

BECOMING HUMAN: THE INDIVIDUAL'S DISCOVERY OF
SELF IN SELECTED PLAYS BY HENRIK IBSEN

THESIS

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PREFACE

The many paths of literary criticism eventually lead but to the same thing: partial understanding of the literary work in question. When it comes to understanding (or misunderstanding) a piece of literature, no school of criticism has a corner on the market. When I first began work on this monograph, my intention was to show how wrong the sociological critics were in their dealings with Ibsen. Since the spring of 1969 when I acted in An Enemy of the People, my reading of Ibsen had been sociological: as I read on, seeking more proof, I felt like the apocryphal sophomore who looks up from a copy of Moby Dick, his eyes wide with discovery, and says, "You know, I think that whale stands for something." The filthy, poisoned water of An Enemy of the People stands for something. The rotting body of Oswald Alving in Ghosts, Nora's mad dance just before her confrontation with fate in A Doll's House--these stand for something. Being a product of Western culture (and Western culture of the 1960's at that), I was again led to point the finger at society. See, I thought, how deeply a sociological writer Ibsen is. The obvious symbols represent society, and the arcane symbols re-affirm that interpretation. But as I have grown with the plays, I have come to

reconsider some of my most precious held conceptions of them: the symbols are still there, but I have come to see depths of meaning in them undreamed of before.

Ibsen is a playwright of the mind. Always considered the master painter of the drawing-room, Ibsen may better be thought of as the decorator of the attic--that room where all the reminders of the past accumulate, balanced precariously box on box, capable at any time of toppling over and sending the chill of an unexpected echo through the rest of the house. Society is rotten because its individuals are rotten; if each man can root out the pestilence within himself, the cure for society's evils will naturally follow. I began to examine Ibsen's life, and then to re-examine his plays with this psychological interpretation in mind. I began to see an emerging pattern, a set of themes which seemed to preoccupy Ibsen and which he dealt with time and time again. He drew heavily on his own life for this thematic material--the problems which harry his protagonists are those problems which harried him. Plot details came from his life: financial scandal, supposed illegitimacy, and loveless marriages are such details. His own early inability to make of himself that which he had wanted to become, the failure of idealism, and the loss of faith in the traditional bulwarks of life all were themes to which he was drawn repeatedly, and all are examined in the chapters to

follow. Because the societal problems with which he dealt have been at least partially remedied since his time, Ibsen seems old fashioned and out of date to many readers today; but if they would read his plays from a psychological standpoint, they might see that he is as relevant now as he ever was. Perhaps more so.

Because the contaminated water is still flowing into the public baths, venereal disease is still driving Oswald Alving mad, and Nora's house is still designed by and for children only, the sociological view of Ibsen continues to be valid. Any critical approach is valid if its application results in a partial understanding of the literary work--but a partial understanding is all that is possible from the use of any one school of criticism, and so I would like to add to the volumes of sociological criticism of Ibsen a brief bit of psychological criticism. My goal is to shed some light on the playwright whom so many people consider to be the most important since Shakespeare.

Wending one's way down any path of criticism is never a particularly easy task, and I would like to thank some of those people who have made the journey a little less arduous for me. Dr. Vernon E. Lynch, who urged me along without ever resorting to either the whip or the cattle-prod (two instruments of instruction several professors had assured me were absolutely essential when dealing

with graduate students), is deserving of special thanks. He was always available and eager to help. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert W. Walts for all the time he took to counsel me, in relation to both this project and others, and Dr. J. Peter Coulson for first leading me into the Black Forest of Dramatic Criticism (I have left a trail of bread crumbs behind me, hoping that I will be able to find my way out, but I suspect that the birds have eaten them).

My greatest thanks I have reserved for my wife, Alice. She found Dr. Lynch's whip and cattle-prod, but she used them sparingly and I suspect that their use hurt her more than it did me. To Alice: I must admit that without her I never could have finished this monograph--in fact, I doubt that I ever would have gotten far enough to begin it.

My final thanks are to my mother, Cynthia B. Weaver, who took a big financial chance by getting me started on the yellow brick road of college. I was eleven years younger then (she has not aged a day), but I did not feel half as ignorant as I do now. Perhaps that is a sign of maturity. Anyway, to my mother, and to every mother who has ever looked at a completed Master's thesis and simply didn't believe it, I--we--thank you.

D.G.B.

CHAPTER ONE

IBSEN'S LIFE AS A SOURCE FOR HIS PLAYS

Some writers tie up their works so closely with their lives that to know either works or life is to know the other. Henrik Ibsen was such a writer. One can almost read in his plays the story of his life--one can certainly see in the plays themes which recurred so often that they must have been deeply ingrained in Ibsen's psyche. Time and again the ordered world of the plays is shattered by threats of monetary scandal, the disclosure of an illegitimacy, or the re-opening of old romantic wounds. These themes have their origin in Ibsen's life. The failure of Ibsen's early ambitions and the loss of his illusions are also mirrored in the plays, as is the quest he spent a lifetime on, the search for some joy in life which could replace his lost faith. These hauntings and longings cover Ibsen's life and plays just as the winter mists cover the Norwegian landscape. Michael Meyer, quoting John Keats referring to Robert Burns, emphasizes the connection between Ibsen's life and plays: "We can see horribly clear in the works of such a man his whole life, as if we were God's spies."¹

¹John Keats, quoted in Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. xxi.

Ibsen's parents had been married for three years when he, the union's second child, was born to them on March 20, 1828, in Skien, Norway, a town of about 2,000 inhabitants situated sixty miles southwest of Christiania (now Oslo). Henrik's older brother, Johan Altenburg Ibsen, died three weeks after Henrik's birth. Between 1830 and 1835, four more children were born to Knud and Marichan Ibsen; thus, Henrik grew up the eldest of five. His earliest memories were of the things and places within sight of the middle class house in which he was born. They were things and places which would impress a child of even less sensibility than Ibsen:

. . . I was born in a court near the market-place-- Stockman's Court, it was then called. This court faces the church, with its high steps and its noteworthy tower. At the right of the church stood the town pillory, and at the left the townhall, with the lock-up and the madhouse. The fourth side of the market-place was occupied by the common and the Latin schools. The church stood in a clear space in the middle.

This prospect made up, then. [sic] the first view of the world that was offered to my sight.²

Henrik had no close friends in Skien; in fact, his extreme seriousness as a child even prevented him from joining in the games of his brothers and sisters, one of whom

²Henrik Ibsen, Memories of Childhood, quoted in Henrik Jaeger, Henrik Ibsen, 1828-1888: A Critical Biography, trans. by William Morton Payne (1890; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., Publishers, 1972), p. 18.

(Hedvig) wrote to Henrik Jaeger saying that Henrik disliked their "thoughtless pranks" and in preference to taking part in them would go into "a little room opening upon a passage which led to the kitchen, and [fasten] the door with a hasp. He sat [there] not only in summer, but in the coldest of the winter." The children would pelt the door and wall with stones and snowballs in an attempt to roust him out. Angry at the interruption of his reading, he would fly out; but since "violence was very far from his character," he settled for chasing everyone away and then returning to his once again peaceful solitude to peruse the same old books which Hedvig Ekdal would later be reading in the third act of The Wild Duck.³

The passing along of his own youthful reading habits was not the only legacy of Ibsen's early life to his work. In fact, throughout his life he seemed to store his passions and preoccupations away (like the actor who wanted to remember how he felt the day his father died in case he had to someday portray the part of a mourning son) for future presentation on the stage. If he would in later life sometimes appear cruel for publicly displaying other people's woes and phobias, he would seem no less honest for revealing his own.

³Henrik Jaeger, Henrik Ibsen, 1828-1888: A Critical Biography, translated by William Morton Payne (1890; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., Publishers, 1972), pp. 27-28.

By 1832 or 1833 the Ibsen family fortune had improved to the point that Knud decided it would be both financially safe and socially advisable to move to a more expensive property in Skien, the Hundevad estate. As a step up in Skien society, the move was successful; but by 1834 the new strain on Knud Ibsen's always tight budget was beginning to have its effect. One year later, Knud's financial affairs had reached such an impasse that he was forced to move his family from Skien to Venstøp, a small town in the parish of Gjerpen. In 1836, Knud, the father of five children, was forced to declare bankruptcy. Seven years of poverty and ostracism--years that left scars on Henrik which he would always be aware of--followed in Venstøp. Not until 1843 (the year of Henrik's confirmation in Gjerpen church) could the Ibsens return to Skien, and then only to live in a house which was owned by Knud's half brother.

Knud Ibsen's financial scandal affected more than just the attitude of society toward the Ibsens; it also affected the attitude of the family itself. Michael Meyer says that, "Financial ruin has been known to alter a man's character for the better. It was not so with Knud Ibsen. He became combative, sarcastic, and bitter. . . ." ⁴

⁴Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 13.

He wanted to dominate everyone . . . and if people did not bow to his wishes he became coarse and uncontrolled, especially when he had a little drink inside him. One can imagine what bitterness the sense of social degradation must have unleashed in a man of his temperament . . . He could still be polite in company and sociable at home when he chose. But he was moody and incalculable and, when the inclination took him, he gave his touchiness full rein.⁵

During the final years of his life, perhaps too much under the influence of his schnapps, Knud would rage at the neighborhood children who loved to torment and ridicule him. Although Henrik would not see his father once during the last twenty-seven years of the old man's life, the son would remember Knud Ibsen and present him to the world as Jon Gynt (Peer Gynt), Old Ekdal (The Wild Duck), and Daniel Hejre (The League of Youth).⁶

The change in the Ibsens' status also had a great effect on Marichen, Henrik's mother. The once cheerful young woman soon became melancholy and reclusive. Although standing by her husband, she became somewhat frightened of him. Her situation at home could not have been improved by the common rumors that her oldest son, Henrik, was not the child of Knud Ibsen, but was actually the fruit of a liaison between Marichen and an admirer named Tormod Knudsen. Meeting in 1825, before Marichen's wedding, she and Tormod had

⁵Oskar Mosfjeld, Henrik Ibsen of Skien, quoted in Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 14.

⁶Meyer, Ibsen, p. 13.

become friends; but gossip had it that they were, throughout the period of Marichen's engagement and well into her marriage, lovers. "This tradition furthermore asserted that . . . Tormod not only was Henrik's father, but even claimed to be." Tormod's legitimate son later claimed to believe the story; and even though the evidence of physical appearance indicated that Henrik was Knud Ibsen's son, Henrik's friends in later life said that the playwright was haunted by the fear of his own illegitimacy.⁷

The dual subjects of financial scandal and illegitimacy appear frequently in Ibsen's plays. Although they are melodramatic staples of the type of nineteenth century theater described in Harley Granville-Barker's phrase, as "the innocuous near-beer of drama,"⁸ these two topics seem to hold a special fascination for Ibsen. A list of the plays which deal with financial scandal includes The Pillars of Society, A Doll's House, The Master Builder, and John Gabriel Borkman; a similar list of those which contain at least suspected illegitimacy includes The Pretenders, Brand, Peer Gynt, Ghosts, The Wild Duck, and Rosmersholm.⁹

⁷Ibid., pp. 14-5.

⁸Harley Granville-Barker, "The Coming of Ibsen," in The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature, ed. Walter De La Mare (London: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 173.

⁹Meyer, Ibsen, p. 16.

At the age of sixteen, Henrik left Skien and moved to Grimstad, where he began his apprenticeship as an apothecary. Two years later he became embroiled in a Freudian nightmare of a relationship with one of the servant girls in the house where he was then living. Her name was Else Sofie Jensdatter, and one of her chores (one she performed all too well) was to look after the young druggist. All his adolescent concern over his own birth must have surfaced again when on October 9, 1846, she bore him a son. Else must have been convinced that the young apothecary who aspired to become a doctor would marry her; the Oedipal dream of the servant rising above her station by marrying the master was about to come true. The Oedipal overtones become even more pronounced with the observation that Else matched Henrik's eighteen years with twenty-eight of her own.

But Henrik's refusal to accept full responsibility for the child caused Else's dream to melt away, and she soon saw her supposed rescuer for the poor, frightened young man he was. Law could, and did, make Henrik pay paternity costs towards the child's upbringing to the age of fourteen; but it could not make him ever want to see either child or mother again. Else, blind and penurious, died in 1892 at the age of seventy-four, never having gotten a thing out her former lover's fame. The son, Hans Jacob Henriksen, who died in 1916, did meet his father once in

later life; Michael Meyer reports thus:

The story goes that Hans Jacob, penniless as always, knocked one day on the door of his father's apartment, revealed his identity and asked for financial help; to which Ibsen is said to have responded by handing him five crowns with the comment: "This is what I gave your mother. It should be enough for you," and shut the door in his face.¹⁰

Situations in his personal life which demanded even the slightest degree of moral courage often brought out the worst in him.

Even though self-service was his motive in his eighteenth year, the affair with Else might have been partially responsible for Ibsen's emergence shortly thereafter as a creative writer in 1847. His earliest known poem, "Resignation," probably dates from that year, and his first play, Catiline, was begun in 1848 and completed the following year. The choice of a Roman subject for the fledgling dramatist may have been inspired by the fact that Latin was one of the subjects Ibsen was studying for the university entrance examination. In 1849 Ibsen saw his first poem in print. It was called "In the Autumn" and appeared in the September 28 edition of the Christiania Posten. In a frenzy of creativity, Ibsen also produced a verse play, The Normans, and the beginning of a novel, The Prisoner of Agershuus.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 689.

Encouragement to continue his writing came from such close friends as Ole Schulerud, who went so far as to pay for the private printing of Catiline with a small legacy of his. This edition of the play, the first play to be printed in Norway since Wergeland's The Venetian in 1843, was of 250 copies and went on sale on April 12, 1850. Catiline's failure was complete--200 of the original 250 copies were destroyed as waste paper. Ibsen once again began to consider a career in medicine and departed Grimstad for Christiania, stopping in Skien to visit his family. Although Marichen would live until 1869 and Knud until 1877, Ibsen would never see either of them again.

In the Fall of 1850 Ibsen took the Christiania University entrance examination. He failed Greek and mathematics and was denied admittance. Turning to writing (perhaps for solace), he re-wrote The Normans in one act, calling it The Warrior's Barrow, and completed nearly two acts of a romantic comedy called The Ptarmigan in Justedal, which he never finished but re-wrote as Olaf Liljekrans. In late September, Ibsen saw the first presentation of any of his plays; the Christiania Theater produced The Warrior's Barrow.

Most of 1851 was filled with Ibsen's work as a non-collegiate contributor to student newspapers and satirical journals. As one of three contributing editors of

Andhrimmer, Ibsen wrote a burlesque opera libretto (based on Bellini's Norma) which attacked the Norwegian parliament. Norma; or, A Politician's Love was Ibsen's first published satire.

In November, 1851, through the influence of the violinist Ole Bull, Ibsen began his career as a professional man of the theater. He became the dramatic poet in residence and stage manager at the National Theater in Bergen; so successful was he there that he was sent to study the theater and drama in Copenhagen and Dresden between April and September, 1852. During this period, Ibsen saw and absorbed the dramatic tricks of Scribe, Dumas, pere, and other popular playwrights. On January 2, 1853, Ibsen's St. John's Eve was performed in Bergen. He grew to despise the play, and he never authorized a printing of it while he lived. For once he agreed with an opening night audience--they booed it right out of the theater.¹¹

Ibsen's happiness that year came in the form of a vivacious young woman of fifteen, Rikke Holst. His infatuation prompted him into such unlikely actions as dressing up and marching in a parade, going on long hikes, and bursting into impromptu poetry recitals. In June, he sent Rikke a letter in verse asking her to marry him--his courage

¹¹Hans Heiberg, Ibsen: A Portrait of the Artist, trans. by Joan Tate (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 73.

failed him at the thought of asking her face to face. She went to her father for advice, and he refused even to consider allowing his fifteen-year-old daughter to reach an understanding with a man ten years her senior. But father Holst's outrage could not keep the young couple apart. In a romantic gesture Ibsen would dramatize thirty-five years later in The Lady From the Sea, he and Rikke bound their rings together and cast them into the fjord, marrying themselves forever in spirit. But despite spies, lookouts, and every precaution the infatuated but fearful young poet could take, Rikke's father, a stern sea captain, found them out. Holst charged at the couple one day, bellowing, his clenched fists raised in Ibsen's face. Ibsen, terrified, ran away leaving Rikke to face her father alone. Whatever feelings she had for her man left with him. On a visit to Bergen thirty years later, Ibsen met Rikke again.

Some of the old feeling came back to him and he asked, wonderingly: "But how was it nothing came of our affair?" Rikke laughed in her old vivacious way: "But my dear Ibsen, did you forget that you ran away?" "Yes, yes," he answered apologetically, "I was never a brave man face to face."¹²

Ibsen's contract at the National Theater called for a new play every year. Each of these plays would be performed on January 2 of the year following its composition. In 1854 the production was of the newly rewritten

¹²Halvdan Koht, Life of Ibsen, translated by Einar Haugen and A. E. Santaniello. 1954; rev. ed. (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971), p. 83.

The Warrior's Barrow; 1855 saw Lady Inger of Østraat, and in 1856 it was The Feast of Solhaug. The Feast was Ibsen's first unqualified success as a playwright; so successful was it, in fact, it was performed at the Christiania Theater on March 13 and published six days later. In 1857, Olaf Liljekrans was presented at Bergen, but Ibsen decided to leave the small, never completely solvent theater there and move to the capital. He accepted a position with the Norwegian Theater in Christiania and assumed his duties as artistic director on September 3, 1857.

Nine months later, believing himself to be financially responsible at last, Ibsen married Suzannah Thoresen, whose pet name was "The Cat." Through the years she became more than a wife to him. She nursed him when he was ill; in the days of his fame, she protected him from unwelcome callers and curiosity seekers, allowing him to work; in his last years she understood his fondness for and delight in the company of young girls. Whatever their relationship might have been, it was one which lasted for her beyond the day he died, forty-eight years after their wedding. The union was celebrated in November, 1858, by the first production of The Vikings at Helgeland at the Norwegian Theater.

In 1859 the Ibsens had a son, Sigurd, the only fruit of Ibsen's union with Suzannah. In the same year Ibsen co-founded with Bjørn Bjørnson The Norwegian Society,

a nationalistic group of artists. Ibsen, serious about the cause of removing all Danish characteristics from Norwegian art, began to lose interest in his society and finally abandoned it when Bjørnson turned it into a political forum.¹³

Throughout 1860-1861, no new play came from Ibsen. He worked on one called Svanhild (later revised as Love's Comedy) and wrote some poetry. In May, 1862, Ibsen received a grant from the University of Christiania to travel in Norway collecting old folk songs and tales. He greatly enjoyed his wanderings even though he sent every penny of the grant money he could back home to Suzannah (and for good reason--the Norwegian Theater went bankrupt and closed that summer). By the end of the year, Love's Comedy was ready for the printer and was published in December.

The Christiania Theater, which had produced The Feast at Solhaug in 1856, invited Ibsen to join its staff as literary adviser, and this he did in 1863. That year also saw the awarding of a governmental travel grant as well as another university grant for the compilation of more folk songs, and the publication of The Pretenders (the first performance of which was given the following January).

By 1864 Ibsen's urge to move on had been increased by his travels around Norway. His decision to leave

¹³Meyer, Ibsen, p. 169.

