International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-10, Issue-3; May-Jun, 2025

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Memory as Burden and Ethical Duty: Trauma and the Ethics of Remembering in Strindberg's *Facing Death*

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Received: 13 May 2025; Received in revised form: 07 Jun 2025; Accepted: 11 Jun 2025; Available online: 17 Jun 2025

Abstract— *This article explores the themes of trauma and memory in August Strindberg's one-act modern tragedy, Facing Death, applying the theoretical frameworks of Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory—particularly his concepts of acting-out and working-through—and Avishai Margalit's notion of the ethics of memory. It focuses on the characterization of the protagonist, Monsieur Durand, critically examining how his traumatic past and its unsettling memories converge and rupture his sense of self, ultimately leading to his suicide. Based on a hermeneutic methodology with subjective interpretation and argumentation, rather than objective, data-driven analysis, the article contends that Durand's suicide stems not merely from financial hardship or generosity toward his daughters, but from profound psychological wounds.*

Keywords— ***August Strindberg, Facing Death, trauma, ethics of memory, Avishai Margalit, Dominick LaCapra, working-through, acting-out, naturalism***

I. INTRODUCTION

August Strindberg, a modern Swedish playwright, poet, painter, and novelist, left an indelible mark on the literary landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through his prolific and diversified writings. He belongs to a contingent of nineteenth-century playwrights who explored the effects of socio-economic conditions, environment, and heredity on human behavior. Deeply influenced by Émile Zola's naturalism, Strindberg strongly advocated for its use in dramatic works. The preface to his famous play *Miss Julie* has been labeled "a manifesto of Naturalism." By 1889, however, he had abandoned Naturalism. In his essay "On Modern Drama and the Modern Theatre," he declared it insignificant, and subsequently shifted toward Symbolism and Expressionism.

Strindberg wrote the one-act play, *Facing Death* in 1892 when he experienced the most troubled stage of his life, often referred to as the "Inferno Crisis"—a deep psychological breakdown triggered by his divorce from his second wife, Frida Uhl; estrangement from his children; and isolation from his friends and literary circle. The play was originally written in Swedish as *Inför döden* and translated into English by Edith and Warner Oland. It is set in the city of Lake Leman (Lake Geneva) in Switzerland, with its main focus on the final moments of a bankrupt father figure, Monsieur Durand, unraveling his past traumatic experiences and fractured identity, which culminate in suicide. This play also exemplifies a "chamber play," emphasizing mood over plot, intense emotional drama, and a claustrophobic dining room setting, while incorporating sparse elements of Naturalism as well.

While much has been written about Strindberg's naturalism, his engagement with trauma and memory remains rather under-explored. This study addresses that gap by applying Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory and Avishai Margalit's ethics of memory to *Facing Death*. It critically examines how trauma and memory function in the play, with particular attention to the protagonist's emotional distress and its impact on his sense of self. It will concentrate on the following research questions:

1. What contributes to the trauma of the protagonist, Monsieur Durand?
2. How does Durand navigate his trauma?

3. What role do memories play in the context of trauma?

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

- Explore how psychological and socio-economic factors contribute to the protagonist's suffering.
- Examine Durand's efforts to cope with his trauma.
- Demonstrate how memory functions as an ethical force in Durand's traumatic life.

Significance of the Study

By critically examining August Strindberg's *Facing Death* through the dual lenses of Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory and Avishai Margalit's ethics of memory, this study enhances our understanding of individual trauma and ethical remembrance in a modern, materialistic society. It contributes to the growing field of trauma and memory studies by applying these interrelated theories to the aforementioned play in Strindberg's dramatic oeuvre.

