

Torment (Hets)

Sweden | 1944 | 101 minutes

Credits

Director	Alf Sjöberg
Screenplay	Ingmar Bergman
Photography	Martin Bodin
Music	Hilding Rosenberg

Cast

Caligula	Stig Järrel
Jan-Erik Widgren	Alf Kjellin
Bertha Olsson	Mai Zetterling
The Headmaster	Olof Winnerstrand The Headmaster

In Brief

Although directed by the (often-neglected) Swedish master Alf Sjöberg, *Hets* is more importantly recognised as the first film to have been produced from a screenplay by Ingmar Bergman. Its noir-influenced narrative sees emotionally-fragile shopgirl Bertha (Zetterling) becoming involved in an increasingly-complicated relationship with a young, naïve student (Alf Kjellin) who, in turn, is tormented by his gleefully sadistic Latin master, nicknamed Caligula (Stig Järrel). Often interpreted as his insightful allegory for fascism (produced, fascinatingly, whilst Sweden was still a neutral country in World War II), Bergman's film debut also saw him take on roles as assistant director, script boy and, for a few additional exterior shots taken after the completion of principal production, as uncredited director. For Zetterling, meanwhile, it provided the acting performance which she lastingly considered her best, granting her the depth of characterisation in a complex, unsentimental and strong leading role which she was so often denied in almost all of her subsequent films as actor.

Ingmar Bergman's first feature-film credit was for his screenplay for *Torment (Hets, 1944)*, directed by Alf Sjöberg. Bergman was also the assistant director for *Torment*, and in fact directed the final sequence of the film on his own while Sjöberg was busy on another assignment. In addition to Ingmar Bergman's debut, it is notable that *Torment* also featured the screen debut of 19-year-old Mai Zetterling, who went on to become a major actress and film director in her own right. Interestingly, her involvement with sexually explicit roles, which began in her debut, continued throughout her film career.

The story of *Torment* concerns the anguished experiences of a young man in his final months at a Swedish gymnasium (senior secondary school). Although the film starts out as an account of the rather dreary authoritarian atmosphere inside the classroom, it eventually careens over to more lurid matters of illicit sex and apparent murder. This led to multiple critical responses to the film. Some people seemed to see *Torment* as an exposé of the stultifying conditions inside Swedish secondary schools, while others saw the film more as a coming-of-age passage for a young man (I would definitely side with this latter perspective).

Nevertheless, the gothic, expressionistic elements are all there, and they are what make the film rather fascinating. Much of the film is shown in dark or starkly lit interiors and with dramatic shadowing, conveying a threatening feeling of enclosure on the part of some unseen forces. In fact much of the visual imagery in the film seems to harken directly back to the German Expressionistic tradition. This heavily theatrical staging may have come from Sjöberg's and Bergman's involvement with dramatic lighting for the stage (they were both heavily involved in theater productions throughout their careers).

One such theatrical effect (not really expressionistic, but interesting nonetheless) was a classic "mirror shot". This is when the viewer sees someone (in this case Mai Zetterling) looking at herself in the mirror. The viewer (i.e. camera position) is placed at an oblique angle from the axis created by the actress and the mirror, and so we see both the person looking and the reflected image of the person in the mirror. But if you think about it, if you see the actress's image in the mirror, then if the actress is looking into the same mirror, she would not be able to see her own reflected image, but instead would see that of the camera/viewer. Since we are so accustomed to these shots in films, we don't question them. In any case the mirror shot shown here, typical though it may be, did stick in my memory as a particularly arresting example.

The story of *Torment* progresses through four phases.

1. Schooldays

In the beginning we are introduced to the formalized patterns and policies of the Swedish gymnasium. There are three students of particular note: the timid, bespectacled Pettersson; the cynic Sandman; and the protagonist Jan-Erik Widgren. They are all intimidated by their domineering Latin teacher, who is only referred to as "Caligula" (after the Roman emperor regarded as an



Mai Zetterling: Actor, Director, Feminist

insane tyrant). Since there are only a couple of months before graduation, the students are all desperately hoping that they can just manage to “pass” Caligula’s class. Consequently Jan-Erik is clearly traumatized when Caligula accuses him of cheating on his latest Latin assignment.

After class Jan-Erik and Sandman stop by a tobacco shop, where Sandman flirts with the pretty salesgirl, Bertha (Mai Zetterling). That evening, when Sandman and Jan-Erik go out and take in a movie, Sandman espouses typical youthful cynicism, while Jan-Erik expresses his idealism – although he is currently romantically unattached, he believes in true love, and he says his aim is to devote his future to writing and playing the violin.



2. Bertha’s Affairs

Afterwards on the way home, Jan-Erik sees a drunk girl on the street, and it turns out to be the salesgirl, Bertha. Earnestly and innocently concerned about her welfare, he takes her back to her apartment. Though inebriated, Bertha is smitten by the young man, and she manages to seduce him. But she also tells him that she is afraid of some unnamed man who has been tormenting her and making her afraid.

