

Ibsenite Protagonists at Extreme Odds with the Rest of the World: A Psychological Interpretation

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On a common plane, all the central characters of Ibsenian plays show a usual trait: they are much prone to self-destructiveness mostly because of their failed attempts to stand alone against the domineering majority. The dream they cherish to their bosom most often remains unfulfilled; if partially contented, their ultimate fantasy never has its accomplishment. This inevitable impediment on their way to idealism lunges them fast to the booby trap of self-division, eventually warranting a total debacle. Ibsen's so-called social plays are inextricably linked with the spatiotemporal circumference. As Ibsen writes about the life he has seen around him, and as his characters are commonly those familiar figures emerging from the bourgeois society, the dramatic milieu he creates inexorably pulls political ideology and ideological state apparatus in, whereby Ibsen proceeds on to create a semblance of realism, if not a fake realism, which remains a faithful and approximate (re)presentation of contemporary life. His plays scarcely aim at serving the purpose of supplying with amusement and recreation for the audience, rather they are "intended to arouse and awaken the audience. They appeal to intellect rather than emotions, and lay their emphasis more on characterization than plot" (Kushwaha xxi). Nothing much happens in course of the plays, the plot advances a bit statically, and when it reaches denouement, it generally leaves the audience not so much with cathartic relief, rather they tend to step out of the theatre with the intellectual brainstorm the playwright throws at them. The social plays, as is generally seen, use retrospective technique wherein the characters interact with each other in relation to their past activities and relationships, ensuing a crux of complex social drama. Kushwaha states: "As external action in his plays is gradually replaced by inner action, Ibsen comes to depend on dialogue for the success of his plays" (xxiv). This idiosyncratic sort of dialogue-debate

goes on as far as the characters come to a certain point where a sudden shock abruptly puts an end (as is traditionally recognised as a psychologically satisfactory conclusion) to the drama without giving much out to the audience. The audience is heavily moved with the intellectually taunting finale, which compels them to look back at the total workout of the drama once again to adopt a piecemeal approach to get a clear and unique picture out of it.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to concentrate on the psychoanalytic criticism to get to the bottom of how the three social plays, namely *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* we have chosen, amount to the correlation between the death drive and the sublimation. We shall try to elucidate the psychological casualty that accounts for the Ibsenite protagonists being goaded towards death or self-destruction in the fashion of Freudian psychoanalysis. For a better understanding, we shall have recourse to Terry Eagleton's essay "Ibsen and the Nightmare of History" now and then. Joanne Faulker's critique on Freud's idea of the death drive and its relation to the super ego titled "Freud's Concept of the Death Drive and its Relation to the Superego" will be recurrently used to delve deeper into the psychoanalytic layer. In this connection, we would like to admit tuning with Peter Barry that Freudian psychoanalysis is sometimes confusing, and here and there, it sounds masculine: "There is a growing consensus today that the therapeutic value of the method is limited, and that Freud's life-work is seriously flawed by methodological irregularities" (92).

All the same, Freud remains at the pivotal point of curiosity because of a twofold reason: the methodology (adopted by him) being a transdiscursive formation, has given birth to so many fields of discussion later on, and a far-reaching cultural influence on the human psyche. Keeping in view of the notions as conferred above, we should venture out to locate Ibsenite protagonists from Freudian psychoanalytic perspective.

