



FROM LIFE TO LITERATURE: TRACING HENRIK IBSEN'S GROWTH AS A MAN AND AS AN ARTIST

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ABSTRACT

Ibsen was a dramatist with a vision. Owing to the deep and universal insights inherent in his work, it would not be wrong to say that he was a writer who belonged to all ages. This paper explores the intrinsic and intricate relationship between Ibsen- the man, and Ibsen- the Artist. By examining his key biographical milestones, an attempt has been made to study the expression of the turmoil in life getting a dramatic reflection in his works. Interestingly, we note that literature here serves both as a mirror and a mask- revealing the man behind the stage while simultaneously crafting a persona through art. The paper reiterates that Ibsen's creative progression was not merely a linear ascent but also a dynamic interplay between self-discovery and artistic expression.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, European Literature, Modern Drama, Biographical Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Looking back at the history of European dramaturgy, apart from Classical Drama, the most influential drama emerged in the late nineteenth century. This drama freed itself from the clutches of the melodramatic nuances prevalent then, and sought to become a more meaningful and serious art-form, with a worthier purpose. In this 'Modern Drama of Ideas,' created for 'life's sake,' realism became more rigorous and apparent. Playwrights began to discuss various social, philosophical, psychological and political problems of their times on the wider platform of a stage for the audience to take a commendable stand and move towards a laudable change. A few dramatists who belong to this category are Strindberg, Hauptmann, Tolstoy, Shaw, and Galsworthy.

However, the name which irrefutably positions itself as the 'father' of this Modern Drama is that of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), one of the classic dramatists from Norway, often documented as an unbending social iconoclast, especially of his time. Apart from introducing significant innovations in

stagecraft and stage techniques, and initiating the depiction of real-life characters, prosaic dialogue and common social and emotional dilemmas and problems faced by simple men, on stage, there is much more in Henrik Ibsen's work which keeps him alive even today, approximately a century after his last play was written.

An in-depth study of Ibsen's plays reflects how genuinely he tried to understand life, an understanding that he, in turn, embodied in his plays. It is this pursuit of truth in the 'man' Ibsen, along with the inspired approach of the 'artist' Ibsen, which helped his drama to venture into the unexplored areas of the human psyche and social consciousness. Though frequently misunderstood as a revolutionary who fought exclusively for the rights of women and the minority by condemning and demeaning social institutions like marriage and democracy and the hypocrisy attached to each, Ibsen belongs to the caste of humanity. G. Wilson Knight asserts, "he was primarily an individualist craving self-expression, never subject to his political and national impulses. He kept his eye on the supreme if undefined new nobility. He wished to ennoble mankind" (27). Lavrin proclaims, "it would be difficult to find another author whose work is so closely interwoven with his own inner quest, with his personal crisis and aspirations, as is the case with Ibsen" (1). Thus, to understand 'the artist' in Ibsen, it appears mandatory to understand 'the man' in Ibsen. The events of his life provide an interesting guide to the pattern of his plays.

ACROSS THE SPAN OF LIFE

Henrik Johan Ibsen was born to Knud Ibsen and Marichen Ibsen, on 20 March 1828, in a small shipping town, Skien, in southern Norway. Knud was a well-to-do businessman filled with robust pride; and Marichen was a woman with a lively spirit. Ibsen's early childhood, as portrayed in *Peer Gynt*, was spent in grandeur and gaiety. However, when Ibsen was eight years old, Knud Ibsen's business collapsed, never to flourish again. Forsaken by rich relatives and friends, the family was obliged to withdraw from the town and shut itself in shame and anger in their country house. The feeling of social humiliation deeply affected the whole family, including Henrik. It left Knud sardonically bitter; and made Marichen grow chronically gloomy, introspective and pugnacious. Ibsen was deeply hurt at being virtually *déclassé*. "The ground was thus prepared," observes John Gassner, "for the future writer who was to castigate the false respectability and complacency of the middle class" (357).

Markedly, the temperament of Knud Ibsen and Marichen Ibsen gets reflected in a few Ibsen characters. As discussed by Keith May as well, we can trace the disposition of Knud in characters like Jon Gynt from *Peer Gynt*, Daniel Hejre from *The League of Youth* and Old Ekdal from *The Wild Duck*. Knud's comic anguish gave rise to the spirit of classical tragedy in Ibsen. Ibsen's thwarted vitality and contempt for society stayed in his personality throughout his life. The portrait of Marichen Ibsen is sketched in characters like Aurelia from *Catiline*, Aase from *Peer Gynt*, Beata Rosmer from *Rosmersholm*, Thea Elvsted from *Hedda Gabler*, Aline Solness from *The Master Builder*, and Gunhild Borkman from *John Gabriel Borkman*. As such, at times, we find her caricatured as an emotionally overbearing mother and, at other places, she turns out to be a lady of unimpressive goodness who has soured into a bitter personality.

