



**AN ATTEMPT TO SYNTHESISE THOUGHT, WORD AND DEED:
A STUDY OF SELECT CHARACTERS FROM HENRIK IBSEN'S PLAYS**

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ABSTRACT

Duty towards one's own self is one of the most powerful themes which can be traced in many plays written by Henrik Ibsen, a nineteenth-century dramatist, who is often acclaimed as the father of Modern Drama. This paper argues that to perform one's duty towards oneself which, according to Ibsen, is to be truthful, one needs to synthesise one's thoughts, words and deeds. At the initial level, Ibsenian characters lack the unity of thought, word and action which is necessary for responsible living. However, conflict forces them to make an effort towards harmonisation. The fear of rejection, desire for comfort and lack of communication allow the characters to live a passive life filled with illusion. In order to maintain the lie, the characters' actions do not synchronise with either their thoughts or words. At the point of conflict, the individuals decide to actively synthesise the three. This process requires from them will-power and strength – a great necessity at the time of conflict. The implementation helps them emerge as honest and responsible individuals with higher self-esteem and freedom. As they are led towards awareness and acceptance, they begin to love and be compassionate towards themselves. They soon share this loving self with the society. This idea is discussed with special reference to a few selected plays by Henrik Ibsen, namely, *A Doll's House*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *Little Eyolf*.

Keywords: Ibsen, thought, word, deed, conflict

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To live a truthful life, at the individual as well as at the social level, unity of thought, word and deed is of utmost importance. A conscious harmony of these three would help an individual to live a committed, contented and conscientious life. However, such a life is not always an ideal one, for one might be committed to a wrong cause. Nevertheless, for a willing learner, such a life is always in the process of becoming an ideal one, for

it is open to discussion, awareness, acceptance, learning and transformation.

Unfortunately, it is often observed that, consciously or unconsciously, we are unable to synthesise our thoughts, words and actions; we tend to speak what is not in our mind; do what we don't want to do or contrary to what we say; and, far worse, we don't even try to find what we actually think. Usually, the disunity amongst these three is

due to the fear of rejection, desire for comfort and lack of communication. It causes the individual to live a pretentious life, in which he fakes emotions, ideas, beliefs and actions. The individual continues this baseless life until he equips himself with a strong will to express what lies hidden, repressed and buried. The strong will which is required to emerge truthful is procured when an individual comes face to face with the ugliness, pettiness and worthlessness of living a dishonest life. This happens when the expected results of hypocritical behaviour are not in alignment with one's expectations. At this stage, the individual resolves to give up the mask which he wears to satisfy others, and the responsibility of respecting himself in the first place dawns on him, by acknowledging his true self.

An action is usually performed keeping in mind a particular reaction. This reaction is formed by the impressions absorbed during an individual's interactions with society. What society creates, is resonated by the individual. However, the individual has to understand that during the process of 'give and take,' it is a 'living' person who resonates, and not the robotic society which is an amalgamation of certain norms and conventions from which the individual borrows. The individual has to induce the conventions with the required humaneness while practising these norms.

One of the most important social conventions which needs to be practised by every individual is 'duty.' Strangely, the usual belief about duty is that it binds. Ironically, social conventions originated to free individuals by providing them with a healthier environment, but most of the time we find that conventions make people feel restricted. The deep-rooted reason behind this dichotomy is that every social institution needs to be understood in its essence or spirit, rather than being followed in letter. This is not to underestimate the nuances attached to each institution; instead, it is to make sure that societal traditions are practised in their very spirit.

Duty can be of many different kinds. At the macro level, an individual is supposed to perform his duty towards his nation; and, at the micro level, the individual is expected to perform his duty towards his family. However, to perform the respective

duties diligently at all social levels, the most primary requirement is to perform one's duty towards one's own self.

Duty towards one's own self is one of the most powerful themes which can be traced in many plays written by Henrik Ibsen, a nineteenth-century dramatist who is often acclaimed as the father of Modern Drama. He was the first one to introduce realism, naturalism, and many more 'isms' prevalent during his time on the stage. Due to his works, the stage could reinstate its respectability and richness - which it had lost to the melodramatic compositions prevalent before that.

