



Henrik Ibsen the Artist: How Lonely! How Forsaken!

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Abstract: This paper brings to light the autobiographical elements of Henrik Ibsen's life (the limitations faced by him in real life) as dramatized in his plays. This study explores that Ibsen's plays become an exercise in delving deep into the limitations faced by his near and dear ones as well as by himself. The characters in his plays often mirror his parents, and his own social and psychological sufferings and conflicts. Most of the autobiographical findings in this paper about Ibsen's life, the limitations he faced in life, and the characters created by him which personify his own self, are based on the comments of different critics, and his biography written by his foremost biographer Michael Meyer. The limitations Ibsen faced, suffered, and portrayed in his plays are his poverty and financial problems, the scar of illegitimacy, his father's bankruptcy, his cowardliness, his isolation in society, his loveless marriage, his fear of heights, his fears of youth in old age, his attraction to young women, and finally his emotional bankruptcy. This study brings to light all the mentioned autobiographical elements in Ibsen's plays, how he climbed to the heights of arts and achieved materialistic success, fame, and popularity, yet at the cost of his emotional and spiritual sacrifices. This work will help the readers to find close resemblances between Ibsen's real life and the characters he produced in his plays.

Keywords: autobiographical, limitations, Ibsen's real life, characters, social and psychological

1. Introduction

"Everywhere limitations. From this comes melancholy like a subdued song of mourning over the whole of human existence and all the activities of men. (Ibsen)

Henrik Johan Ibsen himself summed up this feeling in his preliminary notes to one of his plays. Ibsen, 1828-1906, the Norwegian dramatist was born to Knud Ibsen and Marichen Altenburg, a relatively well-to-do merchant family, in the small port town of Skien, Norway. Shortly after his birth, his family's fortunes took a significant turn for the worse. His father suffered heavy losses and was reduced to a state of poverty. His mother turned to religion for solace, and his father began to suffer from severe depression. Thus, Ibsen's early years were lonely and miserable, he grew up in poverty and suffered hardships and failures in his life. Distressed by the consequences of his family's financial ruin, at the age of fifteen, he moved to the small town of Grimstad, became an apprentice pharmacist, and began writing plays.

The characters in his plays often mirror his parents, and his own social and psychological sufferings and conflicts. This paper brings to light the autobiographical elements of Ibsen's life (the limitations faced by him in real life) as dramatized in his plays. According to Harold Clurman, "Ibsen's plays are deeply autobiographical. . . . They are dramatizations of his emotional, spiritual, social and intellectual life" (2). His characters are not merely the figment of his imagination. Many of his characters bear very obvious autobiographical relevance and importance and as such have confirmed historical existence. Many of them have been modeled on his parents, his wife, and his acquainted

young women, and most significantly on himself. From this account, this paper explores that his plays become an exercise in delving deep into the limitations faced by the near and dear ones as well as by himself. William Archer similarly observes that: "Ibsen is never tired of insisting that all his writings—stand in intimate relation to his own life. . . . Everything he has produced, he says, has its origin in something he has not merely experienced but lived through" (424). However, the real significance of his plays does not lie in projecting his family's lives, and his own sufferings and frustrations. The plays are the perfect work of art, imaginatively conceived, and visualized, dramatizing the (social, biological, and psychological human suffering) action. All his plays are the creation of his acute observation and vast reading with a tinge of his own conflicts and sufferings. Malcolm Bradbury in his work *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers* writes about Ibsen, "he was an avid observer, a close reader of newspapers, an attentive analyst of behaviour, and a man closely in touch with the conflicts within himself. As he once said: "Everything that I have written is most minutely connected with what I have lived through" (64-65).

2. Research Methodology

Most of the autobiographical findings in this paper about Ibsen's life, the limitations he faced in life, and the characters created by him which personify his own self, are based on the comments of different critics, and his biography written by his foremost biographer Michael Meyer. Through close reading of Ibsen's plays *The Wild Duck*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Master Builder*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken* as primary sources and in the light of the secondary sources obtained from various books, articles, websites a correlation between Ibsen's personal life and characters' limitations has been determined. For this purpose, qualitative method, i.e., close-reading technique of data collection and analysis, has been used. Close reading is a technique "to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text" (Braun n.p). Moreover, paper's main focus is on the connection between Ibsen's own life and his characters, to best critique the selected works' explorations of Ibsen's limitations, sufferings and frustrations in life.

