

Elina - As If I Didn't Exist



The year is 1952. Somewhere in the Swedish wilderness, in a northern province called Norrbotten, a little girl cannot get over her father's death. Her grief carries her to an endless borderland, a wild moor where her father waits for her all alone...

The film "Elina - As If I Didn't Exist" is about grief, love, betrayal and loyalty - about a child's struggle to survive the greatest loss of all. The film is also a tale of the alienation that Finnish-speaking children were subjected to in Norrbotten in the 1950s, of the ambivalence and self-loathing they were taught. At the same time, the modern era is approaching, opening the door to possible change.

Recommended from year 2

A FILMGUIDE BY
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Story

The wild moor is suffused with a sense of loneliness. We hear a child's voice crying out, "Daddy, I know you're here!" A little girl, Elina, jumps over pools of still water, searching for her dead father. But all she hears in reply are the worried calls of her mother.

The doctor visits the old croft where Elina lives with her

mother, her sister Irma and a baby brother. Finally, he proclaims Elina recovered from consumption and she can go back to school. But she must remember to be careful, the doctor says; her father refused to listen to the doctor's advice about his own lung disorder and spent far too much time in the woods, leading to his untimely death. Which the doctor gave his condolences for.

The head schoolteacher, Tora Holm, gives a chilly welcome to her new pupil. She immediately points out how rebellious Elina's father was, that he had no common sense. But to Elina he was a good person, one she wants to emulate. So it's natural for her to help her classmate Anton, who has difficulty with Swedish. When the teacher overhears her translating to Finnish - a forbidden language in school - she punishes Anton by not letting him eat lunch. "But he doesn't speak Swedish," Elina protests. The teacher is shocked by her "impudence".

In the cafeteria the children are served pea soup. When Elina catches sight of the unfortunate Anton, who hasn't had a bite to eat, she gives him her own food. But the teacher immediately takes it back. All afternoon Elina is forced to sit in the cafeteria as punishment for not eating her food.

At the same time, a stranger arrives in the village. It's the new schoolteacher, Einar Björk, who starts out by joking around with the children. When Tora Holm sees the children teaching him Finnish phrases, she pursues her



lips, saying, "In this school we teach the children to speak Swedish."

The next day, Elina is eating her meatballs with good appetite when the teacher passes by and comments that any food at all should be good enough for poor children living on welfare. Humiliated, Elina rushes out of the cafeteria and sits on the steps outside the school. Later in the day, the teacher asks Elina to apologise to her. Elina refuses, and the teacher calls her a nasty, ungrateful child just like her father.

Out on the moor, Elina tells her father about the conflict. To her horror, she sees a calf struggling to keep its head over the surface of the muddy waters. Not far away, she sees Irma and some other children watching an old man trying to rescue the calf. Elina pleads to her father to help, and the old man is able to rescue the calf.

The next day in school, Ms Holm bursts out laughing at Elina's drawing of her father rescuing the old man and the calf. The whole class starts giggling. Afterwards Elina goes out and sits on the school steps while the others eat. That's when Einar comes along. He praises her courage in helping Anton, saying that he thinks Ms Holm probably agrees. But just as Einar manages to convince Elina to go into the cafeteria, the teacher comes along with new insults. Elina continues to refuse to eat.

After school, Irma finds her sister on the moor, "talking to herself". Irma snaps that their father is in the graveyard and their mother would be worried sick if she knew that Elina was wandering alone on the moors. Plus, the municipality might lock her up in a reformatory. Some time later, Elina runs into Einar in the woods. He wants to talk about the conflict with the teacher and suggests that they contact the municipality together. This frightens Elina, who runs away in tears.

Einar drops by to talk to Elina's mother about the girl's problems. But when he sees the blissfully unaware woman stiffen with fear, he can't bring himself to say anything. Elina doesn't dare to say anything either when her mother questions her - or when she finds her wet and

ruined boots, showing that she has been out on the moor.

The next day the mother comes home with a new pair of boots. They are a gift from the teacher, despite Elina's "nastiness". The mother shouts that she knows all about Elina's stubbornness and refusal to eat. How can she have a daughter who is so mean and ungrateful? The mother drags Elina to the school and tries to force her to apologise to the teacher, but Elina refuses. Einar pleads with the girl to swallow her pride, but it's no use.

