

# NATURALISM IN DRAMA AND IBSEN'S A DOLL'S HOUSE

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Conformity and revolt are the rhythms that govern the theatre-world. Invariably the theatre of conformity produces plays that are cheap, ordinary, commercial, easy-to-respond. They do not disturb the audience much, question their style of life. Such plays leave the audience in a state of comfort and provide them easy entertainment. On the other hand, "the theatre of revolt"-the title of Robert Brustein's book-produces plays that are new, challenging, anti-conventional, difficult to respond. They disturb the audience, question the moral and spiritual foundations of their life. They awaken the audience by their technique as well as subject-matter to a new awareness. They are usually produced in off-commercial or experimental theatre that the "new" becomes "old" very quickly, and fails to touch the audience in a real way, and bring to them a new perception of life. Thus when the "new" has become a part of the established, conventional theatre, there arises the need for another revolt and so a "new" kind of play turns up.

One may observe this phenomenon of conformity and revolt in the theatre-world of Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth and in the twentieth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century romantic drama had completely displaced and triumphed over classical drama in France, Germany, Sweden and England. The master-spirit of the romantic drama was Victor Hugo in reaction against Corneille and Racine. But whatever virtues romantic drama possessed –virtues like the preponderance of feeling over thought, of the freedom of the individual versus conformity to society, of a certain dynamism of life, it became cliché-ridden and moribund in half a century. It was no longer a serious art form that explored and articulated the meaning of life in significant terms. Comedy had degenerated to farce, and tragedy to melodrama. Another form that delighted the audience was spectacle. In technique, the five-act form was used almost like a formula to include a plot-line with a strict beginning, middle and end, the monologue, narrative passages like a dream or an event, an emotional climax and revelation. If any dramatist dared to depart from this stereotype of a "well-made play," his plays would immediately be labelled as 'bad art' and condemned to oblivion by the custodians of the conventional theatre. Two French playwrights-Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou dominated the theatre in the middle of the nineteenth century. Eugene Scribe who wrote from the 1830's to 1860's was abundant in his output. Altogether he had 374 works successfully performed –216 comedies-vaudevilles, 114 librettoes for operas-comiques and grand operas, and 35 full-length plays. He combined a carefully planned plot structure with light satire of the bourgeois society. Titles of some of his plays-Marriage for money, A School for Politicians, Ambition, Favouritism or The Climb up, Slander, An Entanglement, The Art of Puffing or Lying and Truth –indicate the themes of Scribe's works. Victorien Sardou followed the footsteps of his master and became the entertainer par excellence. He combined tension, tears, terror, and laughter. In the 80 pieces he wrote for the theatre the construction of the play was the chief thing. It is observed that he handled the plot like it was a game of chess, he began with the climax and worked back to the beginning. The theatre of Scribe and Sardou constituted the commercial or popular theatre.

It was in this atmosphere that experimental theatres like Antoine's Theatre Libre in Paris in 1887, and Freie Buhne (Free Stage) in Berlin in 1889, J.T.Grein's Independent Theatre Society in London in 1891 began to patronise 'modern' plays. The establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1897 and of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 mark other important activities round the turn of the century. Playwrights like Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Yeats, Synge, and Shaw began to lodge notes of complaint against the 'well-made play,' and to advocate the need for 'new' plays. Typical was the complaint of Chekhov through the speech of young Trepliov in *The Seagull* (1896):

I regard the stage today as mere routine and prejudice. When the curtain goes up and the gifted begins, the high priests of the sacred art, appear by electric light, in a room with three sides to it, representing how people eat, drink, love, walk, and war their jackets; when they strive to squeeze out a moral from the flat vulgar pictures and the flat vulgar phrases, a little tiny moral, easy to comprehend and handy for home consumption; when in a thousand variations they offer me always the same thing over and over again-then I take to my heels and run, as Maupassant ran from the Eiffel Tower, which crushed his brain by its overwhelming vulgarity. .... We must have new formulas. That's what we want. And if there are none, then it's better to have nothing at all. [1]

Chekhov-Trepliov's complaint was not only against an artificial theatre but artificial life style that had lost its significance. The search for a new theatre was also a search for a new way of life. Towards the end of speech, the search for new art forms assumes great urgency.

