

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Effi Briest 1974

Werner Fassbinder (1945-1982)

Based on the novel of the same name by Theodor Fontane (1894-5)

STORY

Setting *Effi Briest* seems at first to be a tale of a fallen woman, who becomes the victim of social strictures, narrow mindedness, and a degree of prurience, which promotes an unhealthy psychological attitude toward the woman. Elements of Emma Bovary and Hester Prynne intrude here, even perhaps of Medea—except that Medea fights back, with a vengeance. In the end, however, the tragedy—of a repressed female life—proves to be the tragedy of a society and not simply of an individual, for Fassbinder, in reworking this fictional masterpiece of late 19th century Prussia, is dealing with the entire issue of society and its limits. He is in doing this working out from the issues intensely current in the Germany of his time.

Problem A Prussian gentleman in his forties falls for the attractive young (17 years old) daughter of a prominent local family, who after deliberation agree to the marriage. A social upgrade would follow, for the girl, and the girl's family could enjoy the inclusion of an up and coming bureaucrat in their family tree. For all we can tell, the groom is a sensitive man, attracted perhaps more to Effi's mother than to her, but eminently respectable. What proves disastrous, in this formula, is the strictures which society uses to bind the new couple. While the age difference between the two might have been negotiable, it proves unnegotiable under the circumstances, which are that Baron Innstetten's social and professional position requires an absolutely irreproachable lifestyle, while his wife is drawn into an affair which, at least in Innstetten's mind, compromises the marriage's respectability.

Reaction It is not until six years after the actual affair that Innstetten discovers what has happened. (In the meantime, Effi has given birth to a daughter, settled for a prosperous if dull marriage, and long lost any interest in her earlier lover, whom she didn't love anyway.) One day her husband, riffling through the drawer of her sewing table, discovers a pile of love letters which Effi had written, six years previously, to her lover. Innstetten's reaction to this discovery is perhaps the most telling event in the film. He calls in his adviser and best friend, to discuss his course of action. His friend recommends forgetting the whole matter, but after much reflection Innstetten discovers, deep in his heart—which we might translate as 'social consciousness'—that he cannot 'forget the whole matter.' The universe is out of adjustment, in a manner Innstetten, an intelligent but conformist person, cannot fathom. (Perhaps even Effi, who is a member of the same society, and anything but a rebel, would also have been unable to fathom.)

Solution The solution, for Innstetten, is to challenge Effi's former lover to a duel, which he does—and to be immediately accepted, by the same social norms that led to the challenge. The dueling death of Effi's former lover sets in motion the formal machinery by which Innstetten banishes his wife, cuts her off from her daughter's affections—he keeps Effi apart from her daughter for three years, after the duel—and finally brings Effi to 'death by a broken heart.'

Retrospect The tragedy of Effi, which is implicit from the film's outset, when Effi's dad opines that Innstetten would 'have been better off with Effi's mother than with Effi,' is if anything less extraordinary than that of her husband, whose compliance with society's requirements is deeply compulsive. Effi's broken heart cannot hurt less than Innstetten's enchainment in a role which has surrendered all vitality to social demands.

CHARACTERS

Effi is the bride of Baron Innstetten, a prosperous state councilor twenty years her senior. After marriage, her challenge is to adjust to the square world of Prussian bureaucratic society, but she finds the boredom and restraint required of her intolerable, and falls briefly for a dashing lover, Major Grampas, for whom she has no real feelings. She becomes the victim of her passions, for in the end her husband banishes her, and she dies of disappointment.

Baron Innstetten is the husband of Effi Briest, and an ambitious, and proper ladder-climber in the Prussian bureaucracy. When he learns about Effi's adultery—six years after the fact—he reluctantly concludes that he must challenge her lover to a duel. He does so, kills the man, who has almost forgotten the affair himself, and proceeds to banish Effi from his life and that of her daughter. Thus he makes a pitiable success out of his own life.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

EFFI (emotional)

Character Effi is the bride of Baron Innstetten, a prosperous state councilor twenty years her senior. At the beginning we see her as a young girl, playing on the swing in her parents' yard. We know that she is heading into a difficult life, with a severe older man for husband. After marriage, her challenge is to adjust to the square world of Prussian bureaucratic society, with all of the regulations of which she must fully comply. She in fact finds the boredom and restraint required of her intolerable, and falls briefly for a dashing lover, Major Grampas, for whom she has no real feelings. He is simply the best relief she can find, for her painful marriage. She becomes the victim of her passions, for in the end her husband banishes her, and she dies of disappointment. She got nothing from her affair except momentary stimulation, and in the end self-destruction.

Parallels. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* comes to mind at once, as a parallel. Madame Bovary too wasted away with an older, and preoccupied husband, who was insensitive to her needs. She too fell for a man she found dashing and handsome, though he didn't care deeply for her. A similar example might be drawn from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which D.H. Lawrence offers us a woman of breeding and charm whose husband is impotent, and who finds sexual-emotional relief in a 'simpler and more realized man.' The power of such frustration-attraction can be illustrated by the negative example, Racine's *Berenice*, a queen who refuses to compromise her lover, and who withdraws from a deep romance for reasons of state and honor.

Illustrative moments

Childhood. The first shots are of young Effi, a sprightly and pampered little girl, swinging on the lawn of her parents' comfortable country house. One has no way to anticipate the hard times ahead of her. The irony of the entire film is implicit here.

