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An Interpretation of
The Mystic, Symbolic and Poetic Dramas
Of Ibsen's Last Period.

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- I -

The Characteristics of Ibsen's Last Group of Dramas.

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Scientific investigation teaches that the individual is born with potentialities in certain directions which can never be eliminated, but may be controlled, directed, or subordinated to other tendencies, according to the will of the individual and the varying strength of these inherent springs of action. These tendencies are unerringly influenced by an outer force, environment, which without the knowledge of the person, unostentatiously winnows its way into his mind and helps to mould his entire career. Science has not definitely decided to what extent this force is acting in each of us, but we are compelled to believe that in the life and works of Henrik Ibsen it has played a definite and important part.

James Huneker states that "few dramatists have been more responsive to their century", and George Bernard Shaw sees "in his harping on the hereditary transmission of disease Ibsen's active intellect busy, not only with the problems peculiar to his own plays but with the fatalism and pessimism of the middle of our

century". The intermingling in his blood of German, Scotch, Norwegian and Danish strains is undoubtedly the cause of Ibsen's peculiar combination of moods. From the Norwegian element in him as well as his early life among these people, he gained his love of freedom and that meditative and highly imaginative caste of mind tending toward mysticism which is so characteristic of the north. The lyric delicacy and sensitiveness of his poetry was due to his Danish connections, whereas, his philosophic temperament and love for abstract logic is a direct outcome of the Teutonic strain. Added to these his uncompromising morality and lofty ethical ideas were inherited from his Scotch ancestors. These various moods and tendencies were played upon by his environment so as to greatly develop the mystic, poetic, and philosophic side of his character.

This interesting but bewildering combination of elements makes Ibsen "a mystery to his friends and foes", but after a careful study of his life it becomes clear that environment and heredity have together shaped

that genius mind. His early home at Skien was surrounded by no natural scenery, only the town pillory, madhouse and lock-up could be seen, and Ibsen being naturally impressionable as a child was unconsciously turned toward social subjects and the social welfare of humanity. The sudden change of fortune in his youth, the changed attitude toward the family of former friends, followed by his own trials at Grimstad and Bergen, initiated this shy, distant and sensitive personality into the darker side of life at an early period. It was not until "Brand" was produced in 1866 that he obtained recognition from the people and obtained a comfortable pension.

Like many other dramatists and novelists he began by writing poetry, some of which was very promising. Some of his earliest dramas are in verse form and are highly romantic and poetic, dealing chiefly with events of the past, dramatized forms of tales from the old Norse legends and sagas. We cannot agree with Brandes, who thinks that at one time in Ibsen's life a lyric Pegasus must have been killed under him, for his last group of

plays are permeated with poetry and music, but we do admit that in the different periods of his life one of his various personalities has always dominated the others.

In the first period it was the poet and artist that directed his work, but in the second, after becoming thoroughly familiar with the world and its hypocrisies, the social censor ruled the poet and artist so tyrannically as almost completely^{to} subdue the poet. The plays of this group are realistic prose dramas dealing with the present. The dramas of the third period are purely psychological, representing soul struggles in which "the people struggle with forces in their own nature and not in the nature about them". Poetry again finds a place in this group by the effort of the dramatist to portray subtle and almost intangible psychology.

This group is considered his last by George Brandes and other authorities, but Ibsen himself separates the last four plays and places them in a group by themselves. In a letter to Count Prozor, March 1900, Ibsen says, "You are essentially right when you say that

the series which closes with the "Epilogue" (When We Dead Awaken) began with 'The Master Builder'".

"The Lady From the Sea", written four years earlier, is Ibsen's initial attempt at this type of drama, and although fully as symbolic and poetic, it lacks that touch of poetic pessimism and transcendentalism which veils the last four plays. With the final curtain in "The Lady From the Sea", we feel that "they lived happy forever after", whereas, in the last group of dramas, Ibsen has so presented the problem that instead of solving it for us, he merely presents it in such a way that one's mind will continue to wrestle with it even after the curtain is rung down on the last act. This is a strong proof of his hold upon the psychology of life in which the soul struggle never entirely ceases but becomes more intense as the life becomes more complex.

Again, in this final group - "The Master Builder," "Little Eyolf," "John Gabriel Borkman," and "When We Dead Awaken"- all the action has preceded the play and but little remains to be done. With the rise of the curtain we

are plunged immediately in^{to} the midst of the climax, and the action being mental the intensity of the struggle is added to; thus exhibiting a masterly technique. Most authorities agree that the "Master Builder" cannot be surpassed in its dramatic technique. The remarkable rapidity of the action interwoven as it is with a highly poetic symbolism, gives the play a certain magic quality and denseness of content, making it one of the plays "most provocative of a richer and ever richer measure of interpretation".

Archibald Henderson declares that Ibsen penetrates ever deeper into spheres of moral contemplation, self-examination and introspection. We begin to wonder if in this last period the philosopher has not assumed the chief role. As Brander Matthews has stated of the last of these plays, "When We Dead Awaken", "although adjusted to the conditions of the modern theater, and although perfectly actable, it seems to be intended rather more for the reader than for the spectator. Essentially dramatic as it is, its theatric realization is less satisfactory".

"Little Eyolf" has but four prominent characters

and their handling, especially in the first act, is a marvellous piece of dramatic skill, closing as it does with a magnificently dramatic curtain. It is one of the saddest Ibsen has written, and carries with it a certain tenderness that is foreign to the rest of his plays. John Gabriel Borkman, on the other hand, is veiled with a sternness of tone and deliberateness of action which makes him appear before us as "a figure hewn from the native rock".

