# Guilt and Redemption in Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*

*"You see it, God, you see it. The innocent child's death and my revenge. You allowed it. I don't understand you. Yet now I beg your forgiveness."*

These chilling words surely disquiet many minds and encapsulate the anguish that often follows human tragedy, a theme common even in the most uneventful lives. The realization of life's cruelty and the awareness of human crudeness, particularly when one's life is devoid of any disbelief in the divine, are not only disheartening but demoralizing. This is a theme often explored in Bergman's films, taking the viewer on a journey into human consciousness and the apprehension of the divine.

When discussing Swedish cinema, the first name that usually comes to mind is Ingmar Bergman. The 1950s were an extremely challenging time for Bergman, but he managed to create a myriad of excellent films that are still revered more than 60 years after their release. Among them is *The Virgin Spring*, which boldly captures the tragedy set in 13th-century Sweden, telling the story of a girl who is raped and killed on her way to church. The tale is based on a ballad that tells the same story. There is no question that the sight of the young maid, as she is often described in the film, being ruthlessly murdered leads you to loathe the men who, out of sheer depravity, chose to inflict such violence upon something innocent. The girl, unaware of their desires, is easy prey who lures herself into their claws by offering them food before she is sacrificed to their perversion.

Early on in the film, we often see Bergman contrasting elements to make the images confronting to the viewer. We see the fair maiden, despised by the pregnant, therefore non-virginal Ingeri, who is dark in complexion and often depicted as dirty, set against Karin, who is always in fine clothing and thus remains clean and pleasing to the beholder. It is evident that the film represents the struggle between Paganism and Christianity, a conflict unlike any other, as religions often root themselves deeply in human consciousness. Even when abandoned, they never completely fade for those with weak faith. This is the first representation of guilt we see in the film: Ingeri's. She prays to Odin, contrasting with the family that

nurtures her, who pray to the Christian God, and thus finds herself on an obscured path.

The film is acted out simply, with a linear plot. We cannot see deeply into the characters and are unable to feel much sympathy for them until the very end, when the thin veneer of superfluous emotions is removed, revealing the true human experiences beneath. This is not only seen through the death of the girl, but also in the lives of the characters before her tragic killing.

This is the first collaboration between Bergman and cinematographer Sven Nykvist, which introduces a very different style than what we had seen previously. The cinematography of the film showcases guilt in a way rarely seen elsewhere. For example, in the scene where the girl is raped, we not only see the act of sexual violence, but also the face of Ingeri, who witnesses the horrific scene. Her facial expression encapsulates her struggle to act, her inability to do so, and her uncontrollable feelings of guilt, though she despises Karin. This moment captures the pinnacle of human morality, showing how emotions manifest, even when one despises the person at stake.

Ingeri believes that by praying to Odin, whom she associates with the one-eyed man and his pet crow, she invoked him, and thus he led the men to commit the violence. She feels guilty for both her choice of faith and the potential consequences of that choice. In this way, Odin becomes synonymous with the Devil, with Paganism in the film being replete with evil, linked to the spells Ingeri performs, the solitude of Odin, and the envy revealed by the men's actions.

Apart from Ingeri's guilt, which she seeks to atone for by asking to be killed by Max Von Sydow's character, Tore, an ideal Christian father, another crucial figure of guilt is Tore himself. He is the head of the household, a loving father who adores his daughter, but who cannot stand the pampering of the child by his wife. The corrective measures we hear from him are, of course, contrasted by his familiar disposition with his daughter. After learning that his hospitality was sheer naïveté on his part, since he offered a roof to the murderers of his daughter, vengeance consumes him, which is, of course, a Pagan way of dealing with the crude act of violence. Even though he is Christian and says prayers before consuming his daily bread, Tore is dumbfounded when he discovers that the herders, who asked for shelter, are now profiting from his daughter's fine clothing,

scavenged from her dead body. The blood excites more blood, and in the act of revenge, he commits the gravest sin – one that overturns his state and shakes his very core. In his rage to avenge his daughter, he kills the child the herders bring along. The sorrow that both mother and father endure is a significant part of their suffering, but it is the guilt that pervades Tore's mind that is finally revealed in his confession to God. He does not understand the logic behind the divine course of action that allowed a poor girl to be raped and killed, only for her death to be avenged in cold blood, thereby sacrificing another child to the wrongdoings of adults. Sydow's performance makes the scene at Karin's deathbed the climax of the film. After all the struggles he faces, Tore decides that as penance, he will build a church.

Another significant figure of guilt in the film is Karin's mother, Mareta. At first, Mareta seems like a loving mother who cherishes her daughter. Her protectiveness makes sense after we learn that Karin was killed in her quest to bring candles to the church, a task that could have been performed by anyone, had it not been for a religious rule that a virgin must complete the pilgrimage. After learning of her daughter's death, Mareta embarks on a search for her body, and in the process, discloses that she grew to resent her husband, as Karin favored him over her. Mareta, as a devout Christian, feels responsible for her daughter's fate, a belief rooted in the moral guilt of her own jealousy.

In all senses, *The Virgin Spring* is a tale of human guilt in all its forms, even if the recipient of this mature emotion is not particularly old. The child represents innocence but is forced to confront evil, thus becoming involved in the act that sets Tore into a fury, leading him to commit another terrible act of killing. After the girl's death, the boy, forced to wait for the men's return, decides to throw some earth on the girl's body, symbolizing the negligence of the herders, who feel no remorse for Karin. The boy is ill, which leads us to believe that he cannot live with the unbearable truth. The herders are clearly afraid of the boy's possible confession, and while we despise their unabashed behavior, we can sympathize with the boy, who is gradually more likely to break and confess. His death deepens the guilt, as he is the voyeur of guilt – living with it, then becoming the spring of it after his death.

The ground that houses the dead body of the girl suddenly erupts, and from it flows the spring, an unmistakable supernatural manifestation after all the reasons for the characters' guilt have been revealed. At this point, we no longer see further elaboration of the characters, and we cannot distinguish them from one another, as they all represent the same wicked human image, one that is so close to us and difficult to separate from. The nature of the spring, an immaculate intervention, represents a counterpoint to the old ideals of divine retribution. Even though Tore questions his faith, unable to turn the other cheek and instead seeking vengeance for his daughter, and even though Mareta cannot love her husband in the same way after Karin's favoritism toward him, and Ingeri is unable to abandon Odin, adding to her guilt her failure to aid the girl, nature does not offer vengeance, but absolution. The spring embodies the Christian idea of forgiveness and the Pagan significance of water cleansing the soul. This imagery ties together the notion that guilt, revenge, jealousy, and the aftermath of realizing these evil inclinations are not solely attributed to any one religion, but to human nature, which seldom changes course. Tore, by failing to understand God, also fails to understand human nature, which is so difficult to discern. He cannot comprehend the repulsive act of violence committed against his daughter, nor can he grasp how divine justice could be fulfilled in a vengeful act, where the killers of Karin are ultimately killed, only for all to be forgiven. The vengeance is driven by rage and revulsion for the men who shamelessly sought shelter in the house they had brought misery into. However, the guilt is not present with the main perpetrators of the tale, which leads us to the realization that without self-loathing and guilt, we cannot forgive ourselves. Guilt reminds us that even if we commit an awful act, we can still free our conscience, provided we retain grace, as the great Toni Morrison once put it.