



A Reality Beyond Truth: A Lacanian Reading of Henrik Ibsen's

The Wild Duck

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In The Name Of God

The most merciful

The most compassionate

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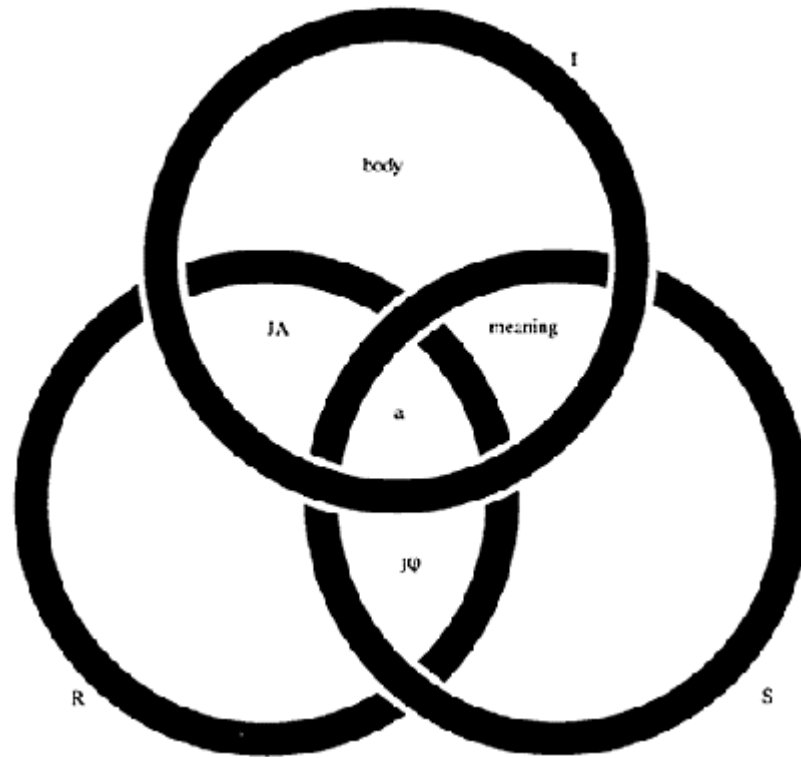
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To my Dear Mother,

Father and Sister



Jacques Lacan:

'That one says remains forgotten as a fact behind what is said, in what is understood.'

Introduction:

Looking Awry at *The Wild Duck*

General overview

i. Thesis statement

In *The Wild Duck* (1884), Ibsen, in representing his characters in their highest realistic look, arrived at the zenith of his métier as a dramatist. The play was well received in Stockholm and directed by August Lindberg, who understood the special problems that *The Wild Duck* posed. “With your new play,” he wrote to Ibsen before starting rehearsals, “we stand on new and unbroken ground...these are quite new human beings, and what will it avail to use the common approach of actors –people who have lost touch with nature through spending their lives playing boulevard comedy? I realized this with *Ghosts*, and it is the same with *The Wild Duck*” (qtd. in Meyer 566).

This comment truly illuminates how in this play, each persona is characterized in conformity with his or her distinct psychological properties and attributes, which uncovers the full extent of Ibsen’s potentials in realizing human condition. To put it in better terms, the “naturalistic school of which Ibsen was a leading figure expressed an increasing conviction that aesthetic purism – art for art’s sake- must give way to the artist’s concern with the concrete problems of men”(qtd. in Fjelde p. 155). Relating to the play, Ibsen himself once mentioned that critics would find plenty to quarrel about, plenty to interpret. With respect to the high capacity of the play in yielding itself to various interpretative trends, it becomes utterly unjustifiable only to hold on to the general aspects of the play and ignore its other significant implications. Indeed Ibsen, for the first time, undertook to launch on a dramatic work, which besides rendering typical of his principal themes aimed at approaching his characterization with a desire to investigate them more scientifically than his previous works. This sort of scientific realism on his part contributed to the production of real-like and unfeigned characters, which in a dramatic form displayed some of their peculiar and

pathological idiosyncrasies. Although it may appear justifiable to maintain that Ibsen himself was not fully aware of the consequence of the psychology of even his own characters, the survey of his works from a psychological point of view would reveal how, of course unconsciously, exact he was in portraying his characters.

