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RECOGNITION: AN ASPECT OF MODERN TRAGIC DRAMA

by

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B.A. Montana State University, 1957

Presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1960

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MAY 27 1960

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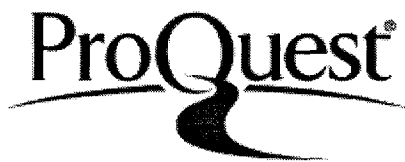


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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. RECOGNITION AS A CLASSICAL AND MODERN ASPECT OF TRAGEDY . . . . .	1
II. IBSEN: <u>AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE</u> . . . . .	16
III. IBSEN: <u>THE WILD DUCK</u> . . . . .	37
IV. MILLER: <u>DEATH OF A SALESMAN</u> . . . . .	64
V. O'NEILL: <u>THE ICEMAN COMETH</u> . . . . .	81
CONCLUSION . . . . .	109
LIST OF WORKS CITED . . . . .	112

## CHAPTER I

### RECOGNITION AS A CLASSICAL AND MODERN ASPECT OF TRAGEDY

In any discussion concerning tragedy, it is necessary to orient oneself as to the past and contemporary significance and manifestations of the form. And in asking what constitutes tragedy, it seems logical to begin with Aristotle, who explains it neatly in his Poetics 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 forms being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."<sup>1</sup> Certainly none of the many scholars and critics who have since attempted definitions has been able to express so much in so few words; even to try for such brevity would be presumptuous. However, the very terseness of the Poetics is often more confusing than enlightening. So far as we know, Aristotle had little previous dramatic

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<sup>1</sup>S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (London, 1907), p. 23. Despite the fact that I feel that any definition of modern tragedy must necessarily be quite different from that given by Aristotle, it is not my intention to give such a definition, and none will be found in this thesis.

criticism to contend with; he was a pioneer, and like other pioneers in other fields, he has been accorded a degree of respect amounting almost to canonization. Admittedly, some of his prescriptions for drama still contain a remarkable degree of truth, but probably not even Aristotle would say that what was true for ancient Greek tragedy would be relevant more than 2000 years later. Critics in every period have tried to say what constituted tragedy for that period. Often, as with Renaissance Italian critics and the later French classicists, theory is simply a restatement of Aristotle, or an attempt to make him say what they want him to say. And modern critics often seem inclined to abandon Aristotle in their description of contemporary drama.

In contemporary criticism, it is often said that tragedy is not possible in our society; that we have no drama worthy of the name; and further that we cannot create tragedy because we no longer have kings and princes--men of elevated position--and no value standards of the right sort. Aristotle wanted the protagonist of tragedy to be an eminent man from a renowned or ruling family. According to certain critics, modern society can produce neither situations of tragic stature nor men great enough to cope with such situations.<sup>2</sup> Although it may be true that in the strictest Aristotelian sense we have no tragic heroes, still it seems

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York, 1929), pp. 91, 96.

unwise to deny so flatly the very possibility of tragedy in contemporary times. Men facing the problems which rise out of contemporary life can be just as significant for us as Oedipus was for the contemporaries of Sophocles. Herbert J. Muller remarks that the great writers of tragedy have always "questioned chiefly the justice of the powers that be, in the name of good and evil." He says further that tragedy is most concerned with man's "relations to his total environment, his position in the universe, the ultimate meaning of his life."<sup>3</sup> These issues--the significance of human life--concern contemporary writers fully as much as they did writers of the past; but whether or not the modern concern produces a true tragic vision has led to a debate which, in all probability, will not be resolved for many years.

To expect that our drama be like that of Sophocles or Shakespeare would, of course, be foolish. It would be equally foolish to force the standards and critical expectations of Greek and Elizabethan literature on that of our own time. Art of any nature considers the desires and needs of the period in which it is produced. We would do well to remember that Sophocles and Shakespeare are similar in very few respects except that both are writers of great tragedy. Each wrote in a manner and on subjects pertinent to his own age; each used materials from the past only in so far as

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<sup>3</sup>Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy (New York, 1956), p. 19.

they pertained to contemporary life. Yet both dealt, as do modern writers, with philosophical questions concerning the nature of man and his universe.

The tragic experience must possess, although it may seem paradoxical, both timeless implications and contemporary vitality. Thus, it seems ill-advised of Joseph Wood Krutch to say that modern man "has put off his royal robes and it is only in sceptered pomp that tragedy can come sweeping by."<sup>4</sup> Literature must, in order to achieve significance for the contemporary audience, be timely. The historical novel and historical drama may perhaps be interesting, but for most readers they have no value aside from simple amusement. Since contemporary society has little use for an aristocracy of blood, modern writers do not care to deal with it. Nevertheless, it is still possible for writers to deal with highly significant men and themes.

Admittedly, modern serious drama may seem an illegitimate offspring of the proud tragic vision of previous dramatists. In it can be found no princes, nobles, or semi-divine personages, who form the center of the tragedies of Shakespeare and Sophocles. Today we find in serious drama people who, if not typical of society as a whole, are at least typical of what our society produces. Formerly tragedy produced such figures as Hamlet and Prometheus. Today we have Willy Loman and Hialmar Ekdal. Some critics

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<sup>4</sup>Krutch, op. cit., p. 94.



are distressed to find such people replacing the grand, departed tragic protagonists. But why? Willy and Hialmar are human beings with actions, visions and conflicts appropriate to them. If their methods of coping with their problems are sometimes fumbling, slow, or indecisive, one can only recall that Hamlet too was beset with weakness and indecision. Present-day critics also become squeamish at what they term the "smallness" of subject matter in modern drama--they are offended at the portraits of stultification found in Ibsen, offended that he should find and use themes significant to a bourgeois culture. Yet Ibsen neither upholds nor defends what is false or unhealthy in middle-class values; his intention is something far different.

Behind the sometimes sordid or dismaying people and situations of modern serious drama, I believe there are themes fully as profound, as disturbingly tragic as any tragic themes in previous dramatic literature. Indeed, the larger or basic themes of contemporary drama seem curiously similar to those which have occupied all the great tragic writers. In these situations we discover men trying to live within personal and impersonal frames of reference; trying to work out family and social conflicts; trying to deal with problems of justice and injustice, right and wrong; and always, through all their problems, suffering. It has been said that tragedy, like all art, reflects the attitudes and beliefs of its time, but that its more important concern is "with the relatively timeless, universal problems of life

and death--the tragic story of Man," the nature of "man's inhumanity to man," "the painful mystery of man's being in a mysterious universe."<sup>5</sup> This, the timeless aspect of the form, is what makes tragedy theoretically possible in any period.

It is true that in many, in fact most, periods of literature no great tragedy has been produced. As has been pointed out, one contemporary critic feels that our age is incapable of producing anything of tragic implications; I prefer to think, with other critics,<sup>6</sup> that certain modern writers do have a tragic sense of life which they are quite capable of reproducing. Thus, I find that anything which can be termed tragic in contemporary drama is tragic because the playwright has blended the so-called classic or timeless elements of tragedy with significant contemporary themes.

As I see it, two classical elements of tragedy which remain integral parts of modern tragedy are peripeteia and anagnorisis, i.e., reversal and recognition--to Aristotle the pivotal points of tragedy. The tragic insight provided by recognition of flaw and error is still of vital importance. Reversal seems less important; in Aristotelian terms, it prepares for the possibility of recognition, the

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<sup>5</sup>Muller, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

<sup>6</sup>Some contemporary scholars who hold this view are Richard B. Sewall, Herbert J. Muller, F. L. Lucas, Mark Harris, William Van O'Connor, Henry Alonzo Myers, and Francis Fergusson.

perception or insight necessary for the protagonist's subsequent reparation and penance. Aristotle defines it thus in the Poetics:

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation as in the Oedipus...But the recognition which is most intimately connected with the plot and action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons. This recognition, combined with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents. Moreover, it is upon such situations that the issues of good or bad fortune will depend.<sup>7</sup>

In the words of a modern scholar, the peripeteia "is the working in blindness to one's own defeat: the anagnorisis is the realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightning-flash in the darkness."<sup>8</sup> Aristotle himself discusses several kinds of recognition: "the best is that which arises from the incidents themselves, where the startling discovery is made by natural means. Such is in the Oedipus of Sophocles..."<sup>9</sup> By saying that recognition should grow from the plot, Aristotle makes it a development from hamartia, the so-called tragic flaw. The protagonist

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<sup>7</sup>Butcher, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>F. L. Lucas, Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics (London, 1957), pp. 113-14.

<sup>9</sup>Butcher, op. cit., p. 61.

has erred, not through viciousness, but through a natural human frailty and must bear a moral responsibility for his error. From the act of error, the plot must work out so that the hero understands fully what he has done. This, I feel, is what must ultimately be recognized--the protagonist's error, the consequences of his error and his final moral responsibility.

Anagnorisis, when used, as it may be, in close conjunction with peripeteia, is the hero's realization of the truth, the full meaning of the deed done in error...  
Peripeteia and anagnorisis, we suggest, are but the due developments and complements of hamartia; they are the surprising, but natural, aftermath of the partly responsible act of error.<sup>10</sup>

Recognition, says Aristotle, "is a change from ignorance to knowledge."<sup>11</sup> But the change always comes too late, and Greek tragedy is rife with the irony produced by ignorance and late knowledge. And it would seem, in Greek drama as well as in modern drama, that the knowledge is of self, of one's errors and their weight. Recognition of person or object may lead to the necessary discovery and insight, but this recognition is of quite secondary importance to the recognition by the protagonist of his own faults. Oedipus is a good example. He blinds himself not because he recognizes Jocasta as his mother, but because he recognizes his hybris, his errors, the awful measure of his

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<sup>10</sup>William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York, 1957), pp. 44-45.

<sup>11</sup>Butcher, op. cit., p. 41.

guilt, and the need for reparation. He has been mentally blind to his own faults and actions; now his penance is self-imposed physical blindness.

Presumably modern tragedy should also depend to a high degree on the theory of recognition. I, however, believe that modern tragedy is often tragic not so much through the protagonist's recognition of his plight and his moral flaws as through the audience's recognition of his errors and the possible application of those faults to themselves. Since the unperceptive, limited character is typical or common in modern drama, the perceptions, insights, and acts of recognition delegated formerly to the tragic hero, I feel, are now transferred by the writer to the audience. The irony implicit in the protagonist's failure to recognize himself and his position for what they are adds to the emotion felt by the spectator. That the spectator may share the obtuse characteristics of the protagonist is not a happy thought, particularly when this very obtuseness has such a large bearing on the protagonist's plight. This irony also makes an astringent statement on the often found failure of modern man to adjust to his environment as fixed and regulated by society. Society, often unjust and arbitrary, has frequently taken the place of Fate, destiny and the angry gods of the Greek myths and of the later Christian concepts of God. Modern man finds that society's edicts can be fully as quixotic, unreasonable, and cruel as any edict handed down by the arbitrary Olympians. Often, as in Willy Loman's case,

man finds he simply cannot fit himself to society's dictates, try as he may. Society has become a force that crushes in contemporary drama. The growth of this concept is shown in a comparison of An Enemy of the People and Death of a Salesman. Dr. Stockmann faces tremendous social pressures, and although his life in society may be severely affected by public opinion, his personal life and philosophy are really not harmed. Willy Loman, however, is beaten to death by the pressures of a society he can neither understand nor cope with.

Thus, in my opinion, the tragic vision in contemporary drama depends to a much greater extent than ever before upon the capacity of the audience to recognize and reflect upon human failure and responsibility. Ultimately, if the limited protagonist of modern tragedy cannot see his responsibility to himself and to his social order, the spectator must take note of it and make the transference to his own need for responsibility. Otherwise, the play would have no point. The fact that present-day protagonists are often morally blind, or nearly so, and that their blindness is in part self-caused, is a measure of the tragedy inherent in modern life.

Throughout the history of tragedy, the spectator or reader has felt inclined to enter with the protagonist into his experiences, actions, thoughts and suffering. The result of this vicarious journey is, in Aristotle's terminology, catharsis, an empathetical experience which seems

to have lost for us today the meaning it had for Aristotle's time. Yet the very act of living through the suffering and action of present-day protagonists still brings with it a profound emotional experience for the audience. The depth of emotion felt may be intensified, I believe, by the sight of a protagonist who cannot fully recognize his error or his responsibility. Pity occurs for the unfortunate who has little or no insight into his own state, plus fear that one may be so unperceptive also. The intellectual strain of attaining recognition of error and responsibility unaided by a similar recognition in the hero may also add to the intensity of emotion experienced.

The technique of transferring recognition to the audience of modern drama is, I find, often accomplished when the author breaks up the single large act of recognition into a series of small insights experienced by various characters during the course of the plot development. When these partial insights are pieced together by perceptive members of the audience, the drama takes on significance and importance. I do not believe in art for art's sake; neither do I believe that art must always teach a Sunday School moral. But I do feel that the function of serious drama should be to give its spectator or reader a greater knowledge of himself and of his own age.

Audience recognition can be very well illustrated by a recent television play, "The Face of a Hero." This play dealt with the problems of a young city attorney in his

first grapple with what constitutes ethical and unethical conduct in both his professional and his private life. It shows his change from a naive, well-meaning young man to a sincere hypocrite of terrifying proportions. While picnicking with his fiancée, he watches a young girl fall to her death in a river. Although no one else is near, he makes no attempt to save her because of his cowardice. Frightened that someone will discover his part in the death, he allows suspicion to fall on the dead girl's escort, a young man from a rich, highly influential family. In trying to quiet his own conscience, he starts a campaign against the corruption of the town government. By the end of the play he is so obsessed with something he terms "justice" that he has conveniently forgotten that he is single-handedly sending an innocent man to death. He seems also to have forgotten his own dishonesty--or, if he has not forgotten, he has repressed it so well that it no longer shows at all. He has sold himself to the devil and does not even know that the transaction occurred. He honestly believes that his witch-hunt has been motivated only by a pure, high-minded search for justice and for an end to corruption. Punishment for his deception will surely come, but it will come as revenge by other corrupt officials. Neither lawyer nor officials will know it for what it is. The tragic focus of this drama lies, not with any of the wronged parties--the dead girl, her father, the boy mistakenly accused of her murder--nor with the wilfully corrupt town and state officials, but with



the self-righteous justice-hunter who cannot see himself for the menacing and shameful hoax he is. There is no mistaking the tragedy in this play, nor the implications of moral responsibility. But recognition belongs to the audience, not to any of the characters.

It seems that only within the past century has the protagonist of tragedy become a character incapable of recognition with the audience assuming totality of insight. The protagonist seems in part to be a product of the somewhat warped or timid standards that are associated with middle class culture. He is also confused because his age is a confusing one; he has discovered anew the terrifying proportions of the universe, his own relative smallness and meaninglessness.

In the three major western cultures-- Hebrew, Greek, and Christian--there have come times (our present era may be one of them) when for reasons internal and external, spiritual and sociological, the questions of ultimate justice and human destiny seem suddenly to have been jarred loose again...Suddenly the original terror looms close and the old formulations cannot dispel it. The conflict between man and his destiny assumes once more the ultimate magnitude. It appears to be not a matter of accident, a temporary and limited disturbance, but an essential change in the face of the universe. The whole society is involved and the stake is survival...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven, 1959), p. 7.

While I feel that all modern serious drama calls on the audience more than on the characters for the recognition and insight necessary to a significant play, I have chosen only four rather outstanding examples for discussion here: Ibsen's The Wild Duck and An Enemy of the People; O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh; and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman.

Henrik Ibsen seems to me to have been the first major dramatist to recognize and use the new, middle-class protagonist and his particular brand of troubles, to use themes significant to this man and to the modern period. Because Ibsen's themes still have contemporary value, for purposes of this discussion I will consider his work as the beginning of modern drama. In his plays we see characters capable of only partial recognition, characters whose perceptions are often very limited. When, however, these flashes of recognition are fused through the medium of the spectator, they provide tragic insight into the nature of modern man and the nature of moral responsibility. An Enemy of the People and The Wild Duck illustrate the theory of audience recognition very well. Each play exhibits characters who have partial knowledge of themselves and of their world, but none of them is sufficiently perceptive to arrive at the total self-recognition evident in older tragedy. Both plays show Ibsen's concern with social injustice and the often tragic attempts of the individual to live successfully within a bourgeois society.

