

PLAYWRIGHT HENRIK IBSEN AS A SOCIOLOGIST

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will pursue two themes about playwright Henrik Ibsen seen from a sociological perspective. First I will try to show how circumstances of Ibsen's life, particularly his long absence from Norway, his native country, influenced the social analyses and the social criticism in his dramas. Then I will describe how several Norwegian authors have analysed some of his dramas in a sociological perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906) is generally regarded as one of the greatest and most influential dramatists in world literature. He renewed the antique tragedy in the form of realistic prose pieces where ordinary people occupy the roles of the classical heroes. In this way Ibsen expanded and gave the bourgeois drama new artistic vitality and distinct social significance (Ystad, 2001).

The road to success went from the utmost misery to international fame and economic prosperity. His father, Knud Ibsen, belonged to the commercial elite of the town of Skien. The economic life of the town was at that time based on export of timber and iron. In 1834 Knud Ibsen got into economic problems and went bankrupt. Knud Ibsen then turned to heavy drinking and became an object of ridicule and disgrace in the small town. His social degradation also affected the education of his son, Henrik. But Knud Ibsen managed to get Henrik a position as a pharmacist apprentice in the small town of Grimstad, on the southern coast of Norway.

While in Grimstad, Henrik Ibsen got an illegitimate child that he had to pay child support for the next twenty years or so. Several times Ibsen was close to being imprisoned for not having been able to pay child support. In 1851 he was employed as an artistic manager at the Norwegian Theater in Bergen, on the west coast of Norway. In this position he got a thorough experience with theatre and acting. Ibsen was responsible for scenography, costumes and instruction of the actors.

In 1857 Ibsen got a position as a manager at Christiania Norwegian Theater in Oslo, the capital of Norway (at that time called Christiania). The years around 1860 became the most difficult years of Henrik Ibsen's life, and they formed the basis for the bitter feelings he later in life got towards his native country. Christiania Norwegian Theater got into deeper and deeper economic difficulties, which also affected the private economy of Henrik Ibsen. He also felt that he was neglected by the government of Norway when he applied for scholarships. In 1861 he was close to financial ruin and got involved in a number of legal cases of debt. At least six of the cases came to law enforcement. After this Ibsen's economic relations was exposed to the public, just as his father had been 25 years earlier.

He now became seriously ill with depression and a very high consumption of alcohol, and it has been claimed that he was on the verge of suicide. But from 1862 and onward his situation gradually became better, mainly thanks to his wife, Suzannah. Ibsen got a scholarship to gather Norwegian folklore and travelled around in the country. Friends raised money so he could get a scholarship to study abroad. In 1864 he travelled to Italy with his wife and son. This was to be the beginning of 27 years of what he called “voluntary exile”, and came to release an explosion of creative power that led to Ibsen’s decisive artistic breakthrough.

In 1866 he wrote “Peer Gynt”, inspired by his Norwegian background, especially folk tales and legends. The drama has a lot of literary references to Scandinavian and European writings, and the problems are universal, not local. Ibsen lived in Italy and Germany and he received numerous invitations to visit Norway. But he only went twice to his native country.

The 1870s has often been termed “the age of the modern breakthrough” and was marked by a demand for a critical, realistic tendency in literature. Literature should have a sting against traditional social forms and out-dated literary romanticism. Ibsen turned to these modern currents and their demands for social criticism. With the publishing of *The Pillars of Society* (1877) and his later dramas of social criticism, Ibsen created the modern, realistic drama, and from the publishing of *A Doll’s House* (1879) Henrik Ibsen became an internationally famous dramatist. These two latter dramas together with *Ghosts* (1881) and *A Public Enemy* (1882) are regarded as masterpieces in dramatic construction and description of people. At the same time these realistic dramas shook the whole world by their bitter social criticism.

When Ibsen now was played on stages all over the world, he became a gradually more skilful businessman and strategist in the financial administration of his works. He now became world famous and financially secure. But the program of critical realism became too narrow to him. He altered the course of his writing. In 1884 he published *The Wild Duck*. In this play the mysteries of the human mind are central and are depicted by ambiguous symbolism. And the road away from realism went further on, through plays like *Romsmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1889), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *The Master Builder* (1892).

