



Irish Film Institute

# IL POSTINO

STUDY GUIDE

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# INTRODUCTION

An unlikely friendship develops between a world famous poet and a postman in the deceptively simple story of *Il Postino*. The film is set on an island off the southern coast of Italy, where Chilean poet Pablo Neruda spent time in exile during the early 1950s. Released in 1994, *Il Postino* was a huge international success, winning several international awards including two BAFTAS (Best Director, Best Foreign Language film) and an Oscar for Best Dramatic Score.

The film's director, Michael Radford has said that the film is about a man "who discovers himself through poetry." Postman Mario Ruoppolo finds his own poetic voice and realises that he truly belongs on the island, having previously imagined that his life would be better spent elsewhere.

This gentle comedy drama is an excellent choice for Leaving Cert Comparative Study. Its nostalgic atmosphere is reminiscent of another Italian film, *Cinema Paradiso* (1989), which has also been a comparative film text. *Il Postino* offers an affectionate study of the unusual friendship that develops between poet and postman, and presents a critique of Italian life in the years following the Second World War.

I hope you will find this study guide a useful, interesting resource in your teaching of this charming film.

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# SYNOPSIS

1952. Exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda arrives on an island off the coast of Italy. Mario Ruoppolo, a fisherman's son, applies for the job of postman to deliver the mountains of mail expected for the famous poet, and is duly assigned the job. After delivering Neruda's mail for a while, he finds the courage to engage the poet in a conversation about poetry. This marks the beginning of their friendship.

Mario meets and falls in love with Beatrice the niece of Donna Rosa, who owns the local restaurant. He asks Neruda to compose a poem for Beatrice. The poet refuses, but Mario is undeterred and woos Beatrice with poetry. However, both Beatrice and her aunt Donna Rosa believe that the poems are written by Mario. After Donna Rosa discovers one of Mario's love notes to Beatrice, she complains to the local priest and to Neruda that Mario has 'seduced' her niece with metaphors. Mario pleads with Neruda for help.

Beatrice and Mario get married, with Pablo Neruda as their best man. At the wedding reception Neruda receives a telegram telling him that he is no longer an exile and can return to Chile. He and his wife Matilde leave the island and promise to keep in touch. Time passes but there is no word. Mario waits anxiously to receive a letter from Neruda. Mario and the postmaster Giorgio read a newspaper article in which Neruda talks about the 'simple people' on the island.

The Christian Democrats win the Election. The project to bring running water to the island stops - on the orders of local businessman and corrupt politician Di Cosimo. Beatrice announces that she is pregnant. Mario receives a letter from Neruda's secretary in Chile asking him to return some belongings, but he is disappointed as the

letter is so impersonal. When Mario visits Neruda's old house he sees Neruda's sound recorder and decides to compose a sound poem for the poet. He records different sounds from the island and describes them.

Several years pass. Pablo Neruda and his wife Matilde return to the island. They enter the restaurant and see a small boy, Pablito, who is chasing a ball. His mother, Beatrice emerges and recognises them. She explains that Mario was killed during a communist demonstration days before Pablito was born. Beatrice plays Mario's 'Song for Pablo Neruda' to them. Afterwards, Neruda walks alone on the beach and imagines what happened to Mario on the day of the demonstration.

## CREDITS

### Cast

Pablo Neruda	<i>Philippe Noiret</i>
Mario Ruoppolo	<i>Massimo Troisi</i>
Beatrice Russo	<i>Maria Grazia Cucinotta</i>
Telegrapher	<i>Renato Scarpa</i>
Donna Rosa	<i>Linda Moretti</i>
Di Cosimo	<i>Mariano Rigillo</i>
Matilde	<i>Anna Bonaiuto</i>
Pablo Neruda (Voice)	<i>Bruno Alessandro</i>

Director	<i>Michael Radford</i>
Producers	<i>Maria Cecchi Gori Vittorio Cecchi Gori</i>
Original novel	<i>Antonio Skarmeta</i>
Screenplay	<i>Anna Pavignano Michael Radford Furio Scarpelli Giacomo Scarpelli Massimo Troisi</i>

*Running Time* 108 mins



# BACKGROUND

The film is adapted from a novel *Burning Patience*, by Antonio Skarmeta, which is set in Chile, and is about the imagined relationship between Pablo Neruda and a postman. In the film, however, the setting is transferred to an island off the southern coast of Italy where the poet spent some time in exile during the early 1950s. The film was shot on the island of Procida in the Bay of Naples.

## MASSIMO TROISI

The idea for the film came from the late Massimo Troisi, a well-known Italian actor and comedian, who plays the title role. He is also credited as co-director and co-screenwriter. During filming, Troisi was seriously ill and could only work for an hour or two each day. He had postponed a heart transplant because of the film, and tragically died just days after filming was completed.

## MICHAEL RADFORD

Massimo Troisi chose English director Michael Radford to direct, having wanted to work with him for many years. Radford, who was born in India and is fluent in Italian, is credited as director and co-screenwriter of the film. Radford's other directing credits include *White Mischief* (1987), *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1984) and most recently, *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), for which he also wrote the screenplay.