In this play, the existence of psychologically appropriate and proportionate parallelisms and contrasts among the characters put Ibsen at the height of his dramatic career. The key characters in this play are exceedingly complicated, and each depicts some ambiguous attitudes towards life, which manifest their impact on their intersubjective relations with other characters. For the reasons cited above, *The Wild Duck* has been selected as the corpus of the study in this thesis. The researcher has attempted to provide an exemplary application of content (psycho) analysis to this work with the aim of uncovering the unconscious motivations of some of its principle characters and to reveal the psychological significance of some of its minor events. To put it in better words, in this study, the researcher, in an empirical way, has attempted to show how by means of psychoanalytical techniques, which are applied rather on some marginal events and phenomena in a particular literary text, it is possible to discover the implicit unconscious motivations and pathological incentives, which lie behind the explicit actions of the main characters. This kind of an approach would help to shed some light on the fact that, in contrast to popular belief, true catastrophes in life are mainly the result of family complexes; arising from human psyche, rather than the functioning of the machinery of the bigger universe itself. Again, it should be reminded that here the guiding purpose is not to reduce the play to its basic libidinal economy but the main point is, by decentering the play, to bring to light its disavowed and hidden unconscious aspects.

ii. Content Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis in general, offers a systematic account of the psychic apparatus (especially the *unconscious* mind) and a theory of the mind and human psychic

development. Psychoanalytical literary criticism exists side by side with any other critical methods of interpretation because this approach attempts to explain human actions without developing an aesthetic theory (Bressler 143). In the fifth chapter of his famous book *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, Terry Eagleton commenting on the nature of psychoanalytical literary criticism, discusses how this particular critical approach has been divided into four distinct kinds, whose functions depend upon their particular object of attention. According to this division one branch of psychoanalytical literary criticism can attend to the author; the other to the work's content; another to the formal construction of the work and the last one to the reader, which is a recent phenomenon. Then in the following of his comments after mentioning the fact that most of the psychoanalytical approaches are of the first two kinds, he expresses the idea that they are also most problematic and especially in the case of content analysis often too reductive (Eagleton 1996).

The content analysis is reductive, according to Eagleton, because it always strives towards a phallic symbol to unsettle the enigma and bring the interpretation of the literary work to a final resolution, which overlooks its specific formal constitution (Eagleton 1996). In other words, Eagleton believes that content psychoanalysis presupposes a great division between the formal aspect of the work and its content. Accordingly this presupposition involves the idea that in order to understand the content of the work we should necessarily ignore its formal constitution. Here the crucial question to be asked is what if this kind of (content) analysis does not demand that the formal aspects of the work should be ignored. To put the question in another way, what if in content analysis it is the very investigation of the superfluous formal aspects of a literary work that, enables the critic to bring to the light the hidden and unconscious material dimensions of the work, which otherwise would remain unnoticed. In other words, content analysis, by using the very formal features of the work itself, undertakes to bring to the light the hidden and unconscious dimensions of the literary work, which

constitute the material aspects of the work itself. Content psychoanalysis, putting in brackets the authorial intentions, mainly concerns itself with disclosing the unconscious motivations of the characters or the psychological significance of some particular events. The uncovering of these unconscious motivations would work to shatter the assumptions of the readers as to the inner nature of the characters, making them encounter the paradoxical nature of human desire and in particular the contradictory desire of the characters. Here the point worthy of attention is that in content psycho-analysis, paradoxically; we do not reach the hidden motivations of the characters through a straightforward way of analyzing the content of the work itself. In other words, the way towards the unconscious mind is not through discovering some significant and important events in the very *content* of the literary artifact, but, paradoxically, through some trivial, insignificant and formal events, which if looked at from an oblique angle would obtain their deserved significance. This is where; the very trivial and insignificant *formal* aspects of a literary work loom up as important and decisive in yielding an analysis, which attempts to shed light on the hidden aspects of the content of the same work itself. To put it in other words, the minor and peripheral (formal) elements of a work when compared, contrasted or paralleled with each other, would help to understand the complex intersubjective relations among the characters and to discover their true unconscious desires. This kind of approach would prove decisive in the very interpretation of the course of the literary work itself, the cause of its events and the discovery of the unconscious incentives, which lie behind the minds of the characters. The crucial deception lies in the fact that, literature by its claims to be a fictive, metaphoric and imaginative phenomenon paradoxically, unbeknown to us, reveals the truth of our unconscious drives. On the other hand, to put it in the words of Slavoj Žižek in his book *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, the crucial point is that this kind of psychoanalytical reading does not merely attempt to reduce the content of the work to its basic libidinal causes; rather by decentering the text, it brings to light the unthought presuppositions and consequences of the work itself (Žižek 1992, 5).

