

## THEMATIC CONCERNS IN IBSEN'S WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper intends to analyze the sufferings of the tragic hero of Ibsen. The protagonists choose, act, suffer and eventually through suffering they attain a higher perception or the realisation of their mistakes which caused their suffering. Since God seems to have withdrawn from the dramatic world of Ibsen, the tragedy of man becomes intensely poignant. This aspect of Ibsen's dramaturgy elicits the erroneous response that his plays are pessimistic. My analysis of the play establishes the validity of the natural human urge for life. Any attempt to throttle or negate this urge is bound to entail suffering and end in frustration.

**Keywords:** Tragedy, Suffering, Perception, and Life

Ibsen subtitled his last work as an epilogue, but it is, as our analysis will demonstrate, a drama, too, following the same structural pattern of a judicious combination of dramatic action and retrospective narration, with distinctly delineated and individualized characters. These characters, except the Nun, are not, as has been asserted by Raymond Williams, "purely symbols of a poetic vision," "symbolic creatures," or "puppets."<sup>1</sup> They are, on the contrary, human figures, in flesh and blood. The main thematic concern of Ibsen's entire dramatic works, i.e. earthly, human life vis-à-vis idealism purporting to abnegate it, has been presented more unambiguously here than in any other play. The dramatic action of the play is thin, no doubt, but the thematic concern is not allowed to suffer from vagueness or sketchy treatment. The elaborate dialectic or debate on idealism noticed in the earlier plays is subdued here and the importance of human emotions and joy of life is given more attention. The play has a more relaxed and quiet mood than we have noticed earlier. The tragic suffering here results from a conflict between natural urge for life and vocational idealism. It is the abnegation of the natural, normal joys of life by the mistaken demands of idealism that accounts for the tragic waste of human life. All the three major characters, Maia, Irena and Professor Rubek have had a life which in reality has been a living death—all this because of the idealism or artistic aspirations of Rubek who is the chief source of suffering in the play.

As the play opens, its mood, atmosphere and setting bring home to us an impression of contentment, relaxation and a healthy openness. The setting of the opening action is "an open, park-like place, with springs, clumps of shrubs, and large old trees, outside a hotel at a spa." The open expansiveness of the setting is indicated by a "view out over the fjord to the sea, with promontories and small islands in the distance." The mood of happiness is demonstrated by the "hot and still sunny summer morning." The contentment of life is conveyed by the couple's (Rubek and his wife, Maia) sitting on their breakfast table in the open "drinking champagne and seltzer" and reading newspapers. But the apparent contentment and relaxation are subtly hinted to be unreal by the "young lively, gay (and yet) weary" woman's "sighs". When the silence is broken, the conversation is more in the nature of phatic communication or a time-filler indicative of ennui and boredom than of a meaningful verbal interaction between the couple. The quiet of the place seems to have a depressing effect of lifelessness in the outside world which in reality is symptomatic of the real state of the couple's own lives.

As the couple's conversation proceeds from the phatic level to a retrospective narration we learn that they have now been married for four years and have been away from their home, as if only spending time without any meaningful occupation in life. Rubek has "lost all pleasure in

(his) work” and has “taken to wandering about restlessly” without trying to “settle anywhere, either at home or abroad.” “Lately (he has) begun to dislike (his) fellow-men,” too, besides his growing lack of interest in his own wife. This condition of Rubek’s lack of interest in life itself began soon after he finished his great statue entitled the “Resurrection Day ” which brought him international fame and made him rich. Since then he stopped his artistic venture on anything great and produced only “portrait-busts' ' which were acclaimed to have “striking likeness” with life by the ignorant masses. “But,” Rubek confesses, “down underneath, there’s the pompous self-righteous face of a horse, the obstinate muzzle of a mule, the lop-eared shallow-pated head of a dog, a greasy hog’s snout and some times the gross, brutal mask of a bull... All the animals that man has perverted for his own ends, and who, in their turn, have perverted man.... And it’s these equivocal works of art that our worthy celebrities come and commission from me—and pay for in good faith and pay through the nose, too. Almost their ‘weight in gold’, as they say” (p.229)