The majority of serious contemporary American

playwrights are Ibsen's direct descendants. The protagonist defeated by the false standards and moral values of his society who appears in An Enemy of the People appears again, altered, of course, in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Willy Loman is not, however, the visionary that Dr. Stockmann is. He has grand dreams of success for himself and his sons, but they are dreams based on a shallow acquisitive standard typical of his society. He is too weak to reach success either honestly or dishonestly, or to revise his goals and standards into something practicable for him. Eugene O'Neill, although less markedly Ibsen's descendant, also shows Ibsen's influence in his choice and treatment of theme. The Iceman Cometh, with its concern for thwarted, impractical idealism, is reminiscent of The Wild Duck.

## CHAPTER II

### IBSEN: AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

An Enemy of the People appeared in 1882, a year after Ghosts. Written perhaps as a reply to the horrified and dull-witted critics of that play, it continues the attack upon social conservatism, which had earlier outraged the middle class audience of A Doll's House (1879). Many critics have come to consider the play to be comedy,<sup>1</sup> but it can be argued that the tragic implications far outweigh whatever comic elements can be pinned down here and there. It may be that Ibsen's "message" has come to seem comic, because his assault on the cruelty, short-sightedness and timidity of contemporary human nature has been absorbed long since by the modern consciousness. On the other hand, his- torical events in the recent past, one might suppose, should lead critics to take more seriously Ibsen's deadly earnest- ness, and perhaps they are doing so now that Arthur Miller's recent adaptation of the play for New York audiences has

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<sup>1</sup>Critics who take this stand are: Janko Lavrin, Ibsen, an Approach (London, 1950), p. 85; M. C. Bradbrook, Ibsen, the Norwegian (London, 1948), p. 96; Brian W. Downs, A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen (Cambridge, 1950), p. 24; and R. Ellis Roberts, Henrik Ibsen, A Critical Study (London, 1912), p. 124.

raised interest in it again.

Ibsen is concerned in this play with the interrelationship of such themes as individual freedom, the tension between the individual and society, the growth of mass-mindedness, and the social situation of the intellectual. The full significance of these themes is recognized by none of the characters, though several of them serve as foci of recognition for the reader or spectator: Dr. Stockmann; Mayor Peter Stockmann; Aslaksen, the printer; Hovstad, the editor of the town newspaper; and the doctor's wife, Mrs. Stockmann. None of these people achieves full recognition of himself, of his errors and responsibilities, or of individual and social truth as Ibsen suggests it in this play. But through Ibsen's use of dramatic irony and of conflicting and contrasting interests and moral positions, significant insight is possible for the audience. The tragic implications present in An Enemy of the People are thus fully recognized only by the spectator or reader.

As protagonist, Dr. Thomas Stockmann is the one character who should be expected to achieve self-insight. Although his perception of the dangerous faults of "the compact majority" is acute and correct, he is blind to his own weakness and to the flaws in his personal philosophy, and he remains largely unaware of them to the end of the play, despite the fact that his insight into the other characters and "the compact majority" increases. Still, Dr. Stockmann fits the Aristotelian definition of protagonist more closely

than do most modern tragic protagonists. The action of the play revolves around him and his ideals and theories, and all the character interaction of the play occurs in relation to him. Stockmann, a member of the upper middle class, is elevated by his intelligence and nobility of mind far above anyone else in his community. He comes to disaster through his own error. Like Gregers Werle of The Wild Duck, his absorption in his ideals produces only a warped vision of himself and of society.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Stockmann is fighting against what Gregers Werle calls a "poisoned marsh." He sees himself as "a patriot who wants to purify society" (p. 153),<sup>3</sup> a purification which is to take place everywhere. He begins with a tangible pollution, "the poisonous morass up at Molledal" (p. 109), to which the poisoning of the Municipal Baths in his community is due; but soon he is dealing with a far more abstract social pollution. Stockmann is a man of science, a zealous, intelligent man, absolutely devoted to what he considers his duty. He is willing to sacrifice everything, even the welfare of his family, to his ideal of duty. As medical officer of the Baths, he feels it necessary to inform the townspeople and officials of their polluted condition. "We are

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<sup>2</sup>See Chapter III of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup>Citations from An Enemy of the People refer to the Rhinehart edition of three of Ibsen's plays (New York, 1957). The translator is not named.

making our living by retailing filth and corruption!" he shouts excitedly to the mayor, his brother Peter Stockmann (p. 126). With this announcement, the conflict between the positions and interests of the brothers becomes immediately evident.

Dr. Stockmann is an idealist, a man whom society fears because his ideas are radical and seem dangerous to the conservative elements. The mayor, of course, represents an entirely different facet of society--bureaucracy, officialdom. The audience recognizes at once his stuffiness and conservatism. In his views on food, we see his miserliness and narrowness. "Good gracious--hot meat at night! Not with my digestion...No, no, my dear lady; I stick to my tea and bread and butter. It is much more wholesome in the long run--and a little more economical, too" (p. 86). Peter sees no value in any degree of self-indulgence; the thought of toddy after dinner horrifies him. Thomas is quite opposed to Peter's stodgy view of life, and we can admire his ability to enjoy himself.

Through Peter Stockmann the audience can clearly recognize the doctor's faults; yet Peter's is only a partial recognition, for he sees none of his own faults and none of the doctor's virtues. He pinpoints very well the faults that lead to his brother's downfall. Early in the play he says, "You have an ingrained tendency to take your own way, at all events; and that is almost equally inadmissible in a well-ordered community. The individual ought undoubtedly to

acquiesce in subordinating himself to the community--or, to speak more accurately, to the authorities who have care of the community's welfare" (pp. 93-4). But Dr. Stockmann cannot abide any higher authority. In answer to Peter, he says, "But what the deuce has all this to do with me?" (p. 94). Peter's ideas of "the individual...subordinating himself to the community," are designed, of course, for the protection of his own position as a local authority and are helpful in showing the audience his dishonesty and self-interestedness. In complaining of his brother's personality and irritability, the mayor says, "Yes, Thomas, you are an extremely cantankerous man to work with--I know that to my cost. You disregard everything you ought to have consideration for" (p. 122). The audience sees that in Peter's pompous view what the doctor ought to consider is his brother's position and reputation. But Peter is nevertheless right: Dr. Stockmann lives only for his own vision of duty and his own ideals, even when attention to the welfare of others should be more important. In characterizing the doctor's quarrelsomeness and his reaction to authority, the mayor says, "To my mind the whole thing only seems to mean that you are seeking another outlet for your combativeness. You want to pick a quarrel with your superiors--an old habit of yours. You cannot put up with any authority over you. You look askance at anyone who occupies a superior official position; you regard him as a personal enemy, and then any stick is good enough to beat him with" (p. 123). The reader



is thus told that Dr. Stockmann's vision of duty has gotten him into serious trouble before and is likely to do so again.

Peter Stockmann, with all his talk about the good of the community, is really only a self-interested hypocrite. As the doctor recognizes, the mayor wants to whitewash his own part in the pollution of the Baths. Peter continues to hide behind a supposed desire for "the common good." "If I perhaps guard my reputation somewhat anxiously, it is in the interests of the town. Without moral authority I am powerless to direct public affairs as seems, to my judgment, to be best for the common good" (p. 120).

Peter threatens his brother with dismissal and other unpleasant consequences if he persists in the publication of his report. The mayor believes that general knowledge of the infected condition of the Baths will lead to the ruin of the town, as well as, of course, to his own ruin. "We should probably have to abandon the whole thing, which has cost us so much money--and then you would have ruined your native town" (p. 119). As soon as he is satisfied that the doctor does indeed intend to persist, he goes to the easily swayed Hovstad and Aslaksen and informs them that alterations will cost the town a very large sum of money and that "with the best will in the world" (p. 144) he feels that the doctor's report is based merely on an overactive imagination. Aslaksen, the staunch believer in moderation, naturally cannot approve of anything so costly to the taxpayers as the Bath repairs. The mayor, with his simple, if slanted,

observations, has produced the effect he desired and can sit back and watch the ruin of his brother's position and the preservation of his own.

At first, Hovstad and Aslaksen, representatives of the "ancient and honorable citizen community" who are anxious for a chance to undermine the local officials, the aristocracy of the town, enthusiastically support the doctor's reforms, though they have no real interest in them. Dr. Stockmann is naturally delighted with their backing and refers expansively to "the broad-minded middle class" (p. 149) and to his "intelligent fellow-townsmen" (p. 133). But when Aslaksen and Hovstad discover that the townspeople will have to pay for the repairs on the Baths, they quickly withdraw their support of the doctor and become quite hostile toward him, thus showing the audience their timidity and over-conservatism. Thereupon Dr. Stockmann calls a town meeting and denounces everyone in the community on the grounds of corruption and stupidity. Because of this denunciation, the townspeople vote Dr. Stockmann, whom so lately they had enthusiastically endorsed as the "friend of the people," to be now the "enemy of the people."

In the beginning, Hovstad sees the doctor's report of pollution as a method by which he can better his own interests. As he says of himself, "I am neither more self-interested nor more ambitious than most men" (p. 111). This may be true, but one realizes by the end of the play that despite his rhetoric about "emancipating the masses," he is

most concerned with his own betterment. Hovstad is anxious to discredit the officials and wealthy people of the town, particularly the mayor, in order to gain a position of authority in the community. He seems quite unaware of his own character, but shows it all too clearly to the audience. Before his change of attitude, he says, "I am not a weathercock--and never will be" (p. 136). When he does become a turncoat, he soothes his dubious principles by asserting that Stockmann has misrepresented the facts. It is of course evident that the doctor has told nothing but the truth about the condition of the Baths. Hovstad characterizes Aslaksen by saying, "He is one of those who are foundering in a bog--decent enough fellow though he may be, otherwise. And most of the people here are in just the same case--seesawing and edging first to one side and then to the other, so overcome with caution and scruple that they never dare to take any decided step" (p. 115). He certainly does not recognize that he fits the description as well as does Aslaksen, but he makes it painfully clear to the audience. Once the mayor says that a large expenditure for the town is involved, Hovstad, anxious not to be identified with anything as unpopular as heavier taxes, quickly changes sides. He then denounces Dr. Stockmann as vigorously as he had formerly hailed him "the friend of the people."

Hovstad represents a segment of the political thought of the time--liberalism. He states his position in this manner: "In my opinion a journalist incurs a heavy

responsibility if he neglects a favorable opportunity of emancipating the masses--the humble and oppressed. I know well enough that in exalted circles I shall be called an agitator, and all that sort of thing; but they may call what they like. If only my conscience doesn't reproach me..." (p. 111). Although Hovstad thinks he believes in daring action, he backs down quickly when his position is threatened, shows no concern for his liberal conscience, and leaves Stockmann alone to be called an agitator. Actually Hovstad's stand is as timid as the moderate Aslaksen's.

Aslaksen is representative of "the compact majority," which, under his direction, becomes villainous. At all costs, he wants to preserve the equilibrium necessary for a stable society. He recognizes that what Dr. Stockmann wants--a community of idealists and progressives--would be extremely impractical and dangerous to that bugbear, "the common good." But he is excessive in his caution that the public be exposed to no radical ideas. He is dangerous in his timidity, just as Stockmann is dangerous in his fearlessness. "I have learnt," Aslaksen says, "in the school of life and experience that moderation is the most valuable virtue a citizen can possess" (p. 157). Aslaksen's "moderation" seems simply a euphemism for cowardice. It is inevitable that neither he nor Hovstad will stand by the doctor, despite his statement, "We small tradesmen are at your back at all events, like a solid wall. You have the compact majority on your side, Doctor" (p. 114). Under stress

Aslaksen's "solid wall" becomes remarkably weak.

Ibsen's portrayal of the "compact majority" is brutal. The audience recognizes that none of the individuals who constitute the mass has an independent mind as soon as the crowd is seen for the first time. "I say," remarks one man, "Who are we to back up in this?" The answer is, "Watch Aslaksen, and do as he does" (p. 154). But Aslaksen in turn has taken his cue from the dishonestly motivated mayor. When the doctor says that all citizens of the country should be exterminated if they live as do the inhabitants of this town, the crowd, angered at his references to their stupidity, shout, "He is an enemy of the people! He hates his country! He hates his own people!" (p. 172). Aslaksen is only too happy to pass a resolution to that effect. Yet despite its size, the majority is an ineffectual, frightened thing. The morning after the town meeting, the doctor comments on the crowd's actions: "And yet they stood out there bawling and swearing that they would do me some violence; but as for doing anything--you don't see much of that in this town" (p. 180).

Despite his use of characters whose insight is partial at best, Ibsen, in An Enemy of the People is much more in line with traditional forms of tragic recognition than he is in The Wild Duck and his later plays. Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist, is a perceptive person. Nevertheless, he does not achieve self-knowledge, the most important aspect of recognition for the classic tragic protagonist. However, in

terms of Ibsen's themes and of final recognition for the audience, his discoveries are the most significant in the play.

Ibsen's treatment of Stockmann's recognition follows the traditional metaphor of mental blindness changing suddenly to insight. But the physical blinding which, in Oedipus, accompanies the change to insight does not occur in An Enemy of the People. Stockmann speaks of his moment of insight in a sight image typical of tragic literature. "My eyes ̄werē blinded to the real facts...the eyes of my mind were opened wide" (p. 162). Although the image of mental blindness is not emphasized in this play, it is reminiscent of classic tragedy and prepares for the heavily emphasized blindness metaphor in Ibsen's next play, The Wild Duck.

At the town meeting, Dr. Stockmann reveals to the community and the audience his new insights. He has recognized three "facts:" the incompetence of the authorities, the dangerousness of the majority, and the relationship of right and might. He begins by talking of his "discovery that all the sources of our moral life are poisoned and that the whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood" (p. 161). This social poisoning has two sources, according to Dr. Stockmann. The first and less dangerous is "our leading men," whom the doctor characterizes as "billy goats in a young plantation; they do mischief everywhere. They stand in a free man's way, whichever way he turns, and what I should like best would be

to see them exterminated like any other vermin" (p. 162). But Stockmann continues, "It is not they who are the most dangerous enemies of truth and freedom amongst us." Those in authority Stockmann sees as too clumsy and addle-pated to do any lasting damage. "The most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom amongst us is the compact majority...it is the masses, the majority--this infernal compact majority--that poisons the sources of our moral life and infects the ground we stand on" (pp. 164 and 166). The majority are dangerous because its members are stupid, ignorant, incomplete. They are not intelligent enough to govern, but feel that they have the right to govern because they have been taught to believe that they are "the essential part of the population" (p. 167).<sup>4</sup> Dr. Stockmann wants to wipe out their influence and replace it with the influence of individuals like himself--"the isolated, intellectually superior personalities" (p. 167). His theory, of course, ties in with the utopian tradition of government by the elite.<sup>5</sup> "The majority," he says explosively, "never has right on its side...The majority has might on its side--unfortunately; but right it has not. I am in the right--I and a few other scattered individuals. The minority is always in the right" (pp. 164-5).

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<sup>4</sup>The description of mass-mindedness Ibsen gives us is almost identical with the definition found in Jose Ortega y Gasset's The Revolt of the Masses.

<sup>5</sup>The theory is one prominent ever since Plato discussed the society of the philosopher-kings in the Republic.

Stockmann's ideas of right and might as expressed at the town meeting represent a radical shift in view from those he held while popular favor was with him.

Mrs. Stockmann. But, dear Thomas, your brother has power on his side--

Dr. Stockmann. Yes, but I have right on mine, I tell you.

Mrs. Stockmann. Oh yes, right--right. What is the use of having right on your side if you have not got might?

Petra. Oh, mother!--how can you say such a thing!

Dr. Stockmann. Do you imagine that in a free country it is no use having right on your side? You are absurd, Katherine. Besides, haven't I got the liberal-minded, independent press to lead the way, and the compact majority behind me? That is might enough, I should think! (p. 127).

The doctor's statements turn out to be ironic in view of how quickly "the liberal-minded, independent press" and "the compact majority" desert him. Mrs. Stockmann recognizes immediately that Thomas' dreams of having might as well as right on his side are absurd; her husband sees it more slowly. He discovers that the liberal democracy of his community is not what its exponents say it is. As George Bernard Shaw says in discussing An Enemy of the People,

[/They/] make it blasphemy against Democracy to deny that the majority is always right, although that, as Ibsen says, is a lie. It is a scientific fact that the majority, however eager it may be for the reform of the old abuses, is always wrong in its opinion of new developments, or rather is always unfit for them...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>George Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism (London, 1913), p. 98.



