

IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR IN IBSEN

"A REVOLUTION IN THE HUMAN SPIRIT"  
AN ANALYSIS OF IMPULSE AND IMPULSIVE  
BEHAVIOUR IN IBSEN'S DRAMA

By

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This thesis will examine the role impulse and impulsive behaviour play in the major works of Henrik Ibsen. The twelve plays examined have been broken down into four chapters, differentiated by the type of impulse being examined. Peer Gynt, A Doll's House, and An Enemy of the People have been treated together as the studies of the immature, unconsciously impulsive character who finds himself restricted by societal impositions. Chapter II examines Ghosts, John Gabriel Borkman, and The Lady from the Sea as plays in which a character's instinctual nature has been wilfully repressed, resulting in human tragedy in Ghosts and John Gabriel Borkman, and social harmony in the third play. The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, and Little Eyolf analyze the consequences of engaging in overtly impulsive behaviour. Through the efforts of a persuasive character who attempts to initiate an unimpulsive character into a new more instinctive type of behaviour, lives are destroyed in the first two plays and redeemed in the third. The final three plays to be considered, Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder, and When We Dead Awaken, concern themselves with the impulsively creative character and the paradoxical nature of the artistic act. In a final chapter, this emphasis on impulse will be related to Ibsen's primary ideas about human freedom and liberty.

## A Note on Chronology

Because the plays to be discussed are not examined in chronological order, and to avoid confusion, it may be necessary to state that the plays were written in the following order and years:

<u>Peer Gynt</u>	1867
<u>A Doll's House</u>	1879
<u>Ghosts</u>	1881
<u>An Enemy of the People</u>	1882
<u>The Wild Duck</u>	1884
<u>Rosmersholm</u>	1886
<u>The Lady from the Sea</u>	1888
<u>Hedda Gabler</u>	1890
<u>The Master Builder</u>	1892
<u>Little Eyolf</u>	1894
<u>John Gabriel Borkman</u>	1896
<u>When We Dead Awaken</u>	1899

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## I

In Peer Gynt, A Doll's House, and An Enemy of the People, Ibsen examines the unsophisticated impulsive character who has not been able to focus this energy into artistically or socially creative channels and consequently finds himself or herself effectively stifled by the restrictive conventionality and monotony of society and eventually even alienated from it. Peer Gynt is the first, and in many ways the most completely analyzed, of these specialized personalities. As the embodiment of instinct, of an ethic of purely impulsive action as opposed to a rational philosophy, Peer Gynt is the prototype for Nora Helmer, Dr. Stockmann, Gregers Werle, Rebecca West, Ejlert Løvborg, master builder Solness, and Maja Rubek.

Peer's life is founded on instinctual psychological drives rather than rational intellectual controls. He consistently follows his impulses and irrational nature. In act four, Peer passionately explains himself to a drunken party of travellers: "The Gyntian 'Self'—it's the regiment of wishes, appetites and desires;—The Gyntian 'Self' is the sea of ambitions, needs and demands; in fact, whatever causes my breast to heave uniquely, and makes me exist as the 'I'



that I am."(IV, 334)<sup>1</sup> Thus he states that his character is comprised of conflicting irrational forces within him. Characteristically, the travellers do not understand his words.

The first act of Peer Gynt reveals Peer's abnormal nature and the alienation from society that this personality creates. The hostility exhibited toward Peer by Aslak the smith symbolizes a coarse society's antagonism to the highly unbalanced individual. Peer is that rare individual who seems able to do all he wants to because he believes himself able to make his fantasy become fact. Consistently, he fools his own mother who knows him well with elaborate lies. His two major actions in this act reveal the impulsive, irrational nature of his character. By throwing his mother on the roof and abducting Ingrid, Peer breaks two major social conventions, the honouring of motherhood and bridal virginity. Yet he characteristically disregards the consequences while acting without reasoning. The curse of Ingrid's father at the end of the first act further represents society's attitude to the totally impulsive character.

Peer's separation from society is realized in the second act, where he is chased from his village to the troll-

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<sup>1</sup>All act and page references to Peer Gynt will be from the Fry translation in The Oxford Ibsen, III. References to A Doll's House will be from the McFarlane translation in The Oxford Ibsen, V, and the references to the third play will be from The Oxford Ibsen, VI, also by McFarlane.

-kingdom. After Ingrid has re-emphasized to Peer that her father will hang him, he runs frantically from the village mob. Even at this moment of high peril, he is exhilarated by the danger and reaffirms his instinctual life-ethic: "You feel you can crush and overthrow, stem the torrent, and root up fir-trees! It's life! It makes you iron and air. To hell with all those crappy lies!"(II, 288)

That this radical behaviour resembles, in fact partially becomes, madness is suggested by Peer's lively dance with the three mad herdgirls and in the madhouse scene in Act Four. It is the insane who are the only truly impulsive people, for in their actions there is no conception of responsibility or guilt, and in this sense Peer's attitude always verges on insanity. In Hussein, the madman who cuts his throat in the penultimate act, Peer is able to see the extreme manifestation of pure impulse.

That Peer Gynt, the impulsive man, should find himself in the palace hall of the Dovre-master, is fitting, for what the trolls represent is pure instinctual behaviour unmodified by morality and thereby perverted into destructive actions. The troll childrens' desire to cut off Peer's fingers and pull out his hair shows that sadistic nature in its grossest form. The philosophy of the trolls ("To thine own self be--all sufficient!"(II, 295) states this self-centered instinctive creed perfectly. Ironically, the trolls

seek to limit Peer's impulsive character by physically making him into one of them, thereby depriving him of the power of the choice of action, but Peer instinctively rebels against such a firm restriction and leaves the palace: "To be stuck as a troll for the rest of your days, this thing of having no line of retreat, as the text-book says, which you so insist on, that's a condition I'll never give in to."(II, 300)

Running from the trolls, Peer finds himself facing The Boyg. This encounter symbolizes the impulsive man's direct confrontation with that prevalent life-force that threatens to absorb his vitality and subsume it into a larger amorphous whole. What characterizes The Boyg is its shapelessness, its refusal to take on any defining shape. In this sense, of course, it resembles Peer himself, who declines to make a commitment that would define him in any way. Even more, however, does The Boyg suggest to Peer the force that he is constantly battling. Submission to The Boyg's command to "go round and about"(II, 302) would force Peer to take a logical pre-determined course of action designed to avoid The Boyg, and such submission would be a betrayal of Peer's impulsive life-ethic. Instead, true to his nature, Peer counters by lashing out at The Boyg that surrounds him, despite his realization of the probable futility of such rash action. The Boyg's assertion that "The great Boyg conquers

everything without an effort"(II, 304) suggests that it represents this deadening, stultifying natural force of life which can only be defeated through an altruistic, creative impulse, such as love, rather than an aggressive reaction. This sentiment is re-echoed in the conclusion.

Ibsen's attitude to Peer is highly ambivalent, at once praising his vitality and condemning his irresponsibility. The ambivalence is basically the result of Peer's lack of consistency as a character. Peer's character is comically suggested in the second act when Peer, shouting his claim to be born to greatness, collides with a rock and is knocked unconscious.(II, 292) Several more implied criticisms of Peer's conduct predominate in the final three acts. Peer marvels at the courage of the boy who cuts off his finger to escape military duty(III, 308), seeing in the irreversibility of the act a truer commitment than he has ever made. The madhouse scene is a criticism of Peer's conduct, the madmen being like exaggerated versions of Peer himself. Peer's sexual behaviour in the final two acts, where he becomes a verbose, tired old man who callously and cynically treats women where before he had joyously seduced them, proves his dictum that "you finish your chances as a prophet the moment you start behaving sensibly."(IV, 358) In the last half of the play, Peer has returned to the society which he initially shunned and used its greed to make a fortune as

a smuggler and slave-trader. By the end of the final act, a disillusioned, lifeless Peer Gynt realizes that he has not really channelled his potentially creative-impulsive nature into socially or artistically creative actions and committed himself to any meaningful life-work.

Thus, Peer Gynt is Ibsen's first critical representation of the figure who attempts to live his life solely by the dictates of his impulsive nature. Ibsen suggests that such an ideal is impossible to realize, for pure impulse is either trolldom, nihilistic impulse, or insanity, —impulse without reference to a code of morality. Peer himself comes to the realization that his life is inconsequential without the supporting force of love that Solveig and Aase represent. Love is the primary creative impulse of Ibsen's world, and Solveig, the girl who patiently waits for Peer without rational hope or reason, is Ibsen's first personification of this irrational loyalty.

Like Peer Gynt, Nora Helmer of A Doll's House is an example of the protean, immature force of impulse. Yet where Peer is able to transcend a dull, static social world, Nora is unable to realize herself in the marriage described in the play. Both plays are studies of impulsive personalities reacting to social pressures which force them to conform to a fixed pattern of behaviour which discourages abnormal actions.

Nora Helmer, like Peer Gynt, lives in a world of illusion, but where Peer's imaginative world was largely his own creation, Nora's false existence has been imposed upon her by her father and husband. Like Peer, she relishes living in this make-believe world, but that is because she has been conditioned to such an artificial style of living. The play demonstrates how this immature woman partially perceives the inadequacy of her life and makes a gesture of escape, which is not a dramatic change of attitude but a characteristic act reflecting her essentially impulsive nature.

The doll that plays in the doll's house is an impetuous, childish young woman whose imaginative sense far outweighs her rational faculty. Nora's actions are always brisk, restless gestures. She is repeatedly clapping her hands, tossing her head, jumping up and pacing around the room. It is not for nothing that her husband calls her a sky-lark and a squirrel, for these are quick, lithe creatures always in motion.

Like Peer Gynt, Nora is always creating imaginary situations, but her dreams are all centered upon the improvement of her financial situation. To ease her financial difficulty, she creates a rich elderly gentleman who generously wills her his money. In fact, "Nora has so little sense of fact and so much imagination that she can make herself

believe practically anything she wants to."<sup>2</sup> When she borrowed the money for the trip her husband needed to save his life, she forged her dead father's signature, oblivious to any legal consequences of such an act. She brings a similar impulsive temperament to everything she does, from dressing her children to tempting old family friends by showing off her flesh-coloured stockings. Clearly, she is, as Maurice Valency suggests<sup>3</sup>, an impulsive personality, but even more does she represent the immature force of impulse that is not yet capable of creative social action. Mrs. Linde is able to see immediately Nora's essential childishness, which is further proven by her boastful revelation of her secret financial agreement with Krogstad to a "friend" whom she has not seen in years and knows little about. Her secretive consumption of macaroons is another manifestation of her childishly impulsive nature. At the conclusion of the play, Nora's decision to leave Torvald is only partially the result of a traumatic realization of the false existence she has been living; it is far more another example of the impulsive behaviour that characterizes her life. Her final door-slam is as impulsive as her decision to commit forgery. Her sudden professed self-awareness at the end, as she endeavours to

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<sup>2</sup>Hermann J. Weigand, The Modern Ibsen (New York, 1960), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>The Flower and the Castle (New York, 1966), p. 154.

rationalize her decision, is a cleverly devised mask to hide the irrational nature of the act she unknowingly commits, and the consequences of which she is largely unaware. In his "Notes for a Modern Tragedy", the playwright described Nora's final state of mind: "The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong."<sup>4</sup> Nora's door-slam is in reality an a-moral act, purely on the instinctual level.

Yet if the play is a depiction, rather than a resolution, of an impulsive temperament, the conclusion seems unnaturally polemical. Ibsen considers it necessary to justify Nora's final action in her words of self-analysis: ("I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are—or at least I'm going to try to be. I know most people agree with you, Torvald, and that's also what it says in books. But I'm not content any more with what most people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear." (III, 282) These words seem more proper to Mrs. Alving than to the totally unscholarly Nora. This lengthy speech seems to suggest a discrepancy between the playwright's intention and his achievement in this play. Ibsen seems to have intended Nora to be a very limited, quite impulsive young woman whose natural vitality is stifled by the restrictive moral conventions of her father

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<sup>4</sup>The Oxford Ibsen, V., p. 436.



and husband. Yet he also wanted to make her final decision a truly significant one, an act of liberation from those restrictive conventions by a character whose understanding of the meaning of such an act would make the act meaningful.<sup>5</sup> The result is a conclusion that seems ambivalent in its attitude toward the heroine. The audience does not seem certain whether it is Nora the doll or Nora the new woman who slams the door. It is possible to argue both that "the play demonstrates only that Nora has not found herself, and failing, has blamed society for her own failure"<sup>6</sup>, that Nora is "an infantile child-wife who has failed to grow up"<sup>7</sup>, and that Nora's final act is an inevitable result of "the sufferings of women in a masculine world."<sup>8</sup> The problem of the conclusion has been most succinctly expressed by Robert Brustein and Irving Deer. The former insists that "Nora's abrupt conversion from a protected, almost infantile dependent into an

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<sup>5</sup>That Nora's final arguments are to be taken seriously is proven by their resemblance to many of Ibsen's own major sentiments, particularly his emphasis on complete individual freedom as the only real criterion for human action.

<sup>6</sup>Marvin Rosenberg, "Ibsen versus Ibsen or: Two Versions of A Doll's House", Modern Drama XII. (1969-1970), p. 194.

<sup>7</sup>F.L. Lucas, The Drama of Ibsen and Strindberg (London, 1962), p. 135.

<sup>8</sup>M.C. Bradbrook, Ibsen, the Norwegian: A Reevaluation. (London, 1946), p. 81.

an articulate and determined spokesman for individual freedom may serve the drama of ideas but it is totally unconvincing in the drama of action"<sup>9</sup>, and Deer suggests that "while the ending is supposed to show Nora achieving the freedom from her husband which will theoretically allow her to fulfill herself, it actually shows her rejecting her traditional self, thus making any reconciliation impossible for her."<sup>10</sup>

This difficulty may be resolved by examining the discrepancy between the public and private life and how it contributes to the impulsive temperament of Nora and the compulsive nature of Torvald, her husband. Torvald is forever retiring to his study, and he always lets it be known that he is not to be disturbed. He thereby seeks to maintain a private self divorced from his public face. He is essentially self-centered, his concern for privacy reflecting his desire to withdraw from the mundane affairs of the world.