The above reasoning by Rubek should not be taken as Ibsen’s attempt to suggest any dialectic of the artist’s response to the generally ignorant mass of lovers and critics of the Arts. It is because this line of Rubek’s argument about his present low-spiritedness soon given up in favour of his promise of his wife at the time of the marriage that he “would take me up a high mountain with you, and show me all the glory of the world.” (p.230) The rather light-hearted conversations about the amusement that they have had for four years of their married life threatens to be serious when it is uninterrupted by the hotel Manager’s detailed enquiry about the comforts of the hotel they have been having. On Rubek’s curious enquiry, the Manager informed him that the thin, shadow-like figure he has seen walking in the night is a woman and a mental case come to the Spa for recuperation. From the Manager description of the woman, Rubek half-suspects that he perhaps knows her, she may be “one of his models at some time,” remarks Maia teasingly. But Rubek has “had only one single model. Only one, for everything that I’ve ever done.” Besides the shadowy woman, whose identity is yet to be ascertained, the Manager also introduces Squire Undheim, a “bear-slayer,” who is “on his way up to the hunting ground.” The Squire’s language is as crude, strong and uninhibited as he himself is. His impressive, strong, physical build, with his life of the open air and high mountains and fleshly pleasures of life offers an immediate contrast to the dull and almost “dead” personality of Rubek. Maia, herself young and interested in the joys of earthly life, is naturally attracted towards the manly Squire who is pulsating with all the physical vitality of life. Maia follows him to where his strong-bodied and ferocious hounds are being fed.

The Strange Lady that Rubek has seen walking alone during the nights appears on the scene. Rubek and the Lady, Irena, recognize each other immediately. They have made each other after a long time. From their conversation we gather that she is the woman who in her youth has been his only model and after the completion of his “Resurrection Day” for which she posed herself all naked as his model he abandoned her. Their initial conversation is characterized by a quiet, dull and lifeless tone, giving an impression as if two devitalised figures are uttering words without any interest or purpose. As the conversation progresses, we, though Ibsen’s usual dramatic device of retrospective narration, learn that Irena has had immaculate beauty and youth which she exposed, in “frank and utter nakedness,” to be re-created into his “Resurrection Day.” She did it “so gladly, so freely and ungrudgingly” with the hope that the artist would pay heed to her “pulsing blood of my youth.” But “never once did he touch her.” Rubek tries to explain his vocational idealism which ruined Irena’s entire life. “I was sick with longing to create the great work of my life.....expressed in the form of a young woman waking from the sleep of death--this waking woman was to be the noblest, purest, most flawless in the world. Then I found you...To me you became something holy—not to be touched except in reverent though. I was filled with the conviction that if I touched you, or desired you sensually, my vision would be so

desecrated that I should never be able to achieve what I was striving after.” (p.246) In brief, what Rubek, when a young artist, had chosen was “the work of art first, and flesh and blood second.” But Rubek’s choice must have been not without a sacrifice of his natural human urge for pleasure. He confesses that he “was still young in those days” and his suppression of his desire for Irena was a difficult task. But his vocational idealism was so strong that he sacrificed his natural human urges.

But these human urges could not be obliterated for good. He later took Maia as his wife but he did not find in her those sophisticated and yet warm-blooded amorous pulsations which Irena had embodied in the fullest measure. Irena reproaches Rubek as a selfish, dehumanized artist—even a criminal exploiter of Irena’s profound interest in him. This reproach brings out both Rubek’s sense of a two-fold guilt and his realization of the mistaken notion of vocational idealism. The one guilt is towards himself: he turned himself into what Irena calls a “dead” person; and the second one is towards Irena who being abandoned by Rubek simply drifted astray trying different types and alternatives of life and finally landing up as a cheap woman for pleasure-seekers and now undergoing treatment for a mental condition which nearly borders on insanity. Rubek’s realization of the mistaken notion of his artistic idealism comes to him when his rejection of human life dried up in him the very source of high artistic aspirations. After his great work he stooped to “only trivial modellings.” Irena for a moment forgets the irreparable waste that her life has been rendered into by Rubek’s criminal rejection of her, and suggests to him to shed off his despair and “go up into the high mountains... as high as you can go. Higher—higher Arnold, always higher.” She would be willing to accompany him to the newly envisioned height. But as we will notice soon this height is not a revival of Rubek’s now lost artistic aspirations, nor is it the height of the “glory of life” that both Irena and Rubek have missed most pathetically. It is the height of complete freedom and quiet which they can attain only through death.