Viewed historically, Naturalism has its roots in the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte who published his *System of the Positive Philosophy* in 1824. Claude Bernard, a French physiologist, took over Comte's ideas, and in his introduction to *The Experimental Medicine* (1865) explained the concept of the scientific method of inquiry through experiment. The experimental method emphasized and brought forth the chain of cause and effect in all natural phenomena. It was a world of determinism. Prior to Bernard, Hippolyte Taine, a French historian had published *The History of English Literature* (1864) in which the philosophy of literary determinism was specifically argued in relation to writers and it was shown that they were products of the interaction of race, milieu, and moment, that is, heredity, the social environment, and the particular situation of the writer. Emile Zola (1840-1902) took, as Martin Esslin explains in his *Brief Chronicles* (1970), the ideas of Auguste Comte through the works of Claude Bernard and Hippolyte Taine, and emerged as the chief exponent of naturalism. [2] In the preface to his play, *Theresa Raquin* (dated 15 July 1873), Zola declared that romantic drama was dying: "There must be no more schools, no more formulae, no more literary panjandrums of any kind. There is just life itself, an immense field where everybody can explore and create to his heart's content." [3] It was in the essay *Naturalism on the Stage* (1878) that Zola spelt out in clear terms the principles of this movement:

Naturalism, in literature.... is the return to nature and to man, direct observation, correct anatomy, the acceptance and the depiction of that which is. The task is the same for this scientist as for the writer. Both have to abandon abstractions for realities, ready-made formulas for rigorous analysis. Hence no more abstract characters in our works, no more mendacious inventions, no more absolutes, but real people, the true history of everyone, the web and woof of daily life. It was a matter of a totally new start, of getting to know man from the every wellspring of his

being, before reaching conclusion in the manner of the idealists who invent their types. Writer from now on are constrained to build from the foundation upward, by bringing us the largest number of human documents, presented in their logical order.[4]

Zola wrote five plays of which *Therese Raquin* was the most important. Every play was based upon a scientific study of heredity and environment. Man was fated to be someone, which depended upon his past and present circumstances. The play became a clinical laboratory to examine the complex fate of man, and it was the truth of a man's life that was the focus of the artist. "Self-realization," as D.J.Palmer right points out," on the social or personal plane, emancipation from the inert and moribund forms in art and life, are the burden of the drama" described as naturalist.[5] Zola said that every play must present "a slice of life," in strict conformity to truth and truth alone.

Henrik Ibsen inherited " the well-made play " of Scribe and Sardou when he came on the scene of modern drama. Ibsen's naturalism was largely in terms of theme rather than of technique. J.L.Styan makes the following observation regarding Ibsen's naturalism: "In Ibsen the Norwegian background is increasingly present, ... and each small town managing its own problems, giving local politics and social mores an unusual prominence ... The time had come for the stage to be peopled with creatures with genuine roots and authentic backgrounds. Causes and effects in society waited and honest treatment, and vast new territories of theme and content lay open to the scientific explores."[6] The plot of "the well-made play" is still the structure on which the tale hangs. The characters and dialogue are modified in the direction of the new goal that Ibsen had set for himself.

While Scribe and Sardou catered to the entertainment of the audience, Ibsen endeavoured to present the truth of human relationships. But this truth was difficult thing to define as with the progress of the nineteenth century the transcendent frame of reference for truth disappeared. Science claimed that human reason can explain everything. Evolutionary theory and relativity began to replace the transcendent and the absolute, libertinism and moral nihilism began to question moral standards and codes. Utilitarianism and the principle of expedience ruled human behavior so much that it has been said of Norway: "Three million different Norwegians, three million different opinions."[7] F.W.Kaufmann makes the following observation in his essay "Ibsen's Conception of Truth":

This truth is more than a mere logical agreement of thought and fact; it is rooted much deeper, since it originates in their interpenetration of life and thought, and involves the total personality. .... Ultimately, such organic truth is to be found in the appropriate response to a given situation, based on an intelligent and sympathetic examination of all factors involved and carried out with the will to assume fullest responsibility for the decision. .... his (Ibsen's) somewhat elusive term "truth" and its opposite, "life lie." The problem of truth is most intimately related to Ibsen's struggle for self-realization. ... the authenticity which he was seeking also accounts for his choice of truth in the existential sense of the word.[8]

From an examination of Ibsen's letters F.W.Kaufmann concludes: "(Ibsen) knows that truth never is a possession, but a constant effort to find the appropriate response to every situation which demands a decision, and that truth, once it is generalized and accepted as valid without reexamination in the light of the new situation, is already disintegrating and in danger of becoming a falsehood."[9] Thus

truth and falsehood become paradoxical and can be defined only in relation to a particular situation.

It was *A Doll's House* which made Ibsen well-known all over Europe. From 1879 when it was produced first, it took ten years or more for England, France and America to receive the impact of this play and Ibsen was no longer a playwright confined to Norway but belonged to the whole of Europe.

