

Consummation through Twin Suicides in Ibsen

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ABSTRACT

In the course of literary criticism, various critics have been analyzing the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of the theme of suicide in Ibsen's plays. In the present study of Ibsen's Rosmersholm (1886) and When We Dead Awaken (1899) the same theme has been explored from a different angle in order to reveal those provocative hidden motives that make an individual embrace death so willingly. Consequently, suicide does not remain a self-destructive act but a means to achieve union with one's soul mate. By committing twin suicides the true couples of the plays i.e., Rosmer, Rebecca and Rubek, Irene reach the zenith of consummation, where the concept of suicide as an impulsive mental condition is negated. Rather it becomes a hermit like reclusive state of mind, when all the corporeal desires and worldly distractions become meaningless and the glories of a peaceful existence of the world hereafter manifest themselves to the ones who happily give away their lives for it. Putting together the fragments of their memories, these characters eventually enable themselves to approach an integrated vision which in their perception leads them to success but to the world may seem an utter failure resulting in their fruitless deaths.

With the growing interest in the field of human psychology, nineteenth century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen gives a new perspective to the self annihilating tendencies of his characters. He gives suicide a substantial focus in his plays. Especially his two plays *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), deal with twin suicides, which stand out in terms of bequeathing a new outlook to the traditional concept of suicide and the horror associated with it. It no longer remains a tragic act, committed by people who are completely shattered and put an end to their lives due to uncontrollable circumstances. Suicide becomes a safe haven for the ones who can no longer satisfy their spiritual and intellectual needs in this world of flesh and blood.

During the course of my study, I shall examine different factors that contribute to an individual's decision to commit suicide and will relate those with the characters of the plays under discussion. Moreover, an attempt will be made to analyse the forces that regulate their decisions and give them courage to look death in the eye and opt suicide as their escape from the conflicts they are facing. Though the two pairs Rosmer, Rebecca and Rubek, Irene are led by different motives, both succeed eventually to consummate their relationship by annihilating themselves physically. Though it does not seem to be their quest right from the outset, it is a kind of spiritual consummation where a person achieves wholeness by embracing death, yet leaving behind all feelings of remorse, guilt and shame.

First, let us study the phenomenon of suicide and its implications. It is an attempt to inflict death upon oneself and is intentional rather than consequential in nature (Fairbairn 58). Normally, attempts at suicide and suicidal thoughts or feelings are a symptom indicating that a person is unable to cope with something overwhelmingly traumatic that has happened in the past and which has somehow become the source of his guilt in the present. Due to the pressures of the past, a person plunges deep into the depths of depression and experiences a void in his life and in order to make this void meaningful, he commits suicide. In Ibsen such situations usually arise due to incompatible marriages and their resulting

disillusionment. Whether it is Hedda in Hedda Gabler (1890), Soleness in The Master Builder (1892), Rosmer or Rubek in Rosmersholm and When We Dead Awaken respectively, they are denied that marital satisfaction which ensures a peaceful mutual existence.

Rosmer too is a victim of such a marriage, which becomes a cause of his “unhappiness” (2.36) and forces him to “ail” and “languish” in its “gloom” (2.68) as Kroll and Rebecca point out respectively. There is in him a desire for a relationship with another human being that ensures satisfaction, devoid of both the feelings of guilt and fear of loss. This desire has a close affinity with Rubek’s yearning for an understanding companion: “What I need is the companionship of another person who can, as it were, complete me, supply what is wanting in me, be one with me in all my striving” (2.46). But their human limitations won’t allow them the kind of harmonious existence they are seeking. Rosmer unable to enjoy such a relationship with his wife and later with Rebecca, becomes a prey to conflicting pressures – the demands of sexuality and the need to liberate from its demands. He tries to cure his guilty conscience by dedicating all his powers to set up a true democracy in the country. But his concept of democracy cannot be interpreted in political terms. It concerns “the task of making all fellow-countrymen into men of nobility...by emancipating their ideas and purifying their aspirations” (1.23). However, he himself possesses a guilty conscience that stands in his way to attain his ideals. He is “guilty over what he believes to have been his share in the suicide of his wife” (Raphael 124). Due to this, he is haunted by white horses in his mind, which are the symbols of his sick conscience and have been integrated into the structure of the play by their imaginative presence. Even in Rebecca’s case these white horses stand for shame and guilt over her origin and the moral weaknesses she has been living with.

