

La Strada Film Summary

La Strada by Federico Fellini

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Context

La Strada is the story of Zampano, a traveling strongman, and Gelsomina, his innocent sidekick. Gelsomina is sold by her mother to Zampano to travel around and act with him. Gelsomina is quiet and naïve, so she agrees to leave her beloved home on the beach to go with Zampano and help her family. Gelsomina's life changes from relaxed and easy to difficult and cruel. Zampano treats Gelsomina like a slave, and she takes it nobly. Although she could leave him at any time, she chooses not to, and her friend the Fool convinces her that Zampano loves her. After Zampano kills the Fool out of anger, however, Gelsomina becomes unhappy and depressed. Zampano leaves her by the side of the road, and Gelsomina dies several years later in the home of a family who does not even know her name.

La Strada is one of the most important films of Italian post-war cinema. Although *La Strada* may seem to be neorealistic, Fellini actually broke away from that genre to create this movie. He embraced a poetic approach to the film shown in the choice of characters, shots, and music. Fellini and Pinelli co-wrote *La Strada*, and the film is now considered one of Fellini's finest.

By deciding to not discuss the characters' economic state and their suffering from their poverty, Fellini chose to do something new and different. Rather than stay in the neorealistic format, talking about the cruel lives of the poor, Fellini chose to focus on the characters' emotional states. Many people felt that Fellini had abandoned the neorealistic tradition that he, in part, began, but Fellini experienced great success with this film. In later years, Fellini continued to create films that explored the emotional and spiritual aspects of the characters rather than their economic situation alone.

La Strada is filmed on location in Italy and contains several major Italian landmarks. Although the movie is filmed in Italian, it was also dubbed in English. Anthony Quinn, the lead man playing Zampano, speaks in English throughout the film, and his words are dubbed over for the Italian version.

Giulietta Masina, who is Fellini's wife, does an amazing job portraying poor, innocent Gelsomina. Masina brings a quality of innocence to every character she plays, and *La Strada* is no exception. Although Masina had performed in some of Fellini's other films, she received international acclaim for her role in *La Strada*. Most would say that the role of Gelsomina is her finest, and it is definitely her best known.

Anthony Quinn, the lead playing Zampano, was a popular American actor of the time. He had played lead roles in a number of American and Spanish films. After winning an Oscar for his role in the Spanish film, *Viva Zapata!*, Quinn became even more popular. *La Strada* was one of his next and best performances. Although he went on to act for decades, Quinn is often remembered most for his role as Zampano. Quinn once said that when his contract was first written, he was to receive a percentage of the profits of the film. However, when his agent found out, he promptly changed the contract to a flat salary; Quinn lost several million dollars because of the change.

Richard Baseheart was a talented actor who starred in several other international films as well. His role as the Fool in *La Strada* is known as one of his best performances as well.

La Strada won numerous awards when it was released. In America, *La Strada* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (the first award of its kind ever given) and was nominated for Best Writing for an Original Screenplay for Federico Fellini and Tullio Pinelli. Additionally, Federico Fellini was nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival, but won the Silver Lion.



Summary and Analysis

As the film begins, we see a young woman carrying a load of sticks on her back. In the background, we hear children calling, "Gelsomina!" They run up and tell her that their mother wants her to come home because a man on a motorcycle has arrived saying that Rosa is dead. They all run back to the small house. Gelsomina is introduced again to Zampano, the man who took Rosa away. The mother weeps, crying because she will never even see where Rosa was buried. The man is rugged and handsome.

The mother says how beautiful and wonderful Rosa was, and she also shows Zampano how much her daughter Gelsomina looks like Rosa. She cries that they are so poor. She says that Gelsomina came out strange, but maybe she'll learn from Zampano. Her mother asks Gelsomina to leave with Zampano so that she can take Rosa's place and then the family will have one less mouth to feed. Her mother reassures Gelsomina and tells her that Zampano gave her 10,000 lira in exchange for Gelsomina. Gelsomina begins to cry when she realizes that she must go with Zampano. Zampano sends the children to get food while Gelsomina walks toward the beach and falls to the ground smiling.