From 1885 Ibsen was back in Norway. His behavior gives an impression of a ruthless artist’s egoism, but this picture is modified in his four latest plays; *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1900). These works are regarded as epoch-making art of balance on the edge between realism, symbolism and modernism. They can also be interpreted as a confrontation with himself, where he drills deeply into his own conditions and reveals his own complex character; hope and dreams of becoming an artist, brutality and egoism, anxiety and betrayal.

Social and Intellectual Context

Ibsen’s main themes seem to be some central questions of the modern, bourgeois, capitalist age (Ronning, 1980). Ibsen wrote in the second half of the 19th century. At that time the Scandinavian societies (of which Norway is a part) went through an enormous transformation by the break-through of modernization, capitalism and bourgeois society. Ibsen focused in many of his plays on problems of mature, capitalist society. He was concerned with the crisis

of liberalism, the conflicts of the bourgeois families, and the psychological break-down of the individual and the power of economy over human relations in capitalist society.

Ibsen was born into and grew up in a society that was underdeveloped compared to the rest of Western Europe. When he went into his “voluntary exile” on the European continent in 1864, he left a backward province only beginning to get a modern industry. 27 years later he returned to a society that had undergone rapid development, capitalist industries had emerged at a fast pace, political conflicts were sharp and a strong national literary and artistic tradition had emerged.

Ibsen thus had a European distance to the problems created by rapid change in a society in the periphery of capitalism. In Scandinavia the phases of capitalist development were pressed together in time, so the changes appeared as especially harsh and contradictory. Ibsen made these conflicts visible in their psychological effects. His dramas thus gave a core understanding of the social processes that made up the basis of late capitalist society.

In most of Ibsen’s production there were some central fields of problems that were examined. These problems became visible in various forms, but were often expressions of a basic understanding of capitalist society. One of these fields of problems was liberalism as an ideology. Ibsen connected to the liberal utopia, the ideals of 1789, that to his generation became alive again in the revolution of 1848. He seemed to maintain that capitalist or bourgeois society was unable to achieve the proclaimed liberty, equality and fraternity. The central conflict was the vacillation of liberalism between adjustment to practical politics and the maintenance of the utopia.

Central to liberal thought is the concept of the free and autonomous individual. Ibsen examined the problem of individualism over and over again. Several dramas centered on the relationship between the individual and the others, and whether the individual had the right to put himself above social and moral norms.

A second field of problems were how the bourgeois family as an institution was full of conflicts and also created conflicts. The family was, in Ibsen’s plays, something people entered into after having abandoned their happiness, or they entered blinded with the illusion that the family was a place of happiness. The bourgeois individuals sold their love in favour of a marriage without love, but with economical advantages. And all the parties suffered from this trade. The family killed happiness; it was an institution that prevented emotional fulfilment. Husband, wife and children were victims.

The family was also a place where power was executed, where all relations appeared as fight for power and domination. The weak women suffered, and the weakest party, the children, were sacrificed. At the outset of the dramas the family appeared as isolated from society. It seemed that Ibsen stuck to the myth about the family as a place for emotional intimacy and commitment. However, conflicts were drawn into the scene. They appeared through relationships between family members. They entered as demands from society outside the family. The conflicts could not be locked out, and the myth about isolated happiness in the family broke down under the pressure from a society where there was no happiness. The breakdown came in relationships with the economy and politics. The family was interconnected with these institutions in society. Women suffered more than men under these circumstances, but they carried a vision about freedom and another kind of life.

A third field of problems in Ibsen's dramas was the power of money. Money dominated and determined the relations between people. It poisoned the atmosphere in the bourgeois homes. In many dramas money tied husband and wife together, money was an obstacle to happiness and intimacy and led to death and destruction. The society Ibsen depicted was dominated by economic capital. People existed only as partners on business contracts. All relations were soaked with economy and struggle for power. Love became a commodity for trade and friendships could be cynically exploited. Private happiness was in an unsolvable conflict with economic interests.

