



# A Psychoanalytical Reading of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

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**Abstract**— Ibsen, as a playwright, as Thomas F. Van Lann comments, has been accused of deceiving his audience regarding the matters of his play- both its central business and its manner; particularly in his style and mode. While reviewing Ibsen through a Lacanian lens, critics such as Oliver W. Gerland III, argue that reading Ibsen is a task of revising interpretative paradigms and that Ibsen's protagonist revises strategies for enacting the "self". *The Wild Duck* (1884), has been critiqued as a poignant drama of illusions, where an idealistic outsider's gratuitous truth-telling destroys a family. This paper argues that Ibsen's texts stage the Oedipal crisis in a revised form by taking recourse to Lacan's re-reading of Freud, where he suggests a paradigmatic triad as a representation of the displaced form of familiar Oedipal structure. For Lacan, the Oedipal structure is not a simple love for the mother and hatred for the father, rather it places the child in the realm of the Symbolic, i.e. its linguistic association with the father. He argues that the self is rooted in the mirror stage and the infant's identification with images of coherence and stability- e.g. its own reflected image. This paper argues that Ibsen locates his drama in the simples of the Oedipal complex, but revises it. Hjalmar Ekdal's Imaginary web is disrupted when the idealist Gregers Werle breaks down the Imaginary, invokes the Symbolic authoritarian "no", and substitutes it with the retelling of Hakon Werle. This paper seeks to accentuate Gregers' idealism as what Lacan termed as obsessional neurosis and a display of his own lacking in preserving his Imaginary i.e. playing a father to his friend and maintaining Hjalmar's heroic image in his mind, finally resulting in little Hedvig's suicide.

**Keywords**— Psychoanalysis, Lacanian re-reading, Freud, Oedipal structure, Imaginary, Symbolic

## I. INTRODUCTION

In an analysis of the Lacanian Imaginary in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, Oliver Gerland III argues that "Ibsen stages the revision of interpretative paradigms" (Gerland 342). The dramatics of Ibsen's texts are populated with mothers, fathers, and children i.e. the simples of the familiar Oedipal Complex, but an Ibsenian protagonist subverts the original locus- the protagonist's love for the mother and hatred for the father, through his enactment of the self. He is often positioned between two other characters, each who represent a vision of the protagonist, an "ideal or heroic image", and coerces an imagination onto him: who he is and how he should behave. These images however stand intelligible according to Oedipal terms. Critics have often characterized Ibsen's protagonists in a characteristic triadic structure and for Oliver Gerland III, "Ibsen's paradigmatic triad represents in a displaced form the familiar Oedipal

structure" (Gerland 343). This paper argues that Ibsen locates his drama in the simples of the Oedipal complex, but revises it.

Lacan reformulated Freud's concept of psychosexual development and the Oedipus complex into the distinction between the pre-linguistic "Imaginary" stage and the linguistic "Symbolic" stage. In the "Imaginary" stage, there is no distinction between the subject and the object, the Self and the Other. In between the Imaginary and the Symbolic stage, occurs what Lacan calls the Mirror Stage when the infant identifies with its image. In the mirror, this marks the beginning of the identification of the Self concerning the Other. In the Symbolic stage, the infant already internalizes the inherited system of difference, as it learns to accept its pre-determined position in the system of linguistic oppositions such as man/woman, adult/child, father/son, mother/daughter, and so on. This symbolic

realm, according to Lacan, is the realm of the law of the father, where the phallus (symbolic) is the privileged signifier that establishes the modes of the other signifiers. Thus in the Oedipus complex, the mother functions as a representation of the child's original narcissism while the father functions as a representation of social ideals.

## II. DISCUSSION/ ANALYSIS

Lacan writes, "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 2). For Oliver Gerland III, the assumption of such images can be truly representative as the child develops a sense that it is a discrete unit of identity, a self. "Since the child's "self" is composed of partial object identifications, however, it cannot be considered such an integral and stable entity. Rather, what the child sees to be itself is a complex of symbolic structures derived from culture. Visual images and mythic constructs serve as templates for the child as it constructs a fiction of unity that it will enact as the self" (Gerland 343). Thus a triad is formed which is a revised form of Freud's Oedipal structure, where the Imaginary is associated with the child's mother, the Symbolic with its linguistic associations and the authority of its father, and another connecting substitute, propagated by such cultural dispositions.

This paper offers reading of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884) to support this critical view. Hjalmar Ekdal is caught up in a set of Imaginary relations, when his childhood friend and the son of his benefactor Gregers Werle breaks down the Imaginary, and like the Symbolic authoritarian "no", substitutes it with the retelling about Hakon Werle. Gregers fails to reframe young Ekdal and instead helps to bring about little Hedvig's suicide. In this text and event, representation and reality are inextricably bound up with the stories characters tell about themselves. Ibsen's settings provide a place for realistic rhetoric- the outside- and oppose it to a place where reality must be represented and often misrepresented- the inside. For instance in Act I, the play begins at the Werle household, where the family is holding a party on the occasion of the return of the young Gregers Werle. The pretension is burst when we hear the two house helps Petterson and Jensen:

"Jensen . And he's giving this spread in honour of his son, they say. Petterson. Yes. His son came home yesterday.

