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Admirable characters in  
Ibsen's paradoxical world /

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ADMIRABLE CHARACTERS  
IN IBSEN'S PARADOXICAL WORLD

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in Education

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by  
Nancy English Shumate  
May 1968

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Nancy English Shumate entitled "Admirable Characters in Ibsen's Paradoxical World." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education, with a major in English.

Joe A. Sutfen

Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

William H. Ellis

Dean of the Graduate School

Late in his career, Henrik Ibsen made this claim: "All that I have written has not proceeded from a desire to propagandize.... My task was the description of Man."<sup>1</sup> Despite this claim to the contrary, Ibsen's plays had a propagandistic effect, causing a furor across the Continent, and one cannot doubt that he meant for people to listen to what he had to say, that he believed his message was important. Ibsen must surely have felt that what he had to say was worth saying, else why devote so much time and effort to espousing individualism, dedication, freedom, and truth and to denouncing the "compact majority," the "life-lie," and degeneracy? Certainly when Ibsen speaks to us from the mouths of Brand or Dr. Stockmann, he is preaching to us, advocating ideas about what life ought to be that were radically different from the accepted ones of his day. As a matter of fact, his plays were, according to Eric Bentley, "so subversive they frightened, at times, even their author."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Ibsen was preaching reform, not revolution. The dramatist said in a letter to George Brandes in 1870, "What is important is the revolutionizing of the human

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<sup>1</sup>Alan S. Downer (trans.), citing Henrik Ibsen, intro. to Hedda Gabler (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961), vi.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Bentley, "Henrik Ibsen: A Personal Statement," Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Rolfe Fjelde, editor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), p. 16.



mind."<sup>3</sup> However, Harold Clurman, drama critic of the Nation, pictures Ibsen as something other than a passive observer when he says of him, "He was going to batter falsity down with moral and intellectual rigor. He wasn't joking about it."<sup>4</sup>

Accepting, then, that the plays of Henrik Ibsen are didactic, one expects the opinions and beliefs deriving from the plays to be those of their author. One postulates that the admirable characters will contain qualities of greatness; the despicable ones, qualities of meanness. One speculates about what an admirable character meant to Ibsen, and one must accept or reject the author's estimation. In order to analyze the criteria by which Ibsen formulated his judgments, one looks to the society that spawned him and to the characters he created to vocalize his thoughts. After garnering the concepts Ibsen proffered, one may speculate about what his view might have been regarding the potential of the human spirit.

In his youth, Henrik Ibsen was something of a rebel. The son of a bankrupt father, Ibsen had once been relieved of his

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<sup>3</sup>F.W. Kaufmann, citing Henrik Ibsen, "Ibsen's Conception of Truth, " Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Rolfe Fjelde, editor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Harold Clurman, "Theatre," The Nation, 204:5, January 30, 1967, p. 156.

position as manager of the theatre at Christiana, and he had become particularly dismayed at his country's attitude during the Danish-Prussian War; thus he had reason to be somewhat dissatisfied with the establishment.<sup>5</sup> He looked the part of the outcast in those days, going about with unkempt hair and clothes, looking disgruntled and dishevelled. Oddly enough, these early days which marked the formulation of Ibsen's philosophy were not the period of the social reform plays, but rather of the romantic epic plays such as The Feast at Solhaug and Lady Inger of Ostraat and, later, of the great lyrical poem plays, Brand and Peer Gynt. Brand was an enormous success in Norway, going through four printings in its first year and causing a particular stir among the younger generation.<sup>6</sup> The success of Brand changed Ibsen from the rebel he had been into a role befitting the national poet. Valency describes Ibsen during this period:

Carefully brushed and barbered, in velvet jacket, light waistcoat, checked trousers, and shoes of bright patent leather, He stood as tall as he could, spoke seldom, shunned publicity, and made careful investments through his publisher, Frederick Hegel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund L. Volpe and Marvin Magalaner, "Introduction to The Wild Duck," An Introduction to Literature: Drama (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 248.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Valency, The Flower and the Castle: An Introduction to Modern Drama (The University Library. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963), p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

True to his paradoxical spirit, it was during this period of outward conformity that Ibsen began writing the great protest plays, most notably A Doll's House in 1879 and Ghosts in 1881. These two plays rocked the Continent with discussions about woman's rights and the institution of marriage. When the instigator of all this furor returned to Norway in 1891 after many years in Europe, he found himself to be a national hero, admired and honored by his countrymen.<sup>8</sup> Ibsen was at last receiving the adulation of the middle class he had both attacked and envied, and he reacted somewhat unpredictably. While continuing to write plays attacking the bourgeoisie, Ibsen became one with them, thus succumbing to the the infirmity he had always deplored--- conformity.