Dr. Stockmann is actually rather vain, although he would be the last person to recognize or admit it. He thinks of himself as a revolutionary, and expects by his exploits to cover himself with glory and accolades. When he thinks that the town intends to give him "some sort of testimonial," he calls it nonsense, but he would be very pleased to receive such notice. He immediately thinks of an increase in salary as a reward: "And if the Baths Committee should think of voting me an increase of salary, I will not accept it. Do you hear, Katherine?--I won't accept it" (p. 104). Of course, no one has mentioned salary, and one suspects that Dr. Stockmann would very much like an increase. This statement is ironic in that the very last thing the Bath officials are likely to do is to reward the doctor for his discovery of the pollution of the water. Instead, they dismiss him from his position as Medical Officer. After all his talk about "the broad-minded middle class" and his "intelligent fellow-townsmen," Dr. Stockmann, when he discovers that they have turned against him, denies their supposed intelligence and becomes very indignant about any attempts they make to place themselves on the same level as himself. "But that the common herd should dare to make this attack on me, as if they were my equals--that is what I cannot, for the life of me, swallow!" (p. 177). Stockmann is very outspoken on what he considers should be the fate of those less than perfect. "All who live by lies ought to be exterminated like vermin!" (p. 171). He does not recognize

that no one is perfect, that even he, with his silly vanity, is certainly less than perfect, and that he would end by exterminating even himself. Perfection, as the audience is to discover in The Wild Duck, is neither a desirable nor a possible state for anybody.

Stockmann's theory of freedom is related to his vanity and selfishness. The major reason he feels so strongly against the "compact majority" is his conviction that its conservatism stifles the freedom of intellectual leaders, particularly his own. Essentially Dr. Stockmann's definition of freedom seems to be a desire to speak, think, and act according to self-imposed dictates with no restraint from outside sources. He wants to be completely free to control and choose his own destiny. Stockmann's theory of freedom becomes ironic when one recognizes that he sees freedom only in terms of himself. He wants to control the populace, and thus, by implication he wants no one else to be free. He wants to replace what he considers a false standard with what he sees as truth without really taking into account the welfare of the people involved. Although he denounces those in authority, he actually wants to be one of the detested "leading men." He speaks of having "young and vigorous standard bearers" at his command (p. 134). Although he denounces political parties as inimical to freedom, he agitates for a party of his own--a group of enlightened intellectuals. The fact that such a group would deny freedom to those alien to their interests never occurs to

him. Stockmann, the audience recognizes, feels that because he is intelligent and has scientific knowledge and talent, he is therefore qualified to speak on a number of subjects unrelated to medicine--politics and government, for example.

Through Stockmann, the audience recognizes that in his view--and in Ibsen's, too--the backward culture of the arch-conservative majority, the public, is to blame for the denunciation and consequent suffocation of "the fighters at the outposts" (p. 166)--the scientists, the idealists, the visionaries. Dr. Stockmann is a fervent believer in scientific and cultural advance, but as a very impatient man he cannot bear to wait for the public to absorb reluctantly the forward-looking ideas of visionaries like himself. He even seems frightened that advancement will be entirely stopped by his dull contemporaries. Thus he feels that to encourage the public to think itself good in any way is criminal. "That is why I maintain that it is absolutely inexcusable in the 'People's Messenger' to proclaim, day in and day out, the false doctrine that the masses, the crowd, the compact majority have the monopoly of broad-mindedness and morality--and that vice and corruption and every kind of intellectual depravity are the result of culture, just as all the filth that is draining into our Baths is the result of the tanneries up at Molledal!" (p. 170).

This cultural morass Dr. Stockmann feels is closely related to the poor sanitary conditions he has tried so hard to correct. "It is ignorance, poverty, ugly conditions of

life that do the devil's work!" (p. 170).<sup>7</sup> This state of affairs is created in part by the dishonesty and dullness of political and economic leaders, people like Morton Kiil, Stockmann's father-in-law and owner of the Molledal Tannery. "You said yesterday," Kiil says to the doctor, "that the worst of this pollution came from my tannery. If that is true, then my grandfather and my father before me, and I myself, for many years past, have been poisoning the town like three destroying angels. Do you think I am going to sit quiet under that reproach?" (p. 188). One expects that Kiil intends to clean up his tanneries immediately. Unfortunately this is not the case. Actually, he intends to blackmail the doctor into recanting his exposure of the tanneries. Kiil has been buying all the stock in the Baths, in order to make it appear that he and Stockmann are collaborating to gain control of the Baths and its profits. Because Kiil has willed his money to Stockmann's family, the doctor and his family will receive nothing from Kiil's estate, if Stockmann persists and the Baths thus become bankrupt. Of course, Stockmann's conscience rightly prevents him from doing so ridiculous a thing as "cleansing" his father-in-law with the lie that actually his tannery is innocuous. But ironically, Hovstad, Aslaksen, and the mayor, although they cannot understand why the doctor would denounce

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<sup>7</sup>This theory, and the theory of educating to correct this state, are very similar to theories expounded by Under-shaft in the final act of Shaw's Major Barbara.

the Baths through devotion to ideals, are quite willing to believe that he would do it for money.

Stockmann's blind devotion to his own vision of society is, in a way, admirable. He states, while still in favor with the townspeople, "What I am doing, I am doing in the name of truth and for the sake of my conscience" (p. 134). No matter how hard life is, he will remain true to his ideals. Even after being ostracized and having lost his position and his practice, he still wants to purify society. He is sure he can do it, for now he is "the strongest man in the world" (p. 198). He attributes this new strength to the fact that he now stands completely alone. He does not seem to recognize that no matter how resolute his convictions, they alone are not powerful enough to will an enlightened change in his community. The audience should recognize by the end of the play, however, that he is wrong. The obtuse townspeople, led by his dishonest kinsman the mayor, will continue to resist him and cling obstinately to "the good, old-established ideas" they already have (p. 122).

Dr. Stockmann's idealism is quite different, as we shall see, from that of Gregers Werle in The Wild Duck. Gregers' idealism is a nebulous matter; even he is not sure of its true nature, except that it has something to do with Truth. Dr. Stockmann, however, is quite sure of what he means by ideals and duty; he speaks about both in great detail, but his logical, well thought-out definitions do not save him from being misguided at times. In speaking of two

of Stockmann's declarations, "The strongest man is the man who stands most alone," and "The minority is always right," R. Ellis Roberts says, "No one was further removed than Ibsen from the crank, but there is a good deal of the crank in Stockmann; and both his watchwords lend themselves dangerously to the crank propaganda."<sup>8</sup> Of course, Stockmann does not realize that he is a crank; he believes in the doctrine of the elite, and his vision of himself is that he is one of "the isolated, intellectually superior personalities" in society who have the "right to pronounce judgment and to approve, to direct, and to govern" (p. 167). No doubt he is intellectually superior, but his superiority does not make him any less fallible than the "common folk," "the compact majority," "the public opinion," he criticizes so severely.

To sum up, five foci of recognition are presented to the audience in An Enemy of the People. The characters who personify these foci are representative of different phases of society--Mrs. Stockmann, Hovstad, the mayor, Aslaksen, and Dr. Stockmann.

Mrs. Stockmann is the clear-headed wife who sees very well that her husband is leading them all into disaster. She knows that the mayor will retaliate heavily if Thomas tries to oppose him and that the doctor's theory of right

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<sup>8</sup>Roberts, op. cit., p. 126.

and might as being synonymous is quite fallible. Dr. Stockmann does not care, however; he is quite willing to sacrifice his family's welfare to his own ideal of duty. Mrs. Stockmann, despite her husband's callow thoughtlessness, continues to support him. He has been abandoned by everyone outside his immediate family, and, as a symbol of loyalty and family stability, she cannot desert him.

Hovstad represents the press and the so-called Liberal thinker; his extreme self-interest is quite evident to the audience, despite the fact that he does not realize that he is betraying himself. Peter Stockmann is the dull, stuffy, unimaginative, ultra-conservative, small-town official who also is only self-interested. Aslaksen represents the timidity, extreme moderation, and foot-dragging of the "compact majority." Yet in a way, the townspeople and their leaders are correct in their attitude toward Dr. Stockmann. Selfishness aside, they are rightly concerned about community stability and welfare.

Stockmann represents the visionary, the progressive, to whom destruction of undesirable attitudes and elements is right as long as it is committed in the name of high standards and cultural advances. But he is really not at all interested in the people or their needs. Interested only in an ideal of duty, he views the town and its inhabitants in a coldly clinical light. He rejects the idea that they are individuals like himself who also want freedom and the right to choose their particular modes of life. Stockmann is thus

in one sense truly the enemy of the people. He is being kept from "ruining his native town." Finally it is ghostly, sinister, all-powerful public opinion which does control Dr. Stockmann's actions. The town is filled with a "dare not" attitude concerning the doctor and his family. As a scientist, he is correct in his theories. He desires education for social amelioration. But Ibsen's treatment of the education project suggests to the audience that the author does not have much faith in its future success. At the conclusion of the play, Stockmann is not crushed by society, as protagonists of recent dramas have been, but happily considers indoctrinating the populace with his own point of view. This is the ending that has been called "happy." I do not find it so. The townspeople are preserving their community at the expense of a greater future ruin. In their shortsightedness lies their tragedy. Stockmann will continue to devote himself to his unattainable ideal, with further unhappiness to himself and to those close to him.



### CHAPTER III

#### IBSEN: THE WILD DUCK

The Wild Duck (1884) is concerned, like the Oedipus of Sophocles, with mental blindness, which here is neatly symbolized in the visual condition of two of the secondary characters.<sup>1</sup> But the characters of this play, with the exception of Dr. Relling, are quite incapable of any significant degree of recognition. What insights they do achieve are, at best, trite and, at worst, harmful. Thus, recognition is reserved not for the characters of the place but almost totally for the audience who attain insight by observing and evaluating the partial insights gained by the characters.

In Chapter I, I referred to a kind of recognition which is fragmentary. Various characters in a play have flashes of insight of varying degrees of importance, but none recognizes the entire truth. But the perceptive reader or audience, when faced with these fragments, should be able to make a fairly accurate analysis and interpretation of what the author intended should be recognized as truth for

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<sup>1</sup>A study by Otto Reinert has been helpful here: "Sight Imagery in The Wild Duck." Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LV (July, 1956), pp. 457-62.

the particular work. In The Wild Duck, five people possess various types of insight into the problem Ibsen is concerned with: Gregers Werle, old Werle, Relling, Gina, Hialmar, and Ekdal. Hialmar's insight is very slight, but he does something which the other characters do with much less emphasis. Hialmar betrays himself, in order that the audience may receive an accurate picture of his personality. The manner in which Ibsen handles this self-betrayal is particularly brutal, as we shall note later.

Thus, none of the characters who should, in order to avert catastrophe, come to a state of recognition, achieves it. This insensitiveness is not remarkable, since a state of mental blindness to a certain point seems mandatory in all tragedy; but in The Wild Duck no one ever comes to any significant degree of insight. It even becomes difficult to tell just who should be expected to gain recognition. The choice seems to lie between Gregers and Hialmar, if only because they usually occupy the stage and carry on the action. Even in terms of the bourgeois protagonist of modern drama, these two men seem very sorry heroes. Neither one does anything remotely admirable; indeed, neither seems capable of any really positive thought or action. For most modern protagonists, we at least can make the simple overture of feeling sorry for them. For Gregers and Hialmar, the audience is hard put to muster even pity.

One wonders why it is so hard to accept either Gregers or Hialmar as the protagonist of the work. Gregers, despite

his unfortunate bungling, is a man with a mission, a person who recognizes certain philosophical failings in others and believes, to the point of being a zealot, that he should transmit his idealistic vision of human perfection to those who do not have it, i.e., to the rest of mankind. To the extent that we sympathize with and admire crusaders, we can admire Gregers. But Ibsen never lets us forget that Gregers' crusade springs from an unhealthy mentality and that it is, first and last, destructive. And Gregers' degree of recognition never extends outside his particular brand of idealism. Gregers refuses to recognize that men can never live in the state of perfection he envisages, and, saddest of all, cannot make the transference of his idealistic aspirations to himself.

Although similar in his obtuseness, Hialmar is quite different from Gregers. He is simply a fool, but he is quite content, in his folly, with his dreams of an invention, and with the wife and daughter who live only for him. Gregers disturbs us with his destruction of the contentment of the Ekdal household, which is, after all, the best possible arrangement for the four people involved. But despite the fact that neither Hialmar nor Gregers is a likable or admirable person, each is at least representative of types found in modern society, and, as such, is worthy of major characterization in an important play.

The reader is inclined to wonder if Ibsen wanted us to consider Gregers and Hialmar as two parts of the same

protagonist. Often when an author splits a protagonist, he means his reader to accept one protagonist as the reasonable man who acts only according to the dictates of conscience and society, and the other as the man who can act as he pleases without regard to society. Hialmar and Gregers do not seem at first to fit this pattern. Neither is capable of effectively escaping social order. They do, however, fit the pattern in that together they produce action, thought, and events that one protagonist could not possibly produce. It seems most unlikely that Ibsen could have produced such a complex theme as that of The Wild Duck with a single protagonist.

A third character in The Wild Duck must be considered in any discussion concerning the protagonist of the play-- Dr. Relling, the perceptive physician who considers one of his duties the care of his friends' psychological well-being. His friend Molvik, who might be considered simply an alcoholic, he calls "demonic" in order to give the man a pride in himself he would not otherwise have. The inert Hialmar, Relling infuses with the idea that he is capable of some great invention. This kind of dream is the "life-illusion" Relling feels so important for happiness. "Illusion," he says, "is the stimulating principle" (p. 300).<sup>2</sup> Relling knows well enough what each person, including Gregers,

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<sup>2</sup>Page references from The Wild Duck found in the text of this chapter are from the Rhinehart edition of three of Ibsen's plays (New York, 1957).

really is. Thus, he is the only character in the play who seems capable of a significant degree of recognition, the quality so important to the protagonist of classical tragedy. But action, another very important quality for a protagonist, never centers in him or is inspired by him. He merely comments on what has happened and predicts the consequences of future action. His wisdom, however, goes unheeded. Like Sophocles' Tiresias, he is a character of great perception, but is never an agent. Hialmar and Gregers, with all their propensity for negative action and attitudes, do at least act, something Relling never does. Relling seems to personify Ibsen's own views most closely. As raisonneur, he interprets the action of the play and provides a high degree of recognition for the audience, yet recognition is never found in complete form in Relling or in his interpretations of situations and character.

The action of the play is set off by Gregers' exaggeration of his father's past deceit and conniving. Gregers is perhaps pushed into this recognition by a neurotic desire to punish his father for his treatment of Gregers' dead mother--a desire placed in him by the mother, mentally ill herself. For years Gregers has suffered from an obsessive detestation of his father, but his recognition of his father's motives is nonetheless valid. When Hialmar mentions the good things Werle senior has done for him--encouraged him to learn photography, set him up in business, made it possible for

him to marry--Gregers is at first pleased. "But, my dear Hialmar, I can't tell you what pleasure all this gives me--pleasure, and self-reproach. I have perhaps done my father injustice after all--in some things. This proves he has a heart. It shows a sort of compunction--" (p. 207). But when Gregers hears that Hialmar is married to Gina Hansen, the housekeeper with whom old Werle once had an affair, he suspects his father of dishonest designs, of using Hialmar for his own ends. It was old Werle who put Hialmar into a position to meet Gina. "Tell me," says Gregers, "was it after your engagement--was it then that my father--I mean was it then that you began to take up photography?" (p. 209). Hialmar's answer is, of course, yes, and Gregers is convinced of his father's duplicity.

