

# A LESSON IN LOVE 1954

Ingmar Bergman

## OVERVIEW

Bergman's versatility of theme bewilders us—can the same person have created *A Lesson in Love* or *Waiting Women*, and on the other hand *Virgin Spring* or *The Seventh Seal*? Can the same producer who created romantic comedies have taken us to the horrors of rape, the chaotic breakdown of social order or the bony ruthlessness of death? The answer is of course yes, for Bergman is never totally light or heavy. His romantic comedies, like *A Lesson in Love*, walk directly into the paradoxes and spiritual discomforts of relationships, while Bergman's heavier works—think of *Persona*, here—are masterpieces of stunning cinematography, and in fact of light and shadow interplay, which arouse our senses and play out ideas which are as brilliant as the love transecting a musical comedy.

In the present film, the archetypal issues of commitment in love, especially in marriage, are played out across actors who have sharp edges of individuality, the tweak of uniqueness—look closely at the razor edges of the thin lips of the gynecologist, the same actor (Gunnar Björstrand) who played the Professor's son in *Wild Strawberries*; or at the tightly packed narrow face of Eva Dahlbeck, with its embedded pixie smile; at these two faces so distinct you feel sure you would recognize them anywhere in a crowd. In Shakespeare's comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Hermia and Lysander) or *The Tempest* (Miranda and Ferdinand) one lives the distinctiveness of such creations, while taking full pleasure from the cross section, in them, of universal with specific.

## STORY

**Background** Wit, flashbacks, sudden digressions, pure play; all these marks of the inventive comedian sprout here from the initial base of a gynecologist's office. Bergman's insistence, that the cinema is basically a study of the human face, not only reminds us of Goethe's observation that 'I am right in the study of the human form, which is the non plus ultra of all human knowledge and action.' There is nothing that the gynecologist will learn or know, in this serious farce, that is not implicit in the way he crosses his office, speaks with his nurse, or attempts to convince a lovely patient, who has made an appointment with him simply out of love, that having an affair is a dead end.

**Reconciliation?** We know we are in for a romp, with the high spirited antics by which David's patient eventually teases him into a kiss into which he puts all his frustrations. David, essentially disinclined to break his sixteen year old marriage, goes back to his wife Marianne with a fresh spirit, and attempts to talk her into rethinking and reconciliation. She, however, is equally tired of their relationship, and has decided to take off for Kopenhagen, to join up with a former lover, from whom David snatched her away at the beginning of time, when the story of these characters begins.

**Daughter** The gravity underlying the antic events of this film gets underlined in a fascinating talk between David and his fifteen-year old daughter, who feels abandoned by mom and unsure of dad, and naturally wants to know whether dad is looking for a divorce. The girl is hurt because she observes that some of her girl friends are changing physically into young grown women—wear lipstick and dresses instead of sweaters and jeans—and accordingly pay less attention to her. She is also anxious to know whether her parents are going to continue to support and guide her. Or will they leave her? We watch dad's face deepening, as he starts to deal with the consequences of his own break away from the marital commitment. Again, as at the beginning, it is the face that carries the entire history.

**Brawl** It is at this point appropriate, for we know it is first in the thought process of David, to go back to the starting point, in the film, of the events that would link their way up into the present in which we find David pacing from one appointment to another in his gynecological office. We are fifteen years in the

past, at a wedding ceremony to join in matrimony a raunchy sculptor, 'best friend' to David, to a lady whom David is about to woo and take away from Carl-Adam, right there in a brawling bar scene which sees David knocked out cold, the drunken groom thoroughly knocked around by flying bar stools, and then a convivial high spirited wedding breakfast among the three of them, before David returns home to his new wife and his practice.

**Interludes** The flashback technique, by which Bergman thickens his accounts, is used generously in the present film, as it stops along the historical way to 'thicken' the picture of the past. (The future for David we don't know, although the prognosis for the marital couple is excellent, now that the sixteen year itch has been scratched.) It is as though, when we have completed watching the film, we will know what we are looking at; as, when I look at an old friend today, I am seeing him as a cross section of histories, and entering that profundity of the human 'Gestalt,' which Goethe discussed above.