Theoretical Framework

LaCapra's trauma theory and Margalit's notion of the ethics of memory constitute the theoretical framework for this study. Trauma, derived from the Greek word "τραῦμα," meaning bodily wound, refers to an abrupt and profound mental wound—not simple or easily healable like a physical one. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). She claims that trauma is not fully experienced when it occurs, but returns compulsively in the form of disruptive repetitions such as dreams or hallucinations—not as memory, but as unprocessed recurrence. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra acknowledges this disruptive nature through the concept of "acting-out," an unconscious, repetitive reliving of trauma, where the past intrudes into the present without conscious control. In contrast, his "working-through" model is a conscious effort to confront, narrate, and integrate traumatic experiences into one's life. It is "an open, self-questioning process that never attains closure and counteracts acting-out (or the repetition compulsion) without entirely transcending it, especially with respect to trauma and its aftermath" (LaCapra 23). LaCapra emphasizes the ethical necessity for individuals and historians to understand— and thereby come to terms with—trauma. In this context, memory plays a crucial role in the process of working-though:

> In memory as an aspect of working through the past, one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between (not dichotomize) the two. In other words, one remembers perhaps to some extent still compulsively reliving or being possessed by what happened then without losing a sense of existing and acting now. This duality (or double inscription) of being is essential for memory as a component of working over and through problems. At least in one operative dimension of the self, one can say to oneself or to others: "I remember what it was like back then, but I am here now, and there is a difference between the two. (LaCapra 90)

LaCapra, thus, acknowledges the space for memory in his trauma theory. This theoretical insight provides me with a platform to call upon Margalit's ethics of memory in textual analysis, especially in exploring the ethical dimension of the protagonist's recollection of his traumatic past.

Avishai Margalit emphasizes memory as an ethical duty. He states that "there is an ethics of memory but very little morality of memory" (7). To explain the difference between the ethics and morality of memory, he introduces two types of relations: thick and thin. Thick relations are those which we have with people close to us—family, friends, neighbours, or community. Thick relations are regulated by ethics, and are rooted in a common past, shared memories, and mutual caring. Margalit states that we can forgive the offenders for the sake of thick relations, but we cannot—and should not—forget past injustices. "Thick relations are grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countrymen. Thick relations are anchored in a shared past or moored in a shared memory. Thin relations, on the other hand, are backed by the attribute of being human…Thick relations are in general our relations to the near and dear. Thin relations are in general our relations to the stranger and the remote" (7). Morality regulates our behavior in thin relations, focusing on respect and basic obligations to all human beings. "Ethics guides our thick relations whereas morality ought to guide our behavior toward those to whom we are related just by virtue of their being fellow human beings, and by virtue of no other attributes" (37). The convergence of trauma theory specifically by LaCapra and Margalit's ethics of memory provides a robust theoretical ground in this article for analyzing how the protagonist's sense of self is shaped by his traumatic past and memories.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, aiming to understand the aforementioned issues through detailed analysis. It is based on the hermeneutic method, which involves interpretation and argumentation. The research consists of subjective insights rather than an objective analysis, treating the primary text as the main source of data and relevant scholarly articles as secondary sources.

Delimitation of the Study

The study focuses on psychological and socio-economic factors that contribute to trauma in the life of an ordinary individual in a modern, materialistic society. The analysis is confined to August Strindberg's one-act play *Facing Death*.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Facing Death remains one of Strindberg's under-explored plays; however, it has received some scholarly attention for its psychological and naturalistic depth. Michael Meyer, in *Strindberg: A Biography*, reads the play as a bleak depiction of familial conflict and fatalism (510). Olof Lagercrantz highlights its autobiographical undertones and exploration of isolation and despair (243). Ishwari Prasad Bhusal examines the protagonist's existential anxiety through the lens of Sartrean freedom, Camusian absurdity, and Heideggerian being-toward-death. He interprets Durand's journey as an embodiment of " the tension between autonomy and resignation, as well as the struggle to impose meaning in a world marked by indifference and socioeconomic oppression" (104). Szalczer, in her article "Nature's Dream Play: Modes of Vision and August Strindberg's Re-Definition of the Theatre," also identifies autobiographical resonances in the play. She suggests that the play can be read as a reflection of Strindberg's troubled psyche and personal experiences.

