

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# CRISIS 1946

Ingmar Bergman

## OVERVIEW

*Crisis* was the first film directed by Ingmar Bergman, when he was only twenty seven years old. It is arguably one of his most interesting early achievements.

The story, recreated by Bergman, is based on a Danish radio play, *The Maternal Instinct*, written by Leck Fischer. While the plot is conventional, by usual standards, the major characters, all five of them, relate to one another in intense intersections, which assure the close attention of the watcher. The conventionality derives from the setting. We find ourselves in a small Swedish town, at a still early period of Swedish modernity, and among folks for whom the contrast between the big city, with all its connotations, and the small town or village sums up the major culture binary of the nation. To our day the village in Iowa, the village in Nigeria, relate to the big city as to a hub of dangers, promises, and possibilities, and Bergman is uniquely positioned to dramatize these lasting historical settings.

## STORY

**Nelly** The center of the vortex of characters, whose interactions constitute the narrative, is Nelly, an eighteen year old country girl. She is just finding her womanhood, and is very interested in the attention that the men of the village are paying to her. This situation, however, is soon to be interrupted, by the return of her biological mother, who left her eighteen years ago, to enjoy a faster life in the big city. Nelly will now have to leave Ingeborg, her devoted stepmother for the past eighteen years.

**Nelly and the village.** In her village Nelly has for some time been receiving marriage proposals from Ulf, an upstanding, strong, but not very interesting swain. She is naturally enough drawn to the boyfriend of her mother, who returns with the mother, Jenny, and remains with mother and daughter for a short visit to the village. During that short visit Jack, Nelly's Mom's boyfriend, and Nelly herself blew up a storm. They boogey woogied in the dance hall, they made out by the lake, and Ulf, Nelly's longtime suitor, knocked out the cocky and eccentric Jack, who nonetheless seemed to come out on top, as he, Jenny, and Nelly returned to the big city the next day.

**Nelly in the big city.** Nelly's own small-town idyll was over, and, to put it mildly, she was facing a difficult three-party-tensions, among herself, her Mom, and Jack. who has been given to deeply depressed, vatic comments about life. (On one occasion, Jack appeared like a tramp at Nelly's door, talking irrationally about having killed someone: so terrifiedly sure is Nelly, that the someone is her mother, that she is astounded when her mother arrives at Nelly's door, catching her daughter naked under the sheets.) So anxiety fraught was the situation in the city, and so intense the pressure on the anyway overwrought Jack, that Jack committed suicide, with disastrous psychological repercussions on both the women. Inevitably enough Nelly returns to the village where she is once again together with Ingeborg—who is herself delighted to be reunited with her stepdaughter.

**Nelly returns to the village.** Back in the village, Nelly, Ingeborg and Ulf are the final vestiges of the five characters who form the nucleus of this film. Nelly continues indifferent to Ulf, in whom she has no interest, and Ingeborg grows increasingly disconsolate as she reflects on the limits of her life, and on her own weakness, in the struggle to help Nelly become as deep a person as she can.

## THEMES

**Village vs City.** The film is pervaded with Bergman's sense of the historical period in which he himself was living, in the early stages of Scandinavian industrial urban society. Jenny finds what small towners expected of the city, some economic opportunity—a hair salon which gives her a chance to spend a little on herself—and a far wider range of immoral exposures than she has ever before imagined.

**Guilt.** There is much room for guilt, in this drama of responsibility. Jack, we might say, is the wild card in the moral realm of the film. In his way he digs deeply into the human condition is prepared to risk his soul on a taboo love, a simultaneous affair with both mother and daughter. Ingeborg feels guilty that she cannot take total care of her beloved Nelly. Jenny ultimately feels guilt for having walked out on Nelly, and determines to share with her the collateral advantages of owning a beauty salon in the city.

**Anxiety.** The entire film is built around anxiety. No character is at peace—for Bergman ordinary life is fraught with discomfort and incompleteness. The village elders are perhaps the only group with a definable value system, and a basic security in their interpersonal relations. The only youngster who belongs to his world is Ulf, the village suitor of Nelly, and the fist-fight victor over Jack; and Ulf comes off as a comic reject.