**Ride** Bergman is generous with flashbacks as he constructs the present of *A Lesson in Love*. In this film in which Bergman cuts loose in many antic ways—the brawl is where we start—there are en route touchdown points, like the unexpected marriage of Marianne and David, or like an idyllic day of excursion, that takes David, Marianne, and David's parents out into the country for a ride. Bergman's attention, to ways of thickening the temporal narrative, brackets a scene, involving David's professor dad and mom, David's wife and daughter, and a classic old vehicle which overheats shortly after departure, and has to be replaced by a brace of horses and a hansom cab.

**Long Underwear** Our takeaway from this interlude, as it builds into our experience of the present, is to see it as a notch or moment in time. We have seen David in a brawl; now we see him in a horse drawn carriage, rolling along down a country lane with his Professor dad, who has a few minutes earlier satisfied the outing party's harmony, by agreeing to his wife's demand that he should go back into the house and put on long underwear before starting out on the excursion. What is the significance of this interlude? It underlines the film's intention to remain close to the everyday.

**Reconciliation** The flashback that left us for the brawl in Copenhagen, and that seemed to announce the absolute present of the initial scene, in the gynecology office, itself becomes a new past at the end of the film, when David's desperation will result in the return of the married couple to one another. What else could possibly have come, of the marital brouhaha that the sixteen year itch has compounded? Bergman, who knew Shakespeare inside out, had to have known how cunning a master he had there, in the art of making it all work out, where the 'all' means the rich stew of temporality, which is always avid for more of itself.

## THEMES

**Itchiness.** When we first meet David and Marianne they are in their sixteenth year of marriage, and are tiring of their routine. They have had their children, heard one another's jokes too many times, and are ready to graze in new pastures. As a gynecologist David has temptations to deal with, and one of those turns into his mistress.

**Riotousness.** Among the surprising resources, of Bergman the comic genius, is his skill at lapsing into slapstick. David's move in Copenhagen, to break up the marriage of the union of his old best friend, the sculptor Carl Adam, with David's wife who used to be Carl-Adam's fiancée, sets off a riot of punches, hard liquor chug-a-lugs, and broken pottery which is topped off with an extraordinary entente cordiale among the three principal battlers, who take off in their hansom cab for a jovial champagne breakfast.

**Tension.** The initial scenes of the film, in which the professional David is seeing patients, shows us his mistress to be torturing him with the request for a kiss—which would not rest at that—and David's awkward efforts to discourage the minx-like seductress, who knows she will get him in the end.

**Sadness.** David and Marianne's daughter is the most deeply wounded figure in this film's carnival of vulnerable and ultimately light-hearted performers. Facing the fact that her friends find boys more

interesting than her, and are deserting her, and that her parents are deserting her for their own reasons, which she doesn't understand, she feels abandoned and alone, and makes this clear to her dad.

## CHARACTERS

**David.** David is a respected gynecologist, who—like his wife—is approaching the time for the marital itch. He has been married for sixteen years, is looking around, and finds himself surrounded by lovely women, some of whom are pursuing him. His recourse is to get out of town for a break, but by coincidence he finds himself in the same railway car with his wife, with whom he shares a good kiss, some chat for old time's sake, and no encouragement for the couple's future. By a circuitous path, studded with obstacles, he finds himself back to the marital commitment from which he started.

**Marianne.** Marianne is David's longtime (sixteen years) wife, who responds to his midlife crisis by reconnecting with her old fiancé, now in Copenhagen. She finds herself there, at the center of a party to reunite her with that fiancé, when her husband David appears, eager to break up the reunion. A hilarious and riotous brawl ensues, ending after all in a threesome breakfast, from which she will begin her return to her marriage with David.

**Carl-Adam** is the pudgy and pugnacious sculptor who was once Marianne's fiancé, to whom she returns in a first reaction of revenge against her husband David, after he breaks from their marriage.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**David.** David is a gynecologist who is entering his midlife crisis. He has been married for sixteen years, and is feeling himself drawn to other women. Taking a train to get out of town, he finds himself, by coincidence, in the same car with his wife, a situation symbolical, as it were, of the fact they are not destined for an absolute separation from one another. They will meet later at a riotous party in Copenhagen, which will ultimately serve as a turning point for their return back to one another. We will see David in a variety of lights, on a country excursion with his parents, 'in the old days,' and in intimate talk with his teen age daughter, whose parents and friends are no longer protecting her; he returns, eventually, to the commitments he opened the film with, but now reaching those tacit understandings, with his wife, that reflect her sense of being an independent person.

