

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Innocent (L'Innocente) 1976

Luchino Visconti

OVERVIEW

Visconti's final film is based on an 1892 novel with the same title by Gabriele d'Annunzio (who was himself involved in a scandalous love triangle at the time). The film is a fitting swan-song for the director, combining lavish interiors with tempestuous emotions, detailed characterisations and a truly tragic ending. In telling the tale of fin-de- siècle aristocrats listening to piano recitals and fencing in noisy rooms, the film weaves together illicit sexual desires, religious strictures and social conventions. Far from the neo-realism of some of his early films, and closer to other historical pieces, such as *The Leopard* and *Death in Venice*, *The Innocent* also share elements found in his very first feature. As with the doomed lovers in *Obsession*, the triangle of lovers in this final film are destroyed by their own passions.

SYNOPSIS

A love triangle in 1890s Rome involves Tuillo, his wife, Giuliana, and his mistress, Teresa. The drama is enacted with glances and secret meetings in luxurious drawing rooms, where high society gathers to hear Chopin piano recitals. Tullio and Teresa argue and then make up, while Giuliana suffers silently. Slowly, though, we understand that Giuliana has begun her own love affair with a novelist named Filippo. Piqued and surprised by his jealousy, Tuillo rediscovers his sexual desire for Giuliana. He also finds that she is pregnant and knows he is not the father. Filippo conveniently dies in hospital from a tropical disease, but there is still the problem of the baby. Tuillo wants Giuliana to have an abortion, but she refuses on religious grounds. Soon after the baby is born, Tuillo causes its death by exposure. When Giuliana leaves him, he commits suicide in the presence of Teresa.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Tuillo	Tuillo is an aristocrat in Rome.
Giuliana	Giuliana is his wife.
Teresa	Teresa, a widow, is his mistress.
Filippo	Filippo, a writer, is his younger brother's friend.

STORY

The mistress It is Rome at the end of the nineteenth century. Tullio, an aristocrat, is sparing with a partner in a duelling club. Abrupt shift to a piano concert in a drawing room, with ladies and gentlemen in formal dress. Among the guests are Tullio, his wife, Giuliana, and Teresa, his mistress. Tullio is angry with Teresa and they argue in a private room. He was unaware that she would be present, while she demands that he leave with her, in front of his wife. She says that although he's told her he doesn't love his wife, it is clear that he still does. 'I won't share a man with another woman,' she says. She goes to leave, but he kisses her and she stays.

The wife At home, Tullio speaks to Giuliana about his affairs, which they both agree have been fleeting. She has ignored them because their marriage is more important. Now he says that although his love for her has faded, his respect for her has grown. She is free to leave him, he says, but he would suffer if she did. He asks her to help him face the social criticism he will receive for living with Teresa.

Filippo After Tullio leaves to be with Teresa in Florence, his younger brother, Frederico, stays in the house to be a comfort to Giuliana. Frederico's friend, a novelist named Filippo, is also in the house. When Giuliana becomes frightened, Filippo looks after her. Later, he gives her a signed copy of his book.

Jealousy In Florence, Tullio and Teresa live as lovers, although he is jealous of Stefano, one of her

admirers, and fights a duel with him. In Rome, Giuliana is advised by her friends 'not to play the role of the abandoned wife.' Tullio returns, furious that Teresa has escaped his grasp. 'She's a liar,' he screams, speaking to his wife. He asks her for help, but she points out that he indulges himself in his own suffering. Later, Tullio and Teresa resume their love-making, but he has a niggling doubt about Giuliana's friendship with Filippo and Teresa suggests that she might have a lover. At the duelling club, Tullio spars with Filippo.

Rekindled desire Tullio shows up unexpectedly at his mother's house, where Giuliana is staying. He was supposed to go to Paris (with Teresa), but changed his mind at the last moment. Giuliana is surprised but not pleased and says they'll have separate rooms. Together they visit a summer house in Tullio's family, where they had lived for a while after their marriage. Piqued by jealousy, and recalling their earlier life, he feels his desire for her return. He makes love to her, saying, 'You've been my wife, my sister, but never my lover.' She responds but is also strangely distant.