The exteriorization of emotional states is the object in this group and consequently poetry, symbolism and mysticism, the music of literature, are employed to heighten and elucidate the emotional tone and color the atmospheric effects. Poetry and mysticism perform sister functions, raising and carrying the soul of the audience beyond the material, concrete realities of the earth, and permitting them to peer into the dim recesses of the unknown. Since humanity is ruled by its emotions and not by its intellect, those who wish to educate and elevate others should address themselves to the emotional natures of their audiences. People are naturally impressed by

the mystic, and it is therefore rational for poets and dramatists to address themselves to this love of the mystic. Regardless of Mr. Nordau's statement that "mystical thoughts are to be laid to the account of insanity and degeneration", we feel instinctively that mysticism has a definite place in the best literature and art. Shakespeare's greatest tragedies owe their charm and beauty to this mystic element which envelopes them, and we may say that most of the charm of Ibsen's last group of dramas lies in the mystic atmosphere which hangs over them.

Closely linked with the mysticism in these plays is symbolism which permeates each drama, reaching to the very heart of the problem, clarifying the entire theme and conveying a sense of art with a meaning underlying and refining the whole. Symbolism pervades our language, but much of it is so ingrained in the tongue that we do not recognize it as such. Ibsen realized the potency of this kind of speech when he said in a letter to Mr. Gosse, "My feeling is that literary form ought to be in relation to the amount of ideality which is spread over the repre-

sentation". As one critic has intimated, he may have been drawn toward this new dramatic form by the influence of his environment while at Dresden. Through the influence of the magnificent art of the past and the music about him with its richness of harmony, melody and dramatic movement, he conceived the idea of using "an object or event as a central theme or motive of the play. Toward this symbol", says Jeanette Lee, "the ostensible action of the play moves, and from it, it recedes. This object or event also stands for the character of the play, whose soul is the stage of the real action of the play, and thus the symbol stands, at last, for the play itself."

We realize that this is a departure from the symbolism which Shakespeare makes immortal, - wherein a character stands for a universal type, - as for instance the jealousy of Othello. In Ibsen's art we see that style of symbolism later attempted by Maeterlinck and other dramatists of lesser note, but Ibsen, the superior technician displayed his ability both dramatically and artistically by so presenting this symbolism as to invest it with

a sense of intense reality. The dramas being wholly psychological, the action is mental, and symbolism, through its picture method, reveals the soul struggle far better than the speech of realism is capable of doing.

In addition, we find that it bears a very important relation to the plot of each of these last dramas. In fact, the relation is so vital that the interpretation of the symbolism throws light upon the plot, and vice versa. The main symbol is always introduced early in the first act, intertwining itself with the plot throughout the entire play, and is surrounded by minor and subsidiary symbolism. At the climax the main symbol again stands forth clearly and emphasizes the intensity of the psychological moment.

These symbols, so harmoniously blended with the plot, show Ibsen's ability to project the accompanying emotional state of an action by the skilful use of symbolism. It has been said that in his last dramas Ibsen does what the most modern of musicians has done in his particular art. A knowledge of the symbolism is as

valuable in the interpretation of these dramas as is an understanding of the leading motives in the music of Wagner. This conclusion may be drawn from the following statement by Mr. H. T. Fink concerning the music-dramas of Wagner: "They can, indeed, be enjoyed in a passive sort of way without paying any special attention to the Leading Motives, which, even in that case, make an impression by their musical beauty, emotional realism, and unconscious association of ideas; but he who would experience all the delights these art works are capable of giving, must bring his active attention to bear on the recurrence and ramification of the Leading Motives. Then will he participate in the joys which Wagner must have felt when, in the white heat of inspiration, he gave them their subtle significance".

Ibsen is frequently termed a pessimist, and he himself answered this accusation when he said; "Well, so I am, in the sense that I do not believe in the eternity of human ideals. But I am likewise an optimist in the sense that I believe in the possibility of transmuting

and developing these ideals". This is essentially true of all his dramas, for in each one there is a note of hope, symbolically expressed, which rings clearly throughout the play, but in the last four plays there is a peculiar under-current of reflection which has a pessimistic caste. It is an individual pessimism, as if Ibsen were wondering if, after all, his efforts had been exerted in the best way and to the best of his ability.

This thought can be easily inferred from his Epilogue - "When We Dead Awaken" - which seems to have a slightly autobiographical strain running through the symbolism. But even here, profuse as is the symbolism, it is so logically conceived that it bears close inspection and can be unravelled so as to throw light on the entire play which, in its close, brings us again to the mountains. This symbol of freedom gives the final note a ring of optimism, carrying with it the truly Browning-like thought that

"This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely and means good".

- II -

The Master Builder.

"Let a man contend to the uttermost

For his life's set prize, be it what it will!"

The voluntary exile of Ibsen was closed in 1891, and with the exception of short visits to Stockholm or Copenhagen, he spent the rest of his days in Norway where he wrote and published his last series of dramas beginning with those three marvellous "portrait plays",- "The Master Builder", "Little Eyolf", "John Gabriel Borkman",- and ending with the dramatic epilogue,- "When We Dead Awaken". In this group he is again the poet, dealing not with legendary themes as in his former poetic period, but with the philosophy of life, and so deft is his handling of human psychology that we feel there is no corner of the soul with which he is not perfectly familiar. Ibsen never wrote a play until he understood the life history of each of the characters, and then "with the infinite patience of the coral, building row upon row with indefatigable industry, Ibsen slowly worked out the psychological features of his dramatic characters first broadly sketched in the scenario".

It is this subtle analysis of the human spirit which gives these plays their mystic, intangible atmosphere, so stimulating to the imagination and reflectiveness of an audience. "The Master Builder", dense in its content, rapid in action, great in its art, "profound and rich in its symbolism", is a puzzle to the critics, and consequently numerous as well as varied are the interpretations of its symbolism. It is unique among Ibsen's plays in that it shows absolutely no trace of an outside influence; only echoes of past plays serving as links by which it can be bound to his earlier work.