While Torvald divorces his public and private selves, his wife presents only one face to the world. The gregarious, sociable Nora contrasts with her self-centered, self-sufficient husband. Nora has no study or room of her own, and consequently she is always on public view. She is

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (Boston, 1964), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>"Ibsen's Aim and Achievement in Ghosts", Speech Monographs XXIV (March, 1957), p. 268.

always putting on a performance to gain approval and adulation rather than reacting honestly to the situation facing her. The tarantella-scene is a focal point of the play, summarizing Nora's situation succinctly. Initially, her play-acting is designed to extricate money from Torvald, but it becomes far more serious as she tempestuously dances the tarantella to prevent her husband from reading Krogstad's note. Nora is continually looking for more opportunities to put on a performance. When Mrs. Linde asks for her help in acquiring a job, her immediate reaction is to imagine the fun of putting on another show for Torvald (I, 212), without considering seriously the importance the job has for her friend. Nora realizes that her greatest advantage is her beauty, and she uses this by enticing Dr. Rank with the sight of her skin-coloured stockings and later by tantalizing Torvald with the seductive dance. It is highly important that the two final significant actions, the changing of the costume and the slamming of the door<sup>11</sup> are obvious theatrical gestures, for they are the final evidence that in A Doll's House Ibsen is using the fact that Nora's nature has a

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<sup>11</sup>It is ironic and pleasingly fitting for Torvald, who has continually locked himself behind a study door from his wife, to finally have a door slammed in his face. A further irony is suggested by the fact that where Torvald consolidates his privacy by locking his door, Nora too finally ensures her privacy by entering the outside world and locking her husband in the house.

creative, artistic aspect as well as an unfocussed instinctual one as an element in his characterization of his heroine. Nora Helmer can be related to that final Ibsen actress, Irene of When We Dead Awaken. In both there is that predominantly public aspect, exemplified by Irene's nude dancing at carnivals and Nora's tarantella. In both women, this public exhibition reflects the frustration of their impulsive natures, which are unable to find satisfaction respectively in Rubek's lifeless dedication to his art and Torvald's mindless adherence to social convention. Edvard Beyer, who feels that Nora "comes nearer than any other figure in Ibsen's total oeuvre to Irene as Rubek saw her"<sup>12</sup>, is perhaps the only critic who has glimpsed this relationship.

A Doll's House presents a dual aspect of the central character. Nora Helmer is at once the immature, non-regenerative force of impulse stifled by a conventional morality and a highly imaginative, impetuous woman in whom can be glimpsed creative possibilities. (Nora was, after all, based upon a writer, Laura Kieler, although a bad one in Ibsen's opinion.) The play functions simultaneously on these two levels, the social portrayal of the doll Nora and the artistic portrayal of the woman Nora. Both levels are united by one common factor, the essentially impulsive nature of the

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<sup>12</sup>"When We Dead Awaken: Some notes on Structure, Imagery, and the meaning of 'Epilogue'", Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen, Haakonsen, ed. (Oslo, 1971), p. 38.

heroine. On the social level, we may question the permanence and validity of Nora's final act, but we must also applaud this dancing doll as she leaves her husband's doll-house.

While both A Doll's House and An Enemy of the People are studies of the immature impulsive individual struggling against a restrictive social environment, the two plays are yet considerably different. Where A Doll's House was a basically serious treatment of the relevance of impulsive behaviour, despite Weigand's over-ingenious argument that seeks to make everything in the play, including Dr. Rank's terminal illness, comic<sup>13</sup>, An Enemy of the People is often a highly comic play. While the basic issue of the work, the water pollution that mirrors the moral sickness of a town, is important, the comically impulsive nature of the protagonist blunts the impact for the audience of his idealistic mission to rid the town of corruption. A Doll's House studied the unfocussed instinctive personality but, along with Ghosts, it did not relate this individual to the external world. All the action in these two plays takes place in two different rooms, while the scene of An Enemy of the People shifts from the doctor's living room to a newspaper editorial office to a public meeting-hall in Captain Horster's house. This indicates that the play is a comic exami-

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<sup>13</sup>ibid. pp. 26-75.

nation of an impulsive character in the process of becoming socially creative. Stockmann's comic nature reveals this social element that Ibsen concentrates upon in this play; since it is the nature of comedy to be more concerned with a social vision than tragedy normally exhibits. From Henri Bergson ("Laughter") to Suzanne Langer ("The Comic Rhythm") to Northrop Frye (Anatomy of Criticism), critics have pointed out the social aspect of comedy, and it is in An Enemy of the People that Ibsen most firmly reveals his disdain for a ludicrous society by showing its moral inferiority to even a ridiculously naïve character.

Dr. Stockmann comes on stage laughing, his loud voice and laughter preceding his actual entry. (I, 27) He effusively describes his joy: "I feel so full of the joy of everything, you see. I can't tell you how happy I feel, surrounded by all this growing, vigorous life. What a glorious age this is to live in!" (I, 28) But the audience, which just one year before has heard such sentiments from another Ibsen character<sup>14</sup> is wary of such unqualified joy in living, and indeed this rapture is shown to be based upon Stockmann's complete misapprehension of his fellow townspeople. Stock-

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<sup>14</sup>Osvold Alving had described how "it's tremendous fun just to be alive at all. Mother, have you noticed how everything I've ever painted has turned on this joy of life? Always and without exception, this joy of life." Ghosts in The Oxford Ibsen, V, translated by McFarlane, II, 403.

mann's happiness results from his discovery that the public baths are polluted. Naïvely he expects public approval for his find, and thus he resembles Nora Helmer in his need for public adulation. Like Nora, he is guided solely by an instinctive moral sense. He reacts immediately and emotionally to every issue. His temperament is child-like in many ways. His reaction to criticism is outrage and invective: "I'll batter them to the ground, I'll smash them, I'll blast their defences wide open for all right-thinking men to see!" (III, 67) Playfully he mocks his brother's pompous nature by saluting him while wearing his hat and carrying his stick. (III, 82) Like a child, he usually expresses his emotional state directly through action, happiness by whirling his wife through the air at the conclusion of the first act (I, 41), and anger by routing his opponents with an umbrella in the final act. (V, 121)

In his society Dr. Stockmann is an anachronism, his child-like impulsiveness contrasting with the <sup>not open or common sense</sup> reticent <sup>to be a part of the type</sup> natures of the townspeople, epitomized by his brother and described by Hovstad: "Most of them are like that round here, teetering along, wobbling one way then the other; they are so damned cautious and scrupulous that they never dare commit themselves to any proper step forward." (II, 51) In contrast, Dr. Stockmann presents to the world, or at least

to his brother, "a restless, pugnacious, aggressive temperament." (II, 57) What Stockmann cannot realize is that a simple reaction to a complex situation is insufficient, that to exist in a society, one must allow for that society's inevitable deceits and corruptions. Stockmann's simple moralistic outlook, like Lemuel Gulliver's, whose final separation from society suggests the doctor's situation, is in effect monomania, as Weigand suggests.<sup>15</sup> Stockmann, like Gulliver, typifies the simple man totally disillusioned by the inherent moral weakness of mankind, proclaiming his own superiority to an incredulous society. His defeat has been the natural consequence of his personality. He had gone into the public meeting with nothing but an instinctive belief in the efficacy of his own perceptions, confident of convincing the populace through reasonable oratory alone. His opponents, on the other hand, counter this irrational faith with a carefully pre-conceived plan to force an election of a chairman. The rational collective actions of a group thus defeat the instinctive reactions of the impulsive outcast.

In An Enemy of the People Ibsen has widened the Helmer living room into a whole town, but the basic theme remains the same. Both A Doll's House and An Enemy of the People study the highly impulsive personality in a conserva-

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 130



tive society and the consequences that result from the confrontation between the two. In both plays a childishly impulsive, highly vital character has for some years sublimated this natural energy into socially acceptable forms. Nora Helmer has been satisfied with being Torvald's doll, and Dr. Stockmann, although clashing with the townspeople on several points, has remained an eccentrically extroverted character whose actions have not radically disturbed the town. Then both characters are faced with a challenge that calls their security into question, and both react to that challenge in similar ways, without considering the social consequences of their actions. By these actions they set themselves against the conventional wisdom, and ostracize themselves from the representative members of their society. Dr. Stockmann's rout of his opponents with his umbrella has the same tragic significance as Nora Helmer walking out on her husband; both actions represent a complete break with the life each has enjoyed and a more basic severance from the powerful factions of established society. Characteristically, neither has any viable alternative plans. Nora says she simply seeks truth through experience, and Dr. Stockmann's elitist educational scheme (V, 125) is ridiculously utopian.

It is their impulsive natures that have created this isolation of both characters. Ibsen suggests that society tends to react to the overtly impulsive character by

expelling it from its midst. While the effect of the expulsion in the later play is softened by the comic nature of Dr. Stockmann, it is nonetheless a rejection from society that the doctor does experience.

In these two early plays, Ibsen tends to present the impulsive character rather consistently. There is little character "development" in either of these plays. Although it is arguable that Nora is a different woman at the end of the play, this "conversion" is really a reflection of her impulsive nature. This "static" quality of these figures suggests that they are Ibsen's studies of a life-force, of an instinctive energy that can only be dramatically manifested in a relatively simple character. Nora Helmer and Dr. Stockmann both reveal an honest simplicity and naïveté in their reactions to social life. Yet it is this innocence which dooms them in the corrupt and lifeless society which they face.

## II

Ghosts, John Gabriel Borkman, and The Lady from the Sea reveal a further dimension to the study of the impulsive character. Whereas in the three earlier plays Ibsen's interest had been in the effects of an impulsive personality on a lifeless society, in these works he analyzes the consequences of a potentially creative character sublimating his or her impulsive nature. This shift in focus is perhaps best illustrated by a comparison between Nora Helmer and Mrs. Alving of Ghosts.

Where Nora's tragedy is the result of her own actions and instinctive nature, Mrs. Alving's difficulty is caused by her failure to act, to allow her impulsive self to lead her to freedom. The futility of Nora's experiences is the result of the demands social convention places on her abnormal character, while Mrs. Alving's despair is largely her own doing. Although both women are highly conscious of social pressures, Nora's reaction is a simple emotional one purely on the instinctual level (Where can I get the money I need? What will Torvald and the others think of me?), while Mrs. Alving's tendency is to intellectualize and unnecessarily complicate her life. Both women have characteristic reactions to life's problems: Nora eats macaroons and Mrs.

Alving reads books. The conflict in the soul of Mrs. Alving is far more complex than in Nora Helmer's, but that complexity is greatly of her own making. Unlike Nora, whose understanding of the consequences of her acts is minimal, Mrs. Alving aspires to comprehend the total meaning and consequence of every act without realizing that such complete awareness is beyond human possibility. Mrs. Alving may test everything "in the light of her extremely strict if unsophisticated moral sensibility"<sup>1</sup>, but she always ends by following the bad advice of others. Nora continually listened to the advice of friends but always acted because of her own motives. When Mrs. Alving follows Pastor Manders' counsel and returns to her husband, a tragically incompatible relationship is perpetuated.

Ghosts analyzes the consequences of Mrs. Alving's unwilling return to her husband, but the play also poses the problem of determinism. To what extent are Mrs. Alving's actions responsible for what happens to her? A strong cyclical sense is evident throughout Ghosts, most strongly focussed in the character of Oswald. Oswald's physical appearance, his affinity for pipes and alcohol, and his flirtation with maids, all relate him to his father. Oswald

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Fergusson, "Ghosts: The Tragic Rhythm in a small Figure", Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Fjelde, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), p. 111.

in fact seems almost a re-statement in melodramatic terms of the diseased state of his father's existence. Both were once vigorous men. Chamberlain Alving in his youth was, as Manders points out (I, 367)<sup>2</sup>, an extremely gay young man. Oswald likewise is a carefree youth whose vitality is expressed in his early painting and his pass at Regine. But this exuberance cannot be maintained and the result is a paralysis of the will, literally physical in the son and virtual in the father. Where Mr. Alving died crumpled up on a sofa, his natural vitality drained by his loveless marriage, Oswald also ends up destroyed and lifeless. Mrs. Alving perceives that her husband "could never find any outlet for this tremendous exuberance of his"(III, 413) and Oswald describes his state as "a living death."(II, 395) The father and son are reflections of the mother, for Mrs. Alving too has been effectively paralyzed after her return to her husband. "She cannot act: therefore she cannot reveal her feelings and thoughts through action."<sup>3</sup> Oswald's final paralysis also brings out his mother's state of moral paralysis. Her refusal to make a commitment with the morphine

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<sup>2</sup>All references to Ghosts will be to the McFarlane translation in The Oxford Ibsen, V, to The Lady from the Sea to the McFarlane translation in The Oxford Ibsen, VII. References to the third play will be to John Gabriel Borkman, translated by Michael Meyer (London, 1960).

<sup>3</sup>Deer, p. 267.

tablets shows her life-long refusal to act expediently. Where A Doll's House closed with a definite, unambiguous action, Ghosts characteristically concludes on a note of stasis, with two immobile characters facing each other, neither able to act.

This difference suggests that the earlier play seemed to deal with the impulsive act in itself, while Ghosts implies that there can really be no truly impulsive action, for every act is eventually repeated and becomes part of a cyclical process, the inexorable logic of which precludes any creative original action. Mrs. Alving "locks" herself into this cyclical process by returning to her husband in spite of her repulsion. When she tries to control fate by building the orphanage and thus assuaging her husband's error, this endeavour fails, and the light of the burning orphanage that concludes the second act seems to reflect, by its placement and dramatic intensity, the sunlight that shines at the end of the play. Mrs. Alving drinking with her son and standing over his gibbering body brings to mind her description of her vigil beside her drunken husband: "I had to join him in secret drinking orgies up in his room. I had to sit there with him, just the two of us drinking, and listen to his obscene, stupid remarks, and then struggling with him to get him dragged into his bed."

(I, 376) To reinforce the point, Mrs. Alving almost immediately after tells how Alving often "lapsed into moaning and self-pity." (I, 376)

This cosmic inevitability, as one might call the cyclical repetition of fate, militates against any significant alteration in characters. Consequently, it is difficult to agree with John Northam's view that "at the final curtain, Mrs. Alving has at last been freed from the gloom of ignorance induced by convention."<sup>4</sup> At the end of Ghosts, Mrs. Alving is a woman who has undergone much suffering, but remains essentially the same woman as at the beginning, a woman who has sublimated her instinctual self to appease social convention.