Christiania was made by his conviction that its populace had given his work only a tepid reception at best; in fact, he pushed that reasoning to its ultimate extension and decided that Norway had treated him no better. In April he moved his family to Rome, arriving in May and having passed through Copenhagen, Berlin, and Vienna. He spent the next year in Rome working on a new play in verse. He had no way of knowing then that its publication would lift him from the ranks of relative obscurity forever, create for him a permanent income, and introduce him to a woman who would serve as one of the greatest inspirations for his art. In early 1866 he completed the manuscript and sent the last of it off to Frederik Hegel, head of the Gyldendal publishing firm in Copenhagen. On March 15, 1866, Brand was published.

Although he had gotten travel grants in the past, none of them had come to him easily. Six weeks after his new play's publication, Ibsen received a travel grant of 100 specie-dollars (\$100) from the Royal Norwegian Science Association. In May, the Storting (the Norwegian parliament) voted him an annual income of 400 specie-dollars and in June allowed him an additional grant of 350 specie-dollars. Brand achieved for him his first dose of notoriety, and with the publication of Peer Gynt in 1867, his reputation spread even farther.

In 1869 the honors began to pile up. Ibsen was asked to represent Norway at the opening of the Suez Canal, and he visited Stockholm to attend the orthographic convention there. He was given the Vasa Order by King Charles XV, the first of many such medals he was to receive over the years, always to his delight. In fact, Ibsen's passion for medals was obsessive--Meyer points out that it is "a trait in Ibsen's character with which it is difficult to feel any sympathy."¹⁴ In 1870 he wrote a letter to an Armenian living in Stockholm asking for help in getting a medal from Turkey. He maintained that the decoration would improve his literary standing in Norway.

His literary standing was already firm enough to make him the recipient of letters and manuscripts from people soliciting his professional advice. One such manuscript, Brand's Daughters ("a kind of edifying Christian tract, intended as an answer to the inhuman moral demands of Ibsen's play"¹⁵), arrived in 1870. Its author was a twenty year old woman from Trøndelag named Laura Petersen. She met Ibsen the following year in Copenhagen, and he took an immediate liking for her; she even visited him in Dresden the next summer, seeing him every day for two months. His regard for her grew, and because of her attractiveness and vivacity, he nicknamed her "The Lark."

¹⁴Ibid., p. 329.

¹⁵Koht, Life of Ibsen, p. 314.

Laura Petersen married Victor Kieler, a teacher from Denmark, in 1873. His income was meager and she tried writing short stories as a means of supplementing it. As their financial affairs worsened, Victor became ill. He accused Laura of spending too much on household items. His temper became more dangerous, and his doctor suggested a vacation in a warmer climate as one way of alleviating some of the pressures. Having too little money to pay all the bills, the Kielers had too little to spend on a vacation; but Laura secretly borrowed some money in Norway, and in 1876 the couple set off for Italy. On the return trip, they stopped for a few days in Munich to visit the Ibsens. Laura confided in Suzannah that she was worried over the repayment of the debt. Meaning to pay back the loan with money earned from the sale of her fiction, she was shaken because nothing had sold. She had never informed Victor about the loan and now felt it was too late to do so.

In 1878 Laura sent Ibsen the manuscript of a new novel and asked him to pass it along to his publisher with a few kind words. Ibsen refused, telling her that the book had been hastily written and that she should tell her husband about the debt. When the time for repayment arrived, Laura still had no money. Not being able to talk her creditors into an extension, she forged a note. She was detected and Victor learned all. He was furious and

accused her of everything from criminal intent to neglect of their children--he demanded a legal separation to keep her from them. The horror of his misunderstanding and betrayal was too great for her, and she suffered a nervous breakdown. He had her committed to a public asylum and while she was there divorced her. Ibsen, in search of an idea for a new play, got a short letter from Victor describing what had happened.¹⁶

Ibsen's reaction to the affair was shock and amazement, but the idea for a new modern tragedy began to take shape. His next play, A Doll's House (1879), was his strongest statement to date of what was to be the great theme of his work: "the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person."¹⁷ It was the play which would bring him international acclaim--not all at a time, but over a period of years (Germany waited two years for a production, England and America ten, and France fifteen¹⁸), but the book went through two editions in 1879.

Many of Ibsen's friends and colleagues admired the play from the start (not his old literary rival Bjørn Bjørnson, however, who found it vulgar and evil¹⁹), but when

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 314-15. ¹⁷Meyer, Ibsen, p. 457.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 458. ¹⁹Ibid., p. 457.

the German actress Hedwig Niemann-Rabbe began a production Ibsen found himself in a difficult position. Niemann-Rabbe had announced her intention to change the ending of the play because she would never leave her children and failed to see how any woman, short of Medea, could. Ibsen was not protected by copyright and so decided that, rather than leave the alteration to a hack, he would write a new "happy" ending himself. Ibsen wrote an open letter to the Danish newspaper Nationaltidende:

I sent my translator and agent for use in an emergency a drafted emendation in which Nora does not leave the house but is forced by Helmer to the doorway of the children's bedroom; here a few lines are exchanged, Nora sinks down by the door and the curtain falls. This emendation I have myself described to my translator as a "barbaric outrage" on the play.²⁰

The altered ending was a type of outrage he would never willingly take part in again.

Through all the praise and condemnation and furor that the play occasioned, one person felt hurt and betrayed by A Doll's House--Laura Kieler. She had boasted too often of her relationship with Ibsen and too many people in Copenhagen knew the story of her personal tragedy. She felt that her friend had played her false by displaying her unhappiness in public much as the executioner held up the severed heads of guillotined prisoners. Ibsen believed

²⁰ Ibid., p. 459.

that he had held her up as an example and commended her courage. There is no doubt as to the admiration behind Ibsen's intentions, but he clipped his lark's wings just the same.

Laura got in contact with Ibsen again in 1888 in the same way she had contacted him originally eighteen years previously--she sent him a manuscript and asked for his advice. He read her play, and his response to her was kind and encouraging. Her new work was received warmly by several critics. This reception gladdened her despite the play's failure on the stage. But once again Laura's happiness was to be short-lived, at first, indirectly because of Ibsen, and then directly. "Georg Brandes . . . reviewing J. B. Halvosen's Dictionary of Biography (which contained a long section on Ibsen) went out of his way to assert that the original of Nora had committed her crime for reasons much less idealistic than those which inspired Ibsen's heroine," a claim he would still be making a quarter of a century later when he wrote that Laura got the money not for the purpose of saving Victor's life, but merely to re-decorate her home."²¹ Even though something of her old relationship with Ibsen had been re-established, Laura still feared to go directly to him for help in squelching this libel; she instead turned to a mutual friend, and this

²¹Ibid., p. 634.

friend wrote to Ibsen to ask for his support. Ibsen's flat refusal was an act of moral cowardice which, when one considers how simple it would have been for him to lay the matter to rest once and for all, appears the most shameful of his life and one fit to rank among the best (or worst) of Peer Gynt, Karsten Bernick (The Pillars of Society), and Torvald Helmer himself. On July 1 he wrote:

I don't quite understand what Laura Kieler really has in mind in trying to drag me into these squabbles. A statement from me such as she proposes, to the effect that "she is not Nora," would be both meaningless and absurd, since I have never suggested that she is. If untrue rumors have been spread in Copenhagen that something happened earlier in her life which bears a certain similarity to the business of the forged document in A Doll's House, then she herself or her husband, preferably both, are the only people able to kill these rumors by an open and emphatic denial. I cannot understand why Herr Kieler has not long since taken this course, which would immediately put an end to the gossip. I am genuinely sad that I cannot accede to your request to intervene. But I think that on considering the matter more closely . . . you will agree that I can best serve our mutual friend by remaining silent and not intervening.²²

Laura came into Ibsen's life a third time late in 1891. Our only account of the meeting comes from Laura, writing when she was an old woman, and it may have been colored by years of pain and moments of wishful thinking. She describes a four hour meeting at which she told Ibsen the story of her entire life.

²²Ibid., p. 635.

When she spoke of her hatred of illusion and her determination to look reality in the face . . . he was so moved he wept. She said he must, even at this late stage, tell Georg Brandes the truth, to which he replied: "No, I can't. That's impossible."²³

They never saw or wrote to each other again. But Laura returned in his work in 1899, the year when Ibsen published a play dealing with an artist and a former model, Irene, who meet again after years of separation. It would prove to be his last play, a play which questioned all he had done in his career from 1869 on. It was When We Dead Awaken.

After the notoriety of A Doll's House, Ibsen felt that his decision of 1869 to abandon verse for prose had been the right one. Verse was a medium which created too great a distance between author and audience for what Ibsen had to say, and the play that he published in 1881 was anything but distant. The attitude of the English press when Ghosts was performed in London ten years after its initial publication sums up critical reaction: "a dull, undramatic, verbose, tedious, and utterly uninteresting play . . . formless, objectless, pointless;" "an open drain . . . a loathsome sore unbandaged . . . a dirty act done publicly;" "revoltingly suggestive and blasphemous;" "an insult to the commonsense of all playgoers."²⁴ At least one critic (alas, anonymously) was original in his presentation:

²³Ibid., p. 680.

²⁴Michael Egan, ed., Ibsen: The Critical Heritage. The Critical Heritage Series, ed. by B. C. Southam (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 188, 190, 199.

Where on earth over night had I been
 Antecedent to going to bed?
 For this morning I'm ultramarine,
 And my eyes opalescent and red!

Did I visit the clinical schools--
 The Dead House? or else had I been
 Consorting in graveyards with ghouls,
 And vampires, and reptiles obscene? . . .

For I drank at the Ibsenite spring,
 At the sign of the Jolly Blue Posts;
 For once in my life had my fling,
 And supped full of horrors--and Ghosts!²⁵

An Enemy of the People followed Ghosts in 1883, and The Wild Duck (1884), Rosmersholm (1886), and The Lady From the Sea (1889) followed that. Not liking Ibsen very much, conservatives at least knew what to expect from him and were getting used to it. But while vacationing in 1889, Ibsen met an eighteen year old young woman who was to change the tenor of his work. Her name was Emilie Bardach; their holiday friendship blossomed into a series of letters and, according to Emilie in 1927, a near proposal of marriage from a man forty-three years her senior.²⁶ But by the end of 1889, Ibsen had decided, for both their sakes, to break off any further correspondence. What the obvious affection of a lovely young school-girl meant to the aging playwright we may never know for certain. He discussed his relationship

²⁵"An Anonymous Satirical Poem," quoted in Michael Egan, ed., Ibsen: The Critical Heritage. The Critical Heritage Series, ed. by B. C. Southam (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 200.

²⁶Meyer, Ibsen, p. 615.

with her once in a conversation with Julius Elias and at that time might very well have been covering up his feelings by deliberately confusing Emilie with the character whom she had inspired, Hilde Wangel (The Master Builder). His description of Emilie as a sort of moral and psychological vampire preying on other women's husbands cannot be reconciled with either his letters to her or her diary; yet the cruel, thoughtless slander of her which he used to camouflage his own feelings stuck with Emilie for the last forty-eight years of her life and marked her the way Nora Helmer marked Laura Kieler. When Emilie saw The Master Builder for the first time in 1908, she saw little of herself in Hilde--but in the title character, she saw little that was not Ibsen.²⁷

Ibsen's relationship with Emilie Bardach made him seem to be more than ever like a character out of one of his own plays. Michael Meyer says that, "Throughout his plays he had preached that whatever a man turns his back on gets him in the end; now the chickens were to come home to roost with a vengeance."²⁸ Rosmersholm and Hedda Gabler had been forewarnings of the plays to come. Ibsen's final four plays are dark portraits of people locked in frustrated struggles for personal emancipation. The old man must have seen in Emilie the opportunity to bring his suppressed

²⁷Ibid., pp. 626, 698. ²⁸Ibid., p. 627.

longings to the surface, to become the complete man at last--but his entire life held him back. The conscious agony of his situation created some of his greatest art.²⁹

When We Dead Awaken was not intended as Ibsen's farewell to the theater, but he had no way of knowing in 1899 that he would fall ill in 1900 and suffer a stroke a year later. Late in 1902 he was still hoping to write another play, but the next year he suffered a second stroke, this one paralysing his right hand. He tried writing with his left hand, commenting to Suzannah how sad it was that a man who had once been rather a good playwright should have to relearn the alphabet.³⁰

He lingered on, unable to do much more than receive the rare visitor now and then. By May, 1906, he was in a coma, only occasionally uttering anything which could be understood. On May 22 he said his last word: "Tvertimod!" ("On the contrary!"). He died the next day.³¹

Several of Ibsen's plays use as their starting points episodes from his life. All of his major protagonists are haunted by the same ghosts which haunted their creator. The threat of monetary or moral scandal, physical or spiritual cowardice, the urge in old age to establish relationships with younger women--all of these elements from Ibsen's

²⁹Ibid. ³⁰Ibid., p. 802. ³¹Ibid., pp. 807-9.

life are present in his plays. From the plays, the recurring themes are the conflict between aspiration and ability on the one hand and the ideal and the actual on the other, the search for some joy in life which can replace lost religious and social faith, and the war against the past; all are interwoven throughout Ibsen's life. Without some understanding of relationships between Ibsen's life and his work, the plays lose some of their meaning. The following chapters will examine the four major themes noted above by looking at Ibsen's earliest plays as well as the major plays of his maturity. Each of the protagonists needs to come to some self-realization before he can become fully human. Each man must find himself in his own way. Ibsen tried to do it by writing. His plays are his spiritual autobiography.

CHAPTER TWO

ASPIRATION AND ABILITY: THE INNER CONFLICT

Ibsen, as a young man, had wanted to be a painter. A water color he painted in 1849 (reproduced in Michael Meyer's biography) indicates a talent for landscapes; his costume sketches and caricatures show a gift for detail and satiric portraiture. Upon his learning that his talent in these areas was not great enough for commercial success, his fancy was taken up by science, and he aspired to become a doctor. Again he discovered that his capabilities were less than the chosen profession demanded. He had seen his father's dreams destroyed by his inability to keep ahead of his creditors, his mother's wish for a happy home ruined by her inability to control his father, and his own romance with Rikke Holst ended because he lacked the courage to face her father. Life as a series of aspirations left unfulfilled by the lack of whatever ability was necessary to carry them to fruition became a vision which was to haunt the rest of his life and permeate many of his plays. Brian W. Downs points out that "meditation on the discrepancy, in all aspects, between desire and performance, or 'dream' and

'deed' [became] chronic with Ibsen. He seems to have envied the man, who, like Mortensgaard in Rosmersholm, 'never wills more than he can do'; but his envy was probably . . . shot with contempt" ¹ Most of Ibsen's protagonists are over-reachers who aspire to more than their abilities can achieve. In his first play, Ibsen presented Catiline not as a villain, but as a revolutionary defeated by his profligate past and his inability to be brutal enough to gain his ends, and in The Pretenders, Duke Skule suffers defeat for a similar reason. Brand is able to meet the demand for all or nothing, but is crushed by the toll the demand takes, while Peer Gynt (Brand's alter ego) becomes sterile in spirit due to his inability to meet any demands whatever. Hedda Gabler shoots herself out of boredom when she fails to achieve the one goal she sets for herself, and Solness, the master builder, finds that even his genius cannot recapture the youth he yearns for. These characters, each a reflection of Ibsen's view of life, long for what they cannot obtain; and the subsequent failure destroys them.

Ibsen's first play, Catiline, begins with its protagonist alone, crying the words which foreshadow the author's career:

¹Brian W. Downs, A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950), p. 193.

Catiline: I must! I must! Deep down within my soul
 A voice commands, and I will do its bidding; . . .
 I feel I have the courage and the strength
 To lead a better, nobler life than this . . .
 Despise, despise yourself then, Catiline!
 You feel the force for good within your soul, . . .
 But what, pray, is the goal of your endeavours?²

Catiline feels the stirrings of nobility, the desire to give up his quest for "mere sensual satisfaction."³ But he finds it difficult to abandon the life-style he has found to be comfortable for so long. Many of his friends see in him the personification of rather than the solution to Rome's problems. They cannot see him, as he sees himself, as "a man who always warms to freedom's cause, an enemy of arbitrary power . . . a friend of the defenseless and oppressed, with pluck and strength to bring the mighty down!"⁴ Their goading and patronization infuriate him:

But I hide my agony in silence
 And none suspects the fire that glows within . . .
 These worthless men who look down on me and scorn
 me . . .
 They do not know how fast this heart is beating
 For right and freedom, for each noble cause
 Which ever stirred in any human breast!⁵

At one moment Catiline is prepared to take up the cudgels and lead his country to freedom, and at the next he yearns for a simple, bucolic life of suburban retreat.

²Henrik Ibsen, Catiline, in The Oxford Ibsen, vol. I: Early Plays, ed. and trans. Graham Orton (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 39.

³Ibid. ⁴Ibid., p. 41. ⁵Ibid., p. 47.

He wants to forget the youth he was, to see his past "as in a happy dream!"⁶--but he cannot. When faced with the choice between peaceful anonymity (perhaps what he is best suited for psychologically) and political glory, he hesitates in his decision; and this vacillation allows him time to make the more self-destructive choice. By play's end, Catiline realizes that he has selected for himself the goal for which he was least prepared by training and inclination. Facing military defeat and suicide, he bemoans his lack of ability to reach his ends:

. . . just to shine forth for one single second
 And blaze with meteoric brilliance,
 Just by some splendid exploit to inscribe
 My name on rolls of everlasting glory . . .
 Ah, that very moment I could quit
 This life; . . . for then I would have lived
 indeed, . . .⁷

Catiline was not the only one of Ibsen's characters to hesitate at the moment of decision and thereby lose the day. In his first important play, The Pretenders, Ibsen retells a story from Norwegian history about the medieval struggle for royal succession between King Haakon and King Skule. Haakon, Bishop Nikolas, and Skule form a triumvirate of successful weakness, blind ambition, and failed ambition. Early in the play, after his selection as king, Haakon has the chance to destroy his rival Skule's

⁶Ibid., p. 62.

⁷Ibid., p. 64.

political power by taking from him Norway's official state seal, which Skule has been protecting.⁸ Although realizing the wisdom in this course of action, Haakon lacks the courage necessary to eliminate Skule's base of power and so solidify his own. His ultimate victory is due less to his own abilities than to Skule's doubtings and the machinations of Bishop Nikolas.

Bishop Nikolas is a marvelous Machiavellian. His successes all come through plots and counterplots, never through the blunt physical action he urges on Skule. One can read the Bishop's implied traits of greatness in his analysis of Skule's Hamlet-like character:

Ah! There is the crux. That is the curse that has blighted your life. You have wished to see all paths open at all times before you. You have never dared to smash all the bridges, leaving only one, and guarding that alone, to conquer or to die in the attempt. You set snares for your enemy. You build traps for his feet, hang sharp swords above his head. You poison all his dishes, and lay out hundreds of nets in which to catch him, but if he makes to enter you dare not spring the trap. When he puts out a hand to take the poison, you think it safer that he should fall by the sword; if he looks like being caught in the morning, you think it better that it should happen at night.⁹

Ibsen presents Bishop Nikolas as one whose life has seen two major ambitions: in youth he desired unlimited

⁸Henrik Ibsen, The Pretenders, in The Oxford Ibsen, vol. I: Early Plays, ed. and trans. Graham Orton (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 235.