This paper argues that to perform one's duty towards oneself which, according to Ibsen, is to be truthful, one needs to synthesise one's thoughts, words and deeds. However, the initial step towards this synthesis is clarity in thinking. Most often, thoughts are blurred by innumerable influences. Weak desires frequently leave an individual confused and indecisive. In order to arrive at unprejudiced thoughts, an individual requires conscientious discrimination. What is also required is a strong will because awareness at this level should impel him to face, accept and live certain harsh, unromantic realities of worldly life. In the next stage, words become as powerful as thoughts in initialising and motivating an individual's actions. When a contemplative man reaches the stage of mature thought, he needs to speak his mind clearly and unreservedly, unaffected by societal reactions and personal apprehensions. This, in turn, should be followed by discreet actions in harmony with one's thoughts and words to avoid undesirable situations. At the individual level, Ibsenian characters lack the synthesis of thought, word and action which is necessary for responsible living. However, conflict forces them to make an effort towards harmonisation.

In *A Doll's House* (1879), a ground-breaking work which took the whole of Europe by storm at the time of its publication, Nora, the protagonist, in subtle ways, shows her aversion to Helmer's dominance over her, yet she is not ready to convey her opinion to him in words in order to keep her illusions secure. She romanticises the role of a doll in spite of her antipathy towards it. Her actions are not

in synchrony with her thoughts. In the last Act, she finally accepts her dual self when she tells Helmer, "When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact..." (74). The realisation comes to her at last, "No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so." From her very childhood, Nora has lived through a puppet-like existence that has stifled her personal identity. Finally, when the illusion breaks and Nora comes face to face with Helmer's reality, she decides to react to this situation. Jarvis suggests, "... we take our world for granted and our behaviour is habitual because we have already learned it from previous experiences, until such time as we are forced to think about it because of a disjunctural experience or because we want to impose our own intentions upon it" (Jarvis, *Learning* 133). Nora, according to Otten, "... is essentially enslaved by her own wilful, if largely unconscious, acceptance of conventional morality" (410).

The conflict makes Nora recognise the necessity of facing the truth and being accountable to herself for her actions. She confidently states, "There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself... I must do that for myself" (75). Nora wants to feel responsible for what she does in her life, and so she chooses to step out of the relationship, till she and Helmer set right what has gone wrong at the personal and social levels. What leads to her growth is that, for the first time, she takes her own decision and is ready to be accountable for it. She tells Helmer:

I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are – or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them. (76)

She is ready to give up her convenient and comfortable life, and embrace a more conscientious living. The truth of experience alone, and not

established beliefs, she feels, can help her find answers to the deeper questions of her life. As an aware and active participant who understands the need to unify unbiased thoughts with discreet actions, she embarks on the journey to fulfil the most 'sacred' and foremost duty of being truthful to one's self. Meyer asserts that the theme of the play "... is the need of every human being, whether man or woman, to find out who he or she is and to strive to become that person. Ibsen knew what Freud and Jung were later to assert - that liberation can only come from within" (35).

Ellida, the titular character from one of the most debateable plays of Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea* (1889), understands that it is she herself who has to synthesise her thoughts, words and actions -

Unfulfilled as wife or mother, she sees her guilt as an "unfaithful wife" in her dead infant's eyes that "changed with the sea," a mirror of her spiritual husband associated with the sea, and a voice rising from her own unconscious like the judgement eyes of Little Eyolf that stare up from the sea and penetrate the soul of Rita Allmers. (Otten 412-3)

Ellida discerns that the 'temptation' lies within her, and she needs to "...save me from myself!" (Ibsen *The Lady from the Sea* 44). She further proclaims, "I am not threatened by any outward power. The terror lies deeper, Wangel. The terror is the attraction in my own mind. And what can you do against that?" (58). Like the other characters, the contradictory blend of the Apollonian and Dionysian yearnings within her gives rise to conflict. According to Hartmann -

But what makes Ellida outstanding is what psychotherapists call 'psychological mindedness,' that is, her courageous willingness to try to know her own mind and her intense struggle for self-realization and 'freedom of choice' even though she knows that this urge might drive her into insanity and darkness. (84)

What differentiates the journey and, ultimately, the end of Nora on the one side, and Ellida on the other, in spite of the two being initially 'bought' as dolls and mermaids, respectively, is the

worth given by Wangel to Ellida. Ellida acknowledges Wangel's efforts when she says, "I have been as well cared for here as human being could desire" (Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea* 55). However, she adds that the beginning is as important as the journey – "But I did not enter your house freely. That is the thing" (55). This implies that the crisis could not have been averted even in Ellida's life, in spite of Wangel's apparent support. She admits that "It was not freely that I went with you" (55), and, inevitably, "... the life we two live together is really no marriage" (56). She, thus, reasons out the conflict, "Believe me, it will come to that all the same after the way we two came together" (56).

