

DISEASE, DESPAIR AND DEATH: A STUDY OF BIOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF HENRIK IBSEN'S CHARACTERS IN GHOSTS, A DOLL'S HOUSE AND THE WILD DUCK

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Abstract

This paper focuses on diseases as biological limitations in Ibsen's plays; a determining force in characters' lives, behaviour and thought patterns. The biological limitations this paper explores are from a broader perspective that includes the study of over-presence of such biological aspects as disease, desire, despair, suicide and death. The analysis of the very quality of life as lived by the characters has been included in the discussion on biological factors. The relationship between past and present in terms of hereditary diseases and biological limitations has been considered and examined with specific references to the plays Ghosts, A Doll's House and The Wild Duck. The biological limitations create physical suffering and mental strain for characters and prove to be the unconquerable obstacles in their lives. The hereditary diseases not only end the pleasures of life but also bring Ibsen's characters to the status of 'nonbeing' (meaningless existence). In the face of these limitations, life becomes meaningless and unbearable for them. Consequently, this status of 'nonbeing' drives them to drastic and desperate actions. The paper determines that the characters are filled with terrors and frustrations and undertake extreme steps - subsequently ending their lives by committing suicide. This study is a literary research based on textual analysis of primary (text of the plays) and secondary (criticism of the plays) sources,

using close reading analytical research design.

Keywords. *biological limitations, hereditary, past and present, nonbeing, despair and death.*

INTRODUCTION

Biology is the science of living organisms, which includes the study of human life processes that end in death, the transference of hereditary traits (genetics), and the physical environment that shapes and affects the quality of life and human behaviour. This paper focuses on diseases as biological limitations in Ibsen's plays; a determining force in characters' lives, behaviour and thought patterns. The biological limitations this paper explores are from a broader perspective that includes the study of over-presence of such biological aspects as disease, desire, despair, suicide and death. The analysis of the very quality of life as lived by the characters has been included in the discussion on biological factors. The relationship between past and present in terms of hereditary diseases and biological limitations has been considered and explored with specific references to the plays. The focus is on the plays Ghosts, A Doll's House, and The Wild Duck.

Life depicted in these plays is just that of bare, deathly existence, yearning for the joys of life, morally void, and devoted to the gratification of physical and biological desires. Biological limitations in the shape of incurable diseases transferred from parents to children create effects that are depressing, pessimistic and frustrating. M.C. Bradbrook emphasizing this aspect of Ibsen's dramas writes: "Hereditary disease was for Ibsen the symbol of all the determinist forces that crush humanity" (90). Life develops into a meaningless and worthless existence for the suffering characters, and eventually, they recourse to suicide. So, the biological limitations and eventual sufferings of the characters in the selected plays are discussed in detail.

GHOSTS AND THE SICKENING TERROR

In the first category of biological limitations, it is appropriate to take up disease – syphilis – here in the play Ghosts. This disease plays a substantially determining role in the life of the young character Oswald, who suffers from this disease. According to Brian Downs in Ghosts, "[t]he disease of syphilis offered some analogies to leprosy and, though it was sufficiently well appreciated that it was communicated in sexual intercourse, many of its effects could also be constructed as the visitation of the sins of the father upon their children" (123). This incurable disease puts extra strain on his body and mind and brings about decay and deterioration at the personal level as well as at the family level. Oswald's illness is of major significance in shaping the course of the play, as Brian Downs points out: In Ghosts the illness no longer remains on the second plane, but is advanced into the forefront and is handled more comprehensively. The late Captain Alving, we are to suppose, contracted it by contagion during the cheerful promiscuity of his youth; the heir to his body bears about with him the uncontagious sequelae, which are manifested

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in his brain and which will reduce him to idiocy. (124)

It is in Act 2 that Oswald informs his mother about his sickness, his suffering from piercing pain, his mental breakdown and his desperate condition:

Oswald: No, don't get up! Mother. Try and be calm. I am not really ill---not in the usual sort of way – It's a kind of mental breakdown, Mother – I am destroyed – I'll never be able to work again. [He hides his face in his hands, and let's his head fall into her lap – shaking with sobs]

Mrs. Alving: [Pale and trembling] Oswald! It's not true! Look at me!