For the above reason, Henrik Ibsen came to realize about 1890 that the younger liberals, a group that had heretofore championed him, considered him "a stuffy and backward old man."<sup>9</sup> Although he had much earlier ridiculed avid liberals, along with the establishment, in his satirical League of Youth, he nonetheless feared their defection and felt the reins of leadership slipping from him. This fear of youth is most notably reflected in a conversation between Halvard Solness and Doctor Herdal in The Master Builder:

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<sup>8</sup>Volpe, loc. cit.

<sup>9</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 202.



Solness. Yes, but that is just what makes me so horribly afraid.

Dr. H. Afraid? Because you have the luck on your side?

Solness. It terrifies me--terrifies me every hour of the day. For sooner or later the luck must turn, you see.

Dr. H. Oh, nonsense! What should make the luck turn?

Solness. The younger generation.<sup>10</sup>

Although he feared youth, Ibsen nonetheless envied it and was fascinated by it. Throughout the late-middle years of his life, Ibsen formed several attachments with very young girls, most notable of whom was one Emilie Bardach, whom he met at Gossensass in the Brenner in the summer of 1889.<sup>11</sup> Somehow, in the paradoxical twistings of his mind, Ibsen conceived of the younger generation as being both attractive and repellent, inspirational and destructive. It is this same ambiguous attitude that is reflected in the relationships of Rebecca and Rosmer in Rosmersholm and of Hilda and Solness in The Master Builder.

The character of Halvard Solness embodies, too, the loneliness, ruthlessness, and dedication of his creator. He carries the same fears (such as his fear of heights and of the younger generation) and the same attitudes toward the creative process. The progression of Solness' career as an architect follows closely that of Ibsen as a dramatist. "Solness had

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<sup>10</sup>Henrik Ibsen, The Master Builder, The Works of Henrik Ibsen (New York: Walter J. Block, Inc., 1928), p. 359.

<sup>11</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 205.

begun by building churches; Ibsen by writing poetic plays. Solness then built homes for men; Ibsen then produced the series of great social plays."<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note the fate to which Ibsen subjected his counterpart: total destruction brought about by a combination of driving dedication and ambitious youth.

The concept of total dedication dominates many of Ibsen's plays. An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, The Master Builder, and Brand all contain characters that are deeply, completely committed to a cause or to a principle. In Ibsen's view, it is the quality of commitment to the cause that is important, not the cause itself. For instance, it is the dedication and persistence of Dr. Stockmann and Brand that Ibsen admires, not their advocacy of better sanitary conditions or of religious fervor. One feels that this quality of idealism is the first requisite for an admirable person, particularly for a person of artistic temperament. Ibsen liked to feel that he possessed this kind of dedication and identified with his idealistic characters. Deer says in this regard, "In Brand, Ibsen saw what he described... as 'myself in my best moments.'"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Clarence Stratton (ed.), introduction to Four Plays by Ibsen (New York: Ginn and Company, 1931), xx.

<sup>13</sup> Irving Deer, "Ibsen's Brand: Paradox and the Symbolic Hero," Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Rolf Fjelde, editor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 56.

Deer goes on to say, however, that Brand also represented Ibsen "at moments when he held the virtue of total dedication in doubt."<sup>14</sup>

Though the above statements appear contradictory, as indeed they are, they are indicative of the paradoxical mind of Henrik Ibsen. He has demonstrated his approval of Brand, applauded his dedication; and yet, what reader loves Brand? What reader admires his stubborn refusal to attend his dying mother, to spare his son, to comfort his wife? Brand, in Shaw's opinion, "...destroys infinitely more out of good motives than the conscious villain ever destroys out of bad."<sup>15</sup> Ibsen never advocated a lack of compassion and would hardly have condoned Brand's lack of it. He makes this clear in the ironic reference to the deus caritatis, with which he ends the play.

By the same token, the dramatist permits even Dr. Stockmann, who has both a worthy cause and total commitment to it, to look quixotic and even slightly ridiculous as he imagines himself receiving the adulation of the townsfolk. As a matter of fact, Robert Hatch sees Stockmann, not as a bumbling do-gooder, but as a malevolent character seeking to humiliate his brother as a result of a longstanding sibling rivalry. "Dr. Stockmann," Hatch writes, "was not looking to improve matters;

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 52.



he was looking to provoke a fight, and his tragedy was that he no longer had a mother to run to."<sup>16</sup> One can see that, while Ibsen admires the "All-or-Nothing" philosophy, he is nonetheless aware of its drawbacks. Chief among these is the omission of love.