Old Werle, in his reaction to Gregers' accusations, gives us insight into his son's character. When he discovers that it was Gregers' mother who told him of the affair with Gina, he says, "Your mother! I might have known as much! You and she--you always held together. It was she who turned you against me, from the first" (p. 217). Gregers denies that he is "overstrained" in his devotion to his mother's memory, but later accuses his father of only mercenary feelings when he married her: "Have you not yet forgiven her for the mistake you made in supposing she would bring you a fortune?" (p. 270). Werle, on hearing of his son's "mission in life," suspects what it is and, "muttering contemptuously," remarks, "Poor wretch--and he says he is

not overstrained!" (p. 222). In regard to Gregers' meddling with Hialmar's life, old Werle shows a degree of perception similar to Relling's. When Gregers exclaims, "Hialmar I can rescue from all the falsehood and deception that are bringing him to ruin," Werle, in reply, shows a recognition of Hialmar's character which Gregers lacks. "Do you think that will be doing him a kindness?...You think our worthy photographer is the sort of man to appreciate such friendly offices?" (pp. 269-70). Ironically, Mrs. Sorby and old Werle are the couple who achieve the true marriage, the "communion founded on truth" (p. 280), the kind of marriage that Gregers strives to attain for Hialmar. In the fourth act, Mrs. Sorby, in talking of their forthcoming marriage, says, "Your father knows every single thing that can, with any truth, be said about me. I have told him all; it was the first thing I did when I saw what was in his mind...And Werle has no secrets either, on his side. That's really the great bond between us, you see" (pp. 284-5).

In Relling's words, Hialmar is the idol Gregers is groveling before. He looks upon Hialmar as "a shining light," a person with great individuality and great depth of mind, capable of enormous spiritual growth. Because of this intense--although uncalled for--respect for Hialmar, Gregers desires to set him straight about his wife, the circumstances surrounding his marriage, and the basis for old Werle's kindness. He sees that Hialmar has become stodgy, notes with surprise that he refuses to acknowledge his

father in public, observes his poverty, and with characteristic reference to his idealism, Gregers decides to cure all Hialmar's ills by telling him the unvarnished facts. Gregers quite sincerely expects that "the claim of the ideal"--his conception of the truth--will jar Hialmar out of the "poisonous marsh," his metaphoric diagnosis of Hialmar's self-deception. Although Gregers is puzzled at Hialmar's refusal to respond to treatment as he expects him to, he never, even at the end of the play, recognizes Hialmar's character for what it really is.

In analyzing Hialmar and his troubles, Gregers says in Act I, "And there he is now, with his great, confiding, childlike mind, compassed about with all this treachery--living under the same roof with such a creature and never dreaming that what he calls his home is built upon a lie!" (p. 221). Later, when we recognize Hialmar's shallowness and Gina's goodness, this statement becomes ridiculous and by recognizing that the opposite is true, we gain insight into both Gregers and Hialmar. The lie which Gregers speaks of has never really existed and, at any rate, Gina's early affair with the elder Werle in no way influences her present home life. She is an excellent wife to Hialmar, and before Gregers' meddling the paternity of Hedvig, their young daughter, made no difference in their lives. There is no harmful lie in the Ekdal home. Trouble comes with Gregers' desire to purge what he considers his father's corrupting influence and to replace it with his false idea of the value



of integrity. "You have strayed into a poisonous marsh, Hialmar; an insidious disease has taken hold of you, and you have sunk down to die in the dark" (p. 263). True enough, Hialmar leads a shabby existence, but the shabbiness comes from his weakness of character, not from lack of idealism. This harsh fact Gregers cannot recognize, because he views Hialmar in an incorrect light. Yet in one way he is correct. Through Gregers, Ibsen seems to say that ideals are a very necessary part of life, but are good only for people with intelligence and vision enough to handle them. For people of the caliber of Hialmar and Gregers, they are only detrimental. The "insidious disease" Gregers speaks of is Hialmar himself, although Gregers does not recognize Hialmar's weakness. Through Hialmar's self-betrayal, however, the audience and the reader can.

Hialmar Ekdal is in reality a very small person, conceited without having anything to be egotistical about. We begin to recognize his smallness early in Act II, when we see that the dishonest person in the Ekdal family is not Gina, as Gregers believes, but Hialmar himself. At the Werle dinner party, Hialmar's social ignorance and naivete are shown up baldly. Yet when he tells the story of the dinner to his family, he becomes the hero of the anecdote. In Hialmar's telling, he told the Chamberlains about Tokay wine and the virtues of the vintages--not, as really happened, the other way around. But he says grandly, "The whole affair passed off quite amicably of course. They were

nice, genial fellows; I didn't want to wound them--not I!" (p. 229). Thus Hialmar has delivered himself the first of many compliments. Of course, within his family, Hialmar can be as expansive as he desires, for they--particularly old Ekdal and Hedvig--are more than willing to believe that he is as great as he thinks he is.

Time after time, in the natural flow of conversation, Hialmar reveals his vanity and self-indulgence. When Hedvig offers him bread and butter, Hialmar at first refuses, but then, "still melancholy," in his usual self-dramatizing manner, gives in: "Well, you can bring in a little all the same. If you have a crust, that is all I want. And plenty of butter, mind" (p. 263). Hialmar's love of butter symbolizes the sensuousness and selfishness of his character. Several times he boasts of his position as the provider for his family, yet Gina and Hedvig go hungry while Hialmar spreads his butter thick.

Hialmar's overwhelming vanity is repeatedly brought out.

Hialmar. A free-and-easy indoor costume suits my whole personality better. Don't you think so, Hedvig?

Hedvig. Yes, Father.

Hialmar. When I loosen my necktie into a pair of flowing ends--like this--eh?

Hedvig. Yes, that goes so well with your moustache and the sweep of your curls.

Hialmar. I should not call them curls exactly; I should rather say locks.

Hedvig. Yes, they are too big for curls.

Hialmar. Locks describes them better (p. 230).

Hjalmar, like Gregers, also has a "mission in life" which is a part of his conceit--his grand but nebulous invention. In talking of the invention he says to Gregers, "You must not think that my motive is vanity...I can raise up father's self-respect from the dead, by restoring the name of Ekdal to honor and dignity" (p. 260). Later this mission changes to future security for Hedvig. "That shall be the poor inventor's sole reward" (p. 267). Again he changes his object, when he hears of Werle's dishonesty, and desires to pay his debts. "That is my reason for proceeding with the invention. The entire profit shall be devoted to releasing me from my pecuniary obligations to Mr. Werle, Sr." (p. 268). Hjalmar sees himself as doing great things for others; in reality, he is parasitic. Gina carries on the photography business, and Hjalmar actually sleeps while supposedly meditating on the invention, or runs off to the pseudo-forest in the garret when he should be working. Hjalmar's self-blindness is symbolized in the fact that, though he is supposedly a photographer, he does none of the work. Gina, the perceptive person in the family, is the actual photographer.<sup>3</sup>

Hjalmar's selfishness shows up well in the incident of old Werle's gift, mentioned in a letter, to Hedvig and to his father, after Gregers has told him of Gina's past. Angry at Werle for putting him under further obligations, he

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<sup>3</sup>Reinert, op. cit., p. 462.

tears the letter in two. But next day, after thinking things over, he glues it back together with many excuses. "Far be it from me to lay hands upon what is not my own--and least of all what belongs to a destitute old man--and to--the other as well.--There now. Let lie there for a time; and when it is dry, take it away. I wish never to see that document again. Never!" (p. 309). This reversal in attitude is only a poorly concealed self-interest, a desire that the money from the gift pass to him.

All of Hialmar's undesirable characteristics are most brutally evident in his melodramatic denial of Hedvig. He is all too willing to disown her when he finally suspects that old Werle is her father. Hedvig, who adores Hialmar, is bewildered by her beloved father's strange new attitude and accepts Gregers' scheme of killing the wild duck in order to win him back. Hialmar is cruelly uninterested in what his repudiation may be doing to the child. While she is in the attic to shoot the duck, he and Gregers have the following conversation:

Gregers. Can you really think Hedvig has been false towards you?

Hialmar. I can think anything. It is Hedvig that stands in my way. She will blot the sunlight from my whole life.

Gregers. Hedvig! Is it Hedvig you are talking of? How should she blot your sunlight?...Hedvig will never, never leave you.

Hialmar. Don't be so sure of that. If only they beckon to her and throw out a golden bait--! And, oh! I have loved her so unspeakably! I would have counted it my highest happiness to take her tenderly by the hand and lead her, as one leads a

timid child through a great dark empty room!--I am cruelly certain now that the poor photographer in his humble attic has never really and truly been anything to her. She has only cunningly contrived to keep on a good footing with him until the time came.

Gregers. You don't believe that yourself, Hialmar.

Hialmar. That is just the terrible part of it--I don't know what to believe,-- I never can know it. But can you really doubt that it must be as I say? Ho-ho, you have far too much faith in the claim of the ideal, my good Gregers! If those others came, with the glamour of wealth about them, and called to the child:-- "Leave him: come to us: here life awaits you--!"

Gregers. Well, what then?

Hialmar. If I then asked her: Hedvig, are you willing to renounce that life for me? No thank you! You would soon hear what answer I should get (pp. 311-313).

Moments later "a pistol shot is heard from within the garret." Hedvig, perhaps overcome by her father's wild accusations, and certainly influenced by Gregers' idea of a ritual sacrifice, has committed suicide. Gregers and Hialmar seem in large part responsible. Hedvig is "willing to renounce life" for Hialmar.

At the beginning of the play, Hialmar indicates that, despite his unchanging denseness, he does have self-insight of a sort, which he loses after Gregers' meddling. When Gregers first mentions his mission in life and expresses a desire to rescue Hialmar from the "marsh poison," Hialmar says, "That's all very well; but you will please leave me out of it. I can assure you that--apart from my very natural melancholy, of course--I am as contented as anyone can

wish to be" (p. 263). So Hialmar too recognizes a truth, for him a most important truth. His comfortable home and the pleasant fiction of the invention make him as happy as he could possibly be. His mistake occurs when he abandons his notion of contentment for Gregers' "claim of the ideal." He even admits to himself at last that his invention is perhaps only an illusion--his "life-illusion." "Why, great heavens, what would you have me invent? Other people have invented almost everything already. It becomes more and more difficult every day--" (p. 310). But still he fails to recognize that the invention is only an illusion.

Gregers Werle is also given to self-incriminating statements. When he first mentions his noble mission to Hialmar, he says, "I, too, have a mission in life now: I found it yesterday" (p. 263). A mission found, thought about, and considered only since "yesterday" would seem to have only shaky foundations. Gregers' weakness is further revealed in Relling's scornful conversation with him on the "claims of the ideal" later in the same act.

Hialmar. Have you been presenting claims, Gregers?

Gregers. Oh, nonsense.

Relling. Faith, but he has, though! He went around to all the cottars' cabins presenting something he called "the claim of the ideal."

Gregers. I was young then.

Relling. You're right; you were very young. And as for the claim of the ideal--you never got it honored while I was up there.

Gregers. Nor since either.

Relling. Ah, then you've learnt to knock a little discount off, I expect.

Gregers. Never, when I have a true man to deal with (p. 265).

We note from this dialogue that Gregers' preoccupation with idealism is a long-standing obsession, and that repeated failure to convince people of the value of his crusade has not been able to make him recognize its futility. Although Gregers never recognizes it, the audience comes to see that in Hialmar too, he has not found "a true man to deal with." Hialmar is capable only of understanding the surface implications of Gregers' philosophy. His reaction to idealism is thoroughly ridiculous, a burlesque of what Gregers actually intended.

Gina, dull and uneducated though she may be, still achieves far more significant insights than do either her husband or Gregers. Through her, we recognize how well off Hialmar was before Gregers' intervention. Gregers she recognizes instantly as a hostile, unsettling influence and wants to have nothing to do with him. At the first mention of renting the spare room to Gregers, she is most reluctant. After his revelation to Hialmar, Gregers remarks somewhat patronizingly that Gina must certainly have "in her innermost heart...something loyal and sincere..." She replies, "almost crying," "You might have let me alone for what I was, then" (p. 281). She knows very well that Hialmar does not have the strength of character necessary for acceptance of her pre-marital affair, that Gregers is wrong in his expectations, and that her home can be happy only under the

conditions present before Gregers blundered in.

Gina's recognition of Hialmar's true character is shown in the rather pathetic statement she makes when he is declaiming his accusations. "But tell me, Ekdal, what would have become of you if you hadn't had a wife like me?" (p. 278). One is at once amused and distressed by Hialmar's huffy resentment of this statement. Gina is right, yet Hialmar is firmly convinced that all benefit from the marriage has been on Gina's side. She has picked up some amount of culture, he tells Gregers. After all, has she not spent all these years with a person as cultured as himself (p. 207)? Like Hedvig, Gina cannot understand Hialmar's repudiation; she "has only wanted to do the best I could for you all my days!" (p. 279).

As has been noted, Dr. Relling is the raisonneur of The Wild Duck. Despite his gruffness, he is a person sincerely interested in people for themselves--in keeping them happy and comfortable. He knows, as Gregers does not, that "truth" and "ideals" are useful only if they serve a constructive purpose, and that most people should be allowed to go through life without reference to such difficult concepts.

Relling's only concern is the happiness of his patient--though it may be noted that that happiness nowhere involves the unhappiness of others: But concepts like the good of society or the moral efficacy of the individual are not only excluded but repudiated.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Brian W. Downs, A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen (Cambridge, 1950), p. 169.



Idealism cannot work in a situation such as that found in The Wild Duck. Truth is relative, again and again, to the different characters. Concepts of truth and ideals such as Gregers holds are merely harmful and destructive to people like Hialmar. Instead of "the claim of the ideal," the Hialmars and Molviks of the world need what Relling calls "the life-illusion, the stimulating principle" (p. 300). This illusion gives them the self-respect they need. Most people are, in Relling's term, too "sick"--too weak--to have pride in themselves as they truly are. In remonstrating with Gregers, Relling says, "Rob the average man of his life-illusion and you rob him of his happiness at the same stroke" (p. 301). This, then, is Relling's perception of Hialmar, and, indeed, of most of humanity. Hialmar is the "average man"--frighteningly enough, the person like most of us, a person too weak to exist without the protective crutch of a pet illusion.

When Gregers zealously tries to show him truth and reality, Hialmar fails to live up to such ideals. He is a person so crass that nothing can ennoble him; nothing, we discover, can show him his errors or strengthen his character.

Gregers. Hedvig has not died in vain. Did you not see how sorrow set free what is noble in him?

Relling. Most people are ennobled by the actual presence of death. But how long do you suppose this nobility will last in him?

Gregers. Why should it not endure and increase throughout his life?

Relling. Before a year is over, little Hedvig will be nothing to him but a pretty theme for declamation.

Gregers. How dare you say that of Hialmar Ekdal?

Relling. We will talk of this again, when the grass has first withered on her grave. Then you'll hear him spouting about "the child too early torn from her father's heart;" then you'll see him steep himself in a syrup of sentiment and self-admiration and pity. Just you wait!  
(p. 317)

The tragedy of Hialmar Ekdal lies in the fact that absolutely nothing can shake him from the "poisonous marsh." This the reader or spectator can recognize clearly--by means of Relling's tough-minded convictions about ordinary human weaknesses.

But integrity of soul or character is not the answer either. Gregers, the misguided visionary, is characterized by Relling as "mad, cracked, demented." When asked what Gregers' trouble is, Rellings says, "He is suffering from an acute attack of integrity" (pp. 371-2). Relling sees Gregers' emphasis on and interpretation of truth as something essentially false for the "average man." If Gregers were not so rigidly, obsessively concerned with integrity, he might perceive that for Hialmar, integrity is unimportant, superfluous. As for Gregers, even integrity can be carried too far; obsessive idealism is a sickness. "Life," Relling tells Gregers, "would be quite tolerable, after all, if only we could rid of the confounded duns that keep on pestering us, in our poverty, with the claim of the ideal"

(p. 317). But Gregers, even after this strong statement, sees nothing wrong with pestering people. Like Relling, he wants to aid people "in their poverty," but he is too ignorant to know how to do it. As Relling tells him, he is blind to the true nature of the "average man."

Relling. ...I am simply giving you an inside view of the idol you are groveling before.

Gregers. I should hardly have thought I was quite stone blind.

Relling. Yes, you are--or not far from it. You are a sick man, too, you see.

Gregers. You are right there.

Relling. Yes. Yours is a complicated case. First of all there is that plaguy integrity-fever; and then--what's worse--you are always in a delirium of hero-worship; you must always have something to adore, outside yourself.

Gregers. Yes, I must certainly seek it outside myself.