Interpreting the women characters of Ibsen, Hartmann proclaims:

All of these women live in fantasy worlds in which they idealize and misunderstand the significant men in their life. Their solutions and struggles are very different, but they have one thing in common: when the wishful fantasies are destroyed by the fatal acts of their idealized men, their vulnerable inner boundaries collapse. (89)

For instance, in *Hedda Gabler* and *Rosmersholm*, respectively, when Lovborg fails Hedda in the end, she –

... is unable to find any meaning or beauty in life. The only freedom left for her is a controlled, consciously decided and lonely death in beauty. Similarly, when Rebecca realizes that Rosmer, by having lost faith in her, has also lost faith in his own life work, her self-protecting boundaries against complete surrender perish. (Hartmann 89)

Gradually, Ellida understands and acknowledges the powerful significance of thought and word apart from action: "You see we can never get away from that one thing that a freely given promise is fully as binding as a marriage" (Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea* 56). Hence, one's actions should be in synchrony with one's thoughts.

Commitment is a psychological responsibility entrusted by one's conscience which, in turn, is regulated and prone to change. The change occurs due to the evolving personal morals

which one practises to find meaning and purpose in life. Commitment operates at two different levels: thought and action. Thus, commitment can also lead to conflict. Ellida stresses on Wangel understanding her, being open with her, since her truth is inevitably linked to his life as well, "Ah! dear Wangel, let us not lie to one another, nor to ourselves" (56). Lucas propounds, "... there appears more hope for the future... in the frank reason, realism, and individualism of the great Norwegian" (3). She asks him for freedom to act as well on her own because she knows that nobody has power over her mind:

You can never prevent the choice, neither you nor anyone. You can forbid me to go away with him to follow him in case I should choose to do that. You can keep me here by force against my will. That you can do. But that I should choose, choose from my very soul choose him, and not you in case I would and did choose thus this you cannot prevent. (Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea* 61)

Nevertheless, Ellida wants the freedom to choose in action as well since this would make her psychologically strong enough to feel wholeheartedly committed to one way.

At one point, Ellida wishes to get out of the bond in which she let herself be 'objectified.' What Nora discovers and Hedda knows, Ellida confesses when, filled with regret, she says, "I accepted the bargain. Sold myself to you!" (55). She comes to believe in the power and necessity of the freedom of choice: "Better the meanest work better the poorest life after one's own choice" (55). However, once she is given the opportunity to follow her own dictates, Ellida chooses Wangel because she knows that "... it would be peace and deliverance if with all my soul I could be bound to you and try to brave all that terrifies and attracts" (62). She exclaims, "Ah! Wangel if only I could love you, how gladly I would — as dearly as you deserve" (56). If Wangel had not left the choice to her, she would have remained committed to the stranger in spirit. However, as soon as she gets the chance to be 'responsibly' free to make a choice, to select one and renounce the other, she chooses Wangel since "... the change

came was bound to come when I could choose in freedom?" (73). As a consequence, she gathers her self-will to negate and let go of all that tempted her: "Neither lures nor frightens me. I could have seen it gone out into it, if only I myself had willed it. I could have chosen it. And that is why I could also renounce it" (73).

Even if the stranger had not come in form, the agitation in her mind would have led her to make a choice. She had already chosen to reveal the partial truth to Wangel before the stranger arrived on the scene. As a matter of fact, the stranger may be treated more as a concretised form of the idea in the mind of Ellida, an idea which she created to get rid of the duality in her mind. Ellida, like Ibsen, who, "... mastered his [trolls], and harnessed them to highly effective use" (Lucas 4), gathers the courage to work towards her disillusionment and, subsequently, resurrection. In a letter to his friend Brandes, Ibsen wrote, "People want only special revolutions, in externals, in politics, and so on. But that's just tinkering. What really is called for is a revolution of the human mind..." (qtd. in Fjelde ix).

In order to sustain a true relationship with the people around her, Ellida needed to, inevitably, make peace with herself. In her pursuit for completeness, Ellida resolves to take up the challenge of not only questioning herself, but also answering herself truthfully. Once she extricates herself from the delusive notions which she felt were obligatory earlier, she is able to be what she merely pretended to be, previously. Ellida, who was 'spiritually disenfranchised' earlier, now fills her persona with the required self-worth and conscientiousness, resulting in consequent self-growth and fulfilment.