Gelsomina tells people that she will be going with Zampano. When she asks her mother when she will return, the mother doesn't answer. The mother begs her not to go for a moment, but Gelsomina runs to follow Zampano. She waves happily to her family as they drive off in Zampano's van. When they arrive at their next stop, Zampano shows people how he can break a chain just by flexing his chest. Gelsomina waits in the back of the van. He finally breaks the chain, and the people applaud.

Gelsomina and Zampano eat on the side of the road at their campsite. He tells her that her soup is terrible, and he gives her some new clothes from the back of his vehicle. He begins training her to be the kind of woman he needs her to be. Gelsomina is very excited about her new clothes, but Zampano is focused on work. He teaches her how to announce him for their shows. He shows her his trumpet and drums; although she tries to play the drum, she is not very talented. Becoming frustrated, Zampano gets a stick from a nearby bush, and he uses it to hit her each time she makes a mistake.

While they rest later, Gelsomina tells Zampano that it is going to rain the day after tomorrow. He tells her to get into the vehicle, but she says she'll sleep outside. He goes to her and tells her to get in and finally basically throws her in the back. Later that night, Gelsomina watches Zampano sleep while she cries.

The next day, she is dressed up as a clown and is playing the drums while Zampano breaks the chains from his chest. He then presents her funny face and tells the crowd that she, his wife, will pass the hat around at the end of the show. Zampano also dresses up, and they put on a show.

At the end of the day, the two dine in a restaurant. By the time Gelsomina finishes eating, the restaurant is empty, but she has wiped her plate clean. Gelsomina tries to



make conversation with Zampano, but he is not very talkative. Instead, he calls to a girl named Rosa to come join them. Gelsomina sits quietly as they flirt, obviously uncomfortable with the situation. Zampano shows off his muscles and just introduces Gelsomina as his sidekick. The girl suggests that they leave, but Zampano and Rosa leave Gelsomina behind when they take the car. She waits on the side of the road all night waiting for Zampano to return. The neighboring people try to feed her, but she refuses to take their food. They realize that she is with Zampano, and they tell her where she can find him. She looks in the back, but then she finds him sleeping outside.

When she begins walking away down the road, a young girl follows her, and they have a few laughs together. Zampano finally wakes up, and he finds Gelsomina planting tomatoes. She has to push the car to get it started. As they drive down the road, she asks if he treated Rosa the way he treats her. She tells him that he's a man who runs around with women. He tells her that in order to stay with him she has to learn to keep her mouth shut.

Later, Zampano and Gelsomina perform at a wedding. At the wedding, two little girls take Gelsomina inside to introduce her to their sick cousin, Oswald. The children want her to make him laugh since he is never allowed outside. A nun finds them in the room and rushes to get rid of them. Downstairs, Zampano meets the woman of the house who tells him that she works hard to care for her family. She tells him that even after working hard, she still has the energy to go dancing. She also reveals that both her husbands have died, but she doesn't want to marry again and have someone bossing her around, admitting that's not all a husband is good for. She offers her first husband's suits to Zampano, but then Gelsomina tells Zampano about the little boy she met upstairs. Zampano goes to get the clothes with the woman while Gelsomina waits for him.

As Zampano tries on his new clothes, Gelsomina talks to him about the wedding. She tells him that she wants to play the trumpet, and she wants to know more about Rosa's work. Gelsomina begins to cry, and she falls into a hole. He tells her that she can just stay there all night if she wants. Earlier in the morning, she tells the sleeping Zampano that she will go back home to her mother. She likes the work, but she doesn't like Zampano. He finally wakes up, but he is not concerned when she tells him she's leaving. Gelsomina leaves, but she does not make it far.

As she sits on the side of the road, she begins to follow three men playing musical instruments. Later, she ends up in the middle of a city parade. That night the Fool performs amazing stunts on the high wire in the middle of a city street. The Fool sees Gelsomina, but he drives off to meet a friend. People on the street believe she is crazy, and Zampano finally finds her in the streets. He tells her to get in the vehicle, but she tries to refuse. He chases her down the street and throws her into the vehicle. The next morning, Gelsomina wakes up and finds herself in a camp that is part of a circus. The Fool is there playing his violin, and she watches him until Zampano calls her. They offer her breakfast, and Zampano tells them that he found Gelsomina barefoot on the beach. Zampano and Gelsomina are going to work with the company. Gelsomina at this time discovers that she is now in Rome.