Pregnant When they return to his mother's house, Giuliana becomes ill and takes to her bed. Tullio is told that Giuliana is pregnant and he knows that he cannot be the father. When he confronts Giuliana, she says that the affair with Filippo was over before she knew she was pregnant. He forgives her, saying she had the same right as he to take lovers and that he wants to start all over. She is overcome with emotion, but it's not clear if she still loves him.

Crime Tullio wants to arrange for an abortion, explaining that it can be covered up as another miscarriage (she's had one already). Giuliana, however, won't allow an abortion because it's a 'crime'. He replies that the 'real crime' would be for her bastard son to bear his family's name. She says that they must separate, but he wants her to live a 'free' life with him. Before Tullio leaves for Rome to make arrangements for the abortion, he meets with Teresa and they agree to break off their affair. She is coldly impersonal but hurt nevertheless.

Disease and death Tullio also wanted to meet Filippo but learns that he is in hospital. Back at the family house, Giuliana again refuses to have an abortion and tells Tullio she will leave him if that is the only other option. She also says that she will give her own family's name to the child, not Filippo's family name. Tullio is concerned that she will suffer as a single mother, and wonders if she wants to keep the child because of her continuing love for the father. When Filippo dies in hospital, she keeps her feelings to herself and he does not press her for revelations.

Birth When the doctor arrives with a midwife to deliver the child, Tullio says that if complications occur, the life of the mother should be spared. The doctor explains the church's view on abortion but is cut short by Tullio, who declares that the church's view is 'immoral and criminal'. A baby boy is born and Giuliana is fine, although she is weak and refuses to see the child.

Mother Tullio's mother dotes on her grandchild but confides in Frederico, her younger son, that neither mother nor father pays attention to the baby. Giuliana, however, sneaks into the nursery at night and cuddles her child. When confronted by Tullio, she tells him that she knows he does the same thing. But he says he's spying on her and that he's suffering because 'by loving the baby, you're loving the father'. She denies this and says she actually hates the child for the anxiety it causes him. The child has come between them, she says, and asks him to take her away.

Infanticide Giuliana accompanies her mother-in-law and the servants to a church service on a cold evening. Tullio enters the nursery, sends the nurse away and places the baby close to an open window. Giuliana notices the nurse coming into the church and begins to wonder. When Tullio hears the group returning, he replaces the baby in its warm crib. An hour later, with the family at Christmas dinner, the baby dies. Giuliana faints but when he goes to help her, she turns on him and cries, 'Don't touch me! I'm not your accomplice.' He reminds her that she said she hated the baby. She denies this, saying she only wanted to save the baby from him. 'I loved and always will love that baby's father, to the end of my days. I hate you.'

Suicide Next, we see Tullio riding in a carriage with Teresa. She tries to relieve him of any guilt for the baby's death, but Tullio says it's his intentions that count. Inside his house, she tells him that she believes he's even more in love with his wife. He admits that his final days with Giuliana were 'intoxicating' because only 'pure people are capable of excess'. Then, she cuts short his love-making by informing him that she's no longer in love with him. Having lost both his wife and his mistress, Tullio kills himself with a revolver.

THEMES

1. *Society* With an arrogant, philandering husband and a cold, vengeful mistress, there is more than one villain in this piece. There are also multiple indiscretions, cover-ups and even a murder. However, the blame for all this, the film suggests, lies not with the individuals, but with the society that has shaped them. Wealthy and hedonistic, yet controlled by conservative religious morals that do not allow them freedom and therefore denies them responsibility, the characters caught up in the tragic love triangle are specimens of their society. An explicit articulation of the social criticism in the film comes from Teresa when (as if speaking for the director) she says to Tullio, 'Contrary to popular belief, I believe truth is never said to one's face. There are too many factors which intervene in our intimacy, so we usually end up not understanding each other.' In other words, these rich socialites are so deeply enmeshed in conventions, precepts and etiquette that they do not know, or even care, if they speak and act with sincerity. This is especially true of affairs of the heart, which are already coded, secretive and dangerous. Tullio's indiscretions, Giuliana's sex out of wedlock and Teresa's husband-stealing are hard to justify, but they are the product of a society with severe restrictions. Only a free society, free for women as well as for men, could have avoided the tragedy at the end. Only the newborn baby is truly innocent.

