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Social Analysis in the Ibeen Drama

Rebecca A. Pitts

(Handwritten notes and text)
Social Analysis in the Ibsen Drama.

Forty of fifty years ago it seemed that the rollicking mirth and breathless passion of romance was gone, perhaps forever, from the pages of world literature. It was a strenuous time, in which a Browning preached determined optimism, and a Tennyson tried to reconcile science and religion for the doubters, while novelists and dramatists the world over were trying to improve society from their respective pulpits and soap-boxes. It was a solemn epoch, a little too self-conscious about its ethical duty, and a little exaggerated in its attempts at social reconstruction; but it swept out for us many an old musty belief, exposed to our view many corruptions we might not have dared to drag out, and, in fine, proved to be a period of wholesome though somewhat painful self-scrutiny on the part of society.

In the midst of this disturbed scene stands a lonely little figure with keen blue eyes, who for thirty years watched at the bed-side of diseased Society, so to speak, and mailed out, from time to time, terse bulletins as to its welfare, or vivid and even repulsive diagnoses of its symptoms. As dramatist and technician in his art, Henrick Ibsen was undoubtedly a great and influential figure; but as an intellectual force in educating people to the actual evils about them and as a moral force in arousing their consciences to a horrified repudiation of these evils, he was the greatest figure of his day. Perhaps he was not a genius for all time, capable of evoking the tears and laughter of generation after generation to come; but he was a prophet to his age, and an inspiration to his fellow dramatists. Indeed, it might be said of him, from the artistic and technical standpoint, that just as Spencer is known as "the poets' poet," so Ibsen might be called the "dramatists' dramatist." But his intellectual and moral message is for everyone -- at least till the evils he scourged have been removed.
Ibsen did not develop all at once into so clear-sighted a destroyer of social illusion. As a young man, in fact, his tendencies were all poetic and romantic, and in that field he won his first recognition. After several boyish crudities, he finished his first significant piece, "Lady Inger of Ostrat," in 1854. This play is almost lyrical in tone, and is thoroughly romantic; there are three great characters, who are nevertheless subdued a little to the general mood of the whole. The setting is in a Norwegian castle in medieval days, at a time of national feeling at high pitch because of a broil with Denmark. Lady Inger is a powerful figure, who reminds me decidedly of Lady Macbeth; she has passion, dignity, cunning, and ambitions for which she does not scruple to sacrifice her daughters. Her great antagonist is Nils Lyppa, the Danish knight, whom Ibsen makes too powerful and too seductive for his place in the drama. The clash between these superb opponents results in the seduction of Fru Inger's daughter, Elina, by Lyppa, and the murder of her son by her own unwitting command. The theme of the crafty mother willing to do anything to advance the cause of an illegitimate son who is dear to her, but in reality working against him and finally causing his ruin, is very suggestive of Norma in Scott's "Pirate." Lady Inger is a good play, decidedly poetic in tone, and with well-managed though somewhat too theatrical situations. It is a far cry from a play like this to -- "An Enemy of the People," for instance.

"The Feast at Solhang," which was produced in 1856, is a much weaker play, and shows evidence of earlier construction, if not actual composition. There is considerable vigor and passion in the action, for all that, and some highly interesting character-delineation. Here again, as in "Lady Inger," we find two women in direct relationship with one strong man - one woman strong and stern, and the other sweet and gentle and graceful. The fresh loveliness of Signe blows like spring through "Solhang," suggesting
such later creations as Agnes and Solveig -- Ibsen's womanly ideal until the shock of doubt permanently shattered Woman for him, and he saw her as a tortured and incomplete failure. Some critics also see in the smug complacency of Bengt a foreshadowing of the "simple husband" type later found in Helmer and Tesman. Other than for these hints, however, the play is significant.

"The Vikings at Helgeland" is an interesting adaptation of the famous Nordic legend known variously in Scandinavia and Germany as the "Nibelungenlied," the "Story of Siegfried," and "Sigurd and Brynhild." Ibsen's rendering is worthy of our momentary notice for several reasons: first, it is the last of his plays to subdue character and action to a romantic mood; second, it is his first use of direct and vigorous prose dialogue; third, there is an interesting contrast between Ibsen's rather realistic and human treatment of the story and the shadowy, legendary grandeur of the original (a contrast by no means to Ibsen's advantage, by the way); and fourth, it is a foreshadowing of the dramatist's power in depicting feminine decadence. Hiordis, the Brynhild of the saga, is a character of great motive energy; she fills the picture wholly, with a subtle, sensuous femininity holding both Sigurd and Gunnar in absolute subjection. Her desires are high and lustful; she is cruel and unscrupulous in her efforts to gratify them. She has none of the heroic yet womanly nobility of Brynhild; and it is very probable that her animal nature, as Max Beerbohm says, would have been just as well satisfied in the embrace of the bear. In this play, as well, we have the same contrasted women: the gentle Dagny and the terrible Hiordis. This was a situation Ibsen became increasingly fond of.

Chronologically, "Love's Comedy" is out of place, apparently, for crudely as it is executed, it is indubitably in the spirit of Ibsen's
analytical period; yet here it is -- published in 1862, before Ibsen has even begun "The Pretenders," and long before he has formulated in "Brand," "Peer Gynt," and "Emperor and Galilean" the social and ethical philosophy which guided him later in his criticism of modern life. He made a grave artistic mistake in writing "Love's Comedy" in rhymed couplets -- which, sparkle though they might, detract decidedly from the effectiveness of realistic conversation. The scene of "Love's Comedy" is laid in a little Norwegian town, modern, provincial, and smug. The characters are the usual merchants, lawyers, preachers, poets and doctors of the average Philistine community -- with a liberal sprinkling of sentimental old maids and dull, respectable married couples. The conversation, in spite of the couplets, is very natural small talk and gossip; as the play opens the guests at a garden-party are discussing recent engagements, and love and marriage in general. A great deal of sentimental rubbish is being indulged in, when Falk, the young cynic, bitterly dissatisfied with life as he knows it, bursts upon the scene.

In a brilliant tirade he shows how early passions fade, and how generous lovers like Mr. and Mrs. Strawman degenerate into dull caricatures under the exigencies of marriage. All the idealism that we are fed on in youth, he says, and that makes love lovely while it lasts, is what makes it impermanent, and married life a long boredom. Love, says Falk, and then give up love while the intensity of passion still glorifies everything in life, and then spend the rest of your life in the memory of that dream -- but for your soul's sake don't marry the woman you love. In other words, it is a clear-cut case of love or marriage -- and not both. It is interesting to note that Strawman, the married pastor, is the first of that long line of clergymen at whom Ibsen points the finger of derision.

Svanhild, the fair girl whom Falk loves, is faced with the necessity of choice between accepting Falk's passion for the time, leaving
when the first glow of love has faded -- and accepting the prosaic marriage offer of Guldstad. Guldstad, in a business like way, realizes that life and marriage are not poetic dreams; and he is willing to take Svanhild even with Falk's kisses still glowing on her lips. Svanhild considers, and then says good-bye to Falk, who goes out into loneliness with very little, it seems to me, to console himself with.

Though brilliant, in a youthful fashion, "Love's Comedy" offers no solution of the two extremes, and is in that respect justifiably resented as an impertinence. The humor is fitfully bitter, but no doubt healthful; it is of a sort, however, which people bristle at. The public at first felt that Ibsen's attack upon marriage was wholly unjust; later they saw some truth in his picture, and hated him for making them doubt.

Yet by implication, and in the light of his later work, the play is by no means hopeless. Ibsen attacks the convention of love-making which emphasizes an idealized or sentimentalized version of the sensual root of mating process -- which is admittedly ephemeral. In other words, we should recognize the fact that "romantic love" is animal in origin, and, though beautiful while it lasts, must go; while married life must be placed on some other basis. Shall it be a purely business arrangement? "Love's Comedy" says yes; Ibsen's work as a whole -- no. Freedom, truth, honor in the relationship of comrade to comrade would make a lasting union, and would render bearable the business partnership -- so often dull -- after passion goes -- as it always does.

"The Pretenders," Ibsen's last drama in the romantic style, was published in October, 1863. In many respects this is one of the greatest plays he ever wrote, noble in style, vivid in the portrayal of great characters, and profound in its analysis of success and failure, and the inevitability of progress. As a work of art it may survive, with "Peer Gynt,"
such productions as "Ghosts" and "An Enemy of the People" by many centuries. In its bearing on Ibsen's philosophy and development as a thinker, however, it has small value for us. In passing we might note that Ibsen was comparing himself to Skule, and Bjornson to Hakon, the favored child of destiny.

With the completion of "The Pretenders" Ibsen's long apprenticeship closed. He had learned how to draw character in both romantic and realistic manner; he had foreshadowed much of his later method in character-contrast and combination; he had "taken a shot" at real social criticism in "Love's Comedy;" and he had shown himself a master in understanding women. An interesting thesis might be written on the development of the woman-concept in Ibsen, and how, in thirty years, the tone of the "woman saga" changed so in his ears, but we can only suggest it here.

