

**DUBLIN BUSINESS SCHOOL**

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**LOOKING FOR ARIEL AND FINDING CALIBAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AND WOMEN IN STRINDBERG'S  
NATURALISTIC DRAMAS**

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I shall examine the treatment of women in three of the naturalistic plays of August Strindberg. He was writing extensively on Darwinism and, through his *Vivisections* collection of essays, examining the power structures which are at play in the world, and he used his naturalistic dramas to work through the theories he analysed in those texts. With the weight of patriarchal structures and hierarchical mores around them these women in these plays are inevitably constrained into fighting dirty. The main point is not just on the nature of women, but on the fragile relationship between men and women and how a patriarchal system has engineered a skewed view of gender and of gender relations.

I intend to use close readings of the texts to ascertain as to whether women are treated more unfavourably than the men in these works, and to back this up with academic texts upon both Strindberg in general and feminism in literature. I shall refer the theories examined in his *Battle of the Brains* and *Soul Murder* essays to isolate the new types of psychological battles being waged between men and women.

He has been accused of misogyny for his treatment of women in these plays but I believe that this is a very one-dimensional view. I shall endeavour to show that the women are not portrayed as being worse than the males, even if Strindberg's depictions are far from the pure and innocent images of women which have persisted down the years. My overriding impression is that his dramas are intended as moral lessons, forcing the viewer to evaluate, Brechtian-style, how the protagonists reached their current situations, and to put the lessons they have learnt from exposure to the plays to work in their own lives.

The public disowns Tragedy, unless she rattles her dagger and goblet, abhors Romance which is not amenable to the laws of prosody, and deems it a sad effect in art if, from the outpoured blood of hapless heroism, there does not at once spring up a growth of sorrowful blossoms. As in the very madness and frenzy of this attitude, people want the drama to befool them, Purveyor supplies plutocrat with a parody of life which the latter digests medicinally in a darkened theatre, the stage literally battenning on the mental offal of its patrons.

James Joyce

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The jurisdiction of the stage begins where the domain of secular law leaves off. Whenever justice is dazzled by gold and gloats in the pay of infamy; when the crimes of the mighty mock their own impotence, and mortal fear stays the ruler's arm – then theatre takes up the sword and scales, and hauls infamy before the dreadful tribunal of justice...the theatre has the power to punish the thousand vices which justice must patiently tolerate...the stage is, more than any other public institution, a school of practical wisdom, a guide to our daily lives, an infallible key to the most secret accesses of the human soul...we will always have to live with foolish people. We must either avoid or confront them; we either seek to undermine them, or we must become their victims. But no longer do they take us by surprise. Now we are prepared for their assaults...it has hauled falsehood and deception out from its twisted labyrinths, and exposed its awful face to the light of day.

Friedrich Schiller *Theatre Considered as Moral Institution*

Strindberg expressed the same opinion in his preface to *Miss Julie*, espousing the theatre as a *Biblia Pauperum* and a mode of teaching the masses on real moral issues which fall outside the remit of the judicial system; throughout *The Father* and *Miss Julie* there are repeated references to the inability of a court to legislate for the events which occur. In these three plays – all written with a two year period – Strindberg examines the tiny battles which take place domestically, and which can escalate dramatically, looking at marriage, trust, sexual issues, adultery and the matter of balance and partnership within marriage. Within such personal battles there is none of the decorum which may occur with an unknown foe and the closeness of the combatants, due in these three cases to marriage or sex, leads to the gloves being firmly removed and all avenues explored in pursuit of victory. Within a marriage that victory will always be pyrrhic and, in these dramas, leads to nothing but death and decrepitude.

Strindberg's bravery in confronting such matters must be acknowledged and he received an outpouring of anger from all quarters, memorably categorised by Emma Goldman...

There is no figure in contemporary literature, outside of Tolstoy, that laid bare the most secret nooks and corners of his own soul with the sincerity of August Strindberg. One so relentlessly honest with himself could be no less with others. That explains the bitter opposition and hatred of his critics. They did not object so much to Strindberg's self-torture; but that he should have dared to torture them, to hold up his searching mirror to their sore spots, that they could not forgive. Especially is this true of women. For centuries she has been lulled into a trance by the songs of the troubadours who paid homage to her goodness, her sweetness, her selflessness and, above all, her noble motherhood. And though she is beginning to appreciate that all this incense has befogged her mind and paralysed her soul, she hates to give up the tribute laid at her feet by sentimental moonshiners of the past.<sup>1</sup>

In his *Soul Murder* Strindberg reiterates this opinion

...people gain a reputation as discoverers (= reformers) when they are able to expose a few points where lies have established themselves all too thickly. But this has an unavoidable consequence in the horrified shrieks that greet every such discovery, since a vested interest is thereby checked and many livelihoods are threatened...not without reason has the truth come to be seen as cynical, raw and dangerous.<sup>2</sup>

He understood that his personal fears were the fears of all mankind and that, following the writings of Schiller, public broadcast of these matters would help his fellow man, forewarned being forearmed. His willingness to put his head on the block for this humanist stance should be applauded. Brustein points out

More than any other dramatist who ever lived, Strindberg writes himself, and the self he continually exposes is that of alienated modern man, crawling between heaven and earth, desperately trying to pluck some absolutes from a forsaken universe.<sup>3</sup>

And it was with regard to the depiction of women that the most vitriolic attacks were directed at Strindberg, even though he gave them the equality which was being demanded by the Swedish feminists at the time; the freedom to be as vicious and manipulative as the men of his dramas. This was apparently not the type of equality desired. The cry of misogynist or sexist is often akin to the 'race card' situation in the United States: the intention being to immediately stymie any argument and expose the speaker as Neanderthal. That the world is rife with both is patently true but criticism of a woman or analysis of her motives should not

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Goldman *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* Applause Theatre Productions(2005): 25

<sup>2</sup> August Strindberg "Soul Murder" *Selected Essays by August Strindberg* (ed. Michael Robinson) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006): 70

<sup>3</sup> Robert Brustein *Male and Female in August Strindberg* *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1962): 131

be met with such a childish retort. Strindberg's women are forces of nature. The accusations of misogyny can only be entertained if the men are depicted as virtuous heroes and the women as heartless harpies, something which cannot be said of any of Strindberg's dramatic output. Against Strindberg's Desdemona, Iago would not have had a chance, and, in the first place, Othello would not have been permitted to consort with such an odious figure. He placed women front and centre, providing actresses with some of the juiciest roles available for years, thereby permitting them to display their full acting talent.

As if in deference to the notion of equality he constructed a new yardstick for seeing who rose and who fell, and one outside the classic patriarchal structure which usually decreed the outcome of such a struggle. Within Darwinism only the strongest survived, and in his essays *The Battle Of The Brains* and *Soul Murder* (written in 1887 between *The Father* and *Miss Julie*) in his *Vivisections I* volume, he elaborated upon the new battlefield and the new (dearth of) rules of combat; "...suggestion is only the stronger brain's struggle with, and victory over, a weaker mind, and that this procedure is applied unconsciously in daily life."<sup>4</sup>

The power struggle takes place between minds, the stronger will triumphing and, in this realm, the sloth of mind generated by a tradition of patriarchal or hierarchical structures puts the 'noble' one at a disadvantage. Strindberg details how he has bested an adversary through the relentless power of suggestion, rendering him incapable of independent or coherent thought, and this process can be seen at work in all three plays.

In the compartment, where he has to sit opposite me, I have him under my gaze all day long, and I drip my thoughts into his brain in the form of well-crafted sentences....in

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<sup>4</sup> August Strindberg "Battle of the Brains" *Selected Essays by August Strindberg* (ed. Michael Robinson) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006): 25

order to entrap him I prepared dialectical snares, tricked him into sticking in a tentative finger, then took an arm, and finally had him by the throat.<sup>5</sup>

The question of character is closely tied to the suitability for such a battle, Strindberg opining that the word character, whose classical definition is that of steadfastness and unchanging, should be revisited. Within his battles such immutability will guarantee disaster and the victor will be the one who can adapt most readily to the changing situation.

