

Ystad, Vigdis:
Suicides in Ibsen's plays

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The Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen knew the problem of suicide through personal experience. As a young man he experienced adversity both as a writer and a theatre employee. When Ibsen married Suzannah Thoresen in 1858 he also took up the position of Director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (Oslo), a position he had difficulty filling, and which in a letter to his colleague Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norwegian author and Nobel laureate, he later characterized as an induced abortion repeated daily. His work in the theatre consumed all his time, and his writing suffered. While he had written play after play in the years preceding 1858, his production now suffered an extended hiatus, while he was unable to satisfy his commitments as a director of the theatre. Previously punctilious and conscientious, Ibsen now underwent what perhaps can best be described as a personality transformation; more and more he was to be found in low-down pubs, he let his appearance go and alcohol became his regular "comfort". Ibsen's mother-in-law, Danish-Norwegian writer Magdalene Thoresen, later spoke euphemistically of the poet's condition in the years around 1860 as "a strong attack of nervous fever"⁽¹⁾, while contemporary and more reliable sources have given accounts of something that should probably be called his deep depression. According to his wife Suzannah and his friend from younger days, Lorentz Dietrichson, Ibsen's condition around 1860 was so serious that he had considered committing suicide.⁽²⁾

Suicide in Ibsen's plays

As a mature dramatist Ibsen would later give suicide substantial focus in his plays. However, it was no longer he who struggled with thoughts of suicide. Rather he created a series of stage characters who look death in the eye and choose suicide – whether directly or indirectly – as their exit from (but not necessarily the final solution to) the conflicts they are in. Already in *Catilina* (1850) the female lead, Furia, says that the main character "falls by your own hand, and nevertheless a stranger will kill you". In the tragedy *The Pretenders* (1863) Duke Skule knowingly chooses to let himself be slain by Haakon's men. Brand in the play of the same name indirectly triggers the avalanche that buries both Gerd and himself; Emperor Julian (in *Emperor and Galilean* 1873) indirectly becomes the cause of his own death because of his rebellion against Christianity. Osvold in *Ghosts* (1881) makes plans for his own death, but is unable to carry out the suicide himself. Perhaps Solness, the master builder in the play from 1892 knows that his climb to the top of the tower that marks his victory over vertigo will result in his fall and death. A similar ascent and fall completes Ibsen's final play, *When we dead awaken* (1899), where sculptor Rubek and his model with full awareness and despite strict warnings set out toward the high hills, where they are cast into the depths by falling avalanches. In all of these plays death as an option and final end is present in the minds of the main characters throughout central parts of the unfolding events – though their deaths cannot really be called suicides.

Others of Ibsen's most famous stage characters cause their own deaths more directly. This is the case with Hjørdis in *The Warriors at Helgeland* (1858), who ends her life by throwing herself into the ocean after first having killed her beloved Sigurd with the shot of an arrow. Hedvig in *The Wild Duck* (1884), Rosmer and Rebekka (*Rosmersholm*, 1886) and Hedda Gabler (*Hedda Gabler*, 1890) also commit suicide – with different motives.

Realist-therapy approach

What is the basis for the poet's obvious fascination with death and possibly suicide as an end or "solution" to human conflicts? Is the motive based on his personal experiences? Some critics have understood the processes leading to the deaths as the result of "sick" or unsound states of mind, in keeping with a strictly realistic interpretation with long traditions in research into Ibsen's works. Emphasis is then given to the fact that Ibsen's characters suffer from miscellaneous mental aberrations, misguided idealism or simply the inability to cope with life, and in line with this they interpret the deaths and suicides as human defeats. Does Oswald's illness trigger a depression that makes life unbearable? Is the double suicide of Rosmer and Rebekka an instance of regressive, sickly fantasies and an overwrought love utopia? When Hedda Gabler shoots herself through the temple, is she escaping the impossible situation she has placed herself in because of her arrogant and egoistic need for self-assertion? If the answer is affirmative, this means that the deaths are seen as expressions of moral guilt, or as "false" or ruinous solutions to problems that should rather have been treated by a therapist or addressed by the sufferer, possibly leading to rational perception and recovery of mental balance. If so, Ibsen's plays apparently claim that suicide may be a logical resolution of major life problems.