Hitherto, we may be justified in feeling, Ibsen's work, though artistic and to a certain degree inspired, had not yet been driven to creation by the "consuming vision" of a prophet. No great ideal seems to blaze in this earlier work, and much of it, even from the artistic standpoint, seems a bit labored. But, during those first busy years in Rome, in the midst of his efforts on the composition of the Emperor Julian tragedy, so long delayed, there grew into consciousness in Ibsen's mind a new play, infinitely removed in spirit from all he had done before. And it was the Norse spirit -- the Norse vision -- that was groping its way out, not Roman antiquity. So in spite of white marbles and sunny Italian skies, it is the austere Norwegian scene, with its fiords and hills and snow, that is expressed in "Brand." With the sudden clarifying of inspiration Ibsen set to work, driven by a force he had never felt before, and in November, 1865, the task was finished.

"Brand" is the first of the three great dramas in which Ibsen set himself consciously to express his ethical and spiritual philosophy, and to
represent the great conflicts in human life and thought. It is the story of a priest spurred on relentlessly by the claims of an austere ideal, believing that he must sacrifice, willingly, all that makes life human and lovely; demanding the same sacrifice of "All or Nothing" from others; and imposing his own uncompromising idealism on others to such an extent that he wrecks their lives and is himself crucified by agony. A consuming spiritual energy fills the play, overcoming tremendous barriers; it is symbolized by Brand's physical daring in surmounting the stern Norwegian mountains.

We first met the young pastor going to visit a dying girl over ice and snow, trying to inspire the faint-hearted peasants to go also. They are not really so faint-hearted, but argue that in the general balance of good and ill it is foolish to sacrifice so much for so doubtful an end. So often, throughout the play, similar valid arguments are urged, but Brand always insists on crashing right ahead, believing that the will is necessary to gain an ideal end. His continual feeling is one of vexations with the limitations of the average man. Meeting two romantic lovers, Einar and Agnes, he impresses them by the harsh contrast of his demands with their light-heartedness. He is bent on burying the old God, and introducing the fierce young God of courage and sacrifice and whole-heartedness. As he leaves the lovers, he has left his picture in the heart of Agnes, who has matured under his gaze. Gerd, the wild girl of the play, is shown hunting the falcon of compromise in the crags -- a symbol of something in Brand's own life.

We find him later refusing to give to charity because the people need ideals more than bread, but he is willing to give up his life to visit a mad-man. His heroism attracts Agnes, whom he later marries, and the peasants, who, though they do not understand him, want him for their pastor. He wants bigger fields, but feels that since he is called to sacrifice, he
must, and stays. Upon his marriage with Agnes he feels a deeper responsibility and sympathy for the race, and labors even harder, in fulfilling himself.

His uncompromising idealism is shown by his dealings with his mother, who is a miser and has bitterly disappointed him by her selfishness, and her willingness to sell life and even love for gold. He will not stir out of his house to go to her death bed, because she has not given up all of her money, and thus perjured herself.

Brand loves his wife and child, but demands "All or Nothing" even from them, chastening wherever he caresses. His God is the God of justice who sends bitterness; the only love is that based on justice. The old Doctor, who has tried to persuade Brand to go to his mother, now points out, kindly enough, that Brand is doing the right thing in leaving this harsh climate for the sake of his baby's health. Brand has been preparing to go, but reminded that here he is evading a chance to sacrifice his dearest possession, decides to stay at his post. Broken-hearted, Agnes clings to him, trying not to judge him. The baby dies. The Mayor, too, has had his time of trying to persuade Brand that moderation and allowance for human weakness is best -- that you cannot expect much of men suddenly. This philosophy Brand despises; he will make the race heroic.

And so on. Conscious though he is of his dependence upon Agnes' love, he deliberately drives her on to the sacrifice of her tender grief for the baby; and she, having achieved a completer renunciation than he had hoped, dies. You cannot "look at Jehovah and live." Brand has been building a new and bigger church, but on the eve of its dedication he realizes that the need of the people is for a deeper spiritual life -- not for a bigger church; and, fired by prophetic energy, he leads them out on a pilgrimage. The end is disillusion for the people, who, quite naturally, come to believe
him mad, stone him, and return home. Left alone in the mountains, Brand wanders on. Everyone but himself seems to fear sacrifice -- faint-hearted, cowardly, half in earnest. Then the vision of Agnes comes to him, with a hint of what life might be, if he gave up his stern cry of "All or Nothing." But he will not compromise, and the vision goes. On and up he climbs, to Gerd's Ice Church, driving himself by the will which he has consistently exercised throughout. But when he gets there, it is cold, loveless and unreal. And then only does he shed tears of real human agony, and calls on Christ, the spirit of love. Just then Gerd's rifle-shot brings down the avalanche, and as he is crushed, Brand meets it with a cry of doubt. Has he, in willing so much and so severely, missed everything?

Brand, in his life and philosophy, represents Ibsen's second empire of the spirit -- that is, Christianity in all its unrelieved austerity. The beauty of sacrifice and self-denial, as a means of attaining the Ideal, is shown with wonderful vividness. Self-realization, according to Brand, lies through self-slaughter; and compromise is the deadly sin.

That Ibsen had no sympathy with this philosophy in its entirety is evident; he keeps our sympathy with Brand solely by making him suffer; we feel the justice of the outcome, because of his crime in forcing others to the same course as his own. Sacrifice is a virtue only when it is spontaneous with the individual. We feel the force of the Brand view of life however, especially tempered as it is at the close by love.

Ibsen undoubtedly intended "Brand" as a scourge for Norwegian half-heartedness and indolence. Otherwise, however, its direct bearing upon social criticism is slight. It is a mistake to think of Brand as a pastor any more than as a sculptor; the spiritual meaning is the essential thing. There is a little satire on local types, I suppose, in the persons of the Doctor and the Mayor; but the main interest of the play for us, and the sole reason for the above extended discussion, lies in the fact that it
Drained of all mental and physical strength for a time by the demands of this work, Ibsen was ripe for disease and misfortune, which overtook him. After his recovery, and receiving the grant which the king allowed him, he was in such high and hopeful spirits that it is not surprising he wrote such a masterpiece as "Peer Gynt." If Brand represents Puritan austerity and restraint, then Peer is the embodiment of pagan joy, trying to fulfill himself, not through sacrifice, but through experience. All-sufficient, imaginative, rollicking, Peer is the easy-going hero of a thousand misadventures, acknowledging no law save that of self-realization. Brand is super-positive, says Moses, in his strength and castigation of Norway's weakness; Peer is super-negative in his all-inclusive humanity -- the very weakness of Norway herself.

We see this lovable liar at first telling big stories to his mother about the wonderful adventures he has been through; she knows he is a liar but the imagination of both of them is so strong that they both believe in spite of themselves. Ase at last is so provoked that to rid herself of her scoldings Peer lifts the little woman on top of a shed and goes off in his rags to a wedding. Ingrid, an old sweetheart of his who turned him down because he was such a worthless braggart, is marrying, and Peer goes to the feast. The girls and boys all hoot at him, however, and will have nothing to do with the ragged ruffian; by accident, nevertheless, he meets Solveig, a fresh and lovely girl whose goodness abashes him. She does not altogether spurn him, for something mysterious has happened to them both; she does show plainly, though, that she fears him and distracts him. Pained and angry, the foolish boy, on the impulse of the moment, steals the bride, Ingrid, and carries her off to the mountains, where he spends the night with her. She was
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evidently fairly willing to go; a remnant of her old love for Peer possibly impelled her. On waking, sick at heart, Peer regrets his folly, and casts Ingrid off without a qualm, blind to the obligations he has incurred -- and to the consequences of soiling oneself for a passing humor.

Peer is pursued by angry townsfolk; only his mother understands that his mental nourishing when a lad is responsible for his wild, wayward ways. Feeling the need for action, Peer runs away, and meets the saeter-girls on the highland pastures. His sport with the saeter-girls in that lonely place is the most fascinating thing in the whole play, poetically, but is most inexplicable. It must have been Pan -- the elemental in him -- breaking out irresistibly when he feels himself outcast.

Then, sick and dizzy, he finds himself alone, with only a sad longing to be clean. In a mood of resolution he strikes out, only to meet the Green-Clad Woman. She drags him into the hall of the Dovre King, down into the very lowest mire of lust. In the midst of a hideous and bestial scene, which he and the Trolls pretend is very beautiful, he is about to marry the Troll woman. To do so, however, he must become like them, wear a tail, slit his eyes, and so forth. This certainly would be Peer's philosophy of self-realization carried to the extreme indeed. The Trolls are to themselves enough; vile and hideous in reality, they deceive themselves into thinking their life beautiful; each is the center of an unreal, subjective world of ugly self-gratification. But Peer is the temporizer, the eluder of responsibility; though he believes the world exists for him, and that his life is complete when he realizes it in experience -- nevertheless he will not be anything irrevocably. If he should slit his eyes, he would be a Troll forever, and his motto is "always leave a way out." He is willing to deceive and soil himself, but he will not be thorough-going even in lust. So he tries to fight his way out, in the darkness, and after a battle with
the Boyg, a terrible and elusive creature symbolic of compromise, and irresolution, he reaches upper air.

