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Self-Realization in the Works of Henrik Ibsen

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SELF-REALIZATION IN THE WORKS

OF HENRIK IBSEN

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE CONCEPT OF SELF-REALIZATION

If we were to encounter a small, pudgy frame dominated by a high, massive forehead, crowned with a mane of iron-gray hair, directed by small and pale but piercing eyes behind gold-rimmed spectacles, we should never suspect that this was the great nineteenth century dramatist, Henrik Ibsen. But if we saw him sip his Falernian wine, rest quietly, and then whisper to his poet colleague, Lorentz Dietrichson, with thin-lipped determination,

So to conduct one's life as to realize one's self--this seems to me the highest attainment possible to a human being. It is the task of one and all of us, but most of us bungle it,

we would suspect that this was Ibsen. For the idea of self-realization obsessed Ibsen and is at the heart of his drama and his intellectual revolt.

This thesis, then, will be an exercise in dramatic criticism, in the examination and clarification of the concept of self-realization in Ibsen's thought.

1 Edmund Gosse, Henrik Ibsen, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1907, 216.
4 Besides deriving validity as a thesis in dramatic criticism, our investigation becomes important when we consider the influence of
To do this, the thesis will first examine the concept itself and show its presence in the plays. Secondly it will indicate that this concept is the origin of tragedy in Ibsen's dramas. The concluding chapter will point out the corollaries and the results of this concept.

What is this self-realization whose importance Ibsen indicates when he says that it is the highest attainment possible to a human being? A few excerpts from the Letters should make this clear. In a letter to Laura Kieler (June 11, 1870) Ibsen remarks that

"...the great thing is to become honest and truthful in dealing with one's self—not to determine to do this or determine to do that, but to do what one **must** do because one is one's self."

An analysis of this statement shows us that Ibsen is dealing with truth ("honest and truthful") to oneself. This truth consists in acting in this way or that because one must ("to do what one must"). The moral "ought-ness", this "must", however, is not imposed on the individual because he is in the stream of things ordered to an eternal end. The obligation derives from the fact that "one is one's self." Therefore on the testimony

Ibsen on English drama. To this William Archer (The Old Drama and the New, 305-6), Benjamin Brawley (A Short History of the English Drama, 219, 235), Thos. H. Dickinson (Contemporary Drama of England, 63-65, 140), A. Henderson (European Dramatists, 73), John Gassner (Masters of the Drama, 354, where he calls Ibsen the "father of the Modern Drama"), Ludwig Lewisohn (The Modern Drama, 7), Otto Heller (Henrik Ibsen, xv), offer eloquent testimony. Also consult Miriam A. Franc's Ibsen in England, wherein an entire chapter (129-150) is devoted to Ibsen's influence on English drama. No testimony is more eloquent than that of the gift of recognition presented to Ibsen jointly by Shaw, J.M.Barrie, Thos. Hardy, Henry Arthur Jones, Mr. Pinero. (Cf. Gosse, 201).

of his own words, Ibsen's concept of truth (and hence goodness in one's life) develops from a conformity of actions and from willing with the inner urge known as self. "All the rest leads to falsehood."\textsuperscript{6}

Precisely what is this "self" of which Ibsen speaks? He hints the answer when he writes to his confidant and friend, Georg Brandes:

\begin{quote}
What I chiefly desire for you is a genuine, full-blooded egoism, which shall force you for a time to regard what concerns yourself as the only thing of any consequence, and everything else as non-existent.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

Here we see that Ibsen wishes a complete independence from every external norm that might sway the will. Consequently, the self of which he speaks is the will choosing with complete liberty and self-command. "It is the will alone that matters."\textsuperscript{8} Again Ibsen remarks that "the great thing is to hedge about what is one's own--to keep it free and clear from everything outside that has no connection with it."\textsuperscript{9} In this statement we see his thought clearly. He feels the constraining effects\textsuperscript{10} of custom, convention, and law--the last of which he uncritically consigns to the same ant heap as the first two\textsuperscript{11}--upon the action of the will. To achieve liberty, then, which issues in character,\textsuperscript{12} one must accustom the will to choose independently, "to act in utter freedom, guided by no law but that of its own nature, having

\textsuperscript{6} Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{8} Gosse, 99.
\textsuperscript{9} Letters (Laurvik ed.), 190.
\textsuperscript{10} Gosse, 233.
\textsuperscript{11} Henrik Ibsen, Speeches and New Letters (Ed A. Kildal), Gorham, Boston, 1910 (Limited edition-500), 36.
\textsuperscript{12} Gosse, 167.
no aim but complete sincerity in its effort after self-realization."13

Action which proceeds from a conscious regard for custom, convention, social pressure, and law is untruth.14 When an action is in unconscious conformity with these or with anything other than the purely willing will, it issues in illusion. In either of these cases the individual is not realizing himself in a pure will act, but is acting with a basely intimidated will.15

Such is the concept itself. We quite naturally ask ourselves whence Ibsen derived this idea, why it obsessed him so. His hot indignation against Norwegian society and its smug righteousness is a strong hint as to the origin of the concept of self-realization. He once said:

> It is said that Norway is a free and independent state, but I do not value much this liberty and independence so long as I know that the individuals are neither free nor independent. And they are surely not so with us. There do not exist in the whole country of Norway twenty-five free and independent personalities.16

We see in the above a distinction between freedoms and freedom, a distinction which Ibsen often drew.17 This distinction has its roots in Norwegian history. In 1814 Norway had ceased to be a dependency of Denmark; her 417 years of thraldom18 had ceased. But the new constitution promulgated in

14 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.
15 Lewisohn, 11.
16 Letters (Kildal ed.), 84.
17 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 350, 205.
1814 left the country in the tight grip of bureaucratic government and outmoded legislative procedures. When the revolutionary spirit of 1848 communicated itself to Norway, it brought down the crushing arm of government sanction. Ibsen saw in his friends the "phenomenon of apostasy." It was brought home to him how easily an ordinary man will abandon an isolated position and with what ease he will deny old convictions and recant promises. It was in this year under such conditions that Ibsen conceived a contempt for the "respectable, estimable narrow-mindedness and worldliness of social conditions in Norway," which developed into a disgust with politics and politicians in general. Moreover, Norway had been unkind to Ibsen's youth. He lived in a home where affection chilled under paternal irresponsibility and stiff church dogma. Ibsen left home at the age of fifteen to become an apothecary in Grimstead where he was excruciatingly poor, quite unpopular, and considered bold. Sheer unhappiness had dogged his earlier years. In such a background we see the germ of a philosophy scornful of social and political convention and law, an attitude which would naturally insist on doing what one must do because one is oneself.

We have seen that the "peculiar aspect of the Ego as the principal and ultimately sole guide to truth was revealed anew to the Norwegian poet."
by a conspiracy of the above circumstances. The doctrine, however, was not new. Kant in his Critique of Practical Reason had insisted that the principle of morality, of rectitude in the action of the will, is to "act so that the maxim of thy will can at the same time be accepted as the principle of a universal legislation." Such a norm shunts morality into the same subjective channels into which Ibsen steers himself. Thus "our moral dignity depends on our moral self-determination." 28

But closer was Ibsen's connection with Kierkegaard. Brandes even insisted that Ibsen was aspiring to be Kierkegaard's poet. 29 Ibsen's vigorous denial of this and insistence that he had read and understood little of Kierkegaard 30 is a disclaimer we can take lightly. 31 Kierkegaard's individualism originated in a spirited reaction against Hegel's absorption of the individual in the unfolding of the universal Reason. 32 Instead Kierkegaard proclaimed

the reality of the individual, the man who actually exists, the man who above all can choose, who is free to choose, and who is responsible for his choice. 33

There is a great similarity between Kierkegaard's "the great thing is not

28 Ibid., 180.
29 Gosse, 224.
30 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 199.
31 Downs, 79.
32 Frederick C. Copleston, S.J., "What is Existentialism?" Month, CLXXXIII (1947), 14.
33 Ibid., 14.
to be this or the other, but to be oneself, and of that every human is capable."34 and Ibsen's

the great thing is to become honest and truthful in dealing with one's self--not to determine to do this or determine to do that, but to do what one must because one is one's self.35

Ibsen's disclaimer that he had read little Kierkegaard is in serious danger here. At any rate, one can see the "spiritual affinity between the philosopher and the playwright."36

Thus far we have seen in Ibsen's letters what self-realization is, how it originated in Ibsen's experience, and how it is either derived from or paralleled by Kant and Kierkegaard. Now it remains to be seen how the concept of self-realization is verified in Ibsen's dramas.

34 Downs, 89.
35 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.
36 Giovanni Bach, The History of the Scandinavian Literatures, Dial Press, N.Y., 1938, 33. Downs adds that "that great and tragic quest of all Ibsen's characters to realize themselves, to discover their mission, to free minds and bodies from all the trammels which could prevent that realized self from doing what the mission imposes on them, is one which Kierkegaard would have hailed as pulsing with the heart of his doctrine, and is also conceived in forms which would have been other but for that doctrine." (Downs, 93.) Italics mine. It is interesting to note in this respect the similarity between Ibsen's concept of self-realization and the tenets of modern existentialists (for whom Kierkegaard is as a father). Father Arthur Little, S.J. defines Existentialism: "...identification of yourself with your experience and of reality with what was involved in your experience comprises the gist of Existentialism." (Arthur Little, "Existentialism and the New Literature," Studies, XXXV. (1946), 459. In this connection, Ibsen has written a letter (Letters, Laurvik ed., 63.) in which he says: "I had a burning desire for, I almost prayed for, a great sorrow which might round out my existence and give life meaning." Here he craves an experience which will become so much his substance, his reality, that in it he can wish, in it he can realize himself as the source of his experience.
It is obvious at the outset that a thorough examination of all or even many of the plays is impossible in so short a space. Of the three commonly accepted divisions of Ibsen's work, the romantic, the realistic, the symbolic, we shall select and confine ourselves to the most important realistic dramas,37 A Doll's House, Ghosts, Rosmersholm, Hedda Gabler.