⁹Ibid., p. 245.

power of his own, and as an old man and advisor to Skule, he wants to mould that pretender into the kind of man he himself had failed to become. This latter goal is intimated in the passage cited above, with its veiled suggestion of a course of action and method of implementation. The earlier ambition is only confessed by the Bishop on his death bed as he parades the hopes and fancies of his youth before his surprised protege:

. . . My clan was the most powerful in the land; from it many mighty chieftains hailed; I wished to be the mightiest of them all. Even as a boy I was ambitious and impatient for my manhood which seemed so far away. Kings arose with lesser right than I--Magnus Erlingsson; Sverre the Priest . . .; I also wanted to be king, but warrior chieftain first--that was essential. The battle of Ilevoldene was my first. The sun rose and a thousand naked swords flashed in its beams. Magnus and all his men advanced as if it were a game; I alone felt cold at heart. Fiercely our army charged; but I could not keep up with them--I was afraid!¹⁰

The Bishop seems to have singled out Skule from among the many pretenders because he is the one whose background and goals are closest to those of the youthful Nikolas. By hoping to see his dreams realized through the person of Duke Skule, the Bishop shows himself to be as self-destructive emotionally as Catiline was physically. What hope can there be of success when the chosen proxy possesses the same weaknesses as the already failed glory hunter he is supposed to replace? Early in the play,

¹⁰Ibid., p. 273.

Nikolas ridicules Skule's hesitation and pushes him into the fight for the throne by holding up as an exemplar one who perhaps seems unusual considering Nikolas' ecclesiastical position:

. . . And you bow before those enemies? Brace yourself, man! For what other reason were you given your immortal soul? Remember that the greatest of all deeds was done by one who rebelled against the strongest kingdom!

Earl Skule: Who?

Bishop Nikolas: The angel who rebelled against the light.

Earl Skule: And who was hurled into the lowest depths.¹¹

Finally, despite Skule's early fears, the die is cast. He trades his soul for the knowledge that he must have everything. The Kierkegaardian demand of all or nothing will sound through Skule's ambition and reverberate through a long line of Ibsen's protagonists.

Bishop Nikolas is not the only one of Skule's friends who recognizes the Earl's desires. "The Earl must be chosen king," says Lady Ragnhild. "It will harm his soul if he is not the first in the land."¹² Skule is a character of Shakespearean proportions and the central figure of the play. Tormented by his own ambition, he is also the repository of the Bishop's. But like the Bishop before him, he is stymied by that in his personality which halts when the need to take decisive action is near. His hesitation is honest because it springs not from physical cowardice,

¹¹Ibid., p. 247. ¹²Ibid., p. 230.

as did that of Bishop Nikolas, but from the doubt that he is actually the pretender chosen by God to rule as king. His ambition to govern is all-powerful but in the final analysis is not, unlike the Bishop's, blind. The weakness that spurs him on to rebellion, and allows him to listen to the Bishop's promptings, is the doubt that perhaps Haakon is not the chosen one. He dreads doing wrong, and so his rationalizations that he is in the right are elaborate. His final argument for action is expressed in words which ring of Bishop Nikolas--indeed, sound exactly like the teachings of that priest:

. . . All succeeds for Haakon. Perhaps he is not the rightful heir; but he believes in himself and stands as strong as ever; . . . my doubt is every bit as firmly fixed as Haakon's confidence; no being on earth can root it out--no one, no one. The glowing iron has been carried, God has spoken and yet Haakon may be an impostor while I waste my life. And even if I were to win the kingdom, the doubt would remain as strong as ever, gnawing, tearing, wearing me away with the slow torture of eternal anxiety. Yes, yes, but better far to sit up there enthroned, doubting one's self, than stand down here among the common herd with doubts of him who sits above me.¹³

With thoughts like these urging him on, Skule has himself declared king; but as he is a man of action, his fate is sealed by the same weakness which plagued the earlier Catiline (and, for a while, had dogged Haakon): he lacks the ruthlessness necessary to crush his rival and so cement his own grasp on the crown. He is horrified when

¹³Ibid., p. 279.

his own son blasphemes by stealing an altar from a church in an attempt to gather support. When those very people from whom support was expected turn on him, Skule refuses to fight further, taking what has happened as an omen. He takes refuge with his daughter (Haakon's wife) in an attempt to force onto Haakon the decision either to sue for cessation of conflict on some equitable terms, or to storm the castle which houses Skule and thereby risk the lives of both Haakon's wife and son. Again in a moment of crisis, Skule shows his lack of the ability that anyone with his ambition must have--the ability to make quick, cool decisions and act on them with celerity and, if need be, ruthlessness. Alone with his daughter, Skule realizes that if his men reach the castle before Haakon's they will murder Haakon's son in an attempt to break his spirit and ruin the chance of orderly succession if his house retains the throne. He toys once again with decision making, but seeks and finds yet another heavenly omen:

King Skule: There are men created to live and men created to die. I have never willed to take the path God has pointed out for me; therefore my way has never been clear before me until now. The serenity of family life I have destroyed: that I can never regain. My injuries to Haakon I can redeem by freeing him from a duty which would part him from the dearest thing he has. The townsmen stand without; I shall not wait for Haakon! My men are near; as long as I am alive they will never yield . . . Look! Look up at the sky! See how

the flaming sword that has been drawn above me
pales and vanishes! God has spoken. I have un-
derstood him¹⁴

Skule, like Catiline before him, desires more than it is in his character to achieve, and is trapped by a false image of himself. He demands of himself all or nothing, giving himself no credit whatsoever for partial success, and he prefers to face certain death rather than continue an existence which has no room left in it for dreams of unattainable glories.

In his next play, Ibsen created a character whose weakness was a paradoxical complement to those of the Roman and the medieval usurper. Brand seems to understand himself. "I am stern / In my demands," he announces. "I require All or Nothing. / No half measures. There is no forgiveness / For failure."¹⁵ It is a demand he will be able to meet; he will give all to his ministry--but this demand implies the ability to continue living as a human being after the demand has been met, and this Brand cannot do. He learns too late that the man who has given all has nothing left with which to function (no love, no mercy, no charity, no understanding of human frailty), and the man who

¹⁴Ibid., p. 338.

¹⁵Henrik Ibsen, Brand, trans. Michael Meyer, with an Introduction by W. H. Auden (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1960), p. 87.

has required all from others leaves nothing in his wake but bloodless corpses.

In the beginning of the play, Brand's ambition is messianic. He spurns an opportunity to preach in a small village where his word is badly needed because he has a "greater calling":

. . . I must speak to the world.
Where the mountains shut one in, a voice is powerless.
Who buries himself in a pit when the broad fields beckon?
Who ploughs the desert when fertile soil awaits him? . . .
I have dared to take upon myself
The salvation of Man. That is my work.
I must leave this narrow valley; I cannot fight
My battle here.¹⁶

The salvation of men is brushed aside for the sake of Man, and Brand seems not to realize that the latter is constituted of the former. One suspects at this point that Brand's inhuman demands are mere window-dressing and that the glory of God is secondary to the envisioned glory of Brand. He sees himself as a glorious evangelical in battle for souls with the faithless, ignorant armies of his time; he has then of himself a grandiose dream, but not an impossible one for a man with the required temperament and inspiration. But here Brand leaves the company of Catiline and Skule. They do not modify their dreams or realize their futility until at the point of death. Brand sees

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 77, 78.

early that his ambition is not designed for easy fruition. He needs a place to begin; he needs a group on which to try out his philosophy, and so he accepts the village job.

This morning visions flocked to me
 Like wild swans, and lifted me on their broad wings.
 I looked outwards, thinking my path lay there.
 I saw myself as the chastiser of the age,
 Striding in greatness above the tumult.
 The pomp of processions, hymns
 And incense, silken banners, golden cups,
 Songs of victory, the acclaim
 Of singing crowds, glorified my life's work.
 But it was an empty dream, a mountain mirage
 Made by the sun in the morning mist.
 Now I stand in a deep valley, where darkness
 Falls long before evening. I stand between
 The mountain and the sea, far from the tumult
 Of the world. But this is my home.
 My Sunday song is over, my winged steed
 Can be unsaddled. My duty lies here.
 There is a higher purpose than the glory of battle:
 To hallow daily toil to the praise of God.¹⁷

But the price Brand demands for the hallowing is tremendous. He requires an absolute obedience to God's laws and unquestioning reliance on His providence. When Brand asks his own mother to give away everything she has spent years laboring to acquire, she refuses, daring not to be left to depend entirely on God's (or anyone else's) generosity. Brand, with what he feels is righteous fury directed at one of little faith, withholds the comforts of both son and church from her, and she dies alone and priestless. He justifies his actions by declaring the decision to be as difficult for him as for her. Now devoted to the spiritual

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 85-86.

improvement of his village, he refuses to move to a warmer climate even though remaining will cost the life of his infant son. His wife, Agnes, pleads with him not to demand all of himself, of her, of a baby too young to decide. He scorns her lack of faith, insisting that God will not take their son unless He intends to take the child no matter what they choose to do. Agnes' farewell to her dead babe is also an admission that she has nothing left but her husband and must try to adopt his philosophy (as she understands it under the circumstances):

But do not let anyone see you cry. Do not say
Your father shut you out. A little child
Cannot understand what grown people must do. . . .
I must work, work silently.
God's demand must be fulfilled. I must
Make myself hard. I must make my will strong.¹⁸

But Agnes lacks the ability to be hard and strong, as she discovers when a Gipsy comes to the house begging for food and clothing for her baby. Brand forces Agnes to give away her baby's clothes, the only remembrance of the little one she had left. Now she has truly given all, and, having no substance left, she dies. Once again, Brand's determination to give all costs him something dear to him. He cannot see the wisdom in the advice given to him by the village's Provost: "Aspire to be a saint, but be a good fellow / And keep such aspirations to yourself./ Don't encourage others to imitate you."¹⁹

¹⁸Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 136.

On a mountain path Brand meets a mysterious figure who represents the spirit of compromise. The figure, strongly reminiscent of Agnes, urges Brand to leave his chosen path and follow her, but it is too late in his career to begin to compromise. He kills his love a second time.²⁰ He has remained true to his vision and lived his life the way he wanted to live it; but he finally realizes that his life is hollow and that he does not have the ability to enjoy that which he created. Thus Brand demonstrates that it is not enough merely to obtain one's goal--the goal must be the right one for the particular individual.

The play that followed Brand has as its protagonist a character as far removed from the stern Brand as it is possible to get. Brand, like the historical figures from the earlier plays, suffers a lengthy period of self-examination finally to arrive at some valid, if painful, conclusions about himself. Unfortunately, his moment of discovery comes so close to death that change of action is impossible. But for Peer Gynt, discovery of self is impossible. Psychiatrist Erich Fromm pinpoints Peer's problem exactly: "Ibsen has expressed this state of selfhood [one's discovery of self] in Peer Gynt: Peer Gynt tries to discover his self and he finds that he is like an onion--one layer

²⁰Ibid., pp. 152-54.

after the other can be peeled off and there is no core to be found."²¹

The first act begins with Peer's lies about himself. It is difficult with Peer, as it is with many an accomplished liar, to tell whether his tales are designed to impress the listener or to convince the speaker. His fancies, in contrast with his mother's fears, are of great things to come:

Sweet, ugly little mother, you take my word.
The whole parish shall honour you. Just wait
Till I do something, something really big! . . .
I'll be King! Emperor! . . .
Aase: . . . You'll end by being hanged!²²

The discrepancy between the greatness that Peer Gynt feels is his and the shabbiness of his actual person is well illustrated by the point-counterpoint of sight and sound during one of his picaresque escapades. He enters onto the stage riding a pig while exclaiming, "You can tell a great man by the cut of his horse!" His hold on greatness is further undermined as other characters refer to him as a "boozing pig."²³ In the village, Peer asks:

Peer: Are you scared of me . . . ?
A Third Lad: Who isn't scared of you? . . .
A Girl: Can you do black magic, Peer?

²¹Erich Fromm, Man For Himself: An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1947), p. 80.

²²Henrik Ibsen, Peer Gynt, trans. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.,; Anchor Books, 1963), pp. 11, 12.

²³Ibid., pp. 39, 17.

Peer: I can conjure up the Devil!
 A Man: My grandmother could do that before I was born.
 Peer: Liar! There's no one else can do what I can. Once I conjured him into a nut. . . . You think I'm making it up?
 A Man: Oh no, you're not! I've heard most of it from my granddad.
 Peer: That's a lie! It happened to me!
 A Man: Sure, what hasn't?²⁴

Peer breaks up a village wedding celebration and runs off into the mountains with the bride. He abandons her and begins his series of picaresque adventures. The episodic structure of the play helps Ibsen age Peer from act to act; and this structure works for Ibsen, as it has for many others, as a metaphor for the continuing search for self-discovery. It is during one of Peer's youthful adventures that he first becomes consciously aware of self. He meets a being--The Great Boyg, a monster from Norwegian mythology--that expresses its existence through Peer's sense of hearing:

Peer: Answer me! Who are you?
 A Voice in the Dark: Myself. . . .
 Peer: Who are you?
 A Voice in the Dark: Myself. Can you say the same?
 Peer: I can say what I like; my sword is sharp. Beware! Huh, hah, now it strikes and crushes! King Saul slew hundreds, Peer Gynt slays thousands! Who are you?
 A Voice in the Dark: Myself.²⁵

Once introduced by the Boyg to the concept of self, Peer spends the rest of his life in an attempt to realize self.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 23-24.

²⁵Ibsen, Peer Gynt, p. 47.

His youth was so packed with self-deception that not only does he not know himself, but his grasp on the rest of the world is weak. His monologues are filled with half quotes, misquotes, and unconscious allusions from and to literary works he only half remembers. Though growing older, Peer grows no wiser. His ultimate goal changes, but the way he thinks about it remains the same. He is not content to think just in terms of finding, and thereby changing, himself--he aggrandizes the concept to see himself once more as the center of world attention:

Peer: . . . in the midst of my sea, on a rich oasis,
 I shall personally propagate the Norwegian race. . . .
 Around a bay on rising sand
 I'll found my capital, Peeropolis.
 The world's degenerate. Now comes the turn
 Of Gynthiana, my new land! . . .
 Like the ass in the Ark I'll send my clarion call
 Across the world, and bring the baptism of liberty
 To the beautiful prisoned coasts that shall be born!
 I must do it! I must find capital!
 My kingdom--well, half my kingdom for a horse!²⁶

It is possible to enter into the rhetorical maze of this speech and never be found alive again. As an example of letting the confused speech serve as a symbol for the confusion of the character it is as clever as anything in Jonathan Swift. Peer's reason is weak if he would build his new city on sand (the wise man builds on the rocks, as the Sunday school song says), and the braying of an ass is hardly the proper simile for a call for spiritual re-birth.

²⁶Ibid., p. 85.

Peer experiences new things, but none of them seems to add to the character that begins the play. Peer's one and only ambition is to find himself, but he has no idea of how to go about it. Like a boy whose goal is to become a millionaire, Peer must have a plan of action, must establish a series of smaller goals all leading to the fulfillment of the big one. As is Peer's way, he believes for years that he has done what he wishes to have done--but at play's end, when he learns that even his wasted life means nothing after he is forgiven by the woman who loved him, he sees the truth about himself:

I've been expelled from the privileged circle;
The exclusive club of men who are themselves.
(A shooting star is seen. He nods after it.)
Hail, brother star! A greeting from Peer Gynt!
We flash for a moment, then our light is quenched,
And we disappear into the void forever.²⁷

Peer's life is for all practical purposes lacking in ambition. Like a beast or a troll, his only sources of gratification are those he can immediately experience through his senses. But nearly a quarter of a century after Peer Gynt, Ibsen was to create another "troll," this one lacking even the relief of temporary pleasures in a life filled with stolid, unrelenting boredom.

Brian W. Downs calls Hedda Gabler "the worst sort of egoist, the individualist run to seed"²⁸ Her

²⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁸ Downs, Study of Six Plays by Ibsen, p. 56.

life is as pointless as Peer Gynt's, but where Peer tries to discover himself through a life of travel, Hedda buries herself in a loveless marriage. Their friends seem surprised that Hedda and George Tesman should become a pair, and yet it is not difficult to find in Hedda that quality which would attract a female-dominated man like Tesman--she is simply stronger than he. Tesman is trading (but not completely) domination by his aunts for domination by Hedda, a society girl and general's daughter. It is Tesman's attraction for Hedda that is difficult to pin down. Weak, only moderately successful, easily controlled by suggestion, he seems the type of man who would be anathema to her. In truth, his only attractions are his pliability and availability. When Judge Brack asks Hedda why she does not find something with which to occupy her time, she admits considering forcing Tesman into politics. "What satisfaction would that give you?" the judge asks. "If he turned out to be no good? Why do you want to make him do that?" "Because," she replies, "I'm bored."²⁹ Boredom is the motivating force behind a cruel trick played by Hedda on one of Tesman's aunts. "She'd put her hat down on a chair. And I pretended to think it was the servant's. . . . Sometimes

²⁹Henrik Ibsen, Hedda Gabler, in "Hedda Gabler" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 316-17.

a mood like that hits me," Hedda explains to Judge Brack. "And I can't stop myself."³⁰

But saying that Hedda is too bored to live, that she must fill her days with "cheap thrills" in order to feel alive only explains the surface problem. It is the explanation Hedda gives to Judge Brack, a man she does not care enough for to confess the truth to. When Eilert Loevborg, a former lover of Hedda's, returns, he gets the truth from her. It is a truth which has woven itself through all of Ibsen's major plays, as well as through his life. "Yes, Hedda," says Loevborg, "You're a coward at heart." "A dreadful coward," she answers. "Yes. Courage. Yes. If only one had that . . . One might be able to live. In spite of everything."³¹

If Hedda lacks the courage to try to make anything of her life, she does not lack whatever courage it takes to try to control someone else's. With Loevborg's return, she finds in him more suitable material than Tesman for control. But if Tesman's aunts were forces of rival influence on that front, Mrs. Elvsted becomes her rival for Loevborg's attention. Mrs. Elvsted, possibly his mistress, has served as an inspiration for Loevborg's new book. Together, they discuss the book as if it were their child. Hedda has admitted, in tones indicative of fear of the process, that she has no interest in giving birth.

³⁰Ibid., p. 315.

³¹Ibid., pp. 328, 330.

Brack: . . . suppose you were to find yourself faced with what people call--to use the conventional phrase--the most solemn of human responsibilities? . . .

Hedda: Be quiet! Nothing like that's going to happen. . . . I've no leanings in that direction, Judge. . . .

Brack: But surely you must feel some inclination to make use of that--natural talent which every woman--

Hedda: Oh, be quiet, I say!³²

When Loevborg loses his manuscript in a bordello, he dreads telling Mrs. Elvsted the truth and so tells her that he deliberately destroyed the book. "Do you know, Eilert," she says, "all my life I shall feel as though you'd killed a little child? . . . But how could you? It was my child, too!"³³ Hedda, who has gotten the manuscript from Tesman, hears this conversation and realizes that if she is to break her rival's hold on Loevborg the evidence of their past collaboration must be destroyed; and so the childless one who wants to change Mrs. Elvsted's plain, useful Loevborg into a beautiful but useless Apollo with vine-leaves in his hair burns the manuscript page by page. "I'm burning your child, Thea! You with your beautiful wavy hair! The child Eilert Loevborg gave you. I'm burning it! I'm burning your child!"³⁴ It is an act which, when done in privacy, takes as much courage as ridiculing an old woman's hat. When Hedda describes for Mrs. Elvsted the new Loevborg she is trying to create, Thea suspects that Hedda is after something. "Yes, I am," Hedda admits. "For once

³²Ibid., pp. 317-18. ³³Ibid., p. 351.