This idea is suggested by Lisbeth F. Brudal. She interprets the suicides in *Rosmersholm* as a self-destructive consequence of disappointment over the emptiness of life. Instead of living through pain so that it may open for positive renewal and development, this condition results in inner confusion and regression, where an unrecognized pattern of birth and death triggers the wish to pass a death sentence on oneself.⁽³⁾

A Doll House

Some may also claim that Ibsen himself held such a view, and they might possibly find support for this idea in one of his most popular plays. Among the drafts of *A Doll House* (1879) there is a little note entitled "Optegnelser til nutidstragedien" (Notes for the Tragedy of the Present Age). In this the dramatist discloses that his beloved Nora was originally planned as the heroine of a tragedy. If we examine the finished play more closely, we may still see the remnants of this plan for a tragedy in the events unfolding in the play. Nora dreams of something she calls "the miraculous" and which is closely linked to her high expectations for how much stress and strain the love between a man and a woman can tolerate. She has committed a crime to save her husband's life. When she fully realizes the possible consequences of her forged signature her immediate reaction is that she will commit suicide to save her husband's honour. However, this cannot happen before Helmer's love has been put to the test, by

allowing him to recognize what she is willing to sacrifice for his sake. Nora continues to believe that Helmer then will stand up for her, defend her and share her guilt in the forgery. In the famous tarantella scene she dances wordlessly the fear of death that is connected to her plan to disappear into dark oblivion, to leave Helmer free and redeemed. However, as the play develops we witness Helmer fully revealing his baseness; he is unable to match his wife's emotional level and high ideals. It is nevertheless precisely at this point of events that Ibsen makes clear that he does *not* consider suicide a response to disappointment. In the decisive final scene Nora undergoes a transformation where she sees the futility of her planned sacrifice, and she correspondingly changes her goal. Instead of drowning herself, the play ends with the famous slam of the front door.

Considered from a therapy angle Nora's development should probably be called healthy and positive. Because the scales fall from her eyes, she saves her own life. From a dramatic point of view, however, this solution is not entirely positive. At any rate the Canadian literary scholar Errol Durbach asserts in a recently published study of this play that the new ending of the play (not the one originally envisioned) can be considered tragic. The demise of the values of love and life is something the main character still must face as she exits the stage, even if her life has been saved.⁽⁴⁾

A realist-therapy approach to the problems Ibsen poses his characters means that we consider the stage characters as analogous to "real" persons with miscellaneous defects, depressions or mental problems, and see them as persons with alternative options where voluntary death, needless to say, is the most negative of a number of possibilities. If we read the plays by Ibsen that end in death and self-destruction as depictions of recommendable conflict resolutions, it may be easy to agree that they present frightening and perhaps dangerous ideals. Young women should not do as Hedvig and Hedda do, but rather – as Nora does – take to reason! How can anyone at all defend a positive assessment of such texts?

The question shows the absurdity of considering world-format tragedies in a rational-realistic light. As stated by Ibsen himself in his famous "Et Rimbrev" (A Rhymed Letter – written to "a super-realist", the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes in 1875), "Jeg spørger helst; mit kald er ej at svare" (I prefer to inquire, my duty is not to answer).

Tragic approach

Ibsen's plays are not stage directions for the acts of rational persons. His suicides are hardly planned or portrayed as depressed persons who escape life's problems ridden by guilt and self-hate due to mental disturbances, social stigmatization or the inability to cope with life's crises. Even though Ibsen had close personal experience with the depressive mechanisms that may result in death by one's own hand, his imaginary suicides have been furnished with completely different rationales for their choices. They have mental strength due to a strong foundation of faith and ideals. Through tragic representation they pledge their own lives, thus exemplifying and elevating existence up and beyond regular everyday life. If we misunderstand this as instructions for everyday people, Ibsen's texts become particularly dangerous to read. However, reading or watching tragic plays is not the same as being encouraged to mimic the

action of the plays. Rather it means that we are offered the possibility of seeing our own lives in a larger – perhaps frightening – perspective, so that we discover the greatness and the possibilities inherent in all the "common" things in all their horror. *Catharsis*, which was already a central element in the theory of tragedy of antiquity, is, needless to say, no less important in tragedy of the present age.