Zampano and the Fool meet each other, but the Fool does not meet well with the Fool. Zampano warns the Fool not to mess with him. As Gelsomina follows Zampano out, she stares at the Fool and runs into the wall. During the first night with the circus, the Fool gives an amazing performance followed by Zampano's normal performance. The Fool interrupts Zampano's performance by making fun of his speech and telling him he has a phone call during the performance. Zampano is extremely angry and threatens to kill the Fool.

Later that night Gelsomina asks what the Fool has against Zampano. Zampano says he doesn't know, but if he ever gets the chance, he'll kill him. He does tell her that the Fool knows nothing about Zampano and Rosa. When Zampano goes to bed, Gelsomina follows him only to find him asleep. The next day, the Fool teaches Gelsomina new tricks. He tries to teach her to play the trumpet even after she's says that Zampano does not allow her to play it. As the Fool finishes teaching Gelsomina the act, Zampano comes back and forces her to stop. He tells everyone that Gelsomina only works with Zampano. Zampano chases the Fool and tries to kill him. Other men follow to break up the fight while Gelsomina goes to sit with the circus director's wife.

Zampano and the Fool are taken off by the police, and Gelsomina is allowed to stay with the circus if she wants. However, they are leaving the next morning, so Gelsomina must choose whether to go with them or stay with Zampano. That night, the Fool comes to visit her and tells her that Zampano is still in jail but might get out the next morning. She blames the Fool for the problem and asks how he got away; he tells her that since he didn't have the knife, he wasn't in as much trouble. Gelsomina and the Fool sit outside and talk. He tells her that going with the circus might be a good idea, and he knows it would make Zampano crazy.

The Fool begins to ask about Gelsomina's family and how she came to work with Zampano. She explains that he paid her mother for her, and the Fool asks if she loves Zampano. He reminds her that she could have escaped, but hasn't. She claims that she has tried, but she says that whether she goes with the circus or stays with Zampano makes no difference. She is convinced that she is no good to anyone.

The Fool begins to tease her, but he finally offers to let her come with him. However, as they talk, he tells her that she must be of some use to Zampano or he wouldn't keep her. She tells him that Zampano really slapped her hard the last time she ran away, and the Fool says that Zampano might be in love with her. He finally asks, "If you don't stay with him, who will?" The Fool explains that everyone and everything has a purpose even if we don't know what that purpose is, so she has a purpose too. She decides to stay with Zampano.

Before he leaves, the Fool asks what the circus people said about him. She tells him that neither he nor Zampano can ever work with them again. He tells her that eventually he will fall off his rope, break his neck, and no one will care. The Fool offers to take the motorcycle and cart to the front of the police station so that Zampano can find her when he's released. As he leaves, he once again invites her to come along, but he tells her



that he doesn't need a girl to go with him. He gives her a small necklace as a souvenir, and then leaves.

Zampano is finally released, and she greets him happily. She tells him about the offer from the circus, and he asks her why she didn't go. She simply helps him into his coat, and they head back out on the road. On the way, they stop at the beach, and Gelsomina asks where her home is from there, but she admits that she no longer dreams of going home since her home is now with him. Finally they stop at a nunnery, and they allow them to stay for the night.

After she finishes eating, Gelsomina shows off her talent on the trumpet. Then, Gelsomina talks to one of the nuns who explain that she moves every two years following her husband just as Gelsomina travels to follow her husband. That night, Gelsomina asks why Zampano keeps her along; he just tells her to go to bed. Then she asks whether he would be sad if she died. She admits that at one point she would rather have died than stay with him, but now she would be happy to marry him since they're going to stay together. Zampano becomes angry that she's bothering him and tells her to go to sleep. However, she continues to question him: "Do you like me a little?" she asks, and then she begins to play her trumpet before finally going to sleep.

Late that night a storm starts, and Gelsomina begins to look for Zampano. Zampano is trying to steal some silver hearts from the wall and asks her to help. When she refuses, he slaps her around. The next morning they leave, but the nun Gelsomina befriended checks on her because she is crying. However, Gelsomina just leaves to follow Zampano, waving happily as they drive off before bursting into tears.