"From this day forward, this girl does not exist to me," the teacher declares, marching out of the room.

In despair, Elina runs after her teacher. Perhaps she should apologise after all? But the teacher refuses to see or hear her. In the classroom, Elina is excluded from all activities - as if she no longer existed. Later, when Einar sees the girl leaving the schoolyard, he rushes to the classroom to beg Ms Holm to take her responsibility as a teacher. A worried Irma reveals Elina's hiding place.

Elina is lying on the moor, which she swears she will never leave again. Suddenly Ms Holm stumbles out from behind trees and bushes. Elina flees over the treacherous pools while her teacher desperately calls out to her. Pupils are now gathering at the site and the teacher is uncertain. Wanting to put a stop to Elina's nonsense, she turns and leaves the girl alone on the moor. Suddenly Elina discovers that her feet are stuck in the mud. "Daddy, you have to help me!" she calls over and over, but she gradually starts sinking.

Irma fetches Mum and brings her to the moor. To their horror they see Elina up to her waist in the mud. Desperately, the mother sends Irma for help while she remains to try to keep Elina over the surface. In the minutes that pass, the depth of Elina's grief becomes clear to her. For the first time she comforts her daughter. Then Irma and Einar arrive, carrying a large notice board with the school's lesson plan. Elina's mother is able to use the board to rescue the girl.

The next day we see Elina once again sitting on the school steps. But this time Irma leaves her lunch on the

table and goes out to her sister. Soon all the others join them - even the teacher, who apologises to Elina. Finally Elina begins to eat again.

The film ends with Elina and her mother together at the father's grave. Elina is finally ready to say goodbye. As they leave the graveyard, Einar pulls up at the gate in his fancy car. "Can I give you a ride," he asks charmingly and the mother gives her daughter a playful glance. Then they run to the car laughing - heading towards a brighter life and new opportunities.

Living in the realm of grief

At the end of the film Elina visits the graveyard. We see the snow burying the headstones and the little tree that will never again assume the shape of her father. The final image of the tree - a recurring metaphor in the film - also summarises the central theme of the story. Elina must accept her father's death and bury him so that she can go on with her life.

Elina lives in an uncompromising landscape, surrounded by mountains, ancient forest land and untouched, sweeping moors. Set against this backdrop, human beings seem small and vulnerable. They can never compare to the forces of nature and seem to melt into the countryside, becoming one with its melancholy and desolation. This is the embodiment of how Elina feels.

Before she reconciles herself to her father's death, Elina lives in a borderland between fantasy and reality. Part of her is living in the real world, in the harsh reality of the early 1950s. Her family is poor, and suddenly the young mother is a widow. How can she work through her own grief when she barely has enough strength to provide for and raise her children?

Perhaps the daughters perceive their mother's silence as an example and a tacit instruction not to express their own grief and longing. Elina in particular tries to be kind and thoughtful.

Elina denies her father's death by seeking him out on the moor. She can feel his presence there, the love and security he gave her. She doesn't need to be frightened or sad there; she will never abandon her father. "I will always be like you," Elina promises, reminding others of his goodness through her own choices and actions. Deep down, Elina seems to be trying to prove herself worthy of her father's love, while also struggling with the feeling that he has abandoned her. Perhaps her father didn't love her enough, since he went away and died?

Living in the borderland leads Elina to loneliness and isolation - as if she didn't exist. Not until her mother rescues her on the moor and explains that her father died of an illness, does Elina understand that the disaster was not man-made. That is when she can begin to live again - together with the others.

- Grief is a part of life. Even when people share the same experiences, no one can understand exactly how you feel. We can only experience our own grief. But try to imagine how Elina feels after her father's death. How is her grief different from her mother's and Irma's? Is grief always visible to others?

- Many cultures bury their dead. The idea is that the earth gives life, just as it gives new life to flowers and trees every year. But our departed loved ones live on in our hearts as well. In the film, Elina goes to the moor, which was a special place she shared with her father. What else can people do to preserve the memory of a loved one (for example, planting a tree or putting together a scrapbook)? Have you lost someone you cared about? How did you find comfort in your grief?

