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THE RELEVANCE OF HENRIK IBSEN

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ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen is one of the most controversial writers ever. Ibsen's relevance to our times is one of the questions on which no two critics seem to agree. For some, Ibsen has become thoroughly outdated; while, for some others, Ibsen is a dramatist who can never lose his relevance. The paper highlights the fact that Henrik Ibsen, more than anything else, is concerned with the problem of the self, and this is a problem which can never become obsolete. Further, Ibsen shows himself to be way ahead of his times, and quite modern, by dealing with sexuality, and especially female sexuality, which did not formally exist for the Victorians, in a particularly revealing and forthright manner.

Key words: Relevance, Self, Identity, Truth, False consciousness, Sexuality.

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen, the great Norwegian playwright, consistently aroused heated controversies throughout his life, and even after his death. Never, certainly, was there a writer about whom more conflicting views were raised in so brief a space of time. Ibsen's relevance to our times is one of the questions on which no two critics seem to agree. For some, Ibsen has become thoroughly outdated; while, for some others, Ibsen is a dramatist who can never lose his relevance.

The Debate

"The emphasis on Ibsen's prose realism and polemicism dates from the time when the Ibsen controversy was raging at its fiercest, and partisans had to make the master's plays support his own cause"(Brustein 42). The legend continues and the effect of this phenomenon is that Ibsen, in some circles, is still regarded as a principally political playwright commenting on topical social and moral issues. As a result, when some of the 'closest' concerns of Ibsen were addressed (for example: women's suffrage, a more tolerant attitude to

sexual conduct, the rejection of religious intolerance, etc.) the view spread that Ibsen had outlived his fame and become thoroughly out of date. Brecht expressed this view when he asserted that Ibsen's *Ghosts* had become obsolete through the discovery of Salvarsan as a remedy against syphilis. Toril Moi illustrates:

Intellectuals started to experience Ibsen's plays as increasingly unexciting, old fashioned and boring after World War II. Already in 1945, the great German critic Theodor Adorno registered the change: 'No sooner is a name like Ibsen's mentioned, than he and his themes are condemned as old-fashioned and outdated.'... Having helped to renew the theatre at the end of the 19th century, after 1914 Ibsen became increasingly irrelevant... Eric Bentley noted that, 'Today the mention of the Norwegian's name elicits, in many quarters, a certain feeling of tedium' (18).

Though the critics who have been talking about the irrelevance of Ibsen, indirectly concede that his work played a vital part in bringing about a change in public opinion and social attitudes, and

consequently increased the status of drama as an experimental laboratory for social thought and social change, yet, their views continues to do more harm to Ibsen's reputation as an artist than any other single influence. Callow Simon elucidates:

Of the two greatest dramatists of the 19th century, Chekhov and Ibsen, it is the infinitely lovable Dr Chekhov who holds the highest place in our affections, both as man and as author. But Ibsen, the forbidding man of the north - accusatory eyes fiercely staring out at us from behind steel-rimmed spectacles, thin, severe lips tightly pursed amid the bizarre facial topiary - may be the one who speaks most urgently to us today (Guardian).

The Truth

In fact, Henrik Ibsen, more than anything else, was concerned with the problem of the self, and this is a problem which can never become obsolete. Ibsen's plays repeatedly reflect the problem of the identity, the need to search for the self's real core, and the awareness that the realization of one's true self is the highest human objective. In a crucial letter Ibsen himself had summarized his underlying philosophy: "I believe that none of us can do anything other or anything better than realise ourselves in spirit and in truth"(qtd. in London Magazine).

James Joyce linked Ibsen with a very modern Samuel Beckett—in spite of the fact that Beckett's anti-illusionist and non-realist techniques are diametrically opposed to those of Ibsen's plays. Martin Esslin agrees with him:

For, I venture to suggest, both Beckett and Ibsen are ultimately deeply concerned with a subject matter of fundamental modernity: the problem of Being, the nature of the self, with the question of what an individual means when he uses the pronoun I ? ... This, it seems to me, is the fundamental and underlying subject matter of Ibsen's oeuvre which was masked... by its surface preoccupation with social and political questions (Discovering Authors).

Ibsen, although he insisted that he often read the newspapers, including advertisements, but seldom books, was still aware of all the contemporary philosophical cross-currents, whatever the means by which he might have

acquired them. His friend and critic Brandes maintained that the dramatist was positioned "in a sort of mysterious correspondence with the fermenting, germinating ideas of the day..."(qtd. in The Independent).