During the day, they run into the Fool on the side of the road fixing his tire. The two men fight while Gelsomina begs Zampano to stop. Zampano tells him that the next time he sees him, the injuries will be far worse. However, the Fool walks off and falls to the ground severely injured before he dies. Gelsomina becomes upset and cries throughout their next performance. Along the road, Zampano stops and yells at her for being upset. As he goes to make some dinner, she tries to run away. He offers to take her back home, but she declines.

Finally, they stop at a beautiful spot, and she stops crying. Zampano fixes some soup for Gelsomina, but she offers to help cook. Zampano becomes angry and tries to justify his actions toward the Fool. He tells her that since she's happy, they can perform at the fair in the next town, but Gelsomina begins crying again. Zampano tells her that he's going to return her to her mother, but Gelsomina simply says, "If I don't stay with you, who will stay?" He tells her that he must make a living and that she's sick - mentally. Gelsomina lies down and tells Zampano that she's staying with him because the Fool told her she should. When she falls asleep, Zampano covers her up with another blanket, puts a bit of money in her hand, leaves the trumpet by her side, and drives away.

The scene then turns to Zampano working with a new woman in a new circus. After getting some ice cream, Zampano walks along the beach. A woman is singing a song that Gelsomina used to sing, so Zampano asks where she learned it. She tells him that



she learned it from a girl who used to perform and play the trumpet. When he asks how long it has been since she saw the girl, she tells him it must have been four or five years. She tells him that she died a few years ago. The woman's father found the girl on the beach one night, sick, but she never talked or told anything about her life. When she felt better, though, she would play the trumpet for the family.

The woman tells him that the Mayor could tell him where the girl is buried since the town took care of the arrangements. Zampano sadly turns away so that he can go perform in the show before he spends the night drinking him self into oblivion. The drunken Zampano tries to fight some men as they throw him out of a bar. Zampano wanders out to the beach, falling to the ground and crying.



Characters

Zampano, played by Anthony Quinn

Description

Zampano is a traveling performer who often works alone but joins circuses sometimes. At one time he worked with a girl named Rosa who came with him because he paid her mother. After Rosa died, Zampano went back to tell the family and bought their next daughter, Gelsomina, for 10,000 lira.

Zampano is a strong man, and his main show is breaking a chain using his chest muscles. Zampano is also a womanizer; he even leaves Gelsomina alone for a whole night so that he can go off with another woman. He treats Gelsomina harshly, demanding perfection from her on the first day after receiving little instruction in her duties.

Analysis

Zampano is a selfish brute throughout the course of the film. He thinks only of himself. Rather than wondering how Gelsomina might feel about going with him, Zampano is simply concerned about filling the place left after her sister died. He then proceeds to treat Gelsomina as a slave rather than a partner by ordering her around and neglecting her when she is not convenient for him.

Zampano hates the Fool especially when the Fool becomes friends with Gelsomina. He forgets his strength when he attacks the Fool and ends up killing the man.

Gelsomina, played by Giulietta Masina

Description

Gelsomina is a strange, quiet girl who grew up in a small home on the beach. When we first see Gelsomina, she is wondering along the beach picking up wood and singing a song. When Gelsomina goes home that day, she discovers that her mother has sold her to a traveling performer named Zampano.

Gelsomina travels with Zampano and becomes his sidekick. Zampano treats her harshly when he doesn't pick up on the trade quickly. He also leaves her alone at night sometimes so he can go have a good time with other women. Through it all, Gelsomina keeps smiling. But, after the Fool is killed by Zampano, Gelsomina breaks. She no longer smiles, and Zampano leaves her by the road. Eventually, he finds out from a woman living by the beach that Gelsomina lived out her final days there, but died several years before he came.



Analysis

Gelsomina is an innocent girl. She knows nothing of the real world when she leaves her home by the beach, but she will learn quickly after going off with Zampano. Gelsomina does her best to please Zampano, but she is elated when she finally makes a new friend, the Fool; however, Zampano does not approve. The Fool convinces Gelsomina that Zampano may have feelings for her, so she chooses to stay with him.

As Gelsomina travels with Zampano, she has an unwavering optimism. Every time she begins to cry, Gelsomina forces herself to smile, seemingly reassuring herself that everything will be okay. After the Fool dies, Gelsomina loses her ability to keep smiling; Zampano leaves her; and Gelsomina dies several years later, the unknown guest of a family by the beach.

