consider suicide a second time, but the dog squirms out of his arms and runs back into the park. Umberto finds a pine cone to use as a ball with which to amuse Flike. Now, he is smiling and rolls the pine cone down the path and urges Flike to chase it. In the final shot, Umberto and Flike dance away from the camera and join the children who are playing and laughing further down the path. We don't know how Umberto will manage in the days to come, but for now he is full of joy with his beloved dog.

*Maria* Maria is a young girl from the countryside, who works as a maid in the landlady's rooming house. She, like Umberto, is lonely, although she has two boyfriends, one of whom has made her pregnant. She has a sweet disposition and quickly senses Umberto's despair. When he shows kindness to her, she responds by treating him like a father or grandfather. Her smile is sun-bright, but she is naïve and unable to handle the situation about the unknown father of her child.

*Sympathetic* Troubled herself, Maria shows kindness to Umberto on a number of occasions. Perhaps the old man and the young girl are drawn together because one lonely person recognises another. She tends to the ailing Umberto, brings him nice things from the kitchen and visits him in hospital. That last scene is the most poignant. Umberto is sitting up in bed, recovering from tonsillitis, when we hear a bell that allows guests to enter the large hospital ward. At first, we don't recognise her because she has changed her shabby work clothes for a bright flower-print dress and done up her hair. She comes in the room, looks around and goes off in the wrong direction. Then Umberto shouts 'Maria!' and she hurries to his bedside. They greet each other with warm handshakes and big smiles. She hands over a banana, adding that it was all she could find for him. When he asks about his dog, it turns out that she tried to bring it in but had to leave it in the courtyard, where Umberto can at least see it. During the rest of her short visit, she helps him with his slippers and adjusts his bedding. She is, in effect, his daughter, who loves and looks after him.

*Callow* Maria is young, very young, and pregnant by one of her two soldier boyfriends. The problem is she doesn't know whether the father is 'the short one from Florence or the tall one from Naples,' as she puts it. That sums up the youthful naivete that she displays when attempting to deal with the situation. A good illustration of this aspect of her character occurs when she is talking with the 'tall one' on the street. She is crying and says, 'I'm pregnant. Don't you understand?' But the man in uniform looks around, in every direction, except at her. Shrugging his indifferent shoulders, he goes off without a word, leaving her alone and in tears. This is the callow Maria, immature and unable to stand up for herself, especially to the man she thinks is the father of her baby.

**Landlady** The landlady is a statuesque blonde with a booming voice, a powerful presence and an unlimited ego. She runs her rooming house like a tyrant, inconsiderate of her tenants' privacy or rights, and only concerned with her profit. She is officious and would like to clear the riff-raff, like the dignified Umberto, out of her life. If Umberto is sliding down the social ladder, she is keen to ascend. In a written comment about his film, De Sica himself said, 'There is a little of this landlady in all of us.' But only just a little, we hope.

**Avaricious** The unchecked greed that drives the landlady is clearly evident in her first full scene. Umberto comes back to find that she has rented out his room by the hour to a pair of illicit lovers. Outraged by both the immorality and affrontery of her action, he shouts at her in the hallway. She marches up to him, telling him to keep quiet (she doesn't want the lovers disturbed, of course) and ushers him into the kitchen. When he asks what she's up to, she merely shrugs her shoulders and smiles indulgently. 'Stop complaining,' she says, 'you're out at the end of the month.' He repeats her words in a mocking tone, but she demands that he pay his debts and shut up. Here, we see the avarice that motivates the landlady. She will rent out his room when he is away; she cares nothing for his privacy or his rights as a tenant. All she wants is more money.

**Preentious** Added to her greed is a pretentiousness. Dressed like a society lady, with her glittering blonde hair swept up in the latest fashion, she has aspirations to join the upper class of local society. We have a hint of this early on when she hosts a group of well-dressed men and women during a singing lesson. But her phony aspirations appear full-blown later, when Umberto comes home in despair and climbs the stairs. Above, on the landing, his landlady is dressed in fancy clothes bidding farewell to her guests, who are equally well attired. The local glitterati parrot nice-sounding clichés to each other: 'All the best, darling' and 'Promise to visit us.' Everyone is smug, sure that they are acting the right part. The fine clothes, the pleasant words and the insincere emotions are emblems of the social status that the landlady assumes is hers.



(Umberto contemplating a bleak future)



(Maria and Umberto)



(Umberto and Flike)



(The landlady and her fiancé)