

AUTUMN SONATA 1979

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Although silence and estrangement pervade the *Autumn Sonata* (1979), it concludes with an interestingly different tone from that we saw in *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) or *The Silence* (1963), in both of which films there seems no outlook for outreach or communication, as the work fades into resignation and illness. To be sure, there is nothing upbeat about the conclusion of *Autumn Sonata*, which takes the remorseful mother away from the children and household she could not incorporate into her life, but there is at least the whisper of the thought of eventual reconciliation, between Charlotte and her daughter Eva. Eva will write a letter to her mother which holds out the possibility of an eventual understanding. We will surround the close of the film with some sense that the furious quarrel between mother and daughter can have opened some windows of understanding, at least a crack. That crack is small and severe, to be sure. By this time we are well past the 'religious argument stage'—*Through a Glass Darkly*, 1961; *Winter Light*, 1962—in which Bergman was working with vistas of transcendence of the human condition. We are even out of the range of *Cries and Whispers* (1972), which centered on a dying woman whose faith was deeper than the pastor's, or on the nurse Anna, who was able to enact the Virgin Mary, suckling the dying Agnes. Those earlier films yield, in *Autumn Sonata*, to a world view in which social psychology calls the shots, and salvation is almost entirely confined to the search for psychological balance, even in the mind of such a clergyman as Ewa's husband.

STORY

The setting The story opens, surprisingly, with the pastor speaking to us, about the first arrival of his wife in the vicarage, and Ewa's statement that she liked the place. The film might be said to concern, from that point on, the developments that lead to Ewa's unhappiness 'in the place.'

Life in the vicarage From the outset, Ewa and her husband have a tepid relationship. He is sensitive to her needs, as he makes clear to Charlotte, Ewa's mother, when he attempts later to explain why his wife does not seem happy. He is above all aware of the lasting pain, caused to his wife by the drowning death of their four year old son. (A special room, the son's, has been preserved unchanged, as a refuge for the mother, who needs to be freed from the yoke of this painful loss.) We subsequently learn that Ewa has abundant enough reasons for unhappiness, quite apart from her son's death. She has enough talent—she has written two books, and despite her mother, can play serious Chopin tolerably well-- to leave her frustrated by a vicar's wife existence in which her greatest triumphs are school concerts and musical evenings for elderly parishioners. And then above all looms the incubus of her own loveless childhood, in which she carried with her the weight of her mother's absence, the details and pain of which are only later in this film to make themselves clear.

Childhood with Charlotte The heart of the story—which is all about Ewa's discovery of reasons why she is not happy in the vicarage—is brutally expounded in the prolonged quarrel between mother and daughter, that segues into Charlotte's very premature departure. The revelations of childhood have of course been awaiting us. We have seen how the prima donna mother talks high theater life with her agent on the phone, ignoring everyone else in the room; we have seen mother correct her daughter's playing of a Chopin Etude, just when a supportive read would be most in place; and we have noted the blighted despair that strikes mother Charlotte when she learns that her defective, and essentially dying, second child is awaiting her in the house, where in fact she has been staying for two years. We have been preparing ourselves to accept the almost bottomless selfishness of the high art Charlotte, who is in fact, though a former star, a now fading star.

Do you like me? The backgrounds for Ewa's unhappiness have been sketched, but the time comes, after dinner, when Ewa and her mother find themselves alone—the vicar is prudently discrete throughout the gathering storm—and Ewa lays it all on the table with a withering question, 'do you like me?', delivered to her mother. From that point on, the film is totally concentrated on the quarrel between mother and daughter, over the psychologically abusive treatment of Ewa and her sister. Intricate details pop up: it seems that Lorenzo, mother's lover who has just died, had been very briefly the lover of Helena, Ewa's now seriously dwindling sister, and that this dynamic had never before been shared with Mom. Mother is angered, and prompts from Ewa a thunderstorm of complaints. The chief charge, which pours out into the night between the two women, is that Charlotte was always absent, during Ewa's childhood—absent while concertizing, absent while living with a lover over a period of many months. The upshot of the argument is a heavy charge of child neglect, with which Ewa provokes her mother's very premature departure from a visit that had pain written all over it from the start. Charlotte has begun, in the middle of the argument, to assert the claims of her artistic calling, and the obligations it laid on her, to be here and there—anywhere but with her daughter. In the end, though, she flees because she sees the crushing inappropriateness, of all her pleas for understanding.