It is virtually impossible to maintain total dedication to a cause when one is distracted by love. Loyalties are often divided, and one is unable to remain completely committed either to his cause or to the loved one. This rejection of love, which is demanded by the "All-or-Nothing" idealist is analyzed thus by Valency:

(Rejection of love) "...does violence to his deepest life. Ultimately, in every field of human activity, it is love that opens the way to one's highest fulfillment....Thus, love is an obstacle to complete dedication; but without love one cannot achieve the goal."<sup>17</sup>

Henrik Ibsen was aware of the dangers inherent in a slavish devotion to the kind of dedication he promoted, and part of the motivation for The Wild Duck was a reaction against the "Ibsenites" who had sprung up around the country. He intended to portray in The Wild Duck "...the deleteriously foolish idealism of the adult (Gregers) and the touching, perilous

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<sup>16</sup>Robert Hatch, "The Persistence of Ibsenism" Horizon, 4:3, January, 1962, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 231.



idealism of the child (Hedvig)."<sup>18</sup> Thus, Ibsen appears to approve the "All-or-Nothing" philosophy in theory, but to reject it in practice.

Closely aligned to Ibsen's beliefs about dedication are his beliefs about truth and freedom. "Know the truth, and it will make you free"; this appears to be the theme of such plays as A Doll's House, An Enemy of the People, and Brand. And yet, the genius negates the same idea in The Wild Duck and Ghosts, to name but two. Why is this so? It is so because Ibsen's ideas about truth and freedom are as nebulous and changeable as are his ideas about everything else. In his inimitable, complicated fashion, he views truth as being necessary but unattainable, and he believes that, once you have pinpointed truth, it is no longer true. Truth, to Ibsen, lies somewhere in the future, just out of reach. He regarded truth in this fashion: "... all truth which is accessible to man becomes falsehood when considered as absolutely valid."<sup>19</sup>

Ibsen felt strongly about individualism and personal freedom, believing that truth and freedom were utterly bound together and utterly dependent upon each other. In order to

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<sup>18</sup>John Simon, introduction to The Wild Duck (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966), xiv.

<sup>19</sup>F.W. Kaufmann, "Ibsen's Conception of Truth," Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Rolf Fjelde, editor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 26.

break the chains of conformity wherein lay the "roots of untruth,"<sup>20</sup> one must be free. If, however, truth is unattainable, can real freedom be attained? Probably not. Mrs. Alving, Brand, and Solness strove for freedom, and they were defeated. Dr. Stockmann and Nora fought for freedom and, while they were still fighting when last we saw them, their prospects did not look especially cheerful. Ibsen left some hope for persons like them, who continue fighting for freedom, when he wrote to Brandes in this regard in 1871, "...if...somebody ceases fighting and says, 'now I have it,' he thereby shows that he has lost it [freedom] ."<sup>21</sup>

Hoy, writing of Ibsen in The Hyacinth Room, offers this thought: "The proposition that knowledge of the truth will make man free is valid only when the truth in question carries with it the promise of a spiritual blessing."<sup>22</sup> This is a provocative statement and a thought-provoking one, but whether or not Ibsen would have agreed with it is another matter entirely. In the first place, the question of whether or not the truth would be beneficial is a moot one, since, to Ibsen, truth was unattainable; and, in the second place, since the playwright held that believing and striving were far more

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

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cyrus Hoy, The Hyacinth Room (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 94.

important than the goal sought, he would not be especially concerned with whether or not the goal carried with it a spiritual blessing. (Brand's did; Nora's did not.)

Ibsen had his characters search for truth and freedom in order to arm them to do battle against the corrupt, hypocritical world in which they lived. The dramatist's opinion of the society of his day was truly vehement. He saw the world as peopled primarily with leaders who were ruthless and self-seeking, interested only in personal gain, and with the "compact majority" of average people "petty, egotistic, worthless,"<sup>23</sup> who followed blindly wherever their political or religious leaders directed them. Ibsen voiced his distrust of the majority when he said, "Bjornson says, 'The majority is always right,' and for a practical politician this is the proper thing to say. I, on the contrary, must necessarily say, The minority is always right."<sup>24</sup> Thomas Stockmann puts it this way:

I don't imagine you will dispute the fact that at present the stupid people are in an absolutely overwhelming majority all the world over. But good Lord!--- you can never pretend that it is right that the stupid folk should govern the clever ones?...The majority has

