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Goodwill in Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*

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With *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), Ingmar Bergman aimed to make a film based on his childhood. He ended up with a masterpiece that not only captivates as autobiography but also encourages viewers to reflect on their own lives. *Fanny and Alexander* explores several interlaced topics, including gender roles, childhood, class difference, and religion. Most importantly, however, the film leaves us with a message: reflect on the social roles you play so that you can live your life with goodwill and love. The character of Helena Ekdahl (Gunn Wållgren) best articulates this message when conversing with the ghost of her dead son, Oscar (Allan Edwall). "Some roles are nice, others not so nice," Helena says. "The thing is not to shrink from them." This follows on her comments to her friend Isak earlier in the film: "We all play our roles. Some play them negligently, others with great care. I'm one of the latter." As she demonstrates throughout the film, playing her many roles (mother, grandmother, wife, lover, actress, and family matriarch) with "great care" means not only meticulously attending to her responsibilities, but also caring for others with love and compassion. Late in the film, Oscar's ghost underscores this message once again when he tells his son, Alexander (Bertil Guve), to "be gentle with people."



Yet it is another of Helena's sons, Gustav (Jarl Kulle), who perhaps best demonstrates the film's message: the need to examine the roles one plays and prioritize kindness. Gustav is an extremely complex character. When we first meet him, he is kindhearted but deeply insecure. Though he attempts to live his life with goodwill and a focus on family, he is crippled by what appears to be a serious oedipal complex.



Through much of the film, Gustav is an adult man-child who blunders more often than he succeeds, but because of his kind heart and love for family, he is redeemed in the end. Bergman uses Gustav's character arc to show the consequences—both good and bad—of coddling men in a matriarchal system. In so doing, Bergman shows us how Gustav learns to navigate both his family and his own insecurities, ultimately setting aside his fragile ego to choose selflessness and familial love.



Gustav's treatment of his maid and mistress, Maj (Pernilla August), early in the film is demeaning, yet strangely understandable due to the permissive conditions that apparently prevail in the matriarchal Ekdahl family. Before the bedroom sequence with Maj and Gustav, Gustav's wife, Alma (Mona Malm), slaps Maj across the face for sleeping with her husband, but rather than an admonishment, Alma's slap is a reminder that while she is

allowing her husband the affair, Maj shouldn't forget that Alma is still in charge. This behavior from Alma is puzzling. It's difficult to know which is worse, Gustav for making his housemaid his mistress or Alma for allowing and even endorsing it. Gustav is clearly immature and driven by his sexual desires, but nobody calls him out on it in the early part of the film. His wife indulges him, as does his mother, though Helena laments that he is "oversexed."

In a sequence that provides an intimate look at their relationship, Gustav feeds Maj oysters in bed while he praises her beauty and calls her a "princess." This imagery shows the audience that Gustav cares for Maj in a controlling way. He wants to have romantic and sexual relationships with both his wife and his mistress, and he apparently doesn't understand why this might be a problem. Gustav's assumption of privilege is not only immature, but also potentially harmful to both women. When Maj is in bed with Gustav, he gushes over her and tells her he'll buy her a café that she can operate. To show his promise, he even writes it out for her. Money is clearly not a problem for Gustav because he has grown up with generational wealth. This lack of awareness of his class and gender privileges blinds him to the consequences of his actions. Gustav and





Maj have sex, but only for a few seconds because he finishes prematurely (despite his boasting about how good a lover he is). This scene effectively demonstrates Gustav's duality. He has a kind heart and good intentions; sadly, he is unable to reflect upon the morality of his actions or the harm that indulging his sexual appetites might cause. He has lived his whole life within a matriarchy that coddles and indulges men—a matriarchy

that excuses men from the consequences of their actions. His mother and his wife let him do whatever he wants sexually. Bergman makes Gustav pathetic, seemingly helpless in the face of his own appetites, however deviant or destructive. Gustav should know better, no doubt, but he is left unchecked while women enable his behavior.

Gustav's oedipal crisis becomes apparent through challenges from Maj and his mother. After having sex with Maj, Gustav presses her to become his mistress and run a café with his money. She refuses, and Gustav has a childish tantrum about it. In her essay, "Shadows of the parental couple: oedipal themes in Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*," Viveka Nyberg speculates that "Gustav seems unable to tolerate feelings of oedipal exclusion, and perhaps his re-enactment of threesome relationships is an attempt to re-instate early phantasies that deny the reality of his exclusion from the parental couple's sexual relationship" (107). Essentially, Gustav has never grown up from his childhood sexual fantasies. He wants desperately to be loved by women, and he chases after validation from them through sex. Unfortunately for Gustav, nobody tells him that what he is doing is wrong. In a later scene, Gustav, Alma, and his mother are all sitting at a table discussing what to do about Maj. The camera is

focused on the trio, and it is clear to the audience that Helena and Alma are dismissing Gustav's presence by not even looking at him. Gustav gets up and paces around the room in this sequence, attempting to gain authority. However, he is clearly out of his league and outranked by the matriarchy. His mother eventually tells him she wants to talk about Maj, in front of Alma. He becomes immediately angry at this, and Helena puts him in his place: "Thanks to Alma's broad-mindedness, she's a member of our family, and she's expecting my grandchild. In your dictatorial way, you've decided her future." Gustav becomes furious and throws another infantile tantrum. The entire sequence is reminiscent of two mothers scolding a mischievous child. Again, Bergman shows Gustav's inability to hold sway over the women of his family. Helena does well to



admonish him for his actions, but it is much too late to have any effect other than compensating for what Gustav has already done. As matriarch, she declares that the Ekdahl family will embrace Maj thanks to Alma's broad-mindedness. But that's a double-edged sword. Maj and her child will be cared for, but she is now forever at the mercy of the Ekdahls. All of this could have been avoided if Gustav had not been allowed to have an open affair in the first place. Even better, if he had the sense to recognize the harm he was doing with the affair. The duality of the matriarchy is again shown. They allow Maj into the family when she becomes pregnant, but their permissiveness allows her to become pregnant with Gustav's child in the first place, which arguably should never have happened.