Flight of Charlotte The film narrative ends with the flight of Charlotte, who has nothing left to defend herself with. She has passed the peak of her considerable career, she realizes that it is too late to recover the traditional love of her beneficiaries—a happy family and its memories. Not surprisingly, though, Ewa has quickly climbed down from her position of high assault, and written a letter, to her Mother, which will hold out the promise of eventual reconciliation. That Bergman is mercifully opening a door into change and growth we can appreciate by, for instance, contrasting the conclusion of *The Silence*, in which Anna leaves her elder sister hopelessly estranged from her, and there is no window onto the future to be opened.

THEMES

Infidelity. Charlotte is culpable of supreme infidelity to her maternal obligations, and to the two girls it has produced, both of whom she has neglected through her absence, throughout their adolescence. She has for years failed to visit her two girls, although one of them, Helena, has been confined, for all that time, in a nursing home for the severely handicapped. The present visit, paid in Charlotte's late fifties, is fraught with the difficulties of making amends.

Fury. Ewa has been building a stockpile of rage against her mother, whose absence from her family has caused increasing pain to her children. In the final confrontation of the two women, Ewa lets out decades of resentment, and will not be calmed. As is often the case, in a display of fury, the increasingly furious individual discovers both relief and startled remorse, at having broken the long respected taboo of silence.

Restraint. The exemplar of both care and restraint, in this film, is Ewa's husband, the pastor. He introduces the film by referencing the positive feeling his wife has always had toward her vicarage home. He avoids intervening in the harsh quarrel between Ewa and her mother, and he maintains admirable objectivity, as he explains to Charlotte the pressures and depressions her daughter has for a long time been subject to.

Selfishness. Long embedded in her highflying artistic life—the life of agents, contracts, concerts, and sustained practice routines—Charlotte is unable to conceal the disappointments that surround her as she arrives at her daughter's village house, for a many years postponed visit. At first, Charlotte is buoyant and enthusiastic, but when she sees the depression of Ewa, and accepts the reality of Helena's being in the house, she begins to feel overwhelmed by the unfulfilled obligations she has accumulated.

CHARACTERS

Ewa. Ewa is the daughter of Charlotte, a well known concert pianist in her late fifties, and the wife of a modest and gentle village vicar, for whom she is gradually losing any romantic feeling. She is apprehensive at the visit of her mother, who has not seen her for several years, and though Ewa

attempts an initial reconciliation, Charlotte's presence—with its critiques and selfishness—begins to seem insufferable. The brief visit, of Mother and daughter, not surprisingly explodes into major conflict, and Charlotte leaves far sooner than intended.

Charlotte is a prima donna pianist, of considerable renown and ability, who has arrived for a visit with her daughter Ewa, and in addition, as it turns out, with her severely handicapped second daughter, Helena. Torn between the professional glamor of her career, and her responsibilities on the home front, and recently bereft of her long time boyfriend, Lorenzo, she enters the narrative at a vulnerable point, and not surprisingly finds herself embroiled in bouts of remorse and argument.

Victor, husband of Ewa, is a prudent and modest clergyman, reminiscent of other subtle and gentle men of Bergman—the pastor in *Winter Light* or the Professor in *Wild Strawberries*. He maintains his careful distance from the hot psychodrama that is engulfing his wife and her mother. At the same time, he intervenes effectively when needed, as when Charlotte needs to understand the mind set of her daughter, whom she has not seen for years.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

EWA

Character Ewa is the daughter of a renowned pianist, the sister of a young woman failing rapidly from a degenerative disease which renders her speech unintelligible, and the wife of a village pastor. She is constricted from all directions—a sick sister who lays great claims on her time and concern, a mother who has for decades suppressed Ewa, and minimized her capabilities, and a husband who is polite and responsible but not romantic—and in addition has suffered the unusual blow of losing her only child, who was four at the time, to a drowning accident. Despite these obstacles in her life, Ewa is energetic enough to undertake a violent flashpoint argument with her mother, and, after that, sensitive enough to write her mother a letter holding out at least the possibility of reconciliation.

Illustrative moments

Welcoming. When Charlotte arrives, Ewa is tense. It is seven years since she has seen her mother. She has much to tell Charlotte, and is at first, in the excitement of encounter, unaware of how bitter her feelings are. When Ewa begins to play the piano, she realizes how ill at ease she is.

Competing. Charlotte asks to hear her daughter play. As the requested performance, of a Chopin Etude, proceeds, we realize from mother's expression that she cannot refrain from a full hearted critique. It is not that Ewa plays badly, but that she is hesitant and careful. Mother looks on, then launches into a general critique of her daughter's understanding of the musician. Ewa is thinking less about the music than about her growing resentment of her mother.

