

## LA TRAVIATA THEMES

### Sacrifice & Redemption

*La Traviata* is the story of a lively Parisian courtesan who gives up the man she loves to save his family's reputation. Perhaps this is the greatest theme of *La Traviata*; self-sacrifice. The opera is a touching story, not just because it is a story people can believe in, but because it is a story people *want* to believe in. It encourages the ideal that it is possible to experience the joy of a pure, redemptive love. The story shows that it is possible – no matter what hurt and offence has been caused – to right wrongs by sacrifice to the greatest good.

The theme of sacrifice is exemplified when Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, demands that for the sake of his family, Violetta break off her relationship with his son. Giorgio reveals that Violetta's relationship with Alfredo has threatened his daughter's engagement (Giorgio: *Pura siccome un angelo* – "I have a daughter as pure as an angel") because of her reputation as a courtesan. While she says that she cannot break off her relationship with Alfredo because she loves him, Giorgio pleads with her. With mounting sorrow and understanding, she finally agrees (Violetta, Giorgio: *Dite alla giovine* – "Say to this child of thine") and bids him farewell. Giorgio kisses her forehead in a gesture of gratitude for her kindness and sacrifice, before leaving her weeping alone.

Violetta's sacrifice is completely misunderstood by Alfredo in Act Three, and because of this, he behaves dishonorably in deliberately treating her as a whore before a large assembly. However at the end of the opera, as Violetta passes away, Alfredo is stricken with remorse at discovering all that she has given up for him and his family.

### Love

Some contemporary critics scorn *La Traviata* for its sentimentality, but the romantic writers (for example Verdi) meant to soften the heart and render the audience more humane, tolerant, and loving by telling simple stories such as this one about true love. *La Traviata* demonstrates that true love must triumph over all.

In Act One, Alfredo tries to persuade Violetta to abandon her current lover, an older baron. To love this young man who has no money of his own (though his father is rich) would not only impoverish her, but open her up to disappointment. So long as she is the mistress of men like the baron, her heart remains untouched; but if she allows herself to believe in true love, she fears disappointment. Alfredo declares his love to Violetta and Violetta is struck by his words. She gives him a camellia, her favorite flower and invites him to return when the flower has withered. When alone, Violetta wonders anxiously about Alfredo's ardent and truthful love confession, even though her life as a courtesan does not allow real love (Violetta: *Follie, follie*). In the meantime, Alfredo, from the street below, interrupts Violetta and sings his memorable theme about his love for her.

Thus Act Two opens three months later with Alfredo and Violetta living together peacefully and happily in Violetta's country house outside Paris. Violetta has fallen deeply in love with Alfredo and has completely abandoned her former life. Alfredo sings of their happy life together. (Alfredo: *Di miei bollenti spiriti* – "Wild my dream of ecstasy").

It seems that love has been abandoned in Act Two as Alfredo and Violetta suffer from a forced separation. However, in Act Three, when Violetta is on her death bed, the maid rushes in to tell her of Alfredo's arrival, and the audience is reassured that their love will not end unrequited. After a long separation, the lovers are reunited and Alfredo suggests that they leave Paris (Alfredo, Violetta: *Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo* – "Dearest, we'll leave Paris"). But it is too late; Violetta knows her time is up (Alfredo, Violetta: *Gran Dio! morir si giovane* – "O, God! to die so young"). At this time, Alfredo's father arrives and asks for mercy from Violetta. Violetta forgives him, and feeling better she tries to get up. But that is the last sad illusion: at once she falls and dies like a withered flower on the sofa. Violetta dies in Alfredo's arms.

Although Violetta is gone, the lovers have reunited in spite of societal attitudes and norms (even Alfredo's father approves of their union at this point). This champions the ideal that love is above petty politics, and perhaps most importantly, that love conquers all.

### **Morality & Hypocrisy**

*La Traviata* is a quintessential romantic attack on conventional bourgeois (upper class) morality. Verdi argues that a good heart is more important than propriety (conformity to established standards of good or proper behavior or manners). He also shows that the social distinctions which split the beau monde (high society) from the demimonde (illicit world at the edges of polite society) are cruel and hypocritical.

In mid-19th-century France, almost as much as in England, sexual hypocrisy was common. For example, prostitution and gambling were extremely popular and widespread, even as these practices were publicly condemned. Additionally, men were expected to have mistresses. And although they supported them financially, they were expected to conceal that fact. Also, they were not supposed to fall in love with these women (although they often did). It is interesting why an opera about a good-hearted courtesan would be appropriate in a film like *Pretty Woman* (1990), in which Julia Roberts' character (a prostitute) is enchanted by Violetta's story.