Relling. But you make such shocking mistakes about every new phoenix you think you have discovered. Here again you have come to a cottar's cabin with your claim of the ideal; and the people of the house are insolvent (pp. 299-300).

Hjalmar's tragedy is personal insolvency, and one is tempted to say that Gregers' tragedy is the same. His ideals, Relling tells him, are only lies (p. 301).

The wild duck, used by Ibsen as the title of his play, seems to symbolize the theme, particularly in its relation to the prevalent imagery of blindness.<sup>5</sup> The problem of recognition in this play is intimately tied to the symbolism of

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<sup>5</sup>Reinert, op. cit.

the wild duck, and through analysis of the symbolism we may see more clearly the direction of Ibsen's theme. The approaching physical blindness of old Werle and Hedvig, and the mental blindness of Gregers and Hialmar, are highly significant to Ibsen's ultimate theme. These four characters, with the addition of old Ekdal, are all associated with the wild duck. Relling and Gina, the other two important characters of the play, are troubled neither with problems of vision nor are they related to the complicated wild duck symbolism. Significantly, these two people have the clearest perceptions of reality found in the play.

Old Werle, who is going blind, is actually the source of all the difficulty, as his affair with Gina makes him possibly the father of Hedvig. He is directly linked with the wild duck because he shot it. Gregers sees his father as the beginning of Hialmar's troubles.

The symbol of blindness also reveals Ibsen's recurring interest in problems of heredity. Hedvig could have inherited her poor sight from old Werle or from Hialmar's mother (p. 235), so that we can never know with any certainty who her father is. Gregers and Hialmar are, like their parents, blind, although theirs is a mental blindness. Each refers often to the other's blindness and talks of the "need for a friend's watchful eye" (p. 271)--yet neither recognizes that he himself has the same difficulty.

Hedvig's lack of perception may perhaps be excused on the grounds of her youth, yet we are disturbed by its

completeness. One expects her to have at least a little insight into the events which so concern her. Her physical blindness is important only to the plot, although perhaps, as Otto Reinert suggests, it is "simply a symbol of her blindness to her father's obvious moral shortcomings."<sup>6</sup>

Hedvig's relation to the wild duck is more complicated than is old Werle's. She claims the duck as her personal pet, although Hialmar and his father seem to feel that they have a prior claim to it. Like Hialmar, she at first has no symbolic understanding of the duck, but, unfortunately, Gregers is later able "to open her eyes" (p. 262) in a vague way to his interpretation. "Suppose you were to make a free will offering, for Hialmar's sake, of the dearest treasure you have in the world!" (p. 295). She now sees the duck as an obstacle to Hialmar's love, and the idea of sacrificing it seems to charm her. One cannot help wondering, however, if this sacrifice is truly "a free-will offering." Like the wild duck, she cannot control her fate. She has been prod- ded and forced by outside sources into a position which, to her, necessitates suicide. At the climax of the play, she is, in a strange sort of way, given a full identification with the wild duck because she takes for herself the death intended for the pet; she, rather than the hated symbol, becomes the sacrificial victim. Ironically, in sacrificing herself to Hialmar, she has offered herself to a completely

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<sup>6</sup>Reinert, op. cit., p. 462.

unworthy idol. Her death will not make Hialmar one bit more perceptive concerning himself and his life.

For Gregers, the wild duck soon becomes a symbol on several levels. It is a symbol of the self-deception in the Ekdal family; it is a symbol of Hialmar; and, most important, it is a symbol of Gregers' own "mission in life," the freeing of the Ekdals from the "poisonous marsh." In the first act of the play, old Werle, in talking to his son Gregers, refers to old Ekdal by saying, "There are people in the world who dive to the bottom the moment they get a couple slugs in their body and never come to the surface again" (p. 216). The wild duck, after being shot by old Werle and getting "a couple slugs in her body," (p. 241), did what old Ekdal says all wild ducks do under the circumstances. They "dive to the bottom and bite themselves fast in the tangle and seaweed...And they never come up again" (p. 242). This wild duck was brought to the surface again by old Werle's "amazingly clever dog" (p. 242). The duck was then given to the Ekdal family. After hearing his father's statement--surely a very deliberate device on the part of Ibsen--and seeing the wild duck in its sham forest habitat, it is easy for Gregers to make the wild duck a symbol for what he considers the Ekdal family's predicament. Upon observing the Ekdals after many years of separation, Gregers decides that he would most like to be "an amazingly clever dog; one that goes to the bottom after wild ducks when they dive and bite themselves fast in tangle and seaweed, down among the ooze"

(p. 244). The Ekdals, Gregers thinks, live a falsehood just as does the wild duck. His mission life must then be to rescue them, particularly Hialmar, from the "poisonous marsh" of their existence--be a savior, an "amazingly clever dog." Thus in symbolizing for Gregers the Ekdal lie, the wild duck also symbolizes his own mission in life, the so-called "claim of the ideal."

The fifth person in this thematic grouping is completely related to the wild duck symbolism. In treating old Ekdal, Ibsen says directly that the duck and its habitat are symbolic of the life-illusion.

Relling. ...And then the old lieutenant! But he has hit upon his own cure, you see.

Gregers. Lieutenant Ekdal? What of him?

Relling. Just think of the old bear hunter shutting himself up in that dark garret to shoot rabbits! I tell you there is not a happier sportsman in the world than that old man pottering about in there among all that rubbish. The four or five withered Christmas trees he has saved up are the same to him as the whole great fresh Hoidal forest; the cock and the hens are big-game birds in the fir-tops; and the rabbits that flop about the garret floor are the bears he has to battle with--the mighty hunter of the mountains! (p. 301).

Old Ekdal escapes from his disgrace and from his unpleasant life through alcoholism and, more important, through the delusion that the garret is the forest. There is nothing wrong with this escapism: it is the only thing which makes the old man's life bearable. His escape from reality is almost total, and in consequence he is as happy as he could

possibly be. Gregers, of course, does not understand the foundation for this happiness and sees in old Ekdal only someone to be greatly pitied because "he has indeed had to narrow the ideals of his youth" (p. 301).

The wild duck is a creature whose natural habitat is the sky and the sea. A dingy little garret certainly is not the place where one would expect it to be happy, but as Hialmar tells Gregers, "She has got fat. You see, she has lived there so long that she has forgotten her natural wild life; and it all depends on that." After such a long period of contentedly allowing others to care for him, Hialmar has no more idea of how to fend for himself than has the wild duck. We realize when recalling the food symbolism that Hialmar in his habitat too "has got fat."

The wild duck is not, as Gregers interprets it, a symbol of self-deception. Instead, it symbolizes the extremely satisfactory adjustment a handicapped creature may make to its environment. It represents "truth" for each of the characters it symbolizes. Although Hialmar does not recognize it, his freedom is severely limited by a cage of personality. He is decreed by the confining aspects of his personality and character to live a certain kind of life. He is confined to and assiduously protected by the loving microcosm of his family, and here he leads a satisfactory enough life for him. When, after Gregers' ministrations, he tries to leave it, disaster ensues.



"The key to Ibsen's concept of tragedy," says Sverre Arestad, "centers on the question of whether or not man is free to order his life as he chooses."<sup>7</sup> In The Wild Duck, the action largely revolves, Otto Reinert says, around "the struggle between Gregers Werle and Dr. Relling for control over Hialmar Ekdal's destiny."<sup>8</sup> The latter statement seems to preclude any free will at all for Hialmar, yet the possibility of freedom of choice for Hialmar and for the other characters is not so cut and dried as this statement implies. The answer to the problem of man's freedom remains the same as it would if the treatment of it in this play were more straightforward. Man's freedom is circumscribed, as is the wild duck's, by environmental and temperamental characteristics. In this play, the audience recognizes that tragedy results, in part at least, because man has tampered with his own destiny. Hialmar is coaxed by Gregers outside the bounds of his proper destiny, yet Hialmar believes in fate and in providence. He says at one point, with a great irony which can be caught only by the audience, "After all, I cannot but recognize the guiding finger of fate" (p. 288). The audience knows well that Hialmar recognizes nothing, particularly not his own fate. He feels smugly that old Werle's blindness is providential retribution for past sins. "And

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<sup>7</sup>Sverre Arestad, "Ibsen's Concept of Tragedy," Publications of the Modern Language Association, LXXIV (1959), p. 285.

<sup>8</sup>Reinert, op. cit., p. 485.

now comes inexorable, mysterious Fate and demands Werle's own eyes" (p. 288). But Hialmar does not have the perception to realize that "inexorable Fate" may demand for his own errors something fully as important as eyesight. "You two are grown-up people; you are free, in God's name, to make what mess and muddle you please of your life" (p. 282), says Relling desperately, in attempting to make Hialmar recognize his responsibility for Hedvig's well-being. To the bitter extent of "making a mess of his life" Hialmar is free. Because he has little self-perception, he will never know that trying to be and do something he is incapable of has caused his tragedy. Man (in this play) is too blind to recognize why and where he has erred, and so the author must make insight possible to the audience in a way other than through traditional recognition by the protagonist. Ibsen has here moved away from his more Aristotelian treatment of recognition in An Enemy of the People. Recognition is now ultimately dependent upon the degree of insight in the audience.

Ibsen in The Wild Duck has neatly opposed "idealism" and "truth," with their respective watchwords, "the claim of the ideal," and the "life-illusion." He wants his audience to perceive that for many people a sterile, directionless idealism is worthless, even destructive. Idealism is appropriate only for people intelligent and courageous enough to handle it in a healthy and constructive manner. In the

place of ideals for the "average man," Ibsen wants us to recognize that a satisfying self-image or "life-illusion" is a better way out. Truth is relative to the individual and his particular situation: no absolute right and wrong is possible when one is dealing with the contentment of the human mind.

Finally, Ibsen presents his audience with the theory that each person's freedom of choice is circumscribed by his own characteristics and abilities. We are free to choose for ourselves only in so far as we do not go beyond our limitations. To play with this strictly bounded personal fate can only invite catastrophe. Hialmar is not the only character in the play to ignore destiny; Gregers, the author of all the trouble, has no real conception of freedom either for himself or for anyone else. The play ends with a most ironic line--Gregers' description of his destiny: "To be the thirteenth at table" (p. 317). He is obtuse to the end. His only insight into what has happened or into himself is that he brings bad luck to others. Beyond this he has no true conception of the meaning of responsibility.

## CHAPTER IV

### MILLER: DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, is, I feel, an important and deeply moving contribution to contemporary American literature. The fanfare which surrounded its appearance, in 1949, has subsided, and many of the critical opinions now advanced concerning it are adverse, unenthusiastic, or slighting. However, the years which have passed since the play's opening on Broadway have not taken away the significance it holds for modern audiences.

Miller says on the title page of his play that it concerns "certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem." This statement suggests a technique for audience insight: Miller wants the audience to see the protagonist, Willy Loman, in the light of his most private and personal thoughts and emotions. We come to know Willy intimately through his words, his voiced thoughts, and the reminiscences to which he is inclined. We are also aided to an understanding of Willy and his problem through Miller's stage setting, which brings to mind the experimental theater of the twenties. Willy's house, like Willy himself a leftover from earlier days, stands boxed in by "the towering

walls of apartment buildings" (p. 1).<sup>1</sup> These walls, constantly surrounding the action of the play, seem symbolic of the social forces which suffocate and finally crush Willy (p. 12). After Willy's suicide and funeral, the play ends "as over the house the hard towers of the apartment buildings rise into sharp focus..." (p. 152). Willy's weak individuality cannot survive the viciously impersonal "towers" of a crushing society.

In this stage setting Miller adheres to the contemporary trend of symbolizing, through visual means, the mental condition and agony of the characters. Thus recognition is still further removed from traditional Aristotelian recognition than in Ibsen. Yet Miller's descent from Ibsen is obvious in many ways.

Like Ibsen, Miller is concerned with the mechanics of society, its pressures, its harmful influences, its self-preservative wisdom. Both men are concerned with the meaning of justice and of freedom, and with the dubious ability of man to control his own fate. Death of a Salesman, like An Enemy of the People, deals with a protagonist who is beaten down by society, but Willy Loman is completely crushed by society, whereas Dr. Stockmann's spirit remains undaunted.

Miller has gone beyond the Ibsen of An Enemy of the

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<sup>1</sup>Page references inserted in the text are from the Bantam Book edition of Death of a Salesman, specially expanded by the author (New York, 1955).

People in the technique of audience recognition. While Ibsen permitted almost all his characters some degree of insight into their problems and responsibilities, Willy never discovers anything of importance. Miller has then taken tragic recognition almost entirely away from his protagonist and thrust it into the mind of his audience. But since Willy lacks insight into himself, and since no one of the other characters approaches a total understanding of Willy, Miller must make recognition for the audience possible through means other than simply the perceptions of his characters. In Death of a Salesman, we see the value standard of contemporary American society and its effect on the people of that society. Via the various characters, their adjustment to society, their goals, ambitions, and dreams, the audience comes to recognize wherein and why the characters, especially Willy, have failed or succeeded. As in An Enemy of the People, the author provides the audience with foci of recognition through his characters.

The most important way in which Miller offers recognition to his audience is through Willy himself. To dramatize for the audience Willy's mind, Miller uses a stream-of-consciousness dramatic technique. "The past," Miller says in his stage directions, "keeps flowing into the present, bringing its scenes and its characters with it--and sometimes we shall see both past and present simultaneously" (p. 4). The "past" comes from the memories that rise out of Willy's subconscious mind, memories inspired by and related

to events of the "present." This recognition device is found nowhere in Ibsen, but it does what Miller intended it should--the audience is supplied with significant insight into Willy's character, his problems and his dreams.

Willy Loman is not a completely blind protagonist. He is acutely aware that something is drastically wrong with society and with his own position in it, but he never recognizes what is wrong or why. He feels that he is worth more dead than alive (p. 104), and that somehow he has failed to live up to society's and to his own demands. But he never recognizes what has destroyed him or what his personal responsibility for his destruction has been.

Willy Loman's view of society and his theory of how one achieves success are the primary reasons for his fall at sixty-three to his present pitiable state. His fall is not, like those of Oedipus, Othello, or even Dr. Stockmann, a calamity grand in its sudden destruction, but is rather a decline determined from the beginning because Willy is the kind of person he is. Nevertheless, society has not been kind to Willy; he is not entirely to blame for his errors and failures.

Society has been, in large part, responsible for the dream that has fostered Willy's tragedy. After his father's suicide, Happy, fully as self-deluded as Willy, says, "He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have--to come out number-one man" (p. 151). Willy's interpretation of "number-one man"--and unfortunately Happy's, too--is to be

the best-known, best-liked, most talked about and biggest money-making salesman in the City of New York. In his all-consuming search for success as just defined, Willy finds only poverty and total failure. Willy has, as Happy admits of himself, "an overdeveloped sense of competition" (p. 22). His competitiveness and the reasons behind it blind him completely to the fact that success may be defined in terms other than money and fame.

For Willy, a successful life is a completely acquisitive life. Possessions are measured in terms of how costly they are, how glossy, or how impressive. Intrinsic worth is ignored, as having no attention-calling value. Willy chose the kind of refrigerator he purchased because "they got the biggest ads of any of them!" (p. 33). The refrigerator, of course, is a symbol. Its only--and dubious--merit is ostentation. As an efficient machine, it is worthless.

As adolescents, Willy's boys are simply other possessions to be shown off. Willy is proud of them because he can brag about their handsome appearance and athleticism. He feels certain that these attributes are all they need for rewarding, successful lives. Intelligence and moral values are meaningless. He is wrong; his boys are like the refrigerator, glossy outside and valueless to themselves and others inside. The ideas Willy has instilled in them can only be detrimental.

The boys are encouraged to believe that being "well liked" is the most important factor--and almost the only



one--involved in future success. In speaking of Bernard, "earnest and loyal," an intelligent neighbor boy, Willy says, "Bernard is not well liked, is he?"

Biff: He's liked, but he's not well liked.

Happy: That's right, Pop.

Willy: That's just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want (p. 31).

"Be liked and you will never want." It is a fascinating thought, but one can starve to death on such a philosophy. Willy's use of the word "understand" in the above passage is also interesting, for Willy certainly does not "understand." Despite his unattractive appearance, Bernard succeeds. He emphasizes and develops qualities more important than good looks.