- In the film Elina is all alone with her grief. Why doesn't her mother see how miserable she is? How could she comfort Elina? What would you do to help her?

- At the end of the film Elina stops going to the moor and begins visiting her father's grave with her mother. Do you think Elina made a wise decision? Does she now accept that her father is dead? Will it be easier for Elina to live her life now?

- How is Elina's grief visualised in the film? Consider the landscape, for example, and the little tree on the moor. Can you find other imagery?

The linguistic borderland

People remember Elina's father as a Finnish troublemaker, so unreasonable and stubborn that he drove himself to death. The undercurrent is clear: he deserved what he got.

Her father's death can be interpreted as the embodiment of the obliteration of the Finnish language and culture in northern Sweden, which began in the 1880s. The goal was to create a stronger bond between the people of the Tornedalen region and the nation as a whole and was the start of decades of enforced Swedish culture. The language was the primary focus. Efforts were made where they would have the greatest effect - on schoolchildren, who received instruction in Swedish from the 1920s on.

The film takes place in the early 1950s, when the attitude towards the Finnish language had already begun improving. However, until 1957 pupils were still not allowed to speak Finnish at school, even during breaks, which is reflected in the scene where newcomer Einar is introduced to the strict language policy. He represents a sympathetic person, while head teacher Holm is the embodiment of the law and the state.

Ms Holm belongs to the older generation of teachers who followed every rule and political decision to the letter. In the teachers' lounge she radiates genuine pride when she shows Einar the notice board with the lesson plan, calling it their life's work and the symbol of their mission: creating order in the wilderness. She defends her tough punishments - which also occurred in real life - by saying, "I try to educate these children, to get them to learn to speak and write Swedish and to understand the rules they need to follow to be a part of modern society."

The Swedish language, she is saying, will allow the children to fulfil their purpose in society and to be part of Swedish culture. In addition, the teacher is conveying the educational principles of the day, which said that bilingualism was detrimental to children's intellectual develop-



ment. Even today, it is not an uncommon belief that children can only learn one language at a time, even though modern research has shown that bilingualism and multilingualism lead to richer cultural and intellectual development.

Perhaps the teacher really is only thinking of what's best for the children, in her own ignorant way. But she is forcing them into a reality that is foreign to them. For example, the children must memorise texts and Bible verses, without necessarily understanding the content. They are taught to mimic the teacher's pronunciation to eliminate their own "unsuitable" dialect. Their schoolbooks also take the children far from their own surroundings and the way of life that has shaped them. Language is much more than an instrument of communication; it is a bearer of culture (ways of thinking, norms, traditions etc.), thought (a means of describing, analysing and understanding reality) and human identity.

- Schoolbooks in the 1950s (and even later) presented a different reality than the children of northern Sweden recognised. For example, they sang songs about the "blue anemones in the woods" or "have you seen Mr Chantrelle", when neither of them grow in the region! There was a disconnect between the words and real life. How might this have affected the children?
- One aspect of the film is the Swedish state's attempts to enforce Swedish culture in the Tornedalen region of Norrbotten. Consider how the teacher behaves towards the children when she is teaching. Why doesn't she want the children to speak their mother tongue (Finnish)? Imagine how the children feel about that and how they're affected by the teacher's strictness?
- Imagine learning that your nationality was a bad thing and being made to feel ashamed of speaking your own language. How would that affect you?
- These days it is considered an advantage to have two mother tongues. In what way is it good? Do you see any disadvantages to having more than one language?

Ambivalence and self-loathing

Someone once said that the worst form of bullying is not being picked on, but being ignored - not existing. This is main idea of the film. The more Elina lives through her father, the less she can exist as Elina. At the same time, identifying with her father emphasises Elina's awareness of her roots. She has a right to respect.

Like her father, Elina loves the moor, which was still considered worthless land in the 1950s. The environment seemingly represents all of the loathing that the teacher feels for the lifestyle of these backwoods people. Without rules (education) the children will continue to live in dirt and poverty, she says in one scene, making it seem as if "poverty" (including spiritual poverty) and "speaking Finnish" are the same thing.