Ibsen's dramas played very much on myths and images that were part of bourgeois ideology. First, these myths seemed to be accepted, but then they were revealed. The ideological structure was, by and large, connected to psychological patterns characterized by anxiety, conflicts and insecurity. Critique of the constraints of society appeared through depicting individual problems. The critique was articulated by use of symbols that were carriers of disaster and anxiety. These symbols were distortions of problems deeply rooted in social conflicts.

The Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, who came from an upper-class family, memorizes in his autobiography: "My mother knew "The Minister's Speech" ("Peer Gynt", 1866) by heart and recited it while we lay in bed longing for dad (his father was imprisoned by the German occupants, having done illegal work for the resistance movement). I took in Ibsen like a sponge in the desert by the first rain in fourteen years, that was when I read all of this author, who more than anyone revealed the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, who set his sharp light on the society I knew" (Galtung, 2000:45, my translation). After this general discussion of Ibsen in a sociological perspective, I will now turn to sociological analyses of some of his dramas.

Capitalism

John Gabriel Borkman (1896) is one of Ibsen's later plays. It seems to contain a clear denunciation of Borkman. He is a great financial criminal who abandons his fiancé for the sake of his own career, steals bonds, brings ruin to others and disgrace to his family. He denies all guilt and dreams about building a new business empire. Borkman dies exactly as he lived, possessed by a wish to be lord of all the forces of the world. He seems to realize that his dream to be master of the world never will come true. Then he can live no longer.

Fredrik Engelstad (1992) has argued that a key to a sociological understanding of John Gabriel Borkman may be an inherent contradiction between the great social and political goals that vigorous and dynamic people set up and their ability to reach these goals. Borkman has a vision of his own contribution to create a modern society. He wants to create communications, community and prosperity. But he fails.

Borkman's ability to shape a great vision of the development of society at the same time destroys his ability to realize this vision. The desire for power leads to power becoming a goal in itself, but the result is that he is unable to maintain a realistic image of his own ability. At the same time this makes Borkman blind for the moral demands of society. It makes him betray his love and steal the shares and bonds that are kept in a bank.

According to Engelstad, John Gabriel Borkman, confronts us with what could be called a fundamental ambiguity in capitalism; compared to earlier modes of production, capitalism

opens up for enormous possibilities of growth in human welfare and happiness. Nature actuates to serve humans in an unprecedented way. Wheels are set in motion, trade and communications bring people together.

But this system does not work as an automaton. To work it depends on daring individuals who can design plans and stake money to realize these plans. At the same time the system creates new positions of power. These new positions of power will far exceed the power of noblemen and princes of the pre-capitalist times. This is to say that capitalism by communications and technology expands the range of individual execution of power, and give powerful people a possibility to construct society in a way that was earlier unknown.

At the same time as capitalism gives enormous power to its leading men, it also gives opportunities for people from lower classes to move into positions of power. The road is opened also for uncultivated and ruthless lower-class persons to reach the highest positions of society. The idea that members of the lower classes climb up the social ladder by fraud and theft, was common in the 19th century. John Gabriel Borkman came from simple circumstances and had seen hard work and poverty. He knew what an easier life could be worth for people. And he knew that his own way out of the underclass does not lead anywhere if he is not willing to seize power.

A basic characteristic of capitalism as a system is that the welfare of many people depends upon someone who is willing to exercise this power. What happens to Borkman is that power becomes a goal in itself, and gradually more and more of a possession. He is willing to sacrifice his own love, and he does it.

Social Classes

Hedda Gabler (1890) can be interpreted as a drama about incompatibility between two different social circles. The play starts with Hedda Gabler and Jorgen Tesman, as newly married, coming home to their newly bought villa, far above their economic ability, but with the prospect of a chair as professor for the recent Ph.D. of cultural history; Tesman. There they arrive after half a year of honeymoon, where Dr. Tesman has sought up museums of brabantian medieval works of handicraft and his wife has become more and more bored.