Terry Eagleton initiates his essay "Ibsen and the Nightmare of History" by drawing on the analogy of the origins of the political state to Freud's coinage of the term 'the primal scene' of a human child that deems its origin a violent and nightmarish experience - both literally and metaphorically, since a trauma gradually unearths at its (the primal scene) inauguration, and Eagleton identifies that a sort of trauma of the same temperament is involved in the supposed process. To Eagleton, political states generally do not tend to admit of their origins, and if they ever do, they try to legitimate the whole process by relating to and distancing from the past. "Legitimation must always be retrospective," comments Eagleton (4). He furthers his argument by showing political states set in competition with and embarrassed by the sibling states that they coexist with, but that they (the sibling states) do things quite differently. In the given circumstance, these states can be found in indulging themselves in what Freud terms "family romance syndrome dreams"; it is almost the same process occurring to a child while it engages itself in fanciful vagaries regarding its origin due to its recoiling to accept the present being so dreary and ordinary. Their (children's) fantasy also channels out in the relieving conduit to a Freudian "Oedipal child", "who dreams that it is self-fathering, self-authoring, sprung from its own loins, without being the product of a history which came before it and which will therefore always dominate and outflank it" (Eagleton 4). The self-producing and self-asserting attitude of an Oedipal child is also the "ultimate fantasy" (4) of bourgeois society, observes Eagleton. In pursuit of tackling the traumatic experience adherent to origins, the political state tries frantically to thrust it into "the political unconscious" (Eagleton 5) and plainly recants it, because remembrance assumes to be unnatural, and evanescence is rather commonplace. Eagleton lays bare that Freud in resonance with Nietzsche also believed that "remembrance is painful and in a sense unnatural" (5). Edmund Burke, as shows Eagleton, surmised that the power originated illegally adopts and validates itself through a steep passage of time; hence, legitimacy "is longevity" (5). Along the line of argument, to Burke, as Eagleton puts, any overbearing law must sublimate itself as the ego ideal as it requires to, that

is, it must hide its filthy instincts under the beautified outfit; for this reason, the law “for Burke must be a cross-dresser” (6).

Now, let us run an investigation regarding how the ideas discussed hitherto by Eagleton can find their solid ground in the plays of Ibsen as proposed above. In the play *An Enemy of the People*, the ruling authority is seen to have forgotten about the role of Dr. Stockmann in the construction of the baths. When the lab results came to Dr. Stockmann, he, to his prior suspicion, finds out that the water therein is polluted and its improvement is mandatory to prevent epidemics. The result upsets the authority including his brother (the Mayor), and they start to convince him not to proceed any further. Having found him unyielding from his preceding position of not coming to any compromises, like the states as mentioned above, these people reckon Thomas Stockmann as a threat, whose doings are at odds with theirs. They feel embarrassed with the coexistence of the doctor, and now they want a good riddance, that is, they tend to declare him a public enemy and push the whole water scandal into the political unconscious. They try to stay clean about their activity, and like the so-called Freudian “family romance”, indulge themselves in phantasmal pedigree than actual.

A Doll's House encompasses Torvald Helmer's ingrate treatment toward Nora when his position in the society becomes insecure; he quickly forgets how she has been loving him all these years since their marriage, and hurls himself vehemently against her.

So, we can find in the character of Helmer a lurking ghost of the political state, who gets threatened easily by the existence of the subordinate subject (malleable and docile enough) thus far when she equates to him by making his position apparently vulnerable to decline. Later, being relieved by Krogstad's disclaimer, he turns into the sublime figure as he used to be and tries to subside the wounded wife by any means he can possibly think of. He, resembling the political state, tries hard to hide his ‘unlovely phallus’ underneath ‘feminine drapery’ (Eagleton 6).

Ghosts sets in a claustrophobic atmosphere in which the long-widowed Mrs. Alving is seen hard-wearing yet unshaken to drive off the ghost of the late Mr. Alving so that his darling child (Oswald) remains totally out of his haunting clasp. Henceforth, a vestige of oblivion lies in this play as well. Mr. Alving, who was traditionally genteel from outside and a debauched pervert inside, bulldozes his wife to get away with his past, even his whole existence largely; thereby a conscious effort to push the past into the Unconscious to transform the residue (Oswald) into somewhat organic, hence the sublime, is very well detectable in Mrs. Alving's character. She actually works as the ego system, who bars the id (Mr. Alving) in its evil try to take over the ego ideal (Oswald), and this way, she acts as a 'cross-dresser' (Eagleton 6).