3. Review of Literature

Ibsen's themes often deal with issues of financial difficulty as well as moral, social, and psychological conflicts stemming from dark secrets hidden from society. These dark secrets of his life and deeply felt experiences in his early days drove Ibsen to write one drama after another. "His work throughout is the expression of a great soul," Havelock Ellis remarks, "crushed by the weight of an antagonistic social environment into utterance that has caused him to be regarded as the most revolutionary of modern writers" (76).

His suspicion that he was illegitimate, the illegitimacy of his own first child, his early alcoholism, the bankruptcy and degradation of his father, the poverty which followed, the hostility of other boys, and his seclusion in a society where he felt like an outsider, always dogged his thoughts (Gray 207). The limitations Ibsen faced, suffered, and portrayed in his plays are his poverty and financial problems, the scar of illegitimacy, his father's bankruptcy, his cowardliness, his isolation in the society, his loveless marriage, his fear of heights, his fears of youth in old age, his attraction to young women, and finally his emotional bankruptcy.

Michael Meyer relates that during his childhood "it was openly rumoured that Henrik Ibsen was not Knud Ibsen's son, but that of an old admirer of his mother named Tormod Knudsen" (33-34). This scar of illegitimacy always haunted Ibsen's mind, once he was in his late teens and drunk, Michael Meyer describes that "as he spoke," to one of his friends, "he gradually became very excited, said in pain words that there were irregularities connected with his birth and bluntly named Tormod Knudsen" (34). Whether this rumour was true or not but "perhaps the deepest scar on Ibsen's psyche was the rumour of his illegitimacy. . . . True or not, it is a fact that for over twenty five years he had no contact with his father. After the age of twenty two he never saw either of his parents" (Clurman 6). Michael Meyer argues that one important piece of evidence is against it that "Henrik Ibsen never remotely resembled Knudsen . . . but he very closely resembled Knud Ibsen. People in Skien used to say of Henrik Ibsen in his later years that it was like seeing old Ibsen [i.e. Knud] resurrected" (34). But in spite of that Ibsen had no respect for his father, and it was something from which he was never to escape. In this regard Harold Clurman observes, "[c]ertainly the decline in his father's fortune when Ibsen was six (and the near-bankruptcy later) must have had a most depressing effect on the boy" (4). We find three recognizable portraits of Knud Ibsen in his plays like Jon Gynt in *Peer Gynt*, Daniel Hejre in *The League of Youth*, and Old Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*. All the three characters have gone bankrupt, and due to their financial ruin, had been living a life of poverty, failure, and bitterness. His father, once prosperous we learn, died bankrupt and a drunk.

In 1846, when Ibsen disillusioned with his life at Skien, he shifted to Grimstad as an apprentice, there a servant girl bore him an illegitimate son, and “Ibsen had, out of his almost non-existent salary, to pay paternity costs towards the child’s upbringing until he reached the age of fourteen” (Meyer 48). So the specter-like presence of bankruptcy and illegitimacy reappear throughout his works. Almost every play from *The Pretenders* to the *Rosmersholm* he wrote has an illegitimate or supposedly illegitimate child. For instance, Haakon and Peter in *The Pretenders*, the Ugly Brat in *Peer Gynt*, Regine in *Ghosts*, Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*, and Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* all suffer from the stigma of illegitimacy.

His poetic dramas *Brand* (1865) a tragedy, and *Peer Gynt* (1867) a comedy created an immediate and widespread sensation throughout Scandinavia. He also wrote his most prolific and realistic modern prose plays *A Doll’s House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), during this phase of his self-exile. “*Brand* marks an extraordinary leap forward in Ibsen’s development as a dramatist,” (258), Michael Meyer remarks, and “to modern readers *Brand* is a mighty, Lear-like poetic tragedy of a lonely, misguided and tormented spirit.” (264). In *Brand*, Harold bloom observes, “he would attack the political conservatism and liberalism, insincere religiosity, and bourgeois values” (11). In *Peer Gynt* Ibsen has dramatized his inner struggle and is at war with trolls in heart and soul within himself. According to Richard Schechner, “*Peer Gynt* is representative of a great many of Ibsen’s fears and antipathies, including demons within himself” (65). As he himself once remarked, “*Brand* was ‘myself, in my best moments’, *Peer* was the other side of the medallion” (Meyer 291). Both *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* are the most representative of Ibsen’s deeper self and the emotional struggle between divine purpose and animal wishes for life. Malcolm Bradbury likewise points out:

