

Henrik Ibsen and Modern Drama

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Abstract: Norwegian literature of the late 19-th century is a phenomenon of major interest in European literature. One of its greatest names is Henrik Ibsen. H. Ibsen renovated and enriched the contents and techniques of the modern European drama. In some of his best plays such as: *Brandy*, *Peer Gynt*, *A doll's house*, *Hedda Gabler* etc, through a philosophical – poetic character, the author aims at stimulating intense, ongoing debate and discussion on existentialist themes. The turning point in his literary career is marked by the play *A doll's house* in which the question of women liberty and dignity is strongly and effectively dealt with. Ibsen introduced new elements into the traditional play form thus breaking new ground in developing modern drama with the powerful characters he created and major topics of discussion he triggered in the cultural debate of his time.

Keywords: drama, modern, characters, traditional play

Norwegian literature of the late XIX century and the early XX century constitutes one of the greatest and most original displays of European literature and culture. Even though it is a small country, Norway is an undisputable and literal indicator of the fact that small countries and popularities produce potential geniuses which in turn have an honorable place in the history of world culture. To the literature of this small country of Scandinavian peninsula, only in the three first decades of the XX century, three renowned writers do belong. These writers such as: Bjornstjerne Bjornson (1832-1910), Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) and Sigrid Undset (1882-1949) are Ibsen's successors and have been awarded the great literary Nobel Prize.

The name and activity of Ibsen, the remarkable representator of modern dramaturgy that is worldwide honored, has become for more than a century a great communication bridge between Scandinavian peninsula culture and the other part of the continent and from there with the whole world. Albanian culture like European one, especially the stage and the theatre, have made the great Ibsen's characters and works an indispensable part of their lives. Born on 1828 in Scien, in a merchant family that will soon face disaster and financial downfall, the playwright-to-be was forced to leave his studies at 16 to work as an assistant of a pharmacist in Grimstad city. Meanwhile, he begins persistently the first literary efforts. After a difficult and challenging youth in the 50s, Ibsen sees himself as the leader of the National Theatre of Bergen but later he was transferred to Christiani city. The great work of Ibsen to enrich and renovate the contents and techniques of Norwegian theatre, brought great possibilities to the best models of the world dramaturgy. His first dramas were nourished under the influence of important European events in '48-'49 as well as of the National-Liberation movement of Norway. In these works, the author incarnates some of his dreams and the rebellious spirit of his youth, in which an important role play the themes of the homeland past, sagas, wonderful nordic legends as well as the folk-historic themes.

After 1864, when the theatre of Bergen bankrupted, Ibsen starts a long journey through Europe, mainly in Italy and Germany where he lived in deep isolation but also in a great dedication towards creative work. Exactly in Italy, opposite to Saint Peter Basilica in Rome, he conceived the drama *Brand* (1886), a work in poem form. The protagonist, a

priest, leads his family to disaster through a severe lifestyle. In this drama, the author depicts his own philosophic absolute seeker type which will then be given in many other dramatic variants. A year later, Ibsen writes the drama *Peer Gynt* in which he aims to represent man's intentions in life. While in the first drama *Brand*, it is shown how the contemporary should be, in the second *Peer Gynt*, it is shown how he really is. Both these poetic-philosophic dramas are written with original fantasy and they represent a transitional period towards profound social and realistic dramas.

The Ibsenian theatre has already marked his great turning point: from past heroic, noisy details, pathetic speech of characters towards problematic dramas which focus on everyday existentialist themes that annoy contemporary man. Hereupon, to Ibsen, that first phase of activity in which sentimental and romantic spirit dominated and in which was emphasized critic attitude towards narrow-mindedness and soul emptiness of "honorable" citizens, to whom he wrote epigrams and made caricatures ironizing social defects and vices, can be considered overcome.

In his first works, mainly poetries and sonnets, the theme that concerns author's artistic conscience is that about "freedom cause" for example, in sonnets *Wake up Scandinavians!*, *Proclamation to Norwegian and Sweden brother*, where the author becomes a determined post scandinavism warrior. Also, in the first dramas, such as *Catilina*, with historic theme of the roman period, the author expresses not only anti aristocratic character of his work but also the mission of society change and man revival.