It is important to note that Rosmer does not shrink back from accepting his guilt when Kroll makes him face his hidden proclivities. Though in the first act, he projects himself as a guiltless person by saying that “we have nothing to reproach

ourselves with” (1.9) but later in the play he is honest enough to realize that he “must have betrayed (himself) in some way or other. She (his wife) must have noticed how happy I began to feel from the day you (Rebecca) came to us” (2.46). With the regression in Rebecca’s image as an innocent and pure woman, Rosmer too becomes conscious of his own sexuality. As is the case with Rubek in When We Dead Awaken (1899), Rosmer’s purity of vision is also tarnished from the very beginning without his being aware of it. Interestingly, the lives of both Rosmer and Rebecca are characterized by an opposite movement in terms of the tendencies they exhibit from the beginning to the end of the play. After Beata’s death Rebecca succeeds in curbing her wild passion for Rosmer in favour of a more permanent spiritual companionship, whereas Rosmer who used to believe in the purity of relationships, succumbs to his sexually inclined love for Rebecca.

Unlike Rosmer, Rebecca West has much to atone for in the play. Possessed by the guilt of her incestuous past, she not only leads Beata, Rosmer’s wife, to suicide by making her lose faith in her husband’s love but also directs Rosmer into embracing an idealistic vision about becoming a saviour of the world, whereby Beata unable to resist the sweeping force that Rebecca is an embodiment of, “puts an end to her life in order that (Rosmer’s life) might be happy” (1.33). Beata becomes a source of guilt for Rosmer just like Rubek’s Sculpture which for him is an ever-haunting phenomenon, and does not want to continue life “with a dead body on (his) back” (2. 50). He cannot separate himself from Rebecca even when he comes to know about the truth. In fact her guilt becomes a part of his life. In order to purge her soul and consummate a long suppressed relationship, he demands a sacrifice from her but that too with his share as an equal partner, aware of the fact that “the tie between (them) has been a spiritual marriage, perhaps from the very first day” (2.58). He freely accepts his destiny like Adam because only then he can attain companionship with his Eve: “Man and Wife should go together” (4.87). Both of them receive their respective identities through one another: Rosmer by following Rebecca’s idealistic visions and Rebecca by adopting the Rosmerholm law of living. Ironically, they achieve little happiness

by doing so. The mutual act of sacrifice in the final scene of the play thus becomes a “marking of complete surrender where each of the character surrenders and extinguishes himself/herself by assuming the nature of the other character—i.e. a virtual twinning of self-extinguishing and self-preservation” (Ystad 6). We see little of this in Hedda Gabler (1890), another play by Ibsen in which the parties involved in self annihilation are led by different motives. The real issue is the preservation of an individual’s personal romantic ideal, instead of an amalgamation of two different entities with their respective aspirations. Hedda envisions her success through an external medium, i. e. Ejlert Lovborg, but when she fails, extinguishes the flame of life along with her desires. In any case, Lovborg remains an object that cannot exist in the world she conceives for herself. On the other hand Rosmer and Rebecca are self-sufficient in giving meaning to their ideals, but in this self-reliance lies their mutual compatibility.

It is normally understood that the processes leading to the deaths are the result of sick or unsound states of mind. Keeping this in mind, Elizabeth F. Brudal interprets the suicides in Rosmersholm as a self-destructive consequence of disappointment over the emptiness of life. She states that, “instead of living through pain so that it may open for positive renewal and development, this condition results in inner confusions and regression, here an unrecognized pattern of birth and death triggers the wish to pass a death sentence on oneself” (qtd in Ystad 2). But what Brudal ignores is the fact that the characters in the play are led by a spiritual energy that enhances their belief in the life after death. It is not an escape from the mental traumatic conditions rather an attempt to seek happiness that “means first and foremost the calm, joyous sense of innocence” (2.57). In a way it is a wish to enter into a pre-lapsarian (asexual) world where as according to Rosmer, “the common belief in the possibility of a man and woman living in chastity” (2.49) must be cherished. It is also important that these characters are not forced by external pressures that may lead them to end their lives in distress; rather it is a self-willed act carried out “to attain the full stature of Man” (Bradbrook 14). Although an indirect suggestion of suicide is made by Rosmer’s old tutor Ulrik