That brooding, doubting, despairing temper, the lonely and shut-off life, these were all in Ibsen’s nature, and part of the spirit of his writing. . . . As he said himself, the heroes of his plays—the rigid pastor Brand, the sinful, self-seeking Peer Gynt . . . were versions of himself, expressions of the contradictoriness and hunger of his nature. (60-61)

Ibsen had to live the next twenty-seven years as a self-imposed exile in Italy, Germany, and Denmark until his return to Norway in 1891. It was during this period that Ibsen produced his masterpieces in verse and prose.

4. Discussion and Analysis of Ibsen’s Plays and Autobiographical Analogies

In Grimstad Ibsen lived a very pathetic and deprived life in an “extremely shabby—undusted, dark and displeasing” low tiny room, and “earned the most miserable of salaries, and did not have enough to eat” (Meyer 45-46). He could not afford to have dresses of his liking, always avoided attending parties or functions, and almost lived a secluded life in wretchedly poor conditions. His friend Due narrates: “Several times I had exhorted Ibsen to partake in these festivities, but important considerations had compelled him to decline. The fact was that he had no evening coat and, what was worse, had never danced and did not dare to make his debut at a ball” (Meyer 71). We find the same illustration of Ibsen’s abject life in *The Wild Duck* when Hjalmar Ekdal attends a party he borrows a dinner-jacket from Molvik which he thinks as “one really fits me very well. It sets almost as though it had been made for me. A little tight under the arms, perhaps” (Ibsen 170) Hjalmar also consoles his wife Gina, and says emotionally, “never mind if our roof is low and poor, Gina. It is home, all the same. And this I will say: it is good to be here” (Ibsen 174). The poor condition of the Ekdals in the play obviously portrays the wretched circumstances of Ibsen himself in Grimstad and his family’s life after the financial ruin of his father. Describing the pitiful state of Ibsen’s years in Grimstad, Harold Clurman writes, “[h]e was regarded as an outsider. His meals were as skimpy as the wages. The quarters in his employer home were appallingly cold. It must have been humiliating for the youth, who liked to dress meticulously, to wear suits as “shiny as the stove.” In short, he was wretchedly poor with only an occasional free Sunday” (5). Dissatisfied with his life at Grimstad Ibsen moved to Christiania [now Oslo] but with no change in fortune as Michael Meyer relates, “he was to spend six years there, years of poverty, bitterness, and failure, learning the alphabet of his craft” (103).

Afterward, in 1851 Ibsen as a theatre director, had to move to Bergen, a much more attractive city than Christiania, where he spent five years and ten months. It was there that he fell in love, “he met a young girl named Rikke (i.e., Henrikke) Holst. She was only fifteen, ten years younger than Ibsen, and not yet confirmed” (Mayer 129). Ibsen asked Rikke to marry him but his frustrations were further aggravated by the refusal of her father:

But her father refused to countenance any engagement before she was confirmed; furthermore, he forbade her to continue seeing this young poet, who was poor, of uncertain prospects, had failed his matriculation, held radical political views, and must altogether have seemed, to any respectable citizen, a singularly unpromising match (Meyer 130).

Ibsen in extreme disappointment had to opt for an unconventional strange marriage with Rikke, and in a “romantic manner by joining their rings on a key-ring and throwing them linked into the fjord. Thus according to an ancient tradition, the sea had joined them as surely as any priest” (Meyer 130). Similarly, an unusual type of scene Ibsen has portrayed in a similar kind of marriage between Ellida and the Stranger in *The Lady from the Sea*. Ibsen is also known to have a great affiliation with the sea. Like Ellida he always longed and had a great fascination for the sea. Similarly, the “sea is the dominant feature of Norwegian geography. And in one critical aspect of his nature, Ibsen was a man of the sea. In *The Lady from the Sea*, the heroine is told by her husband, “Ellida, your mind is like the sea. It ebbs and flows.” So did Ibsen’s” (Clurman 3).

