

Ibsen's Symbolism in "*The Master Builder*" and "*When We Dead Awaken*"

BY PAUL H. GRUMMANN

William Archer in the introduction to his translation of *When We Dead Awaken* says: "But to his sane admirers the interest of the play must always be melancholy, because it is purely pathological. To deny this is, in my opinion, to cast a slur over all the poet's previous work, and in great measure to justify the criticisms of his most violent detractors. For *When We Dead Awaken* is very like the sort of play that haunted the anti-Ibsenite imagination in the year 1893, or thereabouts. It is a piece of self-caricature, a series of echoes from all the earlier plays, an exaggeration of manner to the pitch of mannerism. Moreover, in his treatment of symbolic motives, Ibsen did exactly what he had hitherto, with perfect justice, plumed himself upon never doing: he sacrificed the surface reality to the underlying meaning."

The misconception at the bottom of this statement is probably due to a onesided acceptance of the poet's insistence that his plays are not to be taken symbolically. In spite of the poet's attitude we have had critics without number who have attempted to find symbolism in Ibsen's plays. *Hedda Gabler* as symbolical of a revolver is probably the most picturesque of these attempts. The church tower in *The Master Builder* has been so completely plastered over with symbolic meanings that we are not surprised that Ibsen cried out in self-defense.

It is not proper, however, to accept the poet's statements in matters of this kind, because he cannot possibly give an objective view of himself. He may state his intentions but he cannot define his own activity. Since no man can state to what extent he himself thinks symbolically, Ibsen cannot throw any real light upon himself in this respect.

If we take the term symbolism in its traditional sense, according to which a special significance is arbitrarily attached to stated

things, it is quite clear that *The Master Builder* and all the plays of this period are not symbolical. If, however, we take the view that all thinking is symbolical to some extent, then *The Master Builder* at once becomes symbolical to a marked degree.]

Our conceptions of individuals are not objective, but we throw all kinds of abstract notions into these conceptions. A person who has stolen thus becomes a thief to us. The application of such terms as thief, liar, lick-spittle implies a measure of symbolism in our commonest conceptions. But the process does not end here. [A certain individual of our acquaintance may steal and in addition may betray marked characteristics of dishonesty. This may be so pronounced that whenever the thought of dishonesty comes to us, an image of our dishonest acquaintance appears to our consciousness. We visualize our abstraction in the terms of a concrete personality. This gives us the basis of psychological symbolism quite unlike the older formal symbolism which, in my opinion, must remain a superficial art-form.]

Ibsen's habit of thought is essentially symbolical in this sense. He sees an individual who impresses him as a type and around this individual he arrays the peculiarities of the type.]

So in Nora, we see the type of the woman of strong individuality; in Mrs. Alving, the well-intentioned opportunist who makes the best of a bad situation; in Dr. Stockman, the scientific idealist; in Hedda Gabler, the strong-willed, self-respecting aristocrat; in Borkmann, the constructive promoter; in Solnes, the conceited promoter who does not learn his profession, but uses spurious and unprincipled means to bolster up his deficiencies. [Indeed, it might be said that Ibsen has created a kind of twentieth century mythology in these figures since they reflect our ideas in regard to these various types.]

Since this is the case, we cannot consider Ibsen a realist of the type of Arno Holz, but an impressionist, for he retouches and readjusts his figures in order to present the types clearly. To what extent he does this consciously can, of course, not be determined definitely, nor is it a matter of great concern. This emphasis of the typical qualities of his characters is so marked that

it renders many situations in his plays very improbable, clearly a violation of the realistic technique. This tendency is particularly clear in *The Master Builder*. That Mrs. Solnesz should prefer her dolls to her children violates our notions of probability, but as an impressionistic device of portraying the slavish devotion of this woman to her past, it is very effective.

To put it mildly, the appearance of Hilde Wangel is anything but realistic, anything but probable. She comes exactly ten years after the crowning of the church, she has no trunk, she is mature and rather shrewd yet takes seriously an offhand promise given by a man who clearly was posing for effect. In spite of her silly confidence in his promise, this daughter of a village physician at once sees through all of the tricks of Solnesz, resolutely readjusts his life, drives him up the steeple and insists on having him put himself on the merit basis.

But the moment we look upon Hilde Wangel as one who has the characteristics that we have learned to associate with the ideal, the inconsistencies disappear. As Lowell puts it, "some day the soft ideal that we wooed confronts us." Just so Hilde confronts Solnesz. We have learned in this connection to think of the ideal as "claiming of thee the promise of thy youth." We have come to think of the ideal as exacting, cruel, relentless, persistent and objective. As a type figure Hilde at a stroke becomes thoroughly plausible to us.

The genesis of the figure in the poet's mind is clearly this: Ibsen had met some woman whose actions and utterances reminded him strongly of the conception that he had of the ideal. Upon this concrete basis he gradually, consciously or unconsciously, worked out the Hilde of the play, giving her additional characteristics of the type that had become fixed in his mind.

In the portrayal of Solnesz, it is again the typical that is of interest to Ibsen. It is not at all probable that a given master builder who did not have genuine professional ideals would be dishonest to the extent to which Solnesz is. Let us remember how many characteristics and circumstances Ibsen has connected with this figure: Solnesz has not only failed to prepare properly

for his profession, but does not work on the real problems of architecture after he has become established; he realizes that he has not really deserved his success; therefore accounts for it to himself on the personal ground—he feels that he has hypnotic, supernatural power, that he can accomplish things by willing them; his feeling of guilt is extended to events for which he is not responsible and gives rise to the “sickly conscience”; the feeling that he does not deserve his success makes him afraid to build churches, for the highest ideal he substitutes an inferior one, but glosses over his act, that is, he hypnotizes himself into believing that the building of homes is better than the building of temples; so definite does this feeling of guilt become that he fears youth and experiences a physical reaction every time a knock is heard at the door; he sells himself for a business chance and although he is conscious of his guilt, he keeps on sacrificing his wife and himself to the demon of success; with growing age the old ideals again make themselves felt, but he cannot rise to church building; he constructs a hybrid form—a dwelling with a tower—an architectural monstrosity.