That Osvold reverts to a childish state at the end points out another of the major themes of the play, the perversion and wilful destruction of childhood. The abnormality of the child-parent relationship is immediately brought out in the play. In the opening scene, Engstrand calls Regine "my child" seven times. The audience cannot but wonder about the nature of a relationship which has to be emphasized so much and which is marked by Regine's open hostility to her "father". All the children of Ghosts experience no deep parental love, nor do they have an outlet for their impul-

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<sup>4</sup>Ibsen's Dramatic Method (London, 1953), p. 73.

sive natures. One is reminded of Rosmersholm, where children neither laugh nor cry. Similarly, the children of Ghosts have no opportunity to realize their instinctual natures, Oswald being sent away to schools by his mother in order to escape Alving, and the orphans being institutionalized in the orphanage, which significantly is transmuted into a sailor's brothel run by Engstrand and Regine, another rootless child. It seems that children in Ibsen's drama are never allowed to be children, innocent natural forces, but are compelled by adults to play mature roles and assume adult responsibilities. Hedvig of The Wild Duck and little Eyolf are perhaps the two most obvious examples.

If the unnatural children represent one false aspect of this world, the rain and the ghosts themselves are Ibsen's two major symbols that suggest the unalterable, deadened nature of the cosmos. The rain that falls, and seemingly always falls, according to Oswald's inability to remember a dry day(II, 398), mirrors the changeless, static quality of life inside the Alving mansion. When the sun does finally shine, it does so almost cynically, to spite Mrs. Alving and to reassert the natural cyclical rhythms that control human life. Just as the sun will always break through the gloom, so "a Pastor Manders will always provoke



some Mrs. Alving into rebelling."<sup>5</sup> The climate itself plays a very definite role in the human drama. As Maurice Valency points out, the weather effectively stifles human creativity: "Oswald longs for the sun; but his mother, like his homeland, has no sunshine for him, no more than she had for his father. She can give him only darkness and death, and this, Ibsen implies, is chiefly the portion of those doomed to live in the cold mists from which he himself had barely escaped, and not unscathed."<sup>6</sup>

As well as the climate, the innate conservatism of mankind prevents natural human vitality from asserting itself. This is what Mrs. Alving implies in the famous ghost passage:

When I heard Regine and Oswald in there, it was just like seeing ghosts. But then I'm inclined to think that we are all ghosts, Pastor Manders, every one of us. It's not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It's all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs, and things like that. It's not that they actually live on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. Over the whole country there must be ghosts, as numerous as the sands of the sea. And here we are, all of us, abysmally afraid of the light. (II, 384)

Aside from its re-emphasis on the cyclical nature of the

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<sup>5</sup>Henrik Ibsen, Letters and Speeches, Sprinchorn, ed. (London, 1965), p. 201.

<sup>6</sup>Valency, pp. 163-164.

world, this passage argues that people are afraid to act because of these ghosts, these stifling and debilitating beliefs and conventions that prevent humanity from realizing freedom. The ghosts are Mrs. Alving's equivalent to *The Boyg* that also restricts natural impulse.

This passage also illustrates Mrs. Alving's characteristic ability to analyze meticulously and objectively a subject without realizing its application to herself. She has attempted too long to live on an overly abstract plane, on idealistic principles rather than direct encounter with reality. "What happens, again and again in Ibsen, is that the hero defines an opposing world, full of lies and compromises and dead positions, only to find, as he struggles against it, that as a man he belongs to this world, and has its destructive inheritance in himself."<sup>7</sup>

Ghosts is thus considerably more ambivalent in its attitude toward impulsive behaviour than either A Doll's House or An Enemy of the People. The play analyzes the guilt and consequences of Mrs. Alving's failure to follow the dictates of her instinctual self. But the play also, through the rain and ghosts motifs, implies that impulsive action is itself futile and impossible in a cyclical, unalterable universe. This perception relates Ghosts to Ibsen's final plays

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<sup>7</sup>Raymond Williams, Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology, McFarlane, ed. (Middlesex, 1970), p. 315.

such as John Gabriel Borkman and When We Dead Awaken, where the possibility of any creatively impulsive action has been totally extinguished.

John Gabriel Borkman has been called "the grim-  
 mest lying in state ever exposed to public view by mortal  
 dramatist."<sup>8</sup> It describes a situation in which humanity is  
 no longer able to function creatively. Everything in John  
 Gabriel Borkman exudes sterility. The play studies the ef-  
 fects of the subversion of the beneficent love impulse by a  
 materialistic ethic. This human fault, however, only part-  
 ially explains the play's "monotony of gloom."<sup>9</sup> What is em-  
 phasized here is what was suggested in Ghosts, that man is  
 incapable of conquering nature, that even the greatest of  
 men are in the iron grip of nature. The characters of the  
 play are like the iron ore, creative forces that would rise  
 from the earth and serve humanity, but are trapped in the  
 ground.(II, 38)

Like the misty rain of Ghosts, the snow that falls  
 throughout most of John Gabriel Borkman suggests nature's  
 indomitable control over man's fate. As with the rain of the  
 earlier play, the snow seems to stop but for a moment to al-  
 low mankind to play out its final scene. Unlike the storm in

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<sup>8</sup>Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism (New  
 York, 1966), p. 134.

<sup>9</sup>Lucas, p. 284.

King Lear, a play which resembles Ibsen's in so many other ways, the snowstorm here is ostensibly continuous, creating an unceasing cosmic pressure on the people, rather than a momentary cataclysm mirroring the protagonist's disturbed mind.

The coldness of the weather outside adumbrates the life inside the Rentheim mansion. Borkman describes his wife as being "as hard as the iron I once dreamed of quarrying out of the mountains."(II, 59) Conversely, his wife eulagizes over his body that it was "the coldness of the heart"(IV, 85) that killed her husband. Frida Foldal's playing of the Danse Macabre reminds Borkman of the song of the iron ore of the mountains.(II, 37) Consistently in the play, "the coldness within and without"<sup>10</sup> is emphasized.

In such a world, a man's possibilities for creative actions are extremely limited. A man's impulsive nature is restricted by an innate sense of guilt and his presentiment that all actions are equally ridiculous and futile. All the characters are confronted by what Muriel Bradbrook calls "the past imperfect", which she defines as "the past which cannot be altered or modified, which survives in the present only as a dead weight of guilt not to be shifted, as a

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<sup>10</sup>Northam, p. 197.

living corpse, or as an inescapable burden."<sup>11</sup>

Borkman, once a fearless financial speculator whose decisions affected thousands, is reduced to pacing around his room like a caged wolf. Like that other Ibsen trapped animal, the wild duck, Borkman is a potentially dynamic force whose vitality has been frustrated and destroyed. Borkman's total significance rests in his potentiality rather than his accomplishments. In an attempt to realize this potential, Borkman, like Gregers Werle, tried to impose his ideal upon other people and endeavoured to satisfy his own idealistic vision at the expense of others. However much he may attempt to rationalize this interference with a "philosophy" ("The new vision transforms the old deed."(III, 63), the fact is that Borkman has wilfully attempted to control the destinies of others in the past, and his restricted situation at the opening of the play is the direct result of this earlier interference.

Such interference in the lives of others breaks the playwright's major commandment, for it prevents those people from achieving independence and freedom, Ibsen's two primary goals for mankind. Borkman, however, is not alone in his sin, for the three women of the play seek to use Borkman's son Erhart for their own purposes. Mrs. Borkman,

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<sup>11</sup>M.C. Bradbrook, "Ibsen and the Past Imperfect", Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen, Haakonsen, ed., p. 24.

Ella Rentheim, and Fanny Wilton all try to control Erhart, and thus prevent his instinctive nature from being realized. Instead of acting honestly to situations, the characters act deliberately, to gain advantage over others. Almost every action in John Gabriel Borkman has been debated and evaluated, its purpose clearly defined long before the actual performance of the act. Thus Borkman has been considering for eight years the conditions he will impose on his creditors. (II, 43) His wife has been consciously influencing Erhart for eight years in anticipation for the showdown with Ella, whom she accuses of bribing Erhart in an effort to win his sympathy. (I, 26) By sacrificing his love for Ella to his ambition in a conscious choice, Borkman has destroyed Ella's "passionate nature" (II, 53) and his own soul, as Ella suggests. (II, 53)

Borkman seems to be a serious treatment of Dr. Stockmann, the superior man disillusioned with society. The highly important difference, however, is that Borkman's disease is megalomania, not monomania. He feels that being misunderstood "is the curse, the burden we chosen men have to bear. The masses, the mediocre millions—they do not understand us." (II, 41) Yet this simplistic emotional reaction is precisely the reason for society's incomprehension, as mankind is complex and ambivalent, doubting and believing in the same breath (II, 51), and Ibsen insists again that

society expects at least the semblance of complexity from one of its leading members. Borkman in the storm is like Stockmann at the public meeting, a misguided man proclaiming his superiority while hopelessly battling forces beyond his control.

To counteract this generally nihilistic tone of the play, the two young lovers Fanny Wilton and Erhart seem to represent an alternative instinctual reaction to the world in contrast to the total despair of the older generation. However, upon closer examination, their liaison seems as futile as the other relationships in the play. Mrs. Wilton's actions are seen to be based upon the same need to control Erhart as the two sisters had. Carefully and logically, she employs her sexual attractiveness to win over Borkman's son. She is, in fact, "a siren figure"<sup>12</sup> exercising a spell over the young man. Although she proclaims the impulsive nature of their love based upon free will (III, 70), her Machiavellian nature is revealed in her plan to bring Frida Foldal with them for Erhart's future amusement when both she and the boy become tired of each other.

The most important clue to the doomed nature of this love affair, however, is Erhart Borkman's remarkable similarity to Oswald Alving. Like Oswald, Erhart laments

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<sup>12</sup>Orley I. Holtan, Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays (Minneapolis, 1970), p. 151.

his emotional disintegration in the confining walls of the house: "Mother, I'm young! I'm suffocating in this house! I can't breathe here!": "I can't bear this straitjacket any longer!"(III, 67) Again like the younger Alving, he is disappointed by his failure to achieve independence: "I just want to live, live, live!"(III, 68) He is attracted by the physical beauty of Mrs. Wilton: "Don't you see how beautiful she is?"(III, 71) These words resemble Oswald's description of Regine.(II, 400)

The characters of the two lovers suggest that their love is not inherently beneficent like Solveig's but ~~brutal~~. When the sleigh carrying them away from the Rentheim mansion runs over old Foldal, it seems to indicate that the love of the two is destructive in nature rather than socially creative.

John Gabriel Borkman creates a world where love, Ibsen's primary irrational creative force, has been perverted by a man's materialistic compulsion. Just before his death, Borkman describes his feelings for the ore in terms reminiscent of Volpone: "I love you, treasures that crave for life, with your bright retinue of power and glory. I love you, love you, love you."(IV, 83) As a result of this greed, Borkman has condemned himself and those around him to a life of obstupefaction. This moral inertia is partly mankind's natural state and partly a consequence of a cosmic indiffe-



rence which makes man's actions absurdly irrelevant. In this sense, the play can be related to such absurdist works as Ionesco's Exit the King and Beckett's Endgame, plays dealing on one level with the final dissolution of a monarchy. However, to interpret John Gabriel Borkman solely as "the king who has undergone struggle, symbolic defeat, and death"<sup>13</sup>, or even as "a communal symbol of nineteenth-century industrialism in creative transition"<sup>14</sup> is to ignore the essential human aspect of the theme.

The situation depicted in The Lady from the Sea is similar to that in John Gabriel Borkman in many respects. Ellida Wangel too is confined by a restrictive social setting. Feeling an intruder in a house formerly dominated by a well-loved and respected mother, she has become lethargic and allows her step-daughter Bolette to do most of the housework while she dissipates her energy in a hopeless unsatisfying dream of the sea. Like Borkman's craving for the iron ore, Ellida's passion for the ocean is a supernatural attraction for an elemental force of nature, a nihilistic, anti-social perversion of her instinctive self.

The Lady from the Sea is, however, different from all of Ibsen's plays in its treatment of impulse. In contradistinction to Ghosts, which examined the harmful

<sup>13</sup>Holten, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup>G. Wilson Knight, Ibsen (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 96.

consequences of resisting one's impulsive nature, it considers the socially beneficial results of resisting impulse. Particularly in its emphasis on a carefully detailed social milieu and its many examples of social intercourse, The Lady from the Sea is perhaps Ibsen's most Shakespearean play. While the storm and the turbulently disturbed Borkman brings to mind King Lear, The Lady from the Sea is reminiscent of Shakespeare's comedies.

Northrop Frye's analysis of "The Argument of Comedy" is particularly helpful in revealing the proximity of Ibsen's play to the comedies:

In all good New Comedy there is a social as well as an individual theme which must be sought in the general atmosphere of reconciliation that makes the final marriage possible. As the hero gets closer to the heroine and opposition is overcome, all the right-thinking people come over to his side. Thus a new social unit is formed on the stage, and the moment that this social unit crystallizes is the moment of the comic resolution. In the last scene, when the dramatist usually tries to get all his characters on the stage at once, the audience witnesses the birth of a renewed sense of social integration. In comedy as in life the regular expression of this is a festival, whether a marriage, a dance, or a feast.<sup>15</sup>

The pacing of The Lady from the Sea is thus considerably different from A Doll's House, Ghosts, and John Gabriel Borkman. In these plays, no character seemed secondary, but an integral part of a very concentrated whole.

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<sup>15</sup>Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, Leonard F. Dean, ed. (London, 1967), p. 81.

Every word and act was designed for a specific dramatic purpose, to reveal an essential feature of plot or theme. Above all, these plays were notable for their highly-controlled dramatic economy.