Bride. Married, but with no idea toward what she is moving, Effi rides with her husband down the main streets of the country town where he lives. She is just sensing her new life, fascinated by the differences from her own childhood home, and curious about all her husband can tell her, concerning her new environment.

Anxiety. Effi is frightened of what she imagines to be ghostly sounds in her new marital home; her husband does nothing to dispel her fears, in fact supports them by reference to the grave of a Chinese, alongside the road; an omen powerful and significant to Effi.

Romance. We see Effi together with her lover on several occasions. The classic scene, for them, is in Grampas' carriage. Effi's first serious step is to dine with Major Crampas in that carriage, a romantic upping of the relationship.

Discussion questions

Is Effi a mentally stable individual, from the beginning of her marriage to the Baron? What are the ghostly sounds she hears in her new marital home?

How do you interpret the affection that develops between Effi and Roswitha, the Catholic nursemaid? What does Effi get from this relationship?

Why do Effi's parents refuse to allow her to live with them? Do you feel that she has been unreasonably punished by fate? Or did she simply fail to follow the rules of the game, as understood in her time?

Did Effi's lover have any affection for her? If not, why was she not aware of this from the start?

BARON INNSTETTEN (closed)

Baron Innstetten is the husband of Effi Briest, and an ambitious, and proper ladder-climber in the Prussian bureaucracy. He has a long connection to Effi Briest's family, having in fact been a one time suitor for Effi's mother. He is proud of his young wife, Effi, but when he learns about Effi's adultery—*six years after the fact*—he reluctantly concludes that he must challenge her lover to a duel. He does so, kills the man, who has almost forgotten the affair himself, and proceeds to banish Effi from his life and from that of her daughter. Thus he makes a pitiable success out of his own life, but at the expense of love and friendship.

Parallels. The severe, duty bound patriarchal type is widespread in life and in literature; always with a slight tweak. There is the severe Thomas Buddenbrooks, in Thomas Mann's novel of the same name, and there is the miserly Pere Goriot of Balzac, while, centuries earlier, there were Hector, the male holding his beleaguered family together, and Priam, ruling his family but withered by the loss of the body of his son. And how about the TV brilliance of Don Vito Corleone, in *The Godfather*?

Illustrative moments

Suitor. In Effi's family home we see the Baron Innstetten, who has come to ask for Effi's hand. Twenty years her senior, he seems formidable to her. (In a confidential chat with her mom, Effi reveals that although she admires her suitor she doesn't really like him.) Innstetten's piercing gaze is already at this time set in our minds. Upright, in no way sinister, the man is rigid, ultimately to his own disadvantage.

Oppressive. Riding through the village, to which he has taken his new bride, the baron plays what we would call mind games with his bride, refusing to disabuse her anxiety, lest the sounds she hears from her new bedroom be 'ghostly,' spooky. He also plays with her anxiety about the strange and foreign, telling her of a Chinese person who has been buried in the village.

Horrified. It is with initial horror that the baron discovers the love letters written six years before by his wife to her short-term lover, Major Grampas. Upon reflection that horror softens to hurt, and rather quickly to indifference. The baron undergoes a very human set of reactions, to a painful event which occurred long previously.

Deciding. The baron, who has discovered his wife's old love letters, is faced with a dilemma: should he forget the past—let bygones be bygones—or should he demand satisfaction from his wife's former lover, Major Grampas? To help him with his decision he calls on his old friend, Wuellersdorf, who basically advises against the idea of a duel, and for forgetting the past, but who in the end, seeing that his argument will not win, gives the baron his own blessing to go ahead. Left with this choice, the baron struggles between practical sense, and the broad sense of how 'things ought to work in life.' He gives into his archaic social instincts, loses the battle, and drives away his wife who is just learning how to love him.

Discussion questions

Why is the Baron so disturbed by the appearance of six year old love letters? Why does this chance discovery motivate a duel?

Why does the Baron marry the young Effi? Is she a trophy bride? Or is simply a convention for respectability?

What kind of gaze does the Baron cast on his bride to be, at the outset of the film? Has he a welcoming and loving visage?

Is there an implication, in the film, that the Baron was covertly resentful that he married Effi instead of her mother?

THEMES

Society Fassbinder is creating this film in a social political milieu where norms are being violently challenged, throughout the Western World. The sixties and seventies of the twentieth century were a time of social political upheaval—Cold War, student movements, reassessment of behavioral norms—in which the self-imposed strictures of more 'traditional' society were being universally challenged. (intra generational struggles were being sharply exacerbated on all sides.) Fassbinder's genius lies in the subtlety with which he penetrates the rigidities of the 'tradition,' particularly of the caste society of upper bourgeois Prussia a century before his own time.

Irony Quite apart from the social rigidities, which enchain the actors of this tale, there is the irony of time—the six years later discovery of love letters—which intervenes unexpectedly, to take a dreadful toll on characters who are on their (compromised) ways toward living liveable lives. Once the love letters have been discovered—even though the passions enshrined there have been long forgotten—it is impossible to put them back in their box. Even Innstetten's closest friend cannot ultimately claim that the letters should be ignored, and the status quo maintained.

Cruelties From the outset of her marriage to Innstetten, Effi is anxious and alienated by the unfamiliar regional village to which her husband has taken her. She complains of noises, ghost noises, in the walls, but is told to keep such fantasies to herself. She is suppressed, in her intense feelings, from the outset of her marriage.