The architectural symbol and the death of Solness remind us of Brand, who also builds a church of noble proportions but is hurled to his death by an avalanche on the mountain tops. We first find Hilda Wangel in "The Lady From the Sea", but added years and changes in the environment of Ibsen during this time have somewhat transformed her. In 1889 Ibsen met a girl of seventeen at Gossensass who probably is the principal model for Hilda Wangel in the "Master Builder", although he was

somewhat annoyed when she claimed that honor.

Hilda Wangel embodies characteristics of the superwoman with an almost pagan conscience, coupling an exquisite freshness and imperiousness with a certain cruelty and superficiality, which is shaken when her heart is touched by the pathetic tragedy in the life of Mrs. Solness. These characteristics lend a vigor to her temperament, tinged with romance. As in "Rosmersholm", he presents a struggle between the present order and the past, with woman as the central figure, influencing and guiding the action. This struggle has been wrongly interpreted by many, to mean a tract against excessive ambition when, in fact, the theme of "The Master Builder" clearly states that "life must be lived with courage, with climbing and risks, else there is no happiness, no hope, no true success, no future".

Owing to the denseness of content, this play would be difficult to interpret were it not for the illuminating quality of the symbolism which "breaks down the barrier of flesh, shows the skeleton that upholds it, and makes a sign by which we recognize not alone the poet in

the dramatist, but also the God within us". For this reason the use of symbolism is almost a necessity in this play, since the represented action is comparatively static and only the soul struggle is of consequence. It is the tragic conflict between the purely egoistic seeking of power and a resulting supersensitiveness of conscience. This combination is not at all abnormal, as some critics seem to think, but is characteristic of a type of business man that we frequently meet.

Overcome by the strength of ambition, Solness is forced, almost unwillingly, to push aside all obstacles in the path of his success, and with each step upward his naturally sensitive conscience becomes more conscious of its weakness, and consequently less capable of asserting itself. Solness is essentially a poet, and in the conversations between Hilda and himself the poetic flavor of their words is heightened to mysticism, especially when the symbolism becomes very intricate.

The main symbol in this play is an act,- the climbing of a tower to place upon its top the builder's wreath. Solness had done it in his youth but as he grew

older a dizziness prevented his climbing to such heights, and he contented himself with building comfortable homes. His popularity as a builder is constantly jeopardized by a fear of the younger generation, but he is at last spurred on to a final and supreme effort, only through the pressure of the younger generation, as personified in Hilda Wangel.

The symbol of the builder's wreath is introduced early in the first act when Hilda, after waiting ten years, returns to Solness and demands her kingdom. Coming from a pious country home, he considered the building of churches to be the noblest work of a builder, but after the loss of his children he devoted his art to the building of homes, until even these began to appear to him as unworthy the life work of an artist. It is at this period of his life, when he again changed his ideal, that Hilda appears, as the younger generation, full of daring and vigor to urge him on to a new exhibition of his power.

"Hilda.

(Reflectively) Could n't you build a little - a little

bit of a church-tower over these homes as well?

Solness.

(Starting) What do you mean by that?

Hilda.

I mean - something that points - points up into the free air. With the vane at a dizzy height.

Solness.

(Pondering a little) Strange that you should say that- for that's just what I'm most anxious to do.

Hilda.

(Impatiently) Then why don't you do it?"

Thus spurred to action, he decides to build for beauty, and the symbol of the climbing of the tower weaves its way through the plot, bringing in its wake other symbols bearing upon the main one until, at the climax of the play, it again appears, when in obedience to Hilda he climbs the tower on his new home. This major vein of symbolism carries with it a distinctly autobiographical thought. The churches built by Solness at the beginning of his career, might represent the romantic works of Ibsen's earliest period when he was still ignorant of the social

conditions of the world, and was merely responding to an innate desire for individual expression. Through a crack in a chimney Solness saw his way clear to another form of building which fired his ambitions anew, heedless of complications which might occur in the outcome. He now built only comfortable homes for those about him.

In Ibsen's life as in the lives of all, there came that "rift in the lute" which enabled him to see through the conventions and hypocrisies of the life about him, and fired his ambition for truth in all things. This was the genesis of his social dramas depicting the realistic side of life. Soon the futility of this form of literature became apparent to Ibsen, and he came to the conclusion that alone neither truth nor beauty can help humanity, but truth must unite with the spiritual element of beauty in order to penetrate the souls of people. Solness in his building also desired to build not alone for the spirit or the material welfare of society, but for the material good insofar as it forms a basis for spiritual growth.

Solness does not refer to himself as an architect but a builder, which, as Mr. Archer has stated, might be interpreted to mean that Ibsen had not that professional training in the drama which would permit him to be classed in the professional group. Again, although Ibsen did not wilfully keep other talented dramatists from coming to the front, he may have felt that by gaining a foremost place in the rank of dramatists he prevented those behind him from going one step further toward fame. Solness, of course, wilfully holds back those of his profession so as to further his ends, but this may be thus expressed in order to impress itself more clearly upon the audience. In this manner the main symbol is supported by the subordinate ones which hinge upon it and add to its clearness.

From the point of view of one not familiar with Ibsen and his works, this play seems to represent the tragic psychologic development of an idealist. His first ideal of blind devotion to ancient traditions, as exemplified in the building of churches, soon loses hold upon his growing mind and he seizes upon the ideal of happiness as

found in present social activities. This also becomes worthless in his eyes as his struggle upward becomes harder and he concludes that to base happiness upon anything in life is to submit it to the law of change. Therefore true pleasure is that of the mind, and dwells only in illusions; - the "air castles" which he planned upon building with Hilda. These two interpretations are not incompatible but are rather supplementary.