³⁴Ibid., p. 353.

in my life I want to have the power to shape a man's destiny."³⁵ It is Hedda's one ambition. It is why she has considered pushing Tesman into politics. Hedda lacks the courage to try to do something with her own life and so tries to dominate others. Unlike Ibsen's previous protagonists, Hedda is one whose ambition is to change someone else; like them, she fails. Her vision of Loevborg as Apollo is shattered by Judge Brack's description of Loevborg's revels: "Apparently he put up a very violent resistance. Hit one of the constables on the ear and tore his uniform. He had to accompany them to the police station. . . ." "He didn't," Hedda realizes, "have a crown of vine-leaves in his hair."³⁶

Hedda never tells Loevborg the fate of his manuscript because she sees in his unhappiness the chance to dictate not the terms of his life, but those of his death as he threatens suicide. She urges him to make the act of self-destruction beautiful. "With a crown of vine-leaves in my hair? The way you used to dream of me--in the old days?"³⁷ She gives him one of her father's matched pistols and talks of the nobility and honor of a clean shot, a single bullet through the brain. In actuality, he returns to the brothel looking once more for his manuscript; later, he stumbles and

³⁵Ibid., p. 335. ³⁶Ibid., p. 346.

³⁷Ibid., p. 353.

shoots himself in the abdomen. Hedda loses her last chance to add any beauty to Loevborg's destiny. The blow of Loevborg's death is crushing because it leaves her no one's life to play with but Tesman's; and even Tesman does not remain her exclusive property for long. Mrs. Elvsted, who has kept Loevborg's notes, discovers that with Tesman's help she can raise Loevborg's life's work phoenix-like from the ashes of Hedda's envy and perverted ambition. Tesman becomes so enamored of the idea that he rushes into the project at full speed. Hedda sees that her own destiny is the only one she has any chance to shape, and she takes the pistol which matches the one she gave to Loevborg and exits to complete on herself the "beautiful" act he failed to carry out on himself. For once her courage does not fail her. She had always realized the emptiness of her life, but the courage it takes to do something about it comes to her only when her options are limited to one.

If Hedda's ambition seems petty, that of the protagonist of Ibsen's next play (The Master Builder) looks monumental. Solness, the master builder, is a man who wants to turn his life around, to go back to the type of work he did as a young man--indeed, to recapture youth itself. Brian W. Downs suggests that ". . . a source of misery springs in Solness' bosom . . . the belief that, despite

the heavy sacrifices extracted by his career, that career has fallen short of expectations."³⁸

Solness: . . . I realize now that people have no use for the homes they live in. They can't be happy in them. And a home wouldn't have been any use to me, even if I'd had one. So when all the accounts are closed, I have built nothing really. And sacrificed nothing. It all adds up to nothing. Nothing. Nothing.³⁹

These words sound like Ibsen's. Through the final ten years of his creative life, Ibsen entertained the doubt that his decision to abandon poetic drama after Peer Gynt in favor of everyday prose had been the right one. Solness had begun his career by building churches, and as a young man had had the courage to climb to the very top of the spire, hanging the wreath "before the face of God." Ibsen must have felt about his early verse dramas much the same as Solness felt about his churches--they were monuments to the human spirit--and he must have come to see his prose plays in the light of sociological criticism--as being the equivalent of Solness' homes: common, useful for a particular time and place, destructible, and so ultimately pointless. Solness' yearnings must have been Ibsen's; no other character from his plays before Arnold Rubek in

³⁸Downs, Study of Six Plays by Ibsen, p. 193.

³⁹Henrik Ibsen, The Master Builder, in "When We Dead Awaken" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1960), p. 208.

When We Dead Awaken (1899) is such "a reflection of Ibsen's doubts and regrets,"⁴⁰ in Robert Brustein's phrase, as is Master Builder Solness.

Solness wants to abandon the stolid, practical houses he has been building. His ambition, like Hedda Gabler's, is to create the most beautiful thing in the world, but it is not until Hilde Wangel re-enters his life that he discovers exactly what that is:

Hilde: . . . we'll build the most beautiful thing-- the most beautiful thing in all the world!

Solness: Hilde--tell me! What is that? . . .

Hilde: A castle in the air . . . Do you know what a castle in the air is?

Solness: It's the most beautiful thing in the world, you say.

Hilde: Yes, of course! Castles in the air are so safe to hide in. And easy to build. Especially for master builders with a--a giddy conscience.⁴¹

Once again, Ibsen brings his character into confrontation with that which his heart desires. With Hilde, the symbol of his lost youth, before him offering to lead the way into a new life, Solness quails at the thought of taking the necessary step. "If only," says Hilde, "one had a really brash and hearty conscience! If one dared to do what one wanted." "Oh," answers the tormented Solness, "I think most people are as cowardly as I, in that respect."⁴²

⁴⁰ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 75.

⁴¹ Ibsen, Master Builder, pp. 200-201.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 183-84.

Solness' life is comfortable--not imaginative, not surprising, not exciting. He lives with his wife, his regrets, his ghosts, and feels that he has already suffered his thousand natural shocks and need fear no more if he does nothing to acquire the courage it takes to fight the boredom of accepting existence. "I am what I am," he laments. "And I can't create myself anew."⁴³ But Hilde, who represents to Solness the possibility of a new life, demands that he reach his aspiration. She wants to see him again as she saw him when she was a child--young, brave, climbing up the steeple of his newly constructed church:

Mrs. Solness: . . . My husband gets dizzy. He has no head for heights. . . . he's always been like that.

Hilde: But I've seen him myself, high up on the top of a church steeple.

Mrs. Solness: Yes, I've heard people talk about that. But it's impossible.

Solness: Impossible, yes! But nevertheless I stood up there!⁴⁴

Like Catiline's, and Skule's, and Brand's, Solness' goal seems impossible--to return to what one was and have a second chance at that great decision one was too cowardly to make--but Hilde urges him on and Solness actually reaches the top of the tower. And as she waves her shawl to him, just as the ladies had done the first time she saw him climbing, the flowing material of the shawl makes him dizzy (as his wife knew something would) and he plunges to earth.

⁴³Ibid., p. 137. ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 190.

"But he got right to the top!" Hilde cries. "And I heard harps in the air! My--my master builder!"⁴⁵

Hilde is a mystery who comes to Solness as though from a dream. Is she really a wicked young woman, a psychological vampire who fastens herself to an older man in order to actualize a frustrated sexual fantasy of childhood? Or is she less the reality and more the symbol of Solness' own fantasies and yearnings? "Hilde Wangel," wrote Henry James, "a young woman whom the author may well be trusted to have made more mystifying than her curiously charmless name would suggest, is only the indirect form, the animated clock-face, as it were, of Halvard Solness's destiny"⁴⁶ When Solness meets her again, he feels the impossible beckoning to him. He believes himself specially gifted. "Don't you think, Hilde, that there are people singled out by fate who have been endowed with grace and power to wish for something, desire it so passionately, will it so inexorably that, ultimately, they must be granted it?"⁴⁷ As a young builder on a traveling commission, Solness saw a little girl and wanted her--wanted her so strongly that the impression

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 213.

⁴⁶Henry James, The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama, 1872-1901, edited, with An Introduction and Notes by Allan Wade. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1948), p. 259.

⁴⁷Ibsen, Master Builder, p. 181.

of his desire was planted in her mind. When Hilde finds Solness again, she is only doing what he willed her to do. When she urges him on to build "castles in the air," she is merely giving voice to his own desires. Solness and Hilde are the two halves of the same person, both in conflict for supremacy, one urging responsibility, the other urging achievement of impossible aspirations. When the Hilde-half wins, the Solness-half perishes. For one brief moment atop the steeple Solness is able to return to that time when he wanted that little girl, that time before his id divided into two. Unlike those protagonists before him, his ambition is achieved--but like the others, the result is that he has nothing left to live for.

The tragedy of these characters is their lack of contentment, their suspicion that the best part of life is leaving them behind. They conceive for themselves ambitions that they do not have the courage to achieve, and in failure they do not have the courage to continue living. They destroy themselves with doubts, and fears, and aimlessness--but at least they destroy themselves because they pin their hopes on themselves. Ibsen was also fully aware of the type of person whose hope for happiness depends on an idealized vision of someone or something outside of the self. These people expect fulfillment to come from the outside, expect a miracle to take place which will complete

the task of making them human. Ibsen's judgment on them was as harsh as on any of his over-reachers, as I shall demonstrate in the chapter to follow.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL: THE OUTER CONFLICT

The failure of a person to live up to his own aspirations is bad enough, but Ibsen's people must also come to grips with the failure of their ideals. Their lack of personal fulfillment prompts them to try to find in others the qualities of perfection they desire for themselves but fear they do not possess. Each, subconsciously feeling that he is the only bedeviled one, forces the people close to him into situations the only result of which must be disillusion. They expect too much of others, seemingly never realizing that no individual can live up to another's ideal. Too often they destroy what they idealize, even as they discover the truth.

During the years 1879-1884, Ibsen seems to have been obsessed by the failure of idealism as never before. This failure is one of the major themes in each of the plays he wrote during that period. Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders, Dr. Stockmann, and Gregers Werle are all disappointed in their ideals, even though they perhaps remain better off than Oswald Alving and the Ekdals, who are destroyed by them.

A Doll's House was topical in 1879 because Ibsen used as its background one of the problems which was in the air of Europe at that time. Most writers use the best available tools to capture reader attention--how else can a vehicle for transporting the message be constructed?--and the tool Ibsen used in A Doll's House was the women's movement. The play is not about women's liberation--few of Ibsen's readers grasped that even as late as twenty years after the play's publication. To honor him on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, The Women's Rights League of Norway held a banquet. The women toasted him, but his brief speech must have surprised and disappointed more than a few of them.

I am not a member of The Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propoganda. I have been more the poet and less the philosopher than people generally seemed inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it¹ has seemed a problem of mankind in general.

Mankind in general--that is what Nora Helmer represents; not just subjugated women, but subjugated humanity. She is certainly a prisoner of the cant which defines a woman's place and then puts her in it; but her expectation

¹Henrik Ibsen, Letters and Speeches, ed. Evert Spinchorn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 337.

as to what her husband should do, the ideal she refers to as "the miracle," is her means of trying to define his role. She fails to live up to her husband's ideal just as he fails to live up to hers. The difference between them is that she realizes the full importance of what has taken place and leaves to try to recreate her life in light of this new understanding. The shattering of her old ideals permanently halts her ability to create new ones. Torvald is left with hope that the miracle will yet occur. "A Doll's House," writes Michael Meyer, "is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's Richard II is about the divine right of kings, or Ghosts is about syphilis, or An Enemy of the People is about public hygiene. Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person."² As long as Nora is trapped by both her ideals and Torvald's, she can never see into her own soul.

Nora's ideals are fed by her husband's aspirations. "Let what will happen, happen," Torvald tells her. "When the real crisis comes, you will not find me lacking in strength or courage. I am man enough to bear the burden for us both."³ Torvald's hypothesizing both comforts

²Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 457.

³Henrik Ibsen, A Doll's House, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), p. 62.

Nora and frightens her. Alone with him she cries out, "You see how much I need you! You must show me every step of the way."⁴ But when she is with Mrs. Linde, Nora suspects that Torvald is not as courageous as he would like to be and that therefore her ideal is hollow and cannot withstand even the slightest pressure, let alone the major catastrophe with which Torvald feels capable of dealing. "He's so proud of being a man," Nora says, "it'd be so painful and humiliating for him to know that he owed anything to me. It'd completely wreck our relationship. This life we have built together would no longer exist."⁵ As the pressure mounts, Krogstad, the man from whom the money to save Torvald's life was borrowed by the device of a signature forged by Nora, threatens to reveal the scandal; Nora, who has been both flighty in her smuggling of macaroons into the house and unexpectedly vigorous in her use of strong language, finds herself floating in a limbo of indecision. The opportunity to see her ideal realized seems to be at hand, and yet she dreads the moment's arrival. "Oh, how can you understand? A--miracle--is about to happen," she confides to a bewildered Mrs. Linde. "Yes. A miracle. But it's so frightening, Christine. It

⁴Ibid., p. 76.

⁵Ibid., p. 35.

mustn't happen, not for anything in the world."⁶ Just as she here fears the failure of her ideal, a few minutes later she welcomes the chance to see Torvald prove himself: ". . . it's wonderful really, in a way--sitting here and waiting for the miracle to happen."⁷ Krogstad has written the accusatory letter and Nora knows that Torvald has it in his possession, but she has kept him from examining his mail through coy pleadings and trickery. She still cannot decide whether to risk her home on the miracle's coming off or to continue to distract Torvald until she has the chance either to destroy the letter or force Krogstad to ask for its return unopened. Finally, it is her husband, feeding (as usual) her most urgent dread and desire, who makes up her mind for her. "Oh, my beloved wife," he rhapsodizes, "I feel as though I could never hold you close enough. Do you know, Nora, often I wish some terrible danger might threaten you, so that I could offer my blood, everything, for your sake." Her whispered reply signs her fate. "Read your letters now, Torvald," she says.⁸

The miracle fails to occur. Torvald is furious, accusing Nora of everything from dereliction of her duty toward her children to common criminality. It is only after

⁶Ibid., p. 73.

⁷Ibid., p. 77.

⁸Ibid., p. 89.

Nora's ideal is destroyed that she begins to see her home for the plaything it is. At that point she can begin to see her relationship to all the people and things which made up her world, and, in turn, the relationship of her world to the other world, the real one. The walls of her doll house collapse--she stands in the midst of life with nothing to protect her now that Torvald's proclaimed support failed to appear. Torvald learns that Krogstad has had a change of heart and will not cause a scandal, and so immediately becomes the protector again: ". . . Just lean on me. I shall counsel you. I shall guide you. I would not be a true man if your feminine helplessness did not make you doubly attractive in my eyes."⁹ But it is too late--Nora is incapable of restoring her lost illusions. She sees only one excuse for his failure. "You have never loved me. You just thought it was fun to be in love with me."¹⁰ Stunned at being accused of the triviality of character he had always seen as a characteristic of Nora's, Torvald asks her, "Haven't you been happy here?" "No; never," she replies. "I used to think I was; but I haven't ever been happy . . . I've just had fun."¹¹

The idealism which had earlier prompted Nora to question the state's right to force a woman to stand by

⁹Ibid., p. 93. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 95. ¹¹Ibid., p. 96.

helplessly while those close to her waste away has vanished without hope of recovery, but Torvald is reluctant to let loose his illusion of happiness. He realizes only questions, and demands that Nora supply him with the answers. "Can you also explain why I have lost your love?" "Yes, I can. It happened this evening, when the miracle failed to happen. . . . I knew that you would say to him [Krogstad]: 'Publish the facts to the world.' . . . Then I was certain that you would step forward and take all the blame on yourself . . ."12

Helmer: . . . Can you neglect your most sacred duties?

Nora: What do you call my most sacred duties?

Helmer: Do I have to tell you? Your duties towards your husband, and your children.

Nora: I have another duty which is equally sacred.

Helmer: You have not. What on earth could that be?

Nora: My duty towards myself . . . I am first and foremost a human being,¹³ like you--or anyway . . . I must try to become one.

Not comprehending Nora's self-realization, Torvald can only bluster. He does not merely remain in the present while Nora leaves him behind; he moves backward, allowing his self-righteous indignation to comfort and push him deeper into a false home constructed in an idealistic fantasy. Nora knows that more than Torvald's courage was illusionary--Torvald can only comprehend an aberrant wife. The "vital basis of Nora's life" has shattered, writes Brian W. Downs; "to leave the hearth on which the fire has gone out can give her no further pangs."¹⁴ Nora lets the front door slam

¹²Ibid., p. 99. ¹³Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁴Brian W. Downs, A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950), p. 129.

on all that was false in her life, and Torvald finishes where Nora began--hoping for a miracle.

Ibsen's next play was another with two idealists cast in the major roles and it was, like A Doll's House, misunderstood by its first readers.

Ibsen's contemporaries saw Ghosts primarily as a play about physical illness. . . . With few exceptions, they failed to realize that the true subject of Ghosts is the devitalizing effect of a dumb acceptance of convention . . . The importance of waging war against the past, the need for each individual to find his or her own freedom, the danger of renouncing love in the name of duty¹⁵ these were the real themes of Ghosts . . .

The two idealists of Ghosts follow the pattern set by the Helmers. Mrs. Alving has no ideals left about her late husband, remembering the Captain only as a hedonistic profligate; but she has transferred them to her son, Oswald, who she idealistically believes has inherited none of his father's character. Like Nora before her crisis, Mrs. Alving is allowing a romanticized version of someone else to dictate the future direction of her life. Unlike Nora, when the veil is removed she will be unable to walk away.

Bernard Shaw calls Ghosts " . . . an uncompromising and outspoken attack on marriage as a useless sacrifice of human beings to an ideal . . ." and underscores its

¹⁵Meyer, Ibsen, p. 488.

relationship to A Doll's House by describing it as almost a sequel to the earlier play:

. . . Ibsen is determined to show you what comes of the scrupulous line of conduct you were so angry with Nora for not pursuing. Mrs. Alving feels that her place is by her husband for better for worse, and by her child. Now the ideal of wifely and womanly duty which demands this from her also demands that she shall regard herself as an outraged wife, and her husband as a scoundrel. And the family ideal calls upon her to suffer in silence lest she shatter her innocent son's faith in the purity of home life by letting him know the disreputable truth about his father.¹⁶

Helen Alving gave up the man she loved to marry Captain Alving on her family's demand. Even though her life with Alving was a horror of hungover mornings, boring afternoons, and drunken, licentious nights, Helen stuck to her duty and was guided by her ideal of what the marital relationship should appear to be to the outside world. Her love of Oswald refused to admit of any psychological kinship between him and his father. This idealized portrait of Oswald, which had replaced the one of marriage, was kept clear as long as Oswald was away from home; but when he returned, and he and Helen spent time together as they never had before, Mrs. Alving saw that he was very much like his father--drinking, womanizing, and all. She feared what could be thought of as a negative version of "the miracle"--that instead of finally creating for her the type of perfect home she has pretended

¹⁶ Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism, Now Completed to the Death of Ibsen (New York: Hill and Wang; Dramabooks, 1957), pp. 86-87.

for years to have already, Oswald will be transformed by her presence from the sensitive young man she loves into a replica of his father, just as he was at the age when he married, thereby causing her nightmare home life to begin again at the beginning. She urges Oswald to maintain that better part of himself, to keep her ideal alive, and does not begin to realize that no ideal can exist until he has the first attack of the venereal disease he has inherited from his father. As Oswald degenerates into idiocy before her, her attempts to convince herself (although the remarks are addressed to her son) that the illusion is the actual are as desperate as they are pitiful:

You've just imagined these dreadful things, Oswald. You've imagined it all. All this suffering has been too much for you. But now you shall rest. At home with your own mother, my own dear, blessed boy. Point at anything you want and you shall have it, just like when you were a little child. There, there. Now the attack is over. You see how easily it passed! Oh, I knew it! And, Oswald, do you see what a beautiful day we're going to have? Bright sunshine. Now you can really see your home.¹⁷

But now, unfortunately for her, Mrs. Alving can really see her home--and it is a nightmare. She has no illusions left as she stands before the jibbering son who wanted her to kill him. The ideals of marriage, motherhood, hope in the future, all are gone. The audience wonders how many times

¹⁷Henrik Ibsen, Ghosts, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), p. 196.

she will fire Oswald's pistol--or if she has lost too much courage even to do that, and will merely stand there forever, viewing for the first time in the sunlight of self-realization the ruin of her own life, and too hopeless even to end it. Nora Helmer shed her idealism perhaps just in time; Helen Alving, Nora's more conventional alter ego, waited too long.

