

Wes Fleming
HIST 314/Deshmukh
21 September 1995

Effi Briest

Theodor Fontane's Victorian novel Effi Briest paints a picture of Prussia that is, at times, quite insightful. The cast of characters touches just about every ethnic and social group in mid-19th century Prussia, including Catholics, Protestants, soldiers, aristocrats, commoners, and the middle class. The story centers around Effi Briest, who marries Baron Geert von Innstetten at her parent's behest when she is only 17. At the time of their marriage, the baron is about twenty years her senior. Effi's parents arrange the marriage without consulting their daughter, and Mrs. Briest assures Effi she will grow to love her husband.

Effi takes the role of protagonist, her new husband that of antagonist. However, their roles are not strictly adversarial; the main difficulties between them are rendered by their age gap, Effi's immaturity, and Innstetten's public servanthood. The plot's catalytic character is Major Crampas, a womanizing soldier living in Kessin, where Innstetten is the senior government appointee.

Effi, married so young, does not fully understand and is not able to accept the complexities of married life. Innstetten does little to help her, supporting the novel's reflection of a society where women are background citizens. Crampas finds Effi

irresistible and focuses his amorous attentions on her; eventually the two have an affair that is the critical event that moves the plot to its climax.

Fontane is a good, if somewhat typical, Victorian writer. His descriptive passages are clear and adjective laden, lending view to the increasingly material nature of 19th century central European society. The observation that Innstetten lives in a small house beneath his status while working in a larger one just across the road is made in several conversations through the book, including one between Effi and Mrs. Briest when the Innstettens are preparing to move to Berlin. Mrs. Briest comments that the house Effi chooses to rent in Berlin is more fitting for the daughter of a noble man.

Emerging anti-Semitism in the German republics is apparent in the men of the novel. However, at the time of the novel anti-Semites seem to be significantly in the minority. Baron von Gùldenkleee, toasting a large dinner party that includes Innstetten, Crampas, and both their wives, denigrates Jews, claiming they have "brought and will continue to bring nothing but confusion and calamity."¹

A theme of growing Prussian nationalism is apparent along with the anti-Semitism. The best example of this comes after Gùldenkleee's toast, when all in attendance at the dinner party heartily belt out the Prussian national anthem. Two instances demonstrate the ancestral pride that rides with nationalism. Effi describes Thora von Penz as "typically Scandinavian, with blue eyes and flaxen hair," to which Jahnke replies, "Yes, yes, they're like that. Pure Aryans. More German than Germans."² Herta, talking with Effi after the

divorce, mentions that human sacrifices took place at Lake Hertha "long before B.C.; they were pure Aryans, whom we're all descended from."³ These nationalistic feelings and comments are more effective coming from women; their role as second-class citizens shows how deeply nationalism has permeated the Prussian mindset.

Honor is foremost in Innstetten's mind after he quite coincidentally learns of Effi's affair. He consults with a friend and co-worker, Wüllersdorf, on what action to take. They discuss whether it has been too long since the affair to require a duel to restore Innstetten's honor; both men seem to agree without having to say it that Effi will be divorced. Innstetten's confusion comes forward when he says, "...I'm humiliated, I've been shamefully deceived and yet in spite of that I have no feeling of hatred at all, or even a thirst for vengeance."⁴ Innstetten decides to challenge Crampas to a pistol duel and shoots the Major dead. The newspapers carry an account of the fatal event; Innstetten seems pleased to know that the public knows of the successful defense of his honor. No mention of Effi's fate is made in the newspaper, and it seems as if only the reader should care what becomes of her.

What becomes of Effi after Innstetten discovers her six-years past affair with Crampas is pitiful. During the days of discovery and the duel, she is on vacation in Ems, whiling away her time in conversation. She learns of her impending divorce when she receives a fat envelope containing a letter from her mother that presumably relates the preceding events and money to start her in her newly single life. She finds that her

parents will not accept her at home because, Mrs. Briest writes, "There can be no refuge for you in this house, because that would mean cutting ourselves off from everyone we know and this we are emphatically not inclined to do."⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Briest later rethink this position and take their daughter in. At the age of 23, Effi is hardly capable of dealing with knowing she may never see her daughter Annie again, and she understandably falls quite ill.

Effi's illness eventually ends her life. At her mother's suggestion, she continues to live in Berlin, losing herself in the large city population. While in Berlin this second time, she has a chance glimpse of Annie, about ten years old, and asks Innstetten for permission to spend an afternoon with the girl. Innstetten reluctantly grants Effi's request, and Annie arrives for a visit. Soon afterward, Effi sends Annie away, unable to relate to her now that Innstetten has filled the girl's mind with feeling against her mother. She eventually returns to her parents in Hohen-Cremmen, where she dies.

The treatment of women in the novel follows this somber example. Women are expected to respectfully listen to and obey their husbands and fathers. Effi is never allowed to have any personal growth until after she is divorced and alone; she moves from obeying her father to obeying her husband, and then back to obeying her father right after the divorce. When she is alone but for Roswitha, her maid, she is further denied a chance to grow as a woman by her illness and eventual death.

The circumstances of Effi's death are pitiful. Although she did, in a sense, earn her divorce, she did not deserve to be deserted by her parents, an action that clearly shows the materialistic nature of the aristocracy; she surely did not deserve to be alienated from her daughter by Innstetten. The religious base of the time is clear in that Effi is duly punished for her transgression, something that cannot be overlooked or put off as an unjust action. However, in striving to protect his honor, Innstetten takes the punishment too far and opens the door to the psychology of Prussia's upper class.

¹ pg. 144

² pg. 199

³ pg. 253

⁴ pg. 214

⁵ pg. 232

\$ - generally covered main pts.
OK - what about Innstetten's rationale for the deed?