From this point (as discussed above) onward, Eagleton carries on his argument as to the exacerbation of the problem of origins (of the political state) and the forced illegal legitimation of revolutionary violence sublimated into the law itself as compared to the antagonistic correlation between the id and the superego in Freudian psychoanalysis – concerning the case of middle-class society. This class of society by far is proven to possess the utmost revolutionary zeal on one hand, and in the guise of pursuing peace, harmony, solidarity and so forth with the intention of stacking as much profit as it can, stoops down to however decent or indecent measures it is capable of on the other. The problem then, as identified with the middle class society, comes to this: to be triumphant, it “needs not only to break with the *ancient* regime; it needs in some sense to break with itself” (Eagleton 7). In this fashion, it will enable itself to contrive a kind of stout framework, beneath which will its rebellious, free spirited and atomistic forces blossom; simultaneously, it runs the risk of having its framework dislocated as the forces mentioned before, working within, endanger the framework by breaking through “the very law and order and consensuality which allows them to flourish” (Eagleton 8).

Ibsen's plays, Eagleton argues, have so much to do with the notion of middle-class society and its visible contradictions; and the reasons behind

them, as Eagleton finds out, are as follows: a. Ibsen's writings are located at such a time when national middle-classes were still coming into view, b. industrialization was flourishing rapidly in the latter half of the 19th century, c. middle class democracy had long settled in, and to conclude, there arose parliamentary system and widespread suffrage. Thus, it was in essence an age of transition under whose influence Ibsen's writings came to a stretched position "in which one finds oneself eternally trapped, and where you can easily be torn apart" (Eagleton 8). When somebody desperately tries to reach for freedom to get rid of the primal guilt weighing heavy upon him/her, the "poisoned legacy" (Eagleton 9) is on the pursuit to maliciously snatch it away from the individual. Thus, freedom in Ibsen's writings becomes a self-resisting and self-devastating attempt. As collective freedom is hardly visible in the total planning of the plot, "the unflinching integrity of the lone individual, and the compromises and salutary fictions essential for maintaining social life are tragically at odds" (Eagleton 9). In Freud's time as well as Ibsen's, as Eagleton observes, the "emancipatory impulse" (10) has to set itself free "from the inside" (10); accordingly the freethinking characters (protagonists mainly) have to separate them from themselves, who, when faced with the reality principle, fail deplorably, leaving the "audacity of the attempt" (10) far behind.

Dr. Thomas Stockmann sets off in a mission to stick to the truth he discovers and declares that his war is against the multitude, since it is guided by misleading authority and its principles. *An Enemy of the People* does not conclude by leaving the audience with a horror of total eclipse, rather it lets in a glimpse of optimism, however flickering it might be, when we find that in the war for idealism, the uncompromising hero will be accompanied by his family and so on, though he prefers to fight his battle alone.

A Doll's House rather tends to reach a finis, which pushes the rebellious protagonist (Nora) toward self-destruction. Coming to a "tight place" (Eagleton 11), where none can go back or walk forth, Nora is entrapped in such a society (as soon as she steps out of Helmer's house), which will

rarely permit her of finding a happy place for her own education. She is therefore glided towards self-destruction, if not otherwise.

The play *Ghosts* ends with an overcastting ill portent of total perdition. Mrs. Alving, enlightened within, tries dreadfully to hold on to the prejudiced socially acceptable ideals (so pathetically replicating Pastor Manders), as she wants to exorcise her son of his father's ghostly past. However, in doing so, she loses her son: he dies (apparently) of the genetical burden he inherits from his father, and thus the triadic rapport (in relation to Mrs. Alving) comes to a tragic end. At the beginning, she was in a love-affair with Pastor Manders (the so called ego ideal), then marries a voluptuous libertine (the id), and acting out the role of the ego herself, earnestly tries to clone the ego ideal again, when she tries fanatically to repress the id (Oswald, in this case, a copied version of his father) to keep the social balance ongoing. In the end, she fails as the son is on the verge of death; it triggers in her a death drive, which is much prone to self-destruction.