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<sup>23</sup> George Brandes, citing Henrik Ibsen, "Henrik Ibsen," Creative Spirits of the Nineteenth Century (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1923), p. 359.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 393.



might on its side unfortunately; but right it has not.<sup>25</sup>

In a speech to the workingmen of Trodhjem, Ibsen once said:

An element of aristocracy must enter into our national life, our administration, our representative bodies, and our press. Of course, I am thinking of an aristocracy of character, of mind, and will.<sup>26</sup>

This, then, was Ibsen's answer for the stupid majority; they must be led by a minority of platonic elite, artists, and intellectuals. Did he actually believe that such an aristocracy would ever exist? Probably not, but his advocacy of it provides one more illustration of the paradox that was Ibsen: rebel and conformist, warrior and pacifist, radical and conservative.

Few institutions were safe from Ibsen's attack on corruption and immorality. Government officials came in for their share in such plays as An Enemy of the People and The League of Youth; ministers, in Brand and in the figure of Pastor Manders in Ghosts; marriage, in Ghosts and A Doll's House. All of these plays point up the hypocrisy inherent in the social system of his day. Most of Ibsen's characters go through life saying one thing and meaning something else. Many of them have problems stemming from the enlightenment

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<sup>25</sup>Henrik Ibsen, An Enemy of the People, The Works of Henrik Ibsen (New York: Walter J. Block, Inc., 1928), p. 146.

<sup>26</sup>Simon, op. cit., xii.

of their age.

The era in which Ibsen lived was proud of having broken from the enslavement of ignorance. It was an age influenced by Freud and Darwin, an age of intellectuals and sophisticates, an age described by Bentley in this way:

... we live in a society of ideas to a degree never known in history before, a society buzzing with theories and explanations, a society brought up to know all the theories and explanations--or, which may make for better satire, to half-know them.<sup>27</sup>

Ibsen viewed these intellectuals with something less than amusement; indeed, he viewed them with alarm. He felt that such persons were only superficially enlightened. In reality they were controlled, like Mrs. Alving, by the ghosts of convention.

Mrs. Alving is perhaps the best illustration of Bentley's notion of "...the subject of ideas affirmed by the intellect but not assimilated into the life of the affirmer."<sup>28</sup> She considered herself a modern woman, knowledgeable and informed, and believed that her attitude towards her husband was very civilized. In order to emphasize her acquisition of knowledge, much is made of her collection of books. Nevertheless, Mrs. Alving's ideals about rational thought and intellectual honesty did not help her when she needed to act. Corrigan

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<sup>27</sup>Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum Press, 1965), p. 130.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

has this to say:

Every significant choice that Mrs. Alving has ever made and the resultant action of such a decision is determined by these ghosts of the past rather than by intellectual deliberation.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Ibsen seems to be saying, while the rational, modern intellectual knows what action he should take, his emotional bonds are too powerful to permit him to carry out plans logically conceived.

The elements of immorality, corruption, hypocrisy, and injustice combine to form a sort of code by which the people in Ibsen's world live. The forest in the Ekdal garret, Hjalmar's invention, and Tesman's book are all physical representations of the life-lie, something that is not what it appears to be. The life-lie is obviously not good. It is oppressive and untruthful, and yet it seems to be necessary. Look what happens to Hedvig when her illusion is destroyed. The killing of the wild duck illustrates that "...man cannot slay the illusion, the life-lie, he lives by--if he tries to, he kills himself."<sup>30</sup> In spite of Ibsen's pessimistic picture of the inescapability of the life-lie, he does not condone it, and contends that one must work to combat it.

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<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Corrigan, "The Sun Always Rises: Ibsen's Ghosts as Tragedy?" Tragedy: Vision and Form, Robert W. Corrigan, editor (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 398.

<sup>30</sup> Simon, op. cit., xvii.



The conformist cannot combat the life-lie. Only the individualist can do that, and even he is seldom successful. There can be no doubt that Ibsen admired uniqueness in his characters, no matter what their motivations might have been. It is this individualism that Ibsen admired in such otherwise unattractive characters as Hedda Gabler and Rebecca West. The quality upon which Ibsen insisted most strongly in his characters is that they maintain their "selfness" in the midst of faceless conformity. This presented the dramatist with perhaps his most singular dilemma: how to present a man of heroic stature in a modern world full of social pressure, how to show these pressures operating as an inexorably powerful force upon the tragic hero.<sup>31</sup> Ibsen's world, then, was complicated, ugly, uncaring; he set his characters down in that world and left them to fend for themselves. Corrigan states their dilemma thus:

How is one to live in an irrational world! How is one to give meaning to life in a world where you don't know the rules? How are human relationships to be maintained when you can't be sure of your feelings and when your feelings can change without your knowing it? Ibsen's plays, beginning with Ghosts, dramatize man destroyed by trying to live rationally in such a world.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>John Northam, "Ibsen's Search for the Hero," Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Rolf Fjelde, editor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1965), p. 93.