2. *Marriage* Within this broad theme of a dysfunctional society, the film pinpoints more specific problems, one being the strict control of sexuality within marriage. As Tullio explains to Giuliana, after some years of marriage, 'love is replaced by affection, friendship, common interests'. And when his sexual desire for her is rekindled by jealousy, he explains his renewed passion by saying, 'You've been my wife, my sister, but never my lover.' Tullio is free, more or less, to take a lover, but Giuliana is constrained by her vow at the altar, a 'promise made to God.' At the same time, Tullio is angry that her bastard son will bear his family's name, something that should only be handed down through marriage. It is also significant that Teresa is the only truly 'free' actor because she is no longer married. Divorce had been legalised in Italy only in 1970, a few years before the film was made.

3. *Religion* The film also suggests that religion, specifically the powerful Catholic church in Italy, bears responsibility for the tragedy that envelops the characters. Tullio boasts that he is an atheist, while his wife is deeply pious. She refused to have an abortion, which meant that the child was born, creating friction between her and her husband. She even says at one point that she hates the baby. But when the child dies, she says, 'Now, for the rest of my days, I'll have to live with this mark on my soul.' In other words, although she had no part in the baby's death, the very fact of giving birth to a child unwanted by her husband put the baby's life at risk. It is also noteworthy that the killing of the child can only take place because the whole family has gone to a church service, providing Tullio with the opportunity to expose it to the cold. In addition, it can be argued that the church itself is responsible for the child's death by calling abortion a sin. If Giuliana had allowed herself an abortion, no murder would have occurred. We should recall that abortion was hotly debated in Italy (and elsewhere) in the 1970s and was not legalised in that country until two years after the film was released.

4. *Gender* The other theme contained within the film's broad social criticism is that of gender inequality. As already discussed above, women were more restricted in their sexual behaviour than men, and only a widow could safely take lovers. To his credit, after Giuliana takes a lover, Tullio says that she had the same sexual rights as he does, but her reply is revealing. 'It wasn't to claim a right,' she says. 'I never felt I had one.' In other words, the social definition of gender is so ingrained that a woman's self-image restricts her even when new ideas of liberation gain popularity. Also, several remarks in the film illustrate contemporaneous thinking about male and female genders. At one point, Tullio says, with typical sarcasm, 'Women have the extraordinary capacity to adapt to reality, to the romantic ideals of the worst literature.' Later, Teresa says, 'I wonder why you men raise us up with one hand, only to drag us down with the other.' Finally, the separation between the world of men and the world of women is powerfully illustrated in the opening two scenes. First, we have the loud and violent actions of men practicing their duelling inside a club. A moment later, the camera puts us inside a sedate drawing room, where a piano recital is underway, attended mostly by silent women. We are only two minutes into the story, but it is clear that the sexes occupy different social spaces.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Tullio Tullio is a wealthy, self-indulgent and egotistical aristocrat. His arrogance in his wilful mistreatment of his wife is unforgivable, but, to his credit, he is a liberal and an atheist in a deeply religious Italy in the 1890s. He strains our sympathy by his frequent bouts of tear-stained self-pity, and yet, it is possible to see him as a victim of the world around him. When his love for his wife is rekindled, albeit by jealousy, we almost feel that he has recovered his humanity. Nothing, however, can forgive his unbearable act of cruelty at the end.

Possessive One of Tullio's many negative qualities is his possessiveness, which is displayed from first to last in the film. A good early illustration occurs when he has returned to Rome after fighting a duel with rival for Teresa's affections. He slips into a chair beside his wife, who is listening to a private piano recital, and says, 'I must see her [Teresa] again. She's treacherous, elusive and a liar. The moment you think she's all yours, she escapes. She's already pursuing other desires.' He is angry because he thinks that he has 'possessed' Teresa, who has the temerity to leave him for another lover. It is an insult to his authority, his power and his weak ego.