He builds himself a little hut in the forest, not feeling worthy to go down to his mother and Solveig; in fact, it would not have been safe. So living, Solveig comes to him, attracted by a passion he can now never feel. He loves her, tenderly, pathetically, as a comrade, but he cannot take her in the sense she gives herself. She came too late. And then the Green Woman and her son - and Peer's - the Ugly Brat, come to share his home. He drive them away, but realizes that they will always be returning and spoiling his life with the pure Solveig; the only way is for him to leave.

He goes to see Ase, and finds her dying. His last act as a son is to drive her in make-believe, with the bed-post as horse, clear to the gates of heaven, pressing her dead lips to his cheek, then, as the driver's pay. In this scene, one of the tenderest and richest in all literature, we see the loveliness and humanity of a fellow like Peer; and would undoubtedly prefer to live with him than with Brand.

Many years pass. Peer lives the scheming, inconsequent, materialistic life most men live. Egotism, philandering, temporizing are essentials of his nature. He shocks even his hard-headed associates by a determination to enter the Graeco-Turkish war on the side of --- Turkey. The winning side pays. But everywhere he is careful to leave a way out in case he changes his mind. Finally, after being fleeced by a girl he thought he was in love with, he lands in an insane-asylum -- as logical a place for a person of his temperament as the Ice Church was for Brand.

Finally, having escaped from the mad-house, he sets sail for Norway, where Solveig has all the while been waiting for him. On board the ship he is accosted by a strange Passenger, perhaps symbolic of the terror in the
depths of his soul, who insists that real victory is given in dread.

On the way to Solveig's hut, he meets the Button-Moulder, who asks him what he has done to justify his existence as a separate entity. He has never been good, never bad, only wrongly cast and misused. He, who so proudly all his life had claimed that his philosophy was "Be Yourself" could not prove that he had even been that.

In gratifying the whim of every moment, instead of realizing himself through experience, he has dissipated energy in so many directions that there is nothing left of him. He has never dared to "stick by" a conviction, and even his refusal to forfeit his own being for that of a Troll was largely because of his dislike for being anything long. The Button-Moulder threatens him with dissolution as a personality if he cannot prove that he has been some one thing, at least, consistently. Here Solveig, then, rescues him, saying, "You have made all my life a beautiful song." "Where was I, myself, all these years?" asks Peer. "In my faith, in my hope, and in my love," she answers. So the play ends on the same chord as "Brand." Love is the saving influence.

In "Peer Gynt" we see the half of life complimentary to that in "Brand". Pagan, care-free- irresponsible, the hero is everything that Brand is not, yet his end is less miserable than Brand's; his life is no less empty of the really satisfying. After all, they both, Ibsen seems to say, missed the point sadly. Brand failed to realize his life's possibilities, and to affect other lives for good in his stern attempt to go through -- without compromise. Peer, aiming at self-realization through the satisfaction, not the restraint of his desires, almost failed to retain any shred of reality at all. He tried to go around all obstacles and compromise was his watchword. Peer, ironically enough, in the language of popular Christianity, was a "bad" man; yet the only person he ever really hurt was himself. Brand, by the same standards, was a "saint," yet everyone whose life
he touched he made miserable.

If Ibsen had stopped here in his thinking, he could never have written his social dramas. Beautiful as the last two plays are, the undertone of meaning in both is fraught with despair. Life as we can see it everywhere is full of evils and obstacles — demands upon our care, responsibility, and pity. Brand and Peer are two great representative characters who have faced life from the two extreme points of view; and both have been blotted out in futility. Not only were their physical fates tragic, their circumstances painful; their very life-purposes have been frustrated as well. Is there, then, no point of view from which one may meet personal problems wisely, and attack social evils sanely and with clear eyes?

For many years, intermittently, Ibsen had been grappling with the conception of Emperor Julian's apostasy — a fascinating theme, offering opportunities for many ways of treatment. Undoubtedly, the subject grew in his mind first historically, as an illustration of the fall of the old classic, pagan culture before the onslaught of the cutting blade of Christianity. The doubts in a great leader's mind, and his wistful yearning for "the old beauty that is no longer beautiful" in the midst of a "new truth that is no longer true," would no doubt possess a great interest for a mind as keen as Ibsen's. In treating the story itself, which need not be outlined here, so familiar is it, he departed but little from actual fact. He committed the error, however, of making Julian, in Part Two, degenerate into a blood-thirsty fanatic, while historically he preserved a certain philosophic calmness to the end.

"Emperor and Galilean," the play which Ibsen finally completed, is not in itself a great work of art at all; but taken in connection with and explaining the rest of his plays, it is very significant. The old pagan culture is gone — with the beauty of song and revel, the full-blooded enjoyment of all natural joys, the ecstatic thrill of beauty, the calmly balanced intellectual philosophy — gone; and in its place has grown up an austere and
flaming religion, substituting religious ecstasy for art, asceticism for
revel, and sacrifice and sorrow for song. "Since the Galilean came," says
Julian, "all natural joys have become sins." It is easy to compare these
two culture viewpoints with those of "Peer Gynt" and "Brand" respectively.
But, says Ibsen, Julian retrogressed in trying to reinstate paganism. Its
day is done. Julian, with his "vine-leaves in his hair" (suggestive, by the
way, of Eilert Lovberg in "Hedda Gabler") was guilty of a silliness; pagan­
isim is for the childhood of the race. Furthermore, he says, Christianity,
with its austerities, its sorrows, its self-conscious efforts at saintliness,
is very comparable to adolescence and its difficulties. Adolescence is al­
ways uncomfortable, and the thing for humanity to do is to grow as quickly
as possible into the "third empire," which was the great conception of Maxi­
mus the Mystic. Maximus merely made the mistake of hoping that Julian was
the man to usher this in; Julian was no more than an agent of the great
world-will, appointed to be a scourge for the faltering Christians. The day
of the "third empire" has not yet dawned.

The "third empire", historically, will be an era of social harmony,
of broad perfecting of institutions, in the spirit of truth and freedom.
Old errors and evils will fall away, and men will have a clearer conception
of what life may mean spiritually. It will mean a combination of pagan har­
mony, tolerance, and beauty with Christian sacrifice and earnestness. For
us as individuals the "third empire" means a realization of the whole man in
his splendid maturity -- a free being with a firm grip on truth, consecrated
to high deeds, yet full of "the joy of life." Every faculty must be alive,
the sensuous as keenly as the spiritual.

In the light of this splendid and clearly defined ideal we find
Ibsen now turning to modern institutions and individuals, probing for flaws
and failure, pointing out with keen analysis where they fail to measure up
to so finely balanced a standard.
Ibsen's ethical and social consciousness deepened materially as he wrote his social dramas; he became more and more a fine thinker in the field of analysis and examination; but his fundamental convictions as to conditions as they ought to be never changed much after he had finished his formula in "Emperor and Galilean."

We shall now proceed to examine in some detail the thirteen Ibsen plays commonly known as the "social dramas." In these we shall find some very vigorous attacks upon modern life and existing conditions from various angles. For convenience in comparison, I have rearranged the order somewhat from the chronological; as the themes of some seem to group naturally together, though the actual dates of their composition, in some cases, were widely separated.

It is decidedly a far cry from the "purple patches" of "Emperor and Galilean" to the sausage and sauerkraut atmosphere of "The League of Youth," which was published before the former was completed. That curious phenomenon of the interposition of a dramatic type far different from his usual style, was again repeated -- as in the case of the appearance of "Love's Comedy" between "The Vikings" and "The Pretenders." "The League of Youth" is the first definitely critical social drama he ever wrote. It has the added distinction of being written in modern prose.

This excellent though rather artificial farce deals with the activities of a young demagogue named Stensgard, a shallow egoist who dreams himself a leader of the people. He at first is a radical republican, organizing his young friends into a "league" to overthrow the established order. Accident, however, throws him into the society of the conservatives, and especially the aristocratic Bratsberg family, at which turn of fortune he suddenly develops a fondness for refined society. From then on he is torn between the two factions, buffeted by fortune, and the ready tool of both sides by reason of his temporizing attitude. He reminds me very much of
Peer Gynt in his efforts to leave himself a "way out"; by reason of his refusal to close with any one course and follow that one honestly he is made the laughing stock of the whole town, and is finally ruined.

There is some rattling good fun in the pseudo-romantic passages; on one occasion Stensgard is in the position of having proposed to and been accepted by no less than three women. When he tries to "cash in" at the last, however, he is turned down by all three.