Brendel so as to provide them with the solution to their dilemma, but the choice is not imposed on them. They exercise their free will to resolve the conflicts of their lives and that exalts their sacrifice from the commonality of the act of suicide. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers an insightful quote from Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil" on the matter of free will:

The longing for 'freedom of the will' means to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for your actions yourself and to relieve God, world, ancestors, chance, and society of the burden—all this means nothing less than pulling yourself by the hair from the swamp of nothingness into existence. (n.pag)

Both Rosmer and Rebecca ultimately free themselves from the pull of the swamp of guilt and look ahead for an idyllic existence. Theoharis Constantine calls it the Nietzschean will to power which converge in a plot that sets the past's force against longing for a transformed future life (94). It is not the revenge of the dead woman who takes them away as the old Mrs. Helseth imagines. Mrs. Helseth is conditioned by the Rosmersholm household in such a way, that it is quite impossible for her to mentally detach herself from its influence. Therefore she can hardly think beyond the horror of the wretched mill-race and its ill-fated victims. What she fails to understand is that Rosmer and Rebecca "gladly" pay the price for their inevitable choice and as a consequence are freed of the guilt of the past through a loving death leap from the millrace.

In When We Dead Awaken (1899), the artist Rubek also falls prey to conflicts between his artistic dedications and emotional needs, connected with the ordinary life of senses. His original "zest for life and art is lost in the tedium of a banal marriage" (Raphael 125)). Maia fails to provide Rubek with the key to his "Bramah-locked casket" (2.50) of heart that contains the treasure of his artistic abilities. However, she can perceive the apparent transformation in Rubek's temperament and sums up his state of mind by saying: "you have begun to wander about without a moment's peace. You

cannot rest anywhere neither at home nor abroad” and that “you have lost all pleasure in your work” (1.8). It is obvious that she can only give meaning to those visible signs of depression that he displays but the conflict that has led him to this particular state of mind is beyond her comprehension. Maia is not involved in Rubek’s vision. While he in turn is unable to satisfy her highly sensual demands which she ultimately finds in the bear-killer. Ulfheim rightly draws a line between his and Rubek’s nature by stating that Rubek “struggles with his marble blocks;...and I struggle with tense and quivering bear-sinews” (1.20). He is very much a man of flesh and blood and compared to him Rubek emerges as a cold-blooded artist but not a “Man” in the real sense of the term.

Rubek has no hesitation in accepting the fact that he married Maia as “a sort of makeshift” (2.47) for Irene was the real “fountainhead of his achievement” (1.33) and the sole model he ever worked with. Nevertheless, in trying to remain loyal to his calling he crushed the soul of the one who had actually given life to his famous sculpture “The Resurrection Day”. According to Oliver Gerland, in order to establish himself as an artist, “Rubek denies the negative impulse to touch Irene...for fear that contact would spoil his vision of her and ruin the sculpture which confirmed him in his identity as an artist” (230). This creates within him an unresolved conflict between his artistic self and demands of flesh, which relegates him to a feeling of life-long guilt and remorse. In effect, he is locked into an identity, he has shaped for himself in the past. His attempts to make a show of self-control and suppress his sexual impulse, rather than empowering him artistically, took away whatever inspiration he earlier possessed. On the other hand Irene too can be held responsible for her unhealthy obsession with the Sculpture, she considers to be her child. This child image is suggestive of her sexuality which she should have suppressed: “I should have killed the child” (1.25). Her guilt is that she unconsciously desired a physical union through a child of her vision, which in normal terms is supposed to be a symbol of purity.

Rubek's dilemma is that he could not even remain truthful to his own work of art. The piece which was supposed to depict "a warm-blooded life, a young woman" (2.57) pure and untainted, was marred by his own rejection of its unadulterated individuality/originality. He added other worldly dimensions to it. The grotesque figures and his own projection as a guilty artist, trying to wash away impurities from his hands, completely transfigure the originally chaste vision of both the artist and his model. These figures of the man and the woman on the plinth "represent that which separates the artist from his model, namely the work of art itself (Gerland 233). The life force within the work of art is now losing its potency and making him think of its worthlessness and all its related joys of fame. David Webb, a Suicidologist, in Suicide Prevention Australia Conference 2002, established through research that hopelessness arises from an absence of meaningfulness and in this state suicide becomes a progressively more and more logical and attractive option. Therefore, in order to resuscitate his true self and recuperate his lost sense of purpose, Rubek parts ways with his wife and decides to face his fate 'alone' with Irene. According to Richard Schechner, Irene completely integrates into Rubek's psyche. His language and hers are in harmony and he finds it increasingly difficult to talk to anyone but her (168).