The mystic strain throughout the play, enhances the charm of the symbolism. Solness is not only jealous of the new order but is distrustful of himself, and it is this distrust, coupled with his increasing sensitiveness of conscience which is symbolized as a dizzy feeling, which grew upon him as he advanced in years. Ibsen declared that reality is itself a creation of art and each individual creates his picture of the world. The mysticism of this play lies in the picture of the world which Solness created for himself and also in the dialogues between himself and Hilda which constantly step over the border of poetry into mysticism.

There is something Shakespearian in the quality of the mysticism with which the luck of Solness is enveloped. He seems to have a feeling that

"There is a divinity which shapes our ends

Rough hew them as we will",

and retribution must follow. It is this fear which gives one an eerie feeling when he says:

"It terrifies me - terrifies me every hour of the day. For sooner or later the luck must turn, you see".

In the first act where Hilda refuses to believe that he was dizzy when he climbed the church tower, there is a telepathic suggestion in her statement:

"I knew that instinctively. For if you had been you could never have stood up there and sung.

Solness.

I've never sung a note in my life.

Hilda.

Yes, you sang then. It sounded like harps in the air."

Here the poetry has surely crossed over into the mystic regions of telepathy. All the passages that are most

dense with mystic thought are also the most poetic, as is the following:

"Hilda.

(Quite seriously.) It was this something within me that drove and spurred me here - and allured and attracted me too.

Solness.

(Eagerly) There we have it! Hilda! There's a troll in you too, as in me. For it's the troll in one, you see - it's that that calls to the powers outside us. And then you must give in whether you will or no."

This poetic idea of the trolls runs through the play, connecting it with the earlier plays and reminding one strongly of "Peer Gynt."

The speeches of Hilda carry much mysticism in their poetry, and in the second act she again sounds the telepathic note when she questions Solness. -

"Tell me, Mr. Solness - are you certain that you've never called me to you? - Inwardly, you know?"

Solness.

(Softly and slowly) I almost think I must have."

We are strongly reminded of Hamlet's famous soliloquy when in the last act, Hilda, in a reflective way, drifts into one of those mystic, unanswerable questions that have occupied the minds of thinkers for ages;-

"Hilda.

Not to be able to grasp at your own happiness - at your own life! Merely because someone you know happens to stand in the way!

Solness.

One whom you have no right to set aside.

Hilda.

I wonder whether one really hasn't the right? And yet, and yet - Oh! if one could only sleep the whole thing away!"

The entire play is permeated in this manner with those transcendental thoughts that come up in the lives of each of us at some time or other.

The poetic quality of the dialogue is exquisite, and through its realistic interpretation of "the broken rhythm of life", we feel the waves of emotional thought surging in rhythmic crescendos to the climax. Ibsen, as a

true poet, has utilized the poetic value of names to arouse a mental picture of the characters of the people in his dramas. Aline clearly characterizes the delicate, retiring and dependant wife of a man like Halvard Solness. His name, on the other hand, has a certain strength and determination which is almost viking-like in its ruggedness. That of Hilda Wangel carries with it the thought of youth, freedom and courage.

When Hilda is describing to Solness his former act of courage and bravery, there is a repetition of certain words which gives to her speech that poetic quality found in the Hebraic parallelisms of the Bible. -

"Hilda.

There was music in the churchyard - and many, many hundreds of people. We school-girls were dressed in white and we all carried flags. -

Then you climbed up over the scaffolding, straight to the very top; and you had a great wreath with you; and you hung that wreath right away up on the weathercock."

Again, we find her constantly speaking most romantically of the kingdom he had promised her. The poetry

of these speeches as of those in which she speaks of the trolls symbolically, is interwoven with poetry of a mystic quality.

"Hilda.

And when I asked how long I should have to wait, you said that you would come again in ten years - like a troll - and carry me off to Spain or some such place. And you promised you would buy me a kingdom then."

There is a vein of pathos mingled with the poetic quality of the following speech by Solness, which makes it very effective. -

"Solness.

For you must know that Aline - she, too, had a turn for building.- For building up the souls of little children, Hilda. For building up children's souls in perfect balance and in noble and beautiful forms. For enabling them to soar up into erect and full grown human souls. That was Aline's talent. And there it all lies now - unused, and unusable forever - of no earthly service to any one - just like the ruins left by the fire."

In another speech with Hilda they converse almost entirely in a poetic vein. -

"Solness.

Hilda - do you know what you are?

"Hilda.

Yes, I suppose I'm a strange sort of bird.

Solness.

No. You are like a dawning day. When I look at you, I seem to be looking toward the sunrise."

It is in the reflective quality of the poetry that we see the difference between the poetry of his early plays and that of his last period. When Mrs. Solness tells Hilda of her home that was burned and what losses she regretted most, we find Ibsen expressing a psychologic truth by means of a most excellent example; poetic in itself and powerful in stimulating the emotions of the audience.

"Mrs. Solness.

No, it's the small losses in life that cut one to the heart - the loss of all that other people look upon as almost nothing. - All the old portraits were burned on the

walls. All the old silk dresses were burnt that had belonged to the family for generations and generations. And all mother's and grandmother's lace - that was burnt too. And only think - the jewels, too! (Sadly.) And then all the dolls."

It is this pathetic note which is often mistaken for pessimism in his later plays, and even this tone is not continuous but is constantly relieved by flashes of keen humor. There seems to be a tone of individual pessimism in "The Master Builder". Solness seemed to feel that his life on this earth was somewhat of a failure, but I do not feel that Ibsen wished to make us understand that life in general is a failure. The play closes with a distinctly optimistic note, mingling joy with music and poetry. It is Hilda's speech, with which the play closes. "But he mounted right to the top. And I heard harps in the air. (Waves her shawl in the air, and shrieks with wild intensity.) My - my Master Builder."

Herein lies the thought that we all should strive to our utmost for what we desire, regardless of

the outcome. The will being the supreme thing in life,
its exercise is of the greatest importance. Hilda after
having spurred on Solness, "Made weak by time and fate
but strong in will,

To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield."
sees him again at the zenith of his power. He was again
her Master Builder.