The Fool (Il Matto), played by Richard Baseheart

Description

The Fool is Zampano's rival. He receives a lot of praise at the circus, and Zampano hates him. When the Fool and Gelsomina become friends, Zampano is outraged. He forbids Gelsomina from working with the Fool. Although the Fool and Gelsomina remain friends, the Fool convinces her that Zampano is in love with her, and she chooses to stay with Zampano.

Zampano becomes angry with the Fool, and they fight. After they get out of jail, Zampano and Gelsomina begin traveling again. One day, on the side of the road, they run into the Fool who begins taunting Zampano. Zampano attacks and accidentally kills the Fool. After the Fool dies, Gelsomina loses all hope for the future and cries constantly.

Analysis

The Fool is a silly man who is just looking for a good time. He is very successful in the circus because he has a knack for making people laugh. The Fool becomes Gelsomina's friend partly to annoy Zampano and partly to help Gelsomina. However, the Fool does not know when to stop pushing Zampano. Eventually, he pushes to far, and Zampano kills him.

The Fool does not treat Gelsomina much better than Zampano. After asking her to come with him, he confuses her by telling her that Zampano is probably in love with her. Because of the Fool and his advice, Gelsomina chooses to stay with Zampano even though she leads a miserable life with him.



Themes

Dark Side of Man

Zampano shows the dark side of mankind. He shows his selfishness and cruelty to everyone he meets. Zampano is harsh toward Gelsomina from the beginning of their partnership. He demands much of her and pushes her around. Even the one woman he is kind towards, the woman in the bar, is left alone before the night is over.

The film shows what happens when a man gets so caught up in his own survival that he forgets to care for those around him. Zampano leaves Gelsomina sleeping by the side of the road with no real protection. Although he leaves a few things for her, he does not even try to find her until he hears a woman singing her song many years later.

Destructive Power of Selfishness

Zampano seems to destroy everything he touches because of his selfishness. First, Rosa dies. Although we don't know that she died because of Zampano, given the way he treated Gelsomina, we wouldn't be surprised if Rosa's story was similar. Then, Zampano broke the innocent, optimistic spirit of Gelsomina by killing the Fool. She loses most of her mental capacity and he leaves her beside the road with little thought for her health and safety.

Finally, Zampano destroys himself. At the end of the film, Zampano breaks down on the beach weeping for lost hopes and lost people. He has ruined the life of Gelsomina while also ruining his own life. Zampano's selfish nature has destroyed everyone he knows and himself.

Wall of Innocence

Gelsomina's main protection in her difficult life is her optimism and innocence. Gelsomina is terribly mistreated and in most cases, someone would either walk away from that situation or mourn the situation all the time--but not Gelsomina. Gelsomina survives because her strength lies within her, in her innocence and her positive outlook.

Each time that something terrible happens to Gelsomina, she cries only for a moment before breaking into the biggest smile that she can muster. Gelsomina may be naïve and innocent, but without those qualities, she would have died long before she did. A wall of innocence and a bearer of optimism - these two qualities help protect Gelsomina from the reality of her terrible life. However, after the Fool dies, Gelsomina can only see reality and becomes depressed. Zampano eventually leaves her because of her depression, but she is taken in by a kind family. There, these walls would sometimes reappear and then the woman says Gelsomina was happy and played her trumpet for the family.

Style and Cinematography

La Strada is an excellent black and white film. The story begins and ends on the beach where excellent scenes are created. Each beach scene has a shot that pans the beach. The first shot finds Gelsomina on the beach and then shows her running home. At the end of the film, the shot begins to pan out after Zampano falls to the ground weeping for the lost hope of Gelsomina and his own empty life. The shots add to the drama and the beauty of this film.

Some scenes of *La Strada* are filmed in partial darkness. In these scenes, something bad is usually happening, either Gelsomina has been left alone or is being mistreated by Zampano. The darkness lets the viewer know that something terrible is happening to poor Gelsomina, something maybe we shouldn't even watch. The darkness underscores the dark themes of the movie, and the dark actions of the characters. When Zampano finally realizes what he has done, he falls to the ground on a dark beach and weeps for his lost Gelsomina.