Jensen . This is the first time I ever heard as Mr. Werle had a son.

Petterson. Oh yes, he has a son, right enough.

But he's a fixture, as you might say, up at the Hoidal works. He's never once come to town all the years I've been in service here" (Ibsen, Act I, 258)

The repressing role of the father figure arises when Gregers accuses his father of his mother's unhappiness because of his scandals with other women. In a comparative study of Hamletian characteristics in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, and the Russian novelist Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Jacob H. Adler states:

Like Hamlet, then, *The Wild Duck* is a play about an idealist who sees rottenness almost everywhere he looks, and who unintentionally destroys when he tries to cure. Both Hamlet and Gregers Werle are appalled at what they view as a highly immoral marriage. Gregers hates his father, as Hamlet hated his stepfather. Each had what may have been an unhealthy love for his mother; each feels that his mother's husband has been her ruination. Gregers is incapable of loving any woman but his mother. While it is certainly open to question, Hamlet may conceivably have that problem too. Hamlet correctly suspects his stepfather of having murdered his brother and taken over the kingdom, steeped in guilt. Gregers correctly suspects his father of having ruined his partner and taken over the business, steeped in guilt (Adler 232).

Gregers' accusations of his father can be seen in the following:

"Gregers. You and he acted together in that affair of the forests.

Werle. But was it not Ekdal that drew the map of the tracts we had bought that fraudulent map! It was he who felled all that timber illegally on Government ground. In fact, the whole management was in his hands. I was quite in the dark as to what Lieutenant Ekdal was doing.

Gregers. Lieutenant Ekdal himself seems to have been very much in the dark as to what he was doing.

Werle. That may be. But the fact remains that he was found guilty and I acquitted.

Gregers. Yes, I know that nothing was proved against you" (Ibsen, Act I, 269).

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In a study by Herbert Hendin, offering readings of suicide in Scandinavia, Hendin comments on the extremely strong mother-child ties found in the Norwegian families, very often to the exclusion of the father. He cites one case where the patient in nearly Ibsenesque terms describes the feelings at the birth of her boy and imagines herself in a circle drawn around her and the child. Tyrannical children in a close relationship with their mothers are, as Hendin states, a very common sight in Norwegian clinics (Hendin 100). The Freudian love for the mother and hatred for the father is invoked, in the following conversation:

“Werle. Gregers I believe there is no one in the world you detest as you do me. Gregers (softly). I have seen you at too close quarters.

Werle. You have seen me with your mother's eyes. (Lowers his voice a little.) But you should remember that her eyes were clouded now and then.

Gregers (quivering). I see what you are hinting at. But who was to blame for mother's unfortunate weakness? Why you, and all those! The last of them was this woman that you palmed off upon Hjalmar Ekdal, when you were Ugh!

Werle (shrugs his shoulders). Word for word as if it were your mother speaking!

Gregers (without heeding). And there he is now, Gregers' self-preservation is at its peak when he sets on to break the Imaginary Hjalmar had convinced himself to be real and break into the illusionary web at the Ekdal household. He behaves like an obsessional neurotic arising from his utopian idealism. His isolation from his family after the death of his mother seems to have led to his emotional deprivation. In Slavoj Žižek's reading of Lacan, he describes this obsessional neurosis.

Hence also the fact that the typical reaction of those who do take the ecological crisis seriously is—on the level of the libidinal economy—obsessional. Wherein lies the kernel of the obsessional's economy? The obsessional participates in frenzied activity, he works feverishly all the time—why? To

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! (Comes a step nearer.) When I look back upon your past, I seem to see a battle-field with shattered lives on every hand" (Ibsen, Act I, 274).

The first act in *The Wild Duck* suggests that Gregers is a neurotic out to avenge his mother's death, and in order to do so he tries to undo everything his father had done. This act of revenge is aided by his Imaginary of his friend, Hjalmar Ekdal, and his own self-deception of reality that Gregers considers to be ideal. This constant friction of “self” and “illusion” is analyzed by Robert Raphael in his comparative study of the first three plays of Ibsen's late period; *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmerholm* (1886), and *The Lady From The Sea* (1888).

According to Raphael

Actually *The Wild Duck* is a play about two kinds of illusion: traditional and transcendental. Illusion is self-deception and, quite obviously, a very common mode of human behaviour. Its function is to provide the personality with fixed patterns of value, which are nothing but orientative patterns in the mind that guarantee a certain amount of meaningful continuity to it beyond the randomness and disturbance of external data and experience. These valuable orientations tend to sustain the personality in its constant struggle with reality, so that it is not surprising to find that against such strongly fixed patterns of illusion the reality often is as nothing. Reality, after all, exists to suit and confirm the orientative patterns in the mind and, except in strictly scientific method, not the reverse (Raphael 37).

avoid some uncommon catastrophe that would take place if his activity were to stop; his frenetic activity is based on the ultimatum, "If I don't do this (the compulsive ritual), some unspeakably horrible X will take place." In Lacanian terms, this X can be specified as the barred Other, i.e., the lack in the Other, the inconsistency of the symbolic order; in this case, it refers to the disturbance of the established rhythm of Nature (Žižek 24).