### Illustrative moments

**Professional.** We first see David in his office, dealing with patients in his gynecological practice. He is busy, efficient, and convincingly professional, though between his tight thin lips he conceals a trace of a smile, which is part of his personal identity.

**Paternal.** Though caught up in his own anxieties and frustrations, David makes an effort to interact with his frustrated teen aged daughter. He is humane and understanding, though his capacity to respond is limited.

**Antic.** In the Copenhagen brawl, where David confronts his former best friend, and his own wife, who is leaving him, David is able to cut loose, make out, dance, and throw punches with the best of them. That's where we touch base again with the charming smile that creased his lips in scene one of the film.

**Cunning.** It is authentic David, to enjoy the trick by which he outbets his fellow passenger on the train to Malmo. The other guy bets he can win a kiss from the pretty lady in the corridor. David takes the bet, and goes into the corridor for his smacker. He scores, right on her lips. The bet loser cannot know that the lovely lady was David's wife, who was a fellow train passenger, by pure coincidence.

## Supporting characters

### MARIENANNE

**Character** Marianne is the sixteen years wife of the gynecologist, David, who has recently been hit by the sixteen year itch, with the help of a very persistent patient. Struck by desire for the new, he takes off for a new girlfriend in Copenhagen, the scene of an earlier affair in which he had wrested the same Marianne away from a mutual friend, Carl-Adam, a very in you face sculptor. Little does David understand that Marianne has pre emptied his action, and has herself taken off for Denmark, to meet up again with Carl-Adam. He is in particular stunned to find himself, in the train compartment to Copenhagen, with Marianne herself, and to be treated, in a highly slapstick set of coincidences, to a corridor kiss from her, which begins the process by which the momentarily tired couple find one another again.

#### Illustrative moments.

**Tough.** David and Marianne have gotten out of touch with one another. He fails to realize, accordingly, that she is as tired of him as he is of her. Unknown to David, Marianne is off on a fling of her own, by train to a rendez vous, and quite ready to reach out for her own satisfaction, which he is not providing.

**Coy.** In the train compartment, fleeing to a new love, Marianne steps into the corridor. She knows that one of her fellow compartment passengers is none other than her husband, and is quite willing to lure the doctor into the corridor behind her, to snatch a kiss and win a bet—from a fellow passenger.

**Remembering.** Marianne, we realize, is remembering the brawl which broke out fifteen years previously in Kopenhagen, when David snatched her away from her fiancé Carl-Adam. When she embarks on her revenge trip to Denmark, she knows that no source of memory could prove more painful to David, than the memory of a former triumph which is now slipping away from him.

**Impulsive.** Marianne's marriage to David, square in the midst of a celebration of her afficement to Carl-Adam, was a fifteen years In the past reminder, of Marianne's central trait of impulsiveness. She was herself the passive factor in the guys' contest over her, and yet, in the way she maintained at least civility, in the breakfast transfer of her own self from Carl-Adam to David, she instinctively factored in a necessary degree of good humor and tolerance.

### CARL-ADAM

**Character** Carl-Adam is the former fiancé of Marianne, and rival of David for the 'hand of Marianne.' At the time of the Copenhagen brawl and brunch, when David prevailed over Carl-Adam, the latter was an active sculptor in Copenhagen, and a take it as it comes brawler and boozier. He was at the same time a good sport—he tolerates losing his fiancée to his best friend—and man enough to go out for a celebratory brunch with the guy who is now going to wed his (Carl-Adam's) fiancée. The sculptor's willingness to go with the flow of life, to brawl or drink it up as it comes, spotlights an antic talent, in Bergman, which comes out rarely—his male figures are largely stark and trapped. (Exceptions, that show the Shakespearean daring in Bergman, might be Jof (in *The Seventh Seal*), or Turbal (in *The Magician*). A private example of the Carl-Adam type, dear to this note-taker, is Somerset Maugham's Thorpe Athelny, in *Of Human Bondage*. A family man, compassionate, noisy, endearing, and willing to banter or slug as the occasion requires.