Volume 19 Issue 33
Originally issued as A8



Global Journal of human-social science: A
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 19 Issue 8 Version 1.0 Year 2019
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

The Tension between Illusion and Reality in H. Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

By Dr. Mahmoud Nayef Baroud
Islamic University of Gaza

Abstract- Much of contemporary criticism of Ibsen plays has examined one of two concerns: Ibsen and Feminism, or Ibsen as a realist and a pioneer of modern theatre and drama. Articles on the first matter are often critical of universalizing readings of Ibsen that would have the dramatist concerned with the ills of humanity; articles on the latter theme tend to rejoice Ibsen's assumed anti-theatrical overcoming of melodrama. Both topics can be found in his masterpiece The Wild Duck which is more honoured and received well in the study more than the other plays. Like Hamlet, The Wild Duck can be interpreted by each one in his own image; one day it will be read as a tragedy or tragicomedy, the next as the harshest irony; parts of it are clumsy, in other parts are embedded old controversies of that time. So searching yet so delicate is the touch, that these flaws and notions seem in themselves to strengthen the play. In this work, Ibsen perfected his own special power to infuse the particular, dull, limited fact with a halo and a glory. This paper is an attempt to examine the tension between illusion and reality in the play.

Keywords: *illusion, reality, ideals, lies, truth.*

GJHSS-A Classification: *FOR Code: 130205p*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2019. Dr. Mahmoud Nayef Baroud. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The Tension between Illusion and Reality in H. Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

Dr. Mahmoud Nayef Baroud

Abstract- Much of contemporary criticism of Ibsen plays has examined one of two concerns: Ibsen and Feminism, or Ibsen as a realist and a pioneer of modern theatre and drama. Articles on the first matter are often critical of universalising readings of Ibsen that would have the dramatist concerned with the ills of humanity; articles on the latter theme tend to rejoice Ibsen's assumed anti-theatrical overcoming of melodrama. Both topics can be found in his masterpiece *The Wild Duck* which is more honoured and received well in the study more than the other plays. Like *Hamlet*, *The Wild Duck* can be interpreted by each one in his own image; one day it will be read as a tragedy or tragicomedy, the next as the harshest irony; parts of it are clumsy, in other parts are embedded old controversies of that time. So searching yet so delicate is the touch, that these flaws and notions seem in themselves to strengthen the play. In this work, Ibsen perfected his own special power to infuse the particular, dull, limited fact with a halo and a glory. This paper is an attempt to examine the tension between illusion and reality in the play.

Keywords: *illusion, reality, ideals, lies, truth*.

I. Introduction

Since his death in 1906, Ibsen has attained the statues of the father of modern drama and classic. The impact of his plays on twentieth century theatre and dramatists has been far reaching. Stage directors have explored approaches to his plays ranging from the naturalists to the expressionist, while playwrights as diverse as G. B Shaw, Harold Pinter and Arthur Miller have been influenced by his philosophies. Moreover, He often stunned and puzzled his contemporaries. The overwhelming complexity of his work perplexed critics and readers who were unwilling or unable to probe beneath the 'surface detail of his plays to seek out the patterns of meaning beneath the dialogue, the hidden poetry.' (Thomas, 1981, P1) He was accused of dark pessimism by those who failed to understand the life affirming quality of his acute vision and the realistic portrayal of his diverse characters. Despite the ambivalent tone of his work, modern criticism has led to a far clearer picture of the richness and subtlety of his writing; his plays have been explored from almost every conceivable critical starting point. His *The Wild Duck*, *A Doll's House*, and *Ghosts* are the greatest of Ibsen's social plays and indeed the greatest of his whole legacy. Their greatness lies precisely in the fact that they are pioneering in form and content and thus can be regarded as a manifestation of Ibsen's social concern. Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* was written and published in 1884. The initial response to it was one of bewilderment. It left the audience confused and perplexed. Subsequent generations of critics continued to regard it as obscure, undefined, deep, ambiguous, and elusive - not in the least because of the enigmatic symbol that held it together: an untamed bird in its close and wretched garret, captive to circumstances and with no hope of escape (Meyer, 1985). What role does the wild duck play in Ibsen's famous drama? Zwart argues that, besides mirroring the fate of the human cast members, the duck is acting as ''animal subject in a quasi-experiment,'' conducted in a private setting. Scrutinized from this perspective, the play allows us to detect the epistemological and ethical dimensions of the new scientific animal practice (systematic observation animal behaviour under artificial conditions) emerging precisely at that time. (Zwart, 2000) For the leading modern dramatis, the major problem of tragedy is the same: realism versus escapism, truth versus illusion. 'This question is raised explicitly in his *The Wild Duck*' where Hjalmar eyes are closed to certain unpleasant facts about his marriage until a friend reveals that the domestic happiness which he enjoys is built upon an illusion. (Halsey, 1970)This paper is an attempt to shed the light on the conflict between illusion and reality in his masterpiece *The Wild Duck*.