Few scholars have examined *Facing Death* through the lens of psychological trauma and the ethical responsibility of remembering, leaving a significant gap in Strindberg's oeuvre. This article seeks to fill that gap by interpreting the play at the intersection of trauma theory and memory studies. It argues that *Facing Death* presents a compelling narrative of individual psychological trauma and remembering as a moral duty.

IV. ANALYSIS

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy 12). Durand's family in August Strindberg's play, *Facing Death* is unhappy not only because of penury but estrangement, disrespect and lack of empathy. It explores how humiliation, familial betrayal, and estrangement generate deep psychological trauma in Durand's life, which he processes through acts of remembering, forgiving, and ultimately self-sacrifice. Through Avishai Margalit's lens of ethical memory, Durand's actions reveal the tension between memory as a burden and a moral duty.

Durand's daughters resent and blame him for their troubled situation. His boarding house business brings him more humiliation than bread. He shares his predicament to Antonio that his business "doesn't bring bread—nothing but humiliations" (282). Humiliation is a powerful and recurring motif in the play. His late wife's legacy of humiliation continues through his daughters, who humiliate him in several different ways. They call him names like "pig" and "wretch," and indirectly refer to him as a lunatic. They snatch a glass of milk from his hand while he is drinking it, and take away his matchbox just as he is about to light his cigar.

Durand relives the past humiliation by painfully remembering his troubled married life. He remembers how his wife, for whom he sacrificed his homeland, not only betrayed him but also spread lies about him causing humiliation to him even after her demise. "It is hard to remember a past humiliation without reliving it. … the memory of humiliation is the bleeding scar of reliving it. Humiliation becomes constitutive of one sense of who we are. We may try to shrug it off and avoid living it on a daily basis" (Margalit 130). Durand's strained relationship with his late wife and her legacy of lies and hostility in the family, the death of his son, and dislocation from his homeland France have all eroded his sense of stable and respectful self, leading to a profound psychological trauma.

A failed pension-proprietor and widower, Durand has been living with the burden of traumatic past and terrible present. He belongs to a past where duty to one's nation and family was of prime importance. He suffers from social stigma caused by his failure to perform civic duty to his homeland.When he was about to reach the age of conscription, he moved to Switzerland to marry the woman he had fallen in love with, without delay. The consequent loss of national identity and social fabric is even more agonizing to him as his wife ironically emerged not as a true partner, but as his principal source of humiliation. He painfully recalls how his wife would threaten him of doing prostitution when he tried to prohibit her from spending money on lottery tickets. She ruined not only the family's financial condition but also his identity and dignity by brainwashing their three daughters through lies against him. He feels traumatized when his most reproachful daughter Thérèse berates him—"Is it for you to talk about lying, you

who lie to us and the whole world by saying that you were born a Swiss although you are a Frenchman?" (284). Durand does not refute her. It's obvious that he does not want to reminisce that distressing aspect of his life. He fabricates a story about his birthplace as is revealed in the following conversation with Antonio:

> ANTONIO. Monsieur Durand, I promise it if you will answer me one question; are you Swiss-born, or not?
>
> DURAND. I am a Swiss citizen.
>
> ANTONIO. Yes, I know that, but I ask if you were born in Switzerland.
>
> DURAND. [Uncertainly] Yes. (282)

Durand feels ashamed to confess that he was born in France, since his wife has spread a "lie" that he fought against his own country in the war and deserted it as well. Durand makes confession revealing truths in his monologue to his eldest daughter, Adèle:

> Well, then, I was born in France, but I didn't have to admit that to the first scamp that came along. Just before I reached the age of conscription I fell in love with the one who later became my wife. To be able to marry, we came here and were naturalized. When the last war broke out, and it looked as if I was going to carry a weapon against my own country, I went out as a sharpshooter against the Germans. I never deserted, as you have heard that I did your mother invented that story. (289)

It is, in fact, too late for him to reveal the truths. He has been suffering from stigma for long. He discloses to Adèle:

> Then your mother lied on her death-bed, just as she had done all through her life. And that's the curse that has been following me like a spook. Think how you have innocently tortured me with these two lies for so many years! I didn't want to put disquiet into your young lives which would result in your doubting your mother's goodness. That's why I kept silent. I was the bearer of her cross throughout our married life; carried all her faults on my back, took all the consequences of her mistakes on myself until at last I believed that I was the guilty one. (289)

Durand's memory of his wife traumatizes him—her manipulation lives on like a curse, haunting both his psyche and his present relations, leading him to believe that he "was the guilty one" (289).