<sup>32</sup>Corrigan, op. cit., p. 403.



One can see that the individualist and the truly dedicated man had a difficult time surviving in a paradoxical world such as the one Ibsen described. The "All-or-Nothing" philosophy naturally provided conflicts for Ibsen characters. The fanatical idealist cannot survive; neither can the man who is committed to nothing at all. "... Life must be lived," says Maurice Valency, "somewhere between All and Nothing; at the extremes there is only death and despair."<sup>33</sup> Valency seems to urge compromise, which might be the proper course of action for the "compact majority," but not for the hero and the artist, who by the very nature of their roles are destined to strive for the "All" and are doomed to despair.

Each of Ibsen's characters must, at some point in his life, make atonement for a previous incorrect moral choice or judgment, or they must atone for a wrong choice made by the generation before them. This explains in part the numerous references to moral bankruptcy and debts to be paid and to mining for hidden guilt. At any rate, the people of Ibsen's world try to maintain their individuality and integrity within the norms of a society dominated by conformity and immorality. No matter what decision the character reaches, he is haunted by the choice he might have made. Mrs. Alving might have made a wiser choice had she left Captain Alving. Nora might have been happier if she had

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<sup>33</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 234.

remained with her husband and children. Borkman might have been more contented if, in his youth, he had married Ella. Kaufmann states their difficulty this way:

Ibsen indicates another problem, namely that every choice involves the rejection of other possibilities of perhaps equal moral importance, so that guilt is inescapable, a conclusion which should impose some humility upon any searcher for truth.<sup>34</sup>

It follows, then, that an Ibsen protagonist might feel guilt for having made a wrong choice, as did Borkman, or for a wrong choice made by a parent, as did Gregers Werle. Guilt carries with it a desire for atonement, a need for expiation. Corrigan speaks to this when he says:

Ibsen's plays are a continuous act of expiation.... Thematically, the plays are, almost without exception, patterned in a similar way: a hidden moral guilt and the fear of impending retribution.<sup>35</sup>

This drive for expiation may end in suicide, as in the case of Hedvig and Rebecca; in loneliness and despair, as in the case of Mrs. Alving; or in madness, as with Halvard Solness and John Gabriel Borkman.

Many of Ibsen's characters tread perilously near the brink of insanity; some others are totally mad. Doubtless the dramatist wished to show the effects upon the mind of the eternal paradox that was the society of his day. His plays, according to Hatch, are "...concerned with the

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<sup>34</sup>Kaufmann, loc. cit.

<sup>35</sup>Corrigan, op. cit., p. 396.

functions and maladies of the ego."<sup>36</sup> Some of Ibsen's people, such as Borkman and Gregers Werle, are driven to insanity by a need for expiation. Others have been pushed beyond the limits of the "All or Nothing" and, in their fanatical idealism, are totally mad. Solness and Brand are illustrative of this kind of madness, as are Hilda Wangel and Rebecca West. A startling illustration of this point is made by Eric Bentley:

When Sigmund Freud was looking for the most typical case of a certain neurosis, he confessed himself unable to find any among actual patients who was as thoroughly typical as one of Ibsen's heroines. And it is Rebecca West's life-story that he included in his essay on "Character Types."<sup>37</sup>

In addition, there is the element of inherited madness, as personified by Oswald Alving, who has no control over his destiny, but who is nonetheless destroyed.

Madness is not the only legacy bequeathed to Ibsen characters. Some others receive physical infirmities, as did Hedvig and Dr. Rank; some inherit the moral debts of their fathers, as did Gregers Werle and Erhart Borkman. This particular aspect of Ibsen's philosophy seems especially pessimistic. He seems to leave very little hope for redemption when he insists that each succeeding generation is automatically infected by its diseased forebears.

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<sup>36</sup>Hatch, op. cit., p. 107.

<sup>37</sup>Bentley, op. cit., p. 55.



Recognizing, then, Henrik Ibsen's view of a paradoxical, ambiguous world and of the qualities necessary to exist in that world, one may turn to the characters themselves to see how they reflect the philosophy of their creator.

How do Ibsen's characters fare in the unhappy world in which he places them? Can they maintain their individuality? Have they courage and dedication? Are they able to see through the facade of the life-lie? And, as a secondary consideration, do they set for themselves attainable goals?