Ibsen was never a brave man face to face, and because of this cowardly nature, he could not prolong his relations with Rikke. One day when the Rikke’s father saw them together and threateningly raised his clenched fist at Ibsen, ‘his face green with anger’, Ibsen had to succumb timidly. Michael Meyer narrates that, “[a] bolder lover might have braved it out; but Ibsen turned tail and fled. That was the end of things between Ibsen and Rikke Holst” (130-131). Ibsen served as a director at the Bergen Theatre but he was never satisfied with the working conditions there as he describes in one of his letters: “I have long found the working conditions at the Bergen Theatre oppressive; every way in which I might achieve anything has been barred to me, my hands have never been free, and I have as a result felt daily frustrated by the consciousness of having to work without being able to accomplish what I desired” (Meyer 154). So, he left Bergen unheralded and left for Christiania to take up a new post at Christiania Theatre. The years he spent at Bergen had “been extremely frustrating. As a director his hands had been tied; as an author, he had repeatedly seen every attempt he had made to experiment and diverge from either the antiquated conventions of static verse tragedy, or the banalities of nationalistic rustic comedy, derided” (Meyer 156).

Ibsen got married to Suzzanah Thoresen on 18 June 1858, and “the wedding was celebrated quietly, under the melancholy circumstances, for only seven days previously her father, the Dean, had died at the age of fifty two” (Meyer 172). Ibsen lived in Christiania for five years but found life crippled with a huge amount of debt. The couple lived in very poor financial circumstances and as a result, Ibsen became very disenchanted with life in Norway. After years of failure and poverty, he immigrated at the age of 36 to Italy. During this time, he had no connection with his family members and all the time felt homeless and frustrated. “Time and again, Ibsen said through his most articulate characters that he’d never had a home. His first thirty-six years in Norway had been spent in painful struggle. His father and brothers and probably even his mother had not won his enduring affection” (Clurman 193). It was in 1864; he left Christiania and went to Italy in self-imposed exile. Michael Meyer accordingly writes that “Ibsen’s career as a theatre director ended. If his six years at Bergen had been hard, these five years at Christiania had been harder. . . . His own dramatic talent, instead of flowering as he had hoped, had gone barren; and now with a wife and son to support and no private means, he was without job (201).

Though different facets of Ibsen’s own frustration and limitations have been ascribed by critics in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, but the later plays written after his return to Norway, are more autobiographical, depicting the sorrows and emotional sufferings of the artist. In the three last plays “*The Master Builder*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*” written by him at the age of sixty, “the artist is in contention with himself, with his vision. What Ibsen saw, and reflected dramatically, is the titanic isolation of the artist: alone with himself and those ideas which mirror him” (Schechner 60). Besides, Ibsen’s plays written in the 1880s also represent some of the traits and ideas of the artist, his disapproval of conventional life and his plea for individual freedom. “For me freedom is the first condition of life, and the highest” (521), Ibsen wrote in his letter to George Brandes in 1882.

Ibsen believed in individual freedom rather than collective freedom. Democracy for him was the worst enemy to individual free will; this is how Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* proclaims, especially his demand for the aristocracy, his contempt for mass opinion, and his assertion that the minority is always right:

For this is the great discovery I made yesterday: (*In a louder tone.*) The most dangerous foe to truth and freedom in our midst is the compact majority. Yes, it’s the confounded, compact, liberal majority—that, and nothing else! . . . For it’s this very majority that robs me of my freedom, and wants to forbid me to speak the truth. (Ibsen 54)

Ibsen himself hinted in his letter to Hegel in 1882 that “Dr. Stockmann and I got on most excellently; we agree about so many things; but the Doctor has a more muddled head on his shoulder than I have” (Mayer 520). He was against those leaders who talked and wrote of freedom and progress, and at the same time allowed themselves to be the slave of the supposed opinions of their operators. In 1880, Janson, a politician, noted in his diary what Ibsen said to him, “[h]aven’t I always said that you republicans are the worst tyrants of all? You don’t respect individual freedom. Republicanism is the form of government in which individual freedom has the least chance of being respected”

(Meyer 520). A similar type of vehement expression against the Liberals we find in Dr. Stockmann's utterance to his wife, "I only want to drive it into the heads of these curs that the Liberals are the craftiest foes free men have to face; that party-programmes wring the necks of all young and living truths; that considerations of expediency turn justice and morality upside down, until life here becomes simply unlivable" (Ibsen 75).