- III -

Little Eyolf.

"Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

It was in December 1894 that Ibsen published "Little Eyolf", a drama of the soul. Jeanette Lee referred to it as "the Pilgrim's Progress of modern life". The play, as a whole, is one of the saddest Ibsen has ever written. In his handling of the philosophy of life he emphasizes the importance of "the law of change". It is this thought of the ephemeral quality of all things which gives the play a pessimistic tone.

There are several links by which to connect this play with those of an earlier period. Here Ibsen is again "the castigator of nature" as in "The Wild Duck" and "Brand". Alfred Allmers reminds one a little of George Tesman in "Hedda Gabler" but has greater vigor and is not so complex. Ibsen's characterizations of children are very beautiful, and in this instance, Eyolf, "the little wounded warrior" is treated with such skill that we feel sorry he left us so few interpretations of children's characters.

The psychology of the souls of the characters is of primary importance, and he depicts not only the "tyranny of passion" but an analysis of the mental reactions from a morbid self-consciousness. From the close of the first act to the end of the play the action is almost entirely psychological, presenting the struggles of conscience brought on by remorse.

There are five characters, but the Rat-Wife and Eyolf are scarcely more than symbols, and Borgheim being a very minor character, we may say that there are but three characters in the play. Alfred Allmers is a type of self-conscious egoism, trying at different times to loosen himself from the grasp of this element in his nature, but unable to do so until he has experienced great sorrow and remorse. Rita is pre-eminently selfish and jealous, as the outcome of unconscious egoism. She, too, is incapable of a breadth of vision until through suffering and remorse she comes to a realization of true love, and decides to devote her life to training the host of poor children that live around her.

Asta Allmers may symbolize innocence and "that higher nature with which Allmers might have lived forever had he not been blind". Here we meet with that combination of characters of which Ibsen was so fond. Allmers stands between two women who represent nearly opposite types of character, just as Lövborg stood between Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted, or as Rosmer stood between Rebecca and his wife.

Little Eyolf with his crutch and "haunting eyes" symbolizes remorse as the outcome of the union of these two egoists, and links them to those people who "cannot keep soul and body together on account of the rats and all the little rat children". In the last act we are definitely informed by Allmers that the Rat-Wife symbolizes death. "Here went death and I", he said, "like two fellow travellers", and further on, in speaking of the loss of Eyolf, he says, "And then, when - my fellow traveller came and took him". Borgheim, on the other hand, is not so easily labelled, but his unfailing optimism coupled with the idea that he was a "roadmaker", makes him stand out

as a symbol of hope for the future happiness of man. He being the roadmaker, was merely preparing the way along which future generations would pass.

The "haunting symbolism" of this play carries with it a note of pathos which is not found in earlier plays. When Allmers was lured away from his soul by the body, he forgot its higher needs. Remorse was born, and from that time Allmers was oppressed with a peculiar feeling which he could not explain but which proved to be remorse making its way into his soul. He struggled to rid himself of this oppression and started to compile a book upon "Human Responsibility". The grim humor and irony implied in the title, is characteristic of Ibsen. Mr. Huneker speaks of Ibsen's irony as "a veiled corrosive irony that causes you to tread suspiciously every yard of his dramatic domain".

Still struggling with remorse, Allmers seeks the mountains and the "infinite solitudes", because his soul longs to leave the body and become free again as in his youth. He even has death as a traveling companion when nearly lost, but suddenly he finds his way and

returning, decides to live for the remorse he has created and thus try to heal the wounds of his soul. Just as he is starting upon his new course of action, remorse is snatched from him and he realizes that his resolve to live for it was no broader a motive than his former had been. He was still interested only in the problems of his own soul, entirely unconscious of his duties toward those about him. Not until remorse and defeat had burned the selfish interest from out his soul, was he capable of seeing his real duty which lay in a life of broadened human sympathy and universal love.

This main trend of symbolism is crossed and interwoven with minor symbols, as the "gold and green forests" of Rita's, symbolizes her material charms by which she was capable of attracting and luring away Allmers from a spiritual life to an interest in earthly things only.

In the first act, a hush, foreboding evil, seems to envelop the group as the Rat-Wife "softly and noiselessly" enters the room. There is even a mystic note in Eyolf's words where he cautiously remarks: "Then perhaps it may be true, after all, that she is a were-wolf at

night". The garb of the Rat-Wife is symbolic, in that the large red umbrella shading her may symbolize that thing in life which is always present to help us bear death and soften its sorrow. The dog's name, Mops^äman, is symbolic because he helps mop the earth clean of "gnawing things".

Throughout this scene we have an intuitive feeling of approaching evil which is heightened when we see that Eyolf appears to be hypnotized by the woman and her peculiar dog. With Eyolf's death Rita is stricken with remorse, and his "haunting eyes" may be the symbol of her newly awakened conscience. So numerous are these minor symbols, and so definitely do they bear upon the main one, that it is unnecessary to enumerate them.

The mysticism of the play is interwoven with the symbolism, philosophy and poetry. The philosophy deals chiefly with the "law of change" which threads its way through the play and influences each of the characters. Rita is the first to clearly state this thought when, in the first act, she says that everything must have an end. Borgheim the optimism disagrees with her. "I am thinking

of all that is lovely!" he said. In Rita's reply there is that note of hope which in this play is always found close to one of pessimism, taking away from its harshness. "And that never comes to an end. Yes, let us think of that, hope for that, all of us." When Asta finds that the "law of change" operates between herself and Allmers, she leaves him. Here again the optimistic note is sounded, for she goes not alone but with Borgheim, "the roadmaker".

In the last act Ibsen shows the bright side of the "law of change". Rita feels that a change has occurred in her as well as in Allmers, and calls it "a sort of birth".

"Allmers.

