

Consequences of love deprivation in childhood: Ingmar Bergman's film *Autumn Sonata*

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In the modern society, an early deprivation of mother's love and its consequences are among the most socially significant topics. Potential for and ways of adaptation to demands of reality in individuals, who have gone through such a trauma, are a matter of concern for both scholars and artists. Bergman's film *Autumn Sonata* is devoted to this concern. With a great psychological depth, it represents a story about how those who were deprived from their mother's love eventually live, behave and build their relationships with the world.

There are three main characters in this film, all of them are women: Charlotte, a mother, and two of her daughters: Eva, the older and Helena, the younger. The plot is based on their family's tragedy. Charlotte, a talented pianist and an extremely self-centered person, deserted her little daughters in favor of her profession. This caused severe neurotic illnesses in her children: one developed depression and the other, paralysis.

Eva, the older daughter, left home, made a career, and married. Helena, the younger, is helpless, bed-ridden, and spent years in a mental state institution. Time passed, and the three of them met again at Eva's and her husband Victor's home.

At night, Charlotte sees a dream that Eva strangles her. She screams and wakes up. Eva hears her and comes. "Do you love me, don't you?", asks Charlotte, still under impression of her nightmare. "You are my mother" – Eva replies evasively. Then a conversation starts between them about their past life. Very soon it grows into a hard quarrel with squaring of accounts, unexpected mutual reproaches, accusations, recriminations, admissions of guilt, and tears. In the morning, Charlotte hastily leaves, although she intended to stay longer, and Eva feels guilty for driving her mother out and fears that she will never see her again. Thus ends what they expected to be a reconciliatory family meeting.

The question is what made Eva start a conversation which spoiled their relations that had seemed to get right only a few hours ago?

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“IF SOMEBODY WOULD LOVE ME”



The clinical picture of Eva's illness: In her childhood, Eva survived multiple traumas provoked by separation from the mother. In his scientific work, John Bowlby (1961) discovered that separation not only causes distress in the child at the time or even unhappiness later, but it is the cause of specific mental illness, notably depression. Separation institutes the mourning process which the child is too immature to go through without any harm, and the child results in being fixated on mourning forever. Due to trauma, Eva developed a depression at an early stage of her psychological development.

According to Erik Erikson's theory (1968), such children eventually experience serious difficulties when forming their identity. Eva is 30 years old now, but she is still experiencing the crisis of identity ("My biggest obstacle is that I do not know who I am. I grope blindly").

Another consequence of early separation from mother is that the child loses a capacity to trust her relationships. E. Erikson maintained that if distrust of the mother is developed at an early age, the child tends to carry the distrust into adulthood and attribute it to the world in general. Now, Eva does not believe that people can love her. She does not even believe that "she is loved whole-heartedly" by her husband.

When Eva's mother undertook to upbringing her daughter, she was unrealistically demanding and intolerant: she never encouraged or complimented Eva. In result Eva thought of herself being "disgusting, stupid, and a failure". The terms of classical psychoanalysis fit well here: Eva had an unnaturally passive ID, a weak and underdeveloped EGO, and both were suppressed by an active, imperious, and harmful SUPER-EGO, reflecting the mother's authority, values, and attitudes. According to Sigmund Freud (1960), people having such a structure of personality inevitably develop psychological disorders. It is not a surprise, that Eva has been suffering depression and insomnia since her childhood.

But how is it possible that Eva, being a pathologically apathetic and practically broken, having many neurotic symptoms and suicidal thoughts, grew up to be a functional and productive woman? – She keeps household orderly and comfortable, she helps her husband to do his parish work, plays organ and piano, and even writes books. Additionally, she succeeded to recover after her only child's death, which is difficult even for sane people. Alfred Adler's idea of compensation (1997) can explain this transformation.

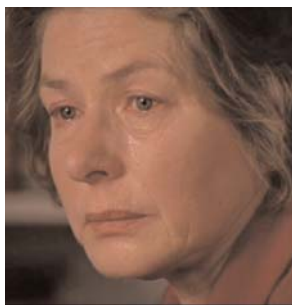
Eva grew up with a weak EGO. She left home, and it helped her to self-realize as a person. Due to her complicated life experiences, she developed her EGO: she learned to think logically, understand connections between causes and consequence of events, and to brilliantly express herself in writing. She compensated and even over-compensated the weakness of her EGO and turned it into a rare talent to see things as they are without coloring reality with her own senses or fantasies. This is what helped her to become a memoir writer, very philosophical one.