## PABLO NERUDA

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), whose real name is Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, was born on 12 July 1904, in the town of Parral in Chile. His father was a railway employee and his mother a teacher. She died shortly after his birth. The poet spent his childhood and youth in Temuco, and at the early age of thirteen he began to contribute some articles to the daily

newspaper, "La Mañana." In 1920, he became a contributor to the literary journal "Selva Austral" under the pen name of Pablo Neruda, which he adopted in memory of the Czechoslovak poet Jan Neruda (1834-1891).

1921 saw the publication of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada/Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, one of his best known and most translated works. Between 1927 and 1935, the Chilean government put him in charge of a number of honorary consulships, which took him to several countries around the world, including Spain. The Spanish Civil War and the murder of poet Federico García Lorca, whom Neruda knew personally, made him join the Republican movement. In 1937 he returned to Chile, and his poetry during the following period focused on political and social issues.

In 1939, Neruda was appointed consul for Spanish emigration, based in Paris, and shortly afterwards he was made Consul General in Mexico. There he rewrote his "*Canto General de Chile*," and transformed it into an epic poem about the whole South American continent, its nature, its people and its historical destiny. It consists of approximately 250 poems brought together into fifteen literary cycles.

In 1945 Neruda joined the Communist Party of Chile. As a result of his protests against President González Videla's repressive policy towards striking miners in 1947, Neruda had to live underground in his own country for two years until he managed to leave in 1949. As an exile from his home country, he lived in different European countries, including Italy, until 1952, when he was allowed to return to Chile. Much of what he published during that period reveals his political views. An example is "*Las Uvas y el Viento/The Grapes and the Wind*" (1954), which can be seen as the diary of Neruda's exile. Pablo Neruda was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971.

### MEDAL OF HONOUR

In 2004, the Pablo Neruda Medal of Honour was awarded by the Chilean government to 100 people all over the world to mark the centenary of the poet's birth. One of the recipients was U2's Bono, who was awarded the medal in recognition of his contribution to music and to humanitarian causes. Bono was presented with the medal by the Chilean Ambassador to Ireland at a ceremony at the ambassador's residence in Dublin in September 2004.

### DANTE ALIGHIERI (1265 - 1321)

Dante Alighieri is one of the most important writers in European literature. He is best known for the epic poem *La Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*) which was completed just before his death. Dante's idealised woman and inspiration for his poetry was Beatrice Portinari, who died at the age of 24 in 1290. After her death, Dante began composing poems dedicated to her memory.

*La Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*) is written in the first person, and tells of the poet's journey through the afterlife: Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Roman poet Virgil (Vergilius) is the guide through the Inferno and Purgatory, and Beatrice, the personification of pure love, has been sent to rescue Dante. She finally leads him to Paradise.

### POST WAR ITALY

The aftermath of WW2 brought sweeping changes to Italy. In 1946 a popular election abolished the monarchy in favour of a republic, and a new constitution was adopted the following year. The Christian Democrats, Communists and Socialists became the leading political parties. The Christian Democrats were the largest party, and

they dominated the Italian government after 1948. Their emphasis was on industrial growth, agricultural reform, close co-operation with the USA and the Vatican. With massive US aid via the Marshall Plan, Italy underwent a dramatic economic recovery that saw rapid industrial expansion. However, much of the expansion took place in the north of the country, with southern Italy remaining undeveloped.



# THE WORLD OF THE FILM

The film is set on an Italian island in 1952. It is depicted as a place of stunning beauty, but also as a place where opportunities are limited and people struggle to survive. Most of the islanders make their living from fishing, and have done so for generations. Political events form a significant backdrop to the film: a communist poet is given refuge, a corrupt businessman runs as a Christian Democrat candidate in an election and a communist demonstration brings tragic consequences. There is a sense of imminent change, exemplified in the character of Mario, who is awakened to politics as well as poetry during the film.

The island itself is isolated from the outside world. However, there are glimpses of the world beyond: the postcards Mario receives from friends who have emigrated to America, the films and newsreels he sees at the local cinema, and most importantly the arrival of famous poet Pablo Neruda to the island.

In a sense, then, there are two worlds in the film. The first is the island, and the second is the world that exists beyond the island. For much of the film, Mario imagines that this idealised world, represented by the sophisticated, urbane figure of poet Pablo Neruda, is infinitely better than that of his own island. However, he does change his views before the end of the film. As Mario composes his *Song for Pablo Neruda* (**A Letter: Sequence 9**) he realises that he has found his poetic voice, and also that the island is a place of beauty, where he truly belongs.

## FAMILY

Mario lives with his elderly widowed father, who is a fisherman. Despite Mario's adulthood, it seems that he has never really had a job. He is unsuited to life as a fisherman, something that is revealed in one of the film's opening scenes when he talks to his father about always catching a cold when he goes out on the boat. In the

same scene his father, who has apparently resigned himself to Mario's unwillingness to be a fisherman, tells him to find a job, or go abroad, but to grow up. "You're not a kid anymore." (**Island Life: Sequence 1**) At Mario and Beatrice's wedding, Mario's father makes a speech that reveals his disappointment in his son, and Mario, realising what he is saying, quickly cuts him short. (**Mario & Beatrice's Wedding: Sequence 7**).