Before going to the limitations of this study, here it is necessary to bring a brief account of the way the idea of the unconscious mind and the way it would affect the conscious mind, has evolved from Freud to Lacan. This would help us to come to a better understanding of the unconscious mind, which is the main key word of our study.

iii. Unconscious mind

In both Freud and Lacan we could find the idea of the *return of the repressed*, in which the suppressed unconscious desires and wishes find an outlet in some disguised forms like the emergence of some compromise pathological formations. For example the formation of neurosis in a person would help him to fulfill his unconscious desire to escape his father's patriarchal dominance and castration. Because, unlike Freud who thought of the unconscious mind as a chaotic realm without rules, Lacan believed that the unconscious mind has a structure like language, the idea of the return of the repressed takes a different form in Lacan. Whereas Freud believed that the compromise formations like slips of the tongue could *momentarily* disturb the autonomy of the ego in order to satisfy some unconscious desires, Lacan, by radicalizing Freud's ideas, maintained that the subject is *totally* at the mercy of the unconscious mechanisms. Now let us briefly explain these differences between the Freudian and the Lacanian ways of understanding the unconscious mind.

Broadly speaking the *unconscious* aspect of human mind in the history of psychoanalytical criticism has been concerned from two different perspectives: the classical psychological criticism of Sigmund Freud and the structuralist psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. Sigmund Freud initially theorized a “topographical” relation between the ego and the unconscious; the former encompassed consciousness and the individual's contact with the world, while the latter was a quite different space of instinctual drives and repressive mechanisms (Gregory 2007, 163). Indeed Freud needed to theorize upon the existence of an unconscious reservoir, which by its repressive mechanisms would guarantee a normal adjustment of the

mind to its external reality. Freud explains this division between the external stimulus and the internal instinctual drives in his three models of the mind- the dynamic, the economic and the topographical- and finally posits the ego as the main responsible agent in maintaining the balance between the unconscious desires and the external reality. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impetuous and uninhibited can hurt us in the end. It is ego's job to meet the needs of the id, while taking into consideration the reality of the situation. Memories of unacceptable wishes become charged with unpleasurable feeling and are thus banned from entering the conscious sphere. This particular operation is called repression. The idea of Unconscious mental processes, which is the key concept of psychoanalysis, should be linked with the theory of repression. Freud distinguishes between the two senses of the term. The first one is the 'primal repression', which inaugurates the formation of the unconscious and is permanent. In other words, in the process of primal repression, the conscious mind rejects some psychical representatives, which embody a particular idea, which is attached to an instinctual drive. Without this primal repression, it is impossible to enter into the world of symbolic language, which is crucial in the establishment of personhood and identity. For Freud primal repression marks a prelinguistic entry into the symbolic world. The term repression in its second sense designates repression proper. In this operation, it serves to exclude guilt-laden experiences from the conscious mind. The pathological symptoms, slips of the tongue and dream represent the idea of the 'return of the repressed', which is a mechanism that designates the emergence of the prohibited wishes in an indirect way. In other words, the repressed instinctual drives can get through the censorship of the ego in disguise or through the so called 'compromise formations' of the return of the repressed (Wright 10-13).

Similar to Freud, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) believed that the unconscious mind has a great impact on our conscious mind. Different from Freud who thought of the unconscious

mind as an unstructured container of dark passions and suppressed desires, Lacan maintained that the unconscious mind is structured like language (Lacan, *Écrits* 112), and that language has the capacity to say something other than what it says. Language, in short, speaks through human beings, as much as they speak it (Lechte 1994, 77); it is a differential system of signifiers and signifieds, which are bound to each other while, at the same time, always slipping away from one another. Using the Saussurian theory of language as constituted by the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified Lacan proceeded to articulate in the early 1960s that the subject is the subject of the signifier. Because the signifier is always separated from the signified and has a real autonomy, no signifier ever comes to rest, finally, on any signified. In fact Lacan expressed the idea that it is in the symbolic domain – the order of signs, symbols, significations, representations, and images of all kinds that the individual changes into a subject. Indeed Lacan goes a long path before he introduces the split between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind and before the individual changes into a subject. First he begins with talks of his new coinage 'l'hommelette', 'little man'; to signify the way an infant in the very early stage of his life is in an amorphous state, which means he does not yet know any boundaries to its experience of sense or of need. In other words, the infant in this state is like a shapeless mass of egg. Lacan in order to mark out the preliminary stages of separation returns to Freud's early paper 'on narcissism'. Lacan believes there is a mythical moment in the mirror stage when the child for the first time realizes that he could identify with its specular image in the mirror. It is here that Lacan begins to explore and expand the concept of narcissistic metaphor. The child observes his image in the mirror and is thrilled by several qualities of his image. This tremendous delight arises from the fact that the former experience of the child of himself as a shapeless mass now gives way to an experience of wholeness and an ideal completeness. In other words, this gratifying experience in a mythical way by closing the gap between inner and outer world makes the child come to this belief that he is in perfect control that assures him the full satisfaction of his desires. Lacan

