

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Monika (in Bergman, *Summer with Monika*) adventurous

Overview *Summer with Monika* (1953) is an early film of Bergman, and hearkens back to the splendid evocations of bare, austere Swedish landscape, especially at times of dawn and dusk, which had been the trademark of Bergman's film-master Sjostrom. Against this backdrop a lusty but unsure young man takes his hot and adventurous girlfriend, Monika, for a summer in Harry's dad's boat, an escape into the lakes of the Baltic peninsula, during which the two late teen-agers can discover sex, violence, and the limits of their mutual relationship. Return to the city, and to their mutually abusive families, drives the couple apart, and the summer idyll wraps up darkly.

Character From the get-go, Monika is adventurous, lusty, aggressive toward her boyfriend, with whom she bonds on several scores—they are both working class youngsters caught in despairing family situations, they both hate their jobs, and they are both up for discovering what life is all about. When she is kicked out of her chaotic family home she turns to Harry, whose recourse—as he too is going crazy living with his neurotic dad—is to take Monica down to where Harry's dad's motorboat is tied, and to 'borrow the boat for the summer.' The bulk of the film concerns the unquiet summer idyll of the two youngsters on the lakes of the Stockholm Archipelago, an idyll during which Monika fully unfolds her sexuality, proves her toughness, and defines the limits of her commitment to Harry.

Parallels Young or first love is the most commonly visited theme of the arts, and in literature makes itself almost unbearably poignant in characters like Dante's Paolo and Francesca, who while reading a romantic book together fell hopelessly, and sinfully, in love. Romeo and Juliet paid even more heavily, for their youthful sin, and for their miscalculation. (The great French 'cynic,' Stendahl, devotes *De l'Amour* (1822) to a thoroughly demystifying account of the 'crystallization' which precedes the effect of 'feeling in love'; bad judgments, he makes clear, are an inevitable result of the lovers' inevitable confusion.)

Illustrative moments

Planning Monika meets us as she takes a smoking break from work. She is in a local Stockholm pub, and cozies up to her boyfriend, Harry, who is griping about his work as a stock clerk in a porcelain factory. Monica is pissed off by her work life, which exposes her to a lot of unwanted male attention, and by her family life, with siblings falling over one another and brawling parents. Out of the blue Monika suggests to Harry that they should travel, wander together, discover the wide world together. He is listening, but cautiously.

Chaos We see Monika waking onto the early morning scene of her family flat, and understand why she wants to flee—and why her family has no time for her needs. Her first act on waking is to reactivate a cigarette stub and start smoking, while around her—all this in one room—her smaller siblings scream and shout, jump on the beds and furniture, and laugh as their Mom goes quietly nuts. Monika is impatient to be free of all this, and throws herself on Harry's mercy, by parking herself at the front door of his apartment. His response will be to swipe his dad's motorboat.

Housewife Although she is not ready for the roles either of housewife or mother, as we will see at summer's end, Monika flirts with the anticipated pleasures of caring for her man. One morning she rises early, in the motorboat beached along a lake front, and prepares coffee from pieces of drift wood. She spoils the still sleeping Harry by waking him with the unexpected smell of java, and both of them have a brief idyll of imagining what a normal family existence would feel

like. Monika needs several more years under her belt, before she will be able to live a sustained reality of this sort, but in this moment on the shore she enjoys a brilliant hope.

Madness Back in Stockholm, at summer's end and in her flat with Harry and the baby—she got pregnant over the summer—Monika begins to lose it. The baby is awake at night and exhausts her mother, who is not prepared for the life change. Harry gets a job in another city—to bring in some income—and is away for several days a week; though the baby is taken care of by Harry's aunt, during Harry's absence, Monika cannot imagine what to do with her free time. She grows more and more restless, starts going out to dance bars during the day, and totally loses her appetite for the fresh faced, but hard working and (now) conscientious Harry, who is trying to support his family.

Discussion questions

Is Bergman critical of Monika, as in the end she loses her interest in Harry and, more or less, in the baby herself?

In the midst of their summer idyll, Harry and Monika must endure a savage attack on their boat and themselves, by a jealous former lover of Monika. Why do you think Bergman inserts this violence into the midst of the 'summer with Monika'?

Does Harry emerge stronger and fitter for mature life, after his summer with Monika? What has he learned from her? How has he changed?