An individual who wishes to have a happy life must either be flexible enough to adjust to circumstances or strong enough to direct matters as he wills. If he can do neither one nor the other, or through bon sens and an influential position bring about a compromise, he will go mad, commit suicide, become a criminal, or end up in the poor-house.<sup>6</sup>

Kiberd takes this a step further contending that the male and female elements within us are at war, neither side wishing to acknowledge the existence of the other, and that without an acceptance of our hybrid nature “the self, so divided is doomed to become neither male nor female but a ‘characterless less character’.”<sup>7</sup> The men are all determinedly ‘men’ (with the exception of Adolf, who was the most rounded – in terms of masculine and feminine elements - until Gustav wrecked havoc upon his mind) and the women firmly ‘women’. Laura speaks of superstition and Tekla notably says “I don’t know anything. I only feel.”<sup>8</sup> whilst Julie clings to the ideal of romantic love, despite all the evidence to the contrary. There is also the repetition of unwanted children, Tekla’s child, the Captain and Julie all being born against the mother’s will. Strindberg has drawn his characters for a modern age and a rapidly changing world and their insecurities and uncertainties are reflected in this characterisation. The varied influences upon this character cloud the issues and make it impossible to polarise the single influence acting upon that character.

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<sup>5</sup> Strindberg “Battle of the Brains”: 39-40

<sup>6</sup> Strindberg “Soul Murder”: 65

<sup>7</sup> Declan Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* (University of Michigan: Macmillan 1985): 34

<sup>8</sup> August Strindberg “Creditors” *Twelve Major Plays* (trans. Elizabeth Sprigge) (New Jersey: Aldine Publishing Co. 2008): 149

I have drawn my characters as split and vacillating, a mixture of the old and the new...agglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of humanity, torn shreds of once-fine clothing that has become rags, in just the way that a human soul is patched together”<sup>9</sup>

This new battleground also leads to a reworking of traditional gender roles; a matter Strindberg attacks with relish. The women of his dramas are simply reacting to the events happening around them and the ‘steadfast’ men are rendered comatose in the face of such flexibility. The lack of trust and empathy between the genders is starkly depicted, with no possibility of playful exchange. Every debate is deathly serious and the benefit of the doubt – surely the cornerstone of any relationship – never proffered. There is also, probably due to those sentiments expressed in the Emma Goldman quote above, more expectation piled upon women (their virtue, compassion, general humanity) which is not applied to men. The plays here show what happens when men go too far in exposing their feminine sides and effectively stop being men, thereby losing the respect of the women in their lives. Strindberg flirts with extremes throughout: Jean is completely male, with no feminine side, whilst Adolf loses all traces of his masculinity. The Captain’s dramatic entrance at the end of *The Father* – bursting through the door - shows him grappling with the last vestiges of his masculinity in a display of anger and strength (the ‘masculine’ attributes) but the damage to his male side has already been done.

The Madonna / whore and boy / man dichotomies are also explored with the same severity. It may seem extreme but these vignettes are the culmination of a series of events. The captain speaks fondly of his love for Laura and Tekla tries her damnest to calm Adolf down but the level of inconsistency has been built up

This portrayal of human inconsistency in the irrational zone of sexual relations is one of Strindberg’s great legacies. Succeeding writers such as Lawrence would henceforth

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<sup>9</sup> August Strindberg “Miss Julie” *Plays One* (tr. Michael Meyer) (London: Methuen Drama 1976): 95

be unafraid to create characters who blatantly contradicted themselves within the scope of a single work. To the modernist, consistency became the mark of the second-rate mind, which fails to appreciate just how often the seeming opposite is really a secret double.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Father* a husband and wife's difference of opinion as to their daughters education has shocking consequences as the father's patriarchal and authoritarian views are reciprocated, in a more brutal fashion, by his wife. In *Miss Julie* a young girl's upbringing, through her parents' callous indifference to her welfare, causes her to be used and manipulated by the servant Jean. It is Strindberg's *Battle Of The Brains* in technicolour as her will is subjugated and disintegrated by a barrage of insult interspersed with hope. In *Creditors* a husband is turned against his wife by her ex-husband, leading to the unjustified disintegration of a marriage and the husband's death.

In all three plays the Darwinian concept holds, one-dimensional attitudes to gender are exposed as unrealistic and the importance of a happy medium reinforced.

Strindberg's violence in analysing these situations is entirely justified. None of the characters are likeable or, indeed, stable, but it must be remembered that this is drama, and subject to a certain level of exaggeration for effect.

...whenever life in its fragmentation comes forward to meet you together with, in your minds (for both must coincide), the momentum of the idea in which it rediscovers its lost unity, then seize hold of it and ignore the mob of aesthetes who only wish to have good health demonstrated in the very disease. After all, you can only show the transition to good health and are indeed unable to cure the fever without dealing with the fever, for this mob who wants to hold you accountable for the paroxysms that you depict as if they were your own, should, if it were to be consistent, also blame the judge who interrogates the felon about his crime, or the priest who hears confession, for dabbling in filth.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 36

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Hebbel "The Preface to Mary Magdalene" *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre* (ed. George Brandt) (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998): 73-74

## CHAPTER 2: THE FATHER

The destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists. Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive. The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognise that everything can go wrong. Therefore, the destructive character is reliability itself.

Walter Benjamin 'The Destructive Character'

*The Father* is a feral beast of a play, massed with contradictions and with so many different angles so that it is difficult to definitively achieve any stability from one moment to the next. Time and space are at odds, events happening in the past which appear to have just been engendered by a present situation, and Laura is relentlessly contradictory. 'Appear' is the key word here, as repeated readings only serve to confuse the issue further. Indeed, Strindberg himself seemed to have difficulty with its nuances as he revisited it, analysing and further commenting on it in his preface to *Miss Julie*. Rokem reinforces this point

...it is impossible to locate any fixed focal points, either outside or inside the fictional world of the play or through the subjective consciousness of the characters. Instead there is a constant flux determined by the awakened desires of the characters<sup>12</sup>

Peter Szondi<sup>13</sup> has put forward an opinion which comes close to making sense of the various strands; namely, that the episodes contained in the play are mediated purely through the Captain's perspective. Taken from this viewpoint, and, having read much critical writing on this play it appears that Szondi is the only one advancing this view in any concentrated fashion, the play becomes ever more fascinating and a world away from the simple brutal tour-de-force it may seem upon one's first encounter. Laura's actions and responses are

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<sup>12</sup> Freddie Rokem *Strindberg's Secret Codes* (University of East Anglia: Norvik Press 2004): 22

<sup>13</sup> Peter Szondi *An Essay on the Tragic* (trans. Michael Hays) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002): 210

channelled through the imagination of the Captain, all serving to advance his victimised impression of the situation. Szondi examines the ‘reflection of consciousness’ which slants the play so precariously...

More important is the recognition that the battle waged against him by his wife usually achieves ‘dramatic’ realisation only as a reflection of his own consciousness. Its main features are even established by him. He himself hands over to his wife her most important weapon – the question of paternity<sup>14</sup>

Even those events which happen when he is outside the house or simmering in the locked room conspire to bring about the eventuality he seems to subconsciously crave. This view would also position it as definitively un-naturalistic and a prelude to the notions of the dream and reality crossover he was to explore in greater and more fluid depth in his later Chamber Plays.

It would also go some way towards explaining the shambolic collision of events and the apparently disparities of evidence on show, and would furthermore reinforce the impossibility of any notion of complete objectivity. Nobody can be completely objective; a shard of subjectivity shall always be present and colour that objectivity. The notion of character, as advanced by Strindberg<sup>15</sup>, and elaborated upon by Kiberd<sup>16</sup>, dovetails with this analysis of objectivity in constructing a play which is furiously ahead of its time and which bears a distinct cinematic relation to such later directors as Bergman and David Lynch. Any accusations of misogyny towards Strindberg must also, therefore, be swept away as the play deals with one particularly skewed view of the situation, and that of a highly paranoid individual.