The musical score is by far one of the greatest accomplishments of this film. The music fits each scene perfectly and enhances the meaning and emotion of each action and look. When Zampano falls weeping on the beach at the end of the film, the music swells and helps the viewer to understand his feelings of loss and loneliness. Additionally, Gelsomina's song that she always sings and that play often in the background helps Zampano to discover her fate as another woman sings the song. Gelsomina's song also reveals her attempt to remain positive and keep smiling during the worst situations. The composers of the film's music have done an excellent job creating a revealing and emotional score to go along with the film.

Motifs

Journey

Both Gelsomina and Zampano experience a journey both physically and emotionally during the course of the film. Gelsomina travels from her family home on a quiet beach to follow Zampano into a sporadic and unstable life. During their travels, Gelsomina begins to lose her innocence, but she keeps a quiet hope and unfailing optimism throughout all her trials.

Zampano also changes as they continue on their journey. In his own rough way, he begins to care a bit for Gelsomina. In the end, he fights the Fool so that he will not have to share Gelsomina with him. However, when Gelsomina breaks under the pressure after the Fool dies, Zampano cannot cope with the stress and leaves her by the side of the road.

Innocence

Gelsomina is the epitome of innocence. When she goes off with Zampano, she is scared and will miss her family, but she still puts on a brave face as they drive off. Even when Zampano treats her cruelly as she tries to learn the trade, Gelsomina continues to remain optimistic about her future. She never changes until after the Fool dies. When Zampano kills the Fool, he also kills Gelsomina's innocence. He can no longer cope with her, and Zampano must leave her by the road. Her innocence lost, Gelsomina can no longer cope with the real world.

Abandonment

Gelsomina spends her life being abandoned by everyone she loves. First, her mother abandons her by selling her to Zampano for 10,000 lira, acting as if she is nothing more than a piece of property to be sold to the highest bidder. When she lives with Zampano, she is subject to his daily abandonment as he goes to be with other women. Finally, she is completely abandoned by Zampano after she breaks down mentally when Zampano kills the Fool. We find out from the woman in the town that Gelsomina is finally cared for by her family, people who do not even know her name.



Symbols

Clown Face

One of the most famous pictures of this movie is Gelsomina dressed up with her clown makeup on. Gelsomina experiences many difficult trials during the movie, but she always keeps smiling. Even in the end, we find out from a woman who cared for her that Gelsomina was still happy sometimes.

The clown face represents Gelsomina's innocence and optimistic outlook on her life, even under the worst circumstances. Additionally, the clown face seems an ironic statement of the way both Gelsomina's and Zampano's lives work out: Gelsomina dies an unknown while Zampano collapses in tears on the beach after learning her fate.

Trumpet

Gelsomina begins learning to play the trumpet only to learn that she seemingly has no talent. Zampano becomes angry that Gelsomina cannot play, but eventually she learns from the Fool. In the beginning, the trumpet represents Gelsomina's incompetence, but by the end of the film, the trumpet represents her one triumph. She does not learn everything about life, but she does learn to play the trumpet; the trumpet turns out to be Gelsomina's one link to her former happiness and innocence which we learn from the woman who says that Gelsomina played the trumpet for her family when she was happy.

Beach

La Strada ends where it began: on the beach. As the film opens, we see Gelsomina wondering along the beach picking up firewood for her family. She seems to be living a quiet, content life. Her family even says that she is a bit odd but of good temperament. We see Gelsomina's journey through the progression from one beach to the other.

In the beginning, the beach is empty and innocent just like Gelsomina. By the end of the film, the only person on the beach is Zampano who weeps for the tragic end of Gelsomina and perhaps his own feelings of guilt for his role in her life. The beach represents two different lives. Gelsomina's that ends in tragedy but with optimism and honesty, and Zampano's life that is not over yet but is filled with cruelty and selfishness.



Essay Questions

Why is Gelsomina's mother willing to sell her to Zampano?

What happened to Gelsomina's older sister, Rosa?

What types of things does Zampano try to teach Gelsomina?

How does Zampano treat Gelsomina? Give specific examples.

How does the music in the film reveal the emotions of the characters?

Does the Fool care for Gelsomina or does he just like to harass Zampano?

What reasons does the Fool give Gelsomina for believing that Zampano loves her?

Why does Gelsomina continue to smile even when things are at their worst?

Zampano leaves Gelsomina by the side of the road; why?

What do you think Zampano is thinking when he falls weeping on the beach at the end of the film?

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