Oswald: [Looking up in despair] I'll never be able to work again! Never – never! I'll be like a living corpse! Mother – can you imagine anything more frightful? (Ibsen 83)

The illness has paralyzed Oswald's creative capabilities. Although, a renowned painter, he has been rendered helpless by his sickness to paint anymore, and life has become desolate and horrible for him. It was during his stay in Paris that the doctor told him of his ghastly disease:

But it wasn't that – I soon found out, I was no longer able to work. I start a new picture and all my strength would suddenly fail me – It was as though I were paralyzed; I couldn't concentrate – and I felt sick and dizzy, it was the most ghastly sensation; at last I went to see a doctor – and then I found out the truth. (Ibsen 83)

The truth about Oswald's illness is linked to the past life of his father. We find that one of the fundamental elements in Ibsen's dramatic technique is constant reference to the past. The past life, events and relationships hover like ghosts and immensely affect and shape the present and even future course of life. The past is not remembered for consolation and strength; instead, it shapes up as a bare existence in the present. Oswald, likewise is the victim of the past, and doomed to the incurable disease from his birth, as the doctor told him:

*Oswald: At last he said: your constitution has been undermined from birth; he used the word *vermoulu*.*

Mrs. Alving: What did he mean by that?

Oswald: I didn't know what he meant either; I asked him to explain. And do you know what he said that cynical man – ? Oh! –

Mrs. Alving: No – What?

Oswald: He said: the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. (Ibsen 83)

The biological past of Oswald's father Captain Alving has strongly affected the biological present of his son. Because of the father's promiscuous life, the son has been deprived of all the joys of life. It is for the sins committed by the older generation that the younger generation has to suffer, Edmund Goss likewise points out:

The Ghosts, or revenants, who give their name to this piece, are the result of

self-indulgent egotism, of sexual hypocrisy, stalking through the lives of the next generation of men. These are the specters of the pleasures of the dead, the teeth of the children set on edge by those sour grapes that their fathers ate. (85)

Oswald also is suffering from the sickness 'syphilis' – a hereditary disease transferred to him from his father. He has lost all his working capabilities for no fault of his own. It is because of his father's imprudent sexual relations and promiscuous life that Oswald contracted the disease, and is unable to work again, as he tells Mrs. Alving:

Oswald: Well then – listen: this fatigue of mine – my inability to work – all of that is not the essence of my illness –

Mrs. Alving: How do you mean?

Oswald: You see – my illness is hereditary – it – It is centered here.

Mrs. Alving: [Almost speechless] Oswald! No – no!

Oswald: Don't scream, Mother – I can't stand it! It's lurking here – lying in wait – ready to spring at any moment. (Ibsen 90)

Mrs. Alving is shocked at the revelation he makes. She notices that he drinks too freely, smokes too much, and seems always restless and lethargic. She comes to know that he is never well, his life is physically ruined, and his nerves and body are a wreck. Now Mrs. Alving discovers that her son has inherited all of his life and his death from Captain Alving and that her sending him away did not remove him from his father's influence but delivered to that influence. Consequently, life has become extremely miserable and meaningless for Oswald. Due to illness, he has lost all the pleasures of life and is living a life in death. Even the gloomy environment of Norway is unbearable for him, and he always complains of the bad weather, where there is always rain and darkness, "Oh, it's so dark – so terribly dark! This incessant rain! It may go on for weeks – for months! Never a ray of sunshine! I never remember seeing any sunshine here" (Ibsen 84).

Oswald feels, all that is best in him is deteriorating. The strained atmosphere has taken away all the 'joy of life' from him and he feels no thrill in life. The adverse effects of the gloomy environment and his illness have ravaged his creative capabilities, and he is unable to produce paintings full of light and filled with the pleasures of life as he did before. He could never find the 'joy of life' in his home town, as he replies to Mrs. Alving's question:

Oswald: Yes – the joy of life, Mother – you don't know much about that here at home. I could never find it here. I simply mean that here people look at work as a curse – as a kind of punishment. They look on life as a wretched, miserable business – to be got through as soon as possible.