There is a great deal of satiric portraiture throughout the play: Aslaksen, the printer, who is later so odiously "moderate" in "An Enemy of the People," Bratsberg, who is drawn rather sympathetically as a conservative, Erik Bratsberg, the young gentleman of rather muddled notions about honor, Heire, the gossip, and the subtle old Lundestad. The average town, the average ideals of family life and honor, the average political cheating and lying -- all are laid bare satirically yet not unkindly. The "new rich," the essential crudity of a man like Stensgard, and the hollow pretensions of his ilk, are drawn very cleverly. The play has no big thesis; it is a farce with a keen picture of types and their follies and as such deserves our notice, but not our prolonged study. If that were all, I should merely mention it as an interesting beginning of social criticism, and a medium of experiment before Ibsen "hit his stride."

But there is one startling episode in the play which struck a note of stark reality in the midst of farce -- foreshadowing a theme with which Ibsen later became deeply preoccupied. Erik Bratsberg is facing disgrace and ruin, and is in the midst of an uncomfortable and bitter discussion with his father; he is suddenly startled by the entrance of his wife, Selma. She has always been petted, pampered, and ignored in the strenuous, vital family crises. For years she has craved care, responsibility, a chance to work and suffer with her husband. Now, when he breaks the news to her, she rebels; she has had no share in his life heretofore, and she will not stay with him now. We feel a
The thrill of sympathy for her as she walks out -- an interesting hint of Nore in "A Doll's House." The incident is peculiarly isolated and unimportant in the play as a whole; but it is the one thing that gives it lasting significance in a study of Ibsen's criticism of social institutions.

Not until after Ibsen had got the Julian tragedy off his mind, however, did he attack society with any serious purpose. In October, 1877, "Pillars of Society" was published -- a play no doubt intended as a compliment to "The League of Youth," but written in a more earnest manner.

"Ibsen," says Moses in a particularly acute passage, "is the woodpecker among playwrights; to him the tree of life is in jeopardy because of the decaying spots which his sounding brings to light." Disagreeable as the task is, he insists on dragging the rottenness to light -- beginning with the more frivolous aspects of life, but deepening continually until he has searched out the hidden spiritual sources of decay. "Pillars of Society" marks a transition; it is a rather superficial dealing with some very great problems.

In a sense, the play is a concise statement of several of the general problems the dramatist was later to attack. Here is Hilmar Tønnesen, the weak cousin who is always flaunting "the banner of the ideal," he is a very good indication of some of the idealists to follow. Here are Mr and Mrs Bernick, a typically ill-mated pair -- the woman subservient to her husband, here is the lie in full force which up subtly intertwining with the roots of the lives in the community and poisoning them. Here is society ruining a young girl for the sins of her parents, and a woman sacrificing her whole life for others, singing the "woman's saga." And best of all, here is the "new woman," Lona Hessel, who refuses to allow the lie to go on, and who clears the atmosphere by a wholesome explosion. These various themes are all logically worked together, with the rottenness of society symbolized in "The Indian Girl," but the ideas are so vigorous that they are hardly
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absorbed into a human drama. We feel that Ibsen's thesis is riding
Bernick, and that he never would have changed so at the end but for
external compulsion.

Consul Bernick has in the past been involved in an amorous tangle with an actress — which had clouded the lineage of her daughter, Dina Dorf. Johan Tomnessen, his wife's brother, in order to save his sister from disgrace, takes the blame and goes to America, accompanied by his other sister, Lena Hessel. (Bernick has jilted Lena for the more profitable match with her sister.) The added blame of embezzlement is given Johan, in order to save Bernick from a charge of mismanagement.

Bernick is thus living by means of a lie; although he is universally acclaimed as a "pillar of society" and a good husband and father. He justifies himself by the argument that people's trust in him must not be shaken, for the welfare of the town as a whole; moreover, he has not really harmed Johan, since he is in America.

Suddenly Johan and Lena return. Lena is a vigorous and engaging woman, who will not tolerate the deception — for her brother's sake, and also for the sake of her old lover, Bernick. Johan is enraged to think that Bernick has never told Martha the truth — and that she still believes him guilty. He is planning to return to America to wind up his affairs; then he will return and demand recompense. Bernick meanwhile, has been pressed to finish repairing "The Indian Girl," a rotten old ship, and he now insists that it be released, even though not seaworthy. The fact that Johan will sail in it adds a fearful motive. Lena, however, pursues him; he thinks her sincere care for his honor is mere desire for revenge, and will not listen. Only when he hears that "The Indian Girl" has sailed, and that on it is his little boy, Olaf, who has run away, does he realize the rottenness of his whole life. And even now the crowd is approaching the acclaim their "leading citizen;" he meets them with despera-
tion, which is suddenly lightened by the good news that the "Indian Girl" has been stopped, and all are safe. Bernick then makes a full confession, and succeeds in shocking everyone; in a feeling of virtuous self-approval he turns to the women, Lona and Mrs. Bernick, as the Pillars of Society. At least he could recognize the fact that he was hardly adequate. But Lona, always wiser, replies, "The spirits of Truth and Freedom -- these are the Pillars of Society."

"Pillars of Society," the cold, artificial, and almost thesis ridden, is a very significant mile-stone in Ibsen's career. After rounding out his ideal philosophy, he seems to have mapped out, in this play, some of the main centers of future attack. The first essential to the attainment of the "third empire," he says, is that all lies and hypocrisies he abolished, and human relationships be established on a basis of Truth and Freedom. When that is done, it will be easier to see what is wrong with marriage, conventional ideals, and woman's place in life.

It might be appropriate at this time to explain that from now on our discussion will be more limited to comment, rather than any extended outline of the story. The rather full treatment of "Brand," "Peer Gynt," and "Pillars of Society" was due to the necessity of understanding to the full the place of the first two in Ibsen's philosophy, and the significance of the third as a chart in some detail of Ibsen's later work.

From now on Ibsen's drama deepens decidedly in social and ethical consciousness. With the publication of "A Doll's House" his significance as teacher and iconoclast was fully recognized; his plays were discussed heatedly from one end of Europe to the other.

People were very foolish to be as shocked as they were when "A Doll's House" came out. If they had read "Love's Comedy" with any critical acumen at all they would have seen that he was dissatisfied with marriage; the Selma
episode in "The League of Youth" might have shocked them into question, at
least, as to just what share women were putting into and getting out of
marriage. Or they might have traced an evolution of sacrificing women:
Solveig, Ingeborg, Martha; — with now and then a flash of rebellion from
spirits like Agnes and Selma. But people do not usually read an author's
works very critically when they first appear; and the public was shocked
at the question mark in Ibsen's mind after Woman.

We first see Nora as a heedlessly merry, care-free "lark", de-
ceiving her husband, playing with her children, and alluring with a half-
conscious sex-appeal every man she wanted anything from. Then under the
shadow of terror and anxiety she deepens into passionate intensity — with
a reckless cunning that almost accomplishes her end. When she sees that
she can no longer hide the truth from her husband, she sees herself as she
is — inconsequent, shallow, unworthy to be a wife and mother; she gives
up her happiness voluntarily but prays for the "miracle", that her husband
sacrifice for her, understand her, and help her to grow. The "miracle,"
 alas, does not happen; Helmer rages against her lack of honor, her deceit,
not because of her condition, but because of the tight place it puts him in.
But when, in his relief, he caresses her, and promises to "forgive," he finds
himself face to face with a stranger.

I do not agree with those critics who hold that Nora is inconsistent,
and that the change in her is impossible. I think that those critical esti-
mates make it so which say that when Nora asked her husband to sit wodn and
talk things over with her calmly, she was suddenly a wise woman, self-possessed,
noble, and mature. She was not. That one shake of disillusion, however, in
which she realized that the "miracle" would not happen, and that there was no
real understanding between her husband the herself, aged her infinitely. "hen
she sat down to say those last words to Rowald she was stern because she was
stunned, and deliberate because she was groping in a new and terrible mental
environment. The only thing clear to her was that if she ever pulled herself out of the mess she was in, she would have to get away. Furthermore, she saw that she was not fit to care for her own children.

It was a new thing in drama -- that last scene, and quite different from the denouement of the "well-made" play. Ibsen knew, however, that no other end would be quite so effective as this doll-wife stepping out boldly into the night through an open door, and leaving her husband with a half-frightened and half-inspired expression on his face.

Nora was the result of wrong treatment from the start; as a child she was petted, spoiled, and ignored by a careless father, and as a wife she was allowed no share in her husband's trials. Naturally she had no sense of business honor; and the sense of feminine power which she always used over men gave her courage to combat Krogerst in a dubious way. Ibsen from line to line castigates such a system of rearing children, such a place in married life for women. Helmer loved his wife, in a stereotyped, romantic way; but there is no true comradeship there. Nora realized this, and that her husband was not to blame, for she herself was unworthy of it. In realizing this she went out, recognizing her duty to herself as an individual as higher than duty to husband and children -- went out to learn about life for herself, experiment, think, and discipline herself. "I am not coming back," she said, "until communion between us shall be a marriage."