While the Finnish lifestyle is low status, Swedishness triggers positive attitudes. Even Elina's mother seems to have adopted this thinking. She forces Elina to apologise to the teacher, thereby denying herself and her father. As a representative of the people, the mother submits to Swedish authority. Must Elina, for her own well-being, show gratitude and obey the teacher, adopting Swedish ways as quickly as possible?

Elina experiences the worst alienation at school. She can never be more than one of the crowd, one of those "hopeless Finnish brats" whose identity is to be eradicated by the school board. "All you have to do is say 'I'm sorry, teacher,' and we can start again from the beginning," we hear the teacher say to Elina, illustrating the message that Finnish children were given in Swedish schools. The best thing they could do would be to forget their heritage and their mother tongue, Tornedalen Finnish. To succeed in life they would have to learn everything from scratch. Then one day they could move south, where all the ingredients for a "real life" awaited.

The negative consequence of this enforcement of Swedish culture was self-loathing and ambivalence among many Swedish Finns. These emotions are embodied in the film in the figure of Anton. At home he is not only a Finnish speaker but also left-handed. In school he is forced to speak Swedish and use his right hand. He is split into two conflicting halves.

Fighting for your roots takes courage and perseverance. Elina faces an oppression that has been going on for decades, ever since King Oscar II and his government issued a decree in the 1880s that Swedish culture was to be enforced in Norrbotten. Not only was the King's will strong, but it was also "aligned" with God's will. The Bishop was appointed by royal edict to monitor the process of Swedification, and also to serve as the county's superintendent of schools.

- Consider the title of the film: *Elina - As If I Didn't Exist*. In what ways does the film portray Elina's loneliness in school and in her free time? What is the worst time for her? Why doesn't her sister help her? What kind of relationship do they have? Why do Elina's classmates laugh at her along with the teacher?
- The film is also about respect. The teacher treats Elina badly. How is this shown? Consider the scene where the teacher declares that Elina does not exist to her. What would happen if Elina apologised? Would their relationship improve? Should Elina listen to Einar, who says that sometimes you have to swallow your pride? Do you agree with him? Have you ever done that to make peace with a friend?
- Think about Einar's attitude towards Elina. How does he show her respect? How do you show respect to someone you like? Why is mutual respect so important to us humans? Grown-ups often say that children don't respect their elders enough. Do you think grown-ups treat children with enough respect? Do they listen to and understand them? Have you been treated disrespectfully at school?
- Elina's father was fair, courageous and stubborn. Why do both Elina's mother and her teacher feel that Elina should not take after him, despite his good qualities? Do you think the mother is letting Elina down, or can you understand her anger?
- At the end of the film, Elina's sister and classmates take her side. Has Elina taught them something important? Why does the teacher give in and apologise to Elina? Do you think they can start over again - and perhaps even become friends?

Old meets new

At the end of the film Einar takes down the notice board with the lesson plan from the wall and carries it to the moor, where it later remains. The teacher's "life's work" becomes a tool for rescuing Elina - a human life is more important than a political decision.

Shortly thereafter, Ms Holm abandons her tough stance for a more human one, recognising the need for change. She sits down on the school steps beside Elina and apologises. Then she asks Elina to go to the cafeteria and eat so she can grow big and strong. Elina goes up the steps towards cooperation and mutual respect.

The meeting between the old and new worlds is a key theme throughout the film. When schoolmaster Einar Björk appears one day in his fancy modern (but dilapidated)

car, he brings with him a breath of fresh air from the new world. Oppression must make way for cooperation and community, which are the cornerstones of modern Swedish culture. As regards language, he breaks the ban on translation and speaks Finnish with the pupils - which, paradoxically, speeds up their integration into Swedish society! As a teacher, Einar is one of the new generation with an understanding of psychology. He sees Elina as a person who deserves the respect of the grown-ups.

But Einar is also a man of the world. He looks like a movie star with his flashy clothes, fancy car and jazzy taste in music. He embodies the lifestyle ideal of the 1950s, when trends came from Stockholm and the United States. People believed in the future, development, large-scale production, mechanisation and streamlining.