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<sup>14</sup> Szondi *An Essay on the Tragic* : 210

<sup>15</sup> Strindberg “Miss Julie”: 95

<sup>16</sup> Kiberd, *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 47-49

The *Battle of the Brains*, written in the same year (1887) as *The Father* has its central premise reflected in the Captain's impression of Laura's machinations

It is generally known that there are hymenopterana which lay their eggs in the bodies of the cabbage white's larvae. The eggs hatch and pupate, and the larvae are as huge as if they were in the family way. But when the time comes for them to give birth a host of hymenopterana emerge, while the larvae lie there with their empty skins. I feel like such a hymenopterana in relation to Schilf. My eggs lie in his brain and my thoughts fly out, while he gets increasingly. He now speaks like me; he uses my vocabulary, my jokes, my quotations. He believes they are his butterflies, but really they are only my baby hymenopterana<sup>17</sup>

Captain. My emotions are still pretty much within my control and will be as long as my willpower remains in working order. But you have gnawed and chewed on it so that the cogs are worn smooth, and soon the great wheels will slip and the whole mechanism will spin backwards and fly to pieces...your behaviour has succeeded in arousing my suspicions to the point where my acumen is blunted and my thoughts run wild – the onset of madness – what you have been waiting for any which may come at any moment<sup>18</sup>

The battle is waged between the Captain and the other women of the house, and his fury eventually extends towards womankind in general, diving into Greek mythology to assemble a cast of men who were tormented by evil women. Harry Gilbert Carlson<sup>19</sup> also sees the house as another woman, its walls imprisoning the Captain whilst the upstairs rooms and the sounds emanating from the attic exert a powerful influence upon Bertha, in a type of induction into the world of womankind. The Captain's complacency within the patriarchal system is shown from the outset in his dealings with Laura. He is gloriously disdainful and dismissive of her opinions and it is clear that the conflict over Bertha's future has been bubbling under for some time.

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<sup>17</sup> Strindberg "Battle of the Brains": 42

<sup>18</sup> August Strindberg "The Father" *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama* (ed. W.B. Worthen) (Berkeley: Harcourt Brace Books 2000): 636/637

<sup>19</sup> Harry Gilbert Carlson *Strindberg And The Poetry Of Myth* (London: California University Press 1982): 53

That this female world which surrounds him is based upon superstition and religion, as opposed to the Captain's dependence upon certainty and fact, in his dual professions of soldier and scientist, only compounds the issue. Laura's sarcastic treatment of him following the 'housekeeping money' episode are capped by an ironic curtsey and a disdainful "yes sir. My Captain!"<sup>20</sup> showing how little respect he commands within the household, his condescension to the women around him being undoubtedly pored over, analysed and ridiculed by the faction in the kitchen. That none of the women are shown is interesting, lending the female company the air of a silently scheming Greek chorus or seething hidden mass, this mute majority, in conjunction with the Doctor and the Pastor complicit in the soul murder.

Captain. This house is filled with women and every one of them wants to bring up my little girl. Your stepmother wants her to be a spiritualist; Laura hopes to make an artist out of her; the governess wants her to be a Methodist; old Margaret steers her to the Baptists; and the kitchen help want her to join the salvation army. You can't pull a person in several directions at once without their coming apart<sup>21</sup>

At the end of the play the Captain seems to validate their views on adherence to a higher faith (echoing Tesla's "I don't know anything. I only feel"<sup>22</sup> into the balance) when he admits "One can't be sure of anything, one can only have faith"<sup>23</sup>

For all the tactical sense his military career may have bestowed upon him he is powerless against the women, his emotional intelligence non-existent. The truth is that the exploration (at least) of several different facets may make Bertha a more rounded person, and unlikely to cling to a blind concrete view. He does show his concern in his choice of career, constructing avenues for her whether she marries or not but it certainly appears that the raft of opinions against his own have increased his intransigence. Marilyn Johns Blackwell, in her essay

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<sup>20</sup> Strindberg "The Father" : 630

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 628

<sup>22</sup> Strindberg "Creditors" : 149

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 641

“Strindberg’s Early Dramas And Lacan’s Law Of The Father” observes that the Captain pushes Bertha towards...

One of the helping professions to which women have been relegated since virtually time immemorial...one might wonder if his real objection is that painting is not a womanly profession and instead is one in which the authentic self (which, in Strindberg’s thought, women do not have) is expressed <sup>24</sup>

He also probably harbours the notion of an ‘honest’ or ‘honourable’ enemy, the result of having followed a military career a safe distance from the front line and this new warfare (the insemination of the hymenoptera) shakes both his self-belief and certainty. “Captain. You have dropped them like hebona in the porches of my ear and circumstances have made them doubly poisonous”<sup>25</sup> Ironically he himself constructs the weapons and issues them to Laura, firstly with the Happy situation and secondly, with his earlier-written letter in which he declared fear for his sanity.

Laura relentlessly denies any knowledge of her actions and this may be another facet of the highly subjective slant of the text, imposing the idea (repeated in both *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*), that women have no fixed idea what they’re doing, acting instead upon some emotional current. Kiberd, in his examination of character states

Along with Strindberg’s recognition of the multiplicity of her possible motives goes the even more radical suggestion that such a woman need have no particular reason for committing a momentous action. The dramatist thus discriminates the notion of ‘character’ from that of ‘temperament’, which once denoted the domination of a particular humour in the constitution of a personality <sup>26</sup>

and Lukacs expands upon the point

Character becomes everything, since the conflict is entirely for the sake of character’s vital centre; for it alone and for nothing peripheral, because the force disposed of by this vital centre alone determines the dialectic, that is, the dramatic quality of drama.

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<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Johns Blackwell *Strindberg’s Early Dramas and Lacan’s ‘Law of the Father’* Scandinavian Studies. Vol. 71, Issue 3 (1999): 319

<sup>25</sup> Strindberg “The Father” : 637

<sup>26</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 47

Conversely, character becomes nothing, since the conflict is merely *around* and *about* the vital centre, solely for the *principle* of individuality”<sup>27</sup>

The male attributes the Captain cherishes most – steadfastness, honour (both themselves indicators of the generally accepted definition of ‘character’) – are useless in a changing world. Strindberg could be speaking of the Captain when he says, describing another mental conflict in his battle of the brains, “like most people who don’t reflect on their character, he knew nothing about himself”<sup>28</sup>

Laura’s conversations with the Doctor vividly show her plan hatching, and gaining depth and momentum with every new piece of ammunition she is handed. The subjective view of the Captain, however, may be constructing this series of events. The various women’s beliefs have reassigned intention to a higher power, their physical and tangible thoughts and actions somehow excused, and the Captain has neither the intelligence or imagination to deal with this new brand of warfare. The loss of patriarchal certainty which explodes in his battle with Laura is mirrored by that loss of his patrimony which will result of his doubts regarding his paternity of Bertha. This loss of enlightenment which accompanies the ‘death’ of his possibility of immortality is explained by Strindberg’s mischievous use of the lamp, Brustein saying “in *A Doll’s House* the lamp is an instrument of enlightenment, underscoring significant revelations – but in the father, it is purely an instrument of aggression”<sup>29</sup>

In his *Soul Murder* essay Strindberg explains the process...

In the past one killed one’s adversary without trying to persuade him; nowadays one creates a majority against him, ‘prevails upon’ him, exposes his intentions, ascribes to him intentions he does not have, deprives him of his livelihood, denies him social

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<sup>27</sup> George Lukacs *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (ed. Eric Bentley) (Hammondsworth: Penguin 1986): 435

<sup>28</sup> Strindberg “Battle of the Brains”: 43

<sup>29</sup> Brustein *Male and Female in August Strindberg* : 147

standing, makes him look ridiculous – in short, tortures him to death by lies or drives him insane instead of killing him<sup>30</sup>

With one fell swoop Laura has destroyed his vision of immortality and, in addition to forcing him to consider his own mortality, also shows the shaky foundations upon which his view of the world order, with its clear-cut hierarchy and power structure, is standing. Once this certainty is called into question everything he believes crumbles. In Act I he questions the viability of the legal instrument in settling debates of this nature (as seen with Happy's situation), coming to the conclusion that they too will adapt to favour the mother (favour which continues to this day). Laura comments upon the present situation "I see the House and Senate met this evening. What did you and my brother decide?"<sup>31</sup>

The preference of the asylum over the grave was also examined by Strindberg, showing how the Captain could have been incarcerated for a while, allowing Laura to organise Bertha's education, whereupon everything could return to normal.