The general public felt, of course, that "A Doll's House" was another unwarranted attack upon the holiest ties of family life. Critics could not see that Ibsen was merely trying to show what a real marriage should be, and what most marriages are not; and that his most earnest attempt was to educate people as to their duty to each other as free individuals.
Nora had prayed in vain for a "miracle" to happen -- the miracle of understanding, tolerance, and the gift of freedom from her husband. It did not come; but many years later, in a play far different in mood and manner, Ibsen has shown us a situation in which just such a miracle did happen, and as a result of which family ties became stronger, and family attachments finer and sweeter.

Ellida, in "The Lady from the Sea," has married into a family where everything is already so beautifully managed that she is not needed at all; her case is decidedly comparable to that of Selma and Nors, except that here she does not even feel that her love is wanted by any save her husband. Purposeless and dissatisfied, she becomes an easy prey of a curious hallucination; her childhood passion for the sea returns and is externalized in the form of a romantic Stranger, to whom she feels herself more truly wedded than to her husband. Her longing to go with him is symbolic of the restless, passionate desire everyone feels at times, to do what impulse prompts, rather than one's duty. This obsession finally mounts so to madness in her that she determines to leave her husband. He at first constrains her by force, but seeing that this only aggravates her disorder, he finally, though with deep fear, makes the great sacrifice, and sets her free. As soon as she feels herself absolutely free to go, with every liberty of choice any individual could wish, however, she appreciates the deep love behind her husband's sacrifice, and is no longer consumed with desire to go. Law has been brushed aside for free will; but love constrains where duty is powerless. Now, too, she sees that her step-daughters need her more than they had thought, and the inspiration comes to stay and fill her needed place.

On the basis of sacrifice then, human ties may be made closer and finer, says Ibsen. Where one individual deeply respects the sacredness of
the other's personality, there is the sure beginning of a truly noble relationship. On such a basis Ellida was justified in staying; and only on a similar basis would Nora have been right in staying.

But immediately upon the storm which burst out when "A Doll's House" was published, Ibsen became savagely on the defensive. If they thought Nora so wicked to leave, he seems to say, I can show them what happens when the woman stays. In November, 1881, consequently, he had finished "Ghosts," and in that way justified himself.

The public might have been better prepared than it was for the theme of heredity; in delineating Dr. Rank in "A Doll's House", Ibsen was sketching out his idea. Dr. Rank was suffering for his father's wild oats -- without, as he observed with a touch of grim humor, having had any pleasure out of them himself. In "Ghosts," however, the problem is complicated by Oswald's inheritance of not only physical weakness, but criminal tendencies as well, which involve him in further misery.

Scientifically, Ibsen bungles terribly with the problem of heredity; it is a mistake to consider that as the important thesis in "Ghosts." The main point, as I see it, is the terrible mistake Mrs. Alving made in not leaving her husband in her youth, as soon as she found out his degradation and beastliness. She did make the effort, and sought refuge with Mander, an old lover of hers; but he, being the sentimentally righteous type that insists on conventional morality at any cost, committed the outrage upon her womanly honor and love for him of persuading her to return to her duty and her beastly husband. Having taken this step, she stilled every womanly feeling, and made her whole life one effort to hide the disgrace from the public and her son -- even going so far in self-sacrifice as to care for her husband's illegitimate daughter, Regina, in her own home.

As a result, her son, diseased from birth (he was evidently born after her return to her husband) came home to die, brain-sick, diseased, and
conscience-bitten after his pagan dipping into experience. Mrs Alving at first refused to believe the truth, desperately promising him anything — any bit of the joy of life — which she could offer. Too late. His last act was to repeat his father's degradation in an incestuous union with Regina, who goes out to her ruin, leaving a shattered household, a half-mad woman, and a boy with fast numbing brain begging for "the sun."

"Ghosts" is undoubtedly the most awful play I have ever read — cold, swift, darkly tragic, insane. Utterly unrelieved, its tragic intensity is made worse by a disagreeable subject, and an absolutely unemotional treatment. It is too often taken, I believe, merely as a laboratory exposition of the "sins of the fathers" thesis, showing the sad effects of syphilis on comparatively innocent children — the interest in this case being heightened by a curious reduplication of events in the presence of Regina. All this is, no doubt, present in the play; but the quality of thought that makes it worth our reading today must be sought elsewhere. And the character of Mrs. Alving is the clue to its meaning, for she is the central motive force in the play.

In the first place, in a sense she might be considered as responsible for Alving's condition; he had evidently in his youth been a strong man, full of the joy of life, and needing someone to share life at its fullest with him. Mrs Alving, reared in the Puritan tradition, and believing in sacrifice and restraint rather than experience, was not the one; and against the drab background of a dull little town he was driven to pleasure in doubtful places, until he gradually became thoroughly degraded.

In the second place, she was morally weak to have allowed Pastor Manders to send her back to Alving. As an individual, as a chaste woman, and as a possible mother, she was allowing her sacred rights to be smirched
in so doing; but again we find the old Christian, Puritan ideal -- the "second empire" -- prevailing, and back she went, to give birth to a tragically fated son, and to crush out of herself all natural humanity.

The rest of the play is just an exposition of consequences, a dissolution; the vital action has all really taken place before the opening. But nowhere in literature has been so darkly pictured the result of smug, shallow morality; nowhere are the terrible consequences of living an unnatural life shown so vividly as in the now almost conscienceless character of Mrs. Alving, and the absolutely immoral nature of Oswald. Ghostly as the play is, Ibsen has nowhere else painted quite so well the utter tragic futility of both the pagan and the Puritan ways of life.

The press of Europe when into convulsions when "Ghosts" appeared. Shaw, in his "Quintessence of Ibsenism," has with sly glee arranged several pages of epithets that were hurled at the play. Here are a few: "Abominable, disgusting, bestial, loathsome, orapulous, offensive, scandalous, filthy, prurient, blasphemous, and stinking." Of course, it is easy to say now that the play was written in the clinical spirit, and many of such expressions are uncalled for; but "Ghosts" attained a degree of naked and unrelieved realism which even Ibsen shunned thereafter.

The outcry of the Philistines against "Ghosts" provoked Ibsen to righteous wrath; but he was in a better humor, for all that, now that he had rid himself of a disagreeable task, and he prepared to write a "peaceable" drama, which could give no offense to any. This turned out to be "An Enemy of the People," in which he answered his critics roundly, and in which he satirized the "liberal majority" for all time to come. Ibsen's view of a true democracy is one whose task is "that of making all the people of this country noblemen;" this view he elaborated at great length later in "Rosmersholm." What makes the majority plebian, according to Ibsen? This
very lack of nobility -- of true aristocracy -- not of wealth, of birth, or even of intellect, but rather of will and heart and character. The majority is always wrong, he says, because of this essential coarseness; a true element of aristocracy must be infused into the common herd before the "third empire" is ever to be realized. And, as Moses suggests, if we examine the play "Pillars of Society," we can easily see that if this majority supports pillars like Bernick, then a stout, upright figure like Stockmann in "An Enemy of the People" will be necessarily repudiated.

Dr. Stockmann and Ibsen had much in common; both fought sturdily for the ideal in the face of impossible odds, trying to clear out lies from society, and drain off a great deal of corruption in spite of bitter opposition. The cesspool under the Baths is symbolic in every way of the stagnating and decaying influences at work in modern life. The play is vigorous, amusing, and full of real characters, also, in marked contrast to "Pillars of Society," which it resembles somewhat as to thesis.

Captain Horster might be taken as symbolic of the younger generation -- foreshadowing a motif destined to deepen markedly in Ibsen's work with the passage of time. In this case, however, the younger generation is not a menace, but a growing aid and defense for the idealism of older people.

Dr. Stockmann fights a losing fight to have the baths cleared out and cleansed of corruption; the local politicians and grafters refuse to make the necessary repairs because of the serious expense and economic inconvenience. Meanwhile the Baths are a serious menace in more important ways. Aslaksen, the printer, again appears; his policy of moderation is scathingly satirized; and all the cringing, hypocritical, or superficial types that make up the political rulers of any community are presented with equally merciless portraiture. Not only are the politicians satirized -- because of their time-serving acquiescence to the stupid will of the majority;
the press comes in for its share of condemnation as well. Instead of trying to mould public opinion, and teaching the people, the newspapers go around looking for what will tickle popular fancy.

Poor Dr. Stockmann finds that he has clashed with the invincible "compact liberal majority" — that muddle-headed herd of stupidity; so at last, in despair, he gives up his project of the Baths and launches into a tirade against Philistinism in general. Truths must be outgrown, he insists, and the intellectual few who can keep up with truth are the only ones who count. What is the significance of a cesspool or two in the town compared with the rancid spiritual condition of a whole people?

Only once does Stockmann waver in his sturdy idealism, and that when he finds that he personally would profit greatly by leaving the Baths alone. He wins out, however, and the family, in spite of several lost jobs and broken windows, gather together hopefully at the last. "A man," says the doctor, whimsically regarding a rent in his clothes, "should never put on his best trousers when he goes out to battle for truth and freedom." He is planning to start a school to educate children to be free lovers of truth, and his last words are: "The strongest man is he who stands most alone."