Reminiscing Ewa has preserved, completely intact, the room her son occupied, before his drowning death at the age of four. It is a place to which she can retire and hold the past like a protective cloak around her. Simply holding on in her life seems enough for her.

Quarreling. After dinner, on the day of her arrival, Ewa and her mother stumble into a terrible quarrel with one another. It begins with Ewa's blunt question to her mother, *do you like me?*, and is followed up directly by Ewa's furious litany of the ways her mother proved to be too selfish to care for her daughters.

Supporting Characters

VICTOR

Character Victor is Ewa's husband, a village pastor—cf. similar personal type and issues in *Winter Light*—basically repressed and quiet, and yet an essential background piece to the chess game engaging Charlotte and Ewa. He has supposed, from Ewa's initial responses to living in the pastorate,

that she is happy with this life style. (That he misjudged the difficulties this Swedish Mme. Bovary would face, soon becomes amply apparent.) Victor's responsible but tepid relation to Eva, especially after the death of their son, has diffused itself through Eva's life, which has lost its drive and confidence, leaving Victor unaware that the life of a village pastor's wife can be devastatingly dull.

Illustrative moments

Positive. The Victor we meet, at the onset of the film, speaks to us of the happiness with which Eva formerly greeted her new life as a village pastor's wife. She had, he explains, a thoroughly positive feeling about assuming her new responsibilities. We sense a certain opaqueness about Victor's account of the situation.

Explanatory. Later in the film, Charlotte—Eva's mother—turns to Victor to get some inside account of how her daughter is doing. Victor fills in some of the expected, and actual, background: that the loss of her son has proven a great burden to Eva, and that she is tired and busy. No word of the actual pressures of daily life in a country vicarage. Victor may not be aware of this dimension.

Absent. Though Victor is aware of the great quarrel that breaks out between Eva and her mother, the night of Charlotte's arrival, he prudently—or cowardly—remains on the sidelines, keeping himself invisible. His situation is marginal, to be sure, and there was probably—evidently he thought this—nothing he could do by intervening.

Domestic. After the mother daughter quarrel has exploded, and Charlotte has decided to leave right away, Helena, the now handicapped sister of Eva, expresses terrible (if basically mute) distress. She feels abandoned, and it is up to Victor to console and calm her. His good intentions and his personal stiffness conflict in this willed effort at religious duty.

CHARLOTTE

Character Charlotte is a renowned international piano performer, who is, and long has been, deeply wrapped up in the bright lights of her performance career, and correspondingly careless with her two children: Helena, who has fallen victim to a serious speech impediment and paralysis handicap, and seems to be losing her life force altogether; and Eva, the wife of a village pastor, who is herself depressed and unmotivated. The combined pull, of these two gravitational weights, is beginning to take a toll on mother, who is no longer in high youth, and who has begun a critical review of her own selfish past. To this review, and to her breakthrough quarrel with Eva, we owe the final letter of the film, in which mother and Eva correspond with one another, and raise possibilities for a considerable rapprochement in the future.

Illustrative moments

Critical. Charlotte sits down to listen to Eva play a Chopin etude, which the girl does quite creditably, though not up to her mother's level, as we realize when Mother takes over the playing and is clearly more skilled than daughter. Not only that, but the mother must add a music culture lesson, about the nature of Romantic music—a complex put down of her daughter.

Generous. We are aware, from the time she arrives, that Charlotte is warming toward her daughter, in her way. In bed, on the first night of her visit, Charlotte dreams that she will give her car to Eva, and she wakes determined to do so—which will involve some little personal sacrifice, flying home instead of driving. We might say that Charlotte offers her generosity in teaspoon sized doses .

Quarrelsome. After a second dream, in which she imagines Eva choking her to death, Charlotte gets up, goes into the living room, and finds there her daughter, who is also too restless to sleep. At that point all hell breaks loose. Eva brings up all her grievances against her runaway mom, who was constantly out on concerts when she was needed at home. Charlotte reciprocates, but sheepishly; inwardly conceding the accuracy of Eva's charges, she makes plans to leave the next day.

Job-like. On the train, the day of her departure, Charlotte entertains many thoughts about the course of her life. One question she (like Job, in the Old Testament) asks herself is: why was Helena allowed to live, to live her life of serious and often painful existence? Why was she not simply allowed to die? Is Charlotte arguing herself, like Job, into a position from which she will be obliged to say yes to 'the way things are?'