Mrs. Alving: I know – "a vale of tears" – we do our best to make it so –

Oswald: But, you see, abroad, people don't look at it like that. They don't

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believe in that old fashioned preaching any longer. You must have noticed, Mother, everything I paint is filled with the joy of life; always and forever the joy of life! My paintings are full of light, of sunshine, of glowing happy faces. That's why I'm afraid here, Mother! I'm afraid that all the strongest traits in my nature would become warped here – would degenerate into ugliness. (Ibsen 85)

Though Oswald loves the bohemian lifestyle, however, he has lived a sensible life in Paris. His sufferings have been thrust upon him with no fault of his own. Harold Clurman observes, "Oswald has striven and has for a long time succeeded in leading a sane life. But he cannot reap its fruits because he is the heir of corruption" (125). Hence, he is desperate, and frightened and looks to his mother for help even though he believes that Regine the housemaid and his father's illegitimate daughter is a better alternative. It is observed that Ibsen's characters suffering from biological limitations seek salvation in the company of beautiful ladies. Similarly, Oswald wants to surround himself with beautiful people to avoid gloom. He considers the young and beautifully built Regine his only salvation because she has the gift of joy in her, as he tells Mrs. Alving:

Oswald: But she's wonderful to look at, Mother! The one thing that could save me is Regine.

Mrs. Alving: What do you mean?

Oswald: I mean I can't endure this agony alone! Isn't she wonderful to look at? So beautifully built! So radiant with health. I 'd never noticed her much before, Mother – but suddenly I saw her there – so beautiful – so vital – she stood there as though waiting to come into my arms. I suddenly realized that she could save me; she was so full of the joy of life! (Ibsen 84-5)

Oswald's deteriorating health and his lack of the physical strength and fervor which Regine has, indicate his helplessness and desperate condition. His preference for Regine's companionship may be an expression of his lust for her. It is also a manifestation of the lust that he inherited from his father because he is doomed to repeat the sins of his father. Regine learning about the reality that he is her half-brother, and about his fatal illness, refuses to sacrifice her youth and look after the invalid Oswald: "I should say not! I'm poor – all that I have is my youth – I can't afford to waste it. I don't want to be left stranded. I have some of that "joy of life" in me too, Mrs. Alving" (Ibsen 89). Regine's rejection turns life merely a meaningless existence for Oswald. He thought Regine could help him to get rid of the terrible existence in the face of his ghastly illness. Now he is filled with fright and terror and groans about his helpless condition to his mother, "Yes – unspeakable, sickening terror! If it had only been an ordinary illness – even a fatal one – I wouldn't have

minded so much – I'm not afraid of death – though I should like to live as long as possible" (Ibsen 90).

Oswald's ambivalent behaviour indicates his feeble situation, as on the one hand, he says that he is not afraid of death, but at the same time, he yearns to live as long as possible. Mrs. Alving consoles him by giving him more and more wine that may bring relief to him and assures him that he will live long, but this brings him no hope of light. Being well aware of his present desolate condition, and meaningless future life waiting for him, he is in extreme mental strain. When he thinks of his future life as predicted by the doctor, he is filled with fright; he speaks out his agonizing thoughts in these words to his mother:

But there's something so utterly revolting about this! To become a child again – a helpless child – to have to be fed – to have to be – oh! It's too ghastly to think of! I won't stand it! I can't endure the thought of lingering on like that – of growing old like that – old and grey-haired like that! And you might die and I should be left alone . . . For the doctor said I might live for years, you see. He called it "softening of the brain" or something of the sort. (Ibsen 90)

Mrs. Alving is horrified to learn about the wretched condition of her son. She screams with terror and assures him of her care during his illness. He tells her that his real reason for returning home from Paris was fear of death and a longing for her care. He blames her for scaring away Regine with the truth, who could have helped him. His meaningless existence is unbearable for him anymore. Because he knows that according to the doctor's prediction, his next attack will be his last, and he shows his mother twelve morphine capsules – a lethal dose. He wants his mother to administer them when his next attack comes. He knows that Regine would have done so had he asked her. In the face of biological limitations Oswald is left with no other option but to bring an end to his life, as he has been converted to a state of non-being by his horrible illness. To put an end to his futile existence, suicide is the only alternative for him, he wants his mother to give him all the morphine tablets in case of the next attack, to which Mrs. Alving vehemently replies:

Mrs. Alving: I can't endure this!

Oswald: You must endure it, Mother. If only Regine were here – I'd have explained to her how matters stood; I'd have asked her to help me put an end to it; she'd have done it, I know.

Mrs. Alving: Never!