Guilt and self-sacrifice are symptoms of trauma obviously found in the protagonist's character. He has made sacrifices for his family but has received no recognition for them. Adele accuses him of doing nothing but ruining the credit of their family throughout his life—"That would ruin the credit of the house entirely, but you have never done anything else" (280). His memories are burdened by helplessness, mistakes, his wife's manipulations, and the sacrifices he has silently endured. Expressing his desperateness and helplessness, Durand points to his wife's reckless spending on lottery tickets and the daughters' unaccountability in his conversation with Antonio: "The condition of the house has been so completely undermined for many years that I had rather the crash would come than live in a state of anxiety day and night, expecting what must come." (281). He feels overwhelmed by anxiety now. Later, when Adele expresses concern about their dark future, hinting at the prospect of doing prostitution, Durand says, "I have been sitting like a lone brakeman on an express train, seeing it go toward an abyss, but I haven't, been able to get to the engine valves to stop it." (286). These poignant reminiscences are not simply factual accounts but fully charged with the traumatic feelings of anxiety, shame, and isolation.

Avishai Margalit asserts that moral obligations arise from 'thick' relations—familial and communal bonds—that demand both remembrance and ethical responsibility. Forgiving and forgetting are two crucial aspects of the ethics of memory (Margalit 10). Strindberg's protagonist embodies Margalit's idea of ethical memory. He takes ethical responsibility for the past, demonstrating dedication to his "thick relations"—his wife and son. Though he holds his wife responsible for much of his misery, his words for her do not reflect bitterness. He has not forgotten her evil manipulation of their three daughters against him, but seems to have forgiven her. He acknowledges her good qualities at a point addressing Adele —"Your mother had her good qualities" (281). The protagonist's forgiveness for her becomes clearer towards the end of the play when he utters to Adele: "And one thing more, never a hard word against their mother. Her portrait is also in the chiffonier; none of you knew that, because I found it was enough that her spirit walked unseen in the home" (290). Durand's act of forgiving his wife but not forgetting her malicious manipulation demonstrates his ethics of memory.

Memory can be both a burden and a duty. The protagonist's recollection of his deceased son reflects this conflicting nature of memory. He loves to remember him though it is a "sorrow" to him. He does not have money to buy even coffee bread for the only guest of his boarding house, but purchases candles for his son's death anniversary. When Adele repudiates him for this act, he says: "Can't you grant me the only contentment I possess—

let me enjoy my sorrow one time each year? To be able to live in memory of the most beautiful thing life ever gave me?" (280). He gets solace in the memory of his deceased son. This is not merely his ethics of memory in terms of Margalit but also an effort to process his trauma. Durand's son Rene's demise has inflicted a serious psychological wound on him. He recalls his son as "the most beautiful thing" life has even given him. His innocent son's death is more agonizing to him as his grownup daughters, under the influence their mother, resent and blame him for their misfortunes. At one point, his eldest daughter remarks about him: "Did he throw away money, the wretch? He should have been put in lunatic asylum the time mother said he was ripe for it" (286). The lies perpetuated by his wife about him and his daughters' scorn combine with the persistent debt, starvation, and societal scorn to create a pervasive atmosphere of despair and hopelessness in his life that completely shatters his sense of respectful self and dignified identity.