Donna Rosa, who runs the local inn/restaurant has also been widowed. We first realise this when she thanks local corrupt businessman Di Cosimo for sending the largest wreath to her husband's funeral. (**Di Cosimo: Sequence 3**). Donna Rosa's young niece Beatrice has recently come to live with her aunt - immediately attracting attention because of her beauty. Donna Rosa is suspicious of all men who approach Beatrice, and later accuses Mario of 'seducing Beatrice with metaphors.' (**Love Poems: Sequence 6**).

## ROLES OF MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

### MEN & WOMEN

The island is depicted as a traditional, patriarchal society where men and women's roles at first glance seem very conventional. The customers in the restaurant are nearly always men. They are waited on by Donna Rosa and Beatrice, who, along with Matilde, Pablo Neruda's wife, are almost the only women in the film. However, as we get to know the characters more, we see that the gender roles do not always conform to our expectations. Mario does not fit into the traditional male role of fisherman. Donna Rosa is portrayed as a stereotypical Italian 'mother' in one sense - she displays fear and superstition about Mario's alleged seduction of Beatrice 'by metaphors.' But as a widow, she is also head of her own household, and as such, has no hesitation in taking an active (male) role by

threatening to shoot Mario if he comes near her niece again. Mario, by contrast (and to comic effect) is afraid of what she might do to him and hides behind the door to avoid her. **(Love Poems: Sequence 6).**

After Mario and Beatrice's marriage, however, he is officially the 'man of the house.' The reality reveals a different situation - Donna Rosa and Beatrice remain in charge of the restaurant, and Mario ends up working in the kitchen. **(Time Passes: Sequence 8)**

The relationship between Pablo Neruda and his wife Matilde is shown as very loving. A key moment that illustrates this is when Mario arrives at their house to deliver mail and sees them dancing together **(First Meeting: Sequence 2).** Although Pablo Neruda and his wife Matilde share a love of music, books and dancing, Matilde is always seen in a supportive role, as Neruda's work as a poet takes precedence. She is also much younger than the middle-aged poet, and this fascinates Mario, who with Giorgio notes that most of the poet's letters come from female admirers. Giorgio's comment: "Even the women in Chile love poetry," helps Mario decide to learn about poetry from Neruda, so that he may have more luck with the opposite sex. **(First Meeting: Sequence 2).**

When Mario meets Beatrice at the restaurant **(Falling in Love: Sequence 5)** she challenges him to a game of table football and wins easily. She is the one who seems in command of the situation, teasing him with the white ball after the game. He falls in love with her immediately, but at this stage she does not appear interested. Only later, when Mario quotes (Neruda's) poetry to her, does she respond romantically towards him. **(Love Poems: Sequence 6).** After their marriage, Beatrice is protective of Mario, and is angry when he receives no word from Neruda. She insists that their baby will not be called

Pablito, despite Mario's declaration that their son will be named after Neruda. **(Time Passes: Sequence 8)**

### CHILDREN

Children appear only briefly in the film. We see glimpses of them playing outside the restaurant. However, towards the end of the film, after Neruda and his wife return to the island, we see Pablito, Mario and Beatrice's son. He is shown chasing a white ball, just like the one that held such significance for his parents. **(Years Later: Sequence 10)**

### WORK

Even though the film is set in the 1950s, the post-fascist era in Italy does not seem to have brought change to the island - at least not yet. Many people struggle to find work, the majority of the population cannot read and their living conditions are poor. Most of the islanders make their living by fishing. Men spend hours on fishing boats at night, often with little or no reward for their efforts. There is no running water on the island, and people have to make do with a supply brought from the mainland. **(Di Cosimo: Sequence 3).** Even though this is very difficult, people seem powerless to change the situation. When Pablo Neruda asks Mario about the island's lack of running water, and tells him that the islanders should make a stand to change the situation, Mario shrugs as if he feels there is nothing he can do. **(Metaphors: Sequence 4)**

### POWER & CORRUPTION

A possible reason for Mario's apparent apathy is because of institutional corruption, which is shown in the film as being widespread, reflecting the political situation in Italy at that time. Local corrupt businessman Di Cosimo is portrayed as having the most power. He appears to control a number of services and

businesses on the island, most obviously the supply of water. A key moment that illustrates this is when a workman asks permission from him to unload the whole supply and Di Cosimo says yes. **(Di Cosimo: Sequence 3).**

Di Cosimo also runs as a candidate in the General Election as a Christian Democrat, and his slogan is: "Vote Di Cosimo for a new way of life". **(Time Passes: Sequence 8).** During his campaign he promises a new building project to bring running water to the island, a policy, which if implemented, would transform the islanders' lives. Beatrice and Donna Rosa are also offered more work for the restaurant as a result. "Di Cosimo has served us a fortune on a silver platter," Donna Rosa says, as it means that twenty families will be coming to help work on the new water mains **(Time Passes: Sequence 8).** However, shortly after the election is won by the Christian Democrats, the building project stops and Di Cosimo's campaign promises come to nothing.