By way of background, courtesans were not classed with common prostitutes, but to the beau monde there was no illusion about their motivation for participating in these affairs: they were in it for the cash and gifts, and were faithful to their lovers only so long as it suited them. These women, who slept with men before marriage, were thought to be "ruined" (rendered unfit to wed), and were supposed to be shunned as social lepers. For many such women, some form of prostitution was the only means of survival. Respectable women feared and detested these courtesans, and would not permit them to mix in "polite society," as it was then called. Further, they were presumed to be predatory temptresses, bent on extracting their wealth from guileless young men, then abandoning them. The most respectable families would not even want to be associated with another family in which one of the members was entangled with such a creature.

That *La Traviata* ends tragically – it is often said today – indicates that 19th-century readers desired to celebrate sexual freedom only when they doomed those who exercised it. While this certainly rings true, it is also true that this story is a commentary on the complexity of moral attitudes at the time.

### **Illness**

Tuberculosis (TB) was romanticized during the 19th century. Many at the time believed that it produced feelings of euphoria referred to as "Spec phthisica" or "hope of the consumptive." It

was believed that TB sufferers who were artists had bursts of creativity as the disease progressed and that sufferers had a final burst of energy just before they died which made women more beautiful and men more creative. The disease was called "consumption" because it seemed to consume people from within with a bloody cough, fever, pallor, and long relentless wasting.

TB has been present in humans since antiquity. Skeletal remains show prehistoric humans (4000 BC) had TB and tubercular decay has been found in the spines of mummies from 3000-240 BC. In 460 BC, Hippocrates identified TB – phthisis was the Greek term for it – as the most widespread disease of the times involving coughing up blood and fever which was almost always fatal. TB is spread when a person with active TB breathes out, for example by coughing, sneezing or talking.

That Violetta is struck with TB and dies, expresses the romantic notion that the highest virtue in a human being is actually a good heart; if some people are too good for this world and must leave early, that is the world's loss.

### **Condemnation**

The very title of the opera – "La traviata," which literally means "The Woman Who Strayed" or perhaps more figuratively, "Fallen One" – suggests the motif of denunciation. Much ink has been spilled over the years psychoanalyzing the cowardice of audiences who could not swallow Verdi's message. The audiences of the time did not want to see themselves on stage – not as the demimonde – as the narrow-minded burghers who condemn a woman (Violetta) to a lonely death merely because she does not bend to their ideal of chastity. Alfredo's father objects to Violetta's union with his son because of Violetta's profession and because she is of low birth. As a side note, Verdi scholars speculate that this subject in *Traviata* was so sharply clarified in the composer's imagination because its domestic milieu paralleled his own household arrangement.

### **Censorship**

As an interesting parallel to Violetta being shunned by society, *La Traviata* was also rejected at first. The year 1848 – known as "The Year of Revolutions" (in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Milan, Venice, Rome, Parma and Prague) – was an extremely turbulent year in Europe and it predated turbulent years to come. At this time, Italian authorities introduced draconian censorship laws which gave Verdi much trouble.

Piave and Verdi wanted to follow Dumas in giving *La Traviata* a contemporary setting, but the authorities at La Fenice insisted that it be set in the past so the "lascivious" goings-on would not be seen as a reflection of "modern" life. *La Traviata* was therefore set around the time of Louis XIV (1700). But that was not enough; more needed pruning. Thus Verdi omitted some of the facts of the story, which would have offended censors. Luckily, since the story was so well known, audiences were able to fill in the gaps. The original title, *Amore e morte* (Love and Death) also had to be changed ("Traviata" is the past participle of the verb "traviare," meaning to go astray.).

It was not until the 1880s that the composer and librettist's original wishes were carried out and "realistic" productions were staged. After some revisions between 1853 and May of 1854, mostly affecting Acts Two and Three, the opera was presented again in Venice (this time at the Teatro di San Benedetto). The approval given by the Venetian censors, however, did not apply in other cities. Some used standard librettos, which contained the original text, and some still

used expurgated versions. For example, Rome and Naples chose to prepare new libretti and to change the name of the opera to *Violetta*.

Constantly plagued by the obstacles posed by censorship, Verdi did what he could to fight back and to push the artistic boundaries of the day.

Sources: [fridae.com](http://fridae.com), [manitobaopera.mb.ca](http://manitobaopera.mb.ca), [wikipedia.com](http://wikipedia.com), [neworleansopera.org](http://neworleansopera.org),  
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