Perhaps the reason Willy places such emphasis on attractive personal appearance and popularity is that, in reality, he has always lacked both and somehow connects this lack with his own life-long mediocrity. On rare occasions, he admits as much. Immediately after saying, "I'm very well liked in Hartford," he adds, "...the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me...They seem to laugh at me... I'm not noticed...I talk too much...I'm fat. I'm very foolish to look at, Linda...I know I gotta overcome it..."

(pp. 34-5). But he can never fully recognize the fact that he, Willy Loman, is less than he needs to be for his kind of success, and he never does "overcome it." His dubious insight fails him when he does not recognize that other factors besides obesity and volubility are involved in this lack of success. Despite Happy's vehement statement to the contrary, Willy's dream was the wrong dream for him and it plays a large part in his failure. And so when faced with Willy's dream, in all its pathetic crassness, the audience is able to evaluate, from a consideration of Willy's obvious self-deceptions and self-betrayals, what is wrong with the "good dream" and why it could not come true for Willy and his family or for any middle class American family.

Willy's interpretation of society is almost inextricably bound up with his dream of success, so much so that it is difficult to determine whether his dream produced his interpretation, or vice versa. Certainly the society in which Willy moves employs a financial standard of success. The salesman who makes the largest number of sales is looked on with most favor by his company's officials and with greatest envy by competing salesmen. He brings to the company more money than anyone else and takes home a greater sales percentage. Willy obviously does not do as well as his company, or he himself, expects. As a mediocre salesman, he has, in his old age, been denied even salary: he now earns only his commissions. When Willy asks for a position that does not entail travel, his young employer, Howard Wagner,

finds it easy to dismiss him because he has been a failure on his old sales route. As John Gassner says,

...But Willy is also an employee, who has become superannuated. He is ready for the scrap-heap, a fate to which he could not have resigned himself easily, given his character, even if he could have drawn old-age benefits or a pension...In other words, Willy is a "social problem" as a discarded employee, and a "human problem" as a personality too big in his feelings and pretensions to be merely a case history soluble by social legislation.<sup>2</sup>

Like Willy, his society is bent on a frantic race for more money and more and more glittering acquisitions. When Willy becomes incapable of contributing to the acquisitive circle, he must be disposed of, his dreams still unfulfilled. Willy's dismissal seems particularly brutal. Howard, approximately the same age as Willy's unsuccessful son Biff, is engrossed with his new tape recorder and cannot be bothered with Willy's problem, life and death though it may be. "Look, kid," he says, "I'm busy this morning" (p. 87). He then fires Willy without any apparent thought for Willy's tenuous future.

In the requiem, the sane, successful neighbor, Charley, in defining for us what Willy, in his role of salesman, has been, explains why Willy had to have his impossible dream.

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And

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<sup>2</sup>John Gassner, The Theater in Our Times (New York, 1954), p. 347.

for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back--that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory (p. 150).

Although Charley is correct in saying that Willy cannot be blamed for being a failure, and thus for committing suicide-- "They started not smiling back"--he is wrong in implying that Willy's was a healthy dream.

Biff, the older son, in defining Willy as a father and as a member of society as a whole, knows too well that Willy's dreams were bad. "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong...Charley, the man didn't know who he was" (p. 150). In this statement, Biff pinpoints for us Willy's tragedy: "He never knew who he was." Like Oedipus and other traditional tragic characters, Willy, through his dream, is searching (albeit unconsciously) for self-identity, but unlike Oedipus, he never discovers his identity.

Happy, the younger son, defends Willy's dream, as we have noted, and adopts as his legacy from Willy the same kind of ambition. The audience can be certain that Happy will never be any more successful than his father. Willy's dream was not a good dream, but Happy will mistakenly fight for it all his life anyway.

Linda, on the other hand, is well acquainted with her

husband's faults. She, Miller points out in his stage directions, "has developed an iron mastery of her objections to her husband" (p. 5). She knows he lies and cheats, but she loves him nonetheless and remains loyal. "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog" (p. 58). What is the "terrible thing" that is happening to Willy? He has grown old and, in desperation, realizes that his dream is not yet fulfilled. With great sympathy, Linda knows that despite Willy's failures, he still deserves and must be given the respect due any human being. As in Greek drama, man here is felt to have a vital dignity which is his, simply because he is human, and which must not be taken from him.

While Willy finally realizes that he has not achieved his dream, he refuses to relinquish the transference of his goal to Biff's life. He cannot recognize that Biff is even less fitted for the acquisitive life than he. He commits suicide with perfect faith in his dream, feeling that his death and the insurance money it will bring will enable Biff to gain great success in business. Willy thinks that he is sacrificing himself to Biff's future. Ironically, Willy's interpretation of the dream of success has long since prevented Biff from achieving anything noteworthy--particularly

happiness--either in business or in his personal life.

Willy is almost heroic in his ability to hold on to his impossible dream. But his tenacity makes one uneasy. Surely even an obtuse spectator can tell that Willy is on the wrong track, that everyone concerned would have better off, had Willy indulged in a different kind of dream. This, then, is perhaps the most obvious recognition that reader or audience achieves: the dreams foisted on one by a vulgar society are harmful and the dreamer would be better off with a less stereotyped vision of himself and of the good life. Willy has been deluded all his life as to what makes the good life. His delusions are those fostered by our acquisitive society, but had Willy been more perceptive, he might have seen through them. Willy's narrow perception prevents him from realizing wherein he erred, but one wonders if he would change even if he could recognize his delusions for what they are. He cannot see any reason for changing his mode of existence or for accepting better values simply because he is a miserable failure.

Like Dr. Stockmann of An Enemy of the People, Willy Loman tries to will his life into a pattern acceptable to his dream. But while Willy wants to mold himself into a mercenary society's vision of the successful man, Stockmann has no use for "success" as such. What Willy seems unable to recognize is that he is constitutionally incapable of such a life pattern. He is not intelligent enough either to

become a success or to recognize that success is not always measured in money and fame. In order to foster the illusion that he is attaining his dream, Willy's life has been built largely on lies. He has lied even to his wife in order to keep up appearances.

Linda. ...Did you sell anything?

Willy. I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston.

Linda. No! Wait a minute, I've got a pencil. That makes your commission... Two hundred--my God! Two hundred and twelve dollars!

Willy. Well, I didn't figure it yet, but...

Linda. How much did you do?

Willy. Well, I--I did about a hundred and eighty gross in Providence. Well, no--it came to--roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip (pp. 32-3).

Linda, however, is not surprised at his exaggeration; evidently he lies frequently about his commissions. Obviously, Willy wants desperately to be as successful as the dishonest figures indicate.

Ultimately his innocent self-deception fools no one and turns out to be not so innocent after all. In order that his dreams be not totally frustrated, he thrusts them on to his adored and adoring older son, Biff. But quite deliberately, he also gives Biff his own dishonesty. It is Willy who teaches Biff to lie, to steal, to expect from life something completely unrealistic. At the same time that he gives Biff his goals, he makes it impossible for Biff ever to attain them. When Biff steals a football, Willy congratulates his initiative. When Biff refuses to study, Willy

encourages him to cheat and make fun of good students. When Biff is chased by the police for stealing lumber, Willy's only comment is that Biff is a "fearless character," and anyway, it was fine lumber. Willy encourages Biff to think that his good looks, his athletic prowess, and his popularity will carry him through any situation. These hollow values are enough to thwart any possibilities Biff might have had for a normally successful life. In addition, at the point when he most needs the guidance of the father he has grown up to believe almost a god, a perfect human being, he discovers that Willy possesses a full share of human weakness. When Biff finds Willy in a hotel room with a strange woman, the aid and advice his father might have provided lose all value. Biff's life is now really lost, but Willy never understands why. Willy resolutely refuses to recognize that he is in large part responsible for Biff's unhappy, misguided life. "Spite," Willy stubbornly calls Biff's failure, placing the blame for it obstinately on Biff's high school failure in mathematics, and on a desire to punish Willy for his infidelity.

Joseph Wood Krutch says of Death of a Salesman that it "tells the story of the final dismal years of a pathetic traveling salesman who is the victim partly of his own vulgar idea of success, partly of a social system which encourages just such vulgar ideals."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York, 1957), p. 325.



The unconscious guilt Willy feels about failing his family comes out in the hard to suppress guilt he feels concerning his infidelity to Linda. The affair with the woman in Boston is a shabby, insignificant thing, carried on, it appears, only because traveling salesmen are supposed to be, by tradition, rakes. Willy takes to his mistress precious silk stockings, while Linda darns her own time after time for lack of money to buy new. Throughout the play, Willy's uncomfortable guilt feelings appear whenever he sees Linda darning her stockings. After Biff discovers his father's affair and finds that he gives stockings to the woman, Willy's guilt concerning Linda's stockings becomes obsessive.

In Death of a Salesman, Biff Loman is the only character who achieves a significant recognition, thus defining Willy's lack of recognition. One suspects that he has known for some time that he is fated to fail at his father's and society's idea of success, but as the play opens, he is still willing to deceive himself with visions of great success. He and Happy will go into business together as the "Loman Brothers." First, he plans a large cattle ranch and, after that, a sporting goods concern. He talks of Bill Oliver, a former employer who he says once offered to help him out. Willy urges him to ask Oliver for fifteen thousand dollars for the business venture. But when Biff sees Oliver, he recognizes his self-deception. "How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave

me one look and--I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk" (p. 111). He tries to tell Willy what he has discovered, but Willy will have none of it. "The man don't know who we are!" Biff cries in desperation. "The man is gonna know! We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house...And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!" (pp. 142-3).

Willy. Then hang yourself! For spite, hang yourself!

Biff. No! Nobody's hanging himself, Willy! I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy? (p. 143).

Biff is, however, also blind to some things. Although his discovery of himself is an honest one, and his recognition of Willy's "hot air" is the truth, he takes no personal responsibility for what he is. As a youth, he walked away from a situation he could no longer bear, but he should, by now, have overcome the hurt he felt at discovering his father human. Biff's unproductive life is not simply Willy's fault, but his own, in part.

Despite his failure to realize the viciousness of his dream, Willy does come to a few subconscious recognitions about himself and his situation in the course of the play. "The woods are burning!" (p. 41) he cries desperately, knowing that he is losing control of himself and that his world is becoming shaky and unbalanced. But it is a personal burning--he does not realize that his problems may be extended to much of American society. Further, he does not or will not recognize that the burning is at least partially his own fault. Realizing, although not understanding, the futility of his life, he says, "Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (p. 104). It is a sad comment on American society, as well as on Willy, that a man can work so hard for so many years only to find at the end of his life that he has earned no reward and no satisfaction. Admitting defeat is, in Willy's words, better than "standing here the rest of my life ringing up a zero" (p. 136). And so, perhaps Willy's suicide is justified. Certainly it seems unlikely that, at sixty-three, he will change drastically or have any revelations of what he is and why. Even if he did, such a revolution could hardly, at this late date, have much effect on the ruined lives of his wife and sons.

One is apt to wonder, after becoming acquainted with Death of a Salesman, if the depressing Willy Loman is the single example of how a person must deal with mercenary

social standards. But in this play, we also find a person who, although his values, too, are somewhat warped, has not been crushed by the acquisitive society and who managed to maintain his equilibrium successfully. Charley lives under the same social rules and values as Willy, but he has remained relaxed and comfortably sane. He seems objective, able to evaluate his position clearly and critically. He is generous, loyal and kind, and has remained a balanced man because he has been wise enough not to become obsessed with success as a goal in itself. He says jokingly, "My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything" (p. 101). But this is not really a sarcastic remark; Charley actually has been saved from Willy's fate because he has refused to take seriously the constant acquisitive pressures of society. Willy has attempted goals impossible for him to attain; the easy-going Charley has never gone beyond his limitations.

In speaking, at the funeral, of the financial obligations of a lifetime which have recently been alleviated, Linda sobs, "Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. We're free. We're free...We're free..." (p. 151). Ironically, the Lomans of the world can never know freedom while they remain tied to false and unsuitable goals, partly self-imposed and partly imposed by social order.

## CHAPTER V

### O'NEILL: THE ICEMAN COMETH

When Eugene O'Neill wrote The Iceman Cometh, he gave to American drama a puzzling but fascinating play. Perhaps because of the baffling difficulties involved in reading it, few good studies of the drama are available. The play calls for a more perceptive audience and a more strenuous effort on its part than do any of the other plays discussed in this thesis. O'Neill masks his theme behind a heavy verbosity and a bewildering tangle of theories and ideas, finally leaving any definite statement of theme up to the individual reader or spectator. O'Neill forces recognition upon the audience in a way different from anything previously observed in this thesis.

Only through a verbal and thematic analysis can one make sense of the play. Very early, O'Neill sets up certain word--phrase--idea patterns which become the clue to recognition. The most obvious of these is the drunkenness/death/peace pattern which leads eventually into O'Neill's theme of nihilism. O'Neill has set up for the derelicts several word equations involving this pattern. The first is that drunkenness equals happiness. The second, that drunkenness is hope,

becomes the all-important "pipe dream." The tavern proprietor's name--Harry Hope--is significant here, for he is a vendor of liquor and drunkenness, the carrier of hope and happiness. From this equation naturally follows the third equation: drunkenness equals the pipe dream which means peace. Peace, however, enters into another word series which is finally, we come to recognize, of great importance to O'Neill's theme. Sleep equals death equals peace. The final equation links all these concepts: drunkenness is death, thus peace.

Another verbal pattern, which operates in opposition to the pattern stated above, is that employed by Hickey. He begins with the sleep/death/peace equation which figures in the pattern stated above. But in Hickey's opinion liquor and a pipe dream are at direct variance with the true bases of peace. Thus, it follows that peace equals disillusionment.

The action of the play occurs in Harry Hope's tavern, a drab, dismal bar inhabited by a collection of drunken derelicts, a couple of bartenders, who are actually pimps, and their prostitute girl friends. All of them are sustained in their hopeless lives by quite implausible but very pleasant pipe dreams. Their illusions and impossible hopes are supported by drunkenness. Twice a year the monotony of their existence is relieved by visits from Theodore Hickman, a hardware salesman. As the play opens, the characters are all awaiting Hickey's arrival for Harry's birthday party.

They become worried when Hickey is overdue. He has always provided happiness and laughter for the derelicts through his free drinks and carefree personality. When he does arrive, however, his friends are distressed to see a sober and changed Hickey. He has decided that pipe dreams are evil, feels that he has shed his own, and wants to "convert" the derelicts to the illusionless peace he thinks he has found for himself. Through the conversion attempt, which absorbs most of Acts II and III, he makes his friends far more miserable than they have ever been. And ironically it develops toward the end of the play that Hickey's "peace" was founded on his murder of his wife and that his desire to rid the derelicts of their illusions stems from a fear that his new-found peace is not so real as he wants to believe.

The second of the three major characters of the play is Larry Slade, who has convinced himself that he is without illusion--the only one of the bums at Hope's who has no pipe dream. Larry sees himself as a man of reason, and thus he becomes the raisonneur of the play, albeit a strange one. He is perhaps the most interesting character of the drama, and it is through him that the audience gains much of its insight. Larry, despite what he says, does have an illusion--that he is without illusion. This satisfying self-image is endangered by the arrival of Don Parritt, the son of Rosa Parritt, the woman leader of a West-Coast Anarchist group with whom Larry had formerly been associated, and with whom he had been in love. As the play develops, we discover

that Parritt has sold out the "Movement." He is himself confused as to why he did so, pleading first patriotism, then greed, and then lechery, but it becomes evident that he was pushed by a desire to betray his mother, whom he hates for her coldness toward him and for her promiscuity.

In the fourth act, "Jimmy Tomorrow," a former newspaper reporter, voices the problem of everyone at the tavern. "I discovered early in life that living frightened me when I was sober" (p. 229).<sup>1</sup> They are all, as Larry says in the third act, "afraid to live...and even more afraid to die," and they sit waiting to die at Hope's, with their "pride drowned on the bottom of a bottle" (pp. 196-7). It is into this atmosphere of insecure, though satisfying, illusion that Hickey--the small-town hick--comes with his visions of salvation. Dr. Relling of The Wild Duck would have been most perturbed with Hickey, for Relling saw illusion as "the stimulating principle," the giver of the will to live.<sup>2</sup> Hickey, however, with an attitude very similar to that of Gregers Werle, sees pipe dreams as the enemy of "peace and contentment," thus as the enemy of death--the death which equals peace. Like Gregers, Hickey can bring only misery and disaster to his subjects. In one of the many ironies of the play, Hickey declares in the important curtain lines of

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<sup>1</sup>Citations from the text of The Iceman Cometh refer to the Random House edition of the play (New York, 1946).