First, however, a brief review of the play may help the reader to track what it is Ibsen attempts in his weaving together of this apparently distinguished theme. *The Wild Duck* follows the fate of two linked families, the hapless Ekdals and the wealthy Werles. Long ago Old Ekdal and Hakon Werle were partners in some kind of geological venture, until a scandal concerning illegal logging on state lands sent Ekdal (but not Werle) to prison. Now Old Ekdal's son, Hjalmar, is a poor, would-be photographer married to Gina; Hjalmar and Gina live with their daughter Hedvig in a cramped apartment that doubles as their photography studio. The apartment is divided between the studio/living quarters and the overtly theatrical backdrop of an attic-like loft space, where Old Ekdal pretends he is still a hunter and where Hedvig keeps her pet, the wild duck. Into this sorry scene enters Werle's son Gregers, the self-exiled idealist, just back from decades overseeing his father's operations in the Hodjal forest. Appalled by the growing conviction that his father made Old Ekdal the fall guy for

Author: *English Department, Islamic University of Gaza, Gaza, Palestine. e-mail: mnbaroud@iugaza.edu*

© 2019 Global Journals

Werle's machinations, Gregers begins spending more time with Hjalmar, his childhood friend, and in due course moves into a spare room in the Ekdal apartment. Eventually Gregers forces Gina to admit she once had an affair with Gregers's father, Hakon Werle and that Hedvig may therefore be Gregers's half-sister. When Hjalmar learns of Gina's ancient affair, he walks out on Hedvig who, prompted by Gregers to sacrifice her beloved wild duck in order to prove her love for Hjalmar, instead she kills herself.

Indeed it is a very complex situation to be revealed: first that fourteen years ago Old Werle has had a child, Hedvig, by his previous housekeeper, Gina, and has arranged for the mother to marry Hjalmar, whom he has set up a business as a specialized photographer. Then it is necessary to clarify that Old Werle has a also perhaps for private reasons of his own connected with a business agreement- looked after Hjalmar's elderly father, that Hjalmar has no doubts of the reason for this, or for his own specially favoured treatment. Gregers, the son, begins to believe that his father is motivated by certain self-interest and his acts of charity towards the Ekdals (Old Ekdal, Hjalmar, Hedvig and Gina) can be looked at as a kind of self-expiation for his guilty conscious. These events may pass well enough as believable at performance on stage, when there is no time to consider them. In so many situations, Ibsen prefers not to stage all actions on the stage as if leaving gaps for the audience and the readers to reflect on. When we start reflecting on the storyline we may notice that it depends on some sort of significant degree of naivety and innocence in Hjalmar, and a tendency of old Werle to venture on very odd matters. We are asked to believe that after Werle discovered Gina's pregnancy he first dismissed her from her job, then he arranged matters so that Hjalmar can marry her before her pregnancy became obvious to him and even failed to notice that she gave birth rather soon after their marriage. Taking into consideration that Hjalmar is surprisingly naïve, or has got a tendency to be cuckolded, this is credible. But with only four or five months for all this to happen- Hjalmar could hardly have failed to observe if Gina had given birth within three or four months of marriage- the time scheme is very tight.