In *The Lady from the Sea* Ellida asserts, "Better the meanest labour—better the deepest poverty—of my own free will —by my own choice!"(Ibsen and Archer 360), and then gets absolute freedom by her husband to 'choose'. It seems to be one of the perfect expressions of the existentialist position in drama. Here a character finds her true self by an act of "her own will". Further, Ellida's encounter with the Stranger had conjured up before her a false self-image dictated by her animal attraction to him. And here again we are in a very modern field of ideas, the idea of false consciousness.

In *The Master Builder*, Solness transmits his own false (because self-deceptive) self- image to Hilda who, years later, returns to confront him with it and to demand its realization in action. Solness is face to face with the reflection of his own now certainly obsolete idea of himself. The situation reminds us of Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* in which Krapp is confronted with his former and falsely romantic self. The similarity lies not in the dramatic techniques but in the substance.

False consciousness, deceptive self-images, the 'I' experiencing itself as the 'Not-I' (to quote a Beckettian expression)—these are the twentieth century expressions for those set of problems for which Ibsen had his own jargon: he called this disease the "Life-lie" (The Wild Duck 431) or, from a different angle, "the claim of the ideal"(360).

Gregers Werle's self-conceit and blind commitment to an abstract ideal leads to destruction in *The Wild Duck*. Further, both Borkman (*John Gabriel Borkman*), who sacrifices his capacity for love, to an ego-centric self-image and clings to it even after repeated failures, and Rubek (*When We Dead Awaken*), who betrays both his capacity for love as well as his ideals by opting for worldly success and wealth, stress upon more than anything else the problem of the self. In the plays of Ibsen, there seems to be a perpetual conflict between antagonistic aspects of the self, opposing

drives and needs, and which the individuals concerned fail to integrate into an harmonious, well-balanced whole.

If one looks at the underlying theme of Ibsen's corpus in this way, even Nora's departure from her home in *A Doll's House*, which so scandalised his contemporaries, is seen in a new light. Paul Taylor observes, "The sound of the door she slams behind her resonates not just as a token of her emancipation but as a true sign of the love she feels for the man she leaves behind; for she has perceived that he was a prisoner, too, of the pernicious 19th-century values that trapped the sexes in licensed mutual diminishment"(Independent). It's for his sake as well as her own that she departs.

Ibsen shows himself to be way ahead of his times, and quite modern, by dealing with sexuality, and especially female sexuality, which did not formally exist for the Victorians, in a particularly revealing and forthright manner. He reflects how its suppression by the society forces the individual into false or inadequate integrations of his or her self. In *Little Eyolf* the conflict is between motherhood and uninhibited sexual urge. Eyolf is crippled and ultimately dies because his mother neglects him and wishes him dead as an obstacle to the fulfillment of her unbridled sexual desires. But Rita's exaggerated sexual urge might well have sprung from her husband's equally disproportionate commitment to his ideal, his work on "human responsibility", which makes him withdraw from Rita both sexually and emotionally.

The hip German director Thomas Ostermeier has brought sleek, but soulless high-tech modern versions of *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* to Barbican International Theatre Events, with some outré twists (Nora shoots her husband point-blank; Hedda takes an axe to the laptop computer on which Lovborg's manuscript is stored). But, in his efforts to make Ibsen relevant to the 21st century audience Ostermeier forgets that Ibsen is someone who can never lose his significance whatever be the age. Mark Stone and Cheryl Wagner in their recently published book, *Henrik Ibsen: Poet, Playwright and Psychologist*, have identified at least five critical issues which

"illustrate Ibsen's influence on more than one hundred years of contemporary thought"(116) :-

- (1) The life-lie
- (2) Mountain vs. valley living (metaphorically speaking)
- (3) The individual vs. the crowd
- (4) Women's rights
- (5) Precursors of psychoanalysis/therapy.

Stephen Unwin has remarkably summed up the relevance of Ibsen in the following words:

Born in 1828... and with his feet firmly planted in the nineteenth century, Ibsen reaches forward into the twentieth—even the twenty-first—century. With his resolute commitment to carefully crafted, artistically satisfying and psychologically revealing classical drama, he is, at the same time, a great modernist playwright who asks the important modern questions: how can men and women live together on equal terms? Can scientific truth triumph over superstition? How do we achieve freedom and happiness in an increasingly fragmented and bewildering world? And, above all, as Nietzsche was also asking, how is it possible to live a good life when God is dead and there is no hierarchy to tell you what to do? (London Magazine)

Conclusion

On the whole, the essential thematic ingredients in Ibsen's corpus not only link him to the main preoccupations of contemporary drama but also make him relevant to the concerns of our time. In short, Ibsen wrote about things that will always have an impact.

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