In this third act of *A Doll's House* a new truth begins to dawn on Nora, as Krogstad's letter about Nora's forgery in an I.O.U. reaches her husband, Torvald Helmer. Nora had borrowed money from Krogstad to finance the family's travel to Italy as her husband was seriously ill and he had been advised living in a warm climate. Nora had forged her father's signature as security as she had wanted to save her father (who was also seriously ill and he had died a little later) from the painful knowledge of the condition of his daughter's family. This had happened eight years ago, and Helmer knew nothing of it. Now Krogstad threatens and blackmails Nora (with the letter) to Helmer revealing Nora's forgery, as Krogstad is dismissed from a bank job and Helmer is the new Manager of the same bank. Krogstad hopes to gain power over Helmer, and not only get back his job but climb up in the bank. Even as Helmer disappears, and the I.O.U. is returned with apology and Helmer wants Nora to continue to live with him as his "songbird," "skylark," "squirrel," etc. But meanwhile Nora has undergone a far-reaching change. She cannot be diverted from the revelation she has had.

Nora tells him :

You don't understand me. And I've never understood you-until this evening ... You and I have got to face facts, Torvald ....

Does it occur to you that is the first time we two, you and I, man and wife, have ever had a serious talk together ?...

A great wrong has been done to me, Torvald. First by papa, and then by you....

It's the truth, Torvald.[10]

And she goes on to comment how her father treated her as a doll: "He called me his little doll, and he played with me just the way I played with my dolls"(p.96). Then she "passed into" her husband's hands. With inexorable logic Nora's speech continues:

... our home has never been anything but a playroom. I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to be papa's dill-child. And the children have been my dolls. I used to think it was fun when you came in and played with me , just as they think it's fun when I go in and play games with them. That's all our marriage has been, Torvald.(p.96).

When Torvald wants her to stay on to educate the children, she tells him:

I'm not fitted to educate them. There's something else I must do first. I must educate myself. And you can't help me with that. It's something I must do myself. That's why I'm leaving you...

I must stand on my own feet if I am to find out the truth about myself and about life. So I can't go on living here with you any longer.(p.97).

The question that has been troubling her: "Has a woman really not the right to spare her dying father pain, or save her husband's life?" needs to be answered. No appeal to books, religion, sanctity of family, or question of conscience can stop Nora from seeking her freedom and truth. She has a duty towards herself: "I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, like you (Torvald) –or anyway, that I must try to become one... I must think things out for myself, and try to find my own answer"(p.98). Shortly Nora leaves, slamming the door on Torvald's home. This preoccupation with the truth of human relationship that constitutes marriage is the aspect of Ibsen's naturalism revealed in A Doll's House.

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9. Ibid.,p.22.
- 10.A Doll's House (1879) translated by Michael Meyer (London:Eyre Methune,1965, paperback ed. 1974),pp.95-96. Subsequent references are given in brackets after the quotations.

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Ibsen is often thought of as the grandpappy of realist drama. Other playwrights wrote in this genre—like Chekhov, Strindberg, Shaw, and O'Neill—but Ibsen was the pioneer. Basically, Naturalism was just a lot more hardcore about representing everyday life exactly as it was: characters might talk on and on about nothing in particular and the plays might have no obvious climax. This could be a little on the yawn-worthy side, but hey: it's pretty dang natural. Realism, however, is unafraid to be a little unrealistic. Look at *A Doll's House*. Sure the characters talk in a generally conversational way, but the plot is obviously and unapologetically contrived. There are melodramatic devices like top-secret letters. The doorbell rings at convenient times, bring Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Realistic dramas quickly gained popularity because the everyday person in the audience could identify with the situations and characters on stage. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*) is considered the father of modern realism in the theatre. Naturalism, in terms of style, naturalism is an extreme or heightened form of realism. As a theatrical movement and performance style, naturalism was short-lived. Stage time equals real time—eg. three hours in the theatre equals three hours for the characters in the world of the play. Styan J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 1, Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge University Press; 1981. Advertisements. In *A Doll's House*, modern drama found its typical form, but it was Nora and her rebellion which caused the play to become a universal sensation. It was soon translated into several European languages and it was staged in theatres as far flung as South America and Australia. It was explained and attacked in newspapers, periodicals, and books; it was condemned from pulpits and discussed by lawyers. Before Ibsen all dramatists followed romantic convention. Ibsen for the first time introduced problem play. *A Doll's House* is a problem play or a thesis play, like most of his other works. It presents the real problem of society to the audience and to the reader. The problem Ibsen has presented in the drama is the position of woman in relation to her husband and her home.