Back at school, there are further instances of Caligula lording it over his bullied students – so much so that Pettersson is too terrified even to come to class and is charged with truancy. An elderly senior teacher who serves as the truant officer bawls out Caligula for being too domineering towards his students, and Caligula confesses that he has been suffering from some unnamed illness. Actually, it seems to this viewer that Caligula has a bipolar disorder and is unable to control himself when he feels threatened by disrespect or insubordination.

Meanwhile Jan-Erik takes up with Bertha and spends all his free time with her, at the consequential expense of his studies. We also surmise that Bertha’s mysterious tormenter is Caligula, himself, although this is not known to Jan-Erik. For some reason Bertha has had some past relationship with Caligula, and the man maintains a hold on the poor woman by continually threatening her. Since Bertha presumably has an unsavory reputation, she has no adults to fend for her.

3. Breakup and Death

One day Jan-Erik goes to Bertha’s apartment and finds her drunk again. Seeing her in such a dissolute state, Jan-Erik feels she has abandoned him, and they break up. Now Jan-Erik is even more distraught than ever and is unable to respond properly in Caligula’s class. He eventually faints and is taken to his home and seen by the family doctor. The doctor here delivers a speech (which presumably reflects the author’s views) to Jan-Erik’s conservative parents about the dismal state of school education which overworks the students with pedantic, narrow, and meaningless exercises of no good purpose.

On his sickbed, Jan-Erik has an expressionistic nightmare in which both Caligula and Bertha appear and speak to him. Bertha calls to Jan-Erik to save her. After she departs, Caligula (still in the dream) says he will murder Jan-Erik.



When Jan-Erik recovers and later runs into Bertha on the street, he coldly rejects her and tells the desperate girl that it is all over between them. But later, he worries about her and rushes over to her apartment. It is too late, though, and he finds her dead. As he is leaving her apartment, he sees Caligula hiding in a closet, and he rushes out to tell the police.

4. Inquest and Departure

Caligula is duly arrested, but he is released when the autopsy reveals that Bertha died of a heart attack. There is no official murder case, but in front of the school headmaster, Jan-Erik and Caligula accuse each other of effectively killing the girl. The result is that Jan-Erik is expelled from school and cannot be graduated. He and Sandman are the only townspeople to attend Bertha’s burial. There is a scene showing all the schoolboys joyously celebrating their graduation, with



Jan-Erik looking on forlornly from the outside.

Given the strict and unsympathetic atmosphere cast by Jan-Erik's parents, he decides to leave his home and go live temporarily in Bertha's' now empty apartment. Before he finally departs, though, his school headmaster comes to him and lectures him about not cutting himself off from society. He assures Jan-Erik that he will try to help him find a job.

After the headmaster has left and as Jan-Erik departs the apartment, he sees Caligula on the stairs. Caligula asks him for forgiveness, but Jan-Erik evidently feels there is no real contrition on Caligula's part and takes his leave as the film ends.

The originally edited version of Torment, before it was officially released, had the film end with Jan-Erik seen as an outcast glumly watching the students graduate, with Caligula looking on with satisfaction. However, audience reactions to pre-screenings complained that the ending was too gloomy. So Bergman was given the task of shooting the final scenes showing the headmaster giving Jan-Erik a pep talk about not cutting himself from the world. Unfortunately, this supposedly more upbeat ending, which was Bergman's first experience as a director, does not fit with the tenor of the rest of the film. So in my opinion Bergman's additional scene weakens the overall effect of the film.

Even with that weakened conclusion, though, the general mood conjured up by the film is quite dark. In fact given the severely expressionistic mise-en-scene and dramatic lighting of Torment, one is tempted to see the film as essentially a horror story about a sadistic and sinister teacher who terrorizes young people – some even to death. In addition, given the year of production and the proximity of Nazi Germany, one might view the Caligula character as

an ominous and threatening fascist prototype. From this perspective, Caligula would represent a dangerous social obsession with order and obedience to rigid authority.

But I think such interpretations offer an overly externalized picture. I see the film as primarily an internalized nightmare on the part of the young protagonist, Jan-Erik. When you are young and impressionable like Jan-Erik, the world seems to have an overabundance of threatening characters like Caligula. Actually, the Caligula character, while objectionable, is not all that unusual – you have probably run into many instances of people of his type. These people are troublesome, but they are usually not monstrous ogres, and anyway there are just too many of them. Here, it is true that Caligula's insidious hectoring of the alcoholic and vulnerable Bertha contributed to her heart attack, but, regrettably, there are many such people, and we do not have grounds for having them all arrested. We have to deal with them in a civil way and carry on with our higher pursuits. This is what Jan-Erik has to do at the end of the film. So, yes, Torment is essentially a mood-piece about the traumas of youth.

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