Dr. Stockmann is the spokesman for Ibsen's deprivations because the latter being an intellectual, himself was never able to gather a majority behind him and spread his opinions freely. Ibsen himself writes, "I firmly believe that an intellectual pioneer can never gather a majority around him. . . . The majority, the masses, the mob, will never catch him up; he can never rally them behind him" (Clurman 8). Edmund Goss equally observes, "[t]he hero of *An Enemy of the People* is a sort of Henrik Ibsen in practical life, a critic who is execrated because he tells the unvarnished truth to unwilling ears" (88). It is supposed that Ibsen alludes to his own position among his countrymen in the representation of Dr. Stockmann. The soberly heroic doctor like Ibsen dares and loses all but the consciousness of duty in a fight against unconquerable prejudice (Ibsen 100). It had remained with Ibsen, and pre-eminent among his political convictions, the belief that the state and compact majority are the natural enemies of the individual. In particular, the play *An Enemy of the People* focuses on the ways in which an individual [like Ibsen] is disliked by the society, which he is trying to help. The problems and limitations of the play's hero Dr. Stockmann are not far removed from the problems Ibsen experienced after the publication of *Ghosts*.

Hedda Gabler, the portrait of a psychologically handicapped woman represents some of the limitations of the author as well. Michael Meyer points out that, "[t]wo emotions are dominant in her, the fear of scandal and the fear of ridicule, and we know that Ibsen . . . was privately dominated by these emotions" (675). After the publication of *Hedda Gabler* critics expressed various views about the play being unrealistic and might have some symbolic importance. To this Ibsen responded, "I only write about people. I don't write symbolically. I draw real, living people. . . . I have often walked with Hedda Gabler . . . And have undergone somewhat of the same experience myself" (Clurman 151). Maura Shea argues that Michael Meyer, in a commentary on the play, refers to Hedda Gabler as a "merciless self-portrait of Ibsen in skirts." The psychologist Arne Duve has argued that Hedda is a portrait of Ibsen's "repressed and crippled emotional life" (696).

Ibsen wrote almost twenty-four plays but indeed, the last plays he wrote after his return to Norway, are more autobiographical. In his later plays, the drama springs most likely from his own inner problems and needs. These plays portray an artist's confession of his failure as a man and his doubts about his achievement. Keith M. May remarks, the plays, "*The Master Builder*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*, constitute indeed the progressive treatment of a theme: a disappointed, guilty man of high ability becomes aware of his need for salvation" (89-90). Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 and continued to write until a stroke in 1900 brought an end to his literary career. During this period his marriage with Suzzanah was joyless, and he had a few vain episodes of friendship with young women. These plays deal with old men who had achieved fame in their respective professions, though their emotional life remains empty. Each of these three plays likewise depicts a marriage in which love has long been dead. According to the critics, it is obvious that in these three plays Ibsen is projecting his own experiences and frustrations of marriage and love. According to Harold Clurman, "[t]here is always danger in ascribing a one-to-one equivalence between the man and the work. Still, with *The Master Builder* an investigation into biographical matter is inevitable. Ibsen himself said of Solness, the play's pivotal character, that he was "a man somewhat akin to me" (168).

In the play, the Solness-Hilde relationship is obviously based on Ibsen's experience with Emilie Bardach, a young Viennese girl whom he met at Gossensas in 1889. The girl of eighteen fell in love with a man almost sixty years old. Ibsen had an unusual fascination for young girls and Emilie Bardach was not the only girl, who enthralled him. There were Helen Raff, a painter he met at about the same time; and Hildur Alderson, a concert pianist whom he first encountered in Christiania when she was a child of ten and was to meet again in 1897, nineteen years later. "All three women absorbed his passionate attention. But it is the special intensity of his feelings for Emilie Bardach which has attracted much notice among biographers" (168), Harold Clurman notes down.

Solness, the master builder suffers from certain limitations, which are obviously found in Ibsen's desperate life. Solness, an old man's fascination with the young Hilde; his emotional emptiness and loveless marriage; his fear of younger generations and heights; all these hints to Ibsen's own limitations and fears. Solness confesses to Hilde that the young has haunted him:

Because I have been so lonely here. And staring at it all quite helplessly. [*Lowering his voice.*] I must tell you—I've begun to be so afraid—so terribly afraid of the younger generation. . . . That's why I've locked and bolted myself in. [*Mysteriously.*] You must know, the younger generation will come here some day, thundering at the door! Break in on me! (Ibsen 154)

Solness's confession that he is afraid of youth, reflects Ibsen's own fear of the young generation towards the end of his creativity. Harold Bloom observes, "Ibsen became preoccupied with the idea of youth as he grew older. He feared it, admired it, and required it" (120). Michael Meyer likewise narrates that "Ibsen, during this first year after his return to Norway, showed an almost obsessive interest in the rising generation, and went out of his way to get to know the new artists and writers of Norway, as though afraid lest he might lose touch with the people who understood his plays most clearly" (710).