II. Illusion Versus Reality and the Importance of Illusions in Human's Life

A significant theme in *The Wild Duck* is the importance of illusion in human life as distinguished from reality. The play can be analysed as an in depth depiction of the paradox between illusions and reality and the relative role each should represent in one's life. Actually it is the contrast between illusion and reality which is in charge of the tragic end of in the play. Gregers Werle is the main character who believes in and preaches the 'claim of the ideal'. (Ibsen, Act three, P42) In the context of this play, the adjective ideal stands largely for the straightforward facts of life, or for the reality itself, without a mask being thrown over it. Gregers is the idealist who insists on opening his friend's (Hjalmar) eyes and telling him the truth that his marriage is a false marriage, unfortunately without thinking about the consequences or the outcome of the truth, even no matter how painful it may be. Accordingly, Gregers intends to open Hjalamr's eyes and that he must see his position for what it is. According to Ronald Gray, Gregers never thinks on the expected consequences of telling Hjalmar the truth about the past, but undertakes the results can only be good and 'this blindness in both of them is not offered so that we may understand it: it is mainstay of the play.' (Gray, 1977, P103)As Dr Relling says, Gregers has got 'a severe case if inflamed integrity.' (Ibsen, P47) He also implies that his disease is a national illness. A Norwegian national illness is likely to be shared by other nations too: there can be few people with no desire at all to remove splinters from other people's eyes. But the objection is not that in *Ghosts*, by contrast, the Norwegian illness is rather hushing things up than revealing them. It is rather that the deep need most people feel to get at the truth is not appropriately represented by Gregers' bad need for it. We, as ordinary individuals, suppress the truth about ourselves for reasons of which Gregers and his camp are ignorant. Gregers' proposal to Hedvig that she should prove her love for her father by sacrificing the wild duck, her dearest possession, is the climax of the play and without which there will be no tragic end. But this is based on no better grounds than Gregers' revelation to Hjalmar about Hedvig's parentage. In his diverse dramatic reactions to that news, Hjalmar burst his entirewrath against Hedvig, rejected her for three times and then telling her that he would like to wring the duck's neck. 'Don't come near me, Hedvig. Get away from me. I can't bear to look at you. Oh, those eyes….! Goodbye.' (Ibsen, Act 4, P59) Here, one might argue that Gregers is the main cause of troubles for the Ekdals and that he seems to behave like a crazy idealist. However, he is not meant to be crazed, despite the remarks to this effect his father makes about him. One indication of that is his similarity, on this point in particular, with other Ibsen characters, so many of whom expect their friends or relatives to behave as Gregers suggests Hedvig should. For example, in his *ADoll's House*, Nora the heroine supposes her husband will certainly destroy his own reputation to protect hers, and is shocked when he does not. The sacrifice or the solution that Gregers offers seems like an act of madness, and to some extent, might be seen as a great tragic necessity. He himself gives no account of how he thinks exactly his proposed course of action will help everybody in the play, especially the Ekdals. With the zeal of a leech he fastens onto the idea of self-sacrifice,

© 2019 Global Journals

as he does to the idea of truth, and is stunned by the outcome of his motivations. Thus the disclosure of the truth leads to the domestic tragedy in the life of Gina and Hjalmar. The moral of the play is clear. Illusions are necessary to happiness; reality may be too painful and catastrophic to be tolerated and may create unpredicted complications. Ibsen has thus exposed the risks of the claims of the ideal which Gregers has been advocating and preaching. The claims of the ideal cannot be accepted and understood by everybody, especially the ordinary ones. Gregers fails as the missionary hero and as the social reformer who took away the illusions from Hjalmar's life replaced them with reality. Accordingly, the play might be interpreted as a satirical attack against Gregers' upholding of the claims of the ideal.

III. Dr. Relling's Realism

On the other hand and in the opposite direction there stands Dr Relling the realist who strongly believes in the assumption that illusions and dreams are necessary and vital to our life and chiefly in the human life of ordinary people like the Ekdals. The real hero in the play is the realist, Dr Relling who has from the very beginning perceived the nature and personality of his friend, Hjalmar. Relling has also known Gregers for many years and is familiar with his passion and interest of the ideal. Actually, in his first meeting with Gregers in Hjalmar's house, Relling makes fun of Gregers' belief in the claims of the ideal and warns him not to interfere in Hjalmar's life. Moreover, Relling goes so far to say that he would throw Gregers down the stairs in case he insists on preaching the claims of the ideal in Hjalamr's life. Relling knows the secret of Gina's past affair with Old Werle but he is also certain that it is in the best interest of Hjalmar as a husband of Gina that he should remain ignorant of that secret. In other words, Relling wants Hjalmar to continue living in illusions. Addressing Gina, Relling accuses Gregers of suffering from 'a severe case of inflamed integrity', an inflammation of conscious. (Ibsen, Act 3, P46). To Relling, it would have been better if Gregers had perished in the mines at the wood and had not been able to come to this place to disrupt Hjalmar's life by his idealism. When Gregers has gone ahead with his plot and has exposed Gina's secret to Hjalmar, he feels deeply troubled. He describes Gregers as a quack and expresses his view that this quack should leave the stage and go home instead of destroying the life of the Hjalmar, Gina and Hedvig. In this regard, Gregers defends himself by saying that he wants to lay the foundations of a true marriage, one which is built on frankness and forgiveness. To some extent, Hjalmar is influenced by Gregers' philosophy and starts using the same discourse of his friend Gregers. He rejects an offer of financial help from Old Werle, conveyed to Hjalmar by Mrs. Sorby. In fact, under the influence of Gregers' idealism, he even decides to pay back to Werle whatever money he had received from that man in the past. But despite all this, Hjalmar cannot truly accept the reality.