In contrast, The Lady from the Sea is a relatively slow-moving play. The dialogue is less tight than in the previous plays, more dispersive and concerned with social amenities rather than moral problems. The relationships between many characters are examined and developed in some detail for their own intrinsic interest and not just to reflect a predominant conflict between two major characters. While the story of Ellida is the single most important feature, it does not dominate the play. It may in fact appear that Ibsen's lengthy concentration on the other relationships detracts from the impact of the central struggle of Ellida Wangel. Weigand, for one, says that "the action runs along in three different strands, and the prominence enjoyed by the characters that figure in the episodes bear no relation to their value as factors in the main drama."<sup>16</sup> What Weigand does not realize is that this depiction of a social milieu is an absolute necessity in the play, for it must suggest the ordered, relatively happy and secure communal world into which Ellida is eventually integrated.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

An analysis of the play reveals that its structure really is an interplay between solitude and social communion, continually shifting from the isolated individual to the society and back again. The first act introduces most of the major characters, who talk with each other on the verandah of Dr. Wangel's house. Since she has been bathing alone in the sea, Ellida Wangel is the last to enter, apologizing for not being present to receive Arnholm. In the first act, therefore, Ibsen has immediately presented the dominant image of the play, Ellida bathing alone in the sea, unmindful of social obligations and responsibilities. Where the other characters gather on the verandah, she prefers either to bathe or sit alone in the harbour, shunning the house which suffocates her. (I, 49) This diffidence has angered her step-daughter Hilde, who insists that "she isn't our kind." (II, 56)

The festive note predominant throughout the first act continues into the second, which opens with the sound of distant singing and young lovers conversing. (II, 52) Then Hilde and Bolette enter and begin to joke with the somewhat lugubrious young sculptor Lyngstrand. They meet the school-teacher Arnholm and the Wangels, and the two younger couples leave to participate in a dance, a joyous social gathering, while Ellida and her husband talk solemnly about her isolation and obsession. After telling Wangel of the stranger,

Ellida runs away from him at the close of the act.

In act III, Arnholm, Lyngstrand and the two sisters are again sitting together, by the carp pond, and Bolette invites Ellida to join them. Her reaction is significant and characteristic: "No, no, no. I won't sit. Won't sit." (III, 74) She fanatically avoids involvement with society at all cost. Instead, she paces restlessly beside the pond until the others leave, at which point the stranger enters and talks with Ellida. Wangel then enters, and, when the rest of the people gather on stage to watch the ship glide by, Ellida walks away as at the end of the preceding act.

People are again gathered together at the outset of the fourth act, casually discussing such diverse topics as marriage, work, and art. Ellida has locked herself up in her room (IV, 90), and she comes down to talk with her husband alone after the others have left. The others return, but diplomatically leave the distraught Ellida alone to drink a toast to her in the adjoining room as the curtain falls.

As with all the previous acts, the fifth opens with the characters gathered together for a social occasion, the boatride. But this happy outing is interrupted by the stranger, who confronts the Wangels. Yet even as the sailor is talking to Ellida, the sound of a brass band is heard in

the background.(V, 118) Thus Ellida is faced with two alternatives, the solitary, dangerous quality of life represented by the stranger, and the communal, festive life which the brass band suggests. Her husband's guarantee of freedom confirms her choice, and the play concludes with the disappearance of the stranger and the celebration of the reaffirmation of the marriage. The married couple, holding hands as a gesture of their new love and social integration, participate in the joyous festival, and the play concludes on the harmonious note of music. Thus, The Lady from the Sea presents the re-integration of an outsider into the social whole, and it does so as a natural element of a festival marking the passing of a season. In this respect, the play is again related to the Shakespearean comedies, particularly to that feature of them which Frye calls "the green world" which "contains a suggestion of the old ritual pattern of the victory of summer over winter."<sup>17</sup> The festival of the first three acts is more in the nature of a ritual celebration marking the birthday of Wangel's first wife, a god-like force of maternal love). Ellida cannot and will not participate in such a memorial celebration.

The nature of the celebration in the final act has changed somewhat. It is Ballested, the pre-eminent fi-

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

gure of social unity in the play, who proclaims the theme of the celebration: "Now is joyous summer nearly ended, / Soon the sea-ways will be locked and barred." (V, 107) The festival is now designed to celebrate the final passing of the Englander, the last steamer of the season<sup>18</sup>, the indication of seasonal change. This change of seasons symbolizes the alteration in Ellida, whose re-integration into society is the signal for the festivities that begin at the fall of the final curtain.

Ellida's final sense of fulfillment seems to be the direct result of her victory over the stranger and what he represents. The transcendent questions asked by the play are what does the sea symbolize for Ellida and why do a few simple words from her husband allow her to overcome her obsession? The answers are found in Ellida's unstable temperament.

Ellida Wangel is in fact like Peer Gynt, Nora Helmer and Dr. Stockmann, an unprotean impulsive personality. When confronted by the stranger, her reaction is melodramatically to throw herself into her husband's arms for protection. (III, 78) Childishly, she locks herself in her room. While her craving for the sea is fulfilled by her daily bathing, it is Bolette who must do the housework. Wangel de-

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<sup>18</sup>Ibsen Draft Manuscript, The Oxford Ibsen, VII, pp.

scribes his wife in these terms: "She's so changeable. . . so unpredictable. . .so erratic."(IV, 92) Ellida feels she has no social outlet for her instinctual self in the Wangel household where she senses her stepdaughters' lack of love. Consequently, she feels overly restricted and useless as Wangel's wife. Like the carp, "Ellida's true sense of identity, her real self with all its hell and disturbance, is threatened with extinction in the carp pond, in her being forced to play a social role in her legal union with Wangel, a role which endangers and violates her personality."<sup>19</sup>

Being the daughter of a lighthouse-keeper, Ellida's natural energy finds itself directed to the sea, which seems by its restless, continually changing appearance to mirror her own instability and separation from the permanent, unalterable social forces on land. In reality, this unnatural longing for the sea has stifled her impulsive nature far more than the society she blames. Her actions become determined by the proximity of water, as she is restless even by the side of the carp pond.(III, 74) Her natural vitality has been perverted into a compulsive longing which has prevented it from becoming socially-creative, maternal love. Consequently she finds herself threatened by the madness that affected her mother.(II, 56)

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<sup>19</sup>Robert Raphael, "Illusion and the Self in The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, and The Lady from the Sea" in Ibsen essays edited by Fjelde, p. 128.



That the sea which fascinates Ellida is a destructive force is repeatedly emphasized in the play, particularly in the character of the stranger, who crystallizes this malevolence. His influence has caused the death of Ellida's only child. (II, 65) A murderer once, the sailor's instinctive reaction to Wangel's threat is to draw a revolver. When he reads of Ellida's marriage, he furiously tears the paper apart. (I, 48) The stranger mirrors Ellida in his isolation. Brought up in a distant part of the Arctic Circle, he became a sailor early in life and he lives the nomadic life of the seaman.

In responding to this power focussed in the stranger, Ellida really has little rational choice of action. Opposing instinctual forces are battling within her, the irrational nihilistic desire for the sea and her equally irrational passion for her family. When her final decision is made, it is triggered by her husband's proposal of complete freedom, but it is not determined by that offer. Indeed, as Weigand suggests<sup>20</sup>, her decision had been made years earlier by her cancelled engagement to the stranger and is re-affirmed by her initial reaction of terror when she recognizes him in the garden. Her basic nature has already chosen Wangel, but it takes an unconventional act by her husband, to liberate her from all uxorial obligations,

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

to finally confirm this choice. Wangel's impulsive act of faith in his wife is met by an equally impulsive sentiment of love on her part. F.W. Kaufmann describes the process of her decision:

Her decision is not made with the absolute freedom of will which idealistic ethics demands. Absolute autonomy has become an illusion for Ibsen; Ellida simply acts without coercion. Her inner attachment to these people, whose deepest sympathy breaks forth in the moment of her greatest desolation, is the cause as well as the aim of her decision to remain with them. Her vitality receives in "free" responsibility a definite direction and with that a higher meaning.<sup>21</sup>

Ellida's final decision is a result of her impulsive temperament. Feeling herself unloved by her stepdaughters, and believing that her maternal self has been destroyed, she is unable to relate to her society, and her natural vitality is dissipated into a neurotic fixation on the sea. It is the impulsive love for Wangel and his family that alters this futile fixation. Thus, The Lady from the Sea analyzes Ellida's progress from separation to integration with society, from a sterile neurosis to a socially creative force of love.

Ibsen has developed in these three plays from merely depicting the impulsive personality in conflict with a repressive society. He is now becoming more concerned with the social consequences of not surrendering to one's

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<sup>21</sup>German Dramatists of the Nineteenth Century  
(New York, 1970), p. 207.

instinctive self. In the tragedy of Mrs. Alving, Ibsen reveals the harmful effects of not following one's instincts. Like Ghosts, John Gabriel Borkman creates a situation where man's natural impulsiveness has been restricted and thereby perverted into a malignancy which is life-destroying rather than life-fulfilling. The Lady from the Sea reverses the theme of Ghosts in showing the beneficial aspects of not surrendering to a destructive neurosis.

### III

Unlike the three previous plays discussed, which portrayed the social results of impulse withheld, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, and Little Eyolf concern themselves with the consequences of impulsive behaviour. Each of these plays deals with the attempted initiation of a character into a style of instinctual behaviour which he is unaccustomed to or has become alienated from, through guilt.

Like The Lady from the Sea, The Wild Duck concentrates upon the social milieu, particularly upon that primary social unit, the family. Ibsen takes particular care to emphasize the communal aspect of the Ekdal family, the joy it provides for both the old Ekdal and the young Hedvig and the remaining members of the group. Old Ekdal happily passes his time in the loft with a bottle. Hjalmar's ego is satisfied with the applause his over-acting elicits. Gina is content to run the house and provide her husband with the emotional support he craves. Hedvig's uncritical love for her parents sustains her. The Ekdal family lives in a nondescript fashion, but the important fact is that at the start of the play, it is satisfied with this existence. This family certainly is not based upon the most altruistic type of love, as

Hjalmar in particular, "the complete egocentric"<sup>1</sup>, must have his voracious ego fed by constant attention, and he generally treats his daughter callously. Like the attic-loft which is a representation of nature, the Ekdal life-style is based upon illusion and ignorance of the actual conditions of life. Gregers' charge that the Ekdal home is built on a lie (I, 150)<sup>2</sup> is justified, but the fact is that this lie is life-sustaining, not life-denying like Gregers' idealism.

Life in the Ekdal household is notable above all for its monotonous regularity. Hjalmar is always on time for dinner. (IV, 199) Conversation is always bland, avoiding contentious issues. Hjalmar's wife Gina in particular exhibits the equanimity and domestic creativity of the Ekdal way of life. Throughout the second act, Gina sits calmly sewing. As the third act opens, she has just returned from shopping and begins to lay the table for the men. (III, 183) She is first seen in the fourth act holding a wet photographic plate. (IV, 199), and in the final act she is holding a brush and duster, with which she soon begins to work. Gina's domestic creativity and her total commitment to the family characterize the dominant tone of the Ekdal household, where there is little overtly impulsive behaviour. Even Hedvig

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<sup>1</sup>Brian W. Downs, A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen (Cambridge, 1950), p. 157.

<sup>2</sup>All references to The Wild Duck and Rosmersholm will be to the McFarlane translations in The Oxford Ibsen, VI, and to Little Eyolf in the Meyer translation (London, 1961).

seems to lack a child's natural restlessness, preferring to remain at home forever and helping her parents. (III, 181) The elder Ekdal did not commit suicide, although holding a pistol in his hand. (III, 187) Even the occupations of the characters suggest their unimpulsive natures. Old Ekdal receives a small salary from Werle for his copying, and Gina and Hjalmar are photographers, reproducers of reality not creators of art. The entire Ekdal family, like the oldest member who is a former renowned hunter who now shoots in his attic, lives an artificially idyllic life of domesticity and security.

The wild duck in the attic suggests the state of the family. It too is a natural instinctive force drained of its vitality. The wild duck lives a content, relatively secure life, growing fat in its warm dark attic loft that approximates nature. In the well-regulated Ekdal house, where nothing new ever seems to happen, time is inconsequential, as it is in the attic where the clock has stopped. Instead of experiencing the world described in the books in the attic, Hedvig is content to merely read about it. As a force of controlled instinct, living a satisfyingly artificial life, the wild duck in its attic mirrors the Ekdal household.

Because Gregers Werle sees this monotonous life as uncreative precisely because of its uninspired, unimpulsive nature, he is determined to change this situation according

to his own ideal vision of family life. In his mind, the Ekdals do not live instinctually, do not make their actions meaningful and symbolic. He is obsessed with the idea of the act as ritual, as a manifestation of man's artistic nature. In particular, he becomes morbidly concerned with the sacrificial act<sup>3</sup> which he comes to regard as the ultimate creative expression of man.

Gregers' major fault is his overly romantic, impulsive temperament which judges human nature in theoretical, idealistic terms rather than realistic ones. Like the romantic poets, he is greatly moved by nature's elemental beauty and violence. He wonders how Ekdal, having been a hunter, can live apart from nature, telling him that living inside a house is debilitating to his instinctual self. (II, 167) Reling later contradicts this idea while describing the joy the old man experiences in his loft:

Him, the great bear-hunter, shooting rabbits there in the loft? There isn't a happier sportsman in the world than that old man when he gets a chance of raking round in there among all the rubbish. He's collected up four or five withered old Christmas trees, and there's no difference for him between them and the whole tremendous living forest of Høidal. The cocks and the hens are the game birds in the tree tops; and the rabbits hopping about the floor, they are the bears that this intrepid he-man goes in pursuit of. (V, 226)

Gregers' idealism inevitably spreads to the impres-

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<sup>3</sup>Lucas, p. 185.

sionable Hjalmar, who also becomes obsessed with the necessity and duty to live life at a higher, more creatively impulsive level. As a result, the secure state of the Ekdal household is permanently destroyed. By callously tearing apart Hedvig's letter and gift from Werle in an obviously intended dramatic gesture (slowly pulling the letter apart and placing both pieces on the table (IV, 217), Hjalmar believes he is being true to his new selfhood. In reality, he is merely aping Gregers' idealistic vision of him and simultaneously driving his daughter to suicide. When Hedvig's parentage becomes a contentious issue in the final act, he emulates Nora Helmer and impulsively decides to leave home.

Until the appearance of Gregers, Hjalmar had, like Nora, been content with play-acting, with fulfilling his impulsive self in his imagination. As Gregers himself points out (V, 224), Hjalmar is essentially childish, and what Gregers has done is to focus Hjalmar's diffuse, hitherto socially tolerable nature into an anti-social, overly instinctual behavioural pattern which both men mistakenly regard as creative.