The death of Elina's father may also symbolise the disappearance of the old ways. The entire village seems to still be living in the 19th century, in the "wilderness of poverty" where men till the soil and believe in God and tradition. The transition that Sweden went through in just a few decades, from an agrarian society to a modern industrial state, eventually transformed Norrbotten more rapidly and thoroughly than anywhere else in the country. Since the 1950s, the population in regions like Tornedalen has diminished by almost half. To counteract this, an organisation was founded in 1981, the National Federation of Tornedalers, to promote the language and culture of the region. In that same decade, pupils were granted the right to instruction in their own mother tongue, after a century-long struggle.

- The film depicts the meeting between the olden days and modernity. What is old and what is new? For example, look at the lifestyles and clothing of the villagers and the environment at the school. Compare!
- The new teacher, Einar, is a modern person. How does the film demonstrate this? How is he different from the teacher? What importance does Einar have for the school and for the pupils, considering all that he does for Elina? Is he in love with Elina's mother? If the two of them become a couple, how might the family's life change?
- Consider Elina's and Irma's personalities. How are they different? Which of them do you think changes the most? What will happen to them when they grow up?
- The villagers are still living in the old agrarian society. Their lives are difficult and impoverished. But the new era has already arrived, bringing with it education and knowledge of the rest of the world. The current lifestyle is changing. Many will move south seeking jobs and education - and life will give them new opportunities. Are there any disadvantages to this development?

About the book and the film

The film is based on a novel entitled "As if I Didn't Exist" (1974) by Kerstin Johansson in Backe. The genre is called social realism, and many elements of it appear to be the author's own experience. The story takes readers back to Tornedalen in the 1930s, where poverty and great social inequality were the norm. Although the film takes place in the 1950s, it reflects the spirit of the time portrayed in the

Director Klaus Härö with Natalie Minnevik as Elina.



novel - in terms of the villagers' lifestyles. We see Elina's simple croft, where rounds of crispbread hang on a pole up under the ceiling and the floors are untreated planks. But by having the film take place in the 1950s, the filmmakers were able to portray the meeting between old and new.

Everything Finnish appears to be considered "old", while everything Swedish is modern and cultural. The bright school building exemplifies this. Social inequalities are highlighted, at least visually. On the other hand, the 1950s were a decade of reconciliation: this was when linguistic oppression began to decline. Perhaps this is why Ms Holm is not as cruel character in the film as she was in the book, making her character more ambiguous.

Elina's character in the novel is quite different from that in the film. In the book she is so deep in her depression that she doesn't even speak. "I don't exist - I can't speak or do anything," Elina reasons. She doesn't do well in school, where everyone knows she's "dumb". She knows very little Swedish. No one sees the richness of her mind. The teacher belittles Elina and her mother seems only to love the obedient Irma. Out on the moor, Elina can let her pain out. She can be someone there and feel loved by her friends - imaginary characters, one of whom is her father. The film focuses much more on her grief for him. The clever, fearless Elina in the film represents more of a bridge between Finnish and Swedish culture. She only needs Einar's help.

The people in the novel have more difficulty choosing their path because their religion is of greater importance. In contrast to the novel, the film does not portray the suspicion that existed between Swedish speakers and the Finnish-speaking Laestadian revivalists in Tornedalen, and the kind of fear of God that keeps people from living. But the film carries the same psychological insights as the novel does, and its story follows the same path. And in both, we are sure that Elina will be all right.

Production details

Sweden 2003

Producer: Anders Landström & Charlotta Denward

Script: Kjell Sundstedt, based on the novel *As if I Didn't Exist* by Kerstin Johansson in Backe

Director: Klaus Härö

Camera: Jarkko T Laine

Editing: Riita Poikselkä & Thomas Täng

Music: Toumas Kantelinen

Set design: Cian Bornebusch

Cast

Elina - Natalie Minnevik

Tora Holm - Bibi Andersson

Martha, Elina's mum - Marjaana Maijala

Einar Björk - Henrik Rafaelsen

Irma - Tind Soneby

Anton - Peter Roger

Technical information

Length: 77 min

Format: 1:1.85

Sound: Dolby DTS

Rating: Allowed for all

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