<sup>2</sup>See Chapter III of this thesis.



the first three acts that the major objective in his anti-pipe dream campaign is to bring happiness.

The lengthy fourth act of The Iceman Cometh thrusts all of O'Neill's theories into one intense, tantalizing, and thought-provoking situation. The focal point of the act--and thus, of the play--is Hickey's confession to his wife's murder. Through an investigation of this confession, we discover many of the ideas basic to the theme of the play. Shortly before his arrival at Hope's, Hickey shot Evelyn, his wife. For years she had dreamed that one day he would correct his drunken and promiscuous behavior, and finally this faith--Evelyn's pipe dream--goads Hickey into killing her. Through the reasons for this killing we get at the most important aspect of Hickey's character.

Hickey says, in the latter part of his confession, "I'd get thinking how peaceful it was here, sitting around with the old gang, getting drunk and forgetting love" (p. 240). But Hickey has previously claimed two things which are directly opposed to this statement. The fact is that Evelyn--and their mutual love--was, he says, the most important part of life for him. The second is that Hickey is pushing a particular brand of peace which he feels is infinitely superior to anything his friends have previously known. Why, then, should Hickey sound so wistfully envious of the peace and good times they had before he tried to rearrange their lives? The answer probably lies in the fact that Hickey has convinced himself that killing Evelyn is the

only key to his own survival. He has rationalized until, in his own mind, killing Evelyn was a great kindness, was actually his duty. With Evelyn gone, the source of all his terrible guilt feelings is gone, and he has peace of mind--of a sort. He further rationalizes until he feels that getting rid of his pipe dream--the pretense that he will straighten out--is the only action available to him.

But the peace of mind Hickey has thus achieved is based on a poor foundation, and somehow he must convince himself that it is indeed a solid, worthwhile peace. He does so by trying to convince his friends at Hope's tavern that with the shedding of their illusions will come a mystical, marvelous kind of peace which will completely reverse the direction of their lives. Hickey, however, has also been suffering from a delusion. What he has been peddling to his friends under the name of peace is not peace at all. After Hickey has been arrested, Hugo, another ex-Anarchist, expresses the delusion by saying, "I don't feel I am dying now. He was selling death to me, that crazy salesman" (p. 249).

At least consciously, Hickey never realizes that he has been "selling death." After listening for some time to his friends choring, "We can't pass out! And you promised us peace," Hickey "bursts into resentful exasperation," saying, "For God's sake, Harry, are you still harping on that damned nonsense!...I've had about all I can stand...I'm just worried about you, when you play dead on me like this...I

thought you were deliberately holding back, while I was around, because you didn't want to give me the satisfaction of showing me I'd had the right dope" (pp. 224-5). What Hickey "can't stand" is the thought that his prescription for peace may be invalid, that his peace may be the wrong kind. His friends aren't "playing dead," they are dead. Hickey continues, "And you've done what you needed to do! By rights you should be contented now, without a single damned hope or lying dream left to torment you! But here you are, acting like a lot of stiff's cheating the undertaker!" (p. 225).

The tavern has previously been compared to a morgue (p. 63, p. 70). One is inclined to wonder if Hickey himself is not "the undertaker." "He goes on exasperatedly." "Can't you appreciate what you've got, for God's sake? Don't you know you're free now to be yourselves, without having to feel remorse or guilt, or lie to yourselves about reforming tomorrow? Can't you see there is no tomorrow now? You're rid of it forever! You've killed it! You don't have to care a damn about anything any more! You've finally got the game of life licked, don't you see that?" (p. 225). Hickey's friends don't care about anything any more, and that is precisely their trouble. They cared about their dreams, and with the loss of those dreams, they have nothing to live for. They have been given damnation, not salvation. For them, life is a game. They play at it with their pipe dreams. When the illusions are lost, they "are licked."

Hickey continues, "...you're putting on this rotten half-dead act just to get back at me! Because you hate my guts! ...It makes me feel like hell to think you hate me. It makes me feel you suspect I must have hated you. But that's a lie!" (pp. 225-6). This statement implies recognition for Hickey, and allows the audience to realize that, subconsciously at least, Hickey did hate his cronies.

The abrupt denial of this hatred leads us to wonder if he has not begun to realize his hatred and is trying to reject it. He says, "I faced the truth and saw the one possible way to free poor Evelyn and give her the peace she'd always dreamed about" (p. 226). Hickey's definition of truth seems unusual. He is not concerned with Evelyn's peace; it is his own peace he fears for. A better way for Hickey to have given Evelyn peace would have been for him to reform, but he is too self-centered to be able to do it. "Giving Evelyn her freedom" insidiously suggests that she is being classed with the prostitutes and the "free" women connected with the play.

Hickey says, with "an obsessed look on his face," "I saw I couldn't do it by killing myself, like I wanted to for a long time" (p. 226). From the fact that Hickey has made his search for peace an obsession, we wonder if he has become mentally unbalanced--as indeed he claims. Hickey wants to be a Messiah, but he forgets that the messianic spirit involves a willing self-sacrifice: Hickey will sacrifice anything but himself. Perhaps the statement just

quoted also involves a death fear on Hickey's part--a fear which he emphatically denies several times. Hickey says he loved Evelyn, but love as strong as that which he professes for Evelyn is generally supposed to involve some sacrifice of self. In The Wild Duck, Hedvig Ekdal is willing to sacrifice a precious pet--and ultimately sacrifices herself--in order to regain her father's love. In The Iceman Cometh, Hickey sacrifices his "beloved" wife to his own comfort--it hardly seems a sacrifice of love.

As Hickey goes further into his confession, the audience recognizes more clearly the duplicity, rationalization, and hypocrisy that have made up Hickey's actions. He says, "Christ, I loved her so, but I began to hate that pipe dream! I began to be afraid I was going bughouse, because sometimes I couldn't forgive her for forgiving me. I even caught myself hating her for making me hate myself so much. There's a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and pity you can take! You have to begin blaming someone else, too. I got so sometimes when she'd kiss me it was like she did it on purpose to humiliate me, as if she'd spit in my face!" (p. 239). Evelyn's pipe dream, according to Hickey, was that she had an unreasoning faith in his ability to reform and seemed convinced that one day he would. Hickey, quite naturally, hates this dream, for it constricts his ability to do as he pleases without feeling guilty. However, putting the blame for his guilt-feelings on a source outside himself seems unfair, to say the least. The problem

of forgiving and not forgiving that Hickey speaks of is one example from many of his pseudo-religiosity. Forgiveness, selflessness, and self-sacrifice bring the salvation and peace which Hickey wants so desperately and cannot attain. He burlesques the salvation he says he brings and adds viciousness to his pseudo-religion when he says he "hated her for making me hate myself so much." He thus contradicts his statement that he killed with "love in my heart" (p. 227). In saying "there's a limit to the guilt you can feel," Hickey shows that he does not--or will not--realize that one sure way to prevent guilt is to stop the guilt-producing actions.

Hickey speaks reminiscently of "sitting around with the old gang, getting drunk and forgetting love" (p. 240). Only with the dreaming, drunken, hopeless derelicts can Hickey find any self-respect. He can feel superior to them; with his wife he felt terribly base. "Getting drunk," of course, meant for him oblivion and peace from guilt. The most significant part of the above statement is that Hickey wants to "forget love." He wants to forget it so desperately that he finally kills his wife. He has boasted of the great love that he and Evelyn had for each other, and yet he must unconsciously admit that he could not in the end bear the responsibility implicit in that love.

Hickey continues his confession. "That last night I'd driven myself crazy trying to figure some way out for her... I thought, God, if she'd only never wake up, she'd never

know! And then it came to me--the only possible way out, for her sake...She'd never feel any pain, never wake up from her dream" (p. 240). Although Hickey never seems to recognize it, Evelyn's pipe dreams are not to blame for the ruin of their home. He cannot accept the responsibility of blame. Actually, Hickey wants a "way out" for himself. Hickey, like everyone else in the play, is self-deluded. One of his illusions is that getting rid of Evelyn will do away with all his problems and bring him peace.

In telling about the murder, Hickey's words are as easy and simple as pulling the trigger must finally have been. "I'd always known that was the only possible way to give her peace..." (p. 241). This bit of rationalization has by now become an unthinking, almost a pious, chant. He betrays himself by saying, "I saw it meant peace for me, too...I remember I stood by the bed and suddenly I had to laugh. I couldn't help it, and I knew Evelyn would forgive me" (p. 241). Another of Hickey's illusions, although a well-substantiated one, is Evelyn's everlasting forgiveness. He believes that, even in death, Evelyn will forgive him for killing her. "I remember I heard myself speaking to her, as if it was something I'd always wanted to say: 'Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!'" (p. 241). In calling Evelyn a bitch, Hickey seems now to be equating Evelyn with the whores, who are a part of Hope's entourage.

In contemporary society as portrayed in The Iceman

Cometh, no satisfactory relationship between men and women is possible. No one in the world of this play is capable of a healthy love, which, like everything else in this society, finally means absolutely nothing. For Hickey, who really seems incapable of fidelity, only with whores may a satisfactory relationship between men and women be assumed. Parritt's love for Rosa, his mother, turns to viciousness. Rosa is capable only of casual affairs, and evidently this promiscuity is what drove Larry Slade from her. O'Neill's final feelings on the questions of women and love are difficult to define and understand. Love in the context of this play seems simply sex drive, lust, lechery. Furthermore, O'Neill typifies all women from a very negative standpoint. He presents us with the "nagging bitch," Hope's wife, Bessie, with the unrealistic Evelyn, and, most emphatically, with the whore. The image of woman simply as whore adds forcibly to the nihilistic theme of the play.

The traditionally "good" woman is lost on Hickey, who is drawn to her, but who simply cannot understand or appreciate her. "What I'd want was some tramp I could be myself with without being ashamed--someone I could tell a dirty joke to and she'd laugh" (p. 236). Hickey cannot understand--although he really seems to worship--Evelyn's purity and lack of vulgarity.

The possibilities for women in this society seem few. They must either be promiscuous women; ashamed whores; or else women who bully and domineer themselves into masculine



roles. Rosa is an example of social and political tyranny; Bessie, of domestic tyranny. The final possibility is most pathetic of all. Evelyn, the sincerely good woman, must pay with her life for her inability to cope with or adjust to any kind of evil. She is damned, as none of the others are, to hell on earth; her husband infects her with syphilis from one of his whores and tries to drag her down to his own level so that he may find some semblance of self-respect.

After Hickey has told his audience that he said to Evelyn, after he had shot her, "Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch," "he stops with a horrified start, as if shocked out of a nightmare..." (pp. 241-2). His hatred of Evelyn is obvious, but he cannot accept or admit that hatred. What, the audience wonders, was the "nightmare" O'Neill refers to? It could be Hickey's theory of peace and salvation, his pretense of bringing Evelyn peace, or his pretense of bringing himself peace. Probably it is a combination of all three. Realizing what he has said, Hickey "bursts into frantic denial" (p. 242). Perhaps, at last, Hickey is afraid, as the others have been all along. He now calls himself a liar, as the derelicts have been doing all through the play. Perhaps Hickey recognizes that his theories of peace and salvation are wrong, but it seems more likely that he is simply trying to save his newly won "self-respect" and that he is trying to save himself from the inevitable charge of murder.

At this point Hickey claims insanity. This plea could

be a handy way out; it could be self-deception. Perhaps he really believes that he was insane for a time. But perhaps, knowing that he is doomed, he elects to return to his friends their illusions (thus giving evidence that he has attained recognition); perhaps this claim of insanity is an intentional way out for the derelicts. My own opinion is that he is self-deceived. Hickey does not seem to recognize clearly enough what he has done to be able to make an honest reparation by giving back the dreams. Hickey has at last given his friends their salvation, but, ironically, he has done it by restoring the pipe dream he was fighting. Moran, the policeman, warns the derelicts, "Don't fall for his lies" about his insanity (p. 244). Ironically, they have fallen for his "lies" twice--once in search of salvation and once to regain the peace of their illusions.

Despite his supposed determination to act as a symbol of peace, Hickey, by the end of the play, has become an overwhelming symbol of death. With Hickey's announcement of his wife's death, Larry exclaims, "I felt he'd brought the cold touch of death on him" (p. 150). Hickey, in speaking the curtain line of Act II, says, "Why, all Evelyn ever wanted was to make me happy" (p. 151). With our knowledge of Evelyn's death, O'Neill gives happiness an insidious identification with death. Hickey has several times previously identified Larry with death, on one occasion calling him "the Barker for the Big Sleep" (p. 111), but this term becomes ironic when we recognize that, more than Larry, it

is Hickey who is "the Barker."

By Act III, the audience has become increasingly aware of Hickey as a death symbol. We find that, rather than have anything to do with Hickey and his "Reform Wave," the inhabitants of Hope's have left the food and drink he provided for Harry's birthday party "like dey was poison," preferring to sneak upstairs to get away from Hickey and his sermons on the evils of pipe dreams (p. 157). Perhaps they are unconsciously avoiding "the peace of death" (p. 203) which it seems Hickey has brought. As the play progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that, as Larry says, "I'm damned sure he's brought death with him. I feel the cold touch of it on him" (p. 161). The references linking Hickey with death become so frequent that one feels O'Neill is making a particular effort to see that no one misses the point. Larry calls Hickey "the Iceman of Death" (p. 182).

Thus, the Iceman of the play's title takes on several levels of meaning. Most obviously, "the iceman" suggests marital infidelity and sexual promiscuity--free love, symbolized in the joke Hickey tells his cronies about his wife. But Evelyn was never unfaithful; as Larry says, "Death was the Iceman Hickey called to his home" (p. 183). The identification of the iceman with death is the second significance. The third level of meaning is the three-way identification of Hickey/Death/Iceman.

Of course, Hickey does not realize that he is a harbinger of death. He wants to bring peace through loss of

pipe dreams. He does this, as we have noted previously, by means of a pseudo-religious salvation campaign.

It is evident that, to Hickey, peace comes with the shedding of pipe dreams. Exhorting his friends to shed theirs is, as he says in Act II, "my line of salvation" (p. 147). And so Hickey's crusade against illusion takes on a religious coloring, even if superficially. "I meant save you from pipe dreams. I know now, from my experience, they're the things that really poison and ruin a guy's life and keep him from finding any peace. If you knew how free and contented I feel now. I'm like a new man. And the cure for them is so damned simple, once you have the nerve. Just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrows" (p. 81). This statement becomes ironic in that Hickey has by no means been honest with himself. He has not really done away with his own pipe dreams, and he has found no true peace. He goes on to remark that "this begins to sound like a damned sermon on the way to lead the good life" (p. 81).

Hickey's religiosity is painfully phony. He cannot get away from the back-slapping, handshaking salesman routine, even in a supposedly serious conversion attempt. Selling has always been fun for Hickey, and we feel uneasily that his present would-be sincerity is only a "do-good" act, a game. "Why, if I had enough time, I'd get a lot of sport out of selling my line of salvation to each of you all by my lonesome" (p. 147). Hickey's religion is only as deep as his phraseology. "Salvation" and "peace" hardly seem

salable items, particularly when they are considered "sport," and Hickey's approach is a cheap one. "This peace is real," he boasts to his friends (p. 148), but even at this point we are not convinced by his hard-sell technique. Hickey goes deeper into his role as an evangelist by calling the derelicts and prostitutes "Brothers and Sisters" (p. 148). Larry, in his cynical reference to "us poor pipe-dreaming sinners," points up the cheapness and fakery in Hickey's "line." A "conversion to peace" by means of Hickey's methods does not seem very valid or very honest.