It is because of the frustrations of his own life that Gregers seeks to satisfy his own frustrated impulsive nature through the life of another. But like John Gabriel Borkman, Rosmersholm, and Hedda Gabler, The Wild Duck again



proves that such imposition by one character into the life of another can only lead to frustration, because it violates the privacy and destroys the freedom of choice of that other. As an ugly man, "a queer fish" (III, 198) alienated from society, Gregers takes up idealism as a career. He goes around the countryside handing out "summonses to the ideal", but his success as a missionary is minimal. Ibsen has very explicitly shown the effects of Gregers' behaviour at the beginning of the third act. Having rented a room at the Ekdal house, Gregers impulsively, without informing Gina, begins to clean it. By screwing the damper down and throwing water into the stove, Gregers leaves the room a mess which has to be cleaned up after him.

While Ibsen deplures the assertive impulsiveness of Gregers, he does not condemn instinctive behaviour per se. Certainly the play is conservative, arguing for the necessary preservation of the artificial, illusion-ridden life of the Ekdals rather than advocating the creative, impulsive life-style that Ibsen becomes concerned with in his final plays. There is, however, an alternative type of behaviour revealed in the play. Dr. Relling opposes Gregers in most things. His hatred of Gregers is immediate and instinctive. He threatens to throw him down the stairs. (III, 194) Rather than accept Gregers, Relling prefers the company of Molvik, the ex-divinity student, who represents a truer ideal of

impulsive man. As soon as he smells Gina's herring salad, Molvik invites himself to dinner. (III, 190) Relling describes Molvik's temperament as demonic: "It just comes over him like a sort of revelation, and then there's nothing for it but to take him out on a binge. Mr. Molvik, you see, is a demonic." (III, 191) With his impulsiveness and drinking habits, Molvik is Ibsen's first model for Ejlert Løvborg. Together, Relling and Molvik represent the impulsive nature that is not willfully destructive or life-denying but purely self-gratifying.

Yet despite the countervailing forces of Molvik and Relling, who modify the criticism of impulsive behaviour somewhat, Ibsen in The Wild Duck is generally critical of the impulsive temperament, particularly when it is forced upon people who are unprepared for it. "Gregers is preferring a truth which is beyond the powers of the recipient (Hjalmar) to use for his salvation, and it can therefore only destroy him. His idealism is abstract--viciously abstract--because it takes no account of the actual moral and spiritual capacity of the individual recipient."<sup>4</sup>

The more valuable reactions to life are represented by old Werle, Mrs Sørby, and particularly Gina. They are true

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<sup>4</sup>Dorothea Krook, Elements of Tragedy (New Haven, 1969), p. 100.

to their basically unimpulsive natures and accept life for what it is, not what it should be. Werle doesn't drink or carouse (IV, 209), expressing his vitality through his sexual energy. Mrs. Sørby, freely admitting that she has "always taken care not to act on impulse" (IV, 210), likewise is content. The marriage of these two, by its mutual trust and comprehension of humanity's failings, contrasts with the dissolving Ekdal family which is destroyed by Gregers. Mrs. Sørby's acceptance of her fate, to take care of a blind man, reveals her maternal instinct of love which Ibsen puts forward as a socially creative alternative to the destructiveness of Gregers' idealism.

Gina also exemplifies this force of love. It is her unthinking, uncomplaining loyalty, her commitment to a life-sustaining ideal, her genuine feelings of affection toward all members of her family, that make Gina "the truly heroic figure in The Wild Duck."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately this love is powerless to stop Hedvig's suicide. Her shooting is the first in a series of impulsive acts that conclude many of Ibsen's later plays. Rosmersholm, Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder, and When We Dead Awaken all conclude with suicidal acts, and the prevalence of them points out Ibsen's interest in the impulsive

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<sup>5</sup>Ruth Harmer, "Character, Conflict, and Meaning in The Wild Duck", Modern Drama .XII. (1969-1970), p. 426.

act and what motivates it.

Quite obviously, Hedvig's suicide is not a rationally conceived act. In Greger's opinion, she is ostensibly in the loft to shoot the duck in order to put an end to the artificiality of the Ekdal life-style and thus signal a new phase of life for the family. Gregers has created this idea of the sacrificial act, and has chosen Hedvig, the youngest and most susceptible of the Ekdals, to carry it out. Gregers has, in other words, determined a course of action to be followed. Although he wishes the act to be an impulsive gesture showing Hedvig's love for her father (IV, 221), the fact that he chooses the act immediately destroys its spontaneity.

What Gregers fails to realize, even after the pistol shot, is that Hedvig's suicide is only peripherally related to his desires. She has killed herself out of grief when she understands that the father whom she has loved cares more for himself than for her. Her reaction is a truly impulsive, irrational one, based upon an emotional trauma. Her father's cruelty and lack of feeling toward her have destroyed her faith in him, and her suicide is an irrational gesture by a lonely despairing girl, not, as Mary McCarthy suggests, "an act of over-interpretation."<sup>6</sup>

Thus Ibsen terminates a play in which he generally

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<sup>6</sup>"The Will and Testament of Ibsen" in McFarlane, ed., Critical Anthology, p. 273.

condemns the impulsive personality with an instinctive act. Together with The Lady from the Sea, The Wild Duck stands apart in Ibsen's drama because of its conservative reaction to impulsive behaviour, but even in this play the playwright reveals his obsession with this mode of existence in the final act.

Hedvig's suicide is caused by several interacting factors, but the act itself and the character committing it are relatively unambiguous, and while the varying reactions of the people standing over Hedvig's body are presented ironically, the act itself is not ~~also~~ treated. In Rosmersholm, Ibsen's next play, which also concludes with an act of self-destruction, both the motives behind the final act and the characters performing it are highly complex and treated in ironic terms.

As the play opens, Rebecca West and Mrs. Helseth are gazing out of the window at Rosmer, who is walking along the path by the mill. Rosmer is testing himself by using the same path his wife had used before she threw herself into the millstream. Despite this step, however, he cannot bring himself to actually cross the bridge, prompting Rebecca's statement that "they cling long to their dead here at Rosmersholm." (I, 294)

In many ways, the basic theme and technique of the whole play is contained in this brief opening scene. It im-

mediately introduces the idea of instinctual action. It also reveals Rosmer as an inherently unimpulsive man, a man unwilling or unable to commit himself completely, who has yet managed to act by crossing the path for the second time in three days. Even more significantly, however, the opening scene establishes the basic ironic mode of the play. The action of the guilt-ridden, timid Rosmer courageously suppressing his instinctual fear in order to use the path on which his wife used to commit suicide is hardly ironic. It is in fact highly suggestive and potentially highly dramatic. However, all the audience is aware of at this point is simply this fact of two women looking from behind window curtains at a man stopping before a bridge. By filtering Rosmer's crise de conscience through the eyes of two women peeping from behind curtains, Ibsen is establishing his intention throughout the rest of the play. Rosmer's actions are made somewhat comical through being presented in this manner. After this scene, it is difficult for the audience to take Rosmer or Rebecca totally seriously. Each of them has been subjected to the ironical gaze of the audience, just as Rosmer has been viewed by the peeping Rebecca.

The basic situation in Rosmersholm is highly ironic. The play concerns an unimpulsive man who is initiated into a instinctual life style by a totally impulsive woman who finds her own temperament altered in the process of attempting to

change the man. The final suicides particularly exhibit this motivational incongruity.

Johannes Rosmer's nature has been fixed by hereditary factors. Like Hedda Gabler, Rosmer's impulsive self has been destroyed by his adherence to his family's traditions as enforced by his martinet father. (I, 306) As with all Rosmer children, Johannes can neither laugh nor cry. (III, 347) Formerly a clergyman, his study a mass of books (II, 319), he is now a scholar who busies himself with historical research. (I, 302) As Kroll tells him, "you were made for the academic life." (II, 329) Goaded on by Rebecca, he attempts to change himself, but in fact this change is purely an intellectual rather than an emotional one. His new political resolve is based upon an abstract idealistic vision: "No more bitter strife, only friendly rivalry. All eyes fixed on the same goal. Every mind, every will striving on and on. . . up and up. . . each by the path best suited to its nature. Happiness for all. . . created by all." (III, 349) This new freedom is to be based upon "a natural instinct for morality." (II, 327) Even his love for Rebecca is idealized and based upon "the belief we share that a man and a woman can live together simply on terms of friendship." (II, 341) Rosmer's fundamental problem is a more serious case of Mrs. Alving's disease, the insistence on intellectualizing and abstracting life and his own emotions. Rosmer pays for

this intellectual refinement with a weakened vitality.<sup>7</sup>

The character of Rebecca West seems antithetical to the logical, somewhat cold Rosmer. Despite Kroll's attribution of her entire conduct to her illegitimate birth (III, 356) and Sigmund Freud's insistence on her Oedipal fixation<sup>8</sup>, Rebecca's nature is totally irrational. Like the stranger in The Lady from the Sea, Rebecca is born in Finmark, in the pagan northland. She later describes her natural passion in terms of the violent northern weather: "It swept over me like a storm at sea. Like one of those storms we sometimes get in the winter up North. It takes hold of you. . . and carries you away with it. . . for as long as it lasts. It never occurs to you to resist." (IV, 369) Unknowingly, this "Nietzschean young woman"<sup>9</sup> becomes involved with her own father, an impulsive act committed without considering the possibility of incest. Later she finds herself attracted to Rosmer, and the nature of the attraction is unmistakably sexual, as Rebecca describes it ("a wild and uncontrollable passion" (IV, 369). In all matters social as well as sexual she acts impulsively, without sufficient regard for consequences. She greets Kroll in her dressing-gown at the begin-

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<sup>7</sup>Kaufmann, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup>"Some Character-Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work", McFarlane, ed., Critical Anthology, p. 399.

<sup>9</sup>Lucas, p. 199.



ning of the second act, undoubtedly aware of his moral prudery. Later she further outrages Rosmer's brother-in-law by referring to Rosmer as "my dear" (III, 359), thus revealing the actual closeness of their relationship.

Superficially, Rebecca resembles Gregers Werle in her attempt to manipulate another human life. She tries to make Rosmer into a famous politician, urging him to start "living, working, doing things. Not sitting here brooding and stewing over insoluble problems." (II, 341) Yet Rebecca's plan, unlike Gregers' is not coldly and rationally conceived. Rather, she is motivated by no clear idea of what her manipulation will lead to. She only sees Rosmer suffering in his marriage and seeks to alter this deteriorating marriage by influencing Beata. When chastized by Kroll, she explains her actions and the lack of motives behind them in an extremely important speech:

But do you think I set about these things deliberately in cold blood! I was different then from what I am now, standing here talking about it. And besides, it seems to me a person can want things both ways. I wanted to get rid of Beata, one way or another. But I never really imagined it would ever happen. Every little step I risked, every faltering advance, I seemed to hear something call out within me: 'No further. Not a step further!'. . . And yet I could not stop. I had to venture a little bit further. Just one little bit further. And then a little bit more. . . always just a little bit more. And then it happened. That's the way things like that do happen. (III, 363)

At the end, she boldly reveals her own faults and heroically assumes total responsibility for Beata's death.

Like Beata, Rebecca finds herself unable to escape the influence of Rosmersholm. Even at the beginning of the play, her admission that "I have become so used to the place now, I almost feel I belong here"(I, 297) hints at her ultimate surrender to the ideals of Rosmersholm. Like Mrs. Alving, she finds herself trapped by the past, as she explains in her own "ghosts" speech: "Oh, all these doubts, these fears, these scruples—they are just part of the family tradition. The people here talk about the dead coming back in the form of charging white horses. I think this is the same sort of thing."(III, 351)

In the last act, as she prepares to leave, Rebecca has to admit that "Rosmersholm has broken me"(IV, 367), that her former nature now "has no strength left. . . no stamina." (IV, 371) The White Horses of Rosmersholm, like the avenging angel of the Apocalypse, have trampled her down.

What Rebecca undergoes is actually a far milder fate than that suffered by Rosmer's first wife. Beata was an energetic, highly sexual woman whose vitality was destroyed by the life-denying forces at Rosmersholm. The sterility that was engendered by her life with Rosmer is symbolized by her own barrenness and hatred of flowers. Unable to find satisfaction in her bookish, impassionate husband, her "wild fits of sensual passion"(II, 324) soon are directed at Rebecca. When she discovered that she could not satisfy her

instinctual nature at Rosmersholm or with Rebecca, this impulsive, highly passionate woman reverted to the austere, religious life-style of the Rosmers before killing herself.

Like Beata, Ulrik Brendel mirrors Rebecca. He is another in Ibsen's series of impulsive, anti-social, more than somewhat comical characters. He resembles Peer Gynt<sup>10</sup>, the drunk at the town meeting in An Enemy of the People, Molvik of The Wild Duck, and, above all, Ejlert Løvborg. Brendel has metaphorically travelled from the schoolhouse to the workhouse, from where he has come to Rosmersholm to borrow clothes and unashamedly ask for a loan. When he enters the house, he instinctively offers his hand to the owner, but mistakes Kroll for Rosmer. (I, 307) Like Løvborg he frequents disreputable drinking establishments, and is beaten and thrown out of one after using Rosmer's money to buy drinks. (II, 322) He does not seem essential to the play except as a model of impulsive behaviour with which to judge Rosmer and Rebecca. As Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman suggest<sup>11</sup>, Brendel represents an influence which must be present to contrast with Rosmer.

Kroll's disdainful reaction to Brendel is based upon his political disagreement with him and reveals the

<sup>10</sup>Weigand, p. 201.

<sup>11</sup>Understanding Drama (New York, 1964), p. 270.

play's primary political emphasis. The battle for supremacy in Rosmersholm between the well-entrenched, lifeless Rosmer conservatism and the new moral force of vitality and impulsive, natural behaviour represented by Rebecca West is the reflection of the political conflict. At the beginning of the play the radical party is ascendant. (I, 300) Kroll's description of the turmoil in his own family (I, 301) suggests the split in Rosmersholm. Through the irresistible pressures exerted by Kroll and his associates, the extreme radical group, symbolized by Brendel, finds itself forced to compromise, and it is Mortensgaard, the shrewd moderate who won't allow Rosmer to make his defection from the church known lest it affect his credibility (II, 332), who is all-powerful at the end of the play. Rosmer's commitment to the radicals, like his newly-professed emotional freedom, is false to his real nature, and he eventually reverts back to the conservative party just before his death. It is suggested at the end of Rosmersholm that some compromise between the vitalistic, potentially nihilistic Rebecca and the lifeless but ennobling (IV, 371) Rosmer tradition is the preferred solution.