**Conflict.** The film is founded on conflict from the start, as the whole biography of Nelly is built on her mother's initial decision to leave her, in infancy, with a surrogate mother. The natural order of things is being defied, from the start, and takes its revenge on Jack, who commits the harsh sin of loving both mother and daughter, as well as on Ingeborg, who remains to the end afraid that she has been unfaithful to Nelly.

## CHARACTERS

**Nelly** is a central character, in that she is a definer for the lives and actions of the other characters. She is daughter, step daughter, lover, and pursued; she is many things to others, but has a very restricted life of her own.

**Jenny** is the woman known for her absence—eighteen years away from her daughter—and then for the loss of her boyfriend, Jack, whose suicide was in the cards, in part because he made himself the lover of both a mother and a daughter.

**Jack** is a cut up and a playboy, very much after the ladies, but with a touch of psychotic melancholy which makes his bad end predictable. He is arguably the most imaginative and thoughtful figure in the film.

**Ingeborg** is the faithful stepmother who sees Nelly through the first eighteen years of her life, after her mother has abandoned her. With not long to live, she retires and remains in her small town, after Nelly too has returned. She never comes to peace with the incompleteness of her care for Nelly.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### NELLY.

**Character.** Nelly, the daughter of Jenny, who has left her behind in the village, eighteen years previously, is a quiet and fairly colorless girl, who chiefly defines herself by her wants and dislikes. She wants to get out of the small town where she has been brought up; a place, we gather from glimpses of a charity ball which will take place there, of old fashioned pleasures, music and dance and sweeping skirts, and mustachios, and of old fashioned moral values. Nelly could—but doesn't—decide to stay in the small town, until some stable opportunity arises, for getting out into the world. What she does, of course, is to return to the city, and into the living nightmare that life with Jack and Jenny will mean. This return is part of the crisis.

### **Illustrative moments.**

**Gleeful.** Jack, who has returned to the small town with Nelly's mother, is a self-proclaimed city slicker, full of ideas designed to wake up the country folks, and ready to redesign the Charity Ball for which Jenny has returned. Nelly is fascinated by this change in local practice, and welcomes the thought of the arrival of what, she has only indirectly heard, is her mother's lover.

**Cutting loose.** Nelly welcomes Jack's precedent-shattering move, to arrange an alternate dance in a ballroom adjacent to the traditional Charity Ball Dance Hall. Nelly jazzes it up on the piano, while Jack strums a thrilling guitar in time to the hot new rhythms at the time invading the provinces of a still fairly remote northern Europe.

**Exposure.** In the big city Jack comes to Nelly's room, looking for 'love,' but wearing ragged clothes, and of an unkempt appearance which is alarming. He is at the same time muttering about having killed someone. Nelly, suspecting it might be a reference to her mother, nonetheless goes to bed with Jack, only to be awakened when her mother, hale, hearty, and angry, appears in the room. The naked daughter cowers under the sheets.

### **JACK**

**Character** Jack is an 'oily and self-centered' midlife man around town, who became Jenny's lover shortly after she moved to the big city, eighteen years previously. (That was when Jenny left her daughter, in the care of the dour Ingeborg, who raised her.) It was a more or less spur of the moment decision that led Jack to accompany Jenny back home to the village, for a charity ball, after eighteen years; but that brief visit to the village is what brought Jack into the center of the narrative.

At the village ball Jack proves himself a cut up, with no sensitivity to the old folks' entertainment tastes, and with a readiness to introduce boogie woogie and highlife into the local dance scene. Tired even of the slow poke dancers who join them, Jack and Nelly disappear from the entertainment, and run down to the lakeside where they make out robustly. Nelly's on site boyfriend, the faithful dog she finds boring, intervenes, even knocks Jack into the lake, but Nelly is hooked—Jack comes over mysterious, and fascinates Nelly by glimpses into the morbid poetry he creates in his head: 'this is a moonlit life. Not yet for you, but you'll soon see...unreal light, darkness and shadow, and all manner of frightful things...' Nelly gladly accompanies Jack and her mother back to the city.

In the city the three figures—Jenny, Nelly, and Jack—form an impossible triangle. (As Jack puts it: 'Jenny lives off me, and I live off Nelly. It's all rather diabolical.') Jealousies and poverty, even squalor, reduce their qualities of life. Jack's mid life exuberance soon wears out, between the two women, and he fades away, as Nelly returns to the village, at peace at last with the rural quiet found there.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Boisterous.** At the village charity ball, Jack shows off as a hot dancer with no patience for the old folks. He moves in fast on Ulf, the local boyfriend of Nelly, and collects his pizzazz—after a knockout blow from Ulf-- fast enough to ensure Nelly returns to the city with him.