In one of the final scenes of the film, Gustav makes a grand speech about living with goodwill and loving his family, showing the positive impact the matriarchy has on his upbringing, redeeming him in the eyes of the family and, perhaps, of the audience. The first shot is of the two newborn girls entering the family, all dressed in pink and white. Bergman slowly pans the camera up from the babies to a wide shot of the entire family sitting around the table. Their faces are lively, everyone is talking to one another, and there is a feeling of pure unity in the moment. The mise-en-scene is powerful. The table is perfectly elegant, and everything is in red, pink, and white, perfectly fitting for the baby girls. The Ekdahls are seated in a circle, giving the family a sense of unity and wholeness. This tableau now includes Maj, who is sitting with the family (immediately to Gustav's left) in honor of the christening of her child with Gustav. Bergman packs all these things into the mise-en-scene to show a family united in matriarchy. With Helena at the head, the Ekdahls celebrate each other and their future. Gustav's speech effectively reinforces the theme of the importance of prioritizing the "little world" of the family while delivering a powerful message about maintaining hope for the future.

Gustav's character in the film is portrayed as an immature boy with a strong oedipal crisis. He lacks a basic understanding of his own family matriarchy while being coddled by his wife and mother. As he starts his speech, he is immediately overwhelmed with emotion. The audience has come to expect this of Gustav. He is, after all, still the same immature, sentimental, sexual deviant as before. Bergman undermines this expectation, however, when Gustav begins to talk about the importance of family. Gustav begins to circle the table, saying that "we Ekdahls have not come into the world to see through it.... We might just as well ignore the big things. We must live in the little world." What he is saying here is that the family should not worry about the grand workings of the world. They need to maintain their focus on the family around them as that is where true

happiness lies. The camera emphasizes his claim by framing him behind the children, alluding to the upbringing of the Ekdahl children as paramount. Gustav's love for the family shines through in this sequence, reforming the bumbling, grown-up-boy rhetoric and behavior we have come to expect of him. The message is a drastic change from the Gustav of old. He sounds introspective, intelligent, and compassionate—traits that were previously suggested but smothered by his ineptitude and general lack of self-awareness.

This change reveals the nurturing side of Gustav, brought to the fore by his newfound acceptance of the matriarchy that has always nurtured him. He truly loves his family and his new daughter, and with that love he discovers a profound empathy for the “little world” of the Ekdahls.



In the latter part of Gustav's speech, he speaks of how the larger world of natural inevitabilities and social calamities has impacted the smaller world of the family: “Suddenly death strikes. Suddenly the abyss opens. Suddenly the storm howls, and disaster is upon us.... The world is a den of thieves, and night is falling. Evil breaks its chains and runs through the world like a mad dog.” This rhetorical shift is certainly dark. Gustav reminds the family about the bleak truths we attempt to forget, such as the ways in which we suffer misfortune or encounter death. Nyberg claims that “Gustav's attempt to banish these demons paradoxically reminds us of their continued threat” (114). While Gustav does remind everyone of this “abyss,” he also implores the family to remain united in the face of such inevitabilities. He says, “Therefore let us be happy while we are happy. Let us be kind, generous, affectionate, and good. It is necessary, and not at all



shameful... to take pleasure in the little world.” Gustav's message here is simple: seek solace within your family from the dangers of the greater world. Be happy because you can, while you can. At the end of his speech, he grabs his child and kisses her affectionately. He says, “I hold a little empress in my arms. It's tangible, yet immeasurable. One day she will prove everything I just said wrong. One day she will not only rule the little world, but everything.” In a moment of profound clarity, Gustav finally seems to under-

stand the family matriarchy. By saying that Aurora will “rule” over the family, he is verbally acknowledging the power women hold in the Ekdahl family. “My wisdom is simple,” he says at the beginning of the speech, and at the end he suggests that his newborn daughter's wisdom will exceed his own so much that she will rule not only the family but the entire world. Gustav's big heart certainly causes this display of emotion, but the way it is paired with the “simple” wisdom of

his words is important. Gustav's boundless faith that his newest daughter will prove "everything I just said wrong" redeems his earlier, bumbling egotism. Bergman gives us hope that after this revelation, Gustav will find a way to love selflessly and unconditionally, prioritizing the wisdom of women over his own narcissism and sense of privilege.

The combination of wisdom and love that Gustav displays in this speech indexes the message Bergman urges his audience to take away. The matriarchy has its flaws, as we have seen throughout, but love for the family has always been its founding principle. Gustav's ability to finally have this revelation in front of everybody gives the audience hope that, moving forward, he will be a changed man and the family will prosper. Bergman includes many complex characters in this film. Gustav is certainly one of them. While he starts the movie as a bombastic sexual fiend, he ends it with a grand speech about hope and love. Bergman uses his character to show how oedipal crises form in matriarchal family dynamics, but he also shows the audience the positive aspects of matriarchal values through Gustav's goodwill and kind heart. In the end, the audience is left with a better understanding of Gustav than they ever thought they would have, especially considering his character in the beginning. Through his ups and downs, he is redeemed through goodwill, despite his past wrongs. ❧

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