

The performance of
giulietta masina: a
character analysis
from "nights of
cabiria..."



Federico Fellini may have titled the film “Nights of Cabiria”—a title that syntactically emphasizes the nights and events in relation to, and as “acted upon,” Cabiria. Yet, perhaps more interesting than the escapades is the complexity of the feisty heroine herself. Giulietta Masina plays an unrefined spitfire of a prostitute who goes by the name Cabiria, whom the camera follows through a trying segment of her life. Throughout the course of her “nights,” Cabiria is repeatedly subjected to life’s many cruelties and ironies. Masina portrays Cabiria much with the same comedic façade as the film does itself—a front that ultimately makes the more tender moments all the more effective and moving. Her delivery has a spunk that matches her physical energy—a fearlessly vulnerable performance of pure heart and soul. The audience comes to view Cabiria as a contradiction in conventional ideas of female virtue and sexuality, and increasingly grows to appreciate the sense of honesty with which she leads her life. Masina’s performance sheds light on the dimensions of Cabiria’s multifaceted personality and effectively provides insight on the formation behind these layers. Her depiction of the prostitute gradually transforms Cabiria from a joke of a caricature to a fully rounded character, sensitively etched with the deep, underlying implications of human pathos, replete with modest ambitions for happiness that are consistently mired by the realities of her situation. Masina powerfully captures and conveys very real, palpable emotions, and legitimizes Cabiria as a character with wells of depth and complexity by the film’s close. Masina’s character is naïve yet tough; she presents Cabiria through a distinctively hardened exterior (no doubt resultant of her lifestyle and occupation), a kindhearted, rather simple-minded prostitute who takes herself seriously to an almost laughable degree. It is only as the film

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progresses that this same self-righteousness takes on a more touching light, for the audience gains insight into how such a protective measure may have developed. Cabiria sports an exaggeratedly throaty, low voice—crude and nasal, as if to draw further attention to her unsophisticated nature and abrasive personality. From her outrageous dancing to her rough and ready stride and physicality to her caricature-like eyebrows, Masina paints Cabiria in a slew of over-the-top, Chaplin-esque character traits. She is impossible to ignore—vivacious, blissfully unaware, completely lacking in inhibitions, preposterously proud, and almost unrealistically resilient. Nonetheless, Cabiria is notably not immune to the harshness of life and its unhappy circumstances, though she is remarkably never broken by her tragic roles. It becomes part of her wry, passive nature to take things as they come. It soon becomes evident how necessary her internal strength is for her survival. Cabiria's marked pride in owning her small home is at first patronizingly humorous, but later seems vital to ennobling her in a lifestyle defined by degradation. She is a character who needs something to believe in, and it suddenly seems natural that she should be sensitive to issues of dignity and self-respect. This internal strength is exaggerated to the same degree as her external victimization. Masina reveals Cabiria's optimism as an essential armor against the realities of her occupation. The commodification of her sexual labor is so inherently dehumanizing and physically invasive that it necessitates her need to feel some sense of control over her life. It isn't hard to believe that, were Cabiria to succumb to a sense of self-victimization and objective awareness of her surroundings, she would lose this life-sustaining capacity to push relentlessly forward. The psychological effects of

prostitution are soon understood to present a very pertinent danger to her in <https://assignbuster.com/the-performance-of-giulietta-masina-a-character-analysis-from-nights-of-cabiria/>

particular, as her inner romantic is revealed, for then her softness and vulnerability becomes most evident and most poignant. When the accountant Oscar professes his love and desire to lead a life with her, Cabiria's response is surprisingly open and nervously cautious—"Don't say that if it isn't true." One wonders, after screening her performance, just how long this character has had to build up this resistance, this protective shell. Most likely, our Cabiria wasn't always so. Masina's performance calls awareness to Cabiria's layers, her inner hopes and dreams, and makes the audience think about the background character development that constructed Cabiria's present spitfire personality front. We realize she isn't, and hasn't been, a static character—rather, she is dynamic and has all the potential in the world that is only compounded by her desperate longing for change. Cabiria grasps eagerly and earnestly toward religion and all sorts of men only to be continually disillusioned and mercilessly damaged. Masina marks Cabiria unique in her aspirations. The character could easily be marginalized as one of all sound and fury, yet behind the negativity and umbrage of her character and actions lays a wealth of hope, sensitivity, and desire for change. Cabiria proves to be a contradiction in regard to conventional notions of female sexuality and feminine virtue; she is essentially the poor prostitute with a heart of gold. The film reveals Cabiria's anguish and ambitions in direct proportion and timing with the escalation of humiliation in her experiences. The more reprehensible the episodes she is subjected to, the more we grow to empathize for her. This most absurd character becomes a woman we grow to know and take quite seriously, despite the fact that her modest ambitions are consistently squashed in the face of society. One of the most beautifully moving scenes takes place at a <https://assignbuster.com/the-performance-of-giulietta-masina-a-character-analysis-from-nights-of-cabiria/>