Stout-hearted courage and honesty strike the key-note in this play, blowing a clean wind right across the out-worn expediency of such people as Aslaksen. After all, it is not the wicked people who do the most harm in the world, but the ones who will not stand up for the right as they see it; and the great duty of the keen-minded few is to enlighten the unwilling mass. The beginning of a definite symbolism may be hated in "An Enemy of the People," also.

Ibsen by now was almost officially the destroyer of illusions for the nineteenth century. Romantic love, the hollow mockery of marriage, our vaunted democratic ideals, the free press, the good citizen; — all had crumbled before his finger of derision. One after another he had shattered
the pet ideals people had nourished for centuries — had shattered them honestly, because he felt that the "third empire" could never be established until society at least saw itself and its weaknesses at actual value. But what good was it really doing, to explode so many cherished beliefs? This question was beginning to embitter Ibsen, and he formulated it poignantly when, in 1884, he wrote his in some respects most disquieting play — "The Wild Duck."

His mood was undoubtedly more pessimistic in the composition of this drama than during any other period of his career; in fact, it seems almost to be a repudiation of all he had ever striven for.

Gregers Werle, the idealist, is a caricature of Ibsen, the destroyer of illusions; and telling is Ibsen in his mood of disbelief in the claims of the ideal, hooting at the efforts of a truth-hunter to destroy the illusions upon which life's happiness is built.

Werle is the rather Quixotic son of an old scoundrel who has seduced and cast off a rather commonplace woman — subsequently seeing that she is married and her husband set up in business. This husband, Hjalmar Ekdal, is a friend of Gregers Werle, who, when he learns the truth many years later, feels it to be his ethical obligation to inform him as to the true state of his household. The Ekdal family is very happy, in a humble way; and the unfortunate Gina is really the mainstay and source of happiness for her husband. Werle, however, feels that their life is based on deception, and that to make it a real marriage, the lie should be abolished (how familiar that sounds to us by now!) and the parties should enter into a new agreement on a basis of truth and freedom. Alas — the commonplace and sentimental Hjalmar is not great enough for this conception; this time, as Moses says, the Browning ideal that a man's reach should exceed his grasp is carried entirely too far. "Truth at all costs is fit only for spiritual giants;" and "a man with an acute attack of
integrity is to be avoided." Gregers himself is inadequate spiritually, or he could comprehend how excessive his demands are.

When Hjalmar knows the truth, he is shocked, angry, runs away, and then returns -- at all times a ridiculous figure; in the hour Gregers fatefully assigned to him for the greatest spiritual crisis of his life, he is drowning memory in a disgusting debauch. Ibsen here propounds -- quite on the side -- another question almost equally important: why should Gina's past be the object of so much disturbance, when Hjalmar's was nearly as bad? This is not developed, however.

The figure of little Hedvig is infinitely pathetic, the only truly tender and lovable character in all Ibsen. Her love for her supposed father is devoted, worshipful; she is too young to criticize, but old enough to feel. When he, in a first blaze of resentment, disowns her, her heart is broken; she listens, at such a time, to further suggestions from the foolish idealist, who offers the hope that sacrifice may win back her father's love. He means, no doubt, sacrifice of something she loves -- perhaps the wild duck. But the little girl is confused and desperate and heart-broken, and shoots herself instead, perhaps vaguely hoping that this will win back his love.

Upon her death, Hjalmar and Gina are reconciled, but Relling, the old cynic, has seen people temporarily enamored by the presence of death before, and he prophesies that in just a short time their feeling will degenerate into hollow­ness. Relling believes that people's life-illusions should be fostered, so that they may be able to live in peace. "Don't use that foreign word: ideals," he says, "We have the excellent native word: lies." After all, happiness is based on illusion for everyone but the giants.

From another point of view "The Wild Duck" is not quite so bitterly cynical; it may be taken as satire or false idealism. After all, the deception Gina was guilty of really hurt no one, as she loved Hjalmar and helped
him devotedly; while the doubt as to Hedvig's relationship certainly cast no shadow over her affection. There was really no illusion of any importance there at all, from this standpoint; and Werle was a false officious "idealist" who was not merely mistaken, but guilty of a real wrong.

Most critics, however, take "The Wild Duck" more seriously, as a piece of cruel self-satire on Ibsen's part. He evidently believed that the horrible wrongs he was exposing were bad enough; but he seemed to question whether the misery were not augmented by exposure, with no good done.

Ibsen's power as a dramatist lies not so much in character-delineation; but he is superb in his understanding and portrayal of feminine nature. His women are not the great radiant representative types of a Shakespeare; they are not exactly normal; but they hold our attention because they represent his conception of the woman-problem -- and are struggling and sometimes tortured individuals. His early women were more human, or at least more conventional; Solveig, Agnes, Ingeborg, Lady Inger, are more like the average woman the world over, perhaps, than Nora, Petra, Lona Hessel, Ellida, or Mrs Alving. But the women of this latter group are products of their age -- self-doubting, cramped, knowing themselves inadequate. The "new woman" certainly finds sympathetic representation in Ibsen.

Twice in his career, however, the dramatist has presented us with an objective picture, masterly in execution, of feminine decadence. The first, that of Hiordis in "The Vikings" has been noted above; the second is the center of the canvas in "Hedda Gabler." Some critics point to this play as an instance of purely objective art, without any idea or thesis at all. This is very true, explicitly; Ibsen himself claimed that his sole purpose was to paint human character and destiny, "upon a broundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of today;" but a great deal of social significance is implicit in the drama, for all that. Hedda Gabler is the
product of her environment; she is an example of the purposeless woman
with no task and with the accident of mis-mating added to her misfortunes.
She is not the "woman every man takes down to dinner," but she is a composite
of variants, as Moses says, raised to the nth power -- and she represents
a very bad social symptom.

Hedda belongs to the same class as Rebecca West, Ellida Wangel, and
Moirdis, the pagans who claim happiness and self-qualification as their right.
She differs from them in being continually the victim of ennui, a condition
due to lack of passionate excitement on the one hand, and an insensitivity
to other forms of interest on the other. Rebecca and Ellida were passionate
women, clamoring for happiness; but they were susceptible to the calls of duty,
affection, and noble service. Hedda is deaf to such appeal. Her treatment
of Tesman's elderly aunt, in the first scene, reveals her essential beastliness;
any woman so harshly impatient with the kindly offices of an old lady, and so
irritated at any suggestion of her condition (some irritation might be natural,
but not to the extent she revealed it) lays bare her sexual preoccupation at
once. Add to this condition plebian tastes for luxuries which her scholarly
husband could not provide, and a personal distaste for the husband himself,
and you have sketched a character type for mischief.

Hedda is decidedly a harlot, shunning every womanly quality; she
loathes herself because she is pregnant; her one feverish, egotistical desire
is for continual excitement. Not only instinctive excitement, however, though
that may account somewhat for her relations with Looberg and Brack; she loves
the thrill of mastery over another human soul, even more. Her condition
spiritually is hopeless from the first; long before the play opens she has
taken the irretrievable first steps into ruin. The thrill of mastery over
Looberg's destiny leads her to tempt him, and later to destroy his work; she
finally kills herself because she sees that she really didn't influence Looberg
to any great extent, even at the last; that Thea had had far more away over him
in creating his work; that Thea and Tessman are already, to her exclusion, preoccupied with the reconstruction of the book; and that she is left to the tender mercies of the suave libertine, Brack. To her ego such a situation is not to be borne, and she makes the best use of her father's pistols that they have been put to for years. The reader is thoroughly glad when she kills herself.

Undoubtedly there are many women born with similar sexual characteristics: not maternal, pagan restive. That is their type of physical and neural equipment -- that is all. But women are not naturally and irretrievably decadent; even Hedda Gabler was the product of poor early training, false ideals, wrong social adaptation. It was a crime to thrust domestic life upon her. The sentimental training so often offered to women never appeals to a mind like hers; but is she had been given strong, "red-blooded" mental and ethical discipline in her youth, that pagan outlook of hers might have been disciplined to service. Society is to blame as much for Hedda Gabler's going "on the rocks" as it is for the career of the imbecile whose birth it should have prevented. She would never have been a "home-body," but what a splendid lawyer, professor or criminologist she might have been! Society in Ibsen's day offered no niche for women like her; but we are gradually clearing ground today.

A woman very like Hedda in her passionate, sensuous egoism, but unlike her in that she was not wholly impervious to influences of nobler origin, is Rita Allmers, in "Little Eyolf." In her, passion for her husband was nearly justifiable by reason of real love; but so strong and jealous was she permitted it to become that it is evil; she will share her husband with no one, not even her little son.

At one time he shared this passion, but insensitivity is dying out in him, and he would be very glad to give her tenderness only; but she insists on being loved to madness, tempting and alluring him constantly. But Allmers is deter-
mined to devote his time to the education of his crippled child, "Little Eyolf," remembering that the reason for his misfortune is that his parents neglected him in the midst of their selfish joy.

