

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Persona 1966 Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

This uniquely debatable, symbolically rich, and universal film raises broad questions and takes its place among major landmarks of the human effort to come to grips with personality and inter personal relations. Rather than look for parallels to this unique film, one might better look for parallel concerns, to those of Bergman in this film. The philosophy of personal identity—cf. entry in *The Stanford (online) Encyclopedia of Philosophy*—addresses the delicate issue of where one personality ends and another begins. Bergman offers perspectives, onto the porosity of personality, which resemble philosophical concerns with the ‘fusion’ of minds in dialogue. In literary critique—say in that of Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)—characters demand an author, rather than the usual reverse. We are reminded that art and the artist are in fact both needed, and not to be taken for granted; the point is made in *Persona* at the time when the simulation of a burnt cinema reel reminds us both of the fragility of the art operation, and of its value to us.

STORY

In *Persona*, 1966, Bergman demonstrates a faultless sense of pace—no waste, no confusion, of simplicity or character—only two major characters, with three additional, minor parts, and one setting—sea scapes and bare interiors for the most part. At the heart of the work is a pair of women—Liv Ullman (Elisabet Vogler) and Bibi Andersson (Alma); in real life friends and lovers of Bergman himself. One of the women, Elisabet, is a stage actress, who has recently, during a performance of the Greek play *Electra*, fallen seriously ill, stricken by a recent ‘seizure’ which has rendered her incapable of speaking. A Stockholm doctor recommends, as a cure, a period of retirement in a cottage by the sea; she sends along Alma, a nurse from a Stockholm clinic, as a caretaker for Elisabet. The film is largely devoted to the deep, often dreamlike, sometimes erotic, interrelations of the two women, during an extended period together in a cottage by the sea. Interpretation of the film, which has reached virtually biblical extent, is endless, but has recurrent themes: that the patient is a split personality, of whom the attendant nurse is one part; that the two women are lesbian lovers, hence can melt into one another; that the nurse is basically a psychotic episode of the patient; even that the deep patient is a god figure, wooed and approached by the anxious energumen, the insecure nurse. *Persona* remains the most discussed achievement in film history. The unfolding of the above poetic and allusive ‘plot,’ with its rich symbolical dimensions, takes place in the simple surroundings of a hospital room or a beach cottage, isolated beside the North Atlantic.

Sharing Alma tells Elizabeth about herself. Elizabeth does not reciprocate. Alma is beset by personal insecurity—in her sex life, in her attitude to her fiancé, and in her doubts about her capacities as a nurse—and the pressure of working with a strong mute woman, who gradually acquires power over her, drives Alma to hope, vainly, for support and encouragement from the direction of Elisabet. Elisabet meanwhile refuses to speak, withholds any verbal or other reassurances to the increasingly hysterical nurse; the effect of her withdrawal, and of her negative feelings toward her nurse, leads her to true contempt for this ancillary figure, who nevertheless merges with her in dreamlike scenes of erotica, as the narrative continues.

Disappointment and anger While running an errand for her patient, Alma makes the mistake of reading an (accidentally still unsealed) letter from Elizabeth to a friend. To her amazement, Alma discovers that Elizabeth is making a study of Alma herself, and particularly of her juvenile sexual experiences. Suddenly Alma is aware that Elizabeth is keenly aware of everything she (Alma) says, and that Alma can no longer assume a sympathetic hearing from her patient. Elisabet has done nothing to reassure Alma, whose insecurity is growing destructive to the nurse, who is insecure at best. Alma is deeply wounded, even angered, by this ‘betrayal,’ and in anger reacts by leaving a sherd of broken glass

on the pathway where Elizabeth walks. This carefully prepared nastiness marks the breakdown of Alma's own self-control, and a new yielding to insecurity. Verbal and physical violence to each other. Alma's threat to pour scalding water on Elisabeth's face. Goaded by Elizabeth's letter, and deeply provoked by the difficulty of her whole nursing mission, Alma not only lets her fists fly at her dominant patient, but in one particular moment of fury threatens to throw scalding water on her. At this threat Elizabeth utters her first words—"no don't!"—in the movie, and for a while open struggle—Elizabeth still silent—dominates the two women.

THEMES

Silence. Elisabeth is a career actress, therefore partially defined by her ability to use language on the stage or screen. When she chooses silence, and will not break that silence, she is performing an act of violence on herself. That violence permeates the deteriorating relation she has to Alma, in the cottage.

Conflict. Alma's relation, to the actress under her care, morphs from giddy friendliness, through hurt and anger—when she reads Elisabeth's letter--toward outright violence—the fight scene, to a wild effort to gain Elisabeth's forgiveness.

Vengeance. Alma is furious when she reads the letter in which she learns that she is an object of scorn to Elisabeth. As an act of vengeance, Alma leaves shards of broken glass where they will cut Elisabeth's feet.

Homosexuality. Alma and Elisabeth both love and hate one another. Each has an ambiguous and anxious relation to her own male attachments—lovers and sons, and each can melt into the other woman in a film of seductive identity.