Isolation and suicidal thoughts are symptoms of trauma found in the protagonist's character. A helpless victim of familial and societal scorn, he resorts to death in his desperate attempt to make his existence meaningful. In a hostile confrontation with him, the motif of death unfolds earlier than his suicidal act:

> THÉRÈSE. Oh, it's you, then, who has begrudged milk for my cat!
>
> DURAND. Yes, it's I.
>
> ANNETTE: And perhaps it is he who has eaten the rats' bait, too.
>
> DURAND. It is he.
>
> ADÈLE: Such a pig!
>
> THÉRÈSE. [Laughing] Think if it had been poisoned!
>
> DURAND. Alas, if only it had been, you mean!
>
> THÉRÈSE. Yes, you surely wouldn't have minded that, you who have so often talked about shooting yourself--but have never done it! (286)

Durand must have been contemplating over suicide for some time, but he resisted it earlier in order to protect his young daughters from misfortune. His deeply internalized trauma surfaces in his response to their reproach: "Do you know why I haven't done it? To keep you from going into the lake, my dear children" (287). He is split between his suicidal ideation and his moral duty as a father. If we love someone, we care about them. Durand loves and so cares about his children despite torture and insult from them. This is what Margalit calls the ethical duty towards thick relations. The tragic hero's traumatic condition together with his familial and financial strains overwhelms him, pushing him towards the brink of self-annihilation. Durand discreetly procures poison and mixes with water. While conversing with his daughters, he begins to sip it. In a revealing monologue addressed to Adele towards the end of the play, he says: "If Monsieur Durand passes out of the world as an [Whispers] incendiary, it doesn't matter much, but his children shall know that he lived as a man of honor up to that time" (289). This desire to maintain a morally sound self-image, even in death, resonates with Avishai Margalit's views of ethical memory—the imperative to be remembered as a person of integrity. For Durand, death is not mere escape but, in his own words, "going to my peace" (287). His suicide is a tragic expression of unresolved trauma, where the past remains painfully present, and his actions are driven not by healing but by a desperate need to resolve suffering through annihilation.

V. CONCLUSION

The psychological wounds inflicted on Durand amount to a deep and unresolved trauma. He strives to cope with it, but ultimately fails and succumbs to death. The memory of his dislocation from his native country, France, and the social stigma associated with it gradually breaks him from within. The accusation by his wife—that he took up arms against his own country during the war, and deserted it midway—helps to erode his self-esteem and credibility, further deepening his psychological distress. The effect of this accusation becomes clearer when he falsely claims to have been born in Switzerland, suggesting an internalized sense of shame or a desperate attempt to escape the memory of betrayal and loss. This vulnerable dimension of the social and psychological aspect of Durand's life is further exacerbated by the ruin of his financial stability and the emotional estrangement from his daughters, orchestrated by the very wife for whom he had once forsaken his homeland. Despite her betrayal, Durand continues to uphold a sense of ethical memory towards her. He does not completely repudiate his wife, even though he identifies her as the cause of much of his suffering. He asserts to his eldest daughter Adèle that her mother possessed good qualities, and he has preserved her portrait in a chiffonier—a testament to his ethical remembering and his traumatized self as well. His ethical and enduring remembrance of his son René, though a source of "sorrow" to him, is also imbued with reverence. He commemorates his son's death anniversary with a mass, purchasing candles even when he lacks money to buy mere coffee bread for the only guest in his boarding house.

Durand attempts to process his trauma through memory as a moral responsibility. His fabrication of a new

origin, his dedication to the mourning rituals for his son, and his acknowledgment of complex familial bonds show his sincere effort to "work through" his trauma. These efforts ultimately fail and culminate in his suicide. His deep psychological wounds lead him to poison himself and remain in the house while it is burning. He sets his house on fire to force his daughters to become accountable in their life which was just a "a play" in his terms, and to ensure they would not begin prostitution—a threat his wife had given him when he had tried to stop her from wasting money on lottery tickets. His act of taking poison and remaining inside the burning house has nothing to do with his self-sacrifice. His daughters would have have got five thousand Francs from fire insurance. For this, he did not need to kill himself. His self-poisoning and remaining inside the burning house amount to PTSD. In essence, *Facing Death* dramatizes a huge individual catastrophe triggered by the burden of memory and trauma.

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