The great archetypal characters, Peer Gynt and Julian the Apostate, may be discounted for the purposes of this discussion, as they lie within the framework of the early lyrical plays and must be considered in that context. So, too, does Brand; but, as he is the prototype of Solness and, to a degree, of Stockmann and Gregers Werle, he needs to be analyzed according to the Ibsen criteria. Brand meets most of the tests. He is certainly dedicated to his cause; he is aware of the shortcomings of his society and is definitely an individualist. However, the character of Brand, like those of other Ibsen characters, is built on paradox and is thus virtually impossible to pinpoint. Which aspect of Brand is more notable: his total dedication or his lack of compassion? "Brand must destroy to create," says Deer. "He must give up love to find love. In the end, he must lose everything to gain everything."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Deer, loc. cit.

No matter what one's personal feeling about Brand may be, one realizes that even Ibsen did not consider him completely without fault.

Turning to the Ibsen character most nearly like Brand, Halvard Solness, one again is aware of the uncompromising idealist, unique and unbending. It is this inability to bend that makes Solness, like Brand, unable to demonstrate compassion towards his wife, towards young Brovik or Kaia. The double-edged sword of idealism, which provides Solness with his qualities of greatness, also endows him with the hardness that prevents his being completely admirable.

Are there any admirable characters in The Master Builder? Hilda Wangel holds to the "All-or-Nothing" philosophy, but she is mad and is thus eliminated from consideration. What about Aline Solness? Knut Brovik? Ragnar? No. All of these, while having qualities of patience, persistence, and loyalty, succumb to the will of the corrupt society, believing it their duty to do so. No, the admirable Ibsen character does not live within The Master Builder.

Thomas Stockmann in An Enemy of the People was a character Ibsen liked. He wrote Hegel, his publisher, in 1882: "Dr. Stockmann and I get on very well together; we agree on so many subjects. But the Doctor is a more muddle-headed person than I."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 164.

Ibsen respected Stockmann's courage in pursuing his goal in the face of formidable opposition. He permitted Stockmann to understand the evil society and imbued him with the will to combat it. Ibsen changed the reforming doctor from a fairly laughable, well-meaning citizen at the opening of the play into a Brand-like individualist who, at the end of the play, stands tall and says, "It is this, let me tell you---that the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone."<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, Ibsen's treatment of Dr. Stockmann is not completely sympathetic, as Valency relates:

Ibsen gives Dr. Stockmann a bad case history. He is, we are informed, a habitual troublemaker, has been dismissed before in similar circumstances, and will no doubt be in trouble again. Evidently his affinity for martyrdom--in which his family participates--includes, as always, an element of sadism.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Stockmann hopes for public commendation and recognition; and, as has been suggested earlier, he may have been carrying a personal grudge against his brother. This, plus the fact that Ibsen's treatment of him is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, makes one wonder about the virtues of Thomas Stockmann. The same fervor he demonstrates, which he applies toward a worthwhile goal, might just as easily have been utilized in a destructive manner, as it is in the character of Gregers Werle in The Wild Duck.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibsen, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>41</sup> Valency, op. cit., p. 165.



Gregers, like Stockmann, is firmly committed to the revelation of the truth as he sees it. He is misguided, to be sure, but he honestly believes that, by insisting that the facts of Hedvig's birth be made known, Gina and Hjalmar will be free to enjoy a happier life together. He is driven to this fanatical insistence upon complete honesty by a desire to make amends for the wrong he feels his father has done the Ekdals. In fact, of course, he brings the whole house of cards, in which the family has been dwelling fairly comfortably, down about their ears. Dr. Relling, on the other hand, advocates not only maintaining the status quo, but reinforcing it with the life-lie. One must have the life-lie in order to exist, he says. Relling's philosophy, however, is not a constructive one, as his own way of life evidences. These characters of The Wild Duck give credence to the statement that life must be lived somewhere between the "All-or-Nothing."

In addition to his individualism and dedication, Gregers possesses the virtue of recognizing the ugliness of the world in which he lives; and he had spent many years in isolation from it--years spent, both literally and symbolically, in mining. Despite the qualities he has to recommend him, Gregers has the same flaw which marred his predecessors, Brand and Solness; he lacks compassion. He is not especially concerned with the emotional reaction of Gina, Hjalmar, and



old Ekdal. He insists that they be happy, in order that the guilty conscience willed him by his father may be appeased.