Solness's statement: "That I cannot stand heights?" (Ibsen 186), makes him the true portraiture of Ibsen himself. The fact is that Ibsen himself was frightened of heights. This can be confirmed when Ibsen was climbing a hill with his friend Bergsoe, the latter citing the detail of Ibsen's this physical cowardice writes, "The last part of the way I had almost to drag Ibsen with me, for he repeatedly asserted that the cliff might fall, and when I objected that we were in proportion to the cliff as a fly to a tower he made the curious observation that even a fly could bring down a tower if it were on the point of falling" (Meyer 280). When he failed to persuade Ibsen further, Bergsoe climbed alone to the cliff, he relates, "[w]hen I finally turned around, I saw him lying with his face to the ground, clasping a rock with both hands. 'You will kill me! He cried furiously'" (Meyer 280).

Moreover, Solness has a very strained and loveless relationship with his wife Aline. They seldom talk to one another and as soon as Solness comes she goes away. She is living a life in death because of her past woes and frustrations, to which Solness points out: "They've sucked all the life-blood out of her. [*With a laugh of despair.*] They did it to make me happy! Yes, indeed! [*Heavily.*] And now she's dead—for my sake. And I'm living, chained to the dead. [*In a desperate misery.*] I—I who can't live without joy" (Ibsen 194). Michael Meyer in this regard illustrates that "[t]he grim relationship between Solness and his wife was generally assumed, at any rate in Norway, to be a picture of the Ibsen's own marriage. Things seemed to have been getting difficult between Ibsen and Suzzanah around this time" (731). Equally, Ibsen's mother-in-law describes their situation in words that precisely reflect the Solness marriage: "They live in grand style, almost elegant, but in a suburban silence; for they are two lonely people—each for himself—each wholly for himself" (Meyer 732). So, as a matter of fact, critics are of the view that Ibsen's relationship with his wife was occasionally strained during that time. Harold Clurman quoting a young Dane, writes, "Does Ibsen love his wife? I don't know but she loves him, but is not happy in her love. Ibsen [like Solness] is so absorbed with his work that the proverb 'humanity first, art second' has practically been reversed" (170-171). Hence it can be argued that "*The Master Builder* might be called 'sorrows of the artist,' the price paid to create anything of great import. . . . Solness suffers all the psychological turmoil and ache of the acclaimed artist" (Clurman 171).

Hilde on the other hand (like Emilie Bardach) has been infatuated with the old artist master builder. She is facing too many obstacles to consummate her love for Solness. She will never find what she yearns for in her whole life, as there are obstacles, she says, "That one daren't reach out for one's own happiness. For one's own life! Just because there's someone standing in the way that one knows!" (Ibsen 195). About the same kinds of obstacles in her diary Emilie Bardach notes down, which deprived them to accomplish their love, "[t]he obstacles! . . . the difference of age! his wife! his son! —all that there is to keep us apart! . . . and yet I suffer at the thought of leaving him. I suffer most from his impatience, his restlessness" (Meyer 637). Ibsen himself once thought of the possibility of divorcing his wife and a subsequent union with Emilie Bardach, but perhaps certain obstacles compelled him to give up the idea. Michael Meyer comments: "Perhaps he feared the scandal; perhaps he felt a duty towards his sickly and ageing wife, who had stood so firmly behind him during the long years of failures; perhaps he reflected that the difference of forty-three years between their ages was too great; perhaps away from Gossensass he felt old" (640).