Mario identifies with the communist cause as a reaction against such corruption. He realises that society needs to be changed to improve life for everyone, not just a minority. Mario admires Pablo Neruda as a champion of the people, and as his friendship with the poet develops, he gains confidence in his views and begins to find the courage to express them. After Neruda has left the island, for example, Mario openly criticises Di Cosimo about the exploitation of the island's fishermen. He is also cynical about Di Cosimo's campaign promises, finding the courage to tell him that he intends to vote Communist in the election. **(Time Passes: Sequence 8).**



**CLASS/RACE**

When Neruda arrives on the island, he is depicted as well-spoken, confident and sophisticated – not at all like the islanders. Neruda’s difference sets him apart, and, ironically, given his communist beliefs, he is treated like royalty and is given his own house, even his own postman. Even though the islanders are depicted in the main as simple folk, who seem powerless to change their situation, some, like Giorgio the postmaster, hold pro-communist views. He describes Neruda as a ‘comrade and brother.’ **(First Meeting: Sequence 2)**. Mario in turn gains more confidence through his friendship with Neruda. However, when Mario reads a newspaper article in which Pablo Neruda is quoted as saying: “I led a happy life among the most simple people,” referring to his time in Italy, Mario is visibly disappointed – perhaps because he feels patronised. **(Time Passes: Sequence 8)**

**RELIGION**

During the film it is clear that the Catholic Church has a major influence on the islanders’ lives. Traditional ceremonies take place that draw on the island’s rich cultural and religious heritage. One example is the candlelit procession of the Madonna statue to the sea, with the statue placed on a small boat in the harbour **(A Letter: Sequence 9)**. However, the parish priest does not seem to be taken too seriously by the islanders, despite his official authority. When Donna Rosa discovers a love note from Mario to Beatrice, she goes to the priest to ask him to read it to her, before complaining to him that Mario is ‘seducing’ her niece with metaphors. Even though we might expect the priest to have higher status in this scene, he seems bewildered by the goings-on, and Donna Rosa does most of the talking. She also takes

matters into her own hands by going to see Neruda and threatening to shoot Mario if he sees her niece again. **(Love Poems: Sequence 6)**. The priest also disapproves of Neruda’s communist background, refusing to accept Neruda as a suitable witness at Mario and Beatrice’s wedding because of the poet’s political beliefs. However, he immediately changes his mind when he sees Neruda praying in his church. **(Love Poems: Sequence 6)**. When Mario and Giorgio are recording the sounds of the church bell for Mario’s poem, the priest discovers them and shoos them away as if they are naughty children. In doing so, he includes his own voice on the recording of the sound poem. **(A Letter: Sequence 9)**

**STUDENT EXPLORATIONS**

- 1) How does the film depict island life? Give some examples of key moments that illustrate the islanders’ lives.
- 2) How does the world of *Il Postino* differ from the cultural contexts/social settings of other comparative texts you have studied? Are there any similarities?
- 3) How does film language reveal how Pablo Neruda is portrayed as different from the islanders? (Refer to costume, characters, camerawork, colour, music)
- 4) Describe the roles of men and women in the film. Are some characters stereotypes, do you think? Give examples. Why do you think the filmmaker has created stereotypical characters? Are there advantages/disadvantages?



# THEMES

## Relationships ; The Power of Poetry<sup>1</sup>

A shared love of poetry forms the basis for the unlikely friendship that develops between the world famous poet and the postman. At first, it appears to be like a teacher/pupil relationship - with Mario an eager student and Neruda his wise teacher. A moment that illustrates this is when Mario asks Neruda about metaphors (**Metaphors: Sequence 4**). During their discussion, Neruda provides Mario with an example of a metaphor: 'The sky weeps'. Mario then asks Neruda to explain a line from one of his poems and Neruda responds by saying that poetry becomes banal when it is explained. He goes on to say, almost as a teaching point: "Better than any explanation is the experience of feelings that poetry can reveal to a nature open enough..."

Later in the same sequence, Mario and Neruda are walking along the seashore together. This scene reveals that Mario has a natural instinct for poetry. Neruda recites a poem he has written about the sea, and Mario responds by saying that as the poem was being read, he felt 'seasick', "like a boat tossing around on the words." Neruda tells Mario that he has just created his own metaphor.

When Mario meets Beatrice, (**Falling in Love: Sequence 5**) he immediately falls in love with her and decides to woo her through poetry. He tells Neruda that the object of his love is called Beatrice, and Neruda immediately says: "Dante." He explains to Mario that Beatrices have been the source of inspiration for many poets in the past, including 13th century Italian poet Dante Alighieri, who composed love poems to one Beatrice Portinari. Hitherto unaware of this, Mario is eager to find out more, and writes the poet's name on his hand.

During Mario's next visit to Neruda's house, (**Love Poems: Sequence 6**) Neruda talks to Mario about why he writes poetry. "To help man in his struggle, to write the poetry of the

mistreated." He also speaks of his experiences with miners in Chile, and describes what one of them had said to him: "Wherever you go, speak of your brother who lives underground in hell." This, he says, was the inspiration for his poem *Canto General*, which, he tells Mario, has been secretly published in Chile, and is selling like hot cakes. The idea that poetry can be an instrument of change in society shows its potential power, and reveals to Mario and the viewer why someone like Neruda is seen as dangerous by the repressive regime in Chile.

Neruda and Mario's visit to the inn is staged to impress Beatrice. Neruda publicly signs Mario's notebook, saying to him: "You have your poetry - now you can write it down," thus giving the impression that Mario is a fellow poet. From this point on, Mario's attempts to woo Beatrice with poetry are successful. She is swept off her feet by what she believes to be his words and falls in love with him. Donna Rosa, however, tells Beatrice: "When a man starts to touch you with his words, he's not far off with his hands." The fact that the words Mario uses are Neruda's is not revealed until Donna Rosa discovers one of his love letters to Beatrice. and shows it to Neruda. (**Love Poems: Sequence 6**).