The essence of the drama is the war against despotism and tyranny as well as the mission of man and society change. Staying a long time in Europe (Italy and Germany) expanded a lot Ibsen's artistic, socio-politic and philosophical horizon and affected greatly the determination of his artistic activity tendency. During this period of his stay abroad, he could study seriously and determinely the contemporary European conditions, the process of capitalism consolidation and complex problems that associate him. Ibsen saw and interpreted them under a new philosophic-aesthetic light. From sentimental-romantic aspect of initial composition can be noticed increasingly the depth of phsycologic and historic exploration, the tendency

of a full dissection of European and Norwegian reality. In theatrical world can be felt the presence of "Ibsenian character", the strong and stoic man who fights against life taboos and its narrow-mindedness. On this efforts to challenge the world through squirms and engagement versus existential dilemmas, the protagonists try to escape from chains of contradiction that are found not only in reports with environment but also within individual himself.

After 1877, when Ibsen wrote the drama *Pillars of society* and *A doll's house*, there can be seen the warning of great themes of Norwegian theatre. The author now enters the depths of social phenomena not only of the national reality but also of the European one. These dramas, which are known for the analytic composition and style innovation, caused bitter debates not only in his homeland but also in many other countries of the world. On the other hand, this general stylistic and thematic renovation, this artistic insight, that associates dramas of this period, transform Ibsen, a writer of a literature somehow suburban, such as Norwegian literature which at that time was little known by critics and scholars, into a central figure of the European theatre. The great turning of Ibsen's dramaturgy began with the drama *A doll's house*, the subject of which he took from everyday life, giving a great generalizing strength and an unrepeatable universality to the mentioned theme. This drama, as it is considered by critics, constitutes one of the most significant and meaningful examples of world dramaturgy about women liberty. Nora in her house is nothing else but just a doll, a toy to satisfy Helmer's selfishness, who is her husband and who never talked to her serious matters. The whole drama is built on the contrast that Nora's grinding emotional state creates and her behaviour to seem happy. After a serious psychosocial drama that she experiences with her husband, his spiritual balance fixes in almost a mechanic way. Nora discovers the abyss that separates her from her husband and from the society moral. Feeling aversion about this ordinary and hypocrite co-living, she decides to give valediction to this intolerable conformity and starts a new independent life [1] Kennedy, X. J. Literature, an introduction to fiction, poetry and drama, Little, BROWN AND COMPANY, 1987.

Nora: *The way, I'm no wife for you .*

Helmer: *I have the strength to make myself over.*

Nora: *Maybe- if your doll gets taken away.*

Immersed in the depth of individual psychic of society and with rare mastery, Ibsen distinguishes the traces of an incurable fracture between authentic values of life and norms of the behaviours dictated by society. Mediocrity, hypocrisy and selfishness of her husband are nothing but a symbol and clear demonstration of marital institution objective lack. Everything is represented in a social context, where ego of success, career and winning, dominate and swallow up spiritual values of individuals. In such a context, the desires, feelings, self realization and the essential sense of life is almost impossible, let alone for a woman who tries to be "happy" inside an aristocratic cage. In this great drama, Ibsen did not only strike ruthlessly the hypocrisy in familiar relationships but also raised on the bases of a new vision the women's role in families and society. He also mentioned the big problem of feminist movement protecting in this way the

dignity and women's emancipation under modern European society. The character of Nora incarnates an important moment of feminism dawn that will later become a great concern of the XX century.

After this moment, Ibsen will bring on stage a series of masterpieces such as *Ghosts* (1881), a kind of analytic drama, where the problem of heritage and tragic point of life are discovered, *Enemy of the people* (1882), in which social critics becomes direct and intends to renovate the bases of modern society. Through these dramas and incarnated characters, the author aims at pointing the unsteady character of the world and discovering the heroes' life's tragic. Passing from philosophical-symbolic dramas towards analytic composed ones, serves as a powerful tool to enter deeply in social phenomena. In the last period of his activity, Ibsen wrote many dramas in which pessimistic notes, that have to do with faith, lost in perspectives of society and human personality development can be obviously felt. Conflicts of this dramas often lead to disaster and their heroes end tragically. The reality blends with a dim fantasy and heroes move dizzy among nature echoes. In the drama *The Wild Duck* (1884), which is probably the most complex and most original drama about false mirage, without which ordinary man is not able to resist the environment pressure and social conditions, contrary to previous dramas, the heroic of characters is shown in a grotesque look, whereas in drama *Rosmersholm* (1886) is presented the drama of progressive intellectuality which cannot manage to revive the intelligence light juxtaposed with the darkness and hidden instinctive reasons.