With such primary childhood impressions, Ibsen left Skien to serve as an apprentice to an apothecary in Grimstad (His departure reminds one of the farcical escape of Peer Gynt from his village.). Even here he lived in wretched poverty. A feeling of guilt and retribution overpowered him when he became the father of an illegitimate son at an immature age. This event, too, finds an echo in a few of his plays. However, around this time, at the age of 20, he wrote his first few poems and his first play, *Catiline*, which was published in the year 1850. This work traces the deep impact on Ibsen of the social unrest caused by the revolutions in 1848. The deep thematic discussions in the play remain ineffective due to the amateur dramatic techniques (which were initially adopted by Ibsen) prevalent in the native drama of Norway at the time.

In 1850, after staying for six years in Grimstad, Ibsen moved to Christiania, where he took up an academic course. While in Christiania, he wrote his second play, *The Warrior's Barrow*, in the popular national-romantic style. It was also staged, and was received well by audiences. A free entrance to the stage production of his own work granted him a closer view of the theatrical world. During the initial period of his stay at Christiania, he even worked as a drama critic and a journalist. At the same time, he was involved with the Socialist Workers' Movement for a little while. In 1851, he left Christiania and joined the National Theatre in Bergen, where he took up the tasks of a stage manager and producer, along with writing. Here, he was responsible for the physical staging of new productions and for the characters' moves on stage. In 1852, while working in Bergen, his employers generously sent him on a study trip to visit theatres in Denmark and Germany. This tour "played an important part in broadening his vision and giving him a sense of stage effect which his earlier plays and critical articles entirely ignored" (Tennant 39). The experience gave him a solid theatrical grounding and inspired him to write more plays. It was here that he wrote nationalistic plays such as *St. John's Eve* (1853), *Lady Inger of Ostraat* (1855), *The Feast at Solhaug* (1856) and *Olaf Liljekrans* (1857).

Later, in 1857, he left Bergen and returned to Christiania to become the artistic director of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre. In Christiania, though his career prospects improved sufficiently in the beginning, his plans were soon thwarted by a combination of public indifference and financial problems. Ibsen suffered a great disappointment when the theatre was forced to shut down in 1862. Besides, the government rejected his application for a travelling stipend. This period proved to be a time of great stress and strain for him. The only support during these lean years of misery and frustration was his wife, Susanna Thoresen. His first realistic play, *Love's Comedy* (1862), written during these very gloomy years of his life, brought him only disrepute. "I was excommunicated," he recalled in 1870, "everyone was against me" (qtd. in Koht 199). His career touched its nadir, and this rejection gave rise to the famous self-imposed exile. In April 1864, Ibsen left Norway. These early struggles in life left an indelible impression on him and his art. Indeed, "Life had to wound his soul till it bled before his writing could proceed from bitter need, from an inner strife which demanded dramatic expression" (Koht 81).

During the twenty-six years of exile, Ibsen stayed in Italy for the first five years. The rest of the period he spent mostly in Germany. His artistic-self seemed to bloom on foreign soil. The distance from his homeland established him into a man with a comprehensive world-view. The tension between the Norwegian and the European in Ibsen provided him with a broad perspective of life. The soil of the times, though rough, was fertile enough for him to sow the seeds of reformative ideas. His financial

situation improved with the publication of *Brand* (1866), and established him as one of the leading playwrights of his times. From then on, he began to publish his most celebrated plays, one after the other, till 1899. In 1900, Ibsen suffered a paralytic attack and never rose to pick up his pen again. He died on 23 May, 1906.

CONCLUSION

At each step of Ibsen's life, roughness was accompanied with comfort. His professional and personal life brought with it phases of bitterness, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, anxiety, hatred, hopefulness, pride, humility, revolt as well as love. A life such as this, one that was consciously composed of varied emotions, brought about a culmination in the awakening of his higher self as well as that of his characters. In the depiction of the process of evolution of his numerous characters can be seen the growth of Ibsen's own multiple selves.

Lyngstrand, in *The Lady from the Sea*, echoes Ibsen's approach when he rightly suggests to Arnholm the ideal inspiration for an artist:

ELLIDA. And what are you going to model? Is it to be mermen and mermaids? Or is it to be old Vikings?

LYNGSTRAND. No, not that. As soon as I can set about it, I am going to try if I can produce a great work — a group, as they call it.

ELLIDA. Yes; but what's the group to be?

LYNGSTRAND. Oh! something I've experienced myself.

