

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***The Merchant of Four Seasons*** 1971

Werner Fassbinder (1945-82)

### STORY

**Milieu.** Like Bergman, in his films exploring the inside of social life in welfare state Sweden, or Herzog looking at little guys like Kaspar Hauser, who are marginalized by their supposedly enlightened post war societies, Fassbinder takes a decisive turn in his own creative vision, by turning his pathos onto a victim of uncaring economics, a pedlar of fresh fruits in a small market urban enterprise. He probes the daily life of a now mid- life man who has been formed by his mother's ideals—that he should become a white collar careerist—but who pretty unsuccessfully makes his own way, first into the Foreign Legion, then, upon return to Germany, into a small business of peddling fresh fruits in the city streets.

**Loser.** The narrative, which leads to Hans' eventual suicide by alcohol, opens on Hans' return from the French Foreign Legion to a mother who thinks him a born loser, and a tall skinny wife who, though willing to work with him in his peddling business, basically finds him comi-- this shorter, squat man. Hans' own romantic inclinations lead him, as they do his wife, away from the family. The love of his life, who lives in the same city street as he does, invites him up to sell her some fine pears; he takes them to her doorstep, then refuses to enter the house, knowing how close he could come to a fatal error, and adultery.

**Pub** Hans leaves this perilous scene with an old flame, reflecting as he does on how he has sacrificed everything of value to him, how low his family life has fallen; he heads for his favorite pub, where as too often he drinks heavily. After too many drinks he settles with some of his former police buddies and reflects on the pleasures of being a policeman, what a good cop he had been, and the unfortunate circumstance that had caused him to lose his police job. As he is muddling along, recounting his troubles, Hans' wife enters the pub, and begs him to come home—he has a young daughter there. In response he throws a chair at her, and when he gets home, later that evening, he finds wife and daughter despondently awaiting him. Still heavily boozed up, Hans makes the grave mistake of taking out his life frustrations on his wife, and beating the hell out of her.

**Social setting.** Hans' wife leaves him, going with her daughter to Hans' mother's house; so that everyone is aligned against Hans the wife beater—except his youngest sister in law who is insistent that Hans should be given a chance. It is Hans' fate, throughout this development, to dissatisfy all his family members—and the in-laws who come with his wife—except his thoughtful and independently minded younger sister-in- law, the emblem of big picture thinking in a petty bourgeois milieu. With the passage of time on the ground, in his job which he is made to feel ashamed of, Hans gets the correct impression that he is being socially ganged up on. The assault on his wife has in any case proven too much, and draws the whole family together in an emergency colloquy, in the midst of which Hans—who is anyway coming closer to winning our sympathy—suffers a heart attack and is rushed to the hospital.

**Denouement.** Incapacitated after his heart attack, Hans must hire an assistant who, though in fact he turns out to have had a quick affair with Hans' wife, during the hospitalization, is a good worker, and builds up profits for Hans in his small business. Because of her indiscretion with Anzell, the honest assistant to Hans, his wife Irmgard does what she can to see that Anzell is fired, and replaced, as it turns out, by an old Foreign Legion buddy of Hans. Meanwhile Hans, informed by his doctor that further drinking will be the end of him, slides gradually into depression—we start to realize how uniquely bleak this film is determined to be—and in a bout of heavy drinking, in the presence of his largely alienated family, Hans keels over and dies.

## CHARACTERS

**Hans** Hans is a misfit in a society which is recovering quickly from the disasters of a war which it was in good part responsible for. He has been diverted from the career he wanted, engineering, and been obliged to take employment in the French Foreign Legion, which takes him nowhere. He returns to Germany, works for a while as a cop, until he loses his job and then works, until he dies, as a fruit pedlar.

**Irmgard** is a loving mother, and a fairly tolerant wife to Hans, for whom she feels some scorn but in the end sufficient attachment.

**Renate** is the beguiling and often distressed daughter of Hans and Irmgard. She suffers mightily when her father assaults her mother, but she is resilient and lively throughout it all.