The four characters of the play are now regrouped to bring out the thematic significance of the play more emphatically. Maia is excited to go up the high mountains with the sturdy bearslayer. She, too, is vivacious and craving for the glory of life to be achieved through the fullest satisfaction of natural human urges of joy and pleasure. Contrasted with this couple, pulsating with life, are Irena and Rubek in whom a spark of fire from amidst the ashes of their life so far comes on the surface eventually. The first Act ends with the two couples getting ready to “go up the high mountains.”

The second Act opens with a further gulf in relationship between Rubek and Maia. Their conversation shows a complete, willing split between them without any regrets. Maia does not find any meaningful vitality in Rubek any more: “Nowadays there’s such tired look in your eyes—a look of defeat”, observes Maia. The truth is that Maia and Rubek never felt that they were “truly near” to each other to be able to share the pleasures or what Maia calls, the “glories of life.” Rubek’s expectations of his wife had been what Maia has miserably been deficient in: “I must have someone who can complete me—fulfil me..be one with me in all my aspirations.” (p.257) But Rubek himself has turned into the direction of apostasy. He confesses to Maia, “all the talk about an artist’s vocation and an artist’s mission and so on began to strike me as empty and hollow...as fundamentally meaningless.” (p.259) He now has come to realize the validity of earthly life and its pleasures: “.....isn’t life in sunshine and beauty altogether more worthwhile than to go on till the end of one’s days in some damp clammy hole, tiring oneself to death wrestling with lumps of clay and blocks of stone?” (p.259) This apostasy of Rubek is in the same direction which the other three characters in the play—Ulfheim, Maia and Irena—have always stood for. Maia happily leaves Rubek for Irena and herself goes to accompany Ulfheim on to the high mountains.

Maia can have a sense of fulfilment of her earthly human urges in the company of the bearslayer. But Rubek has yet to reckon with his “heavy conscience for destroying his as well as

Irena's happiness. His regretful confessions to Irena prepares the latter to try to revive their past moments of being together in Rubek's native village when, day in and day out, she worked as Rubek's model. The two dead seem to wake to make up for the loss they have suffered. For a very brief moment it appears as if the couple will enjoy their newly rediscovered relationship. Their talk about their possible future union is deliberately left as merely averred to. They resume the stock-taking of their past which they had begun since their meeting at the Spa. Irena's conciliatory mood changes to one of vehement hatred for Rubek: "Yes, (hatred) of you. Of the artist who so lightly and carelessly took a warm, living body—a young human life—and wrenched the soul out of it...because you needed it to create a work of art." (p.266) Irena's reproach of Rubek is a repletion of similar talk in the last Act and is partly responsible for the structural weakness of the play, by making the action too scanty and by impeding the movement of the plot. However, the plot begins to move again when Irena expresses her desire to see the statue which she calls her and Rubek's "child". Rubek tries to dissuade her from doing so, because "it was not what it finally became." Irena becomes desperately aggressive at the thought and Rubek wasted her very "soul" by destructively changing the originally shaped statue. She even "half-draws a thin sharp knife from her breast" to do Rubek in. After Irena had left Rubek to give finishing touches to the statue, the sculptor found that his whole conception of his artistic creation, based on the absolute purity, beauty and glory of life, was mistaken. The statue was conceived and shaped on his conception not testified by the experience of the reality of life. Rubek's own explanation will be of great relevance:

In the years that followed, I came to know something of the world, Irena. Resurrection Day began to mean something larger, and something, more complex..(Then) I showed what I saw with my own eyes in the world around me...I enlarged the pedestal...and on it I placed a corner of the curved and splitting earth, and out of the fissures in the ground there now swarm human figures with secret animal faces—men and women, just as I know them in life.(p.269)