Terry Eagleton, in the last paragraph of his essay, signals that the idealism inherent in Ibsen's protagonists is blemished as well as creditable; and, if what consists in it works against it, may direct the subjects towards destruction. Alongside having a social explanation, it also gives rise to psychoanalytic criticism. As ideals are sublime version of instinctual drives, sublimation emaciates the libidinal energy of the instincts, and thereupon they fall prey to 'the death drive'. From this point, our stance toward the sublimation and the death drive and their connection with respect to Freudian psychoanalysis need to be taken into serious account. For the facilitation of our discussion, we shall harbor in the eponymous essay by Joanne Faulkner titled "Freud's Concept of the Death Drive and its Relation to the Superego." Once understood how the death drive propels the protagonists towards destruction and loss, and what the apparent relation of it is with the sublimation, the title of the paper can amply be justified.

Faulkner starts with making an overture that the death drive is crucial to Freudian psychoanalysis for a threefold reason: a. it establishes a connection between what are commonly understood as higher and lower functions of the psychical mechanics, b. it takes an articulated turn away from scientific gaze, permeating deep into shadowy and vague field of implied but not apprehended-discernible phenomena, and c. it adds a great value to psychoanalysis. Faulkner acknowledges that Freud, in his paper "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", diverts from the strict empirical scientific methodology to a highly tentative discourse, in which he hypothesizes that human beings have a feature lying within them, which is remaining of an inorganic inheritance existing within organism, but previous to the instincts. According to Freud, this residual of inorganic past thwarts the pleasure principle and triggers in the physic a metabolic equilibrium by once it has systematized as a 'functional whole' (Faulkner). In disagreement with the pleasure principle, the death drive - the pre-organic residual - attempts to disengage the organic whole.

This inhuman element, the body's primitive (that is to say, the death drive) has an intriguing connection to what Freud calls the sublimated drive or the super ego. Faulkner argues that this highest form of energy, according to Freud, also intersects with the lowest, the acephalous drive in the compound beyond the pleasure principle. To Faulkner, the death drive remains the most inscrutable and metaphysically incomprehensible of Freud's theories. Freud notices in some of his patients, soldiers coming back from the World War I, the "compulsion to repeat", which signalled to the surfacing of a different type of force regulated by the imperatives except pleasure principle. Under this circumstance, the force assumes to flow about a point of untainted pain that is neither driven out from nor mitigated by the psychic system as the pleasure principle demands, and in fact, magnetizes rather than fends off the subject.

The death drive (Thanatos) is the opposite of life drive (Eros). Whereas "libido" affixes to substances or objects, creating bonds of fondness, or "energy cathexes", the death drive razes, and instigates associations of

conflict, causing a ladder-up of anxiety that will direct to immense psychic anguish if it is not tied together and readdressed by the ego. In his earlier work *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, Freud attempts to enlighten masochism and sadism in keeping with his former theoretical plan, organized by the pleasure principle. In that work, he illustrates masochism as a turnaround of sadism, only as its 'passive' inversion. Nevertheless, pleasure is not actually positioned in this "tortured being" for Freud, rather the masochist must identify with his torturer, such that he receives his pleasure through this identification, as an isolated performer of brutality rather than its inert receiver. Consequently, although Freud could not discharge the happening of masochism, the concept of an explicit pleasure that resides in the commotion of injury - dissolution and pain - was inconsistent to him. Hence, after "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" Faulkner remarks, masochism does not result from sadism, but is instead a regression to an earlier stage, the danger of which sadism served to preclude. In "The Economic Problem of Masochism", Freud converses on the leeway of "primary masochism". What Freud means to say is, by sadism the death drive is domesticated by the libido and thus wards off self-destruction. Nevertheless, death still plays a crucial role in the recounting of life as the death drive: the coercion to return the organism to that primeval torpor. Whilst the life force concedes to the stress of the pleasure principle, Faulkner views, at the meta-level, the pleasure principle itself serves the death drive. Freud turns to "desexualised" energy pertaining to sublimation, in which case, the drive is stalled from shaping sexual object-cathexes that might be dangerous (with a parent, father or mother, as for example), and is reintroduced to a non-sexual goal. Just the once libidinal energy is desexualised or sublimated, it is also mature to be subjugated by the death drive, and as a result risks a regression to primary masochism. By way of sublimation, we can therefore set up a correlation between highest culture, the sublime and the death drive.