An illusion is a saving lieor a falsehood behind which one may take shelter or in which one may find comfort, willingly or unwillingly. A delusion is the saving lie which saves the common and ordinary man from falling down under the hardships and burdens of reality. To Relling the realist, if this saving lie is taken away from the average man, his happiness too would be lost and may be for good. That's why Relling believes that the 'life lie is the stimulating principle.' (Ibsen, Act Five, P63) However, Gregers the idealist insists on his sublime philosophy or misapplied idealism, with its subsequent catastrophic outcomes. And that's why some readers in my Drama class opt to call him as a neurotic reformer, as a moralistic troublemaker in other people's lives, and as a truth seeker who fails completely in his wrong-headed task. As he fails in his mission, the play may be looked at as anirony on him and his misapplied idealism, or to put it in another way, his utopian philosophy. In her essay entitled *Animal Magnetism, Theatricality in Ibsen's The Wild Duck*, Rachel Price claims that paradoxes of illusion, theatricality, and realism reduce to an uncertainty: is illusion threatening because too convincing or because not truthful enough? Does realism, in its approximation of life, or does theatricality, with its ability to 'spellbind,' exert a deeper control over others? (See Rachel Price, P798)

Comparatively speaking, the significant difference between the advocates of Idealism and Illusion or Reality, that is to say between Gregers and Relling, is the fact that Gregers thinks of Hjalmar as a man of exceptional ability, while Relling considers him as an average kind of man. Gregers talks of Hjalmar's personality, but Relling says that Hjalmar has no character whatsoever. Relling looks at Gregers as a hero-worshipper and that he is mistaken when overestimating Hjalmar's intellectual abilities. According to Relling, Hjalmar should have been allowed to live with the saving lie, and should not have been exposed to the truth about Gina's past life. The saving lie is essential and decisive for an ordinary man like him. Moreover, Relling gives us two examples in support of his theory of illusions. We may relate one of them which is the case of Old Ekdal. Interestingly enough, when Old Ekdal goes into the dark attic, he has the illusion that he has entered the thick forest where the pet animals and birds appear to him like wild animals. Thus, whenever he shoots a pet rabbit he has the illusion that he has shot a wild bear. Hence Old Ekdal, whose life would otherwise have been intolerable because of his poverty and disgrace, can find some comfort and relief in the illusory belief that he is still in a position to go hunting in the wood and hunt wild animals. The attic, the animals and the birds there constitute the saving lie for Old Ekdal. In this connection and in his confrontation with Gregers, Relling remarks:

© 2019 Global Journals

'Take away the life –lie from the average person and you take his happiness along with it.' (Ibsen, P64)Gregers the intruder sees the duck as nothing more than a symbol of the degradation of Hjalmar and Old Ekdal as both of them, like the wild duck itself, accepts the attic and its contents quite happily as an alternative for their past life.

In his article entitled, *Ibsen and Feminism*, Gail Finney argues that the powerlessness linked to motherhood is the outcome of a web of lies and deception. (Finney, 2006) The mechanism according to which Gina hides her seduction as a servant by the rich Werle by marrying Hjalmar Ekdal and leading him to believe that her child is his echoes the subplot of *Ghosts*, in which Mrs Alving finds a husband for the maid her husband has impregnated. Gina's power is limited to the domestic domain, which she embodies, typically depicted as sewing or adding up accounts and described by Dr Relling as pottering about in her slippers all nice and cuddlesome, and making the place all cosy. Her role seems to face the sorts of changeable forces that led to the conception of her daughter; the housekeeper has become compulsively obsessed with order, subordinating humaneness to neatness. But as in *Ghosts*, all endeavours to maintain peace and stability in the household prove futile once the longstanding deception or illusion is unmasked, leading to the sacrificial death of the child it has sought to save.