The scenes that follow are comic because unwittingly Donna Rosa uses rich poetic language herself. She claims, for example, that Mario's mouth "is full of spells," because Mario has 'bewitched' her niece - a particularly apt description. But when she reveals the 'evidence' to Neruda, the poet realises that Mario has been using his poems. The resulting discussion between the poet and the postman reveals a turning point in their relationship. Mario blames Neruda for making him open to falling in love, and Neruda responds that he didn't authorise Mario to 'steal' his poems. But Mario finally asserts himself by saying:

<sup>1</sup> Explanatory Note: I have discussed both themes together in this section as I felt that they were closely linked, i.e. Mario's awakening to poetry could not have happened without the relationship with Neruda. However, as Relationships is also an Ordinary Level Comparative Mode, the accompanying Student Explorations are presented separately.

“Poetry doesn’t belong to those who write it, but those who need it.” In making this statement, Mario has realised what poetry means to him, an important step on his journey to self-realisation through poetry. For Neruda’s part, he concedes the point to Mario, showing respect for his friend’s point of view.

Later, after Neruda’s departure from the island, a letter does arrive from Chile but Mario is disappointed to learn that it is not from Neruda. Instead it has been written by his secretary, and is an impersonal request to return some of the poet’s belongings (**A Letter: Sequence 9**). Earlier, Mario and Giorgio read a newspaper article together in which Neruda describes his time on the island: “I led a happy life among the most simple people,” he is quoted as saying. (**Time Passes: Sequence 8**). Although Mario says nothing about the letter, he remains loyal to Neruda, even when his friends are critical. Donna Rosa quotes a proverb to sum up her view of the poet: “The bird who has eaten flies away.” (**Time Passes: Sequence 8**). But Mario continues to defend Neruda, and even says that it is no surprise that Neruda has forgotten him – implying that he is insignificant compared to the great poet.

As Mario composes a sound poem for his friend Neruda (**A Letter: Sequence 9**) he finally realises that he belongs on the island, that through poetry he has found his purpose in life. This is illustrated by the way he is introduced at the communist demonstration – as ‘Mario Ruoppolo, poet’. Ironically, Neruda knows nothing of this until he returns some years later and discovers that Mario was killed at the demonstration. (**Years Later: Sequence 10**). The closing scene, which shows Neruda looking out to sea and imagining the events leading up to Mario’s death, suggests that the poet recognises and respects Mario as a fellow poet and friend.

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

### Relationships

- 1) How does the friendship between Mario and Neruda develop during the film? Refer to key moments to support your answer.
- 2) What are your impressions of Pablo Neruda from the film? Do you think he genuinely likes and respects Mario? Are there any moments in the film that reveal otherwise?
- 3) Describe how the relationship between Mario and Neruda is shown during the film. Is it shown as nurturing or destructive do you think?
- 4) Compare the way relationships are depicted in *Il Postino* with other comparative texts on your course.

### Poetry

- 1) How does Mario’s understanding of poetry change during the film? Give examples of three key moments that show his developing awareness.
- 2) Donna Rosa, who cannot read, unwittingly uses rich poetic language during some key scenes in the film. Is it significant that her character is portrayed as someone who uses poetic language naturally? What view of poetry does this reveal, do you think?
- 3) The closing credits quote some lines from Poetry, one of Pablo Neruda’s poems. “And it was there poetry found me..” In what ways is poetry shown to be a powerful force in *Il Postino*? Refer to key moments from the film to support your answer.



# VISION AND VIEWPOINT

## General Vision and Viewpoint

In the comparative study, vision & viewpoint refers to how the film is received by the viewer. An overall vision is presented by the film text, offering a particular view of life to which the viewer can respond. In *Il Postino* the island is presented as beautiful, inviting and undeveloped. There are several key scenes in the film that reveal these qualities. Some examples are when Mario and Pablo Neruda walk along the beach discussing poetry together (**Metaphors: Sequence 4**) and at the end of the film as Neruda walks alone on the same beach thinking about Mario (**Years Later: Sequence 10**).

Throughout the film the island's physical beauty and rich cultural traditions and history form a backdrop to the story of the friendship between Neruda and Mario. Examples include the Lenten procession (**A Letter: Sequence 9**) and the film's opening sequence showing fishing boats returning to shore (**Island Life: Sequence 1**). However, the less appealing aspects of life on the island are also depicted, such as the fact that there is no running water available and few employment opportunities other than fishing. So the overall vision is somewhat ambivalent, presenting the island as culturally rich but economically poor. This ambivalence is reflected in Mario's own feelings towards the island. For much of the film, he talks about leaving for a better life elsewhere (**Island Life: Sequence 1 and Time Passes: Sequence 8**) until he realises, after composing the poem for Pablo Neruda, that the island really is his home.

Mario's vision of a better life is exemplified by the arrival of Pablo Neruda, who is portrayed as sophisticated, urbane and different. Set apart from the rest of the population, Neruda lives in a house high up in the island hills. His temporary residence looks fresh, clean and inviting, in contrast to Mario's shabby home by the harbour. When Mario delivers Neruda's mail for the first time, (**First Meeting: Sequence 2**) the postman observes the poet from a careful distance, not venturing beyond the gate to the house.