**Anna** is the youngest of Hans' relatives through marriage, and the only person, in Irmgard's family, who is willing to support Hans. She is a college student, and brings the larger view of matters for which we often have education to thank.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### HANS

**Character** Hans is a loser, in a society-- Germany in the decades after the second World War—which is on the whole, after devastating traumas, and an insolubly ruinous historical conscience, picking up and moving strongly into new economies and social projects. Hans is looked down upon by his widowed mother, and has been diverted from the career he wanted, engineering. He feels frustrated from the start. He has been obliged to take employment in the French Foreign Legion, where he remains for four years. But this path takes him nowhere. He returns to Germany, works for a while as a cop, until he loses his job there—due to a foolish moment of sexual weakness on his part. Then he forced to work in his neighborhood as a merchant of fresh fruits, which he peddles to his region of the city. At times, and with useful assistance, he turns the job to a profit, but he never acquires social status, or even respect within the family, losing respect even from his wife. In the end, as he fades and drinks more, he simply drinks himself out of life, and becomes a pitiful victim of a booming economy which passed him by.

**Parallels** Facing us today are many postwar victims—heroes or simply veterans—who have fallen through the cracks of society, and who have that in common with Fassbinder's Hans. Hans, too, is a veteran, of the Foreign Legion, and has thereby lost any social fast track back home in Germany. Fairly close parallels are on all sides. The characters in the brilliant (1972-83) TV series MASH (Hawkeye, Radar, the Colonel), Franz Kafka's Joseph K, Herman Hesse's Siddhartha, even Odysseus' son, Telemachus, all these portraits, of guys who grow up searching for what they have missed, but could never quite find, have something pertinent in common with our Hans. Even the *Sad Sack* ('hero?' of a 1957 Comic, dissecting the humbling life of the little guy in the military) or *Gomer Pyle* (1964-69), ties in to the milieu of failure just on the level of ordinariness that swallows up Hans.

### Illustrative moments

*Crestfallen.* We first see Hans as he reunites with his mother, after his return from some years in the French Foreign Legion. She is bemoaning his return, as an instance of the bad apples being the ones that make it back from the front. Hans is crestfallen.

*Decisive.* Hans makes one of his few executive moves when he rejects the invitation of his old flame, to 'deliver the pears right to her apartment.' Rather than make out with this dangerous rival to his domestic peace, he backs out—though a few minutes later he is heading to the pub.

*Humiliated.* Hans liked his job as a policeman, and—as he puts it—slipped up only once. He was booking a prostitute, when she seduced him into accepting a blow job in exchange for forgetting the charges. At the moment he gives in, his superior officer enters the door. Hans is fired.

*Suicidal.* The final scenes of Hans' life show him following his will to die, rather than following the doctor's advice to stop drinking. Seated among his extended family, Hans drinks many shots of hard liquor, each dedicated to a particular individual in his life. Then he keels over dead.

### Discussion questions

We have tried to set an historical context for Hans' downfall. Should we rather have looked for some personal weaknesses? What really lies behind social failure?

What role do Hans' fellow drinkers, at the local bar, play in his attitude toward himself? Do they stimulate or depress him?

Is Hans a depressive type? What turns him on? What turn might he have made, to create a better life for himself?

### THEMES

**Depression** Not surprisingly, Hans gradually gives in to the downward spiral his life assumes, after his return from the Foreign Legion. His mother and his in-laws are largely against him, while his wife tends to scorn him. His drinking buddies are on his side, but as down and outers, themselves, they cannot lift him. The only passion left to him is the 'one love of his life,' whom he has rejected as she tries to draw him into her apartment. At his simple funeral, this woman, holding a bunch of roses near his gravestone, is the only person truly left to mourn him.

**Class** Hans was the victim of a Mother who had high aspirations for him, and who 'didn't want him to get his hands dirty,' in whatever career he chose. Although the Postwar Germany he was born in was on a curve of rapid economic expansion, under Konrad Adenauer, Hans was a misfit, who was discouraged from going into Engineering, the career he wanted, who settled for a career as policeman—until he blew his job—and who finally ended up as a fruit pedlar.

**Economy** While class mattered to Hans' family and in-laws, they were nonetheless pleased when, toward the end of the film, Hans' business profits picked up. Germany in its postwar resurgence generated a thriving economy, and admired money and class equally. By the time he had begun to earn something real, though, Hans had already lost both his health and, shortly after, his life.

**Realism** As a misfit, whom no one he knew supported, Hans fell between the cracks of life. We can contrast Hans with the little man of Fassbinder's fellow director, Werner Herzog. Think of Kaspar Hauser. Kaspar is the little man, confused by life, a puzzle to everyone—no one penetrates his feelings. But he carries an ebullience inside him. Hans carries none. Fassbinder is a psychological realist, in the zone of Dreiser or Arthur Miller.