It will be noticed that in each of the above-mentioned dramas a woman is the tragic heroine. Ibsen has not chosen women without purpose. The claims of freedom and personality in general are best vindicated in women, because in women they are most persistently denied.38 But why should women be thus peculiarly trammelled in their struggle for emancipation, for self-realization? Ibsen answers that there are two types of conscience, one in man and another altogether different in women. They do not understand each other; but in practical life the woman is judged by man's law as though she were not a woman but a man.39

Women are thus commonly exposed to an estimate based on a norm external to their own ego. This complicates their activity. This complication, affection by convention and social pressure, obviously occurs where the two consciences are in frequent contact, in marriage. Now we are in a better position to understand Ibsen's preoccupation with marriage and sex. It is "the deeper problem of personality"40 in which Ibsen is interested. But this problem is best pointed in marriage where there is an interplay of

37 Gosse, 145; Zucker, vi.
38 Downs, 162.
social customs and conventions with the inner urge to self-realization.

Now we are in a position to examine the plays. *A Doll's House* (1879) is the story of Mrs. Nora Helmer who is her husband's "squirrel," his "dove," and plays the role exceedingly well. She is a doll, a mere chattel. Her whole life has been in her husband's keeping. She thinks like a child, acts like a child, and is correspondingly treated like a child. She gets what she wants by coquettish methods and is naively convinced of her husband's completely self-sacrificing life for her.

Nora's husband, Helmer, once fell critically ill. A change to European climate was advised but Helmer declined the trip since he had not the money and refused to borrow it. Nora, however, borrowed it from a certain money-lender, Krogstad, but could not obtain her father's endorsement for the loan because he was dying. Nora forged the note and as the drama opens is working off the payment by clandestine scrivener's work. Krogstad, now unemployed and in bad repute because of a forgery, reappears and reveals to Nora the fearsome position in which he has her. This he presses as motivation to solicit Nora's support in reinstating himself. To her first suggestions that he reinstate Krogstad, Helmer replies with a scorching lecture on the malice of forgery. In the face of this, rather than reveal her position to Helmer, Nora decides to borrow the necessary money from Dr. Rank, a Platonic third in the Helmer household. She employs coquetry on Rank and, to her consternation, he responds with an avowal of passion for her. Now she begins to realize the source of her power. She feels the disclosure of the forgery has become inevitable—as she could not possibly take money from Rank now—
and begins to contemplate suicide rather than allow her husband to assume the blame of the forgery as she is certain he will. Helmer reads of the forgery through a delayed letter from Krogstad and is indignant; he begins to declare Nora unworthy to bring up her children, calls her a criminal, and heaps abuse on her. Nora, ignorant of her crime and conscious only of the sacrifice she has made of her life for Helmer, defends her action. A letter comes from Krogstad inclosing the bond and freeing Nora from all obligations --for Krogstad has found new happiness in the possession of Mrs. Linde whom he had formerly loved but lost. Helmer now becomes very happy and forgives Nora. She, however, realizes the expediency of her husband's devotion. Nora realizes that her life has been that of a doll and decides to leave home, convinced that leave she must if she intends to found her life on truth and not on the illusion of her husband's devotion.

An analysis of the apparently trivial dialogue and stage directions reveals the alarmingly superficial color of things in the Helmer household. The very first time Nora appears she is "humming a tune and in high spirits."41 As she enters her home she leaves the door open42 after her, a small touch indeed43 but indicative of her blithely irresponsible attitude. She next stealthily nibbles on a macaroon and goes "cautiously to the door of her husband's study."44 Helmer has forbidden her the use of macaroons;

42 Ibid., 175.
44 The Plays, 176.
he feels they might harm her pearly teeth. Her husband's preoccupation with Nora's teeth and the husband-wife relation revealed by his forbidding the use of macaroons is a clear cross section of their family life. Helmer deepens our insight into Nora's character, no less than his own, with his first words: "Is that my little lark twittering out there?" ¹⁵ A fine touch of family affection and humor we may say. But Helmer keeps the record playing:

Is that my little squirrel bustling about?...
When did my squirrel get home?...Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?...Come, come, my little sky lark must not droop her wings. ¹⁶

Nora answers:

Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, may we not? Just a tiny wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money. ¹⁷

What began as an innocent and attractive chit-chat is beginning to look like a domestic game played a little too frequently! But they are broaching the subject of money. Surely the lark's wings will desert her here.

Helmer: Very well. But now tell me, you extravagant little person, what would you like for yourself?
Nora: For myself? Oh, I am sure I don't want anything.
Helmer: Yes, but you must. Tell me something reasonable that you would particularly like to have.
Nora: No, I really can't think of anything—unless, Torvald—
Helmer: Well?
Nora: (Playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his.) If you really want to give me something, you might—...you might—

¹⁵ The Plays, 176-7.
¹⁶ Ibid., 176-7.
¹⁷ Ibid., 176.
Helmer: Well, out with it!
Nora: You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it.
Helmer: But, Nora--
Nora: Oh, do! dear Torvald; please, please do!
Then I will wrap it up in beautiful gilt paper and hang it on the Christmas Tree. Wouldn't that be fun?48

By now we see that what is denied to Nora she buys and eats in secret. What she wants, she gets by her sweet coquettish seductions. And somewhat startlingly, what she desires to conceal she conceals by a lie!

Helmer: Hasn't Miss Sweet-Tooth been breaking rules in town today?
Nora: What makes you think that?
Helmer: Hasn't she paid a visit to the confectioner's?
Nora: No, I assure you, Torvald--

Ibsen in a few short pages has shown us the Helmers meeting a problem, small it is true, but none the less a problem, and despatching it with baby-talk, pouts, and languorous locks. There is a chirpingly happy neglect of truth and a willingness to conduct family affairs somewhere in the region of the epithelial layer. An illusory evasiveness is mistaken as domestic harmony and accepted as such, as we learn from Helmer:

Helmer: You are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you inherit these things, Nora.50

Nora has found that a doll's procedure carries the day. She employs it fre-
quently. She has failed to see that she has convinced Helmer that she is a doll. For as such he unremittingly treats her. She also fails to realize at this stage that all her activity is proceeding from this superficially cultivated relationship. She is not herself; she is what she is expected to be, a doll, something to amuse and be amused. In the words of Ibsen, she is willing this or that, determining to do this or that not because she must, because she is herself, but because that is what is expected of her.

Symons confirms this when he says that

the playwright has perfected his art of illusion; beyond a Doll's House and Ghosts dramatic illusion has never gone. And the irony of the ideas that work these living puppets has now become their life-blood.51

In masterful fashion, Ibsen paints in more convincing details. Once we have overcome our surprise in learning that there are children in such a family—for surely the presence of children would tend to destroy the over-the-counter relationship that obtains between Nora and Helmer—we are strengthened in our first impressions to learn that they are out with their nurse.52

In the course of her conversation with Mrs. Linde, Nora, ever her doll-self, gladdens at the thought of her husband's advance in the bank to a more lucrative post:

Nora: For the future we can live quite differently--we can do just as we like. I feel so relieved and so happy, Christine! It

51 Symons, 250.
52 The Plays, 182.
will be splendid to have heaps of money and not need to have any anxiety, won't it?

Mrs. Linde: Yes, anyhow I think it would be delightful to have what one needs.

Nora: No, not only what one needs, but heaps and heaps of money.53

Nora then confidentially reveals to Mrs. Linde all she has done for Helmer and in speaking of the trip to Italy which she made possible for him reveals, by mere order of mention, a hierarchy of interests that astounds us:

Nora: It was a wonderful journey and it saved Torvald's life.54

Mrs. Linde asks Nora to get her a job in Helmer's bank. Nora responds:

Nora: Just leave it to me; I will broach the subject very cleverly—I will think of something that will please him very much. It will make me so happy to be of some use to you.55

Nora has an infinity of little arts that make her winsome to the masculine eye. Nor does she scruple to use them at the slightest provocation. Once Ibsen has given us such a satisfying portrait of Nora, he begins to point the issue ironically. Nora remarks to Mrs. Linde:

How painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything! It would upset our mutual relations altogether; our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is now.56

Ibsen must have winced at Nora's blindness to the real foundations of her home life, those mutual relations revealed in this statement.

53 Ibid., 182.
54 Ibid., 183.
55 Ibid., 185.
56 Ibid., 188.
Perhaps at least with her children Nora is more than a coquettish doll.

At their first entrance, how does she act?

Nora: No, no, I will take their things off,
Anne; please let me do it, it is such
fun?

Lest the reader should miss the innuendo Ibsen remarks in the stage direction that "Nora takes off the children's things and throws them about."\(^{58}\) With Nora's sense of duty effectively minimized to the reader, Ibsen proceeds to hint her educative technique.

Nora: (to her children) Did a big dog run
after you? But it didn't bite you?
No, dogs don't bite nice little dolly
children. You mustn't look at the
parcels Ivor. What are they? Ah, I
daresay you would like to know. No,
no, it's something nasty etc.\(^{59}\)

Such unmistakable conduct, since *A Doll's House* is the first drama in which no puppets' wires are visible,\(^{60}\) continues through the play. Nora, however, has her serious side, her real self; for without it the play would be farcical. Tragedy would be improbable.\(^{61}\) She had unwittingly forged a note and was secretly working off the payments on it. This sacrifice led her to believe her husband could not but make a like sacrifice for her. She failed to recall that their ordinary relations were conducted on an alto-

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60 Symons, 256.
61 Hermann Weigand in his *The Modern Ibsen* (26-76) makes a brilliant case for the comical interpretation of *Doll's House*. What is genuinely tragic, however, is seen as comic through an analysis which, because it becomes altogether too profound, becomes subjective.
gether unreal and illusory basis and that her own doll-likeness was really the determining, the formative factor of her husband's love and devotion to her. Thus when Helmer had his chance, his devotion collapsed; it was devotion to a doll and could not stand the jolt of a real test.

After a rude awakening to her husband's devotion which is hollow and moves along the line of expediency, Nora realizes the folly of their marriage. "Yes," she says, "now I am beginning to understand thoroughly."62 Later she analyzes:

You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me... I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you—or else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which—I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.63

Not only does Nora see this; she discovers the source of the tragedy, herself. Her action, her relation to Helmer, has not been truthful. Their true selves have never contacted.

Indeed, you were perfectly right. I am not fit for the task. There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself—you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now.64

63 Ibid., 247.
64 Ibid., 247.
Her tragedy has not only been a failure in duty to her husband and children, but primarily to herself, a duty as sacred, in her opinion, as the others. This duty is, of course, to know her deepest desires and impulses and base her activity on them. "I must think over things myself and get to understand them." As she prepares to leave, Nora says:

I know nothing but what the clergyman said, when I went to be confirmed. He told us that religion was this and that and the other. When I am away from all this, and am alone, I will look into that matter too. I will see if what the clergyman said is true, or at all events if it is true for me.