When her EGO became strong and mature, it comprehended the cruel lessons of her childhood and dethroned that inadequate and non-functional part of her SUPER-EGO which came from her mother's authority.

Due to Eva's overdeveloped EGO, she practices psychoanalytic conversations with herself – conversations that usually specialists conduct with patients. Meaning, she becomes the psychoanalyst herself. The main goal of a classical psychoanalytic session is to reconstruct a complete picture of the patient's past and relations with others. If this task is accomplished, and the picture is represented to the patient with all necessary explanations, the patient's illness goes away. That's why it is so important for Eva to know why Charlotte caused so much harm for the closest people to her.

The night quarrel between Eva and her mother, which is the central scene of the film, is a collision of Eva's EGO and her former SUPER-EGO. As a child, Eva suffered from her mother's despotism and indifference, and, being unable to resist, she directed her accumulated aggression to herself. She tells shocking details of her self-destructing behavior – biting nails and pulling out tufts of hair. Now, as an adult, she addresses the ultimate source of her tragedy. “Defend yourself”, demands Eva. Charlotte responds with the story of her own childhood, and what she tells is not less shocking.

“I HAVE NEVER GROWN UP”



The clinical picture of Charlotte's illness: Charlotte went through an emotional deprivation in her childhood (“I cannot recall my parents ever having touched me either with caress or as a punishment. I was completely ignorant of everything about love: tenderness, contact, intimacy, warmth”). The trauma of her childhood started up a development of a detached type of neurotic personality with the “moving away from people” adjustment pattern. As Karen Horney pointed out (1945), such individuals lose their ability to love and tend to live distantly from others. Charlotte is over 60

years old, but she still has no idea of home or family. Her first husband oppressed her. Her second marriage is no better: Leonardo “lives at his villa near Naples” and she visits him from time by time in the course of her tours. She could never communicate with children; they irritated her. Also she was indifferent to her grandchild and now – to the memory of him.



The only person she is interested in is herself. She cares a lot about her appearance and success. She turns any conversation to her own person. She is extremely egocentric and self-loving. She is a narcissistic individual perceiving others as a mirror to reflect and admire herself (Freud, 1935).

On the other hand, Charlotte is creative and very active. “Her vitality can crush everyone”, Eva says sarcastically. However, due to this very vitality she successfully found an activity to devote herself and the love of which she had been deprived as a child. Now she is loved and admired by thousands of worshippers. However, they are distant and this relationship bears no commitment. All the other relationships, including family ones, make no sense to her. She does not allow people to

come close to her, so none can see that really she is “an emotionally crippled escapist”.

Charlotte has an energetic and hypertrophied ID, which is the source of her creative potential. At the same time, her ID arouses constant conflicts with her SUPER-EGO. These conflicts bring a lot of problems for Charlotte's EGO (“Always a guilty consciousness”). She carefully suppresses and represses her anxiety, but it returns again and again in the form of a severe neurotic symptom – a pain in her back. Altogether, she experiences a cluster of disorders: pain disorder, insomnia, and addiction to tobacco smoking.

Victims of early emotional deprivation tend to degenerate mentally, socially, and physically. However, Charlotte, did become a famous pianist. Even at her age, when most people retire, she works hard and is very popular. Her concerts are scheduled many months in advance and bring her huge fees. How to explain this? – Sigmund Freud's principle of mental energy preservation and his theory of psychological defense, specifically the mechanism of sublimation, help us to understand this paradox (1960).

Mental energy, if it can not be used in the direct way, is not lost and may be transformed. Charlotte directed all her natural energy and curiosity to music. Due to circumstances of her upbringing, the world of human relationships, so important for others, has no value for her. She understands feelings better if they are expressed in music. When Eva speaks to her about the essence of life, Charlotte cuts her short and is unable to continue such a discussion. At the same time, Charlotte is sensitive to subtle psychological and aesthetical nuances of Eva's spirit when Eva plays Chopin's prelude. Music is more real for Charlotte than reality itself.

Charlotte's "escape from people" may be interpreted as a kind of *sublimation*. Although antisocial by its nature, it serves her musical career, which allows and even requires reduction of social contacts.