It is - or a resurrection. Transition to a higher life.

Rita.

Yes - with the loss of all, all life's happiness.

Allmers.

That loss is just the gain.

Rita.

(Vehemently) Oh, phrases! Good God, we are crea-

tures of the earth after all.

Allmers.

But something akin to the sea and heavens too, Rita."

Mingled with the mystic philosophy of this thought is the exquisite poetry of the last two speeches. It is this struggle between the earthly and the spiritual in us, which brings about the tragedies of life, and therefore this thought could stand for the play itself, in which the entire action is based upon this struggle.

Ibsen brings up another one of those mystic thoughts with which humanity wrestles, and the gloomy poetry of parts of it gives it a clearly pessimistic atmosphere. The pessimism which this thought expresses is felt by all of us at some period of our lives. -

"Allmers.

(Impatiently) For, after all, there must be a meaning in it. Life, existence - destiny, cannot be so utterly meaningless.

Asta.

Oh, who can say anything with certainty about those things, my dear Alfred.

Allmers.

(Laughs bitterly) No, no; I believe you are right there. Perhaps the whole thing goes simply by hap-hazard - taking its own course like a drifting wreck without a rudder. I dare say that is how it is. At least, it seems very like it."

Ibsen shows his excellent knowledge of psychology when he has Allmers say: "In the midst of all the agony, I found myself speculating what we should have for dinner today." It is in touches like this that we realize the power of Ibsen to probe into the mystic "dim lit depth of the soul", and it is this same power which gives "Little Eyolf" a mystic, intangible quality.

This mystic quality of "Little Eyolf" is made more spiritual by the exquisite poetry in which the thoughts are expressed. In the scene between the Rat-Wife and Eyolf there is a mystic atmosphere of illusion enveloping it, even though every detail is realistic and plausible. This effect is brought about by the poetic quality of the dialogue which mingles with the supernatural and mystic so harmoniously that there seems to be a strain of

music running through her words.

"The Rat-Wife.

Then we push out from the land, and I scull with one oar, and play on my Pan's-pipes. And Mopsøman he swims behind. (With glittering eyes.) And all the creepers and crawlers, they follow us out into the deep waters. Ay, for they have to.

Eyolf.

Why do they have to?

The Rat-Wife.

Just because they want not to - just because they are so deadly afraid of the water. That is why they have got to plunge into it.

Eyolf.

Are they drowned then?

The Rat-Wife.

Every blessed one. (More softly) And there it is all as still and soft and dark as their hearts can desire, the lovely little things. Down there they sleep a long, sweet sleep, with no one to hate them or persecute them any more."

There is something horrible about this thought, but it is certainly potent in its emotional effects, especially if the person taking this part is excellently suited to it. Her voice, it seems to me, would have to possess a certain charm and smoothness in order to bring out the poetry and mysticism which Ibsen put into the sentences.

In the following passage, Allmers "with shining eyes" tells of the glories of the mountain peaks. The repetition of the personal pronoun gives the passage a rhythmic quality. "I went up into the infinite solitudes. I saw the sunrise gleaming on the mountain peaks.- I felt myself near the stars - I seemed almost to be in communion with them".

After a careful analysis of "Little Eyolf" it seems to me that the prevailing mood would be one of pessimism, were it not for Borgheim who sounds the note of hope and good cheer throughout the play. But with the climax comes a change in the mood. A feeling of resignation pervades the scene wherein Rita and Allmers look into each others' souls and decide that "Eyolf was not born in vain" nor "died in vain", for by his death they were purged of

their egoism and were now capable of a broad, human sympathy.

This final scene is filled with a delicate and beautiful poetry of a mystic nature, lending a certain spiritual tone to its meaning. They now wish to make peace with "the great, open eyes", and decide to unite in their philanthropic work. The following lines have a note of tenderness mingling with the poetry and symbolism of the thought.

"Rita.

"You will see - that now and then a Sabbath peace will descend on us.

Allmers.

Then perhaps we shall know that the spirits are with us. Now and then, perhaps, we may, still - on the way through life - have a little passing glimpse of them."

The reconciliation scene with its increasing note of tenderness is very dramatic, and the play closes with a hopeful note for the future, in that optimistic symbol; the mountain peaks.

"Rita.

Where shall we look for them, Alfred?

Allmers.

Upwards - towards the peaks. Towards the stars.
And towards the great silence."

- IV -

John Gabriel Borkman.

"And the greatest of these is love."

"John Gabriel Borkman" is Ibsen's last play dealing with the struggle between the past and present orders of society. As Mr. Brandes says: "The spirit of the play reveals that its author is no longer a young man". Its tone is profoundly reflective and exhibits his growing interest in the analysis of psychical situations. There is an intensity of feeling in the first three acts, and a free "open air feeling" in the last act which carry with them none of the perplexing interpretations of "The Master Builder" or "Little Eyolf". Ibsen's interest centers less upon the construction of the play as it progresses, and more upon the pure imagination and lyric beauty in the words of Ella and Borkman as they stand "looking over their shattered lives and playing chorus to their own tragedy".

The character delineation is superb throughout the play. John Gabriel Borkman stands forth an unparalleled egoist and "financial megalomaniac" whose apparent strength is felt to be only a fraction of that which he

holds in reserve. With Borkman between Gunhild and Ella we again have Ibsen's favorite combination of characters. Borkman resembles Consul Bernick in several respects, and I may add that the themes of "The Pillars of Society" and "John Gabriel Borkman" are very similar.

Gunhild has a strength and coldness of nature which is set off by the sympathy and tenderness of her sister, Ella Rentheim. There is something Dickens-like in the portrayal of Foldal as he converses with John Gabriel. The delicacy of the humor is tinged with a gentleness and sympathy for human failings.