In this regard, Durbach argues that the play is mainly about the practical limits of truth and the need for everyday illusions. (Durbach, 1980) This may still be considered as the standard interpretation. It takes Ibsen as at least partly refusing his own emphasis on the importance of truth and the facing of reality. For James MacFarlane, the play, in asking whether it really does add to the sum total of human happiness to put the average person in possession of truth, redresses the balance. (McFarlane, 1989) Meyer shares this same view for he lauds as 'one of his most penetrating passages'a paragraph from *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in which G B Shaw wrote that Ibsen 'left the vulgar ideals for dead and set about the exposure of the choicer spirits….His first move in this direction was such a tragic-comic slaughtering of sham Ibsenism that his astonished victims plaintively declared that *The Wild Duck* was a satire on his former works. (See Meyer, P558) The lesson may perhaps have been useful for Shaw himself. Perhaps because the play is so ambiguous, this understanding has prevailed despite the obvious difficulties it raises. As Ronal Gray put it 'we have more inhibitions than his [Gregers] puritan zeal comprehends, and Ibsen, in showing the results of zeal of that order, is plugging away at the obvious.' (Ibid, P 558) In one way or another it is indeed obvious, however, Ibsen for certain did not consider his countrymen as extremely concerned with the truth, and there is no point in ridiculing a view that is not fairly commonly apprehended. Nor is there any sign in his notes or letters that he contemplated some kind of public withdrawal: on the contrary, he was just as convinced after *The Wild duck* as before that society and individuals are ridden with ideals, misconceptions and illusions which they would be better off without. According to A. F. Machiraju Ibsen saw ideals as artificial and invented, often in the sense of conventions, and far from leading to the truth, as 'a primary source of delusion.'(Machiraju, 1992, P136)

IV. Conclusion

Thus, one might suggest that the obvious outcome of Gregers' ideals in one's life is tragic and cannot be avoided. Moreover, one may also claim that Ibsen advocated self-deception as a solution for the ills of humanity. I think that the play is one of anti-theses, one without any kind of solution. It is contemplative, and not demonstrative. It proves nothing and it invites us to think and reflect. The general mood in the play is meditative and a mood of despair. In *The Wild Duck*, the priest is drunk, the soldier is broken, the idealist is mad, the doctor is ill. They have all sunk metaphorically into the bottom of the sea like the bird the wild duck. But having said that we have got the right to ask and ponder: how should we run our life, according to Gregers' Idealism or to Dr Relling's Realism. Neither of course, is trustworthy. Of the two manipulators of the plot, the one is fanatic, neurotic, sadistic, and perhaps mad; the other is a drunkard and a disgrace to his profession. Life cannot be run according either to absolute idealistic or realistic principles. Life is a dynamic process whose only reality is built on a kind of compromise or reconciliation between our desires and our own circumstances.

References Références Referencias

1. Durbach, Errol. (1980) *Ibsen in the Theatre*, London, Macmillan.
2. Finney, G. (2006) *Ibsen and Feminism*. In J. McFarlane (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 89-105). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL0521411661.006
3. Gray, Ronald. (1977) Ibsen- *a dissenting view: A Study of the Last Twelve Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
4. Halsey, Martha. (1970) Reality versus Illusion: Ibsen's "The Wild Duck" and Buero Vallejo's "En la ardienteoscuridad" in Journal of Contemporary Literature, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1970), pp. 48-57 Published by: University of Wisconsin Press.
5. Ibsen, Henrik. (1968) *The Wild Duck* translated and edited by Dounia B. Christiani, New York, W. W. Norton and Company.

© 2019 Global Journals

6. Machiraju, A. F. (1992) *Ideals and Victims: Ibsen's concerns in Ghosts and the Wild Duck*, in Modern Language Review, Vol. 87, No 1 Jan, 1992, pp. 134-142. Published by Modern Humanities Research Association.
7. McFarlane, James. (1989) *Ibsen and Meaning: Studies, Essays and Prefaces 1953-87*, Norwich, Norvik.
8. Meyer, M. (1985) *Ibsen*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
9. Price, Rachel. (2006) *Animal, Magnetism, Theatricality in Ibsen's The Wild Duck* in New Literary History, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 797-816 Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
10. Thomas, David. (1981) *Henrik Ibsen*, London, Macmillan Press.
11. Zwart, H.A.E. (2000) *The Birth of a Research Animal: Ibsen's The Wild Duck and the Origin of a New Animal Science*, in Journal of Environmental Values, Vol. 9, No. 1 pp. 91-108 Published by: White Horse Press.

© 2019 Global Journals