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Living, Chained to the Dead

In the world of drama, Henrik Johan Ibsen is a giant. Apart from the works of Shakespeare, he is generally regarded as the most frequently performed playwright on the planet. One of the founders of Modernism and perhaps the greatest of the realists, Ibsen trounced convention and began to write scathing commentaries on social matters which were seen by many in the Victorian era as being both scandalous and morally derelict. It is rare for any play to have a completely settled critical opinion on meanings of themes and symbols, but one can, at the very least, generally find the outlines of the competing ideological camps. Ibsen's The Master Builder seems to suffer from a rather bewildering array of such opinions, many of which are completely apposite in nature to the others. The extent of disparate writings on this play is so broad that one can be forgiven for wondering if even Ibsen had any idea the point he was trying to get across. In his review of the Almeida Theater's 2010 production of this play, Toril Moi summarizes what he believes to be the three ways one can interpret The Master Builder. First, it can be seen as a psycho-social investigation of the fall from grace of a powerful man. Second, the play can be used in a Marxist critique of the Victorian era. Third, the play can be seen as "an allegory of the ageing artist's relationship to his art" (Moi). All three methods certainly have validity, but this is a work riven with characters unable to divine the distinction between fantasy and reality, so any analysis of the play which fails to take into account the internal states of Halvard and Aline Solness and Hilde Wangel is going to be incomplete. All three have experienced some traumatic event in the past

which has caused a disconnect from reality, and this failure prevents each from ever attaining the freedom and the authentic self that each is seeking. This drift away from the real world towards the ideal is the narrative arc of the play, and it is worth analyzing in greater detail, because Ibsen's rationalistic focus is still prevalent today and the failure of his protagonist easily replicable in our own lives.

Both Halvard and Aline suffer from the same traumatic event, but their responses to it are wildly different. Roughly twelve years prior to the events of the play, the ancestral home of Aline's family burned to the ground. No one is injured, but Aline's connection to tradition and the past is so strong that this causes her lactation process to go awry. Her twin boys are thus "poisoned" by their mother's milk and perish. Aline is presented as a dour older woman, when in reality she is likely no older than 35 or 40. She possesses a pathological need to do her duty; in fact, she uses this word on eight separate occasions in the play. This Kantian impulse stems from her inner feelings of having "failed" as a mother to protect her children and as a daughter of her line to protect her ancestral home and all of its symbols. This attachment to a golden past and its conventions is a frequent target of Ibsen in his plays, and it should not surprise anyone that Aline's loss of simple material goods should cause the death of her progeny. The message is clear: the old ways are nothing to look back on with fondness; all they do is kill. One would normally think that the loss of her children would have created the most guilt in Aline, but in the third act she tells Hilde that "all's well" with them, that she "must only be glad for them" (191). Presumably this is due to their eternal status as innocents in God's kingdom, and this is yet another instance of Ibsen attacking the Church for its dogma which seems to only create callousness and inhumanity. What truly pains Aline is the loss of the "little things": old portraits, silk dresses, family property, and, most importantly, a set

of nine dolls. She begins sobbing over the fate of the dolls, and it is difficult not to be disgusted with her upon first reading of a woman who can so easily discard the memory of her dead children and yet weeps over the loss of material objects. Upon reflection, however, it would appear that Aline is actually bemoaning the loss of the innocence she had as a younger woman as well as the love she shared with Halvard prior to the fire. The dolls have merely become idols for this huge morass of emotions which she cannot untangle. Aline is completely unable to transform these negative experiences into fuel for growth or empathy with others who have also suffered, and so collapses into the dull existence of the assembly-line robot: only duty gives her a reason to move, to interact, to exist.

For Halvard, the fire is an opportunity. In place of the old ruin of Aline's family home, he divides the garden into lots and builds "homes for human beings" (Ibsen 152). It was this project which propelled him into his present position as the "Master Builder." Even before the fire, Halvard had dreamed of such an event. He had noticed a crack in the fireplace which, if not repaired, might cause a fire to rage out of control. Though the actual fire which brought the house down had nothing whatsoever to do with this crack, in his mind Halvard has begun to believe that he is of the sort blessed with bringing into reality his deepest desires, merely by thinking upon them. This is more than an idle fantasy, in that he has constructed a fantasy of supernatural beings which work to put his dreams into effect in the real world. Thus, the fire is for him a bewildering complex of guilt and ambition: guilt over the death of the children and over the ruined state of his wife; ambition over the power of his artistic vision let loose in the world. Ibsen could not have been ignorant of the work of Nietzsche, who wrote about people who were part *Übermensch* and part guilt-ridden Christian slaves; the result is always an alienation due to the former and a destruction due to the latter. Solness laments this

fate on a number of occasions, especially when he says to Hilde that he is "living, chained to the dead" wife who died to make him happy (194), and that this was "the price [his] place as an artist has cost [him]" (172).