designates this prelinguistic stage the imaginary realm. In this stage, Lacan takes the child to be modeling himself upon the mother since the mother is the first being with whom the child comes to interact. According to Lacan, the mirror stage is homologous to Mother/Child relation. What the child comes to imagine in this stage is a particular primitive belief, which Lacan calls the 'Desire of the Mother'. This, both refers to the mother's desire and the desire for the mother. First, the child believes itself to be the desire of the mother, meaning that he is all the thing that his mother wishes. To put it in better terms, the child imagines that he is all that would gratify his mother's lack, in psychoanalytical terms becoming the phallus for the mother. The mother herself has suffered dispossession by separating from her own mother, and can thus be drawn into involvement with the child that it would alleviate all the throbbing of those separation. Second, the Desire of the Mother indicates the child's own desire for the mother as a person who can satisfy his needs. Both of these aspects merge to maintain the child's ego -concept in an illusory state. Here the child experiences a gap between the concept and its application, which points to the inadequacy of the ego-concept, which has never been tested in use. The gap further looms up with the entrance of the child into the symbolic realm. The structures of language are replete with societal imperatives, which involve the rules, laws and definitions, among which are the laws of the father and the child-mother relation. The society's injunction that we should defer our desire and accommodate it within the horizon of the symbolic world, is what produces the split between the conscious and the unconscious mind, the price we should pay for our use of language. Like Freud, Lacan also tried his hand at interpreting literary works, using his own psychoanalytic findings, which should be thought of as a point of departure from traditional psychoanalytic approaches. For example In his "seminar on *The purloined letter*"(Lacan 1966) Lacan saw Poe's story as an allegory of the supremacy of the signifier over the subject it brings into being, the way they (the characters) are forever at the mercy of the unconscious mind.

Using Lacanian ideas in this thesis the researcher has tried to apply content psychoanalysis to *The Wild Duck* to reveal the way, as Lacan would have put it, the subjects (the characters) are all at the mercy of their unconscious mechanisms and motivations. Before clarifying this point further it is necessary to bring a brief account of some of the limitations, which would be encountered in this research.

Limitations of the study:

On the one hand, since the field of psychoanalytical criticism has become so complicated, it is no longer possible to apply all the tripartite scheme of criticism that is author-based (and its corollary, character based), reader-based and text-based, because each of these is subject to further divisions, which may overlap the three boundaries. Therefore, the researcher for the lack of space has exclusively concerned himself with the analysis of the characters to discover the unconscious motivations behind their actions. On the other hand the object of study in psychoanalytical literary criticism can divide into five subgroups: (1) classical Freudian criticism; (2) post- Freudian criticism; (3) Lacanian criticism; (4) Schizoanalysis; (5) psychoanalytic feminist criticism (Coyle and others 1987, 765). Again, due to the complicated nature of psychoanalytical criticism the researcher in analyzing the unconscious aspects of the characters has mainly confined himself to the various ideas, which pertain to the Lacanian criticism. Another limitation to this research is that because of the abundance of the material, which the researcher has in mind, and for the lack of space the researcher merely has confined himself to the analysis of one corpus-*The Wild Duck*-which the researcher believes, is one of the most significant works of Henrik Ibsen.

Methodology and approach

This study comprises five chapters, in which the ideas of Jacques Lacan have been explored and applied to the first psychological drama of Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*. The

chapters are entitled as: *Introduction, The Wild Truth, The Wild Dreamer, The Wild Wound* and *conclusion*. The library sources have been utilized to carry out this research.