A perception of the superego takes for granted a clutch of the apparatus of identification, at the same time, according to Freud, the introjection of the parental figure is the very first identification, and orchestrates all potential

identifications from that position onward. In view of that, ambivalence is an indispensable component of identification, and consequently, the instrument of sublimation, and the structuring of the superego as well. In addition, by getting rid of the libidinal object and narcissistically introducing itself as the adored object, the ego desexualizes the drive. The cathexis is liberated, and the death drive, which could have been kept in control and constituted by the libido, is on the loose to go berserk through the psychic organism. This peril is intrinsic to any work of sublimation: thus typecasts of any character posited in the “tight place” and in extreme contrast to socially accepted norms.

Joanne Faulkner concludes her essay by elucidating that the sublime, by dint of this threefold entanglement, with the ambivalence of identification, the spitefulness of the id, and the sublimation, does not only offer as the child’s connection to civilization; rather, Freud’s more mysterious averment is that the superego secures the psyche to its primitive past. The link of the superego to the death drive, which all the time comes back to its source, attains this union. It was definitely not our aim to aggrandize a detailed account of the death drive and its relation to the sublime, but without a fair understanding of these two critical terms causal to Freudian psychoanalysis, it would not otherwise have been possible to apply the death drive and the related ideas to the predisposition of the Ibsenite protagonists in regard to self-destruction.

Now, let us investigate what happens to the protagonists of the three stated plays of Ibsen when seen from Freudian psychoanalytic standpoint. *An Enemy of the People* mirrors the Oedipal show of the siblings’ contest over the object- cathexis. Given the idea of the discovery (contamination in water from the lab results) of Dr. Thomas Stockmann, he is drawn into a fight with his elder brother, Peter Stockmann (the Mayor of the town) and rest of the authority. To his shock, Dr. Stockmann finds it hard to get through to the authorities. His brother in conjunction with a large mass behind him to support, holds the already accepted ego ideals, which he wants to firmly hold onto just for the sake of pleasure principle, despite

knowing that the reality principle does not conform to his sublime ideas. They look as if they are quite unable to understand the seriousness of the issue and reluctant to overtly accept and attend to the problem because it could mean financial damage to the town. As the conflict develops, the Mayor warns his brother that he should submit to the community. Dr. Stockmann declines to agree, and holds a town gathering at Captain Horster's house with the intention of persuading people that the baths must be closed. He is ridiculed and censured as a madcap and publicly declared "an enemy of the people". In a scornful confutation of both the Victorian idea of community and the ideology of democracy, Dr. Stockmann decrees that in the issues of right and wrong, the individual is superior to the multitude, which is easily malleable and too often misled by self-advancing rabble-rousers. His ego ideal impels him to continue his war because he identified at the earlier state that he had a huge support behind him. When he finds himself left all alone (except his family and a friend or two in his favour), his sublime form of the ego ideal (about the mass as a great support) gets weakened and the libidinal force, that is, his antisocial ideals, towards energy-cathexis gets reoriented; hence sublimation, by waning his instinctual drives, leads him toward the unpleasure of death drive. But it should also be noted that his idealistic views do not change, which push him towards self-destruction through ultimate lonesomeness: "It is this, let me tell you - that the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone" (100).

A Doll's House recounts the story of a middle-class stereotypical housewife, who takes an outrageous decision to leave her husband and children behind when she awakens herself to the idea of having a place of her own, because her husband, whom she considered as a patronizing figure since her wedding, quickly changes into a tyrannizing male chauvinist as soon as his position is ostensibly threatened by her. When Krogstad returns the incriminating papers having been persuaded by Mrs. Linden (the event which primarily shook Helmer's ground from under his feet), Helmer's tantrum subsides and he tries to soothe his wife, but the wife having gazed at the unexpected change of his behaviour finds herself