It is noticeable that Rubek's intention to enter into the realm of death is not an abrupt decision. It seems his inner desire, which if fulfilled can restore his lost identity. Irene's encounter with him sparks those extinguishing embers of selfhood he has long lost contact with. According to Graham Stoney, people nurturing suicidal thoughts often feel terribly isolated; because of their distress, they may not think of anyone they can turn to (1). In the play Rubek also appears to be an isolated, disillusioned and irritable person, who feels that as far as he is concerned "all the world knows nothing! Understands nothing" (1.9). In such a situation Irene's appearance holds futuristic possibilities for him. It is a direct encounter with his own source of guilt. His guilt is that he "did wrong to (Irene's) innermost, inborn nature" (1.31) and in trying to infuse soul in his sculpture, left her 'soulless'. It is this that she

metaphorically claims to have “died of” (1.37). Irene draws our attention to a particular psychological condition in which a person wonders whether he/she has actually died and the body, mind and personality are some sort of peculiar post-life memory (Webb 1). She frequently refers herself as a dead person who is communicating with the outer world from under the grave. But the pain associated with reality brings her back and she realizes that she is very much alive as an existing symbol of Rubek’s injustice. Therefore, in order to take her out from this intricate pattern of life and death and to give meaning to the callously termed “episode”, Rubek ‘had’ experienced with her in the past, he sacrifices his life with her in the hope of cherishing a permanent union which seems possible only in death.

Vigdis Ystad is of the opinion that suicide in (Ibsen) is motivated by expiation for acts and this implies an acknowledgement of guilt that triggers indirectly self-imposed punishment (4). However, I have certain reservations in categorizing Rubek and Irene’s twin suicide as a kind of punishment. As the “Resurrection Day” suggests, it’s an act of awakening to a real life where according to Rubek they “shall see that day will dawn and lighten for (them) both” (2.50). While the bear-hunter slings Maia over his shoulders and heads down in the direction of earthly life, Rubek with Irene climb upward on a mountain range “pursuing their differing visions of ascent: freedom, excitement, inspiration and retribution” (Fuchs 1). They are not heading towards a dark, impassive world of the dead but to “the glittering glory of the peak of promise” (3.87) where life is “throbbing as fiercely as ever” (3.86). Their deadly climb can be regarded as a triumph of spiritual transcendence. Maia’s song of life becomes more meaningful for Rubek as after remaining “unstrung” for so long in life, he is now awakening to his real life (2.49). The last part of the third act celebrates his union with Irene in death by making use of marriage related imagery. Rubek intends to achieve immortality by celebrating his ‘marriage-feast’ (3.87) with his “grace-given bride” Irene. This kind of consummation cannot be compared with Hedda’s or Soleness’ suicide as their suicides only satisfy them as far as the fulfillment of their ideals or aspirations are concerned. Even in their death they

remain incomplete. Whereas Rubek and Irene's relationship comes full circle and both of them merge to form a single entity.

The double suicides in Ibsen are characterized by mental strength which comes from their strong foundation of faith and ideals. At times these ideals may lose their power but they are so deeply embedded in the psyche of his characters that past and its mistakes cannot root them out. In these plays death as an option exists in the minds of the characters throughout the play, whether it's the "White horses" that haunt the inhabitants of Rosmersholm or the running idea of grave and "rising from the dead" in When We Dead Awaken (1899). In any case the deaths that happen cannot really be called suicides. What the characters find in death is an opportunity to relive their long-lost memories of companionship. For Rubek and Irene, these memories bring back the times when they both used to sit "outside the little peasant hut on the Lake of Tauntiz" (2.64), and in case of Rosmer and Rebecca, they hope to experience once again the beautiful moments when they used to "sit downstairs in the dusk and helped each other to plan (their) lives afresh" (2.47). They are not common people, setting ordinary objectives. Their suicides exemplify a recovery of innocence and elevate existence up and beyond regular everyday life.

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