It is not until he becomes a source of danger that a madman is prevented from doing harm, and asylums are therefore in reality prisons. But the danger in this is that many a criminal, who should have been able to pay for his offence with the loss of a couple of years freedom, has lost his reason in the asylum. Thus, ill-advised or wicked relatives have been known to save their family honour by committing a wrongdoer to an asylum, in the hope that his lack of responsibility will soon be acknowledged and the invalid will thus emerge unscathed, once his lapse has been forgotten<sup>32</sup>

Laura hastens him down this path, by confirming what he already knows.

Lukacs also speaks of this war of attrition, referred to in *Soul Murder*, which, in this case, is the only avenue left to Laura, foreshadowing the emphasis on the individual which would rise up with the birth of Modernism

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<sup>30</sup> Strindberg "Soul Murder": 63

<sup>31</sup> Strindberg "The Father": 629

<sup>32</sup> Strindberg "Soul Murder": 66

For one of individualism's great antinomies becomes its foremost theme: the fact that realisation of personality will be achieved only at the price of suppressing the personalities of others (which, in turn, require for their realisation the ruin of the personalities of others) <sup>33</sup>

The influences here can be clearly traced to Joyce, Camus and Beckett, amongst a wealth of others. The subjective view imposed will later be appropriated and enlarged by the post-modernists, and the fact that many of their works involve mental collapse reinforces Freidrich Hebbel's view, in his Preface to *Mary Magdalene*, that "Dramatic art will have to engage with controversial, indeed highly controversial matters, since the universal collapse can only be made manifest in terms of individual breakdowns." <sup>34</sup>

Lukacs echoes this saying

The realisation and maintenance of personality has become on the one hand a conscious problem of living; the longing to make the personality prevail grows increasingly pressing and urgent. On the other hand, external circumstances, which rule out this possibility from the first, gain even greater weight. It is in this way that survival as an individual, the integrity of individuality, becomes the vital centre of drama. Indeed the bare fact of being begins to turn tragic, the least disturbance or incapacity to adjust is enough to induce dissonances which cannot be resolved" <sup>35</sup>

and Kiberd throws the personality sub-section of male and female gender roles into the equation

If femininity is largely a social construct, then so is masculinity, with the result that most lovers are mere impersonators of time-honoured conventions. The sensitive male who tries to simulate a robustness of manner which he does not truly feel is just as oppressed as the forceful woman who must deny herself in playing the role of the simpering maiden <sup>36</sup>

Strindberg examines the way in which gender roles have been perverted by society, and maintained by the patriarchal system. When these roles are called into question the Captain and Laura effectively change positions. As the play progresses Laura increasingly takes on the

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<sup>33</sup> Lukacs *The Theory of the Modern Stage* : 439

<sup>34</sup> Hebbel *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre* : 73

<sup>35</sup> Lukacs *The Theory of the Modern Stage*: 433

<sup>36</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 212

male attributes and it ends with her assuming the male role in the household, sitting at the desk organising the accounts.

Kiberd has written widely about the requirement of an androgyny, which marries the best aspects of the male and female characters and which is imperative in any co-operative endeavour, particularly marriage. The faults of the Captain are laid bare by Laura and when he displays weakness she is happier, even though it means that she has been obliged to adopt the male position and things can never be the same again.

Passivity in the male is not to be suppressed as a mark of weakness. It may rather be seen as the attribute of a rich personality which has the strength to expose all its aspects, its doubts as well as its assertions<sup>37</sup>

This rich personality could also be seen as the result of the construction of a soul ‘in patches’ the Captain had disdainfully spoken of earlier. Strindberg’s instructions to the critic Lundegard, regarding the Captain’s character as should be presented on stage, are another example of his glorious lack of consistency

Strindberg stated that the Captain should be presented ‘as a normally robust man with a taste for irony and self-mockery, and the lightly sceptical tone of a man of the world. He also directed that the part should be played “subtly, calmly, resignedly...going to meet his fate almost light-heartedly, wrapping himself in his winding sheet of spiders’ webs, which the laws of nature will not permit him to destroy...by and large he symbolises a masculinity which society is trying to invalidate and hand over to the third sex.”<sup>38</sup>

The possibility of a middle ground is impossible for these characters, admittedly more due to the Captain’s intransigence than Laura’s actions; she is merely reacting to the situation in front of her. Kiberd examines the situation “male and female elements are stalemated in a war of attrition, mutually self-cancelling rather than jointly enriching”<sup>39</sup> and observes that,

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<sup>37</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 38

<sup>38</sup> August Strindberg *Twelve Major Plays* (tr. Elizabeth Sprigge) (New Jersey: Aldine Publishing Co. 2008): 4

<sup>39</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 37

without empathy, “The equalisation of the sexes may simply cause each other to reincarnate in the self the most odious qualities of the other”<sup>40</sup>

The lack of play, both between the characters and within the text itself, is the one angle which removes Strindberg’s texts from the modernism which they resemble in all other areas, and this one-dimensionality is remarked upon by Brustein “the Captain and Laura are monolithic figures hewn out of granite, and stripped of all character details extraneous to their warring natures.”<sup>41</sup> Kiberd comments upon how this seriousness, and lack of both humour and bestowal of the benefit of the doubt, undermines both men and women

If a man cannot purge his sexuality of its aggressive impulses, he might at once contain and express them in a mode of playful parody, epitomising both his ancient need for them and his modern doubts about their desirability. The immutable differences between men and women could be treated in a spirit of fun, with that cheerful acceptance of human limitation which is the basis of all true humour”<sup>42</sup>

“The setting of *The Father* is less a bourgeois household than an African jungle where two wild animals, eyeing each other’s jugular, mercilessly claw at each other until one of them falls.”<sup>43</sup> A similar description was used to analyse the proceedings in Pinter’s *The Homecoming*, showing how much influence Strindberg was to have. *The Father* is a deeply flawed play but fascinating for its oppressive and unyielding subjective view. The dream-like structure would be abandoned for a while, and his following plays would profit from that action. With *Miss Julie* he would hone his craft and, possibly in retaliation to the accusations of misogyny, paint the male as the overarching bad guy (nobody in Strindberg is ever completely innocent). The Other<sup>44</sup>, in the shape of the Count, gains a little ground, visual

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<sup>40</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 52

<sup>41</sup> Brustein *Male and Female in August Strindberg* : 148

<sup>42</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 216

<sup>43</sup> Brustein *Male and Female in August Strindberg* : 148

<sup>44</sup> Carlson *Strindberg And The Poetry Of Myth* : 91

impressions of his existence – his boots, the speaking tube – replacing the wraith- like haze which surrounds this play's Other – The Mother in Law.

### CHAPTER 3: MISS JULIE

The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is greater than any hatred. The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears away the traces of our own age; it cheers, because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed a rooting out, of his own condition. Really, only the insight into how radically the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction leads to such an Apollonian image of the destroyer.

Walter Benjamin 'The Destructive Character'

The eggs of the past must be broken to make way for the omelettes of the future. In *Miss Julie* Strindberg examines the effect a life of leisure can have upon a human when confronted by the present and forced to depend upon her wits. The time for Julie and her ilk is over, and the actions of Jean and his Darwinian descendents will eventually have the effect of removing Julie's type from circulation, leading to us "...seeing our national forests thinned out by the removal of decayed and superannuated trees which have too long obstructed the growth of others with an equal right to live and fertilise their age"<sup>45</sup>

The style is the *Biblia Pauperum* he speaks of in his preface to the play, situating the tale somewhere between Greek Drama and Eastenders, so that all may understand, and his assertion that

the theatre has always been a primary school for the young, the semi-educated and women, all of whom retain the humble faculty of being able to deceive themselves and let themselves be deceived – in other words, to accept the illusion<sup>46</sup>

is laid bare with Julie's situation. Her life has left her unprepared for the battle which takes place with Jean and her hierarchical notions have her believe that she is capable of straying off the path, Red Riding Hood-style, and flirting with the wolf. Goldman summarises the struggle as

...the psychology of the utter helplessness of the Julie type and of the brutality of the Jeans. The one, the result of an empty life, of parasitic leisure, of a useless purposeless

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<sup>45</sup> Strindberg "Miss Julie": 92-93

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* : 91

existence. The other, the effect of too little time for development, for maturity and for depth; of too much toil to permit the growth of the finer traits in the human soul.<sup>47</sup>

This also leads into questions of character and the ability to adapt within a given situation, changing course to better capture the prevailing wind.