In analyzing *The Wild Duck* the researcher has endeavored to deposit the main characters (Gregers, Hjalmar and Hedvig) at the center of attention and by exploring the nature of their uncommon individual psychology, account for the dissymmetry in their relation to each other, which is further outlined in their particular eccentric behaviors, statements and thoughts. Throughout this thesis among other things, the researcher has attempted to argue how Gregers and Hjalmar are respectively displaying the symptoms of neurosis and psychosis. By bringing to light the very formal aspects of these particular psychological deficiencies, it would be possible to disclose the fact that Gregers and Hjalmar are standing in opposite directions from each other. In other words, what is decisive in understanding the true motivation of the characters is not the tricky surface of the events and actions but rather in order to come to a valid understanding of the characters we need to explore the other side of the coin; the unconscious mind. In the first part of our analysis, we would concern ourselves with Gregers and by exploring his unconscious mind in a very indirect way we would be able to gain some insight into his true motivations. This kind of an investigation finally would put us in doubt as to whether Gregers has a true conscientiousness nature or whether he is truly in love with disclosing the truth to other people. The researcher would argue, for example, how Gregers' decision to rescue Hjalmar from what he judges to be the falsehood and lying that are ruining his life arises from his peculiar psychic malady—neurosis—rather than his conscious intentions. This would consequently demonstrate how obsessional's conscious search for a discovery—e.g. the truth—paradoxically coincides with a particular unconscious concealment. In other words, the obsessional's fervent activity to conceal the lack in the other should be taken as a pretext, under which the obsessional unconsciously tries to divert attentions as to his own true status as a lacking person. In the second part of this thesis entitled: Hjalmar: A psychotic character, we would concern ourselves with the psychotic nature of Hjalmar. To justify the fact that he

was suffering from a kind of psychosis the researcher would discuss some elements in the play, which relate to Hjalmar's psychosis arising from the lack of adequate paternal authority. Some of these psychotic symptoms arguably are his excessive imaginative creations, his fake attempt to commit suicide, his use of holophrases and inability to come to a proper intersubjective relation with others, which would be discussed in detail throughout this research. To put it in other words, our investigation into Hjalmar's unconscious motivations would lead us to understand the reasons, for which Hjalmar always deters his future invention, the way he wants to direct his father's vengeance towards himself rather than towards old Werle who is the main cause of his father's disgrace, and the way his suicidal effort was no more than a fake, covering his desire to reintegrate himself even further into the symbolic world of the other people. In the third part of this thesis, the researcher has concerned himself with Hedvig and her taking care of a wounded duck, arguing that the wound on the body of the duck is the "little piece of the real" to which Hedvig's death drive clings. This means that the cut introducing torsion on the body of the duck, the existence of an obscene, ungraspable and indivisible real, which is not in full harmony with the duck's body, is the very point in which Hedvig's desire has been invested.

Review of Literature

Henrik Ibsen was a major 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is often referred to as "the father" of modern theater and is one of the founders of Modernism in the theatre. Radical truth as the essential goal and guiding principle in life stands at the centre of his achievement in drama. Ibsen criticism has gone through three stages. For example, Eric Bentley states that Ibsen's place in the eyes of the world has changed over the years, passing through three phases. The first phase was that of the late nineteenth century, of Ibsen's own time, and in that phase one either expressed one's admiration for Ibsen or one's

detestation of his iconoclasm. The second phase came in this century with the acceptance of Ibsen by society at large (Bentley 11). His early works have often been dismissed as either iconoclastic or scandalous. Ibsen's early plays show the influence of his romantic forebears. It was in Ibsen's third phase that his real and dramatic genius manifests itself. All of its characteristic greatness, social and psychological brilliance and its complex characterization descend from Norwegian's works. Indeed Henrik Ibsen's works in this stage are produced out of the heart of his problem in his time. This problem has been sometimes defined in terms of a great vocation, of what Ibsen himself referred to in his mind as a call or a mission. His own chosen vocation was to become a dramatic poet. In following this objective, the theme of finding one's true vocation recurs throughout his life and work. Indeed his protagonists are delineated as thinking on the dilemma of what to make of their lives. The Ibsen hero is not well aware to his own place and does not have much reason to. The laws still exist in the society, but not with the same old order, and the hero must discover their workings deep in his mind. The method he adopts in order to reach this objective is empirical- he closely observes and tests himself. In this condition of being left to himself, he foretells of the arrival of a new Cartesian doubt in the field of drama. For this question of the self and what to make of it mainly arises from the objective predicament confronting modern man (Fjelde 2-3). In this condition finding himself morally and intellectually insolvent, he feels propelled into political, social and hence psychological changes. This awareness underlines the third phase of Ibsen criticism. Born into a provincial milieu, plunged into early poverty, and deprived of an adequate education he had the intellect to turn these deficiencies into challenges, to get to the root of things and uncover the truth (Fjelde 3). To him his modern plays were primarily a study of people as individuals and their interrelationships. Indeed he wanted to portray people with adopting new dramatic forms. In order to come closer to life, He did give up writing in verse, replacing it with straight prose. He brought to theatre the commonplace problems of the everyday life of the ordinary man,