Nora is going out to find herself, and as the audience sits bewildered, Ibsen might be heard whispering:

the great thing is to become honest and truthful in dealing with one's self—not to determine to do this or determine to do that, but to do what one must do because one is one's self.

For as Symons remarks,

it was in seeking to find himself that Ibsen sought to find truth; and truth he knew was to be found only within him. The truth which he sought for himself was not at all truth in the abstract, but a truth literally "efficacious" and able to work out the purpose of his existence.

Lewisohn sums up our point very well when he says that

Ibsen illustrated his theory of life through a subtle inversion of his method. The culmination here consists in Nora's awakening to the fact

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65 Ibid., 248.  
66 Ibid., 248.  
67 Ibid., 248.  
68 Ibid., 249.  
69 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.  
70 Symons, 231.
that, dazed by social conventions, by the traditions of the sheltered life and its ignorance, she has never been able to be a freely willing personality. Hence she discards a past woven of actions and acquiescences which are, in no deep or intimate sense, her own. 71

If A Doll's House is a subtle inversion of his method, Ghosts is typical of Ibsen's treatment of self-realization. 72 Though Nora's departure was only a symbol of her newly found spirit of freedom, 73 the public reacted so strongly that Ibsen's indignation with the plebeian interpretation of A Doll's House found vent in Ghosts. 74

A brief summary is in place. Mrs. Alving, at the instigation of her mother and two aunts, 75 had married an attractive and genial but recklessly and shamelessly dissolute Captain Alving. Even after their marriage Captain Alving persevered in his orgies and loose habits. The great sufferer was Mrs. Alving who could stand the lie no longer and fled to Pastor Manders whom she really loved. Manders severely rebuked Mrs. Alving and persuaded her that it was her duty to return to her husband. She did so but Alving's libertine ways continued and Mrs. Alving set in to devote her entire life to preserve her husband's name from execration and to veil his real life from the world.

One day she overheard a scuffle in an adjoining room between her husband and her maid, Joanna. Captain Alving had his way with the woman, and

71 Lewisohn, 12.
72 Ibid., 13.
74 Haldane Macfall, Ibsen, Morgan Shepard Co., N.Y., 1907, 205.
75 Plays, 38.
the child of this intrigue, Regina, Mrs. Alving took into her service in her mother's place. She herself then bore Alving a boy, but, determined to protect him from the morally polluted atmosphere, sent him abroad at an early age. Alving's debauches continued until his death and Mrs. Alving, ever concerned to screen his way of life, from public knowledge, has erected an orphanage in his honor. As the play opens, Oswald Alving has just returned home from abroad. In Oswald Mrs. Alving sees the ghost of his father. He attempts seduction of Regina and when his mother asks for an explanation of this action, Oswald reveals the true state of his condition. He is suffering from a diseased brain76 consequent on his father's immorality. He is doomed to sudden imbecility and a living death. Once disillusioned in his love for Regina—for Mrs. Alving has revealed to him that Regina is his half-sister—Oswald asks and obtains his mother's promise that she will administer morphia tablets when the dread disease strikes. Suddenly Oswald repeats "Mother, give me the sun," and Mrs. Alving, in a state of indecision, recognizes the horrible state of her boy. The play ends as she is pondering the use of the morphia tablets.

Ibsen, in characteristic style, gives us a few deft touches at the very outset and establishes a brilliant character contrast between Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders. Manders is convention in a collar and tie, perpetually ready with a denouncement and uplifted eyebrow for every vice and a panegyric for every virtue, but withal, easily swayed by the slightest breeze of public opinion. To Manders there is much of duty but little of

76 Heller, 171. "Oswald's case may be defined as progressive paralysis caused by prenatal luetic infection."
happiness. Naturally our first look at the Pastor finds him declaiming, against the very appropriate background of a gloomy fjord landscape, on the duties of a daughter. "But a daughter's duty, my good child." Here we see everything against which Mrs. Alving is attempting to react. Furthermore, Manders is said to be "always punctual," a person in whom the spirit of the law is likely to be lost in the letter. He breathes a stuffy "hm--really!" when he discovers the free-thinking literature in which Mrs. Alving is indulging. Already Ibsen has given us enough of Manders.

He now takes up Mrs. Alving and gives us the picture of a woman serenely free from the shackles of conventional thinking. Her first reaction to her old friend Manders is a "repressed smile" at his prudery in refusing to lodge at the Alving household. A second touch which builds up this antithesis between Manders and Mrs. Alving is her defense of her reading.

Manders: Tell me, Mrs. Alving, what are these books doing here?
Mrs. Alving: These books? I am reading them.
Manders: Do you read this sort of thing?
Mrs. Alving: Certainly I do.
Manders: Do you feel any better or happier for reading books of this kind?
Mrs. Alving: I think it makes me, as it were, more self-reliant.
Manders: That is remarkable. But why?
Mrs. Alving: Well, they give me an explanation or a confirmation of lots of different ideas that have come into my own mind. But what surprises me, Mr. Manders, is, that properly

77 Plays, 29. Here Manders seems to oppose duty and happiness.
78 Ibid., 7.
79 Ibid., 14.
80 Ibid., 15.
81 Ibid., 15.
82 Ibid., 16.
speaking, there is nothing at all new in these books. There is nothing more in them than what most people think and believe. The only thing is, that most people either take no account of it or won't admit it to themselves.

**Manders:** But, good heavens, do you seriously think that most people--?

**Mrs. Alving:** Yes, indeed I do.

Once Ibsen feels he has shown us that Manders is acting from a will evervated by a continual bow to public opinion, and that Mrs. Alving is truly one who has realized herself in the fullest Ibsenesque sense of the word, he shocks us with a neat contradiction of all he has built up about Mrs. Alving. Mrs. Alving and Manders are discussing the problem of insuring the orphanage. Manders succeeds in convincing Mrs. Alving that insurance would provoke public criticism, criticism of their lack of faith in divine Providence. It is here that we are introduced to an entirely different Mrs. Alving, one who is a slave to criticism, convention, mistaken duty, and eventually outmoded ideals.

**Manders:** As far as I am personally concerned, I can conscientiously say that I don't see the smallest objection to our insuring ourselves against all risks.

**Mrs. Alving:** That is exactly what I think.

**Manders:** But what about the opinion of the people hereabouts?

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83 *Ibid.*, 17

84 Manders cloaks his genuine fear of public opinion by insisting that criticism will prevent the good work the orphanage could accomplish. However, the seam of the cloak appears ridiculously when, in a moment of off-gaud spontaneity, Manders regrets that the orphanage is not insured once it has already burned down. (p.50) Manders betrays similar ethical depth when he objects to free love unions especially when no secret is made of them. (26). Nor is he above bribery when the eye of public displeasure seems likely to focus on him. (p.62)
Mrs. Alving: Their opinion--?
Manders: Is there any considerable body of opinion here--opinion of some account, I mean--that might take exception to it?
Mrs. Alving: What exactly do you mean by opinion of some account?
Manders: Well, I was thinking particularly of persons of such independent and influential position that one could hardly refuse to attach weight to their opinion.
Mrs. Alving: There are a certain number of such people who might take exception to it if we--
Manders: That's just it, you see. In town there are lots of them. All my fellow clergymen's congregations, for instance! It would be extremely easy for them to interpret it as meaning that neither you nor I had a proper reliance on Divine protection.85

Social pressure is obviously the motive for Mrs. Alving's action here. As Heller says,

Mrs. Alving reveals herself in the progress of the drama as one possessed of firm views of life to which her actions run counter. Hence her conduct of life, however sanctified by its pathetic appeal to our compassion, must be viewed from Ibsen's idealistic premises, as fundamentally and destructively dishonest.86

After Mrs. Alving relates to Manders the piteous condition of her former life, we are in a position to see and appreciate the two forces which have gone to mold her past and are in present conflict: first, Manders and his smug ethical code based on public opinion; second, her own inner urge to free herself from ghosts, "all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs."87 Her recognition that she has been motivated by and acting on conventional principles is brought about through a series of

85 Ibid., 19.
86 Heller, 163.
87 Plays, 41.
All of which occur within the same two or three hours. These tragedies serve a twofold purpose: they precipitate the necessity for another critical decision by Mrs. Alving; they sharpen for her the realization that she has been untrue to herself. In the following lines she reveals clearly that her suffering has manifested to her the unworthy bondage of her past devotion to duty.

Mrs. Alving: (going to the window) Oh, law and order! I often think it is that that is at the bottom of all the misery in the world. 59

...  
Mrs. Alving: Oh ideals, ideals! If only I were not such a coward as I am90

...  
Mrs. Alving: Yes, I was swayed by duty and consideration for others; that was why I lied to my son, year in and year out. Oh, what a coward--what a coward I have been.91

And her supreme acknowledgment of untruth to herself:

Mrs. Alving: Yes, by forcing me to submit to what you called my duty and obligations; by praising as right and just what my whole soul revolted against, as it would against something abominable. That was what led me to examine your teachings critically. I only wanted to unravel one point in them; but as soon as I had got that unravelled, the whole fabric came to pieces. And then I realized that it was only machine-made.92

88 These tragedies are: 1) Mrs. Alving's discovery of Regina and Oswald in the adjoining room; 2) Oswald's confession of his broken down condition; 3) his conviction that it was his own fault; 4) revelation of Oswald's love for Regina, his half-sister; 5) the burning of the orphanage; 6) Oswald reveals his syphilitic condition; 7) his total collapse.
89 Ibid., 38.
90 Ibid., 39.
91 Ibid., 39.
92 Ibid., 41-2.
Mrs. Alving has finally come to a point where she realizes her failure. As Lewishon says:

This is the lesson which, through the silent years, has burned itself into Mrs. Alving's soul. She shrinks from nothing, now, that society abhors. But it is far too late. Duty and piety throttled her will in the crucial moments of the past. She can but watch the bursting of their dreadful fruit.93

Rosmersholm gives us another vindication of the theory of self-realization through a will brought to ruin by a force Ibsen regards as atavistic and "of the old world culture."94 This force is conscience. Ibsen's own words in a letter to Bjorn Kristensen tell us that.