The other idealist in Ghosts is Pastor Manders, Helen Alving's forsworn lover. Manders is typical of Ibsen's ministers--he is for the most part credulous, but his naiveté has just enough worldliness underlying it to keep him from becoming merely a figure of fun. Manders' idealism concerning his fellow man allows him to believe the most outrageous lies that an old rascal like Jacob Engstrand can manufacture, and yet he sees deeply enough into human nature to realize that he will be blamed for the burning of the uninsured orphanage. As a man of the cloth, Manders should have been willing to help Helen deal with her brute of a husband; but, instead, his idealistic cries of "duty above all" drove her back to the Captain, who, when trapped in a small town with the self-righteous example of his martyred wife, fled even further into the relief of decadence. What Manders would have called a "common sense" approach to marital strife, Ibsen would label "idealism." This idealism

in Manders, bolstering that implanted in Helen, was too much for Captain Alving to cope with, and so eliminated any hope of his finding his way out of the snare fate had set for him. Manders, in his innocence, ruins three, possibly four, lives before the Act One curtain is raised: Helen's life is ruined when the man she loves (Manders) forces her back to the home of a man her presence will help to destroy further, and Helen's child is made sick through a cruel practical joke played on him by a father whose life has little pleasure but cruelty left in it. The fourth life, that of Manders, is left barren of marital companionship by his no doubt well-intentioned deed.

Since all this has occurred before the play begins, Ibsen needs a device to show that Manders' idealism has not been lost over the years. The device he uses is the roguish carpenter, Engstrand. Engstrand, it seems, has never once in his life uttered a truthful statement in Manders' presence. Before the play begins he has been filling the minister's ears with a tale about wanting to open a home for sailors. "Your father hasn't a very strong character, Miss Engstrand," he confides to Regina. "He badly needs a hand to guide him. . . . He needs to have someone near him whom he is fond of and whose judgment he respects. He admitted it quite openly the last time he visited me."¹⁸ Engstrand has led Manders

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

on to believe that he wants Regina with him to help him serve the sailors their hot soup; in fact, he wants her to serve, yes--but what he wants her to serve is a feminine specialty hotter than the hottest broth. Engstrand feels free to prostitute Regina because she is not actually his child: she is the natural daughter of Captain Alving and one of his housemaids, a girl who later married Engstrand while carrying Regina. Manders has sanctified the wedding after swallowing another of Engstrand's lies. When the partial truth finally comes to him, Manders is astounded:

Manders: . . . I remember clearly how Engstrand came to me to arrange the wedding. He was completely abject, and accused himself most bitterly of having indulged with his betrothed in a moment of weakness.

Mrs. Alving: Well, he had to take the blame on himself.

Manders: But to be so dishonest! And to me; I certainly never¹⁹ would have believed that of Jacob Engstrand.

Manders comes to no self-realization when this truth is revealed to him. The terrible life his urgings of duty have caused Helen does not occur to him--he sees only that Engstrand has told him lies. Helen Alving finally sees that she has constructed a false edifice from the ruins of the home she could have had; Manders never sees more than an old liar's shoddy tricks and the possible blame for a burned orphanage, a promised home for children, like Oswald Alving, who are always homeless, always cold.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

Ibsen, who usually spaced publication of his plays at two-year intervals, had An Enemy of the People ready for the printer in an unusually hurried one year. The reaction to Ghosts by even his most liberal supporters had been so vitriolic (see Chapter One) that Ibsen attacked hypocritical liberalism in his new play with the same fervor he had shown in the past when attacking intellectual conservatism. When faced with the misadventures of the quixotic Dr. Stockmann, Ibsen's liberal supporters were shocked, feeling that they were the ones who had been betrayed.

Since the publication of Emperor and Galilean, nearly nine years before Ghosts, the liberal press had been defending the honesty of Ibsen's vision. When the liberal critical fraternity failed to support his most outspoken play to date, Ibsen surely felt as abandoned as a Dr. Stockmann. Into An Enemy of the People he poured all his resentment, not by changing sides and supporting the conservative party, but by lambasting both sides at once. It is only through a series of deceptions and betrayals that Dr. Stockmann, the discoverer of a poison in his home town's health spa water supply, realizes the futility of trusting political parties and the "solid majority" they claim to represent. What Dr. Stockmann fails to see is that the loss of one ideal can lead to the creation of other, possibly more harmful, ones.

When he makes his discovery about the poisoned water source and decides to warn everyone about it, Dr. Stockmann is pleased that

. . . the newspaper is at my disposal, if I should need it . . . it's good to know that one has the free press on one's side--the mouthpiece of liberal opinion . . . Catherine, do you know what I have behind me? The solid majority.

Mrs. Stockmann: I see. And that's a good thing, is it?

Dr. Stockmann: Of course, it's a good thing. How splendid to feel that one stands shoulder to shoulder₂₀ with one's fellow-citizens in brotherly concord!

Convinced that the idealistic platitudes which govern his own affairs are capable of governing those of others, Dr. Stockmann broadcasts them in an exclamatory manner to anyone willing, or unwilling, to listen. "Yes, I love this town where I was born so dearly," he says, "that I should rather destroy it than see it flourish because of a lie!

. . . a free man has no right to befoul himself like a beast. He has no right to get himself into the position where he feels the need to spit in his own face!"²¹

The realization that the managers of the press are willing to put self-interest before public-interest comes slowly to Dr. Stockmann. Hovstad, editor of the paper which

²⁰Henrik Ibsen, An Enemy of the People, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 250-51.

²¹Ibid., pp. 297, 308.

has promised to support Stockmann, expresses the prevailing editorial attitude when he explains to Stockmann's daughter why he has chosen to publish a novel the philosophy of which he finds odious:

. . . But an editor can't always do as he wishes. One often has to bow to people's wishes in minor matters. After all, politics are the most important things in life--for a newspaper, anyway. And if I want to win the people over to my views about freedom and progress, I mustn't frighten them away. If they find a moral story like this in the back pages of the newspaper they're more likely to go along with what we₂ print on the front page. It reassures them.²²

As in A Doll's House, it is the wife who is able to shed her idealism and move on to the next phase of self-awareness. As her husband shouts again of having the solid majority behind him, she knows first that, ". . . that's just the trouble. They're an ugly thing to have behind you." On returning from a public meeting which went out of control, Dr. Stockmann bemoans the fact that the "solid majority" pilloried him, branded him an enemy, broke his windows, and tore his best trousers. Mrs. Stockmann's immediate application of common sense (in the form not of letters to the editor, but needle and thread) to the tragedy prompts her normally humorless husband to add that, "One should never wear one's best trousers when one goes out to fight for freedom and truth."²³

²²Ibid., p. 268. ²³Ibid., pp. 277, 302.

The public meeting is the occurrence at which Dr. Stockmann's fears about the nature of public support are realized. "People don't want new ideas," he has been advised by his brother, the town's mayor. "They're best served by the good old accepted ideas they have already." Hovstad admits that he dare not print any stories about the spa by Dr. Stockmann. "Dare not? What nonsense is this?" demands the doctor. "You're the editor, and it's the editors who rule the press." "No, Doctor," comes the worldly reply. "It's the subscribers."²⁴ The meeting, one of Ibsen's bitterest jokes, proves both politician and editor correct. The scene is one of harried confusion, with everyone shouting Stockmann down at once and voting in rules of order designed to muzzle him. When a vote is called for, and colored slips of paper are distributed (blue designating a vote for one side of the debate, white for the other), a drunk who has been tossed out several times before demands slips of each color so he can vote for both sides at once and so make everybody happy. The crowd does to the drunk what Ibsen would like to do to the crowd; they toss him out once more.

Dr. Stockmann accepts his defeat gracelessly, and when he is once again at home he insists that he simply wants

²⁴Ibid., pp. 255, 278.

. . . to knock it into the heads of these curs that the Liberals are the most insidious enemies of freedom--that party programmers strangle every new truth that deserves to live--and that expediency and self-interest turn morality and justice upside down. . . . It's the party bosses--they're the ones who've got to be rooted out! A party boss is like a hungry wolf--he needs a certain number of baby lambs to devour every year if he is to survive.²⁵

What this speech reveals to the reader, but what Dr. Stockmann obviously does not see as he rids himself of the idealistic belief in the rightness of the majority and replaces it with his new ideal--"the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone"²⁶--is that Stockmann is becoming what he claims to dislike: a party boss. His moral sentiment is the type of soapbox rhetoric upon which new parties dedicated to reform are based. Every existing party began as a reform party, each basing its platform on moral platitudes, each comparing its opposition to a hungry wolf--and each, through the passage of time, the change in leadership, and the corruption of its founding ideals, undergoing the metamorphosis from baby lamb, to killer lamb, to hungry wolf. Dr. Stockmann is a man of decency; therefore, his cause is decent. That, combined with Mrs. Stockmann's common sense, will probably prevent the doctor from acquiring any adherents capable of "standing alone," so the possible effects of his newly founded party are aborted before gestation.

²⁵Ibid., p. 318. ²⁶Ibid., p. 320.

Ibsen, who realized that he himself would be seen as the model for Dr. Stockmann, saw the inherent possibility that the new ideal created to replace a lost one could become a monster capable of destroying anyone near it, and the play which followed An Enemy of the People took this concept as its central theme. Gregers Werle, the Stockmannesque figure of The Wild Duck, creates such a monster-ideal, and once again the Ibsen supporters were dumbfounded.

After An Enemy of the People [sic], Ibsen . . . left the vulgar ideals for dead, and set about the exposure of those of the choicer spirits, beginning with the incorrigible idealists who had idealized his very self, and were becoming known as Ibsenites. His first move in this direction was a tragi-comic slaughtering of sham Ibsenism and his astonished victims plaintively declared that The Wild Duck, [sic] as the new play was called, was a satire on his former works . . .²⁷

Gregers Werle, the most frightening in his obtuseness of all Ibsen's idealists, understands himself less than does perhaps any other character in dramatic literature. "I'm not a romantic," he says of himself early in the play,²⁸ and yet he makes "demands of the ideal" on his friends that no one but a romantic could ever demand. Michael Meyer points out that " . . . he gradually developed into a kind of reductio

²⁷Shaw, Ibsenism, p. 97.

²⁸Henrik Ibsen, The Wild Duck, in "Hedda Gabler" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1961), p. 161.

ad absurdum of Dr. Stockmann, a living illustration of the danger of a single-minded pursuit of truth not tempered by common sense and an understanding of human limitations."²⁹

Werle's "truth" is a highly subjective one, forged by both neuroses and the early loss of one of childhood's most basic ideals--that of the goodness of the parent. Gregers' mother, the cause of his neurosis, raised him to despise his father.

" . . . I believe there's no one in the world you hate as much as you do me," says Werle, Senior; and his son replies,

"I've seen you at close quarters."³⁰ With his ideal of parenthood destroyed, the unstable Gregers searches for years for someone to fill the father's position. John Northam finds the secret of Gregers' soul in this substitution: "This seems to be the true motive-power behind Gregers, this hatred for his father. It sits uneasily with his facile idealistic phrases, but the connection is obvious: Gregers projects on to his friend the qualities he has not found in his father."³¹

When Gregers meets again his old friend Hjalmar Ekdal, he feels that Hjalmar can meet the demand of the ideal. Dr. Ralling, a neighbor of Hjalmar's who has seen Gregers searching before, analyzes the idealist for Hjalmar's wife, Gina, and daughter, Hedvig:

²⁹Meyer, Ibsen, p. 541.

³⁰Ibsen, The Wild Duck, p. 162.

³¹John Northam, Ibsen: A Critical Study (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 117.

Relling: What a pity that fellow didn't fall into one of his own mines and drop right down into Hell!

Gina: Mercy on us! Why do you say that?

Relling: Oh, I have my reasons.

Gina: Do you think young Mr. Werle's really mad?

Relling: No, worse luck. He's no madder than most people. He's sick all right, though.

Gina: What do you think's wrong with him?

Relling: I'll tell you, Mrs. Ekdal. He's suffering from a surfeit of self-righteousness.

Gina: Surfeit of self-righteousness?

Hedvig: Is that a disease?

Relling: Yes. It's a national³²disease. But it only very seldom becomes acute.

The idealistic demand that Gregers makes on Hjalmar is connected with Gregers' father. Gregers comes to believe that Werle, Senior is the actual father of Hedvig Ekdal. He feels that Hjalmar's life is thus based on a lie, but that if he were told the truth he would be brave enough to throw out the false ideal of his home, forgive all, and build a new, stronger home for his family--one based on the truth and not on an idealized version of the truth. Gregers' ideal, then, is the destruction of ideals. The concept is circular, maddening, and completely impossible. Gregers' plan breaks down at two points; in the first place, it is idealistic. In the second place, Hjalmar is a man of weak spirit who allows himself to be talked into even the most self-destructive actions. Relling knows that Hjalmar's character can never withstand the pressure Gregers insists on applying. Gregers expects the miracle to happen when

³²Ibsen, The Wild Duck, p. 212.

his friend learns of Gina's past weakness. He is somewhat surprised, but ultimately undaunted, by Hjalmar's reaction to the news.

Gregers: From such a crisis there must spring a mutual understanding on which a whole new life can be founded--a partnership built on truth, without concealment. . . . I felt so sure, that when I walked through that door you would be standing there transfigured, and that my eyes would be dazzled by the light. And instead I₃₃ see nothing but this dull heaviness and misery.

Hjalmar is so caught up in his friend's fantasy of idealism, he reacts to the news of Gina's one indiscretion just as Helen Alving might have reacted to an entire list of her husband's debaucheries. "There are certain demands," he pontificates, "demands a man makes of himself--how shall I put it?--a striving for perfection--one might say the demands of an ideal--which a man may not ignore without damage to his soul."³⁴ Gina, who harbors no ideals as to the nature of marriage or to her husband's strength of character, expects no miracles from Hjalmar.

Gina: . . . He [Werle, Senior] wouldn't give in till he'd had his way. . . . I ought to have told you about it long ago.

Hjalmar: You ought to have told me about it at once. Then I'd have known what kind of woman you were.

Gina: If I had, would you have married me?

Hjalmar: What do you think?

Gina: Yes, well, that's why I didn't dare to say anything to you . . .³⁵

³³Ibid., p. 220.

³⁴Ibid., p. 215.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 217-18.

In a last, desperate attempt to prove himself correct and his faith in Hjalmar well placed, Gregers persuades Hedvig to sacrifice something she values as a means of getting Hjalmar to love her again. While attempting to shoot the wounded wild duck she has been trying to nurse back to health, she kills herself. Gregers, in his blind singleness of vision, reacts to this tragedy as if it were a God-send. He sees it as the stepping stone Hjalmar needed to lift him above the temporary petulance into which he had fallen. In the play's last exchange of dialogue, Dr. Relling tries to break through Gregers' monster-idealism.

Gregers: Hedvig has not died in vain. Did you see how grief set free all that is most noble in him? . . .

Relling: In nine months, little Hedvig will be nothing more to him than a theme for a recitation.

Gregers: You dare to say that about Hjalmar Ekdal!

Relling: Let's talk about it again when the first grasses have withered on her grave. Then you'll hear him gulping about "the child untimely ripped from her father's bosom." You'll see him stewing in emotion, and self-admiration, and self-pity. Just you wait.

Gregers: If you are right and I am wrong, life is not worth living.

Relling: Oh, life would be all right if we didn't have to put up with these damned creditors who keep pestering us with the demands of their ideals.

Gregers: In that case, I am glad that my destiny is what it is.

Relling: And what, if I may ask, is your destiny?

Gregers: To be the thirteenth at table.
(Relling laughs and spits.)³⁶

Gregers, seemingly incapable of learning anything either about himself or his fellows from his experience, passes from the Ekdals' home, in Joseph Conrad's phrase, "un-suspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men."³⁷

In the earlier plays dealing with idealism, at least one of the idealists came to the moment of self-realization; but Ibsen changes direction after The Wild Duck, and enters into the realm of psychological probing (for which Gregers Werle is a portent) with the bleak and deeply disturbing Rosmersholm. Although he would carry on the battle against idealism in later plays, The Wild Duck's ironic comment seems to have, temporarily at least, freed Ibsen from whatever force had been making him concentrate on this theme for so long. Writing about the end of The Wild Duck, Brian W. Downs asks, ". . . may not 'ideals' be a luxury and as such inaccessible to the great mass of humanity? The pragmatism represented by The Wild Duck seems to return the answer Yes."³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 255-56.

³⁷ Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1953), Chap. 13, p. 253.

³⁸ Downs, Study of Six Plays by Ibsen, p. 170.

Bernard Shaw's definition of ideals is one Ibsen probably could have subscribed to: ". . . these ideals, etc. are only swaddling clothes which man has outgrown, and which insufferably impede his movements."³⁹ For five years Ibsen had been trying to drive home something like this idea, and he had finally made a statement on idealism in The Wild Duck upon which even he found it difficult to improve. Shaw points out in connection with The Wild Duck and A Doll's House the truth behind Ibsen's war on the ideals which bind the opportunity of an individual to develop as a human being to anything outside of the self: "The busybody [Gregers] . . . finds that people cannot be freed from their failings from without. They must free themselves. When Nora is strong enough to live out of the doll's house, she will go out of it of her own accord. . . ."

The realist at last loses patience with ideals altogether, and sees in them only something to blind us, something to numb us, something to murder self in us, something whereby instead of resisting death, we can disarm it by committing suicide. The idealist, who has taken refuge with the ideals because he hates himself and is ashamed of himself, thinks that all this is so much the better.⁴⁰

Not until the twentieth century had assimilated the theories of Freud and Jung would Shaw's interpretation of Ibsen's message--freedom comes only from within, and

³⁹ Shaw, Ibsenism, p. 44. ⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 99, 44.

the laying aside of empty ideals is one of the steps on the road to freedom--be vindicated. Another stumbling block Ibsen saw on the road to self-realization was the lack of something to take the place of the religion so many nineteenth century people were losing. The search for this "livsglaede," "joy of life," became one of the themes in several of his best known plays.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE THIRD EMPIRE: THE QUEST FOR THE JOY OF LIFE

Ibsen was a highly moral man--but morality, like so much else in his opinion, has to come from within each individual. It cannot be imposed from some outside source and so, that being the case, organized religion held few charms for him. But Ibsen saw the difficulty in walking away from any belief which had been drummed into one's head since childhood, and he knew that the struggle to free one's self could easily result in spiritual sterility. How to create and maintain an atmosphere of joy in life while still keeping a system of morals was a problem Ibsen confronted often. This problem was at least a secondary theme in several of his plays, and it constituted the major theme of his longest play, Emperor and Galilean (1864-1873).

Emperor and Galilean is Ibsen's version of the history of Julian the Apostate. Julian begins the play describing himself as faithless and "blind".¹ He is torn between the joy of paganism and the restrained security of

¹Henrik Ibsen, Emperor and Galilean, in The Oxford Ibsen, vol. IV: "The League of Youth," "Emperor and Galilean," ed. and trans. James Walter McFarlane and Graham Orton (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 206.

Christianity. A philosopher friend of his points out the splendors of the old faith, reminding him that "in life there is an endless festival, among statues and temple songs, with foaming goblets full and roses in our hair. Bridges span the dizzy void from spirit to spirit, away to the farthest stars in space."² As emperor, Julian is puzzled at the inexplicable spread of a religion which he feels breeds on death and pessimism.

Julian: . . . Is it not, Maximus, as though men lived simply in order to die? The spirit of the Galilean is in this. If it is true, as is said, that his father created the world, then the son despises his father's work. . . .

What a man Socrates was compared with him! Did Socrates not love pleasure and happiness? Yet he renounced them. . . . What an immeasurable gulf between not desiring, on the one₃ hand, and desiring yet renouncing on the other.