Strindberg counsels against our feeling pity for Julie and he understands that pity is exactly what most readers will feel. His cruel depiction of the events of that evening is a re-iteration of his writings in the *Battle Of The Brains* and *Soul Murder*, where tiny modern wars are fought daily and domestically and, indeed, the story (flirting, seduction, sex and abandonment), occurs upon a nightly basis in hostelries all over the globe, although in general the attendant baggage would be far lighter. There is also male and female complicity in this global scheme of events and an understanding of the trajectory, something Julie doesn't understand in this instance. Her experience of her parents' relationship should have taught her something of the dangers of believing blindly in love, but, in this case, her 'love' is merely an excuse (any port in a storm), and closer to Schopenhauer's writings in his *Metaphysics of Love* than any 'traditional' form. Strindberg sets out a litany of excuses for Julie in the preface, asking us, Brechtian fashion, to see the complex intersections of events which have conspired to lead her to this point

I have suggested many motivations for Miss Julie's unhappy fate. The passionate character of her mother; the upbringing misguidedly inflicted upon her by her father; her own character; and the suggestive effect of her fiancé upon her weak and degenerate brain. Also, more immediately, the festive atmosphere of midsummer night; her father's absence; her menstruation; her association with animals; the intoxicating effect of the dance; the midsummer twilight; the powerful aphrodisiac influence of the flowers; and, finally, the chance that drove these two people together into a private room – plus of course the passion of the sexually inflamed man”<sup>48</sup>

but it is clear that this is a situation which must be allowed to develop, whatever the suffering caused. The lion will eat the lamb, and it is not our place to intervene.

The lack of a definitive clarity within the play results in a huge level of ambiguity and also stresses the realistic slant of the naturalistic medium: when confronted by strangers, we are forced to focus on the here and now and extract meaning from that alone. Pinter constructed a

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<sup>47</sup> Goldman *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* : 29

<sup>48</sup> Strindberg “Miss Julie”: 93/94

career from that very fact. Past events may be hinted at but they are wholly subjective and always open to a variety of interpretations. This naturalistic theatre is voyeuristic, with the feeling that we are intruding upon some private moment and all mention past events are not to be trusted.

“Julie. Myself? I have no self”<sup>49</sup>

Julie has been saddled with a raft of burdens by an unthinking mother and father and their own battle upon the gender roles advanced by society. It is interesting to note that the theme of a child being used as a pawn in its parents power struggles is again present here, as it had been in *The Father* and Julie could be viewed as the grown-up Berta, her fragile state of mind influenced by parental wrangling. Her own actions with her fiancé are a repetition of her mother’s actions towards her father. Her later admission that her mother “explained that the world’s respect did not concern her”<sup>50</sup> is ironic, as Julie could have done with inheriting this particular trait from her. Kiberd notes that

Her tortured self-analyses disintegrate her own personality into a series of impersonations learned from others – self-contempt acquired from a father who taught her to distrust women; hatred of men imbued from a fanatical mother; aristocratic pride learned from both; egalitarian principles learned from her fiancé. Such attributes do not coalesce to form a definite personality which is greater than the sum of its parts. Instead, each quality manages to cancel another out, leaving Miss Julie prey to an inauthenticity which is all the more painful because she has just enough intelligence to know how little she really has.<sup>51</sup>

The many references to her upbringing, particularly as regards her account of her parents tribulations, add to the tapestry of the seduction but their veracity cannot be guaranteed. They are most likely a patchwork of half-truths handed down – Chinese-whisper style - by the servants, gaining embellishment whilst losing truth along the way. At every step the latest source would imbue them with their own peccadilloes. Even Julie’s version of events is likely to be corrupted by those self-same sources, her father hardly having furnished her with such graphic descriptions of her mother’s wrongdoings. Her clinging to some supposed sense of honour is brought into relief by Robinson : “Julie’s family had been tainted long before Julie

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. : 144

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. : 129

<sup>51</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 46

fell from her own perch, and the father's name that she is trying to save from dishonour was disgraced long ago"<sup>52</sup>

Julie displays astonishing arrogance in her initial dealings with Jean, toying with him before magnanimously declaring that she shall lower herself to his level. Her hierarchical position ensures that she must keep her word: a burden Jean doesn't have to bear, with Meyer observing that "The slave has this advantage over the knight, that he lacks the latter's fatal preoccupation with honour."<sup>53</sup> Julie is obviously unfit for the position she has inherited and her attempts to create love from sex are laughably counteracted by Jean.

She battles on an even playing field with Jean, the burden of hereditary being shunted off-stage with the count. Jean's stories of his childhood, and the later admission that they are fabricated, set to balance out Julie's stories and instil a false empathy, and her grateful receipt of those fairy-tale type stories show the female element within her; the part Jean must deceive in order to seduce her. It must be remembered that Jean spends most of his time surrounded by women (and understands women much better than Julie understands men) and thus knows exactly what devices are necessary to deceive.

Jean. The oat-bin? Oh, that was just talk...Well, I had to think of something. Women always fall for pretty stories.<sup>54</sup>

Julie's experience of men up to this point has probably been limited. Her father is presumably as dotting and easily manipulated as any father by his baby daughter and, although her fiancée finally rebelled, we have to presume that he had acquiesced to Julie's authority up to that point. Julie's claim that she ended the engagement is patently untrue. She had danced with Jean earlier in the evening and was obviously interested in him, her line "I want to dance with someone who knows how to lead"<sup>55</sup> showing her attraction to a strongly masculine type, a type she has not previously encountered. Jean realises this instantly. Patriarchal will always defeat hierarchical.

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<sup>52</sup> Ross Schideler "Miss Julie, Naturalism and the Battle of the Brains" *The Cambridge Companion to August Strindberg* (Michael Robinson (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009): 67

<sup>53</sup> Strindberg "Miss Julie" : 96

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. : 126/127

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. : 111

The battle of the brains is beautifully teased out, Jean playing masterfully upon Julie's hesitations and innocence. Her determination that they are equal at that table allows Jean full rein of the masculine tools at this disposal and it is clear that she has no defence, her hierarchal position ensuring that she has never before had to defend herself in this fashion. Jean's nature is shown in his plans for the hotel, and the fees to be gained from the misplaced pride and pretension of his future guests, who will do anything to save face.

The initiative ebbs and flows from one to the other and it is never certain who is seducing who: Julie's rebuttals to Jean's advances are parried and turned against herself, whereupon she takes the initiative and the game starts anew. Were it not for the entrance of the singing peasants, and Jean's opportunity of enclosing Julie in his bedroom, the sexual act would probably not have happened, and both would most likely have circled inexorably until Christine's reappearance.

In *Soul Murder* Strindberg says

...there is nothing so destructive to the thinking process as shattered hopes, and a highly developed form of this torture can induce insanity. People make promise after promise, procrastinating as long as possible until the victim seems to be powerless, and then, when he is about to give up the ghost, they liven up the dying man with a new promise, which is then promptly broken, and so on, until but a shadow of a man remains.<sup>56</sup>

and Jean does precisely this with Julie, raising her hopes and dashing them just as she's regained composure. His control of the situation becomes such that Julie repeats, word for word, his plans for their flight to Christine. Another element from his *Battle of the Brains* is that of "making the weaker repeat words stolen from the stronger"<sup>57</sup>, which Julie does relentlessly and desperately to Christine, repeating word for word Jean's plans for their elopement. There is a clear acknowledgement as to who really holds the power.

Even after the outburst, with Julie clinging to her only source of strength, her hierarchical position..

Julie. Servant, lackey, stand up when I speak!

Jean. Servant's whore, lackey's bitch... Not one of my class ever behaved the way you've done tonight. Do you think any kitchen maid would accost a man like you did?