The child Hedvig is also an idealist, believing where she cannot see. Her destruction is brought about through no fault of her own and is illustrative of Ibsen's saddest indictment of his world: The sins of the fathers--whether they be overtly dissolute fathers or passive, uncaring ones--are visited on their children. Hedvig is but one example of this theme, which Ibsen drives home time and again through such characters as Oswald Alving, Erhart Borkman, and Dr. Rank. All these are diseased or degenerate, suffering from physical or spiritual illnesses bequeathed them by incontinent fathers. They are neither admirable characters nor hateful ones, but merely victims of the paradoxical world of Ibsen.

An especially unusual product of Ibsen's world is John Gabriel Borkman, who can be heard long before he appears onstage, pacing back and forth in his upstairs apartment as he had done for eight long years, waiting restlessly for something to happen. He did not know what to expect, but he had faith that someday, someone would come along who would recognize his greatness. John Gabriel, too, was dedicated to a cause--himself. He was convinced that his worth would not go unnoticed forever. Valency described Borkman thus:

... a man whose need for personal fulfillment is boundless, and who, even on the brink of eternity,

clings tenaciously to the hope that one day the world will understand how great he is, and how necessary.<sup>42</sup>

Borkman believed that his great power plan would have made the world a better place in which to live and that countless people would have benefitted from the benevolent dictatorship he had planned to enforce. Thus he felt that the fact that he had caused pain to Gunhild and Ella and the fact that he had left Erhart the thankless task of restoring the family honor were unfortunate, unhappy means to a necessary, felicitous end. Borkman was not, however, unaware that he had debts to pay. As a matter of fact, Ella made certain he did not forget. This feeling of guilt, along with his fanatical obsession and the strain of preparing for a day of recognition that did not come, combined to force Borkman to take "refuge in madness, or something near it."<sup>43</sup>

The other chief characters of John Gabriel Borkman were victims--Erhart of inherited degeneracy, Ella and Gunhild of societal marriage mores that Ibsen deplored. His notes on Ghosts describe the way he pictured the women of his world:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 220-21.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

These women of the present day, ill-used as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated according to their gifts, prevented from following their inclination, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in temper--it is these who furnish the mothers of the new generation.<sup>44</sup>

Victims indeed they were, but Ibsen had no sympathy for Ella and Gunhild because they refused to fight back. Unlike John Gabriel himself, they accepted misery as their due.

An Ibsen character that is akin to Borkman in his dream of creating a better world is Johannes Rosmer. There, however, the resemblance ends. Borkman was a self-made man; Rosmer was the last descendant in a long line of local aristocrats. Borkman was active, fervent to the last; Rosmer was passive, easily led. He was, however, an interesting personality.

Rosmer was utterly lacking in the drive and ambition to carry through his plan to ennoble the minds of men. He was honorable, intelligent, idealistic--all admirable qualities. But, on the other hand, he was weak and he felt somehow guilty about Beate's death. In discussing Rosmer, Valency says, "In him we have not so much the protagonist, as the battleground of the evolutionary process."<sup>45</sup> If this

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<sup>44</sup>Richard Levin, citing Ibsen, Tragedy: Plays, Theories, and Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1960), p. 127.

<sup>45</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 179.



contention be true and if only the fittest can survive, there was no recourse except suicide for Johannes Rosmer. He was not a man of action and could never have clawed his way through the jungles of Ibsen's world. To make certain the reader is cognizant of this fact, the dramatist included the character of Brendel in Rosmersholm. Brendel was "Rosmer's alter ego--the broken man Rosmer would be if he continued living, a man who does not act until action is impossible."<sup>46</sup> The person of Rosmer indicates that, while a man may achieve personal satisfaction and rewards of the spirit by being gentle and sensitive, he cannot survive in a worldly environment such as the one Ibsen knew. Without drive and courage, such a man as Rosmer was certainly doomed; he would likely have been defeated even if he had possessed them. Only the ruthless persons such as Peter Mortensgard and Kroll could live in a ruthless, corrupt world.

Rosmer was not the most colorful character living at Rosmersholm; that distinction belonged to Rebecca West. Individualistic? Dedicated? Strong? Indeed, Rebecca was all these things. Unfortunately, like Hilda Wangel, Rebecca was a little mad. She came from a cold, unhappy place far to the north of Rosmersholm, and she placed all her hopes for

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<sup>46</sup> Edward B. Jenkinson and Phillip B. Daghljan (eds.), Teaching Literature in Grades Ten through Twelve (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 225.

happiness in Rosmer, whom she loved passionately. The fact of Beate's existence did not trouble Rebecca; she simply tormented Rosmer's wife to death. Later, however, having been ennobled by the idealism that motivated Johannes Rosmer, she felt, for the first time, guilt for Beate's death. Thus, Rebecca could not indulge her love for Rosmer; she must sacrifice it and, in the end, her very life, partly in expiation and partly because of her obsession for Rosmer. The reader of Rosmersholm is more likely to pity Rebecca than to admire her or to despise her.