But the play also deals with the struggle which all serious-minded human beings have to wage with themselves in order to bring their lives into harmony with their convictions.

For the different spiritual functions do not develop evenly and abreast of each other in any one human being. The instinct of acquisition hurries on from gain to gain. The moral consciousness—what we call conscience, is, on the other hand, very conservative. It has its deep roots in traditions and the past generally. Hence the conflict.95

In these words we have, as we shall see, the key to the tragedy.

Rosmersholm has been through generations the citadel of respectability and influence. The latest of the Rosmers, Johannes, has married an ordinary woman, affectionate but with no ambition for him or herself. Into this household struts the bold and free-thinking Rebecca West—ostensibly because

93 Lewisohn, 13.
94 Macfall, 272.
95 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 413.
of a hot fancy the invalid Mrs. Beata Rosmer has taken for her—but really because she envisions in the Rosmer circle scope for an ambitious and able woman. Rebecca falls passionately in love with Rosmer, though she disguises this, and he quite naturally yields to the spell of the woman who understands him. Rebecca sees that Beata is a cause of unhappiness to Rosmer—and a barrier to her own happiness—and sets to work to drive the woman to death. At first, she gains Beata's love by ceaseless attention. Her next move is to put into the hands of the sterile Beata freethinking literature which seems to condone, even advise free unions, especially where fertility can be anticipated. Beata pines over her own sterility. Rebecca next privately intimates that Rosmer has lost the faith of his ancestors. After this shock, Beata is psychologically prepared to believe Rebecca when she discloses that "Rosmer and she must marry immediately." Beata now feels she is in the way and kills herself. The play opens after this tragedy has taken place.

Rebecca, in the course of time, draws Rosmer to her own freethinking ways so that Rosmersholm, from a respected seat of moral living becomes the camp of the radicalists. The conservative enemy accuse Rosmer and Rebecca of illicit relations. They even hint that Rosmer's love for Rebecca has driven Beata to death. Such accusations open Rosmer's eyes to the situation that formerly obtained in his own home. He tries to shake off his guilt-complex and save Rebecca's honor by a proposal of marriage. Knowing that she is guilty, Rebecca refuses. Rosmer's ideal of ennobling the world—which he had made his life's aim—crumbles in the face of his own guilt. Rebecca perceives this and confesses to him her complicity in Beata's death,
thus trying to restore his innocence to him. Rebecca blames herself for ambition. Rosmer sees that ambition accounts for the action but not for the confession and asks Rebecca why she confessed. She pours forth her love showing Rosmer that his comradeship has changed her from a passionate adventuress to a serene lover. But Rosmer must have proof, since Rebecca has tricked him before. He asks her life in the mill-race. Then he will believe in her and recover his faith in himself and the soul's power to achieve nobility. Rosmer sees that, with a will "corrupted by the superstition of the expiation by self-sacrifice"96 he has demanded an atrocity. Rosmer and Rebecca go to the mill-race and die together. Such are the barest facts in a highly complicated drama.

The tragedy is apparently a double one. But upon analysis we realize that it is the tragedy of Rebecca West.97 For Rosmer is distinguished neither by ability or intelligence. Nobility of instinct is all he has to recommend him. He has not the strength of will necessary for tragic conflict.98 His life represents the effort of the intellect to escape the pull of deeply ingrained moral instincts, of conscience sunk in the past. Rosmer even breaks with the church of his forefathers. But Ibsen shrewdly shows us with a simple touch how vain all this will be. For Rosmer instinctively shuns—quite obviously out of a traditional belief of expiation by sacrifice—the bridge from which Beata leaped to her death.99 To this superstition Rebecca remarks

96 Macfall, 271.
97 Weigand, 203.
99 Plays, 252.
that "they cling to their dead here at Rosmersholm." Rosmer fits all too well into this staid respectability of Rosmersholm. He even foreshadows his own pitiful weakness when he says of Ulrik Brendel: "At least he has had the courage to live his own life his own way. I don't think that is such a small matter either." The tragedy of Rebecca is somewhat more significant. Not without purpose has Ibsen brought Rebecca from Finmarken. We discover that it is an ancient stronghold of paganism. Rebecca with a free pagan spirit digs away at Rosmer's intellectual foundations. She succeeds in winning him to a position where he claims that the people must purify and free their wills by their own power for "there is no other," an equivalent denial of Providence. But conscience is founded in the stream of tradition and in this the weak-willed Rosmer is as floating timber. We see this clearly when he exclaims in fairly quick succession:


... I cannot help it, Rebecca. I cannot shake off these gnawing doubts, however much I may wish.

... I will not be crushed to earth by horrible possibilities. I will not have my course of life forced upon me, either by the living or by-- any one else.

Rebecca, however, has failed to reckon with the traits which distinguish Ros-
mer from his ancestors. These men, whose portraits adorn the walls of the mansion, were grave, sober, and punctilious souls who would have elicited Rebecca's admiration but also her combative spirit. But in Johannes she encountered the very qualities that made him the last of his race: candor, childlike meekness, fragility, introspective morbidity. These awakened deep love in her and forced her to yield unconsciously to everything for which he stood. She finally admits in spite of her strenuous efforts that

Rosmersholm has broken me... broken me utterly and hopelessly—I had a free and fearless will when I came here. Now I have bent my neck under a strange law.—From this day forth, I feel as if I had no courage for anything in the world.

And then:

Rosmer: How do you account for what has happened to you?
Rebecca: It is the Rosmer view of life—or your view of life at any rate—that has infected my will.
Rosmer: Infected?
Rebecca: And made it sick... Enslaved it to laws that had no power over me before.

And later on:

Rebecca: But I am under the dominion of the Rosmersholm view of life—now. What I have sinned—it is fit I should expiate.

Thus, as Cleanth Brooks says, "Rebecca dies by the Rosmersholm tradition—expiation of sin." In loving Rosmer, she has fallen under the weight of those

107 Weigand, 205.
108 Ibid., 205.
109 Plays, 328. Cf. also 330, "I believe I could have etc."
110 Ibid., 332.
111 Ibid., 340.
112 Brooks and Heilman, 311.
forces of which her life was a living repudiation. In Rosmersholm, then, Ibsen's characteristic doctrine of self-realization is examined negatively and confirmed by the pathetic suffering and ruin consequent on a will chained to traditional conscience. Conscience, of course, according to Ibsen, is not that faculty of the soul whereby we are conscious of our own acts as our own but it is a "moral consciousness," a moral groove in which the ego moves and has its being and which stems not from the individual but from the forces of his past and tradition. Hence to Ibsen it is a force which tends to prevent the soul from acting "because it must because it is itself."

In Hedda Gabler we have Ibsen's coldest and most impersonal play. The lines of the problem working itself out in an individual life are scarcely detectable. The problem seems entirely absorbed in artistic objectivity. Ibsen does not urge; he simply paints a ghastly picture from which we retire with a shock.

Hedda Gabler, called such because she is more her father's daughter than her husband's wife, is a beautiful woman, idle and bored, the child of convention. She has married George Tesman because she considered him a good match but it takes her only six months to realize that in her aesthetic eyes he is vulgar and plebeian. She hates everything about him: his narrow interests, his naivete, even his name. On the other hand, Hedda has been on

113 Gosse, 168.
114 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.
115 Weigand, 242.
116 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 435.
intimate terms with a certain Eilert Lovborg, a dissipated genius from the
relation of whose crude debauches she derives a feverish satisfaction. Lov-
borg, finding the university where he teaches growing wary of his lectures,
moves away to an outlying suburb and becomes private tutor to Mrs. Elvsted’s
step-children. Thea Elvsted opens new horizons for Lovborg; for her he
gives up drink and resolves upon a new life. He writes under her inspiration
a brilliant book but leaves for town immediately upon its completion. Know-
ing that Lovborg will become a drunkard and lose all without her, Mrs. Elv-
sted leaves her family in pursuit of him. She finally goes to Hedda to soli-
cit her aid.

Hedda realizes the tremendous hold Thea has over Lovborg's character
and becomes jealous of such an influence. Lovborg is soon on intimate terms-
these remain on the conversational level—with Hedda, who is determined to
gain a formative power over the man. Taunting him on his subjugation to
Thea and his slavery to the abstinence Thea has urged, she invites him to
prove himself free and noble by getting vine leaves in his hair, as she will
put it. Completely bewitched, Lovborg gets his vine leaves and in the course
of his orgy, loses his precious manuscript. Tesman finds it and returns it
to the jealous Hedda. Lovborg, assuming a romantic-poetic pose before Thea,
claims he tore it to pieces. He then tells Hedda more truthfully and with a
flurry of adventurous enthusiasm how he lost the manuscript in a home of ill-
repute. Hedda, confident of her mastery over him, insinuates that there is
nothing left for Lovborg to do but die. She presents him with a pistol and
tells him to do it beautifully. Lovborg, however, goes back to the disrepu-
table house and is shot in a scuffle, thus foiling Hedda's whims in his
Judge Brack, an aspirant to Hedda's intimacy, recognizes the pistol Lovborg had as Hedda's. He tells her the entire story of Lovborg's ignominious death and makes it clear that he has it within his powers to tell the police to whom the pistol belongs and thus precipitate a scandal. Hedda now sees she must become the creature of this man or else face the scandal of being mixed up with a repulsive murder in a house of ill-repute. Fearing either of these alternatives, the one because it involves scandal, the other because it involves her abject subjection to Brack's passion, Hedda retires to the adjoining room and kills herself.

As this stern drama unfolds, we find at its core an extremely complex personality, Hedda Gabler. Her first few utterances show us a woman ignobly self-centered. To Tesman's enthusiasm over a pair of slippers hand-woven by his aunt and resplendent with fond memories, Hedda remarks: "Thanks, I really don't care about it."\(^{117}\) In this we perceive a spirit of barren self-interest which clings to nearly every word she speaks to Tesman. Since Ibsen's growing "power as a dramatist is found not in the problems nor in the characters, but in the detail, in the new method of construction by means of interplay,"\(^{118}\) he gives us almost immediately another facet of her character. Hedda's remark about Miss Tesman's bonnet--"No one does that sort of thing"\(^{119}\)--gives us in a sentence the motive for most of her activity. She is the woman of

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117 Plays, 218.
118 M.C. Bradbrook, Ibsen the Norwegian, Chatto & Windus, London, 1946, 73.
119 Plays, 220.
society. Her whole background, even the choice of a husband, has taken its color from convention.\textsuperscript{120} We later learn that she resists the affections of Eilert Lovborg out of a horror of scandal. Hedda's morality follows the line of public opinion so closely that Heller finds that the social aspect of the play "consists in the inhibitive power of the aggregate opinion over the principal's conduct.\textsuperscript{121} Yet a third element is present in Hedda's makeup, a tremendous admiration for Lovborg.