Neruda, a communist, is seen as a hero to many of the islanders, including Giorgio the postmaster (also a communist) and Mario, whose awakening to poetry is also an intellectual and political awakening. Mario identifies with the communist cause as a reaction against institutional corruption, which in the film is shown through the character of Christian Democrat businessman Di Cosimo. He is portrayed as the villain of the piece.

The film's final sequence (**Years Later: Sequence 10**) moves forward some years, when Neruda and his wife return to the island. They discover that Mario was killed before he had the chance to read his work. The final images of the film, which show Neruda looking out across the sea and imagining Mario's last moments, feel sad and reflective. What may be seen as optimistic, however, is the idea that poetry has the power to change peoples' lives. For Mario, meeting Neruda and discovering poetry undoubtedly changed his life and gave him the means to express himself. Just before the closing credits roll, Pablo Neruda's poem, "Poetry" appears on the screen, beginning with the lines: "And it was at that age... Poetry arrived/ in search of me".

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1) Comment on how the island is portrayed in the film. Which aspects are portrayed positively? Are there any negative aspects of island life shown? Give some examples.
- 2) What is your response to the film's overall view of life? Does it present an optimistic/pessimistic view of life? Support your response with examples from the film.
- 3) What does the closing image of the film convey to the audience, do you think? Suggest an alternative image to end the film. Give reasons for your answer.



# LITERARY GENRE

## Literary Genre

An exploration of literary genre in the comparative study is concerned with how the story is told. In *Il Postino*, the story is Mario's journey towards self-discovery through his friendship with Pablo Neruda. This section will discuss some of the important ways in which the story is told, including its genre; plot structure; varying points-of-view; use of contrast and flashback.

### GENRE

The film is a gentle comedy drama. It can also be described as a 'coming of age' film, because Mario, the main protagonist, struggles to find his place in the world. Many films that fall into this category are concerned with young people, including: *A Room with a View*; *Cinema Paradiso*; *Rebel Without a Cause*; *This Boy's Life* and *10 Things I Hate About You*. However, far from being a teenager on the cusp of adulthood, Mario is a thirty-something adult who, according to his father, needs to grow up. His story unfolds as a journey towards self-discovery through poetry.

### PLOT STRUCTURE

Like other 'coming-of-age' stories, Mario has to struggle through several experiences before he reaches the end of his journey, and as with nearly all stories, the plot can be divided into three distinct sections.

#### Act 1 - Beginning

The main character (Mario) is introduced. He is unhappy with his life on the island, and under pressure from his father he finds a job as postman. The arrival to the island of Pablo Neruda provides the catalyst for change in Mario's life.

#### Act 2 - Middle

Mario begins his journey by making a series of attempts to get to know Neruda and his poetry, and to find his own poetic voice.

He struggles to do this. During his journey he falls in love and uses the poetry of Pablo Neruda to help win Beatrice, but is unable to compose his own poetry.

When Neruda leaves the island, Mario once again feels despondent. His lowest point comes when he receives a letter from Neruda's secretary asking him to return some of the poet's belongings. This impersonal request makes him feel defeated. However, once Mario arrives at Neruda's house he remembers the times they shared together, and finds the recording machine that the poet has left behind. At this high point of dramatic tension Mario makes a final, climactic decision - to compose a sound poem for his friend.

#### Act 3 - Ending

Mario takes action immediately. With Giorgio's help, he records the sounds of the island and describes them, creating his *Song for Pablo Neruda*. In doing so, he finds his poetic voice and reaches the end of his journey towards artistic self-realisation. There is also a postscript when Neruda returns to the island some years later. He learns that Mario is dead, and listens to the sound poem that Mario composed especially for him. There is a flashback sequence as Neruda imagines what happened to Mario on the day of the demonstration.

### NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE/POINT OF VIEW

In *Il Postino*, the story is told in the third person. What we see and hear on screen has been carefully selected and presented to us by director Michael Radford. His vision is based on the film's screenplay, which has been adapted from the original novel.

However, during the film we also see events from different characters' points of view. Mario, for example, as the central character, is framed by the camera in particular ways, and

events are often seen through his eyes. An example is when Mario meets Neruda for the first time (**First Meeting: Sequence 2**). Point-of-view (POV) shots are used as Mario arrives at the house and observes Neruda and his wife Matilde. Other characters' points of view are also shown during the film. In **Time Passes: Sequence 8** when Mario has not heard from Neruda, Donna Rosa quotes a proverb to sum up her cynical view of the poet: "The bird who has eaten flies away."

#### Film Language

As viewers we 'read' films using our understanding of film language<sup>2</sup> and the following film codes: Visual (Image); Oral (Dialogue); Aural (Sound); Symbol (Props, Costume, Colour, Interior/Exterior etc). An example of how we can 'read' a scene in this way is shown in **Love Poems: Sequence 6** when Donna Rosa arrives at Neruda's house to complain about Mario. At the beginning Neruda and his wife are dancing outside. The camera shots reveal the beauty and brightness of their surroundings. The atmosphere, however, changes when Donna Rosa arrives, and she and the poet go inside the house to discuss her complaint. The dark, muted colours of the interior reflect the confined, restrictive atmosphere created by her presence, in contrast to the carefree scene moments earlier.