This political shift in the final act points out Rosmer's philosophical uncertainty. In the fourth act, Rosmer and Rebecca are confused people whose actions are more spasmodic than controlled. Their suicide is a confusing act by

confused people. The probability that they do not know why they are acting as they do is suggested by the following dialogue which occurs just before their deaths:

Rebecca. Yes, but first tell me this: is it you who goes with me, or I with you.

Rosmer. That is something we shall never fathom.

Rebecca. Yet I should so much like to know.

Rosmer. We go together, Rebecca. I go with you, you with me.

Rebecca. I rather think that too. (IV, 380-381)

Unlike the suicides in The Wild Duck and Hedda Gabler, which occur swiftly and abruptly, these two seem almost to talk their way to death. Rosmer, the calm, rational, unemotional man, believes he is acting impulsively and fulfilling Rebecca's ideal of behaviour, without realizing that she represents vitality and life, not the death that they choose. The pagan, instinctual Rebecca dies by the Rosmer tradition of expiation of sin.<sup>12</sup> It is Rosmer tradition that dictates Rebecca's death and Rebecca's impulsive ideal that determines Rosmer's. As in When We Dead Awaken, the marriage is a defeat rather than a victory<sup>13</sup>, a conclusion rather than a beginning to life. And as the play opened with Mrs. Helseth

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<sup>12</sup>Brooks and Heilman, p. 311.

<sup>13</sup>John D. Hurrell, "Rosmersholm, the Existential Drama, and the Dilemma of Modern Tragedy", Educational Theatre Journal XV. (1963), p. 124.

and Rebecca staring at Rosmer beside the bridge, so it concludes with Mrs. Helseth describing the suicide as she stands gazing out the window. The parallel reveals the consistency of Ibsen's ironic vision.

The ironic vision is less obvious in Little Eyolf, which also concerns itself with the moral consequences of impulsive behaviour. In this play, which is unique among Ibsen's works for its placement of the vital death in the first act, the playwright is more interested in the consequences of Eyolf's death than the reasons for it. Here he is analyzing the psychological impact on Rita and Allmers of having willfully given in to their natural impulses. Eyolf has been crippled in a fall from his crib at the moment his parents were making love. Because of this, his father Allmers has become sexually repressed, unable to satisfy his natural desires due to a guilt-complex. As a result of his one impetuous act, he is disinclined to act at all. He refuses to drink champagne. (I, 41) Asta easily dissuades him from going out on the fjord on a boat. (II, 51) He leaves his wife on a long walking tour of the mountains, on which he says he only thought incessantly. (I, 24) Allmers' bookish nature resembles Rosmer's and Jørgen Tesman's of Hedda Gabler. Like the unimpulsive Rosmer and Mrs. Alving, he over-analyzes and over-idealizes everything. His proposed book is to cover the whole field of "Human Responsibility." When he

returns from the mountains, he dedicates himself to the upbringing of his son much as Rosmer announced his intention to serve humanity: "I want to try to reveal the potential of the dreams which are dawning in his childish mind. To nurture those high hopes so that they flower and come to fruition. . . I want to put happiness within his grasp."(I, 34) His reaction to his son's death is to compute the distance the current would have carried Eyolf's body.(II, 47) He is only theoretically interested in the idea of suicide rather than its actual commitment.(II, 59)

Allmers' impulsive nature, reflected in his former sexual relationship with Rita, has, through the pressure of guilt and remorse, become perverted into a lifeless, innocent, passionless love for his sister.<sup>14</sup> Substituting his sister Asta for his wife, he feels that "love between brother and sister is the one relationship which does not obey the law of change."(II, 64) Seeing this, his wife Rita attempts to lead her husband back to his original state of vitality. Like Rebecca West, she is a woman working to bring a man back to life from a state of virtual death, and like Rebecca she becomes an equivocal force, not realizing that her former passion for her husband was nihilistic and self-centered, evading parental responsibility for sensual pleasure. The

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<sup>14</sup>Northam, Ibsen's Dramatic Method, p. 191.

nature of her temperament is revealed by her threat to her husband to make love to the first man she meets (I, 43), a suggestion designed to shock him out of his lethargy, but also one emphasizing her willingness to use her sexuality for all purposes.

Her threat is Rita's instinctive reaction to her awareness of her husband's guilt feelings resulting from Eyolf's fall. As a result of Allmers' rejection of her because of Eyolf, she in turn rejects her son.<sup>15</sup> But this rejection effectively stifles her own maternal nature and her vitality becomes expressed in self-indulgent sexuality which reflects in the death of Eyolf at the hands of the Rat Wife, an anti-social, nihilistic, completely life-denying force. It is not until the end of the play, when she impulsively offers to take care of the village children, that her frustrated energy finds a satisfying, socially-creative outlet in motherhood.

Similarly Allmers is "redeemed" at the end of Little Eyolf through an impulsive action. Seeing Rita accepting the children, becoming, in Kernan's words, "a de-sexualized, 'ethical' mother"<sup>16</sup>, he manages to briefly transcend the despair by pledging himself to the care of these children. The

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<sup>15</sup>James E. Kerans, "Kindermord and Will in Little Eyolf", Modern Drama: Essays in Criticism. Bogard and Oliver, eds. (London, 1965), p. 194.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 203.



signal of his new socially-beneficent nature is his raising of the flag to the top of the pole.

Little Eyolf is thus concerned with the overcoming of the guilt-complex resulting from man's expression of his instinctive sexual nature by means of sublimation of that drive into socially-creative, paternal channels. Weigand generalizes about the differing natural reactions of men and women as it applies to this play:

Man, being encased in the strait-jacket of ideology, never able to get away, in his judgment of conduct, from general standards, is at a disadvantage over against woman, who dispenses with abstract reasoning, with ideology, content to base her conduct on the bidding of specific impulses without the thought of general standards. Reason, seen as conscience in its application to moral facts, works nothing but mischief, because it forces man, who in the last resort acts on impulse himself, to waste his strength in building up elaborately complex fictions for the purpose of deceiving himself as to his motives.<sup>17</sup>

Yet this general principle is contravened by one important figure, Borghejm. His vocation as a road-builder is itself a clue to his social creativity. Into the lethargic Allmers household he brings his enthusiasm and fresh outlook on life ("The whole future seems so full of hope and promise." (I, 37) that contrast with the sorrow and death introduced by the Rat Wife. Although forbidden to talk about his next road project, he cannot help telling Rita about it. (I, 37) His courting of Asta is done forthrightly and di-

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<sup>17</sup>Weigand, p. 350.

rectly, with no shame or guilt, in contrast to the other relationship examined in the play. Borghejm's action of raising the flag at the beginning of the third act provides Allmers with a model to emulate at the end. Like the characters Molvik in The Wild Duck and Brendel in Rosmersholm, Borghejm is used to contrast the lethargy of the major protagonists, and to create a model of healthy instinctual behaviour to counteract the despair created by the death of little Eyolf.

In The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, and Little Eyolf, Ibsen has analyzed the consequences of impulsive behaviour. One character in all three plays has attempted to initiate a second person, whose impulsive nature has become dulled, into a new, more instinctual response to life. In The Wild Duck, this was an act of moral aggression by a weak, pretentious character on the life-preserving domestic security of another. The attempted initiation in Rosmersholm, while partially successful in changing one character, results in the emotional transfiguration of another. In Little Eyolf, the process is successful only because the initiator herself sublimates her passionate nature into a socially-creative maternal impulse, thereby convincing the other character. In all three plays, there is a totally impulsive character who suggests, by his presence, which is not otherwise essential to the play, a model of behaviour to judge the other charac-

ters by and who reveals Ibsen's obsessive interest in the impulsive temperament.

#### IV

How are the creative, artistic character and action to be reconciled with and incorporated into a society that Ibsen is coming more and more to portray as totally without value or energy? This is the question that Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder, and When We Dead Awaken consider. Ibsen's own pessimism toward a possible creative social situation and his growing interest in the impulsive temperament are revealed in a progression evident in these plays. From the essentially social world of Hedda Gabler, where a Løvborg is still a misfit in a world of Tesmans and Elvsteds, Ibsen in the other two plays concentrates more upon the nature of the creative act itself, divorced from most social considerations. In Hedda Gabler, society is still able to exert its influence over Løvborg, is able to burn his book and drive him to suicide, but in The Master Builder and When We Dead Awaken, society has a more passive role, merely observing as the artist expiates himself in a public ceremony.

Hedda Gabler portrays a society completely devoid of energy and a personality ruled by impulse. What differentiates this play from Ibsen's earlier works, such as A Doll's House and An Enemy of the People, with their relatively simple theme placing an impulsive character directly in conflict with

a lifeless, convention-ridden society, is that it focusses on a central protagonist whose behaviour both contravenes and exemplifies social convention.

In the play, society is divided into three types of behaviour. Jørgen Tesman, his aunt Juliane, and Mrs. Elvsted represent the ordinary values and aspirations of the average social being. Judge Brack and Ejlert Løvborg are outside this circle, Brack because of his deceitful nature and abnormal sexual morality, Løvborg through his creative imagination and previous licentious behaviour. Hedda is within the Tesman sphere because of her conventional moral sensibility and yet outside it as a result of her self-professed intellectual and cultural superiority.

Hedda's husband is a weaker and less overtly malicious version of Torvald Helmer and Hjalmar Ekdal. He is motivated primarily by two drives, an unimaginative rationalism and an unthinking adherence to social duty. A doctor of philosophy, Tesman busies himself with bibliographical research even during his honeymoon. It is "his boring and learned stupidity"<sup>1</sup> that Hedda despises, his pedantic interest in books and his concomitant lack of interest in life. The subject of his book, the domestic crafts of mediaeval Brabant, is characteristic, for he is primarily interested in the security of his own family situation. The slippers

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<sup>1</sup>Kaufmann, p. 208.

that his aunt returns to him in act I perfectly typify Tesman, a common man whose adaptation to society is complete.

Ejlert Løvborg's nature is antithetical to Tesman's in all respects. He is the artist, the creatively impulsive man whose imagination allows him to transcend the social conventions that Tesman unthinkingly accepts. Unlike Hedda's husband, who is all moderation and compromise, Lovborg is, as Tesman perceives, totally under the control of his impulsive nature<sup>2</sup>: "he just can't keep himself under control at all, you know." (III, 236)<sup>3</sup> As his behaviour at the party suggests, and his description of his youth to Hedda confirms ("I'd been out on the razzle for whole days and nights." (II, 222), drinking and whoring are the two major outlets for his energy. Significantly, however, he has for two years controlled himself while working on his manuscript. He has been able to channel his impulsiveness into his apocalyptic vision of history, a socially creative form. Unlike Tesman's work, the result of extensive research and documentation, Løvborg's book is based purely upon a moment of inspiration which even

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<sup>2</sup>Arne Duvé has made the interesting suggestion that Løvborg stands for Ibsen's emotional self, and Tesman the playwright's intellectual self. (Meyer, Biography, III, p160)

<sup>3</sup>All references in this chapter to Hedda Gabler, translated by Jens Arup, and The Master Builder, translated by J.W. McFarlane, will be from The Oxford Ibsen, VII. All references to the third play will be from When We Dead Awaken, translated by Michael Meyer (London, 1960).

Tesman realizes cannot be duplicated. (III, 238). Although disappointed by the loss of his manuscript, Løvborg reacts to this problem not with lethargy but with the elaborate lie that he tore the book up: "Yes, I tell you. Into a thousand pieces. And scattered them out in the fjord. A long way out. At least the water's clean and salt [sic] out there. They'll drift with the current and the wind. And after a while they'll sink." (III, 247)

Løvborg maintains his impulsive nature to the end. Although defeated by Hedda, he will not allow her to determine his course of action. Had he listened to Hedda and shot himself in the head, he would have surrendered his initiative to her. Instead, Løvborg shoots himself in the bowels, thereby frustrating Hedda and preserving his impulsive nature through his death.

In contrast to the nihilistically impulsive Hedda, Løvborg is the instinctual man who has channelled his energy into socially beneficial channels. In all things, he is ruled by his irrational nature and his extreme imaginative sense which is so child-like and so reminiscent of Nora Helmer. His tragedy results from his assumption that the same standards that apply to the fantastical world of imagination apply to the real world as well. Løvborg's child-like faculties of imagination and impulsive idealism are not tempered by a mature rational capability evaluating human nature real-

istically.

Løvborg's impulsive behaviour is a reflection of his basic nature; it is not chosen for effect or to achieve a purpose. It does not interfere in the lives of others. In all these respects, Hedda Gabler's personality is antithetical. Where Løvborg committed anti-social acts unthinkingly and unhesitatingly, Hedda is prevented from acting by her social conventionality. In Løvborg, the intellect and emotions are balanced so that his impulsive acts are acceptable to him. There is, on the other hand, a marked discrepancy between Hedda's heightened standards of judgement and her commonplace emotional acceptance of social reality. Løvborg hoped to influence people through his book; Hedda seeks to control people directly. Løvborg's impulsiveness results in an apocalyptic book; Hedda's impulsiveness ends in frustration and death.

Hedda is in fact schizophrenic. Her basic instinctive nature has been perverted by her Rosmersholm-like past and by her moral conservatism<sup>4</sup> which will not permit this instinctual self to emerge. The result is a neurotically repressed woman. Many critics have remarked upon Hedda's repressed instinctual self. Henry James saw the play as "the

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<sup>4</sup>In his notes, Ibsen stated that "Hedda is fundamentally conservative." Notes to Hedda Gabler in The Oxford Ibsen, VII, 483.



portrait of a nature, the story of... . an état d'âme, and of a state of nerves as well as of soul, a state of temper, of health, of chagrin, of despair. Hedda Gabler is in short, the study of an exasperated woman."<sup>5</sup> Halvdan Koht suggested that Hedda "had forcibly repressed the desires that were ready to overwhelm her senses and her whole intellect."<sup>6</sup>

John Northam shows how Hedda's father denied her any natural outlet for her feelings and consequently made her a coward towards her instincts.<sup>7</sup> F.W. Kaufmann sees Hedda's death as "an escape from a world which has offered nothing to attract and develop her inner nature or direct her energies to humanly valuable activities; from a world which, on the other hand, deprived her of the possibility and capability of following her nature without restraint."<sup>8</sup> Knight describes Hedda's condition as "a state of inhibited violence."<sup>9</sup>

As in Rosmersholm, it is the past which has caused this frustration. Ibsen wanted the title of the play to indicate that Hedda is her father's daughter rather than her husband's wife.<sup>10</sup> In making this statement, he wanted it

<sup>5</sup>Introduction to The Oxford Ibsen, VII, 11.

