

VIRGIN SPRING 1960

Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)

OVERVIEW

Virgin Spring is a revenge drama, into which Bergman introduces themes that are common features of his work: presentation and critique of religious values; deep personal suffering; the meaningfulness of violence; the power of nature, to create a meaningful background for human events. We are in the brooding mediaeval world of *The Seventh Seal*, with its dark heavy natural background, and its susceptibility to visions—either pagan, as in the bridgekeeper's seeing of the unseen, or Christian. (At that historical period two religious forces are posed in struggle throughout the pagan north.) We are prepared for outbursts of passion and anger as dark as the landscape.

STORY

The story of *Virgin Spring* is simple but powerful. We are in mediaeval Norway, poised between pagan and Christian religious practices; between Jesus Christ and the Norse gods, in this instance Odin. Our story involves a town dwelling family, the father of which is Christian, as are his other family members, except for the handmaiden, Ingeri, who is a worshipper of Odin. The family daughter is assigned the job of taking candles to the church for the Virgin's feast day, a considerable journey on horseback, over isolated country paths and through forests. Karin, excited about the journey, pleads with her very loving mother to permit her to wear her most beautiful finery for the trip; she asks Ingeri to join her on the trip. Ingeri agrees, though there has been some friction between the two women, Ingeri—already pregnant—having taken more chances with boys than has Karin.

On the way through the forest, the girls are separately waylaid, Ingeri nearly falling a rape victim to a troll like old man living in isolation in the woods, while Karin becomes victim to a desperate and much worse fate. She is met by three forest goatherds, dangerous and retarded shrimps, who assail her brutally, raping her and eventually leaving her dead, unburied in the midst of the forest. The primitive murderers are observed in their sadistic behavior, by Ingeri, who has crept up through the forest, in the aftermath of her escape from the wild troll. She is who eventually explains to Karin's father what happened to Karin.

Fate and coincidence determine the frightful denouement of the narrative. On the bitterly cold night of the rape and murder of Karin, a crew of vagabonds—they are the primitive murderers—come to the strongly and comfortably built house of Tore, and beg for shelter for the night. After discussion with his family, Tore agrees to let the trio shelter in a fire warmed enclosure near the house. The trio has no idea, at this point, that the house to which they have come belongs to the family of the girl they have murdered.

Before lying down to sleep, one of three killers show Tore and his wife a beautiful garment that—they say—belonged to their sister before she died, and that they would like to sell. Karin's mother takes the dress to show to her husband, who immediately realizes that it is the garment of his dead daughter. The most dreadful of revenge tragedies is set to kick in.

In the following scenes, Tore massacres the three killers, including the young boy who was hardly a participant, then rushes to recover the body of Karin, which still lies unburied in the woods. In the final scenes of the film, Tore leads his family out into the forest where they say last rites for their daughter, and promise to erect a church on the spot where they are putting her to rest. At just that spot, a bubbling brook suddenly pours forth, a spring of holy flowing water, by which to know the heavenly power of the young woman's sacrifice.

Father's love Tore is mock severe with his young daughter, as he and his wife see the girl (and the servant) off on horse through the woods, to deliver candles to the Pastor. Tore threatens her with mock punishments if she strays from the path, or is late, and the two of them, father and daughter, exchange fanciful tales of knights and ladies in courtly times. His bony face, with its sharply pointed beard, creases around an impish smile when he is around his daughter, and she responds adoringly. We can see that, in the life of hard work, constant piety, and rough conditions, that make up Tore's existence, this young girl is the one outlet for the man's emotions.

Discovery Not long after the murder of Tore's daughter, the goatherds, driven by hunger and cold, mistakenly stop at Tore's manor. He offers them shelter and the goatherds are eating supper together with the family. They have first revealed who they are, by trying to sell Tore and his wife the beautiful clothes which they stole from his daughter, after killing her. At this point Tore knows who the guys are, but he holds his fury, like a truly vengeful person. Tore's wife locks the hall door so that the herders can not get out. Tore is building fury inside himself, and with every moment of film time we feel him about to enter the door into the killing field loft.

Revenge Bergman indulges often in brutal violence, and is never more visual and tangible than in *Virgin Spring*. Tore slaughters the two goatherds with a rare violence, the first with a ritual-handled dagger, the second by an up close choking that has—in the history of responses to this film—equalled the daughter's rape for audience protests, and moralists' despair. Especially in the scene of choking, the camera lens brings the audience close up to the neck of the expiring rapist, and then backs off slowly, letting us see the sense of satisfaction on Tore's face. Finally Tore gives himself the unrestrained pleasure of smashing the youngest goatherd, who was not part of the rape, and who has gained some sympathy from us, against the wall, leaving him a dead inert heap.