Expiation and sacrifice

What then characterizes Ibsen's tragic suicides? Some might want to claim that the deaths of Ibsen's characters are motivated by the desire for *expiation* for the mistakes of the past. If we consider Hjørdis in *The Warriors at Helgeland* this appears to make sense. Through her fiery wildness and uncompromising wish to possess Sigurd's love she has triggered the deaths of many men, before finally meeting her lover on the beach and finding they can never become one. After "punishing" Sigurd with the fatal arrow from her bow, she kills herself by jumping into the waves – richly deserved, perhaps in the eyes of many. Hjørdis, on the other hand, sees this differently. Suicide is the only way left open to her to prove her steadfast loyalty to the man she gave herself to in her youth.

The Warriors at Helgeland is a romantic tragedy, and as such it is permeated by the romantic perception of love. Self-willed death may in such a perspective be considered a sacrifice on the altar of love – but hardly a propitiatory sacrifice. The demonic wildness of Hjørdis is no less at the moment of death than earlier in the play. Right to the very end she realizes her dominating character traits – a personality that could not be accepted in the society where she lived. Hjørdis is a frightening portrait of a woman in a normal human sense. However, we also see a tragedy where the main character *sacrifices* herself to consummate her own self and what has been the core of her personality, her love for Sigurd.

Thus *sacrifice* is a central component in Ibsen's portrayal of what we might call the idealistically or philosophically based suicides. In keeping with such an idea many would also assert that *expiation* could be just as well-founded a reason for suicide. A person who consciously gives his life to pay for his sin or those of another may, needless to say, do this for purely idealistic motives. However, this interpretation assumes that the characters in the drama have an unambiguous recognition of guilt which is alien to the concept of drama, whether this guilt is one's own or that of others. Thus propitiatory sacrifice borders on a psychological realism that would transcend the possibilities of tragedy. The main character in a tragedy cannot be judged according to the same laws as everyday people. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is one of those who in recent times has distinguished most clearly between genuinely tragic and human-moral guilt. In this he actually agrees very much with Aristotle, the tragedy theorist of antiquity. A morally guilty person deserves his or her punishment, and a drama where the villain dies by his or her own hand would thus only be an expression of justice ruling in the end, and hence no tragedy. (5)

The Wild Duck

Hedvig in *The Wild Duck* is such a character of drama, even if in this case it is not she but the generations before her which are the guilty ones. Quite a few readers or members of the audience would not hesitate to call Hedvig's death a tragedy, and this would be appropriate if we were to consider the events of the play in a normal human perspective. It is bitter and disastrous that a young person dies by her own hand. Hedvig's suicide, whether she considered it while in possession of her full senses or as an impulsive act, is triggered by motive forces that do not pertain to her own guilt. She assumes responsibility for confirming the life content of Hjalmar's existence. In this perspective Hedvig can be considered a victim of the manipulating mythologizations of her half-brother Gregers and his need to create "a true marriage" between her parents, and her suicide thus becomes a form of *expiation*. As seen by Bjørn Killingmo, her suicide means that Hedvig "meets her death to expiate the family's burden of guilt".⁽⁶⁾ In this perspective her death is not a genuine end to a tragedy. Instead the end of the play demonstrates how dangerous mental mechanisms may trigger human catastrophes. In this perspective *The Wild Duck* is one of the most realistic psychological plays in all of Ibsen's works.

Ambiguous or tragic guilt

Different to the above is ambiguous or tragic guilt, where man in an *existential* sense is both guilty and not guilty at the same time. This is the type of conflict that is a speciality of Ibsen's. He knows more than most about the profound relationships in human life, where *who we were* in the past pursues us as a shadow now in the present, as an indissoluble part of our complete personality, even when we have gained new and extended perceptions of what and who we wish to be.

How can a person cope with the baggage of the past? If suicide is motivated by *expiation* for previous morally reprehensible acts, this implies an acknowledgement of guilt that triggers indirectly self-imposed punishment. Through this the suicide rejects and deletes his or her former self in the instant of suicide. However, suicide may also enter into a tragic perspective, in the form of a self-confirming, existential *sacrifice*. Then the past and the existential guilt will not be obliterated, rather they will be retained and reinforced. Committing suicide in a tragedy perspective becomes a *confirmation* of everything man stood for and chooses to stand for. A tragic suicide means the final marking of man's basic personality traits and value hierarchy.