belonging nowhere. When she was at her father's house, she used to be "papa's doll-child" (102), and after coming to Helmer's house, she has all along been his (Helmer's) "doll-wife" (102). Now that the "playtime is over" (102), "comes the time for education" (102). In Freudian viewpoint, Torvald Helmer is the sadist and Nora the masochist. As pleasure is not located in being tortured, the masochist (Nora) must identify herself with the sadist (Helmer), and thus will derive pleasure "through this identification, as a distant perpetrator of cruelty rather than its recipient" (Faulkner). When the ego cannot appease the sadistic instinct traceable in the masochist, it emerges in relation to the object-cathexis and projects on to the outwards. As the sadist figure fails to repress (that is, to sublimate) the masochist's libidinal energy, the domestication of death drive by the ego cannot avert her evident self-destruction. Subsequently, Nora decides to make a journey all by herself leaving every of her past belongings behind: "There is another to be solved first - I must try to educate myself. You are not the man to help me in that. I must set about it alone. And this is why I am leaving you" (102).

Finally, *Ghosts* relates the agonizing tale of an unhappy middle-aged woman, who looks forward to building an orphanage to commemorate her husband on the surface, but at the bottom, she desperately tries to dispose of his recurring phantom seeking its ways to cast spells on her son. As the play unfolds, Mrs. Alving on the lookout for building an orphanage is seen engaged in a private talk with Pastor Manders, who is apparently her ex-beloved. She confides to him about the dissolute escapades of her deceased husband Mr. Alving. On her son's return home from so many years abroad, she expects that she could very well manage to keep him away from his father's haunting spirit, but fails to do so. Oswald, the son falls in love with Regina, who is the housemaid and half sister to him, and this incident shocks Mrs. Alving with a streak of horror, as the child repeats the history and regresses to his father's untamed libido. Now that the father is literally destroyed (i.e. dead), the infant boy (Oswald) can love him more, and thereby at a later period of his life, he identifies with the father figure and gets fixated, letting the recurrence (of his father's past dissipation) happens

to feast his libidinal as well as destructive forces. A castration anxiety hover across the Unconscious, as he fears what he has inherited from him (the lethal disease that is consuming him slowly) might kill him. At this juncture, Joanne Faulkner's observation is noteworthy:

The ego wants above all to be loved . . . But it only becomes the id's love object by diverting, or sublimating, part of the drive, and repressing the remainder. Ultimately, the id will not reward the ego for managing - and inevitably frustrating - its demands. When the superego emerges, as an incorporation of the father whose strength is to bolster the ego against the id (rather like the cannibal who ingests his enemy in order to appropriate his strengths), the superego also, paradoxically, serves to represent the id's grievances to the ego.

Mrs. Alving, as the emblem of the ego, wants to be loved (both by the id and the superego), but as she diverts and sublimates the id's (that is, Oswald's) trajectory to the ego ideal (social customs as always already granted), hardly will there be any chance that it (the id or Oswald, in this case) will reward the ego (the mother) with love. On his return home, Oswald pursues his joyful love, Regina (who is seemingly a taboo in Mrs. Alving's eyes), but to abort his mission, Mrs. Alving embarks on an unsuccessful journey to abstain him from reaching his goal. The lustful revelry, thwarted and upset, is directed toward self-destruction boosted by the death drive.

Before we conclude, let us take a quick glance at the comment made by Louis Althusser in his eponymous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses":

There is therefore a cause for the imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence: that cause is the existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the "people" on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations. (295)

The individuals in an ideological state apparatus are interpellated as subjects by a/the Subject; and this interpellation of ideology thrusts them into “material practices governed by a material ritual” (Althusser 298), but the false and manoeuvred representation of ideology (though ideology itself is an imaginary form to represent the real conditions of their existence) can enslave their minds if used as an instrument of domination. More or less, the same happens to the Ibsenite protagonists in the aforementioned social plays with a slight difference of their being interpellated by an opposite ideology, which stands alone at odds with the dominant ideology. With this sort of less powerful (still robustly affirmed) idealism, the protagonists fall prey to self-destruction, as their psychical mechanism ushers in the death drive on the surface, which gets reinforced at the emasculation of the libidinal forces by the dominant ego ideal, and ultimately the central characters are directed towards inevitable self-annihilation.

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