Triumphant admission of the idea of couple and family in full contrast with all conventional rules of social life is given in the drama *The Woman from the Sea* (1888), whereas in the drama *Hedda Gabler* (1890) is presented the effort of a super woman who decides to put in practice the nichean message ending in suicide. Ibsen lays the drama in moral-psychologic plane of the characters showing their complex nature. This drama is specified by scholars as a tragicomedy which bears on itself all the depth and strength of Shakespearean dramas naming Ibsen an original dramaturge in a Shakespearean post in all directions [Refer to: Bloom, Harold, *The Western Canon : The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.]. Beyond social problems which like many of his works is also present in this drama, the author insists on determining a kind of demonic character of the protagonist¹. In Scandinavian folklore, there are many fairy tales, where Huldra is a monster that appears as an extremely seductive creature and lives in the woods, while the craft, these mythological beings, embodies versions of erotic imagination. Although they are witches tales or legends Harpy, they have the power to feign and turn to be human beings. [In Scandinavian folklore, there are many fairy tales, where Huldra is a monster that appears as an extremely seductive creature and lives in the woods, while the craft, these mythological beings, embodies versions of erotic imagination. Although they are witches tales or legends Harpy, they have the power to feign and turn to be human beings]. Hedda, the daughter of general Gabler is prey of an absurd marriage. Since its first appearing on stage, the author has clearly presented the spiritual condition of the

heroine; her room is filled with sunlight as the housemaid has left the house window open and Hedda expresses: *This light is blinding me*. The scholars notice great similarities and a mastery of this figure with the character of Kleopatra of Shakespeare (*Antony and Kleopatra*). As far as the end of heroine is concerned, Harold Bloom states: “ We can literally say that Hedda Gabler behaved like a real madam, maybe not as elegant as Kleopatra, on the verge of her suicide. It is not completely the prototype of feminine martyr, she did not choose to sacrifice like Kleopatra in the middle of a global theatre but however, Hedda did perfectly manage to tread on the filthy morale of the mid Norwegian class of Ibsen epoch.” [Refer to: Bloom, Harold, *How to Read and Why*. New York: 2000]

In the drama *The master Builder*, written in 1892, we see a work with symbolic density where now the traces of naturalism are lost and the works conscience of great European contemporaries such as Strindberg, Chehov, Maeterlinck start to be noticed. In some of Ibsen's dramas, appear moving images of children who end tragically because of adult's selfishness, such as little Hedvige in *The Wild Duck*, a girl full of love to life, who under no circumstances, surrenders to lie philosophy but instead accepts the sacrifices and efforts, or little Eliot in the same drama etc. Now the case of mercy that worried so much the great dramaturge is solved in the humanism spirit against nichean philosophy. In the last drama of Ibsen *When we Dead Awaken* (1899), exactly in the dawn of the XX century, he seems to express perfectly the glimmers of this new century but also the decline of the great XIX century bourgeois epoch.

Ibsen, for more than a half century of rich and diverse composition, reviving old figure of drama as well as enriching its content, managed to break traditional schemes and marked a new dawn in European dramaturgy which for a considerable time was experiencing a kind of decline and was not able to overcome it. Ibsen introduced new elements in the traditional form of drama. In addition to the scheme: exposure-situation-resolution, Ibsen included in the entirety of drama elements the discussion of great problems of that time. He also bared language from rhetoric and falsity.

This made his drama be much closer to life and its problems, preserve better the human dimension and juxtapose with a new aesthetic vision the dream and reality. In the last years, paralysed, which lasted some years, Ibsen lived in a dusk state until he died in the beginning of previous century on 23 May 1906, leaving behind an original and bright work that has now become an indispensable part of European and global culture.

Ibsen's realism has had a profound influence on Chekov and other authors of the XX century which is reflected in the theater to this day. Challenging the epoch, his work was not simply considered an entertainment but it went further than that, it was the potential drama of life. Indeed, he played a major role in the changes that had happened across society. Modernism was on the rise, not only in the theater, but across public life. Ibsen broke new ground in the field of modern theatre with his great themes and potential characters.

References

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