There is none of that "haunting symbolism" of "Little Eyolf", but a freer play of the imagination. The symbolism brings out the central moral of the play, that all human errors come from a coldness of heart and a disregard "of the natural heart of love". Mrs Wilton symbolizes the joy of life, and by her charms is capable of luring the younger generation away from its place at the side of the past generation. Erhart represents this younger generation, and at the close of the third act, where he refuses to help his mother, father or aunt, it

seems as if Ibsen were definitely emphasizing this inevitable break between the old and new orders to the detriment of the dramatic construction.

There are in this play, as in the others of the group, minor symbols that, hinging upon the main one, clarify its subtleties. Mrs Wilton's desire to have Erhart with her symbolizes the necessity of happiness to have something for which to live, and in taking Frida with them the ephemeral quality of happiness is symbolized. "Men are so unstable", Mrs Wilton remarks. "And women too. When Erhart is done with me - and I with him - then it will be well for us both that he, poor fellow, should have someone to fall back upon." In the last act Foldal is run over by the sledge in which his daughter is leaving, and this, I think, symbolizes the unconscious and unintentional manner in which the younger generation pushes to the ground the older, in its mad rush toward success and happiness.

At the close of the drama the main symbol again appears veiled in the poetic language of the two women.

"Ella Rentheim.

It was rather the cold that killed him.

Mrs. Borkman.

(Shakes her head) The cold, you say? The cold - that had killed him long ago.

Ella Rentheim.

(Nodding to her) Yes - and changed us two into shadows. A dead man and two shadows, that is what the cold has made of us."

The poetic and imaginative heights to which Ibsen soars in "John Gabriel Borkman", have not been surpassed in any of the former plays of this group. We feel that Borkman had always been a poet, but the years of imprisonment followed by an equal number in confinement at home, developed this poetic nature "into a visionary, living only in dreams and hopes". He has some of the mental attributes of a mystic, and his language becomes tinged with a poetic mysticism. "Upon my soul," he says to Ella, "it is not so easy to remember one's motives of twenty years ago. I only know that when I used to grapple, silently and alone, with all the great projects I had in my mind, I had something like the feeling of a man who is starting on a balloon-voyage. All through my sleepless nights I

was inflating my giant balloon, and preparing to soar away into perilous, unknown regions".

In the following speech of Borkman's, there is a mystic, poetic quality intermingled in the words which characterize him so well. -

"Borkman.

I can see the veins of metal stretch out their winding, branching, luring arms to me. I saw them before my eyes like living shapes, that night when I stood in the strong-room with the candle in my hand. You begged to be liberated, and I tried to free you. But my strength failed. (With outstretched hands) But I will whisper it to you here in the stillness of the night: I love you, as you lie there spellbound in the deeps and the darkness. I love you, with all your shining train of power and glory! I love you, love you, love you."

In reply to his words, so glowing with passion for power and glory, Ella Rentheim shows in her prophesy that she too has poetry in her, which is colored by a transcendental thought - "And therefore I prophesy to you John Gabriel Borkman - You will never touch the price you

demanded for the murder. You will never enter in triumph into your cold, dark kingdom!"

Mrs. Borkman also has permitted her imagination to expand and develop, during the long years of his imprisonment, and her shattered nerves and coldness of heart are strongly felt in this simile: "I often feel as if I had a sick wolf pacing his cage up there in the gallery, right over my head." (Listens and whispers.) "Hark! Do you hear! Backwards and forwards, up and down goes the wolf."

The poetry of this play is always tinged with a mysticism which makes the play more tragic in atmosphere. The first act closes with a strain of eerie music which is very dramatic but brings on a feeling of horror. It seems to be a warning of the coming change, in which Erhart, as the younger generation, leaves the older alone, to meet and struggle with death. The strains of the "Danse Macabre" grow louder as the curtain falls on Mrs. Borkman prostrate with grief. (She stands still for a moment, then flings herself down on the floor, writhing in agony and whispering) "Erhart! Erhart - be true to me! Oh, come home and help your mother! For I can bear this life no longer".

With the opening of the second act when Frida has finished playing the "Danse Macabre", Borkman asks: "Can you guess where I first heard tones like these? It was down in the mines. The metal sings down there.

Frida.

Really? Sings?

Borkheim.

(Nodding) When it is loosened. The hammer strokes that loosen it are the midnight bell clanging to set it free; and that is why the metal sings - in its own way - for gladness."

Running through the commercial aspect of the theme is a thought of the "preciousness of vital joy", which seems to be of interest to Ibsen in all the plays of this group. This gives the play its tone of pessimism, which gradually changes to one of peace and reconciliation over the dead body of Borkman. The death of Borkman, brought about by the cold world about him and the unquenchable egoism within him, serves at least to unite these sisters, and in the words of their reconciliation I find

the rhythmd and music of a chant.

"Mrs. Borkman.

And now I think we two may hold out our hands to each other, Ella.

Ella Rentheim.

I think we may, now.

Mrs. Borkman.

We twin sisters - over him we have both loved.

Ella Rentheim.

We two shadows - over the dead man."

- v -

When We Dead Awaken.

"Each life unfulfilled you see;
It hangs still, patchy and scrappy;
We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
Starved, feasted, despaired - been happy."

With the appearance of "When We Dead Awaken", in December 1899, Ibsen's dramatic work was complete. He spoke of it as his "Dramatic Epilogue", which seems to be an eminently appropriate title, since the play consists of a harmonious blending of echoes from his earlier plays.

It is a symbolic revelation of his work and himself with "something equivocal, something cryptic lurking" beneath the apparent meaning. The mystic quality is deepened by a vagueness and indefiniteness of the entire conception, which is not found in the earlier plays, and to which I attribute its failure both as a good acting or reading play. Furthermore, the pathological atmosphere would make the play unwholesome were it not interpreted in the light of its symbolism.