<sup>6</sup>Life of Ibsen (New York, 1971), p. 399.

<sup>7</sup>"Hedda Gabler" in Ibsenarb8k 1968-69, pp. 66-67.

<sup>8</sup>pp. 209-210.

<sup>9</sup>p. 63.

<sup>10</sup>Ibsen, Letters (Sprinchorn, ed.), p. 297.

known that Hedda's past life was far more important to her than her present marriage. This suggests that while Hedda has inherited her father's intellectual discipline and standards of cultural and moral judgement, she has never received the love of a mother. It also suggests that Hedda is determined to preserve her independence from her husband and maintain her youthful nature. And yet the question remains that if she were so set on maintaining this independence why did she not leave Tesman, as Mrs. Elvsted ~~earlier~~ left her husband? Again her schizophrenia becomes evident, her adherence to social conventions which prevents her from realizing her basic desires.

As a child, Hedda's natural vitality had been stifled by her life in the aristocratic climate of the Gabler mansion. That this past continues to influence Hedda's present is shown by her pistols, which clearly "are linked with certain values in her background which Hedda cherishes."<sup>11</sup> The pistols symbolize the destructive aspect of Hedda and her past. Furthermore, because they seem to be Hedda's only legacy from her father, they also suggest the empty, decadent military caste of General Gabler.

Thus Hedda, like Nora Helmer, has been brought up by her father and husband in a stultifying home-situation which

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<sup>11</sup>Caroline F. Mayerson, "Thematic Symbols in Hedda Gabler" in Ibsen essays edited by Fjelde, p. 135.

has not allowed her an outlet. But where Nora acted purely from impulse because her intellectual and moral natures had not been sufficiently developed, Hedda's intellectual self has, like Mrs. Alving's, been over-developed and over-refined. On learning of Mrs. Elvsted's leaving her husband, she is outraged and cannot conceive of herself performing a similar act. (I, 193) Hedda is ruled by two contradictory forces, her basic emotional need to express herself in some creative manner, and an equally strong adherence to social duty. As a result, she refuses to act impulsively, to jump off the train of life lest someone stare at her legs. (II, 208)

Because of this frustration that overwhelms her, Hedda becomes a destructive force. She pulls Mrs. Elvsted's hair, desiring to burn it off (I, 190), and eventually burns Løvborg's manuscript. She plays with her pistols. She is repulsed by all things creative, particularly love. (II, 206) When Brack demands the reasons for her actions, all Hedda can say is that "these things just suddenly come over me. And then I can't resist them." (II, 210)

Completely frustrated, sensing the lack of an outlet for her feelings in her own situation, Hedda attempts to satisfy herself through another life. She is thus aligned with Borkman, Gregers Werle, and Rebecca West. Again, however, as in those plays, such interference, because it does not respect the private self of another, leads to death and

tragedy.

To compensate for her own frustrated Dionysianism, Hedda seeks to make Løvborg her own private god. Like Gregers Werle, she becomes obsessed with imposing her own vision of reality on another. Her only rationale is the self-gratification it provides: "For once in my life I want to feel that I control a human destiny." (II, 230) Aside from this pleasure, her desire to control Løvborg is largely motiveless: "Hedda's bid to control Løvborg is essentially predatory. She desires power over him for its own sake, and her purpose is largely uncomplicated by any very clear idea of an ultimate end to which she will apply her power once it is gained."<sup>12</sup> But Løvborg himself refuses Hedda's chosen destiny for him, and he dies the absurd death of a drunk and not the sacrificial death of a god. In fact, Hedda's eventual failure was suggested immediately in her metaphoric description of Løvborg. Initially she imagines him "with vine leaves in his hair." (II, 230) But earlier in the play (I, 183), leaves have already been described as yellow and withered, a description that contributes to the "atmosphere of boredom and social degeneration"<sup>13</sup> of the play. Ibsen thus suggests immediately that the only possible result of Hedda's

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<sup>12</sup>Jens Arup, "On Hedda Gabler", Orbis Litterarum XII (1957), p. 28.

<sup>13</sup>P.F.D. Tennant, Ibsen's Dramatic Technique (New York, 1965), p. 73.

obsession with Løvborg can be decay.

In many ways the concluding acts of Hedda Gabler and The Wild Duck are similar. In both plays, a character, obsessed with the notion of the sacrificial gesture, forces a naïve, basically innocent character to commit suicide. Both plays conclude with a collection of people standing over a corpse, their remarks indicating amazement far more than sorrow. The irony in both plays has its highest culmination in these final scenes. Hedda's description of Løvborg's suicide as "this beautiful act" (IV, 262) shows how incorrect her assessment of his death has been. Upon discovering the nature of Løvborg's wounds, Hedda shoots herself, but, like everything else about her, her suicide is more an ambivalent than a truly impulsive act. Realizing that Brack has her under his control, and could subject her either to sexual domination or scandal, she dies as much to escape the social and sexual consequences as to reassert her freedom of action. Even in death, Hedda remains ambivalent.

Hedda Gabler is thus, in many respects, Ibsen's most complex play. It analyzes the creative individual in society but does not make that character the central protagonist. It portrays a lifeless social milieu, but does not focus on this aspect of life. The play deals with the conflict between impulse, the creative aspect of man, and duty, the rational, social feature of mankind. Ibsen has crystallized this ele-

mental split in one brilliant schizophrenic character. What has happened to Hedda is that "society has entered in and become part of her personality"<sup>14</sup>, part of her impulsive nature. Hedda Gabler thus presents a three-fold image of man. On the first level are Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted, the representatives of complete social duty. Løvborg is the symbol of the irrational artistic impulse. Suspended between these two levels, containing the potential for both, is Hedda, the personification of the destructive force of impulse tied to the obligations of social duty. As a result, Hedda is psychologically destroyed by this inner conflict, and her creative impulsive nature nullified by the social conventionality that co-exists with it.

Like Hedda, master builder Solness is dominated by two conflicting inner drives, the artistic compulsion to create, and his fear that such action will destroy him. Unlike the idle Hedda, however, Solness has created something, has built houses for people and not allowed his impulsive nature to completely stagnate. He is obsessed with the great discrepancy between his former glory as a church-architect and his present artistic state. He sees in young Ragnar an image of his youthful self and senses the gap between Ragnar's potential and his own limited development

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<sup>14</sup>Northam, "Hedda Gabler" in Ibsenarbök, p. 79. This point is re-emphasized in almost the exact same words by Jens Kruuse, "The Function of Humour in the Later Plays of Ibsen", Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen (Oslo, 1971), p. 55.

as an artist since his youth. The result is that, as The Master Builder opens, Solness is a dissatisfied and frustrated man unable to work, incapable of creating any plans for the villa at Lövstrand. He comes on stage like a timid old maid, surreptitiously asking Kaja if the Broviks have gone. (I, 358) He refuses to expand his business to include new people. (I, 359) He apparently is satisfied with his present limited situation. To Brovik he pleads "I am what I am! And I can't change myself!" (I, 363) Brovik's illness seems to set the tone of the first act, which shows a tired, peevish master builder who is suffering from the illness of boredom and insecurity. When Kaja falls to her knees in a gesture of affectionate supplication, he immediately tells her to get up because he hears someone coming. (I, 365) Like Hedda Gabler, Solness seems to be repulsed by love in Act One.

Solness explains his illness to Dr. Herdel as a fear of youth. (I, 375) He feels his artistic security threatened by the younger generation. When Hilde Wangel admonishes him to follow his instinctual self, he replies that he is really as cowardly as the rest of mankind. (II, 413) The scene with his wife at the beginning of the second act helps to explain Solness' present discontent. Aline's thinly-veiled jealousy of Kaja and Hilde and her total lack of interest in her husband's work ("Where that new house is concerned, I can't believe anything." (II, 393) reveal the uncertain state of

this marriage. Her bitterness is the result of the death of her children, although her later elegiac description of the burning of her dolls (III, 425) reveals that "Mrs. Solness is not grieving over her children, but over her lost love and the innocence she knew as a child."<sup>15</sup> Her child-like nature was destroyed in the flames of the Solness mansion, and she instinctively blames her husband.

Instead of achieving satisfaction through his work, Solness is reduced to vicariously imagining his own artistic superiority. (II, 400) Hilde suggests to him that he may have a fragile conscience (II, 413) that has prevented him from achieving more than he has.

The picture of master builder Solness built up through the first two acts is clear enough. He is a discontented strong man, an inherently impulsive man who feels that he has not achieved his full artistic potential. Since the death of his children, Solness has concentrated his energy into building houses for society, and feels guilty as a result. His dissatisfaction is primarily a reflection of his artistic insecurity. Solness is a paradox, the secure man in the prime of life fearing a younger generation that he has effectively stifled, the fierce man who is really soft and gentle (III, 423), the artist who is unable

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<sup>15</sup>Richard Schechner, "The Unexpected Visitor in Ibsen's Late Plays" in Ibsen essays edited by Fjelde, p. 162.



to work.

This paradoxical element in the main character reflects the primary theme of the play, which is the paradoxical nature of the creative act itself. Solness' creative ability has allowed him to build houses and churches, but it has also deprived him of the ability to love that he had ten years earlier exhibited with Hilde. In order to create artistically, socially he must destroy. To be the master builder, Solness is forced to sublimate his own humanity: "To be able to build homes for other people, I have had to renounce... for ever renounce. . .any hope of having a home of my own."(II, 405) For him to become the master builder, his own house had to burn down and provide him with the opportunity to build over it. Solness himself says that "that fire, and that alone, was the thing that gave me the chance to build homes."(II, 405) In an extremely important passage, Solness analyzes what it means to be an artist: "All this I somehow have to make up for. Pay for. Not in money. But in human happiness. And not with my own happiness alone. But also with others'. Don't you see that, Hilde! That's the price my status as an artist has cost me ---and others."(II, 406)

The death of Solness' children further illustrates the theme of paradoxical creation. His children die not from the fire itself, but from an infection their mother

got following the fire. Significantly, it is from the mother's nipple, the source of life-sustaining milk, that the children acquire the deadly infection. It is also on that day his children die that Solness stops building churches.

Solness, the man who sacrifices his humanistic self to his artistic success, is reminiscent of the playwright himself. This fact is also important in re-emphasizing the play's central artistic focus. Although some critics insist that "Solness must not be equated with Ibsen"<sup>16</sup> and that the master builder's paranoia differentiates him from the healthy playwright<sup>17</sup>, the majority accept the strong biographical element in the play. William Archer asserts that "the churches which Solness sets out by building doubtless represent Ibsen's early romantic plays, the 'homes for human beings' his social dramas, while the houses with high towers, merging into 'castles in the air', stand for those spiritual dramas, with a wide outlook over the metaphysical environment of humanity, on which he was henceforth to be engaged."<sup>18</sup> Shaw also sees in the churches

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<sup>16</sup>Bradbrook, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup>Weigand, p. 300.

<sup>18</sup>William Archer, quoted in Meyer, Biography, III, p. 216.

Ibsen's historical dramas in verse and in the ordinary houses his social period.<sup>19</sup> Valency feels that "in this play, Ibsen manifests a more obvious, and therefore more deceptive, subjectivity than in any of his former works."<sup>20</sup> Michael Meyer calls The Master Builder "the most personal and revealing of all his plays, or at any rate the most consciously revealing."<sup>21</sup> Eric Bentley feels the play is "about Ibsen and nothing else."<sup>22</sup> F.L. Lucas fervently believes "that in this autumn of 1889 Ibsen experienced a good many of the feelings that intoxicated and tormented his master builder."<sup>23</sup>

Certainly the relationship between Hilde Wangel and Solness seems to be modelled on Ibsen's brief affair with Emilie Bardach. The only date mentioned in the play, September 19, coincides with the day Emilie and Ibsen spent together at Gossensass in 1884, and the Solness marriage suggests the unhappiness the Ibsens were experiencing at this time.<sup>24</sup> Ibsen's first childhood memory was of himself looking down from a high tower, while being held by a nurse and looking on

<sup>19</sup>Shaw, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup>Valency, p. 210.

<sup>21</sup>Biography, III, p. 209.

<sup>22</sup>The Playwright as Thinker (New York, 1967), p. 100.

<sup>23</sup>Lucas, p. 247.

<sup>24</sup>Meyer, Biography, III, p. 217.

into his own house.<sup>25</sup> In an early poem the playwright described himself as a master-builder.<sup>26</sup> To a question from a painter, Ibsen answered that architecture was his own trade.<sup>27</sup>

There thus seems to be enough biographical evidence and critical consensus to suggest that Solness is an aspect of the playwright himself, and that Solness' vocation, like Ibsen's, is essentially artistic. In The Master Builder, Ibsen is using his own inner self to portray the creative nature of Solness.

Hilde Wangel is also an integral part of the theme of paradox, the lively, vital impulsive young girl who is the instrument of Solness' death. In The Lady from the Sea, Hilde revealed her obsession with death through her fascination with the young dying artist Lyngstrand. In The Master Builder, she tells Solness that she has come out of a tomb. (III, 426) Her youthful innocence is modified by her excitement at the idea of rape. (II, 414) Like Løvborg, her reactions are instinctual and not determined by social convention. Without a trace of shame, she tells Solness of her unwashed underwear. (I, 377) Hilde's impulsive, highly ima-

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<sup>25</sup>Ibsen, Letters (Sprinchorn, ed.), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>Meyer, Biography, II, p. 178.

<sup>27</sup>Koht, p. 434.

ginative temperament is revealed in all her actions, and she represents the impulsive nature of Solness that has been destroyed.<sup>28</sup> She is the personification of Solness' youthful vitality and sexuality<sup>29</sup>, and represents the artistic freedom of his earlier days, when he was able to climb towers. As she monotonously and repeatedly points out, Aline represents a commitment to social duty, and is an effective symbol of Solness' burdened conscience. Ibsen is again posing the same problem of Hedda Gabler, but instead of one character containing within herself both qualities, The Master Builder shows the artist confronted by two concrete choices, the mindless energy of a Hilde and the restrictive social conventionality of Aline.