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<sup>56</sup> Strindberg "Soul Murder": 67/68

<sup>57</sup> Strindberg, "Miss Julie": 95

Have you ever seen any girl of my class offer her body like that? I've only seen it among animals and prostitutes.<sup>58</sup>

Jean again confounds her emotions, attempting to seduce her once more...

Jean. (more gently) I don't want to disclaim my share in the honour of having seduced you, but do you imagine a man in my position would have dared to so much as glance at you if you hadn't invited him?<sup>59</sup>

Whilst she flirts with Jean, her reactions to matters sexual betray a puritan slant. She vacillates between the male and female facets instilled by her parents, the coquettishness of the girl clashing against the brazen sexual profligacy which is supposed to be the demesne of the male. The nature of female competitiveness with another female is exploited by Jean. Julie's knowledge that Christine has slept with Jean, and in so having performed an act which she has not, may have spurred her on in her flirtations, the thought of someone 'lower' than her having had more experience being anathema to her nature. Jean's casual tales of other conquests also raises her hackles: her experience of the world pales in comparison with Jean's, and her superior attitude cannot allow this.

Julie. A charming wife she'll make. Does she snore too?

Jean. She doesn't do that she speaks in her sleep.

Julie. (cynically) How do you know ?

Jean. (coolly) I've heard her.

Pause. They look at each other.<sup>60</sup>

Her views towards sex are repeated later in the play, divorcing her classes view of sex from that of Jean and Christine's (ironically, after having slept with Jean).

Jean. Maybe at bottom there isn't as big a difference as people suppose between people and – people.

Julie. Oh, nonsense! We don't act like you do when we're engaged.<sup>61</sup>

Jean brings her back down to earth and a reality she is avoiding:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. : 127

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. : 127

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. : 113

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. : 120

Jean. You've been the victim of a drunken folly, and you want to cover it up by pretending that you love me. You don't, unless perhaps physically – and then your love is no better than mine<sup>62</sup>

whilst emphasising the male / female divide and, just as in *The Father*, examines the legal aspect regarding male and female treatment

Julie. Do you know what a man owes to a woman he has shamed?

Jean. (Takes out his purse and throws a silver coin on the table). Here, I always pay my debts.

Julie. (pretends not to notice the insult). Do you know what the law says - ?

Jean. Unfortunately the law doesn't demand any penalty for a woman who seduces a man.<sup>63</sup>

Her life of luxury has ill-prepared her for the violence of open battle and Jean, fighting for his livelihood and position, manipulates her with ease. Jean is similar to Krogstad in *A Doll House* when he says "I shall fight as though for my life to keep my little place in the bank"<sup>64</sup>

Julie has no such wiles and only reacts to the situations as they arise, in comparison to Jean's relentless pro-activity, Lukacs observing that

The heroes of the new drama are more passive than active; they are acted upon more than they act for themselves; they defend rather than attack; their weapon is merely a heroism of anguish, of despair.<sup>65</sup>

Strindberg examines the nature of character in his preface, wrenching back the idea of 'character' from the staid definition with which it had been imbued saying

My souls (or characters are agglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of humanity, torn shreds of once fine clothing that has become rags, in just the way that a human soul is patched together"<sup>66</sup>

and this analysis of the vagaries of the human being a full fifty years before Beckett. He shows the human as in-flux and this effect is markedly seen in Julie's varying hysterical responses to Jean's manipulations. Kiberd comments further upon Strindberg's device:

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. : 128

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. : 129

<sup>64</sup> Henrik Ibsen *Henrik Ibsen's Prose Dramas* (ed. William Archer) (Maryland: Wildside Press 2007): 317

<sup>65</sup> Lukacs *The Theory of the Modern Stage* : 429

<sup>66</sup> Strindberg "Miss Julie": 95

...one of the fascinations of the play is the way in which the initiative ebbs and flows, now to Julie, now to Jean. Character develops in a jagged fashion in the work of this playwright, whose greatest gift is to hint constantly at levels of meaning below the surface of things. It is never fully clear whether Jean is exciting his mistress by passive provocation, or whether she is actively seducing him. Strindberg may not even know himself, but may simply be anxious to show how, in the decisive moments of their lives, people often act under the sway of forces which are not fully clear to them at the time<sup>67</sup>

“I have not set out to preach morality. This, in the absence of a priest I have left to a cook”<sup>68</sup>, says Strindberg, and it is Christine’s intervention which finally falls Julie. The hallucinations she has are a direct result of the exhausting soul murder perpetrated over the preceding hours, but her final act is less than clear. Bergman’s film version has Julie demanding that Jean hand her the razor, thus accepting his part in her suicide and there is the possibility that stepping outside, into sunlight and clear air would restore her faculties somewhat. It is possible that she regained her composure, returned to the count and that Jean’s cruelty was later served upon his own head. Strindberg would not approve of this possible scenario.

Goldman says that Christine “...represents the greatest obstacle to social growth, the deadlock in the conflict between the classes”<sup>69</sup> and she is as much a slave to circumstance as is Julie. She suffers Jean’s musings on Julie’s beauty but cannot entertain the idea that anything would happen between them, another blindness due to the hierarchical situation. She knows her place only too well and is subdued also by the patriarchal position of Jean. Unlike Julie she realises that men and women are not equal in that society. She is the ‘queen’ of the servants, having captured Jean, who is probably seen as a catch, but her slave mentality is evident, declaring her disgust at Jean’s behaviour with Julie, whilst admitting a dalliance with other servant girls would have been verging on the acceptable.

The particular competition between the women is noted by Jean during Julie’s initial interactions with Christine, and it is one which will be exploited later. When Julie re-enters after having danced with Jean, he notices the friction and elevates the tension between her and Christine, instigating a competition in which he is the prize. As he leaves to change his coat the ladies do battle, Julie upping her flirtations towards Jean to antagonise Christine. The

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<sup>67</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 42

<sup>68</sup> Strindberg “Miss Julie”: 94

<sup>69</sup> Goldman *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* : 29

battle between Julie and Christine also served to display Christine's superiority over Julie as she quietly circles the situation and analyses the movement. Her early rebuttal to Julie...

Julie. [To Christine.] Christine, Jean is very familiar with you. Are you engaged to him?

Christine. Engaged? If you like. We call it that.

Julie. Call - ?

Christine. Well, you've been engaged yourself, madam –

Julie. We were properly engaged.

Christine. Didn't come to anything, though, did it? <sup>70</sup>

...is brutal, showing the emotional intelligence that Julie is lacking and cementing her position as more worldly. Her religious conviction also proves her slave mentality, as deferent to an unseen God as the unseen Count and the whole idea of the patriarch. Once she sees that Julie has fallen she can act with impunity. The play as seen from her viewpoint (a la Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead) was performed in a German production and it must surely be fascinating: apart from the very fact of its existence additional information on the production is nowhere to be found.

Strindberg took a step up from *The Father* in this play, adding layer upon layer to further confuse the gender relations and power struggle issues. Jean may have triumphed in this instance but his patriarchal power (shown to be fleeting with the Count's 're-appearance' at the end of the play) is built upon shifting sands; Julie was a pushover, his next adversary may not. It is notable that overseeing everything is the Count, who never sets foot on stage. Just like the painting which oversees the action in *Hedda Gabler* and Laura's mother in *The Father*, this brooding presence instils everything with dread. In his next play, *Creditors*, Strindberg brings this Other centre stage in the shape of Gustav. It cannot end well.

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<sup>70</sup> Strindberg "Miss Julie": 112

## CHAPTER 4: CREDITORS

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.

Walter Benjamin ‘The Destructive Character’

Adolf’s first words to Gustav – “...and for all this I have you to thank”<sup>71</sup> are telling. In the previous few days of their acquaintance Gustav has garnered enough information on Adolf to set his plan into action. He arrives as avenging angel, abusing Adolf’s dearth of experience of male company, to dress his revenge as aid. Adolf, no doubt encouraged by the candid and friendly discussions of the previous days, exhumes a torrent of imagined slights and tiny injustices perpetrated upon him by Tekla. All through that initial meeting Adolf repeats how he has lost touch with male company, and thus, the male part of himself and there is a connection towards the pastor’s words in *The Father* –

Captain. ...do you think I can find an ally in him?