CHARACTERS

Elisabeth. Elisabeth is a screen actress, who has lost, or given up, her ability to speak. She is deeply troubled, but at the same time manipulative. Under the care of a nurse, Alma, she is sent to recuperate at a beach cottage on the Swedish coast.

Alma is a young nurse put in charge of the mute Elisabeth, and given responsibility for drawing her patient away from her silence. Instead of accomplishing that cure, Alma goes close to mad in the effort to accomplish her assignment.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ELISABET

Character Elisabeth is certainly the main character here, for it is her silence that provokes the entire drama. Elisabeth Vogler is a well-known stage actress who was struck dumb in the course of performing the part of *Electra*. (*Electra*, in Sophocles' play of that name, is the most plotting and vengeful figure in the House of Atreus trilogy.) This woman is healthy, but will not speak, clearly as some way of relating to earlier wounds, like the loss of a child, and furthermore out of a general disposition to conceal, not to share, her feelings and secrets.

While Elisabeth refuses to speak, withholds any verbal or other reassurances from the increasingly hysterical nurse, the effect of her withdrawal, and of her negative feelings toward her nurse, leads her to true contempt for this ancillary figure, who nevertheless merges with her in dreamlike scenes of erotica. (One line of interpretation, of the film, speaks of Elisabeth vampirizing Alma, who grows increasingly feeble, in her need for Elisabeth's approval.) Elisabeth has done nothing to reassure Alma, whose insecurity is growing destructive to the nurse. Alma reacts in anger by leaving a sherd of broken glass on the pathway where Elizabeth walks. This carefully prepared nastiness marks the breakdown of Alma's own self-control, and a new yielding to insecurity, which Elisabeth carefully manipulates. In one particular moment of fury Alma threatens to throw scalding water on her patient. At this threat Elizabeth utters her first words—"no don't!"—in the movie, and for a while open struggle—Elizabeth still silent—dominates the

two women. We know from Elisabet's earlier behavior that she is contemptuous not only of Alma, but of Alma's simplistic desires for a husband and family.

Illustrative moments

Depressed. When Alma shows Elisabet a photo of her son, Elisabet morosely inspects the image, holding it close, then deliberately tears the image to shreds. For the mute Elisabet, this is as far as she can go toward speech.

Furtive. On her clinic's bed, before her trip to the beach, Elisabet turns from side to side, making herself inscrutable to the Alma who has entered the room to make Elisabet's acquaintance. The actress refuses this initial relation to her nurse.

Sexual. Elisabet fuses with Alma, in Elisabet's bedroom, in the moonlight. Elisabet is diffusely homosexual, and on occasion her face melts into that of the nurse. It is clear that the actress is sexually disturbed.

Fleeing. After her fight with Alma, which stems from the issue of the unsealed letter, and from the general tension between the two women, Elisabet flees along the beach, refusing reconciliation with the distressed Alma. Elisabet is all flight and fear.

Inscrutable. On the sun and wind swept patio, of their summer cottage, Elisabet and Alma commune silently. Then as Alma turns up the register, and starts babbling about herself, Elisabet turns her inscrutable silence on the nurse, and becomes a visual mask, a *persona*.

ALMA

Character Alma is a rookie nurse, in a Stockholm clinic, who inherits the difficult task of helping to bring the actress Elisabet back to speech and her acting career; a task made the more difficult for Alma, because she is of a sharing and confessional sort, and is naturally hungry for a thoroughgoing exchange of secrets and private thoughts. Her anxiety to share with her patient is the more intense because she is beset by personal insecurity—in her sex life, in her attitude to her fiancée, and in her doubts about her capacities as a nurse—and the pressure of working with a strong mute woman, who gradually acquires power over her, is enough finally to drive Alma away from her sanatorium assignment. She is insecure to start with, and must cope with more pressure than she is able to endure. Though assigned to Mrs. Vogler, as nurse and companion, Anna quickly becomes the less executive person of the two, and slips into dependence on her patient, around whom, partly because of her patient's refusal to speak, she (Alma) gradually becomes the dependent, telling all about her life, crashing emotionally when her patient writes critical opinions about her. She is in a position of checkmate, with regard to helping her silent patient.

Illustrative moments

Neophyte. From her first meeting with her patient, in the Stockholm Clinic, Alma is over eager to accomplish her assignment, to help her patient back to speech. But she is easily discouraged, and confesses to the doctor that she is unsure of being able to carry out the job.

Confessional. In the beach cottage, as Elisabet continues her silence, Alma grows increasingly effusive about herself. Her patient's silence provokes her own volubility.

Sexuality. Letting herself go in chatter, Alma reveals secrets of her own sexual life, her early sex with two boys on the beach, and her affair with a married man.

Shock. Alma is terribly shocked when she opens the unsealed letter that Elisabet has sent with her to the post office. Her anger and resentment, at having been scorned by her patient, is almost unbearable.

Guilt After having called her patient 'rotten,' and attacked her for her unkindness, Alma begs for forgiveness, as she runs along the beach, chasing Elisabet.