Because she was a cowardly slave to convention herself, she admired his courage in flying in the face of convention, in living his life to suit himself.\textsuperscript{122}

Hedda suffers from the incongruity of these two elements. In her, convention battles reckless abandon on the barren field of her own ego-centricity. Convention is the greatest victor. Because her cowardice is so huge, her self finds its hankering after freedom and self-realization satisfied, nay indulged, vicariously in the experiences of the dissolute Lovborg.

Once Hedda does realize how impoverished her life has been, the only self-assertion of which her empty personality is capable is direction of Lovborg's life to suicide. Endangered by scandal, she sees that she too must die. And her death is the last affirmation of a series of base intimidations and balkings; these she mistakes for courageous self-assertions. She is the example of emancipation "gone too far or else...moved in a wrong direction."\textsuperscript{123}

Conceding that there is no message in \textit{Hedda Gabler} but only the bad

\textsuperscript{120} Weigand, 249-50.
\textsuperscript{121} Heller, 257.
\textsuperscript{122} Weigand, 251
\textsuperscript{123} Heller, 267.
after-taste of a wretched and despicable life, one could with truth say that in Hedda Ibsen saw personalities "who realized slowly the need for re-creation of their life. Then being incapable of recreation, they die." Self-realization, in order to prove the source of happiness Ibsen intended it to be, must ultimately have character upon which to build. Hedda Gabler represents a complexity of petty motives and laws originating in an insincere and sterile personality. Lewisohn has said that Ibsen desires the purest and most ideal volitions of the individual to prevail. In an individual where such volitions do not seem to exist, we will find only tragedy.

We have seen what the concept of self-realization means to Henrik Ibsen, how it is paralleled in Kant and especially Kierkegaard, and finally how it weaves itself into the plays. Now it remains to be seen how this concept is the origin of tragedy in Ibsen and how it has affected his characters both in scope of conception and in morality of action.

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125 Lewisohn, 11.
CHAPTER II

SELF-REALIZATION THE ORIGIN OF TRAGEDY

We have seen what the concept of self-realization means, whence it is derived, and how it is found in Ibsen's plays. Further analysis will show us that this self-realization is the origin of tragedy in Ibsen's dramas. In order to understand precisely what we mean by "origin" and "tragedy", we must review briefly the most common acceptation of the words.

Aristotle has defined tragedy as

an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper katharsis, or purgation, of the emotions. ¹

Germane to our purpose is the fact that a tragedy must be complete, to be which it should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.² This dictum contains much more than the tautology that is at first apparent. For by its definition, a middle ("that which follows something as some other thing follows it")³ is causally connected with the beginning and the end.⁴ The causality postulated here is achieved by what Aristotle calls the tragic

² Ibid., 279.
³ Ibid., 280. Here the context makes the causality obvious.
⁴ Ibid., 281.
Hamartia. As Butcher says very well:

It is of the essence of a great tragedy to bring together the beginning and the end; to show the one implicit in the other. The intervening process disappears; the causal chain so unites the whole that the first hamartia bears the weight of the tragic result.5

Therefore the tragic hamartia is that which joins the beginning, middle, and end and that which causes the tragedy.6 It is the origin of and hence essential to tragedy.

The tragic hamartia may be three completely different things.7 It may be a simple error in judgment or again, it may be a conscious and intentional act but not a deliberate one, such as an act committed in a fit of passion. Thirdly it may denote a character defect, an assailable point in one's personal make-up.

For example, in Aeschylus, the tragic error is always a sin, "as in the most Hebraic of Hellenes we should expect it to be."8 In Antigone, it is sense of duty,9 in Oedipus, the slaying of Laius10—though Oedipus is more the victim of circumstances—in Hamlet, the failure to act, in Othello, a certain hasty credulity, in Coriolanus, pride, in Romeo, miscalculation, in Macbeth, an ambitious nature, in the Emperor Jones, a superstitious nature. The tragic protagonist in traditional drama "falls from a position of lofty

5 Ibid., 322.
7 Butcher, 317. The reason for this vagueness in Aristotle seems to be his apparent idealization of the Oedipus.
8 Lucas, 100.
9 Ibid., 103.
10 Butcher, 320.
eminence; and the disaster that wrecks his life may be traced not to de­
liberate wickedness, but to some great error or frailty."\(^{11}\)

In determining the tragic flaw in Ibsen, it is necessary to appreciate
the general structure of the Ibsen tragedy. This structure is known as the
tragedy of ripe condition,\(^{12}\) a tragedy in which the crisis has been pre-
formed.

A secret wrong committed long ago, thought
forgotten except by such as profit from the
oblivion and then disclosing itself with in-
calculable force, became an almost ubiquitous
element in Ibsen's mature writing.\(^{13}\)

Since this is so, the revealed past becomes an integral part of the drama--
its beginning--and must be joined to the rest of the drama causally. This
causal connection, even in the Ibsen flash-back-by-revelation method, is
achieved by the tragic *hamartia*. The plays ordinarily open at a point when
the conflict has been enacted and is at a lull before the onset of tragic
doom.\(^{14}\) Thus in *Ghosts* Mrs. Alving's flight from and return to Captain Al-
ving, in *A Doll's House* the continuous (over a period of eight years)
superficial relationship between Nora and Torvald, in *Rosmersholm* the past fail-
ure of Rebecca to reckon with Rosmer's lovable qualities in her relation
with him, in *Hedda Gabler* Hedda's almost perpetual yielding to conventional
standards prepare us for the eruption and confusion that follow. Such a
procedure where past information as well as present action grows out of the

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., 317.
\(^{12}\) Weigand, 245.
\(^{13}\) Downs, 53.
dialogue is peculiarly suited to Ibsen's purpose. For it gives his characters a chance to dwell on the springs and motivation of their past activity and come to realize—all too late—the illusory or conventional standards their actions have endorsed.

In order to determine even more accurately the precise position of the tragic hamartia, the tragic cause, in Ibsen, we have but to examine the condition of the characters as we see them at the beginning of the plays. For the most part they are weak-willed people whose activity is governed by norms and forces external to their own will. They do not will this or that because they must, because they are themselves, but rather are ignobly moved to their decisions. Thus we find Nora startlingly comfortable in the character niche her doll antics have cut out for her; we find Mrs. Alving haunted by "ghosts" of old dead beliefs; Rebecca is comparatively free but too much enamoured of Rosmer, we feel, to escape the contaminating force of the Rosmersholm conscience; Ellida Wangel (The Lady from the Sea, in which Ibsen's doctrine is given its purest expression) we find in a union with Wangel which runs counter to her native impulses. In The Pillars of Society we find Martha whose life is tragic unrealization incarnate, in the Master Builder we find Solness and Hilda living "a true tragedy of the guilty conscience." Upon reflection we realize that these habitual modes of action are not innate. If

15 Cf. Lewisohn, 21. "The drama has withdrawn into its own intense reality and is no longer heard but overheard."
16 Archibald Henderson, European Dramatists, Stewart and Kidd, Cincinnati, 1913. "Self-realization through conscious self-examination and active assertion of the human will—this is the lesson of Ibsen's dramas."(155)
17 Lewisohn, 114.
18 Henderson, 149.
a person's actions show forth habitual qualities or failings, we may be sure these are the result of repeated performances or of a great crisis in one's life. Thus if Mrs. Alving's habitual mode of activity is conventional, it stands to reason that her life, emotional, intellectual, and voluntary, has been shaped by the demands and insinuations of convention to which, of course, she has yielded. For an action once placed is placed with more readiness and facility the second time and if repeated enough, or even greatly feared, becomes habitual. Thus, since Ibsen's tragic characters are at the beginning of the dramas habituated to a mode of action which threatens to fructify in tragedy, we conclude that the tragic hamartia is somewhere in their past.

What then is the tragic flaw in Ibsen's dramas? To decide this we must recollect that for Ibsen the highest achievement possible to a human being was the realization of himself, the procession of all his activities from the native impulses of the will. Whatever, therefore, hinders man from the attainment of his highest achievement is, by that very token, contributive to tragedy in his life. Adherence to conventions, slavish following of a force, conscience, which has roots in tradition and the past, harkening to the suggestions of social pressure and human law—these are the forces which tend to prevent the realization of one's self. When these factors, then, determine a human choice, a course of action, the seeds of tragedy have been sown.

19 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 359; Symons, 223; Gosse, 236.
20 Henderson, 114. "Man's self-development is his highest duty; concessions to the world take the form of evil and temptation. The only way to develop one's self is to stand free and to stand alone. Brand's motto 'All or Nothing' is the logical epitome of his point of view."
As Lewisohn says:

His great and grave warning is not to let these volitions be smothered or turned awry by material aims, by base prudence, by sentimental altruism, or by social conventions external to the purely willing soul. For every such concession leads to untruth which is the death both of the individual and of society.

It follows almost inevitably—for Ibsen was nothing if not tenacious and single of purpose—that his plays are a series of culminations, tragic culminations of the effects of untruth born of some impure or materialised or basely intimidated will. 21

Thus we see that it is thwarted self-realization which is the tragic hamartia, the causal element in Ibsen's tragedies.

A glance at a few of the tragedies will confirm this analysis. Mrs. Alving flees to Pastor Manders, unable to stand the loose life of her husband. She is trying to free herself, free herself from the old concepts of duty which obsess her. But Manders is not the man she expects.

Helen's courage had failed her when the expected helper proved himself a slave to the "ghosts" of social prejudice she was about to exorcise from her soul; so she slipped back into her marital life of shame. Her submission at first sprang not from cowardice, rather from piety toward the orthodox ideas of duty to which Pastor Manders had recalled her. 22

We know the tragedy which followed her submission. Mrs. Alving's return and way of life Moses calls a "lie" 23 giving us to understand that it is the cause of her tragedy.