Pastor. ...all depends on how long he has lived with women.<sup>72</sup>

He repeatedly uses ‘feminine’ words – I feel, it seemed – and his hysteria towards Tekla’s supposed actions...

It really has seemed as if she hated my ideas just because they were mine, and not because she found them preposterous. You see, quite often she has brought out some former opinion of mine and forced it on everyone as her own. Yes, and then on other occasions, when some friend of mine passed on views he had got directly from me she’d think them fine. Everything was fine as long as it didn’t come from me.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Strindberg “Creditors” : 121

<sup>72</sup> Strindberg “The Father” : 629

<sup>73</sup> Strindberg “Creditors” : 122

...cast him firmly as the female figure. This absorption of interests is commonplace amongst women, who take an interest in their men's affairs and interests, and is similarly examined by Chekov in his short story *The Darling*. The patriarchal view sees this spirit of inclusion and cultural communion only in a negative fashion and Adolf's assertion that "she stopped growing and I went on"<sup>74</sup> is ridiculous and condescending. The androgyny Kiberd spoke of rises again here as Adolf has lost all vestiges of his male side (both through choice, in freely relinquishing his friends, and as a result of his own paranoia) and he proves fair game for the stridently masculine Gustav. Later Tekla will see right through Gustav's machinations, not because she was once married to him, but because her thought processes are cleaner than Adolf's.

The apathy Adolf feels following Tekla's departure may be an unconscious retreating towards the child-state, as examined in *The Father*, placing all your strength and will into the maternal figure and losing touch with your masculinity in the process. In his *Battle of the Brains* essay Strindberg examines this effect, saying

My health is unwavering and I feel my strength increasing with the exercise. What if my good wife has been hypnotising me unconsciously, through her tenderness and I have only been suffering from hypochondria!<sup>75</sup>

The stasis has been engendered by neither the woman, nor the absence of the woman, but by the man's willingness to place all his dependence upon her, something Adolf freely admits to having done during the opening scene. And still he blames her for his pitiful state.

Gustav's manipulation of Adolf is remarkably easy, being repeatedly handed more and more ammunition for the battle. He barely talks, allowing the seeds of his few words to germinate within Adolf, like those hymenoptera, and his position of mentor is wrongly evaluated by Adolf

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. : 123

<sup>75</sup> Strindberg "Battle of the Brains": 42

You've been like a watchmaker, mending the works in my head and winding up the spring again. Can't you hear for yourself how much clearer my thoughts are and how lucidly I'm talking?<sup>76</sup>

Gustav later revisits this metaphor to denigrate Tekla

Look here, she doesn't even speak correctly! You see, something's wrong with the mechanism. The watch case looks expensive, but the works inside are cheap.<sup>77</sup>

Gustav has positioned himself as the male ideal and following his tale of the angel who "managed to usurp the prerogative of the male...initiative."<sup>78</sup> Adolf realises his position and hastens towards the adoption of an intransigent male position, taking Gustav as role-model. Similar to Julie's appropriation of Jean's speech – "making the weaker repeat words stolen from the stronger"<sup>79</sup> – Adolf "listens so intently that he unconsciously imitates Gustav's gestures."<sup>80</sup>

The image of the skeleton in the cupboard is repeated – foreshadowing the concrete manifestation of it in Strindberg's later *The Ghost Sonata*, and Gustav's comment (which could have come straight from Beckett) – "work, grow older, and pile up new impressions against the cupboard door, so that the skeleton can't get out"<sup>81</sup> references how all Adolf's skeletons have suddenly come tumbling out. This is, in some translations, referred to the 'corpse in the cargo'<sup>82</sup>, a maritime idiom, and recalls Strindberg, in his *Nemesis Divina* essay, saying

I still believe that I have not had a more dismal life than other people, nor experienced greater misfortunes than other people, but only been more courageous in hunting down the corpses in my mind.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Strindberg "Creditors" : 124

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.: 134

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.: 126

<sup>79</sup> Strindberg "Miss Julie": 95

<sup>80</sup> Strindberg "Creditors" : 126

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. : 128

<sup>82</sup> Carlson *Strindberg And The Poetry Of Myth* : 86, 87

<sup>83</sup> August Strindberg "Nemesis Divina" *Selected Essays by August Strindberg* (ed. Michael Robinson) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006): 48

Gustav. You see, a woman loves by taking, by receiving, and if she doesn't take anything from a man she doesn't really love him. She doesn't love you.<sup>84</sup>

Adolf is by now too punch drunk to offer any critical analysis of this opinion, although he may be aware of his 'feminine' position and that he has taken nothing from his involvement from Tekla. Gustav's position as avenging angel takes full flight with his macabre 'the one'<sup>85</sup> speech and follows it up with images of cannibalism, serpents, hypnosis and hallucination, and the soul murder, replicating Jean's assault upon Julie, is complete.

I think I'm beginning to hate you and yet I can't let you go...you pull me out of the hole where I've fallen through the ice, but as soon as I'm out, you hit me on the head and push me under again. As long as I kept my secrets to myself I still had my vitals but now I am empty.<sup>86</sup>

The fact that Gustav's delivery of the earlier line about skeletons reminded Adolf of Tekla's delivery and gaze (and also showing how couples come to resemble one another in both thought and visually) gives Gustav free rein to drive home the soul murder. He is drawn to the part of Tekla which still resides in Gustav, and attracted by the parts of Gustav he has unconsciously witnessed in Tekla; it is a two-pronged attack ;

Gustav. ...now I'll pull you out of the ice again. Listen! Will you listen to me and obey me?

Adolf. Do what you will with me. I'll obey.

Gustav, rising. Look at me!

Adolf, gazing at Gustav. Now you are looking at me again with those other eyes that draw me to you.<sup>87</sup>

The notion of credit and debit – never a good position to take within a relationship – has been bounced back and forth during the first half of this play. Adolf's marital accountancy positions Tekla as his debtor and shows his patriarchal leaning, where books must be balanced and emotions ignored. Gustav is seeking to balance a book of a different kind; the one in which he was cuckolded. Kiberd observes that "it is not surprising that two of the most

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<sup>84</sup> Strindberg "Creditors" : 129

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. : 130

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.: 135

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.: 136

prevalent male responses to feminism are a defeatist self-pity or an angry self – assertion”<sup>88</sup> and the two extremes can be seen in the characters of the male protagonists. Strindberg also examines the position of those individuals more susceptible to his soul murder and, although Gustav’s occupation is never mentioned, Adolf – a painter and sculptor - perfectly fits Strindberg’s description...

And which worker complains the most? The manual workers, perhaps, or the agricultural labourers, who have the heaviest burdens? No, for they are nevertheless strong and sound. It is the machinists, who no longer work with their bodies. These gentlemen in their cuffs and loose collars, who stand beside the machines that do their work, simply twiddling a screw here or a tap there, have become highly-strung, as delicate as an old clerk from too little real work; they are anaemic neuropaths for whom we shall soon need to prescribe iron and physiotherapy.<sup>89</sup>

The same could be said of *The Captain* and *Julie*, and Gustav is positioned alongside Laura, Christine, Jean and Tekla as having the spirit (or strength, or will) necessary for involvement in the twentieth century.

Tekla’s arrival brings out the ‘screen-scene’. Rokem<sup>90</sup> has analysed the use of the eavesdropper in Strindberg’s early naturalistic dramas. It occurs fleetingly in each of *The Father* (The Captain in his sick-bed overhearing Laura and the Doctor talking, Laura’s eavesdropping) and *Miss Julie* (Jean ‘absent’, sharpening his razor whilst Julie and Christine talk). Here it is explicitly repeated twice, with the roles of eavesdropper respectively reversed, and it produces a Brechtian effect. Rokem observes that the audience is positioned in two contrasting positions simultaneously; in a position of strength and having influence over the play as a result of their having more information than the protagonists, and becoming vulnerable and victimised at their powerlessness over events, for the same reason. The fact

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<sup>88</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 207

<sup>89</sup> Strindberg “Battle of the Brains”: 34

<sup>90</sup> Freddie Rokem “The Screen Scene in *Creditors*” *Strindberg’s Secret Codes* (University of East Anglia: Norvik Press 2004): 59-81

that it could be played as farce, Strindberg notably referring to the play as a tragicomedy, only shows the proximity of tragedy to farce.