Repentance After these killings, and after recovering the body of his daughter, with the help of the servant Ingeri, Tore—with his back to the camera, and his arms outstretched to God—promises to God that he will construct, for him, a large church out of stone and mortar—most regional churches were wooden—and that he will make it with his own hands. This promise comes as Tore begins to be flooded with a sense of the enormity of the killings he has just committed, and the far more painful murder of his daughter. He is reaching out to whatever source of peace he can believe in. His anger, understandably, has been too much for him, and he realizes the fatal consequences of acting without control.

THEMES

Piety. The family of Tore is deep in their Christian faith, and scornful toward the pagan indigenes with whom they are surrounded. Prayer and rite govern their actions, and the construction of a church is the most fitting action with which to honor the murdered Karin. Christian and pagan pieties are at war with each other in this culture.

Vengeance. Tore himself is deeply Christian and yet—in one spirit of the times—furious in his vengeance, of course especially when the murder of his daughter is involved. His return murder, of his daughter's killers, is exceptionally ruthless; his wife herself drawing back from the hands-on brutality with which Tore deals with the hapless young boy, whom he slaughters by throwing him against the wall. Homer, of course, drives a comparable fury through the might of Odysseus, as he faces Penelope's suitors for the last time.

Primitive. We see, from the 'woodland beasts' that waylay both Ingeri and Karin, that the backwoods were immensely dangerous in the mediaeval mind. Tore himself is a town dweller, and a man of 'good sense,' but the pagan world surrounding him is portrayed as little more than bestial.

Innocence. Karin, who is to be slaughtered, is the perfection of innocence, which illustrates itself through her as a sublime virtue. She is totally and simply joyful, when her mother allows her to wear her favorite clothes to church. She trusts the three wild primitives for she has never encountered viciousness.

CHARACTERS

Tore is a prosperous town dweller in, say, 13th century Sweden. He is pious, family loving, withdrawn, but in the end capable of violent revenge.

Tore's wife is crazy about her daughter, serious, and a responsible householder.

Karin is Tore's daughter; she is sweet, girlish, and pious, and above all innocent toward the viciousness in the world.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

TORE

Tore is a prosperous, god-fearing town dweller, who lives in comfort with his wife and daughter, and with the family servant, Ingeri. He is a proud and reserved man, his thoughts often on god and duty, and his particular soul mate is his young daughter, with whom he shares his fancy and imagination. One spring day he makes the fatal mistake of sending his daughter, on horse and with the servant, to take candles to the church. He is soon to be ripped apart, by the news of what happened that day, that his daughter is raped and killed by two no-good goatherds. When these same goatherds unknowingly come to Tore's manor for shelter, a few nights later, Tore learns who they are and stabs them to death with exceptional brutality. Not much later, having discovered the body of his own murdered daughter, he vows to God that he will build Him a noble church, on the spot where his daughter died. He will in that way show his repentance for his terrible anger.

Parallels Sigrid Undset's three volume *Kristin Lavrasnsdatter* (1920-22) is a potent evocation of imagined life in Norway in the 13th century, and touches many of the same themes as Bergman's *Virgin Spring*: the conflict between paganism and Christianity; the violence latent in daily life; the intensity of passion and hatred. For an unbearable depiction of rape and humiliation in film—parallel to the scene of Karin's rape—one might turn back to *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, released as a film in 1972. The rape of Bobby, a porcine businessman, by a backwoods hillbilly, is as distressing as that of Karin. It makes us watch in terror.

Illustrative moments

Paternal. Tore is deeply fond of his teen age daughter, Karin. He is willing to let her ride off to the church, to deliver candles, but he is anxious. His fury at the rape and murder of his daughter must be understood as a violent expression of extreme love for the girl.

Generous. When the three rough characters from the woods arrive, to request shelter for the night, Tore grants their request. He seems a god fearing man, with a respect for his fellow humans. But he can only be pushed so far.

Pious. Tore is reverent and concentrated when it comes to prayer or attention to God's will. He respects guests, if possible, and he both feeds and prays for them. His piety is responsible for his decision to let his daughter travel alone, on horseback, to deliver candles to the church.

Ritual. Tore is careful to prepare himself for the act of vengeance against his daughter's killers. He cuts down a sapling, for fresh branches with which to scourge himself, he bathes ritually, and the leads his family caravan, like a furious priest himself, to a clearing which will be appropriate for the construction of a church.

Violent. Tore is violent as only a loving father can be. He savors every moment of his furious revenge against the primitive killers. He sees his revenge assume form, as an ultimate praise of God, and he goes so far as to build a church on the power of his drive to vengeance.

Discussion questions

Ingeri, the servant of the family, calls on Odin, the pagan pre-Christian god, to help her. What is the role of paganism in this film? How does the pagan-Christian conflict play out in the story?

When young Karin's body is found, it is lifted from the ground, and a stream springs up from under it. Is this to be interpreted as a miracle? Broadly speaking, what is Bergman's attitude toward Christianity in this film?

What kind of sympathy does Tore's wife feel for the youngest of the three goatherds, who was not part of the rape, and who tried to bury Karin? Why does she feel this sympathy?