The figure of "the young woman rejoicing in the light in the middle of the throng" had to be moved little back, and Irena's face, "transfigured with joy at seeing the light." Had to be a "little subdued." Rubek thus had to contaminate his creation to make it more realistic and broad-based, rejecting his own earlier artistic idealism. And Irena's response to it, accompanied with her threat of physical harm, sums up Rubek's entire artistic journey and his present predicament: "Now you've pronounced your own doom" Neither Irena nor Rubek can ever escape the crushing remorse. While Irena screams with unbearable remorse at a wasted life, Rubek feels no less agony. He says that in the portrait he "placed (himself) in the group, in front, by a stream—here, as it were—(where) sits a man, so laden with guilt that he cannot quite free himself from the earth's crust. I call him remorse for a wasted life. He sits and dips his fingers in the running brook to wash them clean, and he is racked and tormented by the knowledge that he will never succeed—never in all eternity will he be free to live the resurrected life. He must stay for even in his own hell." (p.270)

Rubek's sense of guilt is too heavy to get rid of and has assumed the propensity of tragic irreversibility which ominously threatens to end only in expiation through death. And the disastrous end towards the close of the play is only the inevitable conclusion of this guilty-ridden conscience's frantic efforts to free itself. Rubek's tragic predicament does not have any spiritual or religious overtones or undertones. It is almost exclusively human and emotional. Irena's tragic situation is more poignant. She did not only suffer emotional starvation and waste of her life, but even denied motherhood to herself. Her regret, too, is as profound as irreversible: "I should have brought children into the world, many children—real children, not the kind that are hidden away in tombs. That should have been my vocation; I should never have served you, you poet." (p.271) Both the tragic sufferers suffer because of their deliberate but mistaken choice of vocation which eventually proves to be illusory. Hence the burden of self-responsibility is



gnawingly present in the minds of both, though the illusion so long as it lasted had appeared real and pleasurable, at least for Rubek. But so far as Irena is concerned, Rubek had considered her as a mere “happy episode,” to be done with and then forgotten about. It is for this sin that Irena will never forgive Rubek.

Irena’s and Rubek’s reminiscent reproach and self-reproach suddenly get transformed to a symbolic or even expressionist level. The imagery of flamingos and sea-gulls, presented through the floating petals of a red-rose in the stream, chased by ship-like leaves with no hunters—only indicates the meaningless efforts of the two lovers to reconstruct their lives out of the debris which they themselves have created. The tragic poignancy here is achieved through a complete withdrawal of God, the supernatural, or fate from the whole affair. The individuals stand only self-reproached and self-condemned. All Rubek’s reminiscences of his past happiness in Irena’s company and his successes only bring out Irena’s obsessive self-remorse and reproach to Rubek. The conversation about the past memories culminates, as if to give a Philip to the sluggish movement of the plot, into Irena’s reminding Rubek of his once “enticing” Irena to “a dizzy height on the mountain to see the glory of the world” where she “fell on (his) knees and worshipped (him)...and served (him).” It is to such a dizzy height to which Irena will entice Rubek to come with her finally. Irena rejects Rubek’s offer to live with him in his villa, as “empty, dead, idle dreams.” “There is no resurrection of a partnership like that,” she asserts.

While Rubek is struggling for a renewal of bond with Irena, Maia has found her desired companion with whom she is gliding up to the mountains, singing a song of freedom and joy. While Irena has woken up to a negative realization of life, Maia exclaims, “Oh, how gloriously light I feel down that I’m awake.” The alternating rhythm of excitement and despair continues until the end of the second Act, summed up in Main’s song of “I am free” and Irena’s despondent reply of “We see the irreparable only when we dead awake.” The second Act ends with the excited and warm—blooded Maia racing up to the mountains and Irena’s firm promise to meet Rubek up on the dizzy heights of the mountains. This contrast continues right into the next and final Act and is kept until the end of the play, which contributes significantly to the tragedy of Irena and Rubek.

The final scene is set in a “wild jagged mountain-side, with sheer precipices falling away at the back. Snow-covered peaks rise to the right, and lose themselves in high drifting mist. To the left, on a screen, stands an old half-ruined hut. It is early morning; dawn is breaking, but the sun has not yet risen.” The stage direction shows the deft hand of Ibsen, the great craftsman. The setting and atmosphere demonstrate a subtle blend of the contrasted human predicaments of the two couples. The scene opens with Ulfheim’s goatish chasing of Maia on “the bare mountainside” up a deep chasm. Maia’s protest is too mild to confirm her disinclination. Maia finds the Squire “a living image of a satyr,” with his external wild ugliness and strong beastly sensuality. They converse rather elaborately about their interest in each other, which is full of sexual innuendos. Maia’s pretended coyeness and hesitation at the “satyr’s” sexual proposals disappear when the latter offers her prospects of material prosperity and more than this, utter rejection of any sort of artistic pretensions or pursuits. Their future life will be entirely earthly, abounding in fleshly pleasures. Maia offers herself wholly to the Squire when the latter assures her that her husband, “the tame eagle,” will be shot through if he stands in their way. She exclaims, “speaking resolutely,” “Come on then, carry me down to the depth.” The “depths’ ’ should not be interpreted in terms of moral or ethical norms but as intensity of the desire to live on the plane of natural urges.