21 Lewisohn, 11.
22 Heller, 162.
23 Moses, 376.
Rosmersholm shows us Rebecca West succumbing to the influence of the Rosmer conscience. It is only at the end that we realize this. But this is quite natural since Rebecca "does not discover this true self until too late." However, the tragedy has its seeds in Rebecca's fated love of Rosmer under the influence of which she yielded to his guidance, and would stop at no sacrifice. It was under the influence of this love, a love developed in the past and revealed in the present, that Rebecca developed unmistakable traits of the Rosmer conscience. Even the tub-thumping, somewhat muddle-minded Kroll perceived this.

Ah, I fancy it is much the same with most of what you call your "emancipation." You have read yourself into a number of new ideas and opinions. You have got a sort of smattering of recent discoveries in various fields--discoveries that seem to overthrow certain principles which have hitherto been held impregnable and unassailable. But all this has only been a matter of the intellect, Miss West--a superficial acquisition. It has not passed into your blood.

Nora Helmer's tragedy has its origin in a sheltered, superficial relationship. Such a relationship has not been an instantaneous development, but as Nora says,

In all these eight years--longer than that--from the very beginning of our acquaintance, we have never exchanged a word on any serious subject...
I am not speaking about business matters.
I say that we never sat down in earnest.

24 Huneker, 344.
25 Weigand, 205.
26 Plays, 318.
together to try to get at the bottom
of anything.27

This is Nora's articulation of her tragic flaw, one with roots deep in their
past relationships. "To try to get at the bottom of anything." It is pre-
cisely this that she has neglected and such continual neglect has put her life
on a superficial level and prevented self-realization for Nora. For as Ibsen
himself said, the first element in self-realization is honesty with one's
self.28

When we speak of thwarted self-realization as a tragic hamartia in Hedda
Gabler, we mean something rather different. Hedda, we must remember, is a
woman who

hates all that has been done, yet can her-
self do nothing, and she represents, in
symbol, that detestable condition of spirit
which cannot create, though it sees the
need of creation and can only show the irri-
tation which its own sterility awakens with-
in by destruction.29

She has been brought up by General Gabler in the military tradition where law
is law and things are done because other people say so. "Hedda is ruled by
her militant blood."30 When she allows herself, an aristocratically reared
girl, to slip almost unwittingly into the petty bourgeois world31 of Tesman,
she retains the trappings32 of her aristocratic past, and a critical malad-
justment between Hedda and her environment is the result. Hedda simply "will

27 Ibid., 246.
28 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.
29 Gosse, 235.
30 Bradbrook, 116.
31 Weigand, 245.
32 Cf. Hedda's entrance in Plays, 216. "Her face and figure show refinement
and distinction. Her complexion is pale and opaque. Her steel-gray eyes
express a cold, unruffled repose."
not face her life, her limitations," and these unresolved dissonances, this intellectual dishonesty, founded on the many years of a sterile military home life, end in her amazing--one can scarcely say tragic--death. Hedda's tragic flaw then is her failure to recognize the sterility and general incapacity for constructive activity with which her background had foreshadowed the future.

The tragic hamartia, therefore, of Ibsen's characters is generally an act whereby they have stifled their native volitions or by dishonesty have failed to take stock of these. This tragic hamartia is quite naturally an error in judgment, for according to Ibsen there can be no "disloyalty to a moral universe and the re-establishment of harmony through retribution" where there is no moral universe other than the individual will. Thus Lucas has said:

And if we seek the hamartia in more modern tragedy like Ibsen's, it becomes clearer than ever that an intellectual mistake is all that the term need mean. In that clear, bleak Scandinavian world the root of evil has become more than ever an intellectual thing...It is the failure to think out situations fundamentally, the weakness of relying on formulae, however noble, that brings to the precipice Brand, and Mrs. Alving, Nora and Rosmer, and the Dead who awake too late.

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33 Bradbrook, 116.
34 Lewisohn 5. Traditional drama, be it remembered, dwelt with the transgression of the moral law by a strong but assailable will. Most ordinarily the tragic action began with the incurring of guilt and ended in expiation. Thus Aristotle derived his tragic fear from a warning addressed to the equal frailty of our own wills.
35 Lucas, 104.
However, when under closer scrutiny, this intellectual mistake of which Lucas speaks is seen to be compounded with a weak will. For the very reason that the mistake has been made is that the intellect was working under the pressure of outside forces such as convention and social pressure, and thus erred. Thus in Mrs. Alving's decision to return to her husband, in Hedda's dishonest appraisal of her capacities in the light of her background, in Nora's cultivated doll-likeness, in Rebecca's unqualified love of Rosmer, we perceive at once an error in judgment and the flutterings of a weak will.36 "Ibsen is the dramatist of failure through spiritual incapacity."37

Ibsen has shown us that self-realization, when impeded by a lack of self-examination or active assertion of the human will,38 can lead to tragedy.39 Thus an unrealized self is the cause of tragedy.

We ask quite naturally why Ibsen chose the negative presentation of his theme, why he chose self-realization as vindicated by its tragic negation in the protagonist. We have our answer when we reflect that "the initial impulse of Ibsen's mature work was an impulse of protest against the social and spiritual conditions in his native country."40

This negative treatment of the tragic hamartia, throttled self-realiza-

36 The degree of weakness varies, of course, with the different characters. In Hedda Gabler it is less obvious than in the others.
37 Jameson, 83.
38 Henderson, 155.
39 Note carefully that we say can lead to tragedy. Tragedy is not inevitable upon such weaknesses as is obvious from Ibsen's The Wild Duck. In fact, the dominant note of The Wild Duck is that "if you rob the average man of his illusions, you are almost sure to rob him of his happiness."(Gosse, 161)
40 Lewisohn, 8.
tion, has had very important results in Ibsen's work and paradoxically enough is the source of his weaknesses and his strength as a dramatist.

First we shall examine one of the obvious weaknesses. It is clear that Ibsen's characters are and must be weak-willed. The truth is always greater than the men and women who seek it. And this must be so. Otherwise we would have men and women of strong will embracing in pure will acts the truth manifested in and by their most secret selves. We would not have the tragedies whereby Ibsen registers his protests against the intellectual and spiritual conditions in Norway. But Ibsen has determined to be a realist, to depict men as they are, as chained to the chatterings of society, flung about by its fears and clannish condemnations. And precisely by such a determination--a determination he was forced to make by the new concept of tragic hamartia--he has cut himself off from the Shakespearean articulation of the unuttered element in human experience. As he himself says,

We are no longer living in the days of Shakespeare. Among sculptors there is already talk of painting statues in natural colors. I have no desire to see the Venus of Milo painted but I would rather see the head of a negro executed in black than in white marble. Speaking generally, the style must conform to the degree of ideality which pervades the representation. My new drama is no tragedy in the ancient acceptance; what I desired to depict were human beings, and therefore I would not let them talk "the language of the Gods." Yet it is precisely by the inimitable articulation of the unuttered crises in human experience that Shakespeare has secured a lasting place in world literature. The great struggle and inner shiftings of Hamlet's spirit are unfor-

41 Jameson, 33.
42 Gosse, 136.
gettably revealed to us in his "To be or not to be." Macbeth pours out his ambitious yet conscience-ridden impulses in the halting soliloquy "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" And it is precisely the willingness and ability of Shakespeare to put into words these secret gropings of a great soul that make him so communicative. For on the common ground of their secret gropings and their most intimate desires for abiding happiness do humans find a bond of eternal union and common understanding. Shakespeare's most masterful lines are simply projections of the suffering or joyful human spirit in which we find and rejoice in a faithful picture of ourselves, of our potential greatness. Ibsen, on the contrary, shirks these great crises of the soul, as shirk them he must. Because his drama is born of indignation with and is aimed at Norwegian society, Ibsen is forced to choose the average Norwegian man or woman as his tragic hero. As a result, "there are no great characters in Ibsen." As Arthur Symons says very well:

> When he is most himself, when he has the firmest hold on his material, Ibsen limits himself to that part of the soul which he and science know. By taking the average man as his hero, by having no hero, no villain, only probably levels, by limiting human nature to the bounds within which he can clinically examine it he shirks, for the most part, the greatest crises of the soul.

The talk of such characters, rather than express, veils deep underlying thoughts. It is because of this that many of Ibsen's characters are some-

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43 Bradbrook, 16.
44 Symons, 262.
45 Symons, 262.
46 Franc, 135.
what uncommunicative.\textsuperscript{47}

Yet again it is precisely because Ibsen was the "first to portray the tragedies in the lives of suburban, provincial people"\textsuperscript{48}--and this, be it remembered, he was forced to do because of his idea of tragedy as issuing from thwarted self-realization--that he was able to give us so thorough a knowledge of his characters, petty as they may be. He gives us characters in situations like our own,\textsuperscript{49} a thing Shakespeare did not do. As a result Ibsen can do away with many artificial stage techniques such as soliloquies, asides, and murmuring maid servants.\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, because the average human of Ibsen's choice is so clearly associated with and so intimately a member of the society in which he lives, Ibsen gives us a complete picture of bourgeois society.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{47} Butcher, 270-1. "The private life of an individual, tragic as it may be in its inner quality, has never been made the subject of the highest tragedy. Its consequences are not of far-reaching importance; it does not move the imagination with sufficient power. Within the limited circle of a bourgeois society a great action is hardly capable of being unfolded. A parochial drama, like that of Ibsen, where the hero struggles against the cramping conditions of his normal life, sometimes with all the ardor of aspiring hope, more often in the spirit of egoistic self-assertion, which mistakes the measure of the individual's powers, can hardly rise to tragic dignity. We are conscious of a too narrow stage, of a confined outlook, and of squalid motives underlying even conduct which is invested with a certain air of grandeur. The play moves along the flat levels of existence. The characters are unequal to the task imposed on them; and though we may find room for human pity in witnessing failure and foiled hopes, still it is commonplace and gloomy failure. No one can question the skill in dramatic construction and the stirring interest of Ibsen's plays, but the depressing sense of the trivial cannot be shaken off..."