The Master Builder appears to be the most personal portrait in revealing Ibsen's fears, yearnings and frustrations. The flowers and plants in Gossensass are still smelling so sweetly, "but how empty!—how lonely!—how forsaken!" (Meyer 640), Ibsen is, in the absence of Emilie Bardach. Like Solness, Ibsen had also long considered himself a builder of plays that were like architecture. Hence Michael Meyer records this in his biography of the artist:

The character of Solness was the nearest thing to a deliberate self-portrait that Ibsen had yet attempted (though he was to follow it with two equally merciless likenesses in *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*). He admitted in an address to the students of Christiania six years later that Solness was 'a man somewhat akin to me. (729)

John Gabriel Borkman, a play about a lonely, forsaken old man, released from prison, has been living for eight years in an upstairs room of his house and bankrupt, refusing to see his wife, visited only by an old clerk and his young daughter—bears many resemblances with the later period of author's secluded and loveless life. Michael Meyer relates that "[t]he gossips of Christiania, naturally, took the loveless marriage of the Borkmans to be a picture of Ibsen's relationship with Suzannah" (782). Borkman as a young man had married Gunhild not for love but for materialistic purposes to achieve his ambitions. He had rejected Ella Renheim, his wife's twin sister, whom he had

loved, and since that had to live a life of emotional bankruptcy. “Ibsen, like Borkman, had turned his back on romantic love for a woman who could enable him to achieve his ambitions, and Emilie Bardach, Helene Raff, and Hildur Anderson were living symbols of what he had rejected” (Meyer 783). So, Ibsen like Borkman had to live a secluded and joyless life in his old age. Michael Meyer supposes, “one may be forgiven for suggesting that *John Gabriel Borkman* does represent a sad survey of the dramatist bleak emotional life” (783).

Ibsen wrote *John Gabriel Borkman* in 1896, and it was in 1893 that he himself had been living lonely in an upstairs room like Borkman and had a young actress visiting and reading to him from time to time. Michael Meyer giving the details writes:

He seems to have kept largely to himself for the rest of that year; . . . he paid fewer visits to the theatre and none to lectures or concerts. Among his infrequent visitors was Jonas Lie’s youngest daughter Johanne, then at a start of her career as an actress. Ibsen . . . asked her to come and read to him at Viktoria Terrasse. When she arrived, Suzannah admitted her with the daunting welcome, ‘Dr Ibsen is expecting you,’ and showed her into his very small study. (746)

A similar kind of scene has been dramatized in *John Gabriel Borkman*, where a young girl of fifteen Frida Foldal daughter of his friend, visits Borkman in his lonesome room and plays music for him on the piano. Here the character of Borkman appears to be a close portrait of the author himself: “John Gabriel Borkman is standing beside the piano with his hands behind his back, listening to Frida Foldal, who is sitting playing the last bars of the Danse Macabre. Borkman is a solid, strongly-built man of middle height in his late sixties” (Ibsen 312). Ibsen in his late sixties like Borkman had to live a lonely and unhappy life. Ibsen needed a variety of companions to visit him, and when a Danish schoolboy visited him he behaved very unusually. Michael Meyer relates the sad incident in these words, “[r]emarkable to relate, this lonely man opened his heart completely to the youth from Denmark who he scarcely knew, and wept. He laid his head on my shoulder and wept” (747).

John Gabriel Borkman also suggests the spiritual bankruptcy of the protagonist. Borkman tried his utmost to become an industrialist, and to great extent, he succeeded. And in the course of time, he gained materialistic success but lost his soul. And finally charged of embezzlement and was sentenced to eight years imprisonment. Ibsen likewise a renowned world playwright achieved all his ambitions, he was praised and cherished throughout Europe and particularly in Scandinavia, but might failed to achieve his love and satisfaction of the soul. Michael Meyer assumes the same and writes, “[i]n a sense the play is about what Ibsen’s marriage might have been like had he failed as a writer; in another sense, it is about emotional bankruptcy, the buried treasures of the heart that lie unmined; how a man may gain the whole world and lose his soul” (783). Hence it appears that Ibsen’s quest for material success might have led to his emotional bankruptcy, which he laments in the character of Borkman.