Oswald: Oh yes she would! If she'd seen me lying there like an imbecile child – beyond help – hopelessly, irrevocably lost . . . She would have done it! Regine has such a magnificent light and buoyant nature. She wouldn't have put up long with an invalid like me. (Ibsen 90)

Mrs. Alving now realizes that despite her coward and futile tactics she failed

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to protect Oswald from his father's influence. Because of her compromises to the world of duty, she ruined her son's life. She is responsible for all his pain and suffering. Overcome by the disease he suddenly asks, "Mother – give me the sun" and then crumples up in his chair and sinks into a state of unconsciousness and repeats twice "the sun, the sun" (Ibsen 91). Theoharis Constantine notes that "[h]e cannot know, but Mrs. Alving must, that he is asking for the death that joy demands she accomplishes" (89). She is indecisive and terrified, screaming, shocked, and panicked, asks if he knows her and gets no recognition, only the demand:

Mrs. Alving: [Springs up in despair, tears at her hair with both hands and screams] I can't bear it! [Whispers, paralyzed with fear] I can't bear it! Never! [Suddenly] Where did he put them? [Passes her hand rapidly over his breast] Here! [Draws back a couple of steps and cries] No; no; no! – Yes! No; no! [She stands a few steps away from him, her hands clutching her hair, and stares at him in speechless terror]Oswald: [Immovable as before] The sun – The sun. (Ibsen 91)

Her jumping up, her motion to and fro from him, her screaming, her whispering, and her indecisiveness all manifest her limitations as a human being. She is on the mercy of circumstances, and utterly helpless to help her imbecile son. Theoharis Constantine observes: "Oswald's bodily life-in death repeats Helene's spiritual entrapment, in one sense results from it, and represents to her the disastrous consequence of that original compromise with the world of the duty Manders forced her to live under" (90). Mrs. Alving's pathetic ambivalent condition indicates the futility of human existence in the face of limitations imposed upon them by society and misdeeds committed by the older generation. Being a loving mother she cannot endure killing her son with her own hands by giving him the lethal morphine tablets. But as M.C. Bradbrook observes, "In fact, whether Mrs. Alving does or does not kill Oswald matters nothing to him, since he had ceased to exist as a human being" (93). All her years of long-suffering have come to nothingness. She must kill her son or, if she does not have the courage, watch him speechless and slobbering for the rest of his life.

A DOLL'S HOUSE: DEATH STARING IN THE FACE

We find that in Ibsen's plays, inherited diseases ruin the lives of human beings who themselves are in no way responsible for their affliction. Though in *Ghosts* this idea of heredity has great importance, it plays a less important role in the play *A Doll's House*. On Ibsen's depiction of hereditary diseases in these plays William Archer remarks that "[i]n *A Doll's House* he touches upon, in *Ghosts* he frankly faces, the problem of hereditary disease, which interests him, not in itself, but simply as the physical type and symbol of so many social and ethical phenomena" (66).

Dr. Rank a supporting character in *A Doll's House* is suffering from a disease which he (like Oswald) has inherited from his father. We find Dr. Rank mournfully saying that he is suffering from a terrible disease for no fault of his own. This is what he says to Nora: "With death staring me in the face? Why should I suffer for another man's sins? What justice is there in that? Somewhere, somehow, every single family must be suffering some such cruel retribution" (Ibsen 45). His chief regret is that he has to pay the penalty for the sins of another man. There is no justice when one has to suffer for something that another man has done. He suffers from a spinal disease which is due to the dissipated life his father had led during his youth. Brian Downs corroborating the idea about Dr. Rank's hereditary illness notes: "The first case which Ibsen presented was that of Dr. Rank, the family friend of the Helmers, in *A Doll's House*, and with him it is the central nervous system which is attacked. Rank himself attributes his illness entirely to paternal excesses" (123-24).

Dr. Rank complains to Nora about his pathetic physical condition that "[m]y poor innocent spine must do penance for my father's gay subaltern life" (Ibsen 46). He is trapped in a helpless situation. Although a doctor, despite that he is unable to get himself out of this miserable condition. His limitations are very obvious from the pitiable words that he expresses to Nora: "No point is deceiving oneself. I am the most wretched of all my patients, Mrs. Helmer. These last few days I've made a careful analysis of my internal economy. Bankrupt! Within a month I shall probably be lying rotting up there in the churchyard" (Ibsen 45).