Rita cannot bring herself to forget her own emotional cravings, and be of any service to others. So there is friction in the household; the only one who understands Allmers is his supposed sister, Asta, who loves him very much, and wants to help him.

Then the Rat-Wife comes -- terrible symbol of Death, and perhaps more than death -- and tolls little Eyolf to the sea, little Eyolf, whom neither had really loved, because, in a different way, he had gnawed so at the egoism of both. After his death both are half-mad with remorse -- not grief, for they had really never loved him. Both realize that their selfishness, their emotional pampering of each other, had been the cause of his short life of misery, and his death; and, all that attraction changed to repulsion, they hate each other. In such a mood life is not worth living, especially together, and separation seems impending; Allmers is tempted to run off with Asta, who, it develops, is not his sister. The "law of change" seems to have effected deep results in all their lives; even his love for Asta is different.

But grief and despair and wounded love have left a deep void in Rita's heart; she feels a need to do something, to love someone, as she never has before; and a consciousness of the need of the ragged village children stirs a vague new determination in her to be of use -- to turn her life-energies out for the good of others. And she touches Allmers spiritually in this resigned purpose, as she had never touched him in years of passion; his sympathy is kindled and he loves her more than ever before. The law of change, in putting out the fires of passion, has made a better thing possible.
There is a great deal of philosophic depth here. Ibsen is dealing with the very personal problem of the use of the emotional and vital functions by the individual. Egoism and selfishness lead only to misery; we must, if we would live, put ourselves to some good use; and the instinctive nature may be a source of blessing to others. The inevitable change which affects all of us, too, may mean, if we wish, the kindling of higher purposes and the opening of new opportunity. "Little Eyolf" is in many ways the most intimate and human in application of all Ibsen's play.

"Rosmersholm" is to my mind the greatest play Ibsen ever wrote, from the point of view of passion, character portrayal, poetic setting, and thesis. It contains one of his greatest feminine characters, and unquestionably the greatest hero in the social dramas. Furthermore, it contrasts so subtly and so powerfully the effects on character, and the counter-effects, of the two extreme views of life: the pagan, and the Puritan. So I choose to discuss it here, just before turning to the three final plays which seem to me to foreshadow Ibsen's own fall and the rise of the new, and to search bitterly for the clue to whether the dramatists' own life had been futile. "Rosmersholm" is the last sure stroke of the master; the rest is haunted by question.

The Rosmer view of life is that of ennoblement by sacrifice and pain, and austerity and innocence in the personal life. Rosmer, a dreamer, longs to establish a democracy by which all mankind shall become ennobled; he loses, however, his religious faith, and is for that reason not quite so respected in the community. Rebecca West enters his household, a pagan adventuress, full of the "joy of life;" her first desire is merely to use Rosmer and his wife as a means of social advancement; but to her own great surprise she finds herself in love with Rosmer before long. Feeling that she can help him better than his wife, and also wanting him for herself,
she works upon Beata by suggestion, until she forces her to suicide.

Rosmer, however, believes firmly that their subsequent association is on terms of the most perfect innocence, and she lives with him for a year on that basis. When the liberal forces with whom Rosmer is in league hear of his religious defection they no longer hesitate to attack his life with Rebecca; upon which for the first time Rosmer questions his own innocence. All hope of accomplishment is gone when he loses faith in himself; and Rebecca, who has, under the influence of his way of life, changed from passionate desire to a deeply unselfish love of him, is confronted with the possibility of all her efforts at "emancipating" him being futile. Suddenly each realizes that he has taken over some of the traits of the other during their association together; Rosmer is no longer austerely simple in his faith and judgment, but is almost ready to seize life for himself, while he has completely discarded much of his old faith; and Rebecca has deepened in consciousness of responsibility and duty until she is no longer free to clutch at happiness. She suddenly realizes the need for sacrifice in her new love; and he feels that their sin against Beata must be atoned for; consequently, having sat in judgment upon themselves, they go to their death the way Beata went.

The play is thus a dramatizing of the conflict of "Brand" and "Peer Gynt," pagan and Christian trying to mingle -- in which both elements change greatly. The Rosmer view of life is hard, essentially noble, perhaps unnecessarily sacrificial, it exerts a profound influence over Rebecca in changing her passion to love, and her personal ambition to a desire for service. Her influence on him makes for freedom of thought and development of personal desire, but beyond a certain point it works toward his dissolution; when he feels himself no longer innocent he cannot work.

The drama, as Moses points out, is beautifully poised; the conflict between the two elements is well presented; it is hard to see why they could
not have reached an ideal marriage, and happiness, though the probable reason was that their association was tainted by Beata's death. Traditional morality can never be ignored, says Ibsen, even for the pagan happiness we might win thereby. Again and again he sounds the sad note that Christianity takes the joy out of life by reason of its austerity; the Rosmer view ennobles, but kills happiness.

"Rosmersholm" is tragic because it shows so clearly that Rosmer and Rebecca needed each other, and what they could give each other, to make an ideal marriage; yet their union ends only in catastrophe because of circumstances beyond their control. Ibsen never emphasizes the note of Fate; but destiny plays a bitterer part here than anywhere else in the Ibsen universe.

We are now justified in saying that the real bulk of Ibsen's life-work is finished. There remain, however, the final comments of the old man upon his own life, its measure of achievement, and the degree of its futility. The power of newer ideas was a conception which haunted Ibsen in his last years; and it is significant of the man's real greatness that he was willing to welcome them, and step down before the younger generation. The sacredness of individual happiness and love also impressed him more and more deeply; and we note in his last plays a cry of suppressed regret for the magic and passion and "joy of life" that in his younger days he had so denied himself. In an epilogue that is lacking in intellectual vigor but rich in broken color and meaning he takes up for the last time the old themes of love and marriage, individualism, and sacrifice, and gives us a final statement about life-values.

"The Master Builder," taken as an objective story, is about as meaningless as anything Ibsen ever published; but as one threads apart the over-intricate symbolism it becomes a mystical explanation of the poet's own life. Halvard Solness, the Master Builder, is Ibsen himself, the great creator of works famed everywhere, who, nevertheless, has had to pay, and pay bitterly, for every bit of success he ever got. Solness paid in the loss of
home, children, and domestic happiness -- Ibsen in the sacrifice of many
sides of his nature that needed fuller and richer development. Solness
first built churches, then "homes for human beings," and finally, air-
castles; Ibsen first wrote great romances and philosophic poems, then
his practical social dramas, and now, finally, these dreamy, poetic
attempts at life-summary. Solness believed firmly in the direct inspira-
tion and interference of "demons", or outside influences; Ibsen certainly
was dependent upon inspiration and contemporary philosophy. Solness was
fighting hard to hold his own against deposition; the power of "the younger
generation" was already preoccupying Ibsen. Then the younger generation, in
the form of the bewitching Hilda, "slips upon" Solness to the extent that he
is completely under her influence; she shakes him out of his rut, and jolts
him into the performance of great deeds he could never have done alone; and
he is finally ruined because he has thus over-reached himself. So Ibsen was
bewitched by all the magical things the younger generation stood for, in the
person of a young girl he met in 1889, midsummer -- a pathetic case of an un-
developed side of a rich nature; and if he did not topple it was only because
in real life one usually has more presence of mind.

When we have said this much about "The Master Builder", however, we
have only touched on the less spiritual and less mystic side. A cry of spiri-
tual need seems to be wrung out of Ibsen's heart -- a consciousness that there
is infinitely more that is sad and mysterious and lovely in life than anything
he had ever expressed in his work before. The play is shadowy with hidden
meaning and fascinating symbolism; but there is little of social criticism
in it except for the hint as to the "younger generation;" though of course
we have suggestions from other plays in the family situation of the Solnesses,
and the study of ambition versus opportunity.

The "younger generation" theme is again touched upon in "John Gabriel
Borkman" -- this time more fully and in a less mystic way. A morbid and tragic
family are the Borkmans, living in their lonely home -- Mrs Borkman on the first floor refusing ever to see her husband who lives above. Borkman is one of the most vividly presented characters in all Ibsen -- a megalomaniac who had been severely punished for his schemes to gain power as a capitalist. Stroke after stroke Ibsen thrust at the ambitious dreams of such men, who want the "kingdom, the power, and the glory," though they have never contributed anything at all to the real wealth of the world. Borkman has, perhaps, suffered a little more than he deserves, because of the treachery of Hinkel, who has betrayed him, enraged that Ella Rentheim will not marry him. Borkman, to gain power, was willing to give up Ella, whom he really loved, and who loved him, and take her sister, whom he did not love; but Ella, though such cruelty killed the warm heart in her, would not be sold, and remained single. Upon her money, then, the Borkmans live while John Gabriel is in prison, and, later, at home in solitude. Ella cares for them all because she loves Erhart, the son, so dearly -- because he should have been her own. Mrs Borkman is rearing Erhart with the sole purpose of having him restore the stained family honor, but he -- "the younger generation" -- is self-willed, determined to live and laugh and love, and not at all disposed to trouble himself about the morbid egotism of his parents. Confronted with the necessity of choice, Erhart really debates very little as to whether he will devote himself to his aunt, who loves him and wants him to live with her or to his mother, who wants him to restore the family name, or even to his father, who commands his respect somewhat by hoping he will support him in his own effort to regain his power; for all these claims are of the past, and Erhart is young, full-blooded, and in love. Consequently he goes off with his sweetheart, Mrs Wilton, driving rough-shod over the older generation as it is symbolized in the person of old Foldol whose daughter they are taking with them.