carnival hypnotist show, in which Cabiria is exploited before a crowd of howling roughnecks to reveal her innermost dreams and vain romantic hopes. Hypnotized, she is oblivious to the crowd's ridicule, and walks about in a trance believing she is in a garden with a man. The haunting scene epitomizes the isolation and loneliness of her life, her struggles to find a good man, and the seeming futility of her efforts to establish lasting human connection. Like her reality, the interactions of her dream state aren't real and are ultimately based on a system of exploitation and moral irresponsibility reflected in all her other interactions as well. None of it lasts, none of it fulfills, and they more or less end with her feeling cheated (and confused, which she quickly recovers from on stage once the hypnotist wakes her). The ephemeral nature of her happiness and contentment on that stage points toward the insincerity of what she experiences in life, and heartbreakingly so. Fellini gives Cabiria's life an element of adventure, following her around as she encounters all different aspects of life and gets a taste of the highs and lows of humanity. The incorporation of these fantastical elements seems, if not escapist, a rather soothing look at the different walks of life. One dream-like sequence introduces her to the cave people who seem to wake and emerge from nowhere to greet their weekly altruistic provider. Cabiria hitchhikes a ride back with the good Samaritan, during which she reveals her true name, Maria, which is perhaps just as ironically virginal in its connotations as her stage name (Cabiria comes from an Italian historical epic of the same name, whose title character is wealthy and virginal). Fellini incorporates his favored spontaneity of life again when he has the movie star Alberto Lazzati take Cabiria in on a whim, looking for distraction post-lovers' quarrel. During her night out with Lazzati, Cabiria can

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barely contain her excitement in the presence of his fame. He takes her back to his palatial estate, where she presents herself as almost painfully pathetic, unnecessarily legitimizing herself and proudly insisting, “ I have it all, I have everything,” when detailing her ownership of her diminutive home to the slightly bemused yet bored Lazzati. When his lover, Jessi, returns, he hurriedly pushes Cabiria into the bathroom, where she spends the entire night with the dog. With a few bills and a distracted goodbye, Lazzati kicks out the unwilling Cabiria in the morning. The speed in which she recovers from this unbelievably demeaning disgrace is almost instantaneous, showing the extent to which she has internalized and naturalized this sort of treatment from men and humanity in general. She is regrettably accustomed to being used and consequently discarded by society. Cabiria is let down by all institutions of society—religious ones included. Her willingness to seek out the church illuminates her dissatisfaction and search for a deeper meaning in life. However, Fellini presents the church as zealous, inauthentic, and just as flawed and self-serving as other institutions. Cabiria leaves the church no more spiritually equipped than when she arrived to reconcile her discontent and inner pain, though the audience is shown that her desire for transformation on a spiritual level is very real. The moments at the picnic prior to her test-trial of the church carry a strong sense of urgency, anxiety, and frustration. Cabiria’s disgust with the inertia of her state is palpable, and she is visibly antsy from the prospect of remaining static. It is when we see her suffer the ultimate betrayal—that of love—that it is most apparent the extent and disadvantage to which she wears her heart on her sleeve. The scenes that lead up to Oscar’s desertion and robbery consist of Cabiria unabashedly pouring out her heart and soul to him, laying bare her hopes, <https://assignbuster.com/the-performance-of-giulietta-masina-a-character-analysis-from-nights-of-cabiria/>

her sufferings, her years of financial savings. The intensity of her babbling excitement for their shared future glows like that of a child, making his betrayal hit her as profoundly as a loss of innocence all over again. Additionally, Oscar's betrayal is so ludicrously undignified (a soft-spoken accountant planning to push Cabiria off a cliff for the sake of a petty sum!), that it proves the utmost debasement of Cabiria's value and existence. When Oscar's intentions slowly dawn upon her, Masina provides an exquisite and excruciating performance breakdown of character spirit. Oscar becomes conflicted and increasingly agitated as Cabiria literally crumples before our eyes, broken for the first time. She writhes on the ground, sobbing, " Kill me then! Please do it. I have nothing more to live for." This graphically vivid scene depicts her at rock bottom, almost animalistic in her grief, publicly displaying the ugly honesty and brutality of emotional loss. Indeed, having stationed the two characters far out in the woods of nature, Fellini underscores how equally removed Cabiria and Oscar are from the values of civility and morality, subjected instead to the basest motives of human behavior. This final setback is perhaps the most disillusioning, and the audience for the first time questions whether Cabiria can go on. As she literally seems to drag herself up by the bootstraps and emerges from the forest, Cabiria walks in on some sort of celebration. As the youth around her try to engage her in the festivities, she slowly begins to find her own sense of hope, in the face of an unmanageable future. Her endless obstacles seem to purposely reinforce her own sense of self-reliance, which is at the heart of the optimism, hopefulness, and autonomy she maintains. If it wasn't clear before, the film views her here with pure triumph as she smiles up revived—destitute, homeless, alone, the traces of her tears in a circus-like cartoon

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drop on her makeup—and celebrated as a character more than ever. Similar to his work in *8 ½*, Fellini depicts his dissatisfied protagonist finding some sense of order and rightness in the world in the midst of a carnivalesque celebration. In an inspired metacinematic gesture, the camera pans in on Cabiria in the end, and she smiles directly at the audience for the only time in the length of the film. Masina's performance in these few shots likens her to one of the great silent screen actresses; her expressive face speaks volumes without uttering a single word. In that moment, the film acknowledges itself as film, in order to offer us, the audience, the same sort of hope that this character has achieved.