Julian, a Christian who has fallen away from the church, shares Ibsen's view of pagan religion--its followers seem to have a greater zeal for living, its concern is for life, and even its sins seem more beautiful, even though Julian has been warned by his friend Basil that that is a misconception: " . . . beautiful poems have been sung and tales been told of pagan sin; but it wasn't beautiful. . . . you are confusing fact with fiction."⁴ Julian knows that the same argument could be leveled against the dogma

²Ibid., p. 219. ³Ibid., p. 411. ⁴Ibid., p. 241.

of the church, but he still finds himself drawn away from what he desires and toward the mystical magnetism of the Galilean. He tells his friend Maximus: ". . . you have never been in the power of this god-man. It is more than a doctrine he has spread over the world; it is magic which makes your soul captive. Once you have come under his spell, I don't think you can ever really escape."⁵ Julian feels that even his official opposition to the church serves to further its goals. He sometimes feels he is a mere puppet or a trained beast going through its paces. But he is never sure, and so he feels that all men must choose between what he calls "life or the lie."⁶ "Cling to the Christian's God those of you who find it desirable for your peace of mind. As for me, I dare not build my hopes on a god who has opposed my every venture."⁷

Julian: . . . Oh, he is terrible, this mysterious . . . this merciless god-man! Wherever I wanted to go, he loomed up large and forbidding in my path, adamant and pitiless in his demands. . . . All human emotions have been forbidden since the day the seer of Galilee began to rule the world. With him, to live is to die. To love and to hate are to sin. But has he changed man's flesh and blood? Is man not still earth-bound as before? With every healthy fibre of our being we revolt against it; . . . and yet we are told to ⁸will against our own will! Thou shalt, thou shalt!

⁵Ibid., p. 310. ⁶Ibid., p. 313. ⁷Ibid., p. 324.

⁸Ibid., p. 309.

Julian's humanistic cries echo through the massive play. He sees the new religion enveloping the world; he knows there must be an alternative because no one can live under the gloom which has been cast by the Christians' ". . . morbid longing for death."⁹ He sees their only glory resulting from a temperament which is the very antithesis of those who would live for life, rather than for the life to come. "A rumour spread that the pagans had started to hold secret meetings again by night in the temple," says the Christian fanatic, Agathon.

All the faithful rose up in anger. The authorities had the temple razed to the ground, and we smashed the offensive idols. . . . Behind our holy banners we marched through the town, singing hymns, and fell on the godless like messengers of wrath; we took their precious possessions from them; many houses were set on fire; many pagans perished in the flames; we killed still more in the streets as they fled. Oh, that was a great day for the glory of God!¹⁰

Julian ponders the final outcome of such mindless butchery practiced on a world scale by both sides. The possible results are few: irreparable damage, chaos, apocalypse, or a new world order, a new faith growing out of the best of the old.

Julian: . . . can you tell me the outcome of this struggle?

Maximus: Yes, brother, I can tell you the outcome.

Julian: . . . Who shall conquer, the Emperor or the Galilean?

Maximus: Both the Emperor and the Galilean shall lose. . . . Listen to me, brother and friend of

⁹Ibid., p. 368. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 220.

truth! I say that both shall lose . . . but not to be lost.

Do we not lose the child in the youth, and then the youth in the man? But neither the child nor the youth is lost.¹¹

Emperor and Galilean looks forward to a time when the joy of living and the quiet morality of Christian faith can be joined in the creation of "the third empire."¹² Ibsen does not try to predict when or how this merger will come about. Julian's knowledge that the Galilean never entirely relinquishes what he takes hold of is Ibsen's knowledge, too, and so he knows full well that the "third empire" is not at hand. The "third empire" requires no god; it requires no messiah. What it does require are eyes which see the beauty in everyday things, a heart which beats with joy at the contemplation of honest, worthwhile work ably done, and a mind which can grasp the concept of liberty combined with, but not subservient to, community responsibility. Most of all, it requires people who can cast off the outmoded dead-weight of humanity's infancy, and free themselves.

The tragedy of the "third empire" is that it is so small, and its citizens so easily crushed by the tonnage of man's past. Ibsen confronts the new man with the somnambulist old one, and the weight of ancient authority is overwhelming. In Ghosts, Oswald Alving returns home;

¹¹Ibid., pp. 400-401. ¹²Ibid., p. 430.

his joy of living is threatened with decay by the aura of death which clings to his mother.

Oswald: . . . the joy of life, Mother--you don't know much about that here. I never felt it here. . . . The joy of life and the joy of one's work. They're practically the same thing. But that you don't know anything about, either. . . . Mother, have you noticed that everything I've painted is concerned with the joy of life? . . . That's what makes me afraid to be here at home with you. . . . I'm afraid that everything in me will degenerate into ugliness here.¹³

Oswald's return stirs a fear in Mrs. Alving that her son is becoming the profligate image of his father, and with all her being she dreads his possible descent into sin--but "The idea that emerges from Ghosts," writes Eric Bentley, "is that what Alving did was not sin after all, it was the unfortunate result of his legitimate joy in life"¹⁴--a joy in which, Mrs. Alving admits, she was unable to participate.

Mrs. Alving: Your poor father never found any outlet for the excess of vitality in him. And I didn't bring any sunshine into his home. . . . They had taught me about duty and things like that, and I sat here for too long believing in them. In the end everything became a matter of

¹³Henrik Ibsen, Ghosts, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 180-81.

¹⁴Eric Bentley, Theatre of War: Modern Drama from Ibsen to Brecht (Abridged edition) (New York: The Viking Press; Viking Compass Books, 1973), p. 189.

duty--my duty, and his duty, and--I'm afraid
I made his home intolerable for your poor
father, Oswald.¹⁵

She confesses the crime Richard Gilman summarizes so succinctly: ". . . she has failed to think for herself, to be herself. She has acted in bad faith. . . ." ¹⁶
The demands of a wifely duty¹⁷ which she recalls as part excuse, part justification are based on an ideal which Ibsen feels should have been long since discarded as inhuman. Robert Brustein defines one of the ghosts of the play's title as being this "intellectual inheritance-- the specters of beliefs which continue to prevail long after they have lost their meaning. . . ." ¹⁸ It is a phantom which has blown aside the seed of joy, sterilizing the ground and turning a possible beauty spot into a garden of earthy decay.

¹⁵Ibsen, Ghosts, p. 189.

¹⁶Richard Gilman, The Making of Modern Drama: A Study of Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Handke (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974), p. 66.

¹⁷For a fuller discussion, see Chapter Three.

¹⁸Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 68.

Mrs. Alving: . . . There is in me something ghostlike from which I can never free myself. . . . I almost think we are all ghosts. . . . It isn't just what we have inherited from our father and mother that walks in us. It is all kinds of dead ideas and all sorts of old and obsolete beliefs. They are not alive in us; but they remain in us none the less, and we can never rid ourselves of them. I only have to take a newspaper and read it and I see ghosts all over the country. They must be as thick as grains of sand. And we're all so horribly afraid of the light.¹⁹

It is curious that "the light," a symbol usually for those things which are connected with the revelation of duty and the hand-me-downs of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is used by Ibsen to represent the joy of life, a concept which is in many ways the antithesis of that tradition. At the play's final curtain, Oswald asks his mother for the sun--light--joy. It is the one thing he has never seen through the rain and mist of his home. She sees it, but it is out of her grasp.

In Rosmersholm, John Rosmer is another seeker of the light. His is another home traditionally blanketed by mist, a home where no one laughs, no one weeps. A pastor who has left the church, he suffers (without realizing the cause) from his inability to totally abandon the Galilean. "I am no longer a man of God," he tells his old friend Kroll. He denies any further allegiance to the faith in which he was raised. "I have given it up. I had to give it up,

¹⁹Ibsen, Ghosts, p. 163.

Kroll. . . . I ought to have felt a sense of joy at what you call my apostasy. But it grieved me." Kroll's objection to Rosmer's spiritual liberation raises the key issue in Ibsen's search for the "third empire"; ". . . you think there is no purity of spirit to be found in apostates and emancipated people?" asks Rosmer. "You don't believe they can have any sense of morality?" Kroll's answer cuts deep: "I have little faith in any morality that is not rooted in Christian faith."²⁰

Rosmer, like Oswald Alving, hopes to find his joy in his work, that being the spreading of new, liberal ideas to the countryside. He knows the task is formidable, the chances of success slight--but he sees the light as well worth the candle.

Rosmer: If only I could awake them [the local people] to self-knowledge. . . . If I could succeed, what a joy it would be to be alive! No more hateful strife! Only emulation. Every eye directed towards the same goal. Every will, every mind, striving forwards--upwards--each by its own natural and predestined path. Happiness for all--created by all.²¹

The search for such joy is an immense task for a man born into a family the children of which never cry, the adults of which never laugh; "Never laugh until the day they die," explains Mrs. Helseth, Rosmer's housekeeper.²² Rosmersholm

²⁰Henrik Ibsen, Rosmersholm, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 364, 363, 375.

²¹Ibid., p. 396. ²²Ibid., p. 394.

is a dark place, a place as haunted by ghosts as the Alvings' home. It is a place of fear, suppressed desires, and guilt--three awesome enemies of the light. It is the guilt--guilt of a particularly religious nature--which troubles Rosmer the most. His wife, frail and sickly, has killed herself by drowning. Rosmer is plagued by the fear that he could have done more to help her in easing her burden. He feels that the good he could do as a liberal educator would at least partially remove the sin of omission from his conscience.

Rosmer: . . . For a cause to win a lasting victory, it must be led by a man whose soul is joyful and free from guilt.

Rebecca: Is joy something that means so much to you, John?

Rosmer: Joy? Yes, Rebecca. It is.

Rebecca: You, who can never laugh?

Rosmer: Yes, in spite of that. Oh, Rebecca--believe me²³--I could be the most joyful man on earth.

But Rosmer's hopes are short-lived. A meeting with the conservative gentlemen of the town, among whom Rosmer had formerly been counted a member, convinces him that ". . . the task of making the world noble is not for me."²⁴

The gentlemen have pointed out to Rosmer the apparent impropriety of the household at Rosmersholm. Rebecca West, originally a companion for the late Mrs. Rosmer, has remained as a companion, if not more, for the widower. This is one

²³Ibid., p. 398. ²⁴Ibid., p. 413.

guilty association Rosmer had spared himself to date; but when it is brought to his attention, he feels the sin even where no sin has been committed. His dream of joy is shattered.

Rosmer: . . . it is happiness that makes men noble, Rebecca.

Rebecca: Don't you think--suffering too? Deep suffering?

Rosmer: Yes--if one manages to survive it. . . .

Rebecca: That's what you must do.

Rosmer: I shall never conquer this . . . I shall never again be able to enjoy the one thing that makes life so wonderful to live. ²⁵ . The sense of calm and happy innocence.

Even though the threat to smear his "relationship" with Rebecca across the headlines of the local press has blackmailed Rosmer out of the liberal movement, he believes he can still find contentment with Rebecca if he actualizes the better part of the insinuation and marries her. Kroll, who considers Rebecca to be the source of Rosmer's errant liberalism, is disgusted and accuses Rebecca of being a perverted schemer whose plan is at last reaching fruition. He forces her into a confession that he is partially right. She had wanted to marry Rosmer, and so had slowly convinced Mrs. Rosmer that she was holding her husband back, keeping him from his true calling, and that his only hope for happiness or her only hope for escape was--the mill-race.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 387-88.

Rosmer's guilt over a deed perhaps unconsciously wished for but never carried out is made trivial by Rebecca's suppressed longing which prompted her hints to Mrs. Rosmer. Sigmund Freud explains the foundation of Rebecca's actions:

The practising psychoanalytic physician knows how frequently, or how invariably, the girl who enters a household as servant, companion, or governess, will consciously or unconsciously weave a day-dream, which derives from the Oedipus-complex, about the disappearance of the mistress of the house and the master taking the newcomer to wife in her stead. Rosmersholm is the greatest work of art among those which treat of this common girlish phantasy. What makes it a tragedy is the circumstance that the early history of the heroine in actual fact had completely anticipated her day-dream.²⁶

The "early history" that Freud is referring to is Rebecca's life before her sojourn at Rosmersholm. She was an illegitimate child raised in the household of a Dr. West. Freud suggests, as does the play in Ibsen's most subtle manner, that while still young Rebecca became Dr. West's mistress, thereby predating her Rosmersholm phantasy with a similar situation at Dr. West's. When she receives information from Kroll indicating that Dr. West was perhaps her father, Rebecca rejects Rosmer's offer of marriage. "The enigma of Rebecca's behaviour is susceptible of only one solution," writes Freud.

²⁶Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met With in Psychoanalytic Work," in Character and Culture, ed. Philip Rieff, trans. E. Colburn Mayne (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 179.

The news that Dr. West was her father is the heaviest blow that can befall her, for she was not only the adopted daughter, but she had been the mistress of this man. . . She cannot have had anything else in mind when she accounted for her final rejection of Rosmer on the ground that she²⁷ had a past which made her unworthy to be his wife.

The circle of guilt is complete. Although no one has committed a prosecutable crime, the guilt of past actions--actions which are not necessarily sins against the "third empire"--destroys forever the possibility of joy in life. Joy in death remains, and Rosmer and Rebecca walk together down to the mill-race.

The one happy character in Rosmersholm is Ulrick Brendel, one time social reformer, now full-time vagabond. Kroll, of course, is offended by Brendel's shabby clothes and open requests for charity. "At least he has had the courage to live life the way he thought it should be lived," observes Rosmer. "I don't think that's so small an achievement."²⁸

The Master Builder, perhaps the key play in the Ibsen canon, deals with the question of duty to the past as the destroyer of joy. Hilde browses among Solness' books, here used as a symbol for the unknown, and comments:

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 175-76. ²⁸ Ibsen, Rosmersholm, p. 362.

Hilde: . . . You've an awful lot of books. . . .
 Do you read them all?
 Solness: I used to. Do you read?
 Hilde: No! Not any more. It all seems so
 meaningless.
 Solness: That's exactly how I feel.²⁹

Solness' life has settled into its rut. Bound to his wife not by ties of love but by ties of guilt and duty, Solness realizes that his present predicament stems from a failure of duty--duty performed blindly, stubbornly, and without a thought of its long range consequences--a "duty of motherhood" which had been drilled into Mrs. Solness' head just as the "wifely duties" had been drilled into Mrs. Alving's. Solness recalls for Hilde the night his wife's ancestral home burned down:

Solness: It was a terrible shock for Aline. The alarm, and being rushed out of the house, into the ice-cold night--they had to be carried out, just as they were--she and the little boys.
 Hilde: And they couldn't stand the cold?
 Solness: Oh, they stood up to that all right. But Aline caught a fever. And it infected her milk. She had to feed them herself. It was her duty, she said. And both our little boys--both of them. . . . From that day on, I lost interest in building churches.³⁰

Solness will no longer contribute to a glorification of the Galilean--he connects the "motherly duty" which inadvertently took the lives of his two sons (while sparing the mother--for which he cannot forgive Aline although he is, paradoxically, duty-bound to remain with her), with the

²⁹Henrik Ibsen, The Master Builder, in "When We Dead Awaken" and Three Other Plays, trans, and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1960), p. 170.

³⁰Ibid., p. 174.

Christian teaching of self-sacrifice. He does not seem to realize that his chance for joy is not being ruined by Mrs. Solness' ancient act alone--it is also undermined by his own self-sacrificial act of staying with her. Like the mythological snake which eats its own tail, Solness has formed a circle which is unbroken, vicious, and steeped in guilt and self-disgust. He can, however, sense release, and he longs for it.

Hilde: . . . you've built such a frightful lot.

Solness: I have. Especially these last years.

Hilde: Lots of church spires, too? As high as the sky?

Solness: No. I don't build church spires anymore. Nor churches, neither.

Hilde: What do you build now, then?

Solness: Homes for people to live in.

Hilde: Couldn't you put little spires on them, too? . . . I mean--something that points--straight up in the air. . . .

Solness: It's strange you should say that. That's just what I'd like to do--most of all.³¹

He has moved away from the towering churches of youth to the drabness of production line cottages--from joy to the mundane.

Mrs. Solness, too, leads a joyless life. Still bound to the old teachings of Christian duty (when Hilde describes her as "frightfully sweet" because Aline has done some shopping for her in town, Mrs. Solness replies, "Not at all. It's my simple duty."³²), her existence precludes any pleasure in her daily routine or in the life around her.

³¹Ibid., p. 159. ³²Ibid., p. 169.

Mrs. Solness: You've found some flowers, too,
I see.
Hilde: Oh, yes! There are heaps of them.
Among the bushes.
Mrs. Solness: No, are there really? Still?
I hardly ever go down there.
Hilde: What? I should have thought you'd skip
down every day.
Mrs. Solness: I don't skip anywhere, I'm afraid.
Not any longer.
Hilde: But don't you go down now and then to
say hello to all the beautiful things there?
Mrs. Solness: It's all become so foreign to me.
I'm almost afraid to look at it again.³³

Mrs. Solness, to borrow a phrase from melodrama, was not always as Hilde sees her now. Her conversation heavily implies that once she enjoyed the simple things of nature, but her grief has destroyed that enjoyment. She is able to continue to function with her guilt better than Solness because nothing enters her life (as Hilde enters Solness') to lead her away from the concept of duty for duty's sake-- she will always believe it is her duty to function with guilt because she will always believe in duty as the Christian substitute for joy. Joy, for her, will probably retain an aura of sin about it. Duty can no longer be that substitute for Solness, and so he can draw no comfort from it, but he is afraid to fulfill his ambition³⁴ and make a grab at happiness.

Solness: And what's to become of me when you've gone? What shall I have to live for? Afterwards?

³³Ibid., p. 193.

³⁴For a fuller discussion, see Chapter Two.

Hilde: It's easy for you. You have duty towards her. You must live for that duty.

Solness: Too late. These powers--these . . . demons! And the troll in me! They've sucked her blood.

It was done for my happiness. And for my sake she died. And I am chained to the corpse. I--I, who cannot live without joy! . . .

Hilde: That one should be afraid to seize happiness! To seize hold of life! Just because someone stands in the way. Someone one knows.³⁵

Solness feels that he is to blame for Aline's present condition. He believes that he has the power to will things into existence, and that that power is at fault for the burning of Aline's family home (the insurance money started him as a builder). The demon of his quest for happiness, he says, has drained the joy from his wife. Perhaps this is true; but what Solness fails to realize in his guilt is that, in order to become free, Aline must go through the same process of questioning and re-discovery that he is going through. If she never attempts to liberate herself, she has no one to blame for her stagnation but herself. Her self-pity turned to complacency is what mires her down. Solness would sever the chains which bind him to her corpse. He would discard the archaic concept of duty which holds him to a joyless life and live the rest of his time as he desires.

Solness: Those sagas tell about vikings, who sailed to foreign lands and plundered and burned and killed--

³⁵Ibsen, Master Builder, pp. 198-99.

Hilde: And carried away women--
 Solness: And kept them--
 Hilde: Took them home with them in their ships--
 Solness: And used them like--like the worst kind
 of trolls.
 Hilde: I think that must be so exciting!
 Solness: To take a woman, you mean?
 Hilde: To be taken.³⁶

In his quest for life's joy, this is his fantasy of escape.

In his next to last play Ibsen created a man of genius who is bogged down. Professionally, he has done all that he is going to do. Like Oswald Alving, he has found joy in his work, and like Solness, he is trapped in a joyless marriage.

The landscape of John Gabriel Borkman (1896) is as bleak as any in Ibsen's work. Edvard Munch called this play " . . . the most powerful winter landscape in Scandinavian art."³⁷ The Borkman house and grounds are covered by snow, and the unflawed white sterility has cast its influence over the house's occupants. Borkman, years since found guilty of embezzlement, has imprisoned himself on the upper floor of the house, from which he never emerges. He tries to, going so far on occasion as to put on his hat and coat; but he never goes outside, never even gets downstairs. The son of a miner, he has burrowed in and hidden from the light. In 1851, Ibsen had written a poem called "The Miner." The poem could have been written by Borkman.