Being the products of modern times man now has a low tolerance when it comes to *sacrifices*. Thus modern feminism has made today's women alert when it comes to connecting this concept to issues regarding human (female) self-realization. We believe (perhaps rightly so) that sacrifices belong to an era long past. What we might then overlook is that tragedies depend on precisely the sacrifice as a marker of values greater than those that can be held and represented by an individual life. Through the sacrifice the tragic character performs a vicarious suffering that allows the spectators to sense or recognize basic human values. In Ibsen we see repeated examples of such suicides, both the direct and the indirect ones. When Duke Skule in *The Pretenders* steps out through the gate of Elgeseter monastery and allows himself to be slain by Haakon's men, he opens for the first and only time to the idea of the unity of the realm

that had possessed him through the previous acts of the play. Thus the past of Ibsen's characters may bloom precisely through their self-willed death, signalling beyond a doubt that the features that previously drove them into dramatic action are fully alive also at the moment of their death. Then, however, they are driven by tragic guilt rather than moral guilt.

Rebekka West

Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm* is an example of a woman who if measured by usual human standards would have much to atone for. She arrived at the Rosmersholm mansion under false pretences, her secret goal being to win Rosmer after first getting his barren wife Beate out of the way. There has been a fight to the death on the keel of a capsized boat about who will survive, herself or Beate, Rebekka admits later. The outcome of her presence at the mansion is partly Beate's suicide, partly that she has managed to manipulate Rosmer into embracing a grandiose idealistic vision about becoming the saviour of the world through his preaching of Rebekka's own "liberated" ideas.

From our perspective Beate's fate is interesting. In her case Ibsen portrays a normal human reaction triggered by extreme circumstances, a suicide probably performed in a state of acute depression. But Ibsen has not created Beate as the main character of his play – she is not a tragic character. Rather, the writer is interested in the double suicide of Rebekka and Rosmer, and this is where the genius of Ibsen shines.

Rosmersholm

Rosmersholm is perhaps the play that has generated the greatest interest in Ibsen among psychologists and psychoanalysts, with Freud himself as one of the most interesting contributors. His famous analysis leads to the diagnosis of an oedipal pattern behind Rebekka's manipulative actions and finally death.⁽⁷⁾ Many researchers have taken this idea further with analyses of the causes behind the twin suicide that closes the play, and Freud's ideas are fully alive in such a recent work as Anita von Raffay's analysis of this play. Her book *Die Macht der Liebe - Die Liebe zur Macht* (1995) also regards the twin suicides as Rebekka's punishment of herself for an oedipal relationship, where the "murder" of Beate is repeated in the form of an act of revenge that "punishes" Rosmer and "the fathers" who never loved her. Sexual desire is ridden by guilt, the value of life dissolves into illusions, and death for both Rosmer and Rebekka becomes atonement, liberation and final redemption.⁽⁸⁾

Psychoanalytical interpretations consider the profound spiritual mechanisms as barriers to true life. The ego and the world are "forgotten", anxiety and a sense of guilt become a dominating and lethal power. It may be easy to interpret such a perception as reductive. However, the deepest conflict in *Rosmersholm* may also be considered in another perspective, where the victim has reversed the negative sign. In this play Ibsen perhaps more penetratingly than anywhere else presented a creative encounter between free individuals, where each receives his or her identity through the relationship to the other person. Within their interaction we see how their responsibility for the existence of the other person unfolds. Ambiguous tragic guilt is

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About the autor:

Vigdis Ystad is a Dr. Philos. and has been a Professor of Scandinavian Literature at the University of Oslo since 1979. She has published books and articles on a number of Norwegian authors. Her works on Henrik Ibsen include *Henrik Ibsen: Dikt* [Poems](1991) and '-livets endeløse gåde': *Ibsens dikt og drama* [- "life's eternal riddle": Ibsen's poems and drama] (1996), articles about Ibsen in a number of publications in Norway and abroad. She has been an editor of the Ibsen biannual volume *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* since 1988. Since 1998 she has headed the work on the scientific historical-critical new publication of *Henrik Ibsens skrifter* [The works of Henrik Ibsen].

Henrik Johan Ibsen (/ˈɛbsən/; Norwegian: [ˈhɛ̂nrɛ̂k ɛ̂psn̩]; 20 March 1828 – 23 May 1906) was a Norwegian playwright and theatre director. As one of the founders of modernism in theatre, Ibsen is often referred to as "the father of realism" and one of the most influential playwrights of his time. His major works include *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Emperor and Galilean*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *When We Dead Awaken*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder*. He is the