Soon they get into contact with two earlier acquaintances, Eilert Lovborg, Hedda's earlier admirer/wooer and Tesman's former friend, now his possible competitor for the chair as professor. Eilert Lovborg has written a couple of noteworthy books, partly written in cooperation with Thea Elvsted. Thea Elvsted has run away from her husband and wants to save Eilert from a wild bohemian life and gain him for herself. Through Hedda's conversations with Thea and Eilert, Hedda's relation to Eilert is revealed, the same is the case with the relation between Thea and Eilert, that Hedda fears might become a more lasting one. Now Hedda set out with a game with Thea and Eilert. This game indirectly drives Eilert to his death, among other things through an excessive abuse of alcohol. Tesman's real estate agent, Brack, often comes to the Tesman home and he desires Hedda. He gets knowledge of her relationship to the death of Lovborg, and thus gets power over Hedda. This emotional pressure, among other things, leads to Hedda shooting herself.

Ryvold (1972) interpreted the play as showing the result of two incompatible social circles. These two circles were Hedda's conventional upper-class background (the daughter of a general) and the bohemian circles that can be glimpsed behind Eilert Lovborg's debauched

life-style. Through Hedda and Eilert a relation between these two social groups is established. However, it will be impossible with a marriage between them. In the upper-class of Hedda Gabler, such a relationship would be totally inappropriate and unacceptable. The social reality for Hedda then, is that whatever her personal opinion of Eilert Lovborg, a marriage between them would lead to social condemnation, loss of social prestige and social degradation. And Hedda is a lady of the upper-class with a wish to live in a luxurious way.

Jorgen Tesman was to Hedda a man with socially adequate qualities, decent and of good repute. He could at least realize her upper-class aspirations. During the dull and miserable marriage with Tesman, Hedda realizes that she failed when she rejected Lovborg before she married Tesman. This explains Hedda's renewed interest in Lovborg.

It can here be argued that a social group like the upper class has its own system of values that is expressed in the actions of the members. The way of life of Lovborg, when he got into contact with Hedda, was incompatible with prevailing values in the upper class. Through a contact with a deviant way of life, the values of the upper class would be made topical. The upper class will insist on their own values, and for a member of the upper class who enter into a relationship with the deviants, a situation of choice arises. The conflict can be solved either by rejecting the contact, or by accepting it. In the latter case it will have devastating social consequences for the person in question. This is, among other things, the way a social system is maintained in relation to other social systems.

Power

It seems that Ibsen's description of power was based on an acute observation of life in Norwegian small towns. He depicted power as the social pressure on all the citizens. This view of power can be seen as similar to what Max Weber (1971) termed traditional domination. Weber tied this primarily to tradition-bound support of a ruler or a group of rulers. Ibsen's description, on the other hand, focuses on the adaptation of the members into the dominant order of society. He did not only postulate the heavy burden of social conventions. He also demonstrated how conventions are generated and maintained. Traditions, expectations and norms not only exist, they are recognized and intentional. They obtain their weight by the total effects of many people exercising social control on a micro level. And they work because anxiety for the scandal is a common dominating motive in all people.

Engelstad (2001) argues that most of these mechanisms are concentrated in *The Pillars of Society* (1977). Ibsen's later plays go more thoroughly into themes that are struck in this play. Norms and expectations are carried on and reinforced through reading aloud, by warnings and corrections. To be in accordance with the norms, reality is reinterpreted through painting it more beautiful than it is, by oblivion and active denial. Mrs. Lynge, who is a newcomer in town, get a whispering introduction into what unpleasant events of the past that are not to be spoken about.

No one escapes the pressure of the prevailing morality. Young people are protected and looked after by the older ones, the older ones look after each other, and what can and can not be talked about. For everybody, but especially for the powerful, it is important to master how the person appears and is regarded in public. The thought of condemnation by others run as a red thread through the life of people of the upper class.

It is obvious that there has been a pietistic awakening in this town. It was supported by the higher circles out of the need to consolidate and make visible a solid business morality. To be worthy of credit and have extensive trust in public reputation is a key to economic success. This is made absolutely clear by consul Berninck, who is one of the main characters of the play. It is necessary when one is about to establish a railroad, which he is in the process of doing. But he must have felt it much more important when he in his younger days had to save the family business from bankruptcy when he had to conceal how dangerous the situation really was. This gave him undoubtedly a strong motive for taking a lead in the introduction of pietism and moralism in the small town.