³⁶Ibid., p. 184.

³⁷Edvard Munch, quoted in Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 747.

Groan and thunder, mountain wall,
 Before my heavy hammer blow.
 Downwards I must carve my way.
 Till I hear the iron ore ring. . . .

When I first entered here
 I thought in my innocence:
 "The spirits of the dark will solve for me
 Life's endless riddles."

No spirit has yet taught me that strange answer.
 No ray has shone from the depths.

Was I wrong? Does this path
 Not lead to the light?
 But the light blinds my eyes
 If I seek it in the mountains.

No, I must go down into the dark.
 Eternal peace lies there.
 Heavy hammer, break me the way
 To the heart-chamber of what lies hidden there.

Hammer blow on hammer blow
 Till the last day of life.
 No ray of morning shines.
 No sun of hope rises.³⁸

But Borkman's life is not the only wintry one. The woman he wooed and jilted is in the play, as well as is her sister, the woman he married. His wife, Gunhild, has never been able to adjust to the scandal and poverty his crime brought upon her and her son, Erhart. Whatever guilt Borkman might be expected to feel over his crime is augmented by Gunhild's presence below him, that being a constant reminder of his ruination. Her glacial presence helps to keep him separated from the rest of the world. She lives

³⁸Henrik Ibsen, "The Miner," quoted in Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 64-65.

for vengeance--by pushing Erhart on to success, she hopes to eradicate Borkman's name forever. Like Mrs. Alving, her hope for salvation is her son.

Ella Rentheim, Gunhild's unmarried sister, has been the source of the Borkman's livelihood ever since the scandal. They live in a house she owns and during the height of the scandal she took care of Erhart, then a child.

The play begins with death. Knowing that her own death is near, Ella visits the Borkmans for the first time in years, her purpose being to spend the little time she has left with Erhart. Sensing that Ella's motive is not merely the quest for companionship, but is actually the desire to remove the young man from her sphere of influence and gradually seduce him away from her plan of vengeance, Gunhild refuses. The frigid morbidity of the situation is summed up by Ella when Erhart asks her if she can hear the piano music from upstairs. "It is the Dance Macabre," he says. "The dance of death. Don't you recognize the dance of death, Aunt Ella?" Her response, for both herself and the Borkmans, is a sardonic, "Not yet."³⁹

But the argument over Erhart's possible future happiness rages on, the fight being contested by people who have never experienced any happiness of their own.

³⁹Henrik Ibsen, John Gabriel Borkman, in "When We Dead Awaken" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1960), p. 250.

Ella says that she merely wants Erhart to have a chance to find happiness. "People in our position," answers her sister, "have more important things to do than bother about happiness."⁴⁰ Joy, like every other issue in Gunhild's life save only revenge, is dead. But if Gunhild is like Helen Alving and believes that she can only patch up her shattered faith in life through the life of someone else, Ella, whose goal at first sight seems so much more worthy, is seeking fulfillment in exactly the same way. She, like Gunhild, has seen everything she held sacred destroyed by Borkman and, not having the courage to reconstruct herself, she seeks to find some part of joy outside of herself. "I've never felt charity towards anyone," she tells Borkman, "not since you betrayed me."

If a poor, starving child came into my kitchen, frozen and crying, and asked for a little food, I told the cook to see to it. I never felt any compulsion to take the child into my own room, warm it at my own fire, enjoy watching it eat its fill. And I was never like that when I was young--I remember so well--it's you who've created this emptiness and sterility in me, and all around me.⁴¹

The one person whose opinion about Erhart's future is not solicited is Erhart himself. Kept from his father by Gunhild's horror stories and hatred and chilled by the

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 236. ⁴¹Ibid., p. 271.

icy atmosphere of her parlor, Erhart seeks an escape. He finds it in the form of Mrs. Fanny Wilton, a young widow (although a few years older than Erhart) who is the Borkmans' neighbor. She is the reason Erhart confesses:

Erhart: Aunt Ella--you have been so wonderfully good to me. You gave me as happy a childhood as anyone could have . . . but I can't give up my life to you now. . . . Good God, Mother, I'm young! I'm suffocating in this house! I can't breathe here! . . . Aunt Ella, it's no better with you. It's different--but no better. It's roses⁴² and lavender--it's airless, the same as here.

Gunhild, who feels she can defeat the threat to her influence over Erhart which comes from Ella, is helpless in the face of this new threat. Fearing that the relationship between the two young people may already be beyond her control, she demands to know why Mrs. Wilton was not, and is not, able to sympathize with her.

Mrs. Borkman: . . . Why didn't you tell him to stop seeing you? . . . That is what you should have done while there was still time.
 Mrs. Wilton: I couldn't do that, Mrs. Borkman.
 Mrs. Borkman: Why not?
 Mrs. Wilton: Because my happiness, too, depended on it.
 Mrs. Borkman: Hm--happiness!
 Mrs. Wilton: I have never known till now what happiness is. And I cannot turn my⁴³ back on it, merely because it comes so late.

"It comes so late" is the key to the end of the play. Erhart and Fanny escape into a new snow storm to

⁴²Ibid., pp. 282-83. ⁴³Ibid., pp. 286-87.

try to find whatever happiness they can. Borkman emerges from his spiritual hibernation, finally realizing that the only way to recover his lost joy is through work and the abandonment of Gunhild. Her perverse dreams of a lost glory which may never have actually existed have chained him to her corpse just as Solness had been chained to Aline. Hearing the truth from Fanny Wilton, Borkman decides to make a grab at happiness even though "it comes so late." He rushes out into the snow, which was earlier a symbol for sterility and is now a symbol for cleansing rejuvenation and purity. For him, the "third empire" is at hand. He had tried to enter it years before by knowingly, but uncaringly, going beyond the law to achieve his ends. He had failed then because, when caught, he discovered himself bound to the sense of guilt which follows close on the heels of the sense of Christian sin. Now, by being willing to leave his wife, to ask Ella to leave with him, and to flaunt his "wicked" past in the world's face, he is "sinning" again--but this time he is able to "sin" without the morbid sense of guilt attaching itself to his actions. To the miner's son, the whiteness of the fresh snow is overwhelming.

Ella: But where will you go?

Borkman: I shall go on, and on, and on, See
if I can find my way back to freedom and life
and humanity. Will you go with me, Ella? . . .

Ella: But--how far--?
Borkman: As far as I can go. . . .
Ella: I shall go with you, John.
Borkman: Yes, we two belong together, Ella:
you and I. Come.
Ella: Where are we going, John? I don't
know where I am.
Borkman: Follow my footprints!
Ella: But why must we climb so high?
Borkman: We must follow the winding path.⁴⁴

But the prospect of freedom is too great an excitement for Borkman, and he dies in the snow. Like Solness and Captain Alving before him, Borkman sees the elusive joy of life where others see only "sin"--and for all three of them, the wages of joy are death.

Ibsen saw the "third empire" as the natural next point on a line which had progressed from paganism through Christianity. Both of these early "empires" are in man's past and so must be broken with before anything new can be begun. But Ibsen knew how difficult it is to break cleanly with the past. In play after play he created protagonists who are shackled to their pasts and seem able to break free only to rush headlong into death. Just as Ibsen himself could never exorcise the ghosts of his father's bankruptcy, his own possible illegitimacy, or his recurring cowardice, his characters live their lives waiting for the chickens of their youth to come home to roost. Ibsen compared being unable to break the ties to the dead past with sailing with

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 297-98.

a corpse in the cargo. The final chapter of this study looks into several of the plays and examines this, the most pervasive of Ibsen's motifs.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CORPSE IN THE CARGO:

THE INDIVIDUAL'S BONDAGE TO THE PAST

Ibsen's major recurring theme is the necessity of man to break free from the traps set for him by his past. His protagonists have all done or been something which has made of them what they are, and before they can become what it is possible for them to become they must come to terms with the past and then walk away from it. Ibsen's plays deal with that period in the protagonist's life when the pressures have built to the bursting point and some sort of change is essential. George Steiner says about this moment that

Ibsen starts where earlier tragedies end, and his plots are epilogues to previous disaster. Suppose Shakespeare had written a play showing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth living out their bleak lives in exile after they had been defeated by their avenging enemies. We might then have the angle of vision that we find in John Gabriel Borkman.¹

In Ibsen's first play, Catiline's future is checked by his past; Catiline is held back by the libertine he had once been. He meets Furia and falls in love with her.

¹George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (New York: Hill and Wang; Dramabooks, 1963), pp. 296-97.

She brings out all that is most noble in him. Her influence causes him to renounce all oppressors of freedom, and he swears a dreadful vengeance on the man who had seduced and caused the death of Furia's sister. "Well, if you like your colours dull and pale," Furia tells him, "then you shall have the garland of green weeds / which Tullia wore upon her dripping locks / that day her corpse was floating on the Tiber!"² It is at the mention of the dead sister's name that Catiline realizes he has sworn vengeance on himself. He wants to change, to alter the world's perception of his name which has ". . . long since been the symbol of monstrosity."³ He has sworn to attempt this change by destroying one among the number of men such as he himself once was. The symbolism is clear: in order to live anew, one must kill what one was. It is a sacrifice Catiline feels himself unable to make until the closing moments of the play, at which time Catiline kills himself on the field of battle. He is Ibsen's tragic figure, the man who can only become human at the moment of death. In this respect, Catiline foreshadows the great protagonists of Ibsen's mature plays.

Another early play, Lady Inger of Øeststraat, deals with the theme of man bound to the past. Lady Inger has

²Henrik Ibsen, Catiline, in The Oxford Ibsen, Vol. I: Early Plays, ed. and trans. Graham Orton (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 102.

³Ibid., p. 74.

two central characters who cannot escape their pasts. Nils Lykke, come from Denmark to Norway to persuade Lady Inger to support the Danish king rather than rebel against him, finds himself physically attracted to Lady Inger's daughter, Eline. Because he is an emissary of Denmark, Nils finds his flirtations answered by taunts. Eline despises Danes for their politics and despises courtiers because one jilted her sister, Lucia, causing her to die of a broken heart. Nils' past is littered with broken hearts, as Eline well knows; what she does not know is that Nils is the very man who caused the death of Lucia. Cynically, Nils muses:

Flowers wither quickly up here in the north! A young girl gets hurt--snap, and it's over once and for all. I wonder whether it's through anger and shame at losing her so-called honour, or whether it is through sorrow and grief at finding herself deceived by the man she has given herself to. Well, in either case she is a fool, and one fool more or less in the world . . . Hm, my life's young spring has been rich enough; early each year I have seen a rose-bud bloom; each autumn I have seen a lily wither!⁴

Nils pleads with Eline to forgive the unknown seducer of her sister, saying that " . . . he bears his punishment in his own breast." She answers, "I cannot, even if I would, for I have sworn."⁵ Even as Eline begins to soften in the

⁴Henrik Ibsen, Lady Inger of Øestraat, in The Oxford Ibsen, Vol. I: Early Plays, ed. and trans. Graham Orton (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 293.

⁵Ibid., p. 342.

face of Nils' blandishments, she is tied to the past by an oath sworn to a dead sister. As she continues to deny Nils she is, unbeknownst to her, retracing with Nils Lucia's fate. The past repeats itself.

Nils Lykke is the first of the two major characters in the play who are caught up in the circles of their pasts. As the antagonist, Nils serves as the victimizer of the second major character with a past, Lady Inger; he is the agent who destroys Lady Inger's entire house, person by person. He warns her not to attempt to thwart his plans, --for during the course of the play--he has gained the secret of her past. "You boast of having seen through me," he jibes, "you heap on me bitterness, scorn, and ridicule; . . . ah, you should take care not to arouse my lust for vengeance, for with two words I can have you kneeling at my feet."⁶ Her secret is that years before she has borne an illegitimate son about whom very few people know. The bastard's father was king, and so--if the rebellion against the Danes is successful--Lady Inger's son will become the major pretender to the Norwegian throne. The fact that this son lives and must be protected is what stays Lady Inger's hand and causes her to tread lightly around political thin ice. "You must believe that my intentions towards my countrymen are honourable," she tells one of the rebel leaders.

⁶Ibid., p. 327.

"But I still haven't a free hand."⁷ Not having seen her royal bastard for many years, on his reappearance she mistakes him for an enemy and has him killed. The secret of her past, which has been the focal point of her life, has caused her to juggle more balls at once than she can control, and so the entire intricately flying pattern crashes down around her. "My child," she moans over the posthumously identified young man,

My lovely son! Come to me! Here I am! Hush,
I have something to tell you: I am hated . . .
because I brought you into this world; . . . I
was born with wealth, a keen brain, and a famous
name, so that I might be God's standard-bearer
on earth. But I went my own way; . . . that is
why I have had to suffer so much for so long!

Like that of so many of Ibsen's later protagonists, Lady Inger's past has one episode in it which prevents her from becoming all that she might have been. Lady Inger of Øestraat is an early example of this motif in Ibsen's work; twenty years later, in The Pillars of Society, his first great prose work, Ibsen re-opens the mine of this motif.

The Pillars of Society is more laden with scandal, past and present, than any of Ibsen's other plays. In his youth, Karsten Bernick committed a sexual indiscretion for which his brother-in-law Johan took the blame. Johan and his older sister, Lona Hessel, jilted by Bernick, then left

⁷Ibid., p. 323. ⁸Ibid., p. 351.

for America and a new life. After their departure, Bernick misappropriated some money, a crime for which he again blamed Johan. As the play begins, Bernick and his wife, Betty, have reared to maidenhood the young woman popularly believed to be Johan's illegitimate daughter, Dina, but who is in fact Bernick's natural daughter. Things are going well for Bernick--he is about to settle a land development deal with the railroad which will make his town prosperous and himself rich; his shipyards are doing well; and Dina is being courted by Roerlund, the local schoolmaster.

With two old scandals, rather than one, blowing on the wind of one of Ibsen's villages it is no wonder that many lives are touched and several ruined. Dina, knowing full well what a socially advantageous match one with Roerlund would be for her, is forced by both her past (actually, her mother's past) and Roerlund's patronizing attitude towards it to refuse his offer of marriage. "I'm one of the depraved sinners," she tells him, although the fault lies more in her stars than in herself. "Mother was a depraved sinner too," she adds, more to the crux of the matter.⁹ When Johan makes a sudden re-appearance, he too woos Dina without, at first, realizing who she is supposed to be. Although far more

⁹Henrik Ibsen, The Pillars of Society, in "Hedda Gabler" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1961), p. 33.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 57.

attracted to Johan than to Roerlund, Dina once again declines the man's attentions.

Dina: . . . You ought not to be seen with me.
 Johan: But why not?
 Dina: Oh, you're a stranger here. You don't understand. I'm not--
 Johan: Yes?
 Dina: No, I'd rather not talk about it.
 Johan: Come on. You can tell me.
 Dina: Well, if you want to know--I'm not like other girls. There's something--well, something. So you mustn't.¹⁰

Perhaps the most pestilential aftermath of Bernick's misdeeds is the way they affect others. Dina seems well on her way to ruining her life. Another victim is Martha, Bernick's sister, much of whose money he embezzled and lost (intending to put it back before the loss was missed). Martha had been in love with Johan before his hasty departure for America. Over the years she has taken care of his "daughter," devoting her life to all that was a visible reminder of her past happiness.

Martha: . . . I have acted as your proxy. The duties that you forgot to fulfill here, or couldn't fulfill, I have fulfilled for you. I tell you this so that you shan't have that to reproach yourself with too. I have been a mother to that wronged child; I've brought her up as well as I could--
 Johan: And wasted your whole life for her sake.
 Martha: It hasn't been wasted. But you took so long in coming, Johan.¹¹

But if Martha's life has become passive because of Bernick, his life has been most active. He has become a

¹⁰Ibid., p. 57. ¹¹Ibid., p. 65.

moral and economic pillar of the community, and yet his buried scandals can always be unearthed and become ruinous. The moment for that discovery seems to be at hand when Johan and Lona Hessel return. Miss Hessel, in whom Johan has confided the truth of the earlier affair, tries to get Bernick to relieve himself of the fear and guilt he feels. "Isn't there something in you," she asks him, "that cries out to be freed from this life?"¹² He tries to justify his actions to Miss Hessel, but finally admits to having committed a crime against her more grievous than any other:

. . . I swear to you that not a tenth part of all the rumours and slander that went round about me was true.

Miss Hessel: Possible. But then Betty [Mrs. Bernick] came home, pretty and rich, and everyone's darling; and the news got around that she was to inherit all her aunt's money and I was to get nothing--

Bernick: Yes, that was the crux of it, Lona. I shan't beat about the bush. I didn't love Betty; I didn't break with you because my affections had changed. It was only for the money. I needed it; I had to make sure I got it.¹³

Bernick constantly seems to confuse his actions and his basic nature. He treats the earlier scandalous actions as if they were aberrations, youthful blotches on an otherwise unsullied record of achievement. He does not realize that deceit is a part of his nature. At the time of Johan's return, Bernick is willing to allow a rotten ship to return

¹²Ibid., p. 71. ¹³Ibid., p. 69.

to sea, even though he knows that it will sink and that lives will be lost, because he has complied with the ship's owner's instructions for repairing it, and because he has gotten into a squabble with the repair yard's foreman over the advantages of machine-work over hand-work. His deal with the railroad is unethical: after persuading the townspeople to leave the details of bargaining with the railroad to him, he purchased all the land which the railroad needed for right of way, thereby assuring himself a fortune. These corrupt dealings originate in the same character flaw which caused his previous scandals. Rather than admit this, Bernick considers himself a man with two indiscretions in his past. If he could see that his past is an integral part of his nature (and therefore that his past is his present and future), he could begin to change his nature, and so shuck off his past.

Miss Hessel: . . . a lie made you the man you are now.

Bernick: Who suffered by it--then? Johan had sworn he'd never come back.

Miss Hessel: You ask who suffered by it. Look at yourself, Karsten, and tell me honestly; don't you think you've suffered?

Bernick: Look at any man you choose to name; you'll find every one of them has at least one skeleton hidden in his cupboard.

Miss Hessel: And you call yourselves pillars of society?

Bernick: Society has none better.¹⁴

Bernick's ruin becomes sure when Johan tells him that he is returning to America to liquidate his assets,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 83.

after which he will return to his old home town where he expects Bernick to clear his name. Johan, now desperately in love with Dina and wanting to marry her, is sailing to America on the ship Bernick knows is fated to sink. He becomes adamant in his determination to let the ship go--his reputation and success mean all to him. But upon learning that the townspeople are conducting a torchlight parade in his honor, his conscience flares up:

Bernick: You despise me, don't you, Lona?

Miss Hessel: Not yet.

Bernick: You've no right to do that. To despise me. Oh, Lona, you can't imagine how dreadfully alone I am in this narrow, stunted society--how, year by year, I've come to renounce my hopes of really fulfilling myself and becoming what I might and could have become. . . .¹⁵

When he discovers that his son has stolen aboard the American ship to an attempt to stow-away to the New World, Bernick is forced to admit to himself, and to the villagers, that his misbehaviour has been chronic. His realization that his past has completely dominated his present enables him to find, and so begin the process of changing, himself at last. His son is found safe, the ship does not sail, and the townspeople agree to a fair sharing of the railroad's money. Karsten Bernick is that rarity among Ibsen's protagonists: the man who finds himself in time to change himself.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 107.