Tekla's character has been repeatedly assassinated before her entrance, but true to the stage direction of "Tekla enters, goes straight up to him and kisses him. She is friendly, frank, gay and attractive."<sup>91</sup> she is nothing short of charming. Her declaration "No, I don't know anything about myself."<sup>92</sup> mirrors Julie's similar exclamation, and it may (in this case, if not Julie's) simply be her adopting the gender role assigned to her. She is playful towards her husband and her emotional understanding of the situation repeatedly referenced ("who has been here?"<sup>93</sup>), as is her tactile tenderness. Following Gustav's 'murder' Adolf is now in full patriarchal mode and unwilling to enter into the play which Tekla proposes, Kiberd observing that

The implied equation between 'play' and 'equality' is revealing, since it confirms the suspicion that playfulness is the greatest democratizer of all. Only true equals can trust one another enough to submit together in the anarchic world of play.<sup>94</sup>

and further tying the idea of play into the greater patriarchal and capitalist scheme

A society devoted to goals has little use for a goal-free activity, for capitalist man is justified by his products, whereas play is concerned with means rather than ends, and the quality of an action rather than its result.<sup>95</sup>

The man-child dichotomy seen in the Captain's disintegration is repeated here, with Gustav as the man (when he enters to speak with Tekla) and Adolf as the child. The two knocks from Gustav in the other room remind Adolf, like God warning Adam about Eve, to stick to his course and he steels himself again. Tekla repeats her efforts in the face of this assault, finally being forced to assert herself, and remind Adolf of his obligations

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<sup>91</sup> Strindberg "Creditors" : 140

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. : 141

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. : 142, 143

<sup>94</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 216

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. : 218

Adolf. I command you to come with me by the next boat.

Tekla. Command me! What sort of talk's that?

Adolf. Do you realise that you are my wife?

Tekla. Do you realise that you are my husband? <sup>96</sup>

The metaphor of debit and credit is again reprised

Tekla. Oh? What have you given?

Adolf. Everything.

Tekla. That's a lot. And if it's so, then I've taken it. are you giving me the bills for your gifts now? And if I have taken them that's a proof that I loved you. A woman only takes gifts from her lover. <sup>97</sup>

Understandably, Tekla capitulates – “I'm tired of playing nursemaid” <sup>98</sup>, again situating Adolf in the child position.

The following scene, with the entrance of Gustav, is probably seen as an example of Strindberg's misogyny; the fickle woman being easily charmed and turned away from her husband. However, Adolf's pitiful attempt at her soul murder has left her confused at disoriented, a state not helped by the immediate entry of her ex-husband, and one who is so clearly the polar opposite of Adolf. Adolf's cruel dismissal of her faculties – “your barrel organ has only one note” <sup>99</sup> is a reprisal of Strindberg's observation of Schilf in *Battle of the Brains*

I now discovered that he was a modern music box, made in Dresden, and only equipped with four short pieces. He wound himself up, played a Marx overture, went click, played a Bebel waltz and so on, until there was a whirring noise and everything came to a stop. <sup>100</sup>

and Gustav takes exactly the opposite tack. Where Adolf was seeking argument he emphasises agreement. His opening line contrasts with Adolf's repeated assertions that Tekla

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<sup>96</sup> Strindberg “Creditors”: 148

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 148

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 149

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 151

<sup>100</sup> Strindberg “Battle of the Brains”: 32

is old - “and you are as charming as ever. And even younger.”<sup>101</sup> - and his compliment-laden manipulations continue; “the narrowness of my horizon was not for your adventurous spirit.”<sup>102</sup>

It is notable that Adolf does not understand the situation, by now realising that Gustav is the ex-husband, and enter to put a stop to it. For all his talk of credit and debit he is patently unable to weigh up the situation and come to a very obvious conclusion.

The child – man matter is again analysed very presciently by Gustav

You have played hide and seek so long now that you can't find each other. That's what happens. You have gone on playing the innocent until now he doesn't dare.<sup>103</sup>

and it is the same situation as occurred in *The Father*, reinforcing Kiberd's views on play and the importance of retaining a sense of masculinity, whilst still exploring your feminine side.

Tekla cannot be accused of playing the innocent – that claim lies upon Adolf's shoulders –but the appointment she arranges with Gustav following Adolf's departure should not be construed as intended infidelity. She is already suspicious of Gustav, although swayed by his silver tongue, and vulnerable due to her husband's cruel treatment of her. She does, however have some faculty (her earlier “I don't know anything. I only feel”<sup>104</sup> an overarching description of her) and, unlike Adolf, sees through Gustav's victimisation. Here we see what he is really made of, even attempting to use the stigma of public opinion (the two lady travellers) against her and showing why she abandoned him in the first instance. She will go on, a little wiser, following these events; Adolf's time was up.

It is one of Strindberg's finest plays, gloriously complex, and with a succession of threads, motifs and metaphors running the breadth of the action. Kiberd states that “ a true feminism

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<sup>101</sup> Strindberg “Creditors” : 153

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. : 154

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. : 158

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. : 149

would not assert woman's independence of man, but would firmly remind men of *their* dependence on women.”<sup>105</sup> and Adolf's dependence on Tekla, from the dangers of the world outside, is obvious. It is ridiculous of him to blame his wife for his deficiencies and the 'credit' he has advanced her would have been repaid tenfold by her love and protection. His true enemy is within.

[Gustav] becomes, along with Laura in *The Father* or Jean in *Miss Julie*, not so much a villain as a catalyst who precipitates the moment of fatal stress. The captain, Julie and Adolf are not crucified by their adversaries, they impale themselves on their own weaknesses...rather than forces of pure evil, they are nature's instruments for finding and eliminating weakness.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Kiberd *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* : 225

<sup>106</sup> Carlson *Strindberg And The Poetry Of Myth* : 89-90

## CHAPTER 5 : CONCLUSION

The walls protect the actor and audience not only from the racket of the street but also its morality. Inside the black box, the imagination is wild and tragic and is criminally unfettered. The unspeakable is spoken. Here alone is the audience trusted with the full burden of what it has witnessed and liberated from the ideology of redemption, it witnesses in silence, a silence of pain, the terrible ambitions of the human spirit. Cruelty. Magnificence. Wrong actions. Instinct. Horror. Love beyond legality. When an audience witnesses such things beyond the structures of redemption or education, ideology or affirmation, it has recourse only to silence, a pathos which is perhaps a kind of self-pity permitted to a hero who finds himself, at last, alone.

Howard Barker 'Theatre Without a Conscience'

Strindberg bridged the gap between sugar and spice and trouble and strife. Some women may be aggrieved at a presentation of their sex as possessing more than the one-dimensional view which has persisted down the ages. He claimed that his misogyny was only theoretical, as he could clearly not live without women, and it is to his credit that he put himself firmly in the firing line in addressing and exposing the multi-faceted nature of women. In this sense he is a feminist.

The women in the plays are not dissimilar to the men and it is only the patriarchal structure, and being left with no avenues of escape, which constrains them into taking drastic action. In an equal world, and had men not become complacent through their uninterrupted and unchallenged hierarchy, the situations in these dramas would not have arisen.

It is also to his credit that he examined many levels of power battles and also those same sex battles (Christine and Julie, Adolf and Gustav) which he was to bring to a zenith in his later *The Stronger*. In just three plays he examines marriage and children, sex, and the dangers of 'keeping score' in a marriage and, in all of them, the effect that extreme parental positions will have upon their children. I feel that they should be approached as you would morality plays such as *Everyman* and that there are basic life lessons to be gleaned.

It is, after all, drama, and some allowance of ‘drama for effect’ should be permitted. If you want ‘real life’ it would be better for you not to enter the theatre and, instead, remain on the street outside, where you may gorge yourself on as much bland reality as you can stomach. Strindberg’s drama is challenging, not for the faint-hearted and, to quote Emma Goldman,

This is the social significance which differentiates modern dramatic art from art for art’s sake. It is the dynamite which undermines superstition, shakes the social pillars, and prepares men and women for the reconstruction.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Goldman, Emma *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* New York: Applause Theatre Productions (2005) : 6

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