Gregers however fails to influence his friend Hjalmar Ekdal. And this failure can be explained through various perspectives, such as when Dr. Relling claims that Hjalmar might not live without the life-lie he has constructed around himself and stops Gregers from bursting into his Imaginary.

Rose-Marie G. Oster calls this “life-lie” “a unique Norwegian phenomenon” (Oster 395). Despite shreds of evidence to the contrary, Gregers insists on believing Hjalmar as some idealist hero who can accept the truth as it were and find his marriage again on truer grounds.

The Ekdals, in Lacanian terms create an Imaginary space in their attic. Hjalmar and old Ekdal try to preserve their narcissism in the darkness of this attic. Old Ekdal finds his prideful days in Hoidal forests, days of hunting and killing animals here in the attic when he shoots rabbits in a make-believe forest. Similarly, Hjalmar tries to stabilize the perception of himself, through his invention which is a work in progress, while being a man to Gina and a father to little Hedvig. Their garret is a site of personal performance, they act as mirrors to the characters’ images of their own selves. They re-tell their stories here in the attic even when the setting of the attic is never truly shown on stage to the audience in the theatre. Just as how the play provides two readings- the first is scripted by Hakon Werle starring Hjalmar Ekdal and his father, and the second is re-written by Gregers Werle.

The animal imagery here too is retraced through a psycho-analytical lens, when we observe that the wild duck might have been an Old Ekdal in his youth days, back in the forests of Hoidal, who got trapped by the hunter that is Hakon Werle and now is caged inside the attic of a make-believe wilderness. Just as how his prideful days are re-enacted when Old Ekdal wears his uniform or shoots in the attic. Hakon Werle helps in maintaining Old Ekdal’s life-lie. On the other hand, however, there is Gregers who’s entered to change the entire course of Ibsen’s narrative. In an instance, Gregers calls himself the dog who saves the wild duck, i.e. Hjalmar.

“Hjalmar (laughs). Ha, ha! If you weren't Gregers Werle, what would you like to be? Gregers. If I should choose, I should like best to be a clever dog.

Gina. A dog!

Hedvig (involuntarily). Oh, no!

Gregers. Yes, an amazingly clever dog; one that goes to the bottom after wild ducks when they dive and bite themselves fast in tangle and sea-weed, down among the ooze”(Ibsen, Act II, 294).

However in his version of the story, Gregers forgets who owns the clever dog that saves the wild duck, it is Hakon Werle, the owner of the Symbolic. In other words, like Hjalmar Ekdal, who constructs an Imaginary in his household, Gregers Werle constructs a framework for Imaginary living that represses the presence of Haakon

Werle, the father. Within this Imaginary space, Gregers can overlook the difference between Hjalmar and Hjalmar's romantic image, between himself and the image of himself as a father to his friend. Gregers assumes that by releasing "the wild duck" from its literal moorings, he can liberate the protagonist from the Imaginary.

Gregers’ acts of (mis)appropriation end with a fatality, as it does when one dwells too much on the illusionary. Little Hedvig commits suicide because of Gregers’ meddling behavior.

Detailing the psychological models of suicide, Barzilay, and Apter comment on the following:

Freud argued that the universal goal of all organisms is to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world and that repetition compulsion forms the basis of all self-defeating behaviors. He believed that the energy to kill oneself derived from an earlier repressed desire to destroy another. Suicide represented an internalization of this object and a turning of the external death wish inward, against a fragment of one’s own ego. Elaborating on Freud’s death instinct, Menninger (1938) claimed that every suicide is an inverted homicide, or “murder in the 180th degree.” He conceptualized a suicidal triad consisting of the wish to kill (murder), the wish to be killed (guilt), and the wish to die (depression) (Shira & Apter 296).

Hedvig here dies to prove her love for the father. She too has construed her own Imaginary with the attic and the wild duck. At certain points in the text, both the wild duck and she become the same, carrying similar references, such as when she talks of the wound in the wild duck, similar to her eyesight problem. The wild duck too, is trapped in a web of make-believe wilderness, and she too is unaware of her own heredity. And finally, when Hedvig is manipulated by Gregers to kill the wild duck to prove her loyalty to her father Hjalmar, she plans to wring its neck, ultimately killing herself in the process. Her wish to kill herself evolves as her own way of punishing herself for hurting her father, she finally castrates herself by shooting at her chest. She dies to preserve her Imaginary, constituted of the wild duck and her happy Ekdal family.

### III. CONCLUSION

Thus, young Werle's ruinous attempt to unravel the economic and Imaginary order sponsored by his father reflects the contradictions in his conversion project: like his school friend, Gregers works within an Imaginary framework rooted in the past. *The Wild Duck* therefore

explicitly characterizes its framework as a product of the Imaginary, analogous to the protagonist's "life-lie".

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