The protagonist of Ibsen's next play was able to free herself from a stagnant situation which was brought about by an indiscretion in her past. Nora Helmer, in A Doll's House, is haunted by not only her own sins but also by those of her father, sins which her husband feels she has inherited. Not realizing what Nora does with any extra money she gets, Helmer accuses Nora of being a spendthrift, just as her father was:

. . . The squanderbird's a pretty little creature, but she gets through an awful lot of money. . . .

Nora: For shame. How can you say such a thing? I save every penny I can.

Helmer: That's quite true. Every penny you can. But you can't. . . . You're a funny little creature. Just like your father used to be. Always on the look-out for some way to get money, but as soon as you have any it just runs through your fingers, and you never know where it's gone.¹⁶

The theme of inherited weakness is a powerful one in Ibsen's work. We see in A Doll's House that Nora must pay the price of her father's irresponsible behaviour when Torvald refuses ever to discuss anything seriously with her. He constantly treats her as if she were a child, consciously because of the similarities he thinks he sees between her behaviour and that of her father, and unconsciously because he is putting himself into the role of her father. Either way, her present situation is made what

¹⁶Henrik Ibsen, A Doll's House, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), p. 26.

it is by both her past association with her father and her existence as the inheritor of certain of his traits.

Before she can begin to free herself, Nora must sever her connections with both her father, who never allowed her to mature intellectually to a point beyond his own, and her husband, who serves as a surrogate father continuing the relationship her real father had begun.

The inherited weakness that Nora is accused of propagating, flighty irresponsibility, symbolizes for Ibsen the societal weakness, passed from one generation to the next, of intellectual irresponsibility; that is, he sees the handing down of threadbare ideals and worn-out platitudes. But another character in A Doll's House also suffers from an inherited infirmity. Nora discusses Dr. Rank's physical deterioration and says that ". . . he's got a terrible disease; he's got spinal tuberculosis, poor man. His father was a frightful creature who kept mistresses and so on. As a result, Dr. Rank has been sickly ever since he was a child--you understand. . . ." ¹⁷ Dr. Rank is dying as a result of a past which is not even his. It is a past he can never apologize for and escape. When Nora accuses him of not being in a good mood and so dampening her own spirits, he replies:

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

With death on my hands? And all this to atone for someone else's sin? Is there justice in that? And in every single family, in one way or another, the same merciless law of retribution is at work. . . . My poor innocent spine must pay for the fun my father had as a gay young lieutenant.¹⁸

Just as Nora's inheritance has a symbolic meaning, likewise does Rank's. Nora's legacy is one that she can eventually learn to dominate without burning herself out while doing so--in fact, the learning process she goes through constitutes the play's main action--but Rank's disability is permanent. Like the guilty pasts of other Ibsen protagonists, it can be overcome only when it is killed, but the death of the ailment requires the termination of the patient. Rank's heritage symbolizes all that is morally rotten in the world; it is a cancer the destruction of which demands the ultimate sacrifice. Nora's past can enslave her only as long as she will allow it to do so; Rank's past crushes him.

In Ghosts, his next play, Ibsen again treated the theme of the past as a legacy for the future. Oswald Alving suffers just as Dr. Rank does, and for the same reason. Capt. Alving creates an inescapable past for Oswald which damns his present, just as Lt. Rank had done for his son.

The ghost of Capt. Alving, which seems at times to possess Oswald's body, is a reminder to Mrs. Alving of the

¹⁸Ibid., p. 64.

past that she helped to shape and which is now destroying her son. This past is made tangible when it is passed on to Oswald so that he, like Dr. Rank, carries the past which haunts him as a physical burden.

Oswald: . . . I sent for the doctor. And he told me the truth. . . . He began to ask me a lot of questions, which seemed to me to have absolutely nothing to do with it. I didn't understand what the man was driving at. . . . In the end he said, "You've been wormeaten from birth." That was the word he used: vermoulu. . . . I didn't understand either, and asked him to explain more clearly. And then the old cynic said . . . "The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children."¹⁹

In The Wild Duck, the theme of an instant, unalterable past inherited from someone else is explored again (Hedvig is going blind of a disease which is also affecting Werle, Sr.), but after Ghosts Ibsen, for the most part, became more concerned with the past that each man creates for himself and can therefore overcome by himself. In Rosmersholm, John Rosmer's inherited past is a collective one. As Kroll points out about the Rosmers, they are "Men of God and men of war. Respected servants of their country. Every one of them a man of honour who knew his duty. A family that for nigh on two hundred years has been venerated and looked up to as the first in the county."²⁰

¹⁹Henrik Ibsen, Ghosts, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), p. 174.

²⁰Henrik Ibsen, Rosmersholm, in "Ghosts" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 356.

The responsibility of keeping up the good name of Rosmer is a demanding one, but John feels capable of it: "My conscience is clean," he says.²¹ But the Rosmer legacy belongs to all Rosmers, not just to John, and unlike that legacy which is inherited by Dr. Rank, Oswald, and Hedvig, the Rosmer reputation for honor only becomes painful when a Rosmer's actions come in conflict with it. The part of Rosmer's past which haunts him is the part he had a hand in creating. He remains uneasy about his wife's death and when walking the grounds he refuses ever to cross the footbridge from which Beata drowned herself. "They cling to their dead here at Rosmersholm," observes Rebecca West. The housekeeper replies, "If you want my opinion, Miss, it's the dead who cling to Rosmersholm."²²

Rosmer does not realize that he is clinging to the dead in an unnatural way. He does not see his failure to let go of the dead Beata as Ibsen sees it: as an inability to let go of dead ideals which demand loyalty to someone even after death, to the exclusion of future happiness. Rosmer wants to free himself of Beata, but he cannot find out how to do it. His private actions do not match his public pronouncements. While avoiding the site of her suicide he tells Kroll, "No, I don't find it painful to be reminded of Beata. We speak about her every day."²³ In fact, the reminders of

²¹Ibid., p. 381. ²²Ibid., p. 346. ²³Ibid., p. 351.

Beata are painful. Rebecca, having made the mistake of thinking that Beata's death would remove her presence, yells at Rosmer, "Oh, don't talk about Beata! Don't think about Beata any more! You've managed to free yourself from her at last. She's dead."²⁴

Logically, Rosmer knows that Rebecca is right-- but what the intellect grasps the heart often fails to act upon, and Rosmer cannot shake the gnawing doubts he has about Beata's death and his relationship with Rebecca. Finally, he decides to make the move away from death and towards life and happiness. He asks Rebecca to marry him: "Then her part in the saga of Rosmersholm will be finished. Completely finished. For ever and ever. . . . It must be so. It must! I can't--" But to his surprise she declines his offer, saying that she ". . . will not go through life with a corpse on [her] back."²⁵ The situation is ironic. Rosmer had refused for so long to ask Rebecca to marry him because he felt compelled by the dead wife in his past not to; by the time he insists on asking, Rebecca has discovered something so disgraceful in her past,²⁶ it precludes any thought of accepting his offer.

²⁴Ibid., p. 385. ²⁵Ibid., p. 389.

²⁶For a fuller discussion, see Chapter Four.

Rosmer: Your past is dead, Rebecca. It no longer has any hold on you. It has nothing to do with you. All that happened to someone else.

Rebecca: Oh, my dearest, those are just words. What about that sense of innocence you spoke about? Where shall I find that?²⁷

Herein lies the central problem of the play. Ibsen expresses again what Shakespeare expressed before him:

". . . there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."²⁸ The past is dead if one will allow it to die. The dead have no strength in their fingers and so, in spite of what the housekeeper says, it is the living who must always cling to the dead. Loosen the grip and in the natural flow of life the dead will fall away, but letting go of the dead is what neither Rosmer nor Rebecca can ultimately do.

In his next play, The Lady From the Sea, Ibsen examined a couple similar to Rosmer and Rebecca. But Dr. and Mrs. Wangel will be able to approach their version of Rosmer's mill-race without leaping in. When the play opens, the first Mrs. Wangel is dead and has been replaced in the home by Ellida. She is told that her husband and his two daughters are ". . . living a life of memories . . ." into which she may never enter.²⁹

²⁷Ibsen, Rosmersholm, p. 417.

²⁸William Shakespeare, Hamlet 2.2.253-54.

²⁹Henrik Ibsen, The Lady From the Sea, in "When We Dead Awaken" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.,; Anchor Books, 1960), p. 39.

This evaluation of her present position is only partially accurate. Dr. Wangel, while still fondly remembering his first wife, has been able to let her go, and only one of the daughters (the same Hilde Wangel who will appear in The Master Builder) is totally resentful of Ellida's presence, moaning to her sister, "God knows why Father ever dragged her into the house."³⁰ Wangel knows that memories of the dead do not die easily; he also knows, and accepts, what Rosmer knew, but could not accept: that memories of the dead outshine the presence of the living only if one allows them to. "One cannot wipe out one's memories," he tells Ellida. "I can't, anyway. I'm not made like that. . . . To you it's almost as though the children's mother were still alive. As though she were invisibly living among us."³¹

But the children's mother is not the only one of the communion of the dead who haunt Ellida. When but a child she had pledged herself to a mysterious sailor who then disappeared and never returned. From one of the neighbors, Ellida heard, after her marriage to Wangel, of a shipwreck involving a sailor who had read of her marriage and had sworn to return to her. He was supposed by the narrator to be lost in the wreck.³² She is pondering her guilt over having broken her "promise given freely," which she feels is "as

³⁰Ibid., p. 45.

³¹Ibid., p. 47.

³²Ibid., pp. 37-38.

binding as any marriage,"³³ when her mysterious sailor returns and demands that she choose between her oath to him and her "false" marriage to Wangel. She tells her husband the story of a past she never fully understood, but simply rejected in hopes that it would go away.

Ellida: He [the sailor] took out of his pocket a key-chain, and pulled a ring off his finger, a ring he always used to wear. And he took a little ring from my finger, too, and put these two rings on to his key-chain. Then he said that we two were going to marry ourselves to the sea. . . . Yes, those were the words he used. Then he threw the chain and rings with all his strength, as far as he could, into the sea. . . .

Wangel: That man must have had an extraordinary power over you, Ellida.

Ellida: Yes. He was a demon.

Wangel: But you mustn't think about him anymore. . . . We are going to find a new cure for you now. . . .

Ellida: I shall never be able to escape from it. . . .

Wangel: But you have freed yourself from that. Long ago. When you broke with him. All that is dead and forgotten.

Ellida: No. That's just it. It isn't.

Wangel: Not forgotten?

Ellida: No, Wangel! It isn't forgotten. And I'm afraid it never will be.³⁴

The decision to go or to stay is Ellida's--she demands the right to make it herself and Wangel agrees to her demand. The past, with its rigid, unchangeable events locked in forever, is represented by the sailor. He admits of no change, no progress, and demands that relationships remain what they were when life was naive and children made promises they could never keep. When Ellida finally realizes

³³Ibid., p. 84. ³⁴Ibid., pp. 51-53.

that this is what the sailor represents, she sends him on his way and turns her back on a past best forgotten. She manages to save herself while she still has enough of her life to search for happiness. She is the last of Ibsen's characters who will be able to do this.

John Gabriel Borkman's life is proof of the philosophy behind the old poem which states that ". . . stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage." Borkman's prison is on the upper floor of his house, in a room which, with its old faded tapestries and furniture in the Empire style, serves as a visible reminder of the past. His only friend is Vilhelm Foldal, a man Borkman knew before going to prison for embezzlement. Foldal is a constant reminder of the people Borkman has wronged, Foldal himself being one whose money was taken by Borkman. Every time Foldal, with the tragedy he wrote years before and is still perfecting, enters the room, Borkman's past comes calling. It is a past which, although sordid, is somehow comfortable; it dominates Borkman's existence but, except for whispering "Remember!" it never probes the most painful memories and is not too demanding. In fact, Borkman has arranged the facts of his past in such a way that he feels he has risen above it. Convinced that his past dishonesty was for the good of the majority and that he was prosecuted only because of the petty envy of his enemies, Borkman sees Foldal

because Foldal is the only old friend who agrees with his evaluation of the past. He can see great events in his past because, like an exiled king, he knows that in the natural course of history they would have taken place. It is only when Ella, the woman he spurned, returns with a terminal illness that Borkman is forced to see the past as it really was.

Ella: I shan't live for long, Borkman. . . .
It's a disease for which the doctors know no
cure. . . .

Borkman: But what on earth can have been the
cause of this disease? You've always lived
such a healthy life.

Ella: The doctors suggested that perhaps I
had at some time gone through some violent
emotional crisis.

Borkman: Oh, I understand. I am to blame for
this?³⁵

Ella brings Borkman a new perspective on his past. She forces him out of his martyr's den, with its decaying phantasy of a glory which never was, and down into the real world, a world where Borkman's son is having his future planned by the warped longing for revenge which has been suckled at Mrs. Borkman's breast for years. Like a poisonous Helen Alving, Gunhild Borkman is trying to redeem (through the life of her son) an evil past in which she played a part. For the Alvings the attempt to redeem the past was doomed by the past, but for Mrs. Borkman the attempt is

³⁵Henrik Ibsen, John Gabriel Borkman, in "When We Dead Awaken" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1960), p. 273.

destroyed on two fronts: Erhart Borkman finds his own joy and so cannot abandon himself to the whims of her vengeance, and her husband re-enters the world and takes stock of the situation. "You cannot redeem another man's failure," he tells his son, Erhart.

That is only an empty dream, which has been instilled into you in this airless room. Even if you were to live like all the saints put together, it would not help me one whit. . . . Nor would it help if I were to moulder up there, contrite and penitent. All these years I have tried to keep alive on hopes and dreams. Now I want reality. . . . I shall start at the bottom again. It is only through his present and his future that a man can redeem his past. . . .³⁶

Borkman is doomed to die at the end of the play. The miner's son, as Mrs. Borkman says, is not able to live in the fresh, clear air--not after spending so many nights locked up.³⁷ But his future, in the person of Erhart, will find joy and so redeem the past. If Erhart had followed his mother's plan, he would have become, in effect, her future--and her future would not have been a redemption of the past, but a re-living of it. By turning his back on his parents' past and creating his own future, Erhart is doing what Borkman was on the threshold of doing. Borkman comes to see the past for what it is--the first act of life's drama--rather than what he always thought it was--the entire play, followed by only a few mournful exit lines. When the

³⁶Ibid., p. 284. ³⁷Ibid., p. 301.

sleigh which carries Erhart, the woman he loves, and Foldal's daughter bumps into Foldal in the dark and knocks him over, it symbolizes the escape of a possible future from the strict paths of conduct laid out by the past. The accident is, by proxy, Borkman's break for freedom.

Borkman: What have you done to your foot?

You're limping.

Foldal: You'll never guess. I've been run over . . . by a sleigh. . . . With two horses. They came galloping down the hill. I couldn't get out of the way quickly enough, and so--

Ella: And so they ran over you? . . .

Borkman: We all get run over some time in life. The only thing to do is to get up again and³⁸ behave as though nothing has happened.

The lesson has been learned, but for Borkman it has been learned too late.

In When We Dead Awaken, Arnold Rubek is an Ibsen protagonist (and surrogate) whose past haunts him not because he wants to escape, but because he wants to return to it. Like Solness, and like Ibsen, Rubek is an artist who once created large scale works of art which he feels glorified the human spirit; but now his huge sculptures (like Solness' churches and Ibsen's verse dramas) have been replaced by busts of notable, but not too notable, citizens (comfortable houses, prose plays). That spark of divine creativity, in the play symbolized by Rubek's mysterious model, Irene, has gone out. Rubek has married a beautiful girl who is the same age Irene was when she and Rubek worked together, but

³⁸Ibid., pp. 293-94.

Maja, Rubek's false youth and inspiration, is no substitute for the real thing. Rubek's longing for the recapture of that which he once willingly let go is suggested in everything he says. "You said you wanted to take me with you to the top of a high mountain," Maja reminds her husband, "and show me all the glory of the world" Rubek replies dreamily, "Did I promise that to you, too?"³⁹ The possibly dangerous implications of Rubek's response are forgotten upon the appearance of a mysterious, dark woman who seems somehow familiar to Rubek. Maja asks if she might not be a model of Rubek's from his younger days, but he thinks not. "No, little Maja; to tell the truth, I have only ever had one model. Only one--for everything I have ever created."⁴⁰

The dark woman turns out to be Irene, the one model and inspiration of Rubek's youth. Abandoned upon the completion of his greatest work, she has considered herself to be dead ever since; selling herself to whatever hack would use her, she has been a shrouded figure wandering the earth.

Irene: I was dead for many years. They came and tied me up, tied my arms together behind my back.

³⁹Henrik Ibsen, When We Dead Awaken, in "When We Dead Awaken" and Three Other Plays, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1960), pp. 322-23.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 326-27.

Then they lowered me into a tomb, with iron bars across the doors, and padded walls so that no one up above could hear the shrieks of the dead. . . .

Rubek: Do you blame me for this? Do you hold me guilty?

Irene: Yes.

Rubek: Guilty of--of your death, as you call it?

Irene:⁴¹ Guilty of leaving me no future but death.

When We Dead Awaken is a play of anguish when one realizes that Ibsen was writing about himself. Rubek is an artist who cannot live without working, and yet his work, in his own eyes (the only ones that matter to an artist), has become mundane, stale, predictable--worst of all, unimportant. His tragedy is not that he lost the gift of his greatness, but that he willingly abandoned it in favor of popular success. All that was great in himself, he killed. As an old man he longs for resurrection, and yet fears that its coming may be too late. Irene and Rubek, talent and artist, trying to become one as they once had been, are perhaps the most agonizing couple in Ibsen's work.

Irene: Go high up into the mountains; as high as you can go. Higher, higher--always higher, Arnold.

Rubek: Are you going up there?

Irene: Dare you meet me again?

Rubek: If only we could! Ah, if only we could!

Irene: Why shouldn't we? If we want to. Come,⁴² come, Arnold! Oh, please come up to me--!

⁴¹Ibid., p. 334. ⁴²Ibid., p. 337.

With Irene by his side once again, Rubek faces and finally conquers the mistake of his past. Rubek and Irene go to the mountain, where they meet Maja and her new friend Ulfhejm, a boorish hunter. As Maja goes down the mountain, Rubek is finally able to climb through the mists to the top. Suddenly, Rubek and Irene are buried in an avalanche of snow. Nothing remains but a blanket of pure white. It is a last scene which is terrible in its prophecy.

The author must have rejoiced in the death of the old Ibsen (Rubek), leaving nothing to be seen but the whiteness of a freshly turned new page. Ibsen, through the last act of John Gabriel Borkman and all of When We Dead Awaken, had been drifting away from the prosaic and back towards symbolism. Like a character from one of his own plays, he was beginning to leave his past behind him and to strike out in a new direction. But, also like one of his own creations, the jettisoning of all the old corpses came too late. Ibsen had only enough time to sing the song of freedom, but not enough time to be free. A series of strokes left him incapable of working, and so, although he lived for seven years after the publication of When We Dead Awaken, he never wrote another play. The story of Arnold Rubek marked the final part in the twenty-six play autobiography of Henrik Ibsen. The problems he begat upon his protagonists were ones that he eventually managed to overcome for himself.

All Ibsen's plays relay to us the greatest message there is: life is a burdensome struggle to overcome the agonies of the soul and of the past. Freedom from pain can come only from within, and although the battle sometimes destroys what it should save, it is a battle which must be fought before a person can become fully human and can sing, with Ibsen, the song which echoes across the pure whiteness of Rubek's mountain grave:

I am free! I am free! I am free!
My imprisonment is past! I am free!
I am free as a bird! I am free!⁴³

⁴³Ibid., p. 372.

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