The Family

Antonio Ferreira (1967) has described interaction in a family by his central concept of family *myth*. It is seen as a series of incoherent, myth-like conceptions that members of a family have about each other and the relations among them. Ferreira used the concept of family myth to shed light on the problem of psychosis. He argued that it was insufficient to see psychosis in a family member in terms of inner psychic conflicts in the person. Psychotic behavior had to be regarded in terms of the role-distribution within the family. Some families can only function fairly stable at the expense of defining one member as ill. The illness, the bizarre behavior, is not something the person “has”, but is part of a pattern, the interaction pattern of the family. To change the behavior of the patient is almost impossible; the whole family must adjust to new rules for being together, to reach a new balance on a new basis.

Ferreira further argued that the family myth was an integrated part of the system of balance within the family. Family myth contributes to define the nature of the relations by assigning roles and prescribe behavior. The enormous significance of family myth is first fully recognized when you see how each family member fights to maintain a family myth. In some families it even seems that the myth is the only thread that prevents the family for total breakdown.

The contents of the myth are often that one family member is ill, the others are healthy. The myth makes a single member the problem, and that is the patient. In this way the myth protects the family from seeing that the illness is situated in the relations between the family member, they do not have to deal with the real conflicts. The family myth is a group defence against disturbances or changes in the relations between the family members. In this way, the family myth has an important function to maintain the relations as they are, and the assertions of the myth can be far beyond “facts and realities”.

Ericsson (1972) has shown how the concept of family myth can shed light on the play *Little Eyolf* (1894). The play is about a family of four: Alfred Allmers, his wife, Rita, Asta; Alfred’s half-sister and Eyolf, the son of Alfred and Rita, nine years old and crippled. In the first act we encounter a relatively well integrated family, where a long routinized family myth consolidates stable relations between the family members. In the second act the myth has broken down, and the latent conflicts pour out in a chaotic and uncontrolled way. The entire habitual pattern of interaction unravels. In the third act we see how the family strive to achieve a new balance, a balance resting on another basis than the ruined family myth.

At the outset of the play, there is no sign of any other problems in the family than a natural worry and compassion for the disabled son. But a mysterious old lady, called the Rat Maid, enters the family home. She offers her services to get rid of rats and mice by alluring the

animals into water so they drown. But Rita Allmers says they have no use of that kind of services. The Rat Maid leaves by saying that if anything in the house gnaws, they can just call on her. She has noticed that under the harmonious surface something gnaws in the Allmers family.

After this, Alfred tells Rita and Asta that he has decided to give up his literary ambitions and devote himself to little Eyolf. Here again is emphasized that the problem of the family is poor little Eyolf, from now on all attention will be paid to him and his illness. But now it turns out that Eyolf is a problem in another way as well. Rita is not very happy with Alfred's decision to devote his life to the son. She feels that she will be left in the shadow, she will not compete with anybody about Alfred's love. She comes close to saying that she wishes Eyolf dead. In his fascination with the Rat Maid Eyolf goes into the sea and drowns.

The grief the parents feel from the loss of their son is interpreted by Ericsson as rather a grief over the loss of a habitual pattern of interaction. The death of little Eyolf has fully upset the balance of the system, releasing an outburst of previously denied conflicts. The persons have no longer a stable way to relate to each other. The family faces dissolution; Asta will leave the family, Alfred has decided to leave Rita. But Rita begs Asta to stay. This can be interpreted as an attempt to put her in Eyolf's place, as an object of pity and a lightning rod for the conflicts between Alfred and Rita. But Asta leaves and the couple has to formulate a new set of family rule for themselves.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to show how playwright Henrik Ibsen in his dramas, particularly from the 1870s on, captures some central themes and dilemmas of modern, liberal, bourgeois society. This can partly be explained by his distance from his home country of Norway in the crucial years of modernization of the country. At the same time, Ibsen got many impulses from continental Europe and the center of modern, western thought. I have also given some examples of social or sociological analyses of chosen plays. Although the main themes of Ibsen and modernity can be seen in most of his plays after the 1870, the plays I have chosen for analysis seem to give a condensed exposition of the afore-mentioned themes.

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