Death as a biological finale of life no doubt makes an irritating presence in Dr. Rank's life. Nora considers this a very ugly thing for him to say. But Dr. Rank well aware of his ghastly incurable disease says that the fact of death is indeed very ugly but that the worst of the situation is that, before he dies, he will have to endure much physical suffering in the bed. Like Oswald the thought of enduring physical suffering and mental strain in bed before death is unbearable for him. He is slowly losing his health and there is nothing to be done about it. He is frightened that he has very few days left to live in this world, and for him "[t]he whole damn thing is ghastly. But the worst thing is all the ghastliness that has to be gone through first. I only have one more test to make; and when that's done I'll know pretty well when the final disintegration will start" (Ibsen 45).

The terrible disease has made life meaningless for Dr. Rank. He has lost interest in all the activities of life and has been transformed into a state of non-being. He will discontinue his connection with this world and will lock himself in a room. He would not like even his best friend Torvald Helmer to visit him when he is lying ill and waiting for death in his bed. He cannot bear anyone to see the last ugly and disgusting days of his life. As soon as he becomes certain that the time of his death is approaching, he will send a card to Nora and Torvald Helmer with a black cross on it,

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indicating his imminent horrible death. He tells Nora, "You will know then the final horrible disintegration has begun" (Ibsen 45).

Like Oswald in *Ghosts*, Dr. Rank in this extreme moment of frustration is trying to find salvation in the company of beautiful Nora. He confesses his love for Nora and would willingly give his life for her. He does not appreciate Nora's physique as Oswald does about Regine's. However, he shows his lust when he looks at her skin-coloured stockings. Whereupon Nora asks why he is looking at them in such a critical manner and if in his opinion they will fit her. Dr. Rank replies that he has no means of judging whether the stocking will fit her, he wants to get the opportunity and take a good look at her legs. He asks if Nora will allow him to take a look at certain other nice things too. It is obvious, that Dr. Rank is now hinting at Nora's undergarments including perhaps, her brassiere. To this, Nora replies that he is too naughty and that she will not allow him to look at anything more. All this shows the extreme frustration of a person suffering from an incurable disease. Facing a certain death, the only pleasure in life for him is to sit with Nora and talk with her in a jovial mood, as he tells her:

Rank: sitting here so intimately like this with you, I can't imagine . . . I simply can't conceive what would have become of me if I had never come to this house.

Nora: [Smiles] Yes, I rather think you do enjoy coming here.

Rank: And the thought of having to leave it all . . . (Ibsen 47)

Dr. Rank's confession of his love for Nora indicates the precariousness of his being. He has very little time to live. His secret passion for her, and her unexpected awareness of this passion, certainly signify that she sympathizes with him. She neither rejects nor accepts his amorous feelings towards her. Her ambivalent reaction to his love gives us the idea that she knows about his wretched condition due to his fatal illness and imminent death. Reciprocating his feelings of love she says:

Nora: . . . Oh, my dear Dr. Rank, that really was rather horrid of you?

Rank: That I have loved you every bit as much as anybody? Is that horrid?

Nora: Anyway, you know that I'm at your service, body and soul. (Ibsen 49)

During his final visit to the Helmers in Act Three, Dr. Rank further shows his frustration with facing certain death by remarking that these rooms are very familiar and very dear to him. He says that Helmer and Nora are a very happy couple who must be feeling very cosy in this apartment. He declares that one should enjoy everything in this world as much as one can and as long as possible. His yearning for the joys of life (like Oswald) indicates the deterioration of his physical condition. He wishes to enjoy life but his fatal disease does not allow him to live any longer. He in desperation tells Torvald Helmer:

Rank: At the next masquerade, I shall be invisible.

Helmer: That's a funny idea!

Rank: There's a big black cloak . . . haven't you heard of the cloak of invisibility? That comes right down over you, and then nobody can see you. (Ibsen 72)

In saying that at the next fancy dress ball, he would render himself invisible, he means that he would by then be dead and no longer able to attend the dance party. After Dr. Rank bids them goodbye and leaves, Helmer finds two cards with the former's name on them. There is a black cross over the printed name of Dr. Rank. According to Nora, by putting a black cross over the name he has announced his death. These cards mean his final farewell to the Helmer's family and now he would shut himself in his room and wait for his death. Helmer reacting to the miserable condition of Dr. Rank says, "He had grown so close to us. I don't think I can imagine him gone. His suffering and his loneliness seemed almost to provide a background of dark cloud to the sunshine of our lives" (Ibsen 74).