However, developmental distortions caused by lack of a loving mother are so severe that even the most successful sublimation can't defeat them. Actually, since her childhood Charlotte has been spending her psycho-physical resources to maintain sublimation. There was nothing left for motherhood. Due to this, Charlotte's life style that helped her to cope with her psychological problems and reach a high social status, harmed her family and mutilated her children's destinies, especially Helena's one.

"MAMA, COME!"



The clinical picture of Helena's illness: Helena was first separated from her mother at the age of one. At that age, a baby does not yet distinguish herself from her mother physically and perceives her mother's long absence as a partial loss of herself. It prevents her from developing a sense of her body's wholeness. Eventually, she, like her older sister, experienced multiple separation traumas.

Also, Helena's identity is undeveloped. In fact, she had always identified herself with her mother and could not perceive herself as an independent being. In adolescence, this inadequacy showed itself when she fell in love with Leonardo, her mother's second husband. It was a manifestation of her belated Oedipus complex.

This unrequited love became the last link in the chain of frustrations and traumas she went through. This time her subtle personality collapsed. S. Freud would say that Helena developed a somatoform disorder resulting from a conversion of underlying emotional conflicts into physical symptoms.

At the age of barely more than twenty, Helena is bed-ridden with atrophied muscles and impaired, unarticulated speech, and her condition continues to deteriorate. Eva, with whom she lives, takes care of her and serves as an interpreter connecting Helena to the world.

In Helena's personality, distorted by her illness, we can discern a suppressed ID, an undeveloped EGO and a SUPER-EGO in which her mother reigns. Helena is fixed on her childhood, still needs her mother and waits for her. She also suffers from nightmares provoked by repressed frustration and accompanied aggression – all this is due to the impossibility of being with her mother. When Charlotte unexpectedly leaves, not even saying "Good bye" to her, Helena falls into hysterics.

In Helena's case, because of very early emotional trauma, no compensation occurred. A trauma affects mostly those functions which develop intensively at that time. At one year, infants learn to walk and talk. That's why Helena's muscles responsible for locomotion and speech were so much impaired. At the age of one, consciousness and EGO start to develop intensively as well. Trauma prevented them from normal development. Therefore, Helena cannot consciously and voluntarily

control her psychological functioning. This explains why her illness progresses uncontrollably and why it is incurable and irreversible.

“THE MOTHER’S INJURES ARE HANDED DOWN TO THE DAUGHTER”

And still there are neither rights nor wrongs in this story. Charlotte made her daughters suffer because she had suffered in the same way. Eva is Charlotte’s victim, but at the same time she is guilty of her son’s death. Children do not get drowned without a cause. (It is worth noting that in the initial version of the scenario Erik did not get drowned; he died from some unknown illness; but he did not stay alive anyway). Ingmar Bergman, as a scenario writer and film director, intuitively knew that Eva, in spite of being kind and attracting the audience’s sympathies, was not a proper mother either.

This seems to be a law of social life: a woman who is unable to love will probably raise a daughter with the same defect, and the daughter will transmit it to the next generation. A mother carrying a trauma resulting from love deprivation inevitably dooms her posterity to illness and degeneracy.

There is one more circumstance without which our understanding of the characters’ relationships will be incomplete. Eva and Helena belonged to an unhappy and dysfunctional family. When their mother was touring, an atmosphere of anxiety and depression reigned in their home. The father fell into apathy and, although he loved his daughters, he could not help them in dealing with emotional problems. Even during her absences, Charlotte seemed to be the center of their home and life.

Charlotte is an extraordinary individual: beautiful, elegant and sophisticated, talented and famous. She serves art. For sensitive, suggestible, and imaginative children such people are extremely attractive, because they look like magicians. If such a magician happens to be their mother, she is doubly attractive: they adore her, believe that she is perfect, and bow before her. There is similarity between the daughters’ behavior and the behavior of many teenage girls who are madly in love with their rock star, a musical idol.

Is it worth while to love a star? – A star is beautiful and shines with a cold light. It is not dangerous at a distance; but one should not come near it because it burns. So, the daughters burned up in their mother’s radiance.

From the history of psychology we know that S. Freud quarreled with his followers, when they deviated from classical psychoanalysis created by him and made new ways in science. However, my exposition shows that Bergman’s *Autumn Sonata* supports different theories created by S. Freud, A. Adler, E. Erikson, K. Horney, and J. Bowlby even if Bergman did not care about theories at all. All these theories (and maybe others) can collaborate and complement each other in the study of this film. Ingmar Bergman reconciled them by the means of his art.

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