Ibsen’s last play *When We Dead Awaken* is his final account of himself. “Here the quintessence of Ibsenism” G.B. Shaw maintains, “reaches its final distillation; morality and reformation give place to mortality and resurrection; and the next event is the death of Ibsen himself” (114). It tells a story of an aged sculptor, Arnold Rubek who (like Solness and Borkman) achieved fame at the expense of personal happiness. His marriage with a younger wife, Maja, is a failure. Ibsen portrayed different facets of himself in most of his plays, but it is complete here, as Michael Meyer asserts:

But nowhere do we find so complete and merciless a self-portrait as the character of Arnold Rubek. The ageing artist, restless in his married life, restless in the homeland to which he has returned after a long sojourn abroad, restless in his art . . . such is Ibsen’s Portrait of the Dramatist as an Old Man, painted at the age of seventy-one. (830)

In the play, Rubek the sculptor, like Ibsen, returns to Norway after a long absence, he meets his former model, Irene, who had loved him but in whom he was interested only as an artist. She had served only to be a source of inspiration for his creating statues. Ibsen, like Rubek, could not feel at home after his return to Norway, Igna-Stina Ewbank upholds the same idea:

There is of course, compelling reasons to see such internalizing of the symbolism in autobiographical terms. Rubek, who returns to his own country but finds himself in a spiritual no man’s land . . . he (Ibsen) lamented to George Brandes in 1897 that he had only a ‘native’ not ‘a home’, a country. Rubek is internationally famous (though aware of the hollowness of fame), as Ibsen had become by the 1890’s: published, translated, performed—and written about—all over Europe as no Norwegian had ever been. (128)

Irene reminds one of Ibsen’s former beloveds, most probably Hildur Anderson, with whom he failed to make a true union. It was after the publication of *When We Dead Awaken* that Ibsen wrote her a letter with a set of his collected works, twenty-four plays, and the poems: “These twenty-five twins are all ours. Before I found you I wrote seeking, groping. I knew you were somewhere in the world, and once I had found you I wrote only of princesses in varying

forms” (Meyer 840). Ibsen’s letter explicitly indicates that Hildur was a source of inspiration for him as Irene is for Rubek.

Rubek married Maja a young worldly woman, not because he loved her, but because he was lonely, restless, and disheartened. When Irene left him Rubek lost his inspiration and could not produce a work of importance like his masterpiece ‘The Day of Resurrection.’

Rubek: You were no model to me. You were the source of my creation.

Irene: [is silent for a moment]. What have you created since then? What poems in marble, I mean? Since the day I left you.

Rubek: I have created nothing since that day. No poems. I’ve merely toyed at sculpture. (Ibsen 260)

Perhaps Ibsen in this play writes about an artist’s final reckoning with himself. This was his last and shortest play, which took him almost three years to complete. Here he might be lamenting his own barrenness and the loss of creative powers. M. C. Bradbrook likewise observes: “*When We Dead Awaken* . . . was written slowly and painfully, and barely finished when Ibsen collapsed. As Koht said, “It is his own life problem which trembles and vibrates through the play, almost without concealment and change” (142).

Rubek and Irene are now living a life-in-death, which might allude to Ibsen’s loss of creative powers. So, Rubek decides to leave his wife to climb to the top of the mountain with Irene, who is his true spiritual companion. Yet only in union with Irene, he can find any kind of peace. He cannot find the peace he is looking for in Maja, who is too much of the earth. As they climb up, though striving to reach the very top of the tower, lit by the rising sun, they disappear into the low clouds, and so did the author’s splendid career. The disappearance and death of Rubek and Irene likely reflect Ibsen’s whole career as an artist. He mounted to the heights of fame as a dramatist, achieved his ambitions, and gained financial success, but due to his joyless life could not achieve spiritual satisfaction throughout his career. Janette Lee appropriately drawing the scene writes, “[t]he storm is upon them. They are whirled along buried in the masses of snow drifting on the high peaks. Maja’s voice—earth-child, happy in her freedom—is singing about them. Religion reaches out empty, groping hands to them. The poet and his Truth have gone from us. His lips are silent. They are forever sealed” (207). *When We Dead Awaken* presents the last account of the author’s life.

5. Conclusion

Hence, the plays written in old age, present Ibsen’s last images of himself. This reflects that Ibsen climbed to the heights of arts, but at the sacrifice of his own life and emotions. Though he achieved materialistic success, fame, and popularity, yet at the cost of his emotional and spiritual sacrifices. Since birth, he was alone in the society, occasionally mixed with people, and lived a secluded life, till death. Ibsen bore everything alone; poverty, miseries, failures, isolations, fears, and confrontations, as he has left us in his notes: ‘Everything must be borne alone . . . Despair, resistance, defeat’ (Bradbury 70). He died on 23 May 1906 in Christiania after a series of strokes, and the great artist, with his sorrows and frustrations, disappeared forever into the great darkness.

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