Though the character of Dr. Rank in *A Doll's House* is not very essential to the plot of the play, however, Ibsen in his character reveals the helplessness of humanity. The young generation suffers for the sins of their fathers by inheriting incurable diseases from the latter. It is also possible that Dr. Rank might commit suicide to avoid prolonged terrible illness. He is deprived of certain pleasures of life because of his father's lecherous and excessive indulgence in those pleasures. All is over for him, and death is the only alternative to get rid of the useless and meaningless life.

THE WILD DUCK: BLINDNESS A TERRIBLE MISFORTUNE

Henrik Ibsen brings more biological limitations into light in the play *The Wild Duck*. In this play, we find a fourteen-year-old innocent girl named Hedvig, whose eyesight is becoming weaker and weaker and that soon she will go blind. We learn in the play that the disease of the eyes from which she is suffering is hereditary and will with time lead to complete blindness. Her father Hjalmar Ekdal in Act Two of the play talks about the pathetic condition and hereditary disease of his daughter to his friend Gregers Werle:

Hjalmar: She is the brightest joy of our life, and its darkest sorrow, Gregers.

Gregers: Why, how do you mean?

Hjalmar: Yes. You see, she's in grave danger of losing her eyesight. Gregers: Going blind!

Hjalmar: Yes. There are only the first signs showing as yet; and it may be all right for a time still. But the doctor has warned us. It's bound to come.

Gregers: That's a terrible misfortune. What's the cause of it?

Hjalmar: It's hereditary, it seems. (Ibsen 76)

Hedvig the loving daughter of her father is leading a different life from that of

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normal children. Because of her weakening eyesight, she is unable to attend school like other children. On being asked by Gregers about her leisure time and education she replies:

Gregers: But I expect you haven't so very much free time. Of course, you go to school.

*Hedvig: No, not any more. Because Daddy's afraid I shall hurt my eyes.
(Ibsen 194)*

Little young Hedvig because of her illness of the eyes is deprived of school education. Her life is limited to her house, particularly helping her mother in the kitchen. She is not allowed to walk in the sun which might hurt her eyes. Besides these limitations, more sufferings and frustrations are waiting for her due to her inherited illness.

We learn from Hjalmar's wife Gina that her husband's mother had weak eyesight too. So Hedvig might have inherited the illness from her grandmother. But the fact of the matter is that Gina was a housemaid in old Werle's house before her marriage to Hjalmar. She had been seduced by Mr. Werle before her marriage. Gregers the son of old Mr. Werle is startled to learn about Hedvig's hereditary disease because he remembers that his father's eyesight is also becoming weaker and that the latter too is in danger of going blind in the course of time. Greger, because of his idealism comes into conflict with his father. Mr. Werle had led a dissolute life and had been unfaithful to his wife on many occasions. His callous disregard for the feelings of his wife had driven her to a state of desperation, made her ill, and led to her premature death. Gregers excessively devoted to his mother has, therefore been having a strong grievance against his father and has kept away from him for many years. So he reveals the secret of Gina's past life to Hjalmar. As Hedvig's disease of the eye has been described by doctors as being hereditary, it occurs to Gregers that Hedvig might be Mr. Werle's illegitimate daughter, born of a sexual relationship between his father and Gina just before her marriage to Hjalmar. On being interrogated by Hjalmar, his wife admits that she had been seduced by Mr. Werle before her marriage. Hjalmar distress and dismay now know no limits.

Hjalmar's limitation is that he does not dare to face the reality of life. It requires a man of high calibre and great moral courage to face the truth. Hjalmar is unable to endure the truth and feels heartbroken about being acquainted with it. His reaction to the revelation of Gina's past and to the possibility of Hedvig being another man's daughter proves to be unbearable for him. In "The Wild Duck", Brian Down points out, "Hjalmar Ekdal is convinced of Hedvig's bastardy on the evidence of the defective eyesight which she shares with Werle senior" (125). He cannot cope with the

situation that has been created for him by Gregers' disclosure. The new development is that Mrs. Sorby hands over a letter from Mr. Werle to Hedvig. The contents of this letter further strengthen the suspicion in Hjalmar's mind that Hedvig is not his daughter but Mr. Werle's. He fervently asks Gina: "I want to know whether- your child has the right to live under my roof. . . . You're to answer this question. Does Hedvig belong to me- or ...Well?" (Ibsen 234). Her reply that she does not know, confirms Hjalmar's suspicion and he declares that he no longer has to live in this house and that he would have nothing to do anymore with Hedvig. All his love for her now seems to have collapsed, and he is not able even to bear the sight of Hedvig anymore:

Hjalmar: Don't come near me, Hedvig! Go away! Right away! I can't bear to look at you. Ah, the eyes! Good Bye.