"Borkman" is a great play, with a warm, colorful background, vivid characters, and at least three great ideas. John Gabriel is a great figure,
with tremendous power, but consumed with an insane egotism, and overweening self-confidence. Ella Rentheim, really the motive force in the play, is a superb woman — splendid in her resentment of the crime Borkman had committed against their love — even more splendid in her love for a tolerant sympathy with the desires of the younger generation. Foldal is an interesting portrait — an old fellow who in spite of constant failures still has faith in his own genius; he is a shadow, a caricature of Borkman; and both share the fate of being over-ridden by their children.

The great ideas in "Borkman," it seems to me, are three: first, that the older generation cannot hope for any consideration for their own selfishness at the hands of the younger who will live their own lives and follow their own beliefs, at any cost; second, that the man who wants an undue amount of power is an arch-criminal against society, and that the greatest sinners in this regard, as a class, are the capitalists; and third, that the greatest crime of all is committed by the person who does violence to the personality and heart of another, for selfish reasons. It is made very clear that Borkman's main guilt lay in his not marrying Ella and thus preventing her life from reaching its full fruition. This theme is developed more fully as the central thesis of "When We Dead Awaken."

"Borkman" closes tenderly and quietly, with the two grim sisters, at last reconciled, meeting over the dead body of the man they had both loved — while far away in the night Erhart's sleigh-bells are tinkling toward freedom and new life. It is an effective play — and a great theme.

Ibsen's last play, "When We Dead Awaken," was delayed for a long time; the old man was month by month growing feebler, both in body and in mind. That he felt this keenly, realizing that his day of intellectual supremacy was fast going, is shown clearly by the note of warning with regard to the "younger generation;" and that he doubted, at times, the efficacy of his own message, and the purpose of his life, is evident from the question
in "The Master Builder," and in "When We Dead Awaken."

Pitiful snatches of broken loveliness flash through this last and most passionate of Ibsen's dramas; it is as though he sobbed and laughed at once over the curious misdirection of his career, and paid this last "art tribute on the altar of love;" for "When We Dead Awaken" is the greatest love drama he ever wrote. "When a man of Ibsen's age," says Moses, "turns upon himself, and becomes satiric over the outcome of his life-work, it is as though he had laughed at his own funeral." He had seemed to do this in "The Wild Duck," but that self-scrutiny was merely intellectual, at best; this final piece is tortured with a starved regret.

In the balance between Ulfheim and Rubeck, Maia, and Irene, is suggested once more the old, eternal dualism that had so long oppressed him; the pagan, brutally happy, earthy loveliness, snatching at life and living joyously, as against the austerity and self-discipline that sacrifices life that it may create. The avalanche suggests "Brand;" again and again Ibsen points out that that way of life ends always in defeat.

The great crime of Borkman was repeated and intensified by Rubeck, for he, in the name of art, steeled himself not only to passion but to the love and hunger in a woman's soul; and when the ordeal, the sacrifice, was over, he found himself burnt out, spiritually dead, and guilty of the murder of her inner life as well. The loss out of their lives was irreparable; that greatest of experiences they had deliberately cut away from their share of existence. And was the work of art worth it? Of course, that is the greatest of questions I suppose; is any great achievement worth the starvation-price of natural joy, and a well-rounded, full-blooded life? Poets the world over have sung that the best of life is love; have the ascetics given us any more than the ripe in experience?

Ibsen thinks not. The cry of agony wrung from the chilled lips of Rubeck and Irene, the longing and regret instinct in every line — are only
echoes of the feeling in his mind. Too late, they tried to recapture experience, and the avalanche was a fitting close to their love tragedy; too late, Ibsen seemed to realize that not only would life have been richer had he lived and felt otherwise, but the deeper immortality would have been his as well; and the avalanche of mental darkness seems a merciful relief.

Ibsen stands alone in the nineteenth century, conspicuous for the heaps of wreckage scattered about him. Clear-eyed, and judging life by a superb ideal, he has attacked those aspects of life which most stand in the way of the realization of the "third empire." In so attacking human institutions he succeeded in making himself feared and hated and suspected as an anarchist, a poisoner of youth, and a derider of family affection. Because his message was deliberately social in purpose, he is the arch-type of the "problem-novelist" and propagandist; as a physician to his age he was tremendous, but his art has suffered thereby.

A long hard life it was -- of self-denial, restraint, bitter reflection, deliberate examination of the disagreeable. Its reward was at the end fame -- which he had come to despise -- and the taste of ashes in the perception that a great poetic gift had not been used to wake dreams and tears and laughter, thereby winning his immortality, but had been perverted into harsh polemics or dry analysis. Nevertheless, could he view society today, he might have the rare satisfaction of knowing that his stout-hearted idealism and keen, penetrative criticism have swept like a clean wind through many a rotten public institution or theory; and that without doubt his stimulating philosophy has braced many an individual fighter to the conflict, or stirred the thoughtless into uncomfortable self-scrutiny.

With deep insight he has seen through both halves of life and its philosophy: the side of compromise, and that of unswerving faith to the Ideal; the joyour pagan against the austere Christian; self-denial versus experience; -- and like a prophet he has tested the failure of both, realizing
that the ideal of the future lies somewhere ahead in maturity, "the third empire."

Truth and freedom must be the basis of this ideal society; the lie in all its forms must be abolished.

Understanding the modern woman and her need of readjustment better than any other thinker of his day, he has shown weak women as victims of wrong rearing and sentimental marriages; rebellious women beating against constraint and lack of human freedom in marriage; pagan women gradually ennobled by need and disciplined to usefulness; and utterly decadent women who are symptomatic of social maladjustment. He has shown us many marriages: the Strawmans, degenerated from romance to dull, spiritual boredom; the Bratsbergs, where the wife has never been given a chance to live; the Bericks, loveless, and with the wife utterly subservient to the husband's selfishness; the Helmers, where sentimental passion is the only relation, but where there is felt to be tragic need for a deep spiritual comradeship; and the Allmers', whose morbid egoism almost ruins life for them, until they learn that true marriage lies in mutual renunciation and a life of service. The duty of unselfishness is inherent, he seems to say, in marriage; and both parties must contribute intellectually and spiritually, and bring deep respect for the sacredness of the other's personality. The magic of love and passion and the "joy of life" are good and necessary; but life-energies must be made to bear fruit in usefulness.

The individual's duty to judge his case individually and ignore the conventional code is emphasized in "Ghosts;" the awful law of heredity and the solemn watchfulness and responsibility it imposes are also given attention.

Time after time Ibsen satirizes or openly attacks such groups as the clergy, the press, politicians, and capitalists, who, by virtue of their offices of responsibility are more guilty than others when they fail to be brave, sincere, and unselfish.

Then comes the poignant question which no real thinker can ignore;
does it pay to shatter illusion -- to tear the veil from the terrible face
of Truth? If it does not, then a thinker like Ibsen has more than wasted
his life. And as the habit of self-questioning comes to a man in his
declining years, comes also a consciousness of the approaching overthrow
by the new age; only a great spirit -- as was Ibsen -- is able to be
tolerant of new aims and rights, and to resign his throne to younger thinkers.

One is likely, I think, to get in the reading of Ibsen a rather
distorted view of life -- at first. His people are all so gray, and common-
place, except when they are palpably maladjusted to their world, and fit
subjects for psychiatry; his view of life is so deliberately stark and dark,
or else so coldly practical and commonplace. There is so little poetry
("Peer Gynt" and "The Pretenders" are all that is really great; Hedvig
is the only humanly pathetic figure; and Dr. Stockmann is about the only
character drawn in the genial spirit of comedy. There are left satire,
polemics, and detached pictures of the horrible or the fantastic --
fantastic at least symbolically.

If Ibsen had stopped after even "Rosenmersholm," great as it is,
we should have felt him great in his way, but incomplete, in human. It
is the suffering, the note of longing and regret, so marked in his "epilogue",
that compels us to realize that he was a man after all. Much as he had
ignored this all his life, in private and in his work, love and its magic
are the best of life; and even the most "dedicated" spirit owes a duty to
passion and to his emotions which he dare not ignore. It is evident that
Ibsen bitterly regretted at the close of his life that he had not breathed
more of that joyous humanity into his own work.

But for such as the man was in his way, we may salute him.
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