ARNHOLM. Yes, yes; always stick to that. (15)

In the fifty years of his creative life, which covers the second half of the nineteenth century, Ibsen wrote twenty-five plays. Each succeeding play which Ibsen brought to the world introduces to the readers not only a changed man, but also an enthusiastic artist sincerely trying to discover new stage forms and techniques. Nevertheless, in each play we find streaks from past impressions, revealing to us a sense of continuity, and highlighting a similarity typically Ibsenian in nature.

Ibsen's long creative journey, which began with the publication of *Catiline* in the year 1850 and concluded with *When We Dead Awaken* in the year 1899, for the sake of convenience, can be divided into five stages of dramatic development. The first stage comprises the nine plays from *Catiline* to *The Pretenders* (1863) which he wrote before departing from Norway. These plays are based on Norwegian folklore, legends and sagas, apart from themes taken from national and Roman history. This phase was dedicated to the revival of the nationalistic spirit, with a desire to build a national theatre. However, the only play that is treated differently is *Love's Comedy*, a play which presages Ibsen's realistic plays. In it, Ibsen adopted a radical attitude to deal with contemporary problems like marriage and love. All these plays were poetic dramas written using the traditional form. Apparently, at this stage, Ibsen's intense personal and nationalistic emotions seemed to wrestle within him as they were left caged and unharnessed in the limited melodramatic form of his times. H. Koht observes, "It is too clearly evident that Ibsen is following the fashion and demand of his times, not a

demand within himself” (65).

The second stage comprises two extraordinary tales of imagination and fancy. They establish Ibsen as one of the finest romantic and dramatic poets with an intellectual bent. In spite of being extravagantly fancy-filled, the two plays, *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867), bring forth the deep hidden libertine, on the one hand, and a fanatic, on the other hand, in every ‘respectable’ citizen of the world. Though these plays were not meant to be staged, they are loaded with themes and symbols which “form a kind of bank for Ibsen to draw on in all his later plays” (Bentley, *The Playwright* 119). These poetic dramas stand apart as a class in themselves in the dramatic career of Ibsen. Through these plays, Ibsen also gained the long-awaited financial stability and public acknowledgement that he had aspired for.

The third stage launched Ibsen as an artist with an international reputation. This category includes the famous problem plays, starting with *The League of Youth* (1869), *Emperor and Galilean* (1873), *The Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll’s House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and, finally, *An Enemy of the People* (1882). In these plays, as G.B. Shaw puts it, “the problems of conduct and character of personal importance to the audience are raised and suggestively discussed” (137). In them, Ibsen plays the role of a rigorous reformist and brings to the forefront the moral corruptions of a society shadowed by the ghosts of conventions and poisonous ideologies. These realistic and naturalistic plays conferred on Ibsen the well-earned title of ‘The Father of Modern Drama.’

In the plays written during the fourth stage, Ibsen abandoned public issues, and entered the subtle realm of the human psyche. Plays such as *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) are stupendous efforts at studying the human mind. Apart from their psychological motivation, the plays are rich in the effective use of symbols and myths. As George Steiner puts it, “with the toy forest and imaginary hunt of Old Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*, drama returns to a use of effective myth and symbolic action which had disappeared from the theatre since the late plays of Shakespeare” (292).

In the last four plays, which constitute the final phase of his dramatic career, Ibsen taps at the inner world of man. These plays are, as J. Lavrin observes, “partly tragic monographs of individual conscience, and partly transposed confessions of the author himself” (12). In them, “His concern is rather with the inner experience of the individual, with his often unaided exploration of that experience, with the reassessment and revaluation of his past at some ultimate turning-point of his soul’s pilgrimage” (Ellis-Fermor 7). “Here,” Shaw declares, “the quintessence of Ibsenism reaches its final distillation; morality and reformation give place to mortality and resurrection” (91). The plays in this category include *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and, finally, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). According to a few critics like C. M. Bradbrook and John Gassner, these last plays show some deterioration in Ibsen’s craftsmanship; nevertheless, they mark the ultimate stage of self-enquiry and self-discovery in Ibsen’s life. Thus, these plays may not be strikingly theatrical, yet they are deep and significant.

Each phase of Ibsen’s writing carries not only a significance of its own but also an amalgamation of impressions learnt and un-learnt in other stages. In conclusion, while examining Henrik Ibsen’s dramatic through the lens of biographical criticism, it becomes evident that his personal

experiences and ideological struggles are deeply embedded within the architecture of his plays. Thus, the convergence of life and literature in Ibsen's creations affirms that the playwright was not only creating characters and conflicts, but also composing a nuanced portrait of the man behind the pen.

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