Hedvig: [clinging tightly to him and screaming]. No, no! Don't go away from me!

Gina: [crying out]. Look at the child, Hjalmar! Look at the child!

Hjalmar: I won't. I can't. I must get out, away from all this.

[He tears himself free from Hedvig and goes out by the hall door.] (Ibsen 234-35)

Hjalmar's leaving the house in extreme distress is unbearable for the innocent loving daughter Hedvig. Despite her excessive love for Hjalmar, she cannot stop him from leaving the house. She is now in a wretched condition and believes that her father will never come back. She says, "[with despair in her eyes]. He's going away from us, Mother! He's going away from us! He'll never come back again. . . . [throwing herself down on the sofa, sobbing]. No, no, he'll never come back to us again" (Ibsen 235). She is now feeling utterly miserable at her father's changed attitude towards her. She still lying on the sofa sobbing and unaware of her fault why her father rejected her, says, "I think I'm going to die of all this. What I have I done to him? Mother, you must make him come home again" (Ibsen 235). She is not certain what is the cause of her father annoyance with her and inquires Gina to tell her the truth. She then in suspicion tells Gregers Werle, "I think I know it is. Perhaps I'm not Daddy's real child" (Ibsen 235). Hedvig's frustrations further aggravate when Hjalmar discards her in Act Five again, when he returns home:

Hedvig: [at the kitchen door]. Mother, shall I - ? [Sees Hjalmar, screams with joy and runs to him.] Oh, Daddy! Daddy!

Hjalmar: [turning aside and waving her away]. Go away! Go away! [to Gina.] Make her go away from me, I tell you.

Gina: [in an undertone]. Go into the living-room, Hedvig. [Hedvig goes in silently.] (Ibsen 246-47)

Now Hedvig's frustration knows no limits. Her dearest father cannot even bear to see her, and her presence in the house is intolerable for him. Consequently, due to hereditary illness and doubtful parentage, her existence in the world becomes

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meaningless and useless. George Bernard Shaw likewise points out: "The doubt cast on her parentage, with her father's theatrical repudiation of her, destroy her ideal place in the home, and make a source of discord there; so she sacrifices herself" (99). She is left with no option but to put an end to her state of non-being. M. C. Bradbrook observes that "Hedvig's piteous limitations leave her exposed to catastrophe. She does believe in Hjalmar, as no one but a child could do. He is her God and when he betrays her, she is terror-stricken with all the final black despair of childhood" (106).

Hedvig is terrified and speechless, opens the attic, steals across, takes the pistol from the shelf, goes into the garret, shoots herself in the breast, and thus brings an end to her meaningless existence. According to critics the reason for her suicide might be her love for her father, and life without his love would be meaningless for her. David Thomas remarks: "In her desperation, Hedvig comes to associate herself entirely with the wild duck and eventually shoots herself to prove her love for Hjalmar. She dies an innocent, even a spotless victim" (110). However, in reality, the reason for her suicide is her suffering from a hereditary illness. Hjalmar would never have rejected his dearest child if he had no suspicion of Hedvig's being the illegitimate daughter of Mr. Werle. The innocent little Hedvig lost her life due to the inherited weak eyesight. Because of her biological limitations, she was bound to die like Oswald and Dr. Rank. Thus according to M. C. Bradbrook in Ibsen's realistic dramas, we find "poor puny humanity crushed between the upper and nether millstones of society and heredity" (90).

In conclusion, in Ibsen's selected plays, we find the fact that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the offspring. What happens is that the characters who are the victims of hereditary diseases are virtually trapped in the sequence of the past affecting the present. The inherited diseases make life a continuous pain for them, which they cannot endure to undergo anymore. Life void of joys and love becomes agonizing for Oswald, Dr. Rank and Hedvig, and they struggle to find their true place in society. Their motiveless existence in society brings them into a state of non-being. Thus, death is the only possible eventuality to bring an end to their worthless existence.



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