Self-pitying A moment later, in the same scene, Tullio descends into one of his tearful bouts of suffering. 'You must help me,' he cries to his mute wife. 'Convince me not to see her again,' he begs, and she says she cannot help him. 'That's not true,' he continues. 'You see, my frustration is making me feel so unhappy. But at the same time, I feel alive.' Not even noticing that his wife has walked out of the room, he goes on complaining: 'It's the first time I'm in such a situation...One can sell one's soul and find oneself unconditionally in love, with no defence.' As he moans about his broken heart, Tullio leans back on a soft couch, looks sad and sighs. When his wife says he's acting as if she didn't exist, he apologises, but the next moment he asks her to be patient with him as if he 'were a sick person.' The only ailment that Tullio suffers from is self-pity.

Arrogant Tullio's arrogance takes many forms, one of which is his extreme self-confidence and belief in his 'freedom'. He expresses this attitude in a scene in his wife's bedroom, while she is recovering from an illness associated with her pregnancy. When he tells her he's going to arrange for an abortion, she refuses to cooperate on religious grounds. 'It's a crime,' she says, but he turns this around and says that the real crime would be to give his family name to another man's child. He goes on to declare that he's an atheist and a free man. 'Earth is my only country,' he says. 'I don't have a hell to fear.' On the one hand, we can admire his independent mind and unconventional views. But, knowing the rest of his character, we also see that his declaration of 'freedom' is an assertion of arrogance. No one controls me, he is saying, because I'm too special and powerful. Similarly, in a later scene, he says that he cannot feel guilt because he's 'not touched by man's justice' and that 'no court on earth would sit in judgement' of him. He thinks he can act with impunity.

Cruel The culmination of his self-absorbed arrogance is his act of infanticide. When the whole family is at church, he sends the nurse away, opens the window on a cold winter night, rips off the blanket covering the baby and places it next to the draft. Disregarding its cries, he leaves it exposed, and when he hears the others returning, he replaces the baby in its cot. But the damage has been done. It dies quickly. One cannot say that he does this with some maniacal joy; indeed, he seems disturbed. But the murder—for that is what it is—is predicated and committed in cold blood, as he himself says later, without any regrets. Cruel seems an inadequate word for him.

Teresa Teresa is the polar opposite of Giuliana. Most important, she is a widow and therefore a 'free' woman. More than that, she is haughty, wilful and seductive. She is also intelligent, able to articulate the complexities of the social world that controls her, Tullio and Giuliana. With her cold, austere personality, she is difficult to like, but we can also understand that she is shaped by social norms.

Spirited In her first speaking scene, Teresa reveals a good deal about her character. She has just snubbed Tullio in public and retires to a private room, where he tracks her down. She explains, in a cold voice, that she is fed up with their situation, with his divided affections—to her in private and to his wife in public. 'It's time we faced this,' she says in a haughty tone. When he protests that he doesn't love his wife, she turns her piercing eyes to him and declares that she is 'a free, liberated woman and I act accordingly...I won't share a man with another woman. Not even his wife.' She speaks those words with venom, spiting them in his face. Although, at the end of the scene, she does submit to his love-making, Teresa has shown her independent spirit.

Seductive As an independent woman, Teresa can play the game of love with as much skill and

subterfuge as any man. In one scene, she is alone with Tullio, planning a dinner in her house and a trip to Paris. She is in high spirits, teasing Tullio, who is in a bad mood because he is suspicious of his wife's behaviour. She smiles like the coquette that she is, kneels down beside him and asks him to approve her seating plan for the dinner. She coaxes him, strokes his leg and speaks with playful hints of delight. When he says she's very active, planning this and that, she smiles again and says, with a mocking smile, 'You're a bachelor again, and so... I'm taking advantage.' The scene ends with her kissing Tullio to thank him for agreeing to accompany her to Paris. Here is Teresa at her most seductive. She smiles, she teases, she offers her charms and, in the end, she gets what she wants.