Solness' climb up and fall from the tower has been interpreted in various artistic, psychological, sexual, and theological terms. His action has been described as a triumph and a foolhardy act, as the work of a Promethean rebel and a frustrated, insane man.

What seems most important about the action is what this lack of critical agreement suggests, that the climb is ambiguous. Several modern critics have remarked upon the paradoxical nature of the final act. While comparing Solness

<sup>28</sup>Much of the argument that follows is based upon Charles R. Lyons' "The Master Builder as Drama of the Self", Scandinavian Studies XXXIX, (Nov. 1967), pp. 329-339.

<sup>29</sup>According to Dorothea Krook, "she represents love, and specifically sexual love." Elements of Tragedy, (p. 110). (1957), p. 110.

Solness to Daedalus, Leonard Quirino describes the final scene as "Ibsen's apotheosis of the master builder as the victim of a glorious defeat, the hero of a Pyrrhic victory."<sup>30</sup> John Northam has suggested that the wreath Solness places on the tower is a symbol of both the consummation of love and of death<sup>31</sup>; while Charles R. Lyons argues that "the ascent has the quality of a willed assertion and a surrender."<sup>32</sup>

Hilde describes Solness' accomplishment as doing the impossible (III, 444), and indeed Solness does attempt the impossible. His climb is both an expiation for the guilt feelings he has experienced and a creative impulsive act. In attempting to reproduce his past performances, he does re-create Hilde's youthful energetic response, which undoubtedly mirrors his own elation over his act and the overcoming of his fear. The harps that play in the air seem like the music of a muse that inspires Solness.

Yet even as he acts, Solness shows himself to be governed by forces beyond his control. The vertigo he suffers from is the acknowledgement of his essential earth-bound nature that cannot be ignored, as Solness momentarily has in his egotism, and he pays for his brief satisfaction with his life.

<sup>30</sup>Ibsen's Daedalus: The Master Builder", Modern Drama XII, p. 240.

<sup>31</sup>Ibsen's Dramatic Method, p. 182.

<sup>32</sup>Lyons, p. 338.

Despite the irony of its horrific outcome, Solness' action is a necessary ingredient in a cyclical creative process. Orley I. Holtan views this process as "the ritual sacrifice of the old king to make room for the new"<sup>33</sup>, but this seems overly limiting, for what Solness' act does is reassert man's creatively impulsive nature. The Master Builder suggests that despite the social forces that threaten to restrict it man's latent artistic self will emerge even at the cost of death or social retribution.

Arnold Rubek of When We Dead Awaken is, like master builder Solness, a dissatisfied artist whose life has become purposeless. After an initial creative outburst he has dissipated his talent through laziness. The major difference between the two men is that where Solness has spent his creative energy in the service of mankind building houses, Rubek has depreciated his talent through his mockery of the animalistic qualities of his models. Like Lövborg, Solness is primarily a beneficent social force, while Rubek's artistic gift has been perverted so that his sculpture degrades rather than uplifts man. Rubek's dissatisfaction is not, like Solness', an artistic insecurity that can be alleviated by a final creative gesture, but reflects a basic irrevocable choice he has made and now regrets.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 106. The Master Builder by Henrik Ibsen, trans. E. V. Rieu, London, 1911, p. 106.

A mood of cosmic lethargy is immediately established at the outset of When We Dead Awaken. Maja asks Rubek to listen to the silence, to the lifeless, sterile quality of existence which has "something dead about it." (I, 18) Ibsen employs the image of the stopped train (I, 19), a development from Hedda Gabler's metaphoric comparison of life to a train journey, to suggest this inertia. This cosmic ennui reflects the boredom of Rubek's life. Because of his own awareness of his frustrated creativity, Rubek cynically transfers his own failure to the world which "knows nothing" and "understands nothing." (I, 21) With the introduction of Irene, the cause of Rubek's condition becomes clear. As he tells her, he has sacrificed his youthful vitality and natural sexual impulse to the demands of his art: "I was convinced that if I touched you, if I desired you sensually, my vision would be profaned so that I would never be able to achieve what I was striving after." (I, 35) The result is that while he has achieved complete artistry, he has only become a partial man. Twice (I, 34 and II, 54) he insists on his pre-ordained right to become an artist. Typically, he looks upon the play of children analytically like a craftsman and not sentimentally like a human being: "There's a kind of harmony in their movements; almost like music." (II, 40)

This traditional paradox between life and art is at



the center of When We Dead Awaken. Where do artistic obligations end and the duties of life begin? How much of his own happiness and vitality must the artist sacrifice to his vocation? These questions dominate the play. To achieve artistic success, Rubek has to sublimate his natural impulsive nature and his capacity for human love. Ironically, Rubek's artistic success has also destroyed his artistic capability, for "in sacrificing love, the hero not only destroys his life's happiness, but also his highest creative possibilities."<sup>34</sup> Too late, Rubek begins to doubt the efficacy of art: "it suddenly occurred to me that all this talk about the task of the artist and the vocation of the artist was empty, hollow, and meaningless." (II, 45) His final discovery that he had "set that dead figure of clay above life, and happiness, and love" (III, 67) comes just before his death in the avalanche.

As in Rosmersholm, the final scene is highly ironic. Rubek's and Irene's wedding feast, which traditionally marks the beginning of a joyful union of two people, celebrates only their deaths. The two pairs of lovers end up in totally contrasting positions: "Maja and Ulfhejm return to what they think is life but what Rubek and Irene regard as death, while Rubek and Irene climb upwards to what the

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<sup>34</sup>Valency, p. 224.

others regard as death but they regard as life."<sup>35</sup> Even the setting of the play seems ambiguous. Although the action supposedly takes place in a "mountain health resort", the presence of an inspector, the fact that the inmates are forbidden out at night (I, 24), and Irene's past history of mental illness, make it very possible that When We Dead Awaken takes place at a mental institution.

Like Ghosts, When We Dead Awaken is about the failure to act, to immediately and impulsively commit oneself to a course of action that instinctively seems correct but upon rational examination appears foolhardy. Because Rubek did not attempt to make love to Irene, in order to preserve the purity of his statue, he has destroyed his creative loving nature to preserve an artificially sterile artistic career. Irene acts out in melodramatic terms Rubek's perversion of his art. Like Rubek, who has prostituted his art, Irene becomes a nude carnival dancer and a prostitute. Like Rubek, who has destroyed his capability for love, Irene says that she too is unable to love. (III, 57) Where Rubek cynically exploits people through his art, making animals of them, Irene too exploits men through her own particular sensual art which drives them mad. Irene's melodramatic description of herself as a ghoul (I, 33) symbolizes Rubek's own state of artistic lethargy. Rubek's refusal to accept her youth-

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<sup>35</sup>Meyer, Biography, III, p. 306.

ful sexuality has made her into another Hedda Gabler, a demonically destructive force. Like Hedda, her natural instinctual self has been destroyed and, like Hedda with her pistols, she expresses her frustration through her knife, which, being "the psychical memento of Rubek's art"<sup>36</sup>, symbolizes the death of her soul. It is the Irene and Rubek relationship above all that exemplifies the truth of A.R. Thompson's claim that "Ibsen was the poet of love destroyed rather than love fulfilled."<sup>37</sup>

While the focus of the play is upon the Rubek-Irene relationship, it is significant that the final words of the play are not given to either of these two but to Maja, Rubek's wife. Like the carefree children of the second act, Maja, together with Ulfhejm, presents an alternative mode of life to the sterile existence of Rubek and Irene. Maja is an impulsive character, as is immediately apparent at the opening of the play, where she begs her husband to leave the stifling resort. Her naïvely impulsive temperament brings Nora Helmer to mind. Like Nora, she is a restless creature whose basic drives are unnaturally stifled by the loveless marriage she has consummated. Maja suggests to Rubek that he only wanted her for sexual pleasure, to

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<sup>36</sup>Schechner, p. 163.

<sup>37</sup>The Anatomy of Drama (Los Angeles, 1946), p.326.

play games with (I, 22), a charge Rubek is unable to deny. Again like Nora she offers the promise of future sexual gratification ("I'll be so good if you do." (I, 36) if Rubek will allow her to go to the mountains. Maja is an energetic, vixenish, highly sexual creature, essentially "very primitive at heart"<sup>38</sup> who seeks to gratify her instinctive self. She is "the embodiment of sensuality, joy, warmth, and life."<sup>39</sup>

Maja, however, retains the façade of social convention unlike Ulfhejm, the bear-hunter she is attracted to. Ulfhejm is an ugly, coarse man who exists on a rudimentary cultural level. Robert Raphael has connected him with Borghejm of Little Eyolf and Erhart of John Gabriel Borkman<sup>40</sup>, and indeed all three are united by their similar impulsive characters. This "Scandinavian Stanley Kowalski"<sup>41</sup>, who is perhaps as close to a troll as Ibsen ever came to portraying in his later plays, lives a hedonistic existence in relative harmony with nature and his dogs. Unlike the repressed Rubek, who seems to have an equally strong sexual appetite but consciously controls it, he blatantly chases women, unmindful of social censure. Yet, as he points out to Maja, even

<sup>38</sup>Northam, Ibsen's Dramatic Method, p. 213.

<sup>39</sup>Brustein, p. 81.

<sup>40</sup>"From Hedda Gabler to When We Dead Awaken: The Quest for Self-Realization" Scandinavian Studies XXXVI, p. 43.

<sup>41</sup>Brustein, p. 81.

his vocation has its artistic aspect as well: "We both like tough material to work on, ma'am, your husband and I. He struggles with his blocks of--marble, I suppose it'd be-- and I with tensed and quivering bear-sinews. And both of us conquer our material in the end; make ourselves masters over it." (I, 28) Ulfhejm's life is by its very energy creative and contrasts with the sterile art of Rubek.

When We Dead Awaken concludes the playwright's final phase, his portrayal of the artist and the creative act. In these three plays, Ibsen reveals the artistic act as paradoxical, intellectually fertile but destructive of human love. In Hedda Gabler Ibsen examines the artist Løvborg and reveals how social pressures, manifested in one nihilistic character, can nullify and destroy the artistic impulse. The Master Builder is more concerned with the nature of the creative act itself and the psychological drives of the artist. When We Dead Awaken is more pessimistic about the artist's vocation, pointing out how the commitment to art can destroy human love and compassion. But even this deep pessimism is moderated by Maja's song of freedom, her impulsive commitment to life. Just as another genius had concluded his symphonic compositions some seventy-six years earlier, so Ibsen ends his final play with an ode to joy and freedom.

## V

From Peer's bride-rape to Maja's joyous song of liberation, Ibsen's plays consistently concern themselves with impulsive actions and characters, and with the effect impulse has on an inherently compulsive, lethargic society. In Peer Gynt, Nora Helmer, Dr. Stockmann, Molvik, Ulrik Brendel, the stranger from the sea, Ejlert Løvborg, Hilde Wangel, Borghejm, Maja Rubek, and Ulfhejm, Ibsen reveals this obsessional interest in the highly instinctive temperament. Many of his other characters are also driven in varying degrees by the necessity to express themselves through impulsive actions. The primary dramatic tension in Ibsen's plays results from this confrontation between the impulsive personality and an unyielding, resolute society which reacts by expelling this abnormal character from its midst.

Although this interest in the impulsive character is consistent in his drama, Ibsen's treatment of it is complex. His early plays tended simply to portray a vigorous, naïve character who struggled ineffectively against a well-entrenched, stultified society. In the plays following these early ones, Ibsen concentrated upon the social consequences of impulsive behaviour, depicting in three the effects of

instinctual action, particularly when forced upon people, and in three others the impact on characters of deliberate resisting of impulse. The creative, artistic impulse and its effects on human nature form the substance of the final three plays considered.

Despite the complexity and diversity of Ibsen's attitude to the impulsive personality, one point is clear. Ibsen considers impulsiveness an absolute necessity in the achievement of man's freedom. Although he may criticize the zeal of some of his more impulsive characters, Ibsen quite obviously prefers them with their shortcomings to the people who are enslaved by social convention. His sympathies lie with people like Nora Helmer, Dr. Stockmann, Ejlert Lövborg, and master builder Solness rather than with Torvald Helmer, Mayor Stockmann, Professor Kroll, and Jörgen Tesman, for they act according to their instincts to gain independence and freedom from moral and social restrictions. Freedom and independence are the goals Ibsen would set for mankind. Throughout his letters and speeches, these two concepts recur consistently: "He who possesses liberty as something already achieved possesses it dead and soulless; for the essence of the idea of liberty is that it continue to develop steadily as men pursue it and make it part of their being."<sup>1</sup> "I do not believe that it is our mission to be responsible

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<sup>1</sup>Letters and Speeches, Sprinchorn, ed., p. 108.

for the freedom and independence of the state, but rather to awaken individuals to freedom and independence—and as many of them as possible."<sup>2</sup> "For me, liberty is the first and highest condition of life."<sup>3</sup> "It is more imperative to liberate people than institutions."<sup>4</sup>

It was in fact "a revolution in the human spirit"<sup>5</sup> that Ibsen called for, and in his plays he implies that such a revolution could occur only if people acted according to their instinctual selves. As in all revolutions, there would be the innocent victims, the Hedvigs and little Eyolfs, but they are the necessary price to be paid. Although her own independence may be uncertain, Maja Rubek, in the playwright's last words, states Ibsen's goal for humanity, a goal that can be reached through a more instinctual life-ethic than that predominant in the society depicted in the plays:

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!  
When We Dead Awaken, Meyer, translation, III, 59.

<sup>2</sup>Letters and Speeches, Sprinchorn, ed. p. 179.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 106-107.



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Many of the more important selections from works not primarily concerned with Ibsen are reproduced either in the Fjelde or McFarlane collected essays. The important Francis Fergusson essay "Ghosts: The Tragic Rhythm in a Small Figure" from The Idea of a Theater is reprinted in Fjelde (pp. 109-119). The McFarlane selection contains his complete chapter from Ibsen and the Temper of Norwegian Literature (pp. 295-303), Raymond Williams' chapter on Ibsen from his Modern Tragedy (pp. 312-319), and George Steiner's view of Ibsen in The Death of Tragedy (pp. 303-306).