**Melancholic.** Through Jack runs a strain of poetic melancholy, which makes him unusually attractive to Nelly, when she first encounters him. Jack is in fact more than just a drugstore lothario, but an extravagant actor, with a fear of death and a popular poetic way to express it.

**Homicidal.** Early upon Nelly's arrival in the city Jack goes to her rooms, and begins talking—in a rambling fashion that leaves his lover confused—about having committed a murder. (It seems as though the victim might be Jenny, but it is not.) Jack and Nelly make love, burying the odd language in sex.

**Ragged.** Shortly after Nelly has joined her mother in the city, Jack appears at Nelly's door, wearing ragged clothes and looking beat up. If we had any doubts about Jack's reliable stability, they are fortified by the disjointed, melancholically psychotic way this formerly fast talker now talks.

## INGEBORG

**Character** Ingeborg is Nelly's stepmother, who has raised the girl for the first eighteen years of her life, until the girl's birthmother, Jenny, returns from the city to reclaim her child. Ingeborg never fully recovers from the loss of Nelly from her life, and looks forward ardently to the time when the girl will return to her—as she does at the end of the film. Yet Ingeborg is unable to feel at ease, when finally Nelly is with her again, because her conscience will not forgive for having wished her own happiness—having Nelly with her—without first considering the happiness of the girl herself. So subtle was Bergman, even in this first film under his direction!

### Illustrative moments

**Mothering.** Ingeborg is a counter figure to Jenny, the birthmother of Nelly. While Jenny left her daughter, in order to enjoy the big city—which it appears she did not too long enjoy—Ingeborg remained largely at home in the village, caring for her ward, and leading her own retiring life, giving music lessons, putting up with a chronic terminal illness, and keeping herself almost invisible.

**Shocked.** Some time after Jenny, Nelly, and Jack have settled in the city, and have begun living out their emotion fraught triangle, Ingeborg takes a trip to the city to visit the trio. She is deeply shocked by what she finds, a turmoil of interpersonal conflicts, jealousies, and threats of violence—not long after this visit, Jack will pronounce to Nelly, that he has just committed murder, and though we never hear the end of this we taste the atmosphere of violence that is there when Ingeborg visits.

**Conscientious.** When returning by train from the city, after her visit with Nelly, Jenny, and Jack, Ingeborg falls into a deep and symptomatic dream. Its content is that she is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, for the possessiveness with which she longs to retain control over Nelly—the substitute child, who was the joy of her life for eighteen years. The dreaming stepmother is aware that she now covets the prospect of having Nelly with her again. But it is just this projection that seems to her culpable. She reacts sharply against the side of herself that wants to possess the life of another person.

## JENNY

**Character** Jenny is Nelly's biological mother, and in some ways the opposite of Nelly's stepmother, Ingeborg. While Ingeborg was a faithful and loving custodian of Nelly, for the eighteen years she was growing up, Jenny was in the city, living a socially marginal existence in prostitution, with her lover (and perhaps pimp) Jack, and more recently starting up a small beauty salon for herself, a source of some comfort, and a little financial security. When we first meet Jenny she has just returned to the village, with the intention of meeting up with her daughter Nelly. She will return the next day—with Nelly and Jack—to the city where they have all been living, and where, given their disastrous triangular dynamic, disastrous outcomes can be expected.

### Illustrative moments

**Trampy.** When Jenny returns to the village after eighteen years, to bring her daughter to the city, she is trampily dressed: hair a bit disheveled, fingernails long and over painted, cheap jewelry. Her outfits and manner reflect the social level at which she has long been living.

**Startled.** Having brought Jack with her, on her return to the village, Jenny was unprepared for the ardor with which Jack pursued Nelly at the boogie woogie dance. Jenny cries out to Jack in shock and disapproval, as he climbs up and down her beloved daughter!

**Shocked.** Shortly after Nelly arrives in the city, her mom drops in on her, and is shocked to find a naked Nelly in bed with Jack. If Jenny was planning to reclaim Nelly for herself, by bringing her back from the village, the plan is doomed. Jenny has introduced her daughter into the nastiest of triangular affairs.