As Maia and her bear-slayer are descending the now mist-covered mountains to the secure level of earthly life, Rubek and Irena are seen ascending the mountains over the edge of the chasm to a height of their destruction. Ulfheim warns Rubek against an imminent storm indicated by the approaching strong “gusts of wind.” To Rubek “they (the gusts of wind) sound like the prelude

to the resurrection day.” The fatal imminence of the storm forewarned by Ulfheim seems to be a desired finale to Irena and something familiar to her.

ULFHEIM: They're squalls blowing from the peaks, man! Just look how the clouds are billowing down—soon they'll be all round us like a winding sheet\

IRENA: I know that sheet.(p.286)

As the storm is approaching fast, which may liberate Irena from the burden of her life, she apprehends that she might forcibly be rescued from the storm before it produces the desired effect on her life. In that even Irena will use the knife she has always been keeping with her. Before the final catastrophe comes, Irena and Rubek talk again about their past life—its waste, the resultant remorse, etc. This repetitive device does not seem to serve any dramatic purpose and seems only as a time-filler. But it brings out one important point, and that is Irena's and Rubek's realization that they had emotional attractions to each other all along, which are still alive; they realize that their “Love belongs to...the lovely miraculous earthly life...the mysterious earthly life—that is dead” in them. While Rubek declares that “that very love is burning and seething in me as hotly as ever it did,” Irena remorsefully feels how she scattered and debased it by her two marriages in the past and by “standing on the turntable—naked—and (making) a show of myself to many hundreds of men since you.” (p.288) Rubek's confession of his guilt and responsibility cannot change the current of Irena's life:

RUBEK: It was I who drove you to the turntable. How blind it was then—when I set the dead clay image above the joy of living and of living and of loving.

IRENA: (dropping her head): Too late—too late...The longing for life died in me, Arnold. I'm risen now, and I seek for you: And now that I've found you, I see that both you and life are dead—as I have been. (p.289)

On Irena's repeated assertion that she is as dead now as she has been since she was abandoned by the artist, Rubek implores to her “let us two dead things live life for once to the full—before we go down to our graves again.” Like the bright flame of a dying out lamp Irena feels an ecstasy of joy which Yeats has called tragic gaiety, so effectively presented by Shakespeare in his dying Lear. The last conversation which sets in the mood of a strange tragic calm deserves quoting: The couple decide to go up to the “promised heights” in their newly accepted relationship:

RUBEK: Up there we will hold our marriage feast, Irena, my beloved!

IRENA: All the powers of light may look on us freely—and all the powers of darkness, too. (Gripping her hand) Will you follow me, my ransomed bride?

IRENA: (as if transfigured): I follow you freely and gladly, my master and my lord.

RUBEK: (taking her with him): We must first pass through the mists, Irena—and then...

IRENA: Yes, through all the mists, and then right up to the topmost peak gleaming in sunrise! (p.290)

The above duet of amorous bliss between the lovers is immediately interrupted by the storm which buries the couple under an avalanche falling at a terrific pace from the peak of the mountains. The avalanche seems to be a judgement on the sin that Rubek had committed on life and his end is a retribution for the two-fold crime he had committed in the blindness of his vocational idealism—one against himself (self-denial) and the other against Irena, the victim of his deluded artistic aspirations. Infact, it is Irena who leads Rubek to the “promised heights” where the end of life is both a redemption and an expiation or punishment. The assertion of the supremacy of life over idealism is ironically conveyed through Maia's singing of the song of freedom and joy of life, while the avalanche has completely covered Rubek and Irena, with which the play ends. “Maia's triumphant song still floats up from lower down the mountains,” while the Nun, attending on Irena, “makes the sign of the cross in the air before her, and says, Pax vobiscum.”

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