\textsuperscript{48} Franc, 133.
\textsuperscript{49} G.B.Shaw, \textit{The Quintessence of Ibsenism}, Brentano, N.Y., 1913, 234.
\textsuperscript{50} Shaw, 234; Franc, 136.
\textsuperscript{51} Lewisohn, 9.
For example, Mrs. Alving wishes to reveal the state of her husband's past life to Oswald but finds it extremely difficult because

If others had known anything of what happened, they would have said: "Poor man, it is natural enough that he should go astray when he has a wife that has run away from him."52

Mrs. Alving is a part of that tiny realm we call society. She fluctuates with it. As Symons says:

The characteristic dramas of Ibsen are rightly known as "social dramas." Their problem for the main part is no longer man in the world, but man in society. That is why they have no atmosphere, no background, but are carefully localized.53

Finally, Ibsen's tragic hamartia, the unrealized self, helps explain the predominance of the pathetic in his dramas. Ibsen's tragedies are not precipitated by a strong will carrying itself relentlessly on to ruin but by a weak will or a maladjusted mind crumbling before a problem. Once the protagonist has failed to act or has acted with misguided rectitude, Ibsen turns on him a veritable avalanche of unfortunate incident. In Ghosts, for example, the pathetic element is terrible. Ibsen allows the truth of heredity, which due to scientific speculation and rationalistic tendencies, was pressing in forcibly upon his attention, to color the play continually and finally wipe out Oswald in one of the most appalling endings in modern drama.54

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52 Plays, 39. This confirms Ibsen's contention that "a woman cannot be herself in the society of today." (Henderson, 174)
53 Symons, 263.
54 Edmund Gosse, Northern Studies, Walter Scott, London, 1890, 94. "How any human creature can see the play acted through without shrieking with mental anguish, I cannot tell. Perhaps the distraction of the scene makes it a little less terrible to witness than to read. As literature, at all events, if anything exists outside Aeschylus and Shakespeare more direct in its appeal to the conscience, more solemn, more poignant, than the last act of Ghosts, I at least do not know where to look for it."
pathetic is likewise predominant in Rosmersholm, in A Doll's House where the uneven struggle of the protagonists with a force greater than their shrinking wills is pitiful.

Thus it is clear that self-realization, in its negation, is not only the cause of tragedy, the tragic hamartia in Ibsen's works, but that it is important (in the demands it makes on the dramatist) in determining the style, breadth of character-conception, and depth of pathos in them.

To get a more adequate notion of self-realization, we shall now examine the morality of the concept.
CHAPTER III
THE MORALITY OF SELF-REALIZATION

The very title of this chapter throws us into the middle of a problem treacherous with its possibilities for irrelevant discussion. For example, we must beware of identifying and condemning self-realization as Ibsen intended with self-realization as his characters achieved it. Nor must we force Ibsen to indorse the conduct of his characters, or indicate whether he considers it good or bad. The artist's role—and Ibsen's insistence that he is an artist, not a propagandist is almost deafening—is not to teach except in so far as close contact with beauty must educate by enriching. Furthermore, a complete precision of the idea of self-realization for the purposes of study might lead one to read it into the plays in an altogether disproportionate light. For self-realization is not an Ibsenic creed rigidly and artlessly imposed on his characters but is the result of careful craftsmanship. It is achieved, as we said, by the natural revelation of character, by an accumulation of touches and delicate interplay of dialogue. It is the light and shadow in the foreground of his characters' lives as they unpiece their crumbled pasts. Hence, a clear definition of purpose is necessary at the very outset.

Now an author's concept of morality will unquestionably affect his plays. This is precisely its importance. Ibsen himself confessed that "no-body can poetically present that to which he has not to a certain degree
and at least at times the model within himself. And more clearly yet he stated that "everything I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through."2

Thus an objective estimate of the morality of self-realization is in order. The issue, however, has been somewhat obscured by the interpretation put on Ibsen's works by George Bernard Shaw. Though Shaw did not formally introduce Ibsen in England,3 his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* has been largely formative of English and American opinion on the Norwegian dramatist. Hence, a summary of his interpretation will best clear the way for an objective appraisal of the concept of self-realization.

Shaw begins his explanation by showing us how man has grown through the centuries and become more courageous.4 His courage has raised him from a state of mere consciousness to knowledge "by daring more and more to face facts and tell himself the truth."5 For man in his infancy of helplessness could not face the tremendous number of inexorable facts that faced him. The threatening ones, the painful ones, man masked as soon as he discovered them. Thus,

The king of terrors, Death, was the Arch-Inexorable; man could not bear the dread of that. He must persuade himself that death can be propitiated, circumvented, abolished. How he fixed the mask of per-

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1 *Letters* (Kildal ed.), 50.
2 *Gosse*, 147.
5 Ibid., 21.
Thus personal immortality, Shaw contends, is simply the creation of man, a mask to blunt the realization of his inevitable future non-existence. These masks men fabricated were their ideals; and thus men quickly became idealists because this was the most comfortable policy of life.

We call this sort of fancy picture an Ideal; and the policy of forcing individuals to act on the assumption that all ideals are real, and to recognize and accept such action as standard moral conduct, absolutely valid under all circumstances, contrary conduct or any advocacy of it being discountenanced and punished as immoral, may therefore be described as the policy of Idealism.

One of the most beautiful of these masks—which, remember, Shaw regards as unreal, and hence, essentially untrue—is that created to disguise the sex instinct in man. Because there is some danger in unregulated indulgence of this instinct, men threw about it iron laws to guard its gratification. This mask they called love and family life. The history of this mask has been the record of a desperate pretense that a forced institution is in reality a congenial one.

Now whenever anyone is dissatisfied with the idealist arrangement of things, whenever he claims that the mask of family organization is a failure for some people, whenever he decides to tear off this mask and face reality, the idealists, though they secretly adore him, threaten to take his life.

6 Ibid., 21.
7 Ibid., 25.
8 Ibid., 23.
This realist at last loses patience with ideals and sees in them only something to blind us, something to throttle self in us. As Shaw says:

To the one /Idealist/ , human nature, naturally corrupt, is held back from ruinous excesses only by self-denying conformity to the ideals. To the other, these ideals are only swaddling clothes which man has outgrown, and which insufferably impede his movements.9

Thus the concept of duty as devotion to an ideal is built on the belief that the will is naturally malign and devilish.10 One of the greatest of idealist abominations is that of forcing "self-sacrifice on woman under the pretense that she likes it."11

In the light of this sketchy build-up, the man who sets out to destroy ideals is not only enlightened but truthful.

And the advantage of the work of destruction is that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies.12

Upon such a background of presumptions and with the obvious fact that Ibsen harped on conventions and conventionalists as ideals and idealists,13 Shaw sets out to interpret the plays. In every play he finds the same motif, that every step of progress means the repudiation of a duty, the unmasking

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9 Ibid., 31-2.
10 Ibid., 47.
11 Ibid., 34.
12 Ibid., 48.
13 Ibid., 29.
of a mask. Thus when Shaw comes to comment on the morality of Ibsen's plays, his position is obvious. Since all obligation has been effectively reduced to a base convention insincerely tagged an "ideal," there can be no question of morality for Shaw. As he himself says:

The statement that Ibsen's plays have an immoral tendency, is, in the sense in which it is used, quite true. Immorality does not necessarily imply mischievous conduct; it implies conduct, mischievous or not, which does not conform to current ideals.\(^\text{14}\)

If we are ridden by current ideals, then, we will inevitably regard Ibsen's plays as immoral,\(^\text{15}\) for their lesson, according to Shaw, is a reminder to men that they ought to be as careful how they yield to a temptation to tell the truth as to a temptation to hold their tongues...the practical decision depending on circumstances just as much as a decision between walking and taking a cab.\(^\text{16}\)

Thus, when Mrs. Alving says to Pastor Manders that it was a crime on his part to persuade her to return to her husband, Shaw remarks that "Ibsen agrees with her, and has written the play to bring you round to his opinion."\(^\text{17}\)

Such a statement takes us into the heart of our matter. Ibsen "has written the play to bring you round to his opinion." This is the statement of a man whose professed opinion on the value of art is that it is "the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective means of propagandism in the world, excepting only the example of personal conduct."\(^\text{18}\) Such a doctrine that drama is a subtle means for doctrinal dissemination has not only fla-

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 188.  
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 192.  
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 189-90.  
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 7.  
\(^\text{18}\) Balmforth, 12.
vored Shaw's own drama, but also his approach to Ibsen's. This point is well substantiated by Miriam Franc's many reminders that Shaw "invariably stressed the didactic elements," that "Shaw had no hesitation in declaring the Norwegian a Socialist," that he constantly overemphasized the propagandist in the poet." She refers to him as the typical example of the strange literalness of the English mind, its inability to distinguish between drama and dogma. His Quintessence of Ibsenism Mr. A. B. Walkley calls a "brilliantly misleading opuscle." Dickinson adds that "this (sc., Ibsen's moral reflections on the inner life) the English dramatist took and magnified to a cruder purposefulness."

Thus Shaw has Ibsenism stand for "Women's Rights," "Free Love," "Socialism," "Mercy Killing." The whole burden of his criticism is that man is constantly outgrowing his ideals. Hence the burden of the Shavian emphasis

19 Cf. Lewisohn, 201 where he refers to the plays of Shaw as the "theatre of the analytic intellect." Cf. Dickinson, 179. Davies in his Realism in the Drama, (Cambridge U. Press, London, 1934) says: "To Shaw and to writers like him, these sociological problems are treated in a scientific, a genuinely scientific way; that is to say, the dramatist himself is altruistically, not personally, interested in them. Ibsen on the other hand, was directly and personally interested in the problems with which he deals. For him, they were not problems, but questions upon which his own way of living and feeling depended directly. In a word, Ibsen was a poet, and Shaw was not a poet, but a very able dramatic sociologist and politician."

20 Lewisohn, 76, where Shaw's approach to Brieux has also been colored by his own ideas. Montrose Moses remarks that the Quintessence of Ibsenism carries the reader through Hedda Gabler, but none of the other saga plays.

21 Franc, 29.
22 Ibid., 34.
23 Ibid., 55.
24 Ibid., 35.
25 Franc, 160.
26 Dickinson, 65.
27 Franc, 60.
is on the riddance of the outgrown ideals. And it is precisely such a distorted emphasis that has confused the problem in so many minds.

Such a digression has been necessary to etch the problem clearly.

The problem stated fairly is that Ibsen has appallingly tragic sequences to a stifled volition, to thwarted self-realization. As we pointed out in Chapter Two, this thwarted self-realization is the tragic hamartia, is causally related to the tragedy, not merely temporally anterior to it. Is it Ibsen's intention that the protagonist avert these tragic sequences by choosing the opposite course of action to that taken in the commission of the tragic hamartia? In other words, does Ibsen, when he has Mrs. Alving return home to her husband and conceal his way of life for so many years, when he has tragic results follow upon the return and concealment, does he wish us to conclude that free love or divorce is the state of things which he would wish to exist? We have had Shaw's answer.