[A figure conceived thus is neither realistic nor probable, but the moment we look upon Solnesz as a type the exaggerations become as natural as they would be in an impressionistic picture or a high grade caricature. These types are then set over against each other as foils. So in Solnesz and Ragnar Brovik, Rubek and Ulfheim, Hedda Gabler and Mrs. Elvsted, Tesman and Lövborg, Ella Rentheim and Mrs. Børkman, etc. etc.]

[On the whole, the interpreters of Ibsen have erred in looking too closely at details without reference to the basic idea of the play as a whole.] “Sie sehen den Wald vor den Bäumen nicht.”

The central thought of *The Master Builder* might be outlined in a few words as follows: A man who forsakes his highest ideals and attempts to find success by unworthy means will come to grief; he will again be confronted by his former ideals and these ideals will drive him to ruin. This central thought of *The Master Builder* continued to engage the attention of Ibsen, for we see it reappear in *When We Dead Awaken*. Before the last play was written Hauptmann's *Sunken Bell* had appeared.

It is not rash to suppose that Ibsen's final study of this problem was affected by Hauptmann's solution. When Meister Heinrich feels the doubts taking possession of him he says: "So mag der Satan dieses Werk vollenden, Kartoffeln will ich legen, Rüben baun, will essen, trinken, schlafen und dann sterben."

Rubek does the same thing. He makes portrait busts for money, into each one of which he puts the features of some animal. He buys a villa, marries a young wife and decides to live without reference to his old artistic ideals.

This is the more external relationship, for Ibsen might have based this much upon his own *Master Builder*. But we have a different conception of the ideal which accords rather with that of the *Sunken Bell* than that of *The Master Builder*. Hilde remains steadfast and prods Solnesz up to the promise of his youth. In *Sunken Bell* Rautendelein goes to the Nickelmann when Heinrich forsakes her. The conception clearly is that an ideal degenerates when it is forsaken. This idea Ibsen works out consistently in *When We Dead Awaken*. Rubek casts aside Irene. She becomes totally depraved, yet when he meets her later he interprets into her all and more than all that she had ever been to him.

In *When We Dead Awaken*, the characters are typical just as they had been in *The Master Builder*. Rubek is the artist who at first lives up to the highest demands of his art, but then resolutely turns his back upon his ideals, commercializes his art and buys the comforts of life scorned by the real artist. His wife Maja (type counterpart) is the village belle without higher aspiration, who marries for position. Ulfheim is the brute man, Irene is the woman typical of the degenerated ideal.

Hauptmann in *Sunken Bell* and *Und Pippa tanzt* gives us a naturalistic picture of the inner life of Heinrich and the director; hence Rautendelein and Pippa are presented entirely as conceived by Heinrich and the director. Ibsen in *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken* presents typical characters, but in addition points out that Solnesz and Rubek encounter in real life actual experiences which remind us strongly of a man's relation

to his ideal. This experience is so typical for artists that we may look upon it as symbolical. Whether Ibsen succeeds in completely harmonizing typical characters with typical experiences is a question which can hardly be discussed adequately in the present paper. There is little difference between *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*, except that in the latter play the problem stands out more clearly. Ibsen had learned not to overload his play with unessentials to a still greater degree than in the earlier play. As for surface reality, the latter play is superior to the former. The development of Rubek's statue into a group is far more plausible than Solnesz's home with the nurseries. Irene in the flesh is far more plausible than Hilde in the flesh.

If we apply the theory of psychological symbolism to both plays we find a solution which is absolutely satisfactory, one that does not break down at any point.

The distinction involved may be brought out by a significant example. Rubek speaks of the railroad employees at the stations through which they have been passing. "No one got out or in; but all the same the train stopped an endless time. And at every station I could make out that there were two railway men walking up and down the platform—one with a lantern in his hand—and they said things to each other in the night, low and toneless and meaningless." When, as has been done, we attach a symbolical meaning to these men and this lantern we lose ourselves in meaningless surmises. If, on the other hand, we conclude that Rubek interprets a meaning into them that answers to his own state of mind we are on solid ground. The men were really there for a very definite purpose, they spoke in low tones for a very good reason not always observed by our railroad men at night, their lantern served a very practical end, yet to this morbid Rubek the whole scene became symbolical of the aimlessness of his activity.

But to return to Archer. He calls *When We Dead Awaken* a piece of self-caricature. If Ibsen has caricatured himself in this drama, he has at some time turned his back on his ideals and has produced nothing but spurious art. This indeed would be

"melancholy and pathological." But fortunately the analysis of a man who has not lived up to the best that is in him is not melancholy and not even pathological.

In 1882 Ibsen wrote to Björnson:

"So to conduct one's life as to realize one's self—this seems to me the highest attainment possible to a human being. It is the task of one and all of us, but most of us bungle it." Ten years later he wrote *The Master Builder* which is dominated by this thought. All of his subsequent plays are clearly based upon this idea, but in *When We Dead Awaken* he centers his attention once more upon this theme. He therefore called his last play the dramatic epilogue.