#### Opening Scenes

As the opening credits roll (**Island Life: Sequence 1**) we see fishermen coming to shore. The exterior location is beautifully shot, with the fishermen bringing in their boats in the traditional way, as they have done for generations. Mario is at home, waiting for his father's return and also looking closely at a postcard from America. Home is shabby and dark, sparsely furnished. A close up shot of the postcard shows a bright, shiny American car that contrasts starkly with Mario and his father's plain surroundings. Mario seems unhappy with his life on the island and his

father tells him to grow up and find a job. This short opening sequence reveals Mario's conflict, which he will have to solve. He must find his place in the world, but does not know how.

#### Closing Scenes

The film makes use of a flashback sequence (**Years Later: Sequence 10**) when Neruda imagines what happened to Mario on the day of the demonstration. As Neruda walks alone on the beach, the film cuts to black and white scenes of the demonstration. A poignant image towards the end of this flashback sequence is Mario's poem, written on a sheet of paper. The film shows the paper falling, in slow motion, to the ground, symbolising Mario's death. After the flashback sequence, the film cuts back to Neruda, who is standing alone on the seashore, still imagining the sounds of the demonstration. The camera pulls away from the shore into a wide shot so that the figure of the poet becomes smaller and smaller, dwarfed by the vastness of the cliffs and the sea.

#### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

- 1) Choose 3 key moments from the film that highlight important steps in Mario's journey. Give reasons for your choices.
- 2) As viewers, we 'read' films using our understanding of film language. Choose 1 or 2 key moments from the film and show how *Il Postino's* camerawork, music, characters, costume, colour and symbolism help to tell the story.

<sup>2</sup>(See *Strictly Ballroom Study Guide Appendix E* for a detailed glossary on film language)



# SEQUENCES FOR STUDY

## 1. ISLAND LIFE

- An Italian island, 1952.
- As the opening credits roll, we see fishermen coming to shore.
- Mario Ruoppolo, a fisherman's son, is reading a postcard from America. His father tells him to get a job or go to America.
- Mario cycles to the cinema and watches a newsreel of exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's arrival in Italy.
- Mario applies for the job of postman and discovers that he only has one delivery address - to Pablo Neruda.

## 2. FIRST MEETING

- Mario cycles up to Neruda's house to deliver his mail and observes the poet and his wife Matilde.
- Mario and postmaster Giorgio discuss Neruda's fan mail from women.
- Mario cycles to the poet's house and asks him to sign his book.
- At home, Mario looks at where Chile is on a map of South America.

## 3. DI COSIMO

- In the town. A workman asks Mr Di Cosimo if he can unload all the water from the water truck, and Di Cosimo gives his permission.
- Donna Rosa, who has just been widowed, thanks Di Cosimo for the wreath he sent. He tells her to vote for him at the next election.

## 4. METAPHORS

- Mario and Neruda discuss poetry. Neruda tells Mario that a poet needs to have an open nature.
- At their next meeting they discover that Neruda is in the running for the Nobel prize for Literature.
- Walking on the beach they discuss the island's lack of running water.
- Mario describes one of Neruda's poems and the poet tells him he has invented his own metaphor.

## 5. FALLING IN LOVE

- At the restaurant Mario sees a beautiful girl, Beatrice playing table football. They play a game together, and she wins.
- Mario tells Neruda that he has fallen in love with Beatrice. He asks the poet to compose a love poem for her. Neruda refuses.
- Mario tries, without success, to compose a poem for Beatrice.
- At the restaurant Mario tells Beatrice: "Your smile spreads like a butterfly."

## 6. LOVE POEMS

- Neruda gives Mario a notebook and tells him why he writes poetry.
- At the restaurant, and in Beatrice's presence Neruda signs Mario's notebook with a personal message.
- Mario meets Beatrice by the seashore. She later tells her aunt that Mario has spoken poetry to her.
- Donna Rosa discovers one of Mario's love notes to her niece and asks the priest to read it to her.
- Donna Rosa goes to Neruda's house and complains to him about Mario. She shows a love note to Neruda, who realises that Mario has used his poems to woo Beatrice.
- Mario pleads with Neruda for help. But Neruda replies that he did not give Mario permission to steal his poems.
- Beatrice sneaks out to find Mario. They kiss.
- Later, they go to the priest to arrange their wedding and ask if Neruda can be their witness. The priest agrees after he sees Neruda praying.

## 7. MARIO AND BEATRICE'S WEDDING

- Neruda receives a telegram telling him his exile is over. He reads one of his poems for the newlyweds, then announces that he will be returning to Chile.
- Neruda asks Mario to look after his belongings until he returns. They say goodbye.

## 8. TIME PASSES

- An election slogan reads: "Vote Di Cosimo for a new way of life"
- Di Cosimo promises building projects for the island.
- Mario reluctantly agrees to work in the restaurant kitchen.
- Mario and Giorgio read an article in which Neruda is quoted as saying that he led "a happy life among the most simple people" during his exile in Italy.
- The Christian Democrats win the election, and soon afterwards the building projects are abandoned.
- Beatrice announces that she is pregnant.