In order to answer this question correctly, a tenuous distinction must be introduced, tenuous but in the circumstances genuine enough. It is the distinction between spiritual and mental emancipation in general (self-realization) and the acts Ibsen might choose to illustrate this freedom most forcibly. For example, while Ibsen would employ free-love, repudiated with tragic results, to indicate the freedom he is seeking, it is the individual's freedom and self-realization he is seeking, not the free-love. It is the vigor of self-assertion, of a full-blooded egoism he would vindicate, not the free-love tendencies. Miss Franc states the distinction neatly: "Ibsen does not pretend to supply a ready-made solution for all the rest (sc., of the
problems). He illustrates, or rather illumines a general principle by a conceivable case; that is all.²⁸

An examination of the plays will show us that the emphasis is on the self-realization. There is little or no positive attention given to the intrinsic goodness or value or the opposite course of action, of free-love or divorce.

Mrs. Alving: Oh, law and order! I often think it is that that is at the bottom of all the misery in the world.

Manders: Mrs. Alving, it is very wicked of you to say that.

Mrs. Alving: That may be so, but I don't attach importance to those obligations and considerations any longer, I cannot! I must struggle for my freedom.

Manders: What do you mean?

Mrs. Alving: (Tapping on the window panes) I ought never to have concealed what sort of a life my husband led. But I had not the courage to do otherwise then—for my own sake either. I was too much a coward.²⁹

This is one of the many places where the emphasis is on abstract liberty. In A Doll's House, Nora's enunciation of her decision consequent on her realization of the true nature of things in her home is studiously negative:³⁰

Nora: But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home

²⁸ Franc, 35.
²⁹ Plays, 38–9.
³⁰ Of Nora's departure, Huneker says that "Nora's departure was only the symbol of her liberty, the gesture of a newly awakened individuality. Ibsen did not preach—as innocent persons of both sexes and all anti-Ibsenites believe—that woman should throw overboard her duties; this is an absurd construction." (331)
I was papa's doll child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald.31

And later on:

Nora: Indeed, you were perfectly right. I am not fit for the task. There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself—you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now.32

"That is why I am going to leave you now." There is no emphasis on "woman's dependent position"33 in the family. Any insistence that the dependent position of the wife in the family is to be repudiated proceeds from a philosophic and propagandistic approach which fails to accept Ibsen's important statement that what I really said was that I was surprised that I, who made it my chief life task to depict human characters and human destinies, should, without conscious or direct intention, have arrived in several matters at the same conclusions as the socio-democratic moral philosophers had arrived at by scientific processes.34

In Rosmersholm, Rebecca unwittingly becomes victim of the Rosmer view of life, of the Rosmersholm conscience. When she realizes what this has done to her, when she realizes that her freedom has been lost in her great love for Rosmer, the result is no wild insistence that in the future she will defy and overcome conscience or that in the past she should have, or that in the fu-

31 Plays, 247.
32 Ibid., 247.
33 Zucker, 163.
34 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 431.
ture others should. There is no Shavian propagandism but only a negatively
couched regret that her self has been abnegated.

Because Rosmersholm has sapped my strength.  
My old fearless will has had its wings  
clipped here. It is crippled! The time is  
past when I had courage for anything in the  
world. I have lost the power of action,  
Rosmer.35

Such a distinction between self-realization in general and the case  
whereby it is proposed or concretized in the plays gains strength when we re-  
view Ibsen's assertions concerning his purpose in writing drama. Ibsen has  
insisted over and over again that he is not a propagandist. He once said that  

whatever I have written has been without  
any conscious thought of making propaganda.  
I have been more poet and less social philoso-  
pher than people generally seem inclined to  
believe...I am not even quite clear as to  
just what this women's rights movement really  
is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity  
in general. And if you read my books carefully,  
you will understand this...My task has been the  
description of humanity. To be sure whenever  
such a description is felt to be reasonably  
true, the reader will insert his own feelings  
and sentiments into the work of the poet. These  
are attributed to the poet but incorrectly so.36

Again he says: "I have never belonged and probably never will belong to any  
party whatever."37 Gosse remarks that he was never a prophet, never a pro-  
pagandist."38

35 Plays, 331.  
36 Letters (Kildal ed.), 65. Italics mine.  
37 Letters (Laurvik ed.), 431.  
38 Gosse, 86. In speaking of Hedda Gabler, Ibsen claimed that "it was  
not my desire to deal in this play with so-called problems...When  
you have read the whole play, my fundamental idea will be clearer  
to you." (Letters, Laurvik ed., 435-6)
From these few quotations we have some idea of Ibsen's purpose. It was certainly not the popularization of any doctrine. We get a clearer idea of the impulse behind his work when we read what is perhaps the most important single statement of his career:

Everything that I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through, even if it has not been my own personal experience; in every new poem or play, I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and purification.39

Such a statement throws us back into the life of Ibsen for an answer to our original question. In his life we find one struggle, one mode of salvation, "being true to himself."40 Many of his great personal decisions—such as the one to leave his parents—are motivated by that "full-blooded egoism" about which he once wrote to Georg Brandes,41 not by the desire to undermine any age-old concepts or ideals.

Now we are in a position to answer our question: does Ibsen wish us to conclude that free-love or divorce is the state of things which he would wish to exist? No, he does not. Such intentions he has vigorously denied in his letters and avoided by studiously negative approaches to impeded self-realization in the plays.42

With such an analysis we have cleared the way for an objective appraisal of self-realization. It must be admitted that Ibsen's definition of self-realization—"not to determine to do this or determine to do that but to do

39 Gosse, 147.
40 Letters (Kildal ed.), 36.
41 Letters (Laruvik ed.), 4.
42 Letters (Kildal ed.) 37.
what one must do because one is one's self.\textsuperscript{43} contains the seeds of error. When he says "not to determine to do this or determine to do that," Ibsen sweeps aside the supremacy of any ethical criterion, and then proceeds to establish his own criterion. The norm whereby actions are, in Ibsen's terminology, truthful,\textsuperscript{44} is the measure of their procession from the untrammelled will, the self. To the scholastic philosopher, the failings of such a norm of morality are obvious. Though Ibsen certainly never unravelled his definition to the point of dialectics, we would and must immediately realize that such a definition of the rectitude and value of human acts implicitly denies that 1) good and evil are \textit{objective} values 2) derived from a conformity of human actions with the ultimate norm of morality 3) which, in its turn, is derived from the divine ordination of all things to their respective ends. Ibsen obviously never realized the full intent of his definition but wished only a vigorous assertion of the will. His emphasis became so strong that self-realization, instead of perfecting the intellect and will through conformity with the norm of morality, became that very norm itself.

The impulse of such an error could easily have been diverted into healthier and more orthodox channels, into a revolt against hypocritical observance of law and morality for the sake of respectability. For Ibsen did not, as Shaw implies, regard ideals as unreal masks to cruder realities, but heaped them indiscriminately into his group of throttles to individual self-realization. Thus his anger was with the individual who would fail to realize him-

\textsuperscript{43} Letters (Laurvik ed.), 194.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 194.
self, just as his hope was in the individual.\textsuperscript{45} Error there unquestionably was. But one must be careful not to condemn Ibsen for what is only germinal-ly in his work. The germ for all that Shaw found in Ibsen is certainly and clearly latent, so to speak, in Ibsen's writings. But the care which nurtured this germ into full-blown iconoclasm is Shaw's own.

Part of the great importance of determining the morality of self-realization is, as we have said, due to the fact that it was bound to influence Ibsen's drama. For morality is linked closely with all drama—-one could even say all literature. Drama is built on the idea of conflict. The protagonist is tragically or comically at odds either with himself, his circumstances, or other human beings. The significance of the drama will often depend on the depth of the conflict. Thus if the dramatic forces arrayed against one another clash against the clear background of ultimate values, of good and evil, we will have, potentially at least, a drama of significance. However, when the author brings his own warped scepticism or atheism to bear upon the characters of his drama, the eternal reality of good and evil as conflicting forces in his work will shade off into the anaemic opposition between convenience and inconvenience, pleasure and displeasure, comfort and discomfort. What is genuinely evil becomes simply inconvenient, unpleasurable. The impact of the conflict and hence of the drama is lessened when the conflicting forces are discovered at their true value.

In Ibsen the strength of the drama is necessarily lessened because the conflict is no longer one between the ultimate values of good and evil but

\textsuperscript{45} Letters (Kildal ed.), 37. Cf. Introduction by Lee M. Hollender.
fades off into a hazy, sometimes incomprehensible struggle between the individual and a group of never too clearly defined forces which tend to throttle self-assertion. Ibsen's rancor, his satirical indignation is not a healthy hatred of evil but a disgust with the nineteenth-century compromise of men like Kroll (Rosmersholm), Pastor Manders (Ghosts), Rorlund (The Pillars of Society), Gregers Werle (The Wild Duck).

Ibsen's great defense of the sacrifices self-realization will make on the individual is cunning. For in An Enemy of the People, the play so obviously a polemic against the compact majority's observance of respectability and in defense of himself, Ibsen does not merely have Dr. Stockman assert himself against the compact majority, but cleverly jockeys him into the ranks of objective truth; the majority he steeps in a hideous lie. Thus Stockman wins our affections immediately because he is a staunch, if muddle-minded, defender of truth. This is the only play of Ibsen where truth and falsehood are so clearly the basis of conflict, where self is asserted by embracing the truth, not merely by realizing itself.

Thus, in writing this polemic in defense of his own position that "the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone", Ibsen seems to realize that this strength is, however, not a hazy, undetermined self-realization, but the strength of a will confident of its own powers because it is aligned with self-sustaining truth. He seems to realize for once that in self-

46 For he never clearly identifies ideals with evil.
47 "Dr. Stockman and I get on so very well together; we agree on so many subjects." Letters (Laurvik ed.), 359.
48 Weigand, 113.
49 Plays, 172.
assertion there is no particular truth or virtue unless that assertion be in conformity with objective truth. That this realization was only momentary and more an astute defense than a burning conviction, was at once the Achilles' heel of his concept of self-realization, the error of his own life, and the weakness—in spite of all its qualities—of his drama.
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The thesis submitted by Richard A. McCormick, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

Signature of Adviser