The arrival of Hilde in the play is a typical Ibsenian tool, one which Richard Schechner develops in great detail in his essay on "The Unexpected Visitor." He believes that characters like the Rat-Wife, Ella, Irene, and Hilde are equivalent to Jung's archetypal "old man" who represents promises unkept, and who drive the protagonist to his final achievement (121). To Schechner, these characters are "personified thoughts" that condense out of the past to act as catalysts which break up the impasse in the hero's life which has caused him to fail at his quest for greatness. Hilde certainly can be viewed through this psychoanalytic lens. When she arrives, she comes bearing a story from ten years in the past, of which Halvard recalls nothing. He eventually absorbs Hilde's tale, and uses her as a mechanism to rid himself of his guilt and strive for the greatness implied by his art. That his climbing of the tower results in his death is unimportant to this reading of the play: he built his tower (symbolizing his turn away from humanity and their houses), he climbed it (conquering his fear), and then he dispelled his guilt by waving at the top. In Jungian (as well as in Nietzschean) imagery, the summit of mountains always stand for some form of pilgrimage and ascent, which often stand for the psychological meaning of the self (124 Schechner). In the moment of his ascendancy, Solness became his true self, a pure artist.

Another potential reading of the play puts Hilde into the same group as Halvard and Aline as survivors of a trauma they cannot think around. This reading is applicable to Schechner's, but can also stand apart and be viewed in purely realistic terms, free from psychoanalytic symbiology. For Hilde, her sexual encounter with Halvard ten years in the past is the traumatic bedrock of existence that she cannot resolve. In order to make sense of it, she creates

a memory of "harps in the air" and romanticizes the future she and Halvard might have together. Her fantasy world pulls Halvard in because she represents the younger generation he so fears will cast him down in the near future. It is ironic that Halvard cannot see this manipulation for what it is, because he has done the exact same thing to the poor Kaja Fosli. Halvard's fear is of youth, irrelevancy, and death, and Hilde's world gives him a chance to escape into yet another ideal world of fantasy. That this world ultimately kills him, is, in some respects, exactly what he deserved.

In the confluence of these characters we can see the social alienation which was so frequent in Ibsen's works. In failing to perform to societal standards as a mother, Aline retreats into herself. As a child rudely awakened to the adult world of physical intimacy, Hilde retreats into a fantasy of princesses and kingdoms and "castles in the air." Though he rejects building churches and desires to instead build homes filled with light for human beings, Solness's guilt over the fire causes him to be unable to connect with humanity in any way, and to see himself as the bearer of a terrible gift. Their ideals (to be dutiful, to be a princess, to be the greatest builder) are so abstract that they are converted into uprooted individualists and have, as F.W. Kaufmann phrased it, no "common base for their interchange of opinion" (236). Without any genuine personal contact humans have no chance of developing their inner identities, as such constructs are always socially created. All that one can become at this point is the true artist/Übermensch (if one is great enough, which few are), and we see Solness attempt this before falling to his death.

The meanings of this conclusion are myriad. The current author takes the stance that Ibsen was wrestling with the limits of his own rationalistic worldview over the meaning of existence and the balance one needs to strike between striving for one's individual purposes in relation to the obligations and needs of the Other. Struggling against the morals of his day, he clearly

needed to assert the importance for human beings and especially artists to focus on their craft and to perfect it; this, to him, made men truly great. He was observant enough to note, however, that this process produces alienation and self-absorption, which acts as a countering force and which often leads to destruction. Like Nietzsche, Ibsen desired to create a higher world of the self without drifting into the metaphysical, yet his version of "self-realization" prevented him from seeing that man is a part of the culture which created him and that any action one makes affects everyone. The idea that the truly self-realized was a man who considered the good of those around him just as much as he considered his own was too close to the old morality he sought to destroy, and so he could not synthesize a secular altruism into his pursuit of the *Übermensch*. Though he failed at this, he was honest enough to recognize his failure and eternalized it in a play. This is the ultimate irony: the synthesis he couldn't reach was exactly epitomized by the fact that he left us this gem of a play by which to learn of his error. Such is the stuff of greatness.

## Works Cited

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(1) It is a play about how things / material wealth, work & consumerism can replace family / love & children.

(2) The Tower also represents Babel, the desire to be God.

(3) The desire for a younger woman who makes the man feel like "God" something absent himself experienced is also present.

(4) The master builder sees himself as God. Until he fails.

Excellent work. If it is the course.  
Hope you've received  
all you want.