In treating Hickey as a religious person, O'Neill discredits religion in general. Although Hickey's spiel on disposing of illusion is phrased in religious terms, there is no religious faith in any orthodox or traditional form in this play. Yet one deep "faith" is discussed at some length, at least indirectly. This is the Anarchist Movement, "the One True Faith" (p. 29), to which Larry Slade belonged for many years. But Larry, through his cynical intelligence, has lost even this faith. He was an idealist, and perhaps still is, but the idealism connected with Anarchism has long since left him. "I saw men didn't want to be saved from themselves, for that would mean they'd have to give up greed, and they'll never pay that price for liberty. So I said to the World, God bless all here, and may the best man win and die of gluttony!" (p. 11). But, evidently, the most disillusioning fact was that his supposedly idealistic fellow

Anarchists were just as bad as those they tried to convert. "I know they're damned fools, most of them, as stupidly greedy for power as the worst capitalist they attack..." (p. 27). So Larry has lost his "religion" (actually, through a fear of life rather than through wounded idealism) and entered "the grandstand of philosophical detachment" (p. 11). He has, however, retained the nihilistic tendencies of his Anarchistic faith.

Hickey, in his attempt to bring peace to everyone at Hope's, tries to jar Larry out of his "philosophical detachment." Despite Hickey's nagging, Larry still maintains that he is "sick of life." In a most cynical passage, he says, "I'm through! I've forgotten myself! I'm drowned and contented on the bottom of a bottle. Honor dishonor, faith or treachery, are nothing to me but the opposites of the same stupidity which is ruler and king of life, and in the end they rot into dust in the same grave. All things are the same meaningless joke to me, for they grin at me from the one skull of death" (p. 128). Here Larry takes up Hickey's advocacy of nihilism. Life, only a "meaningless joke," is the same as the "skull of death." Larry denies the value of ethics and religion ("honor or dishonor, faith or treachery"), but we wonder how seriously we can take what he says. With Larry, cynicism has become a pose, and we are inclined to suspect that he has not "forgotten himself," that his drowned contentment in alcoholism is a lie, and that his faith founded on the Movement is still much more important

to him than he is willing to admit. He may believe quite sincerely that life is "stupidity," but he is not half so blase about it as he wants others to believe. He cries out desperately to be left "in peace the little time that's left to me!" (p. 129). And so, in part, he has given away his secret: life is not so peaceful as he pretends, and as he so desires that it should be. In self-defense, he retreats as far as possible from life. But his mode of existence is threatened by Parritt and Hickey, who try to force him into active living and he says "furiously" to Parritt, "Look out how you try to taunt me back into life, I warn you!" (p. 129).

Parritt, in quoting his mother, equates the Anarchist Movement with faith, religion. Rosa has said, "Larry can't kill in himself a faith he's given his life to, not without killing himself" (p. 124). It becomes evident that in the attempt to kill faith--not admittedly, a very successful one--Larry is gradually committing suicide. He cannot rid himself of religiosity, and the conflict caused by the attempt torments him greatly. As we have noted, he equates faith with treachery (p. 129), but we can hardly believe that this is his true feeling. Yet Larry--and, indirectly, Rosa--is the only "religious" person in the play.

Larry has no use for Hickey's crass pseudo-religious tactics. He cries impatiently to Parritt, and thus indirectly to Hickey, "For the love of Christ, will you leave me in peace!" (p. 182). Hickey, for all his messianic leanings,

cannot bring peace. The closest Larry can come to admitting any religious tendency is through "a superstitious awe" (p. 183). Parritt, however, identifies Larry with the Movement, which, as we have noted, is closely related to religion and religious sentiment. "And you're the guy who kids himself he's through with the Movement! You lying old faker, you're still in love with it!" (p. 181), Parritt accuses Larry, thus letting the audience know that perhaps Larry is still, in a sense, religious. Parritt reiterates his mother's faith--"The Movement is her life" (p. 160)--and links Rosa and Larry by means of their mutual devotion to the Movement. The undefined relationship between Rosa and Larry, which O'Neill drives his audience to speculate about, seems, at least on one level, to be a love relationship, and we must recognize that, like all the other important figures of the play, Larry too has an unhealthy feminine element in his past.

O'Neill seems further to reject religion in the one instance he gives of prayer. Larry prays sardonically, and with an attitude of complete cynicism. "I'm afraid to live, am I?--and even more afraid to die! So I sit here, with my pride drowned on the bottom of a bottle, keeping drunk so I won't see myself shaking in my britches with fright, or hear myself whining and praying: Beloved Christ, let me live a little longer at any price! If it's only for a few days more, or a few hours even, have mercy, Almighty God, and let me still clutch greedily to my yellow heart this



sweet treasure, this jewel beyond price, the dirty, stinking bit of withered old flesh which is my beautiful little life!" (pp. 196-7). This passage seems to display more of the author's nihilistic philosophy: here, as elsewhere in this play, we find a complete negation of any sort of religious belief.

The problems of death/peace and religion are important ones in O'Neill's theme. Another important problem is that of ethics. Everyone in the play employs a warped ethical code. Hickey exhorts his friends to become honest with themselves and face the truth, as he thinks he has done. But we recognize that Hickey has consistently lied to himself about the bases of his peace. Each of the derelicts wilfully deludes himself with his precious pipe dream. The prostitutes of Hope's tell themselves that they are not whores, all the while being symbols of dishonest ethical conduct.

Perhaps the character with the most obviously warped ethical standard is Parritt. The boy confesses theatrically that he sold out his mother "just for money" (p. 160), reflecting the human greed which Larry had earlier spoken against (p. 27). Actually he betrayed Rosa because of jealousy of her. Such a reason seems even less ethical than betrayal for reasons of greed. Larry tells Parritt that he doesn't even have "the honor of a louse" (p. 181), thus perhaps revealing his own knowledge of ethical conduct.

Freedom, another concept important to the development of O'Neill's theme and allied strongly to the problem of ethics, enters early in the play. The one person--incidentally, only indirectly involved in the play--who is spoken of as being truly free is Rosa, Parritt's mother (p. 31). Freedom is thus presented in a strange context. Rosa is a "free" woman--a woman of loose morals. The three women who appear on stage are also "free"--they are prostitutes. Thus, from the beginning, O'Neill gives us a warped concept of women. An uneasy fear of women pervades the play. Parritt says of whores, "They always get you in dutch" (p. 37). But this statement may be applied with equal accuracy to the other four women involved in the play--Bessie, Hope's dead wife; Evelyn, Hickey's wife; Rosa; and Marjorie, Jimmy Tomorrow's wife.

The problem of drunkenness in Act II is also closely linked with the ethical problem. Alcohol, in addition to being a way to oblivion and peace, is always an excuse, an escape, a flight. Hickey, in talking of Larry's illusion, accuses Larry of being "an old man who is scared of life, but even more scared of dying" (p. 116). In order to soothe his fears, Larry is "keeping drunk and hanging on to life at any price" (p. 116). Larry himself says that he has escaped to contentment "on the bottom of a bottle" (p. 128). Willie Oban, another of the derelicts, says rather pathetically of his own alcoholism, "Christ, you'd think that all I really wanted to do with my life was sit here and stay drunk"

(p. 121). Of course, we recognize that this is precisely what Willie wants. He cannot bear life without the escape provided by drink.

In Act II the ethical problem provided by women has deepened. The three prostitutes declare desperately that they are only tarts, not whores. Parritt says of Rosa, "She just had to keep on having lovers to prove to herself how free she was. It made home a lousy place...I'd get feeling it was like living in a whorehouse..." (p. 125). Thus, freedom is linked directly to whoredom. O'Neill here also furthers his preparation for our acceptance in Act IV of his verbal equation mother/whore. Hickey speaks of Jimmy's wife, Marjorie, the fourth unseen woman whose influence is felt in the play: "We've all heard the story of how you came back to Cape Town and found her in the hay with a staff officer. We know you like to believe that was what started you on the booze and ruined your life...But I'll bet you were really damned relieved when she gave you such a good excuse" (p. 141). Here we find another example of a free woman. In his inquiry into Parritt's background, Hickey goes further into the theme that women, and the love of them, can only cause serious trouble. "Hasn't he been mixed up with some woman? I didn't mean trollops. I mean the real old love stuff that crucifies." (p. 118). Of course, the woman Parritt has "been mixed up with" is his mother.

In Act III, O'Neill furthers his interpretation of women as warped, insidious influences. Parritt says of

Rosa, "She used to spoil me and made a pet of me. Once in a great while, I mean. When she remembered me. As if she wanted to make up for something. As if she felt guilty. So she must have loved me a little, even if she never let it interfere with her freedom" (p. 159). Rosa and Don Parritt are very far from a normal or desirable mother-son relationship. The freedom spoken of is insidious. It means for Rosa not only freedom to do as she pleases, but also to be a "free woman." The parallel which is being built up between Parritt and Hickey begins, of course, with the women who create their trouble. Parritt declares wildly that he sold out his mother "just for money! I got stuck on a whore and wanted dough to blow in on her and have a good time! That's all I did it for! Just money! Honest!" (p. 160).

All the threads of O'Neill's theme are pulled together with the pervading influence of death. Death becomes not only oblivion, the end of life, but also nothingness. Larry refers to Hickey as "the great Nihilist" (p. 104), and thus Hickey becomes the harbinger of complete, hopeless nothingness. Hickey, in Act II, begins both subtly and bluntly to advocate death by suicide for certain of the tavern's inhabitants. In prescribing for Parritt's problems, he says, "You've got to face the truth and then do what must be done for your own good and the happiness of others" (p. 123). The "peace" he speaks of is peace by means of death: Parritt must take the "hop off the fire escape" that Hickey

told Larry he should take if he "really wanted to die" (p. 116). And so with Hickey's statement to Larry begins the subtle use of the fire escape as a means of suicide. With very few exceptions, suicide in this play is always a "hop off the fire escape"--thus, escape from life. Surely O'Neill's consistent use of the word "escape" in connection with suicide is not accidental. Hickey also reinforces his theory that contrary to what Larry says, he actually does not want to die at all (p. 116). "He'll have to choose between living and dying, and he'll never choose to die while there is a breath left in the old bastard!" (p. 123). From Larry's stiff, hostile reactions to these statements, the audience begins to recognize the truth of Hickey's words. O'Neill thus prepares for another facet of his death theme: suicide demands a grim courage, not escapism. Yet, I believe, we must recognize at the end that Larry--despite his choice of life--is actually a stronger person than Parritt, who does finally die by suicide.

In the fourth act, the chorus which was started previously--"Who cares? We want to pass out"--is continued and emphasized. By this point, it seems obvious that the peace these people desire in asking to pass out is not the oblivion of drunkenness, but the peace of actual death. Parritt, in one of his frequent attempts to goad Larry, again suggests "a hop off the fire escape." The bartender, wiser than he knows, replies, "Sure. Why don't he? Or you? Or me? What de hell's de difference? Who cares?" (p. 220). In terms of

the attitude present in the tavern, there is no difference between or preference for life and death. The two states might as well be the same. The answer to the question, "Who cares?" of course, is "no one." But as Parritt says, it takes "nerve to die" (p. 219), and since all of these people rely on escapism, not courage, no one has yet committed suicide. Jimmy Tomorrow (p. 216), when sober, realizes the futility of his life and considers suicide, but is too frightened of dying to attempt it. Don Parritt, the one person who does finally commit suicide is, significantly, an outsider largely free from pipe dreams. But he, too, "starts frightenedly" at the thought of dying (p. 220) and needs encouragement for his suicide. Larry accuses him of "trying to make me your executioner" (p. 219).

Parritt's confession parallels Hickey's in many respects. In echoing Hickey's line about Evelyn's pipe dream, Parritt says, "Yes, that's it! Her and the damned old Movement pipe dream!" (p. 242). One wonders if Rosa's is a damned dream. But the Movement has a destructive objective, since it is a faith based on anarchism and nihilism. Perhaps, then, this dream, too, is damned. Perhaps Rosa's dream is, as her son claims, only a pipe dream; however, Parritt (parrot) doesn't lend his own confession much credence or validity by his imitation of Hickey. Parritt feels that his problems are too deep, his life too complicated, and his sins too dark, to allow him to continue living. But he, too, is cowardly and needs aid in committing

suicide. Thus, he makes Larry his executioner. Larry cries to him, "Go! Get the hell out of life, God damn you, before I choke it out of you!" (p. 248).

Finally, we see that Larry is the only person intelligent enough or strong enough to accept the wisdom in Hickey's theories. But accepting it has completely ruined Larry. He comments on himself at Parritt's suicide: "Be God, there's no hope! I'll never be a success in the grandstand--or anywhere else! Life is too much for me! I'll be a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die! May that day come soon! Be God, I'm the only real convert to death Hickey made here. From the bottom of my coward's heart I mean that now!" (p. 258). Earlier, Larry accused Parritt of having a "rotten soul" (p. 228). Perhaps this is O'Neill's indictment of all of modern mankind. Most people are too weak to see themselves as they really are. Those, like Larry and Parritt, who are strong enough to view themselves realistically, are shocked either into a state of terrified, trembling numbness, or into flight from life. Being able to face the truth, in this disillusioned interpretation of society, means being "converted to death."

In The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill tells us bluntly that he finds the situation of contemporary man a very sorry one and that he can find no way to better this situation in the value standards of our society. Indeed, in his bitterness,

he seems not only to deny these standards but also to refuse to offer an answer to man's plight. He indicates clearly through his cynical presentation of religion that he feels it has no practical value. The love of woman he finds only tawdry. He postulates that the traditional values connected with love, marriage, and the home have vanished. Action and thought no longer can bring the exaltation they brought Dr. Stockmann; they simply lead through catastrophe to a disillusioned, bitter death. All these aspects of society combine to bring to man his "rotten soul." Finally, the audience is left to assess the ideas O'Neill has given us in this play. Larry's views seem to parallel most closely O'Neill's, but we are forced also to accept O'Neill's reservations about them.



## CONCLUSION

Today drama is often considered to be less than a legitimate art form, if, indeed, it is art at all. Certainly there is often cause for the horror expressed at the so-called dramatic forms of entertainment. While critics may despair over the lack of quality which production for a mass culture has brought, no one can deny that drama today often has merit, and that even in the popular media we may find unusual quality at times. Contemporary drama has a wide audience--far wider perhaps than at any time in the past. Through the development of such modern conveniences as television, movies, and radio, everyone now has the opportunity for exposure to some form of drama. But I find no reason to condemn all drama for the faults of popular entertainment. Many serious dramatists, like those discussed in this thesis, still make, I believe, important contributions to the fields of drama and literature.

In modern drama we find all the elements of previous drama, in changed form, of course, but not so altered as to be unrecognizable. The philosophy, the dramatic theory, which Aristotle tells us was inherent in and basic tragedy still operates, and we may see evidences of its force wherever we observe serious drama. Catharsis--although perhaps

somewhat changed from Aristotle's vision--is a powerful influence in contemporary dramatic philosophy. Even the musical comedy and the television Western depend heavily on the force of catharsis in the psychology of their appeal to their audiences.

But whatever the contemporary playwright has used from his inheritance, the spirit which pervades his work--and often irks the traditionalist--is one peculiarly characteristic of our painful and bewildering era. The present-day author is as intensely involved with the "great questions" as anyone in the past. We still are driven to search for the answers to such queries as "Who is Man?" "Who am I?" "What is the purpose of my life?" and more challenging still, "For what purpose must I suffer?" No serious dramatist of our day has refused to ask those questions. The three men whose plays I have discussed do not sidestep this responsibility. Nor do such writers as Shaw, Williams, Eliot, Brecht, and others avoid the questions. The reader or spectator, however, is not likely to find clear cut answers anywhere he looks.

Indeed, a startling paradox of modern drama lies in its pervading spirit. The men portrayed often are truly miserable creatures, incapable of insight of any sort. Their meagerness as humans need not, however, deny their intrinsic worth to those in our contemporary audience who have or can develop insight. Today it is largely the responsibility of the audience, rather than the protagonist or

actor, to recognize faults and errors in the characters and their actions and to make a vicarious correction. Thus the responsibility for answering the great questions of tragedy also lies with the audience. Of course, the audience of serious drama has always had this responsibility. A play would have no point if its spectators could not realize what its author intended it to mean. Today, however, recognition, and its implications, is placed almost entirely within the audience. Issues and values are no longer so straightforward or clear cut that the author may presume to give answers which may be applied to all humanity. Though some modern men are as dull as Hialmar Ekdal and Willy Loman, others must be counted on to be wise enough--or to try at least--to judge and evaluate them. Therein lies the paradox.

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