## 9. A LETTER

- During the Lenten procession Mario receives a letter from Neruda's secretary asking him to return some belongings.
- Mario visits Neruda's old house. He plays a record and remembers Neruda and his wife dancing together. He also listens to the voice recording that he made with Neruda.
- Mario decides to compose a sound poem for Pablo Neruda. He records different sounds from the island and describes them.

## 10. YEARS LATER

- Pablo Neruda and his wife Matilde return to the island. They enter the restaurant and see a small boy, Pablito, chasing a ball.
- The child's mother, Beatrice recognises them. She explains that Mario was killed during a communist demonstration days before Pablito was born.
- Beatrice plays Mario's 'Song for Pablo Neruda' on the recording machine.
- Afterwards, Neruda walks alone on the beach.
- Flashback scene in b/w. Mario has been asked to read out his poem to the crowd. The riot police begin attacking the demonstrators. We see Mario trying to find his way through the crowds, but his paper falls to the ground and he is lost.
- Neruda stands alone on the beach, imagining the events leading up to Mario's death.



# KEY MOMENTS

## KEY MOMENT/ MODE OF COMPARISON

## FILM LANGUAGE

## WHAT DOES THE SCENE CONVEY TO THE AUDIENCE?

### Island Life: Sequence 1

Mario and his father at home  
*Social setting/cultural context*  
*Theme: Relationships*

Mario and his father are framed in a medium shot, seated at a table at home. Close up shot of postcard shows a bright, shiny American car which contrasts starkly with the mise-en-scène of the shabby surroundings.

When Mario shows off the postcard from his friends in America, he seems unhappy with his life on the island. His excuse for not going out on the fishing boat is met with a knowing look from his father, who tells him: 'You're not a kid anymore'.

### First Meeting: Sequence 2

Mario delivers Neruda's mail for the first time  
*Theme: Class*  
*Relationships*  
*Vision & viewpoint*

Mario's POV shots of the house, Neruda and Matilde. As Neruda and Mario exchange a few words, the camera cuts back and forth from positions behind Neruda, then Mario in close-up shots, revealing how each character is responding to the other.

Mario arrives at Neruda's house to deliver the mail, but is careful to remain outside the gates. He seems in awe of the poet as they exchange a few words. His outsider status is emphasised in this scene, and he seems tongue-tied.

### Di Cosimo: Sequence 3

A workman asks Di Cosimo if he can unload the water from the truck  
*Cultural context/Social setting*  
*Vision & viewpoint*

Mise-en-scène - Di Cosimo is dressed more smartly than the locals, as he wears a light coloured suit with a hat and scarf. A coat is draped over his shoulder.

Di Cosimo's presence in this scene reveals his status on the island. The workman who asks permission to unload the water truck shows Di Cosimo's importance. The presence of a 'minder' with the businessman hints at his links to corruption/organised crime.

### Falling in Love: Sequence 5

Mario meets Beatrice for the first time  
*Theme: Love; Relationships*

Mise-en-scène - Mario at the restaurant, framed in a wide shot across table football table. MCU of Mario's reactions to Beatrice, plus POV shots of her, opposite him and teasing him with the white ball.

Mario is enthralled by Beatrice. She is depicted as being in control of the situation, leaving Mario speechless. This is an important turning point for him. He has fallen in love and he needs poetry to help him 'woo' Beatrice.

### Love Poems: Sequence 6

Donna Rosa arrives at Neruda's house and complains about Mario 'seducing her niece with metaphors'  
*Theme: Power of poetry*  
*Relationships*  
*Cultural Context/Social Setting*

Neruda and his wife Matilde are dancing to music on the record player, which they turn off as soon as Donna Rosa approaches. Film soundtrack changes, reflecting the shift in mood.

Donna Rosa arrives at the house. Mario hides behind a door to avoid her. She complains to Neruda about how Mario has seduced Beatrice with his use of metaphors. The scene is comic as Donna Rosa also uses poetic language such as metaphors and similes herself.



## KEY MOMENTS



### KEY MOMENT

### FILM LANGUAGE

### WHAT DOES THE SCENE CONVEY TO THE AUDIENCE?

#### Love Poems: Sequence 6

Mario and Neruda discuss who 'owns' poetry.

*Relationships*

*Theme: Friendship; Poetry*

Much of the scene takes place in one continuous shot, which frames both characters on either side of the doorway. Neruda is dressed in a white suit, Mario in a dark well-worn suit. He sits with his knees and feet turned in, in contrast to Neruda's more open stance.

After Donna Rosa has left, Mario and Neruda sit outside, some distance apart. This 'gap' emphasises their different views, and could also reflect their unequal, teacher/pupil relationship. When Neruda tells Mario that he has been 'stealing his poems'. Mario tells the poet 'Poetry belongs to those who need it'. Neruda concedes the point.

#### Years later: Sequence 10

Pablo Neruda imagines the day of the demonstration

*Vision & Viewpoint*

*Literary Genre*

As Neruda looks out to sea, he is framed in a wide shot. There is a flashback in b/w which reveals what may have happened at the demonstration. The film ends with the camera pulling away from shore, so that gradually Neruda's figure becomes smaller and more distant, dwarfed by the vastness of the cliffs and sea.

Neruda remembers his friend Mario and imagines what happened to him on the day of the demonstration. Like Neruda, we also imagine the events. The violence of the demonstration contrasts with the peaceful setting of the island's shore.