The degraded human soul is again portrayed in its efforts to reach a higher plane, and we are presented one of life's greatest tragedies, in which man discovers

that he has permitted his golden opportunity to slip by him forever. A slightly similar situation is presented in the two former plays, in which both Allmers and Borkman realize, when it is too late, that they have forfeited true happiness, and in the following words of Borkman's we find a suggestion of the main theme of "When We Dead Awaken", -"I have been close to the verge of death. But now I have awakened."

Professor Rubek is primarily a sculptor, just as Solness was first and foremost a builder. Both have killed the best which life offers, in an attempt to climb to the topmost round of the ladder of success. Maia symbolizes earthly Love and Realism, whereas Irene, stands for the Love and Beauty and Ideality of life which is almost spiritual in essence. Ulfheim stands for the purely animal joy of living, and is sharply contrasted with Rubek, in whom the intellectual and spiritual pleasures are in the ascendant. The life of Rubek might be that of Ibsen's own soul, and it is thus that I have interpreted it.

The symbol of the play is the sculptored group called "The Resurrection Day". By means of this symbol

Ibsen tells us of his first literary attempts, for which he chose the best of models, but since he did not love this world of Love, Beauty and Ideality, for itself, the power to make use of it was taken from him. He wedded Realism, and soon tiring of her, he feels the void in his heart which the loss of Love has made.

It is the story of a crushing defeat in a life which has already gone too far to be able to retrace its steps. Irene as the symbol of Love and Ideality, has been abused and shamed since she left him. The love was dead in her, and many who would have loved her vitality were killed by her coldness. "There is still time for us to live our life", Rubik exclaimed, and Irene replied sadly, "The desire for life is dead in me, Arnold. Now I have arisen. And I look for you. And I find you.- And then I see that you and life lie dead - as I have lain". In her words there seems to be that repetition for rhythmic effects which is so frequently met with in the Bible .

In the development of the sculptored group Ibsen portrayed his life's defeat, showing the harsh criticism

which he administered to his work as he looked back upon it. After having accomplished a work of art by the help of Love and Beauty, he permits her to leave him. "I learned worldly wisdom in the years that followed", he said to Irene, and this knowledge made him view the world from a realistic point of view. So engrossed did he become in it that he inserted it into "The Resurrection Day" which now interested him, and since his interests were buried in the realities of life, he pushed back the central figure to make room for the new ones.

His view being broader, he had to expand the plinth in order to have room for the "representation of a segment of the earth", from the fissures of which, "swarmed men and women with dimly suggested animal faces", men and women as he saw them in real life. This might symbolize his realistic dramas in which he portrayed men and women with the object of showing that side of their natures most clearly suggestive of the animal or the brute.

The artist places a representation of himself in the picture. "In the front, beside a fountain - sits

a man weighed down with guilt, who cannot quite free himself from the earth-crust. I call him remorse for a forfeited life. He sits there and dips his fingers in the purling stream - to wash them clean - and he is gnawed and tortured by the thought that never, never will he attain to freedom and the new life." Ibsen may have thought his realistic plays to have been a blot upon his artistic work, and in his last group, by combining imaginative beauty and poetry with a realistic theme and setting, "he is dipping his fingers in the purling stream to wash them clean".

The Sister of Mercy shadowing Irene, has been interpreted in various ways, all of which seem to me, inadequate. Since Irene is the symbol of spiritual Love and Ideality, it follows that the Sister represents something which fosters and protects this element for the good of mankind. It is the Christian spirit which is symbolized by the Sister, as the protector of Love and Ideality, feeding and watching it most carefully when it is nearly dead.

The mysticism, pessimism and poetry of this play are inextricably interwoven. Here we again have the thought of the "preciousness of vital joy", exemplified in the lives of all the characters. In Maia's request, "Come, Rubek! Drink and be merry!", the idea seems to imply that, "tomorrow we may die".

The scenes are all laid in the open, which makes a most romantic setting for the poetry and mysticism of the play, while deepening the pessimistic tone. The play is filled with mystic, philosophic thoughts that haunt the mind of the reader or audience. There is something awful in the mystic quality of the following conversation between Maia and Rubek. -

"Maia.

Just listen how silent it is here.

Professor Rubek.

And can you hear that?

Maia.

Yes, indeed I can. Of course there was noise and bustle enough in the town. But I don't know how it is -

even the noise and bustle seemed to have something dead about it."

With each act the scenery becomes more wild and solitary, while the atmosphere grows in mystic and poetic intensity, until the close of the last act where we find the scene very similar in emotional intensity to that of the last act of "Brand". The reminiscent strain of the following poetic passage is characteristic of most of the poetry of the play, -

"Professor Rubek.

You used to set birds swimming in the brook.

They were water-lilies which you -

Irene.

They were white swans.

Professor Rubek.

I mean swans, yes. And I remember that I fastened a great furry leaf to one of the swans. It looked like a burdock-leaf -

Irene.

And then it turned into Lohengrin's boat - with the

swan yoked to it."

All the poetry seems to have a symbolic significance which further enhances the mystic tone of the play. Undoubtedly, pessimistic as the atmosphere is, the play closes with that optimistic call to the future which has characterized every play of this group. It symbolizes a past that has failed, and closes with a clear note of hope that the future shall be bright through free choice.

Love or Ideality accompanies the artist up into the mountains, the haunts of freedom; traveling always upward through mists and storms, until the re-born souls of both look out on the world with clear eyes. There is a stir of the elements accompanying this resurrection, and mingling with it we have the gay, free song of Maia as she descends the mountains, while Rubek and Irene, whirled along by an avalanche of snow, are buried in its depths. The Sister of Mercy appears, and shrieking, "stretches out her arms toward them". The moment that follows is tense with expectation and emotion as she silently makes the sign of the cross before her in the

air, and utters that call of hope: "Pax vobiscum!", while
from far beneath Maia's song of freedom can still be
heard.

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