Another of Ibsen's women who possessed the will to fight for what she wanted was Hedda Gabler. Hedda, like Rebecca, was not scrupulous about the means she chose to achieve her goals. In point of fact, her contempt for Tesman, her destruction of Lovborg, her manipulation of Thea, even her pettiness toward Aunt Julia seem utterly despicable. Hedda is not, however, without redemptive qualities. Chief among these is her refusal to accept passively the deadly role society had decreed for her. True, she had committed the sin of Mrs. Alving and Gunhild Borkman when she made a loveless marriage; however, she never resigned herself to it. She waited impatiently for something to happen and, when action was not forthcoming, Hedda made things happen.

Valency puts it this way:

Hedda is not a vampire-woman. If she is dangerous it is because she stands at bay. She is frustrated at every turn. Her plight is desperate. All her

aggressions are aroused; she is defending her inmost life.<sup>47</sup>

Destructive she was, but because she was a fighter, one may not condemn Hedda as being totally without merit.

Mrs. Alving, the protagonist of Ghosts, seems to be all the things Hedda Gabler is not. Mrs. Alving was intelligent, compassionate, generous, self-sacrificing--all qualities the average reader would find worthy of emulation. Yet Ibsen would probably not have been as fond of Mrs. Alving as he was of Hedda.

Mrs. Alving's superficial enlightenment and her failure to take action upon her insight have been discussed earlier in this paper. However, this aspect of her character is not so damning as the fact that she married Captain Alving in the first place, thus succumbing to the pressure of an inherently wicked society, a society personified by the hypocritical Manders and the leering Engstrand. Mrs. Alving was not, in the strictest sense, a victim of the society in that she realized the injustice of what she was asked to do. She was aware that, in making a marriage of convenience, she was violating her "selfness," submerging herself in the "compact majority." She merely compounded the offense by remaining with the captain on Manders' advice.

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<sup>47</sup>Valency, op. cit., p. 200.



Mrs. Alving was created as another aspect of Nora, the central character of A Doll's House. At the opening of the play, Nora seems the antithesis of all the things Ibsen would require of an admirable character. She is not ambitious, does not have a goal, is not deeply committed to herself, is of the egotistic bourgeoisie, and has made a marriage arranged by the social mores. She is spoiled, pampered, babied; she teases her children and coaxes her husband; she is the darling of the household staff. She even lures and goads the dying Dr. Rank, partly because she needs his help and partly because she wants to gratify her feminine ego.

Quite suddenly, in the space of an evening, Nora gains insight. She identifies Helmer's hypocrisy and his oppression of her. She is able to understand the social system that spawned them both and gives voice to a protest against it. She visualizes a goal---self-fulfillment---and becomes so dedicated to that goal that she is willing to sacrifice everything to attain it. She has gained the will and the courage to stand alone. When Nora says to her husband, "I must try and educate myself--you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself,"<sup>48</sup> she contains all the qualities of an admirable Ibsen character. Northam says of Nora, "... she will sacrifice no basic principles, however

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<sup>48</sup> Ibsen, A Doll's House, op. cit., p. 212.



desperate her situation.... Ibsen has discovered his modern hero."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Ibsen has at last created a character who can live in the ugly world, who can survive without the life-lie, who can be dedicated but not destructive, who can walk among the Engstrands and Krolls and not be crushed by them. Perhaps Nora can live in Ibsen's paradoxical world.

In speaking of Ibsen's characters, Maurice Valency says, "In general, they are either comic or pathetic. They are rarely tragic; and never successful."<sup>50</sup> It is well that Valency qualifies his statement with words such as "in general" and "rarely"; unfortunately, he says they are "never successful." Perhaps Nora is the exception. One cannot know; she is lost to sight after the slamming of the door. However, she has taken a giant step toward success when she sets out to find herself.

The other Ibsen characters are indeed comic or pathetic, unfortunate or oppressed, unhappy or impotent, and indeed they are unsuccessful. But Nora? Perhaps in Nora the great pessimist, Henrik Ibsen, saw a glimpse of the potential of the human spirit. Perhaps, in Nora, a glimmer of hope shines.

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<sup>49</sup>Northam, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>50</sup>Valency, op. cit., pp. 127-28.

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