Perceptive Teresa is sharp of both tongue and mind. Her acute understanding of the world around her is illustrated in a scene that occurs after Tullio stayed behind with Giuliana and did not go to Paris with Teresa, as agreed. She is dressed in spectacular fashion, with a high-collared embroidered dress and a spiky hat that looks like artichoke leaves. When Tullio tries to explain why he didn't join her, she is withering in her response. 'You're contradicting yourself,' she says and points out a glaring discrepancy in his statement. She goes on to say that she knew he would attempt to deceive her and that she knows he is through with her. 'It's not pleasant for a woman to be abandoned,' she explains. 'There are those who pity her, and I don't want that. There are those who question her charm, and I don't want that either.' Still wearing her cold smile, she finishes by saying that this will be their last day together. Teresa is hurt by his desertion, but she has the presence of mind to be able to analyse his behaviour and her reactions.

Giuliana As the neglected wife in a classic love triangle, and as a woman who is patient and loyal to her cheating husband, Giuliana has our sympathy from the outset. She is also a deeply religious person, who judges herself by the moral precepts of the church. Underneath this mistreated and conventional woman, though, we also see strength and passion. She suffers a great deal, but she has reserves that ameliorate her pain.

Forbearing Giuliana shows immense patience as the wife of the philandering Tullio. That part of her character is established in an early scene, when her husband tells her that he no longer loves her. She doesn't say much as he paces the room explaining that, for a married man, love fades and that he regards her with affection but without passion. She sits on the edge of the bed, eyes downcast, hands in her lap. As he has already observed, she has 'peacefully accepted' his infidelities. Then he says that he regards her not as a wife, but as a 'beloved sister.' Her first words are to ask him how she can help him face the difficult situation with Teresa, his mistress. Then she listens to him describe how 'sensual, desirable and seductive' his mistress is. The scene ends when he leans down and kisses her hand, like a sister. Although she is suffering inside, Giuliana masks her humiliation with an outward display of toleration.

Self-respect Despite her forbearance, Giuliana is not without self-respect. We see that aspect of her complex character illustrated in her next conversation with Tullio. Again, he asks her for help, this time because Teresa has slipped from his grasp. They are in a private room of a house where they had been listening to a piano recital. She is seated, dressed in a revealing gown with sparkling jewellery, while he walks around. Again, she asks how she can help, and he says, 'Convince me not to see her again.' She turns her expressionless face to him and says, 'Nobody can convince you of that, least of all me.' When he goes on complaining of his immense suffering, she stands, walks away and then turns on him. 'You talk as if I never existed,' she says. He mumbles some apology, and she comes back with a second sharp comment, saying that he is self-indulgent and selfish. Now, her placid face is sharpened, her brows furrowed and her voice harsh. There is no outburst of anger, for that would be out of character, but she displays a healthy dose of self-respect.

Passionate In a later scene, we see that Giuliana has hidden depths of passion. She is singing, while dressing herself with special care, a lovely dress with a wasp-waist and a fashionable hat. Tullio wanders into her dressing room and she says she's going to an auction. She sprays herself liberally with a new perfume. With a tiny smile, she pulls down her mauve veil and pins it to her hair. Tullio then picks up Filippo's novel and sees that the writer signed it for her. He dismisses the novel as 'mediocre,' but she disagrees. 'He has an extraordinary style. It's enchanting, like music.' She turns on her heel and leaves him. This is a very different Giuliana, one who contradicts her husband and goes out on her own (not to the auction, we later learn, but to meet Filippo, her lover). She is in love with a man who can write a book that moves her as much as the classical music she hears in the drawing rooms of her friends. The novel inscribed to her is entitled 'The Flame,' a term that would also describe her in this scene of hidden passion.

Confused When Giuliana's pregnancy is revealed, she undergoes a series of emotions—guilt, shame, hopelessness, confusion. All this emerges in the conversation she has with Tullio in her bedroom in his mother's house. After he asks if what he heard was true, she looks up at him, with tears brimming, and says it is. She explains that she was lonely and that the affair was over quickly. 'I'm desperate,' she says. 'But I come last. What about you?' He does not condemn her and says that she has as much right as he to take a lover. But she explains that her taking a lover wasn't about 'claiming a right' and then flings herself into his arms, claiming her husband and expressing remorse that she broke her marriage vow to God. This is a powerful scene, revealing the torment raging inside Giuliana. She is pulled in different directions, pressured by various forces, utterly at a loss and only finds comfort in her husband's embrace.



(Tullio and Giuliana)



(Giuliana)



(Teresa)



(Tullio and Teresa)