Rita, one of the most controversial characters from one of the last plays by Ibsen, *Little Eyolf* (1894), on the other hand, is not under any illusion because she is not unaware of the fact that she is heading towards wickedness due to her possessiveness. Nevertheless, she is unwilling to give up her disgraceful existence until the result of her obsession hits her hard. To come face to face with her responsibility, she knows that "... I shall have to educate myself for it; to train myself; to discipline myself" (Ibsen, *Little Eyolf* 67). The

catastrophic moment of Eyolf's end breaks her stubbornness and pushes her to take charge of herself and her actions. She is not affected by the choices of her husband anymore; instead, she decides to choose for herself, with the aim of reconstructing herself. The guilt which then haunts her – in the form of the open eyes of the dead child – may find release in the course of the subsequent choices she makes. She appears resolute in her keenness to get rid of the self-demeaning existence which she has, hitherto, chosen for herself. This decision materially elevates her above the persona of Alfred – to the extent that even Alfred finds his resurgence in Rita's choice. Finally, she rises above her self-centredness and equips herself with the strength to fulfil her duty to herself, recognising that "Duties to oneself are not about self-interest but about self-perfection and being worthy of one's humanity" (Wood 11-12).

Therefore, at this stage, through self-analysis, the characters delve deep into the complexity surrounding their association and accept the truths about themselves and the relations they have made in the society. In the process, they get introduced to their new selves and their different emotions – both of which they had either repressed or covered due to social restraints and individual fears. Conflict provides them with an opportunity to grow. According to Fjelde, "For Ibsen... the primary reality is to be found precisely in ideas – or rather in the inherent power of the concrete human spirit unceasingly to evolve them" (xxxii). From this state of awareness and, then, acceptance, they reach the next stage of change in which they decide to amend their approach to life. Wood explains that "Humanity in the person of every rational being has dignity – that is, a worth that is above all price, a worth that must always be respected" (27), and, therefore, "... each of us should try to make ourselves into useful members of the world, as a way of showing respect for the worth of our humanity" (25).

However, there are situations when the individual decides not to react, nor experiment, nor evaluate, nor reflect and not even reason out such encounters. At such times, the potential for one's growth through experience is curtailed or

minimised. At the point of conflict, we find a variety of responses from the characters of Ibsen. It is true that the awareness of truth dawns on almost all of them. However, many of them do not choose to respond contrary to social norms since the change in them is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The action takes place in the minds of the characters. For example, Nora breaks open the door of change by refuting the existing social conventions, whereas Mrs. Alving, in *Ghosts*, continues to exist in illumined darkness. Nora, like Ellida and Rita, is able to synthesise her thoughts, words and deeds by the end of the respective plays; however, Mrs. Alving, like Hedda and Rebecca, is not able to put her thoughts - after awareness dawns - in action. Their inability to concretise and actualise their lessons and understanding stagnates and curbs their completeness. However, a synthesis of thought and word, if not action, raises them to a higher pedestal compared to many other passive characters in the plays. In short, the change and growth in all the focussed characters seems inevitable in the face of a conscious reflection on the causes of conflict and disjuncture between the social and subjective self. Acknowledging all kinds of such responses, Jarvis believes, "Only when they have made a response to the disjuncture, either through learning or by acknowledging that they cannot or do not wish to learn from the situation, can people again try to live in harmony with their culture" (*Paradoxes* 15).

However, learning becomes worthwhile when one consciously reflects on the experience and converts one's newly-formed attitudes and beliefs into action. Learning would then make life and its experiences meaningful and worthwhile.

Conclusively, then, the fear of rejection, desire for comfort and lack of communication allow the characters to live a passive life filled with illusion. In order to maintain the lie, the characters' actions do not synchronise with either their thoughts or words. At the point of conflict, the individuals decide to actively synthesise the three. This process requires from them will-power and strength - a great necessity at the time of conflict. The implementation helps them emerge as honest and responsible individuals with higher self-esteem and freedom. Here, we find the characters actively

engaged in performing and participating in the most sacred duty they have towards themselves, i.e., of being honest and thoughtful. As they are led towards awareness and acceptance, they begin to love and be compassionate towards themselves. They soon share this loving self with the society.

Thus, the synthesis of thought, word and deed allows a person to live an unpretentious life. This, in turn, helps him to face the conflict in honesty, leading to an awareness that envisages a transformation ahead, at both the individual and social level.

Ibsen is one of the most frequently staged dramatists after Shakespeare. His greatness lies in the universality of the deep-rooted truths of human life he deals with in his plays. Unreservedly, we can proclaim him as a writer who belongs to all ages. The idea of synthesising one's thoughts, words and deeds is as relevant and important today as in any other age. Its exercise and practice can make a clear difference at all levels of life.

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