

The Lady from the Sea

Ibsen came from a long line of sea-captains. During his exile in Germany and Italy he longed for the sea. In 1885 he returned to Norway for only the second time in over twenty years, staying for two months at Molde on the Atlantic coast. Michael Meyer writes:

There he stood for hour after hour staring down into the fjord, and several times had himself rowed in a boat along the fjord to the open sea. People in Molde told him strange stories about the sea and the power it had over those who lived near it. One, told him by a lady, was of a Finn who, by means of the troll-power in his eyes, had induced a clergyman's wife to leave her husband, children and home and go away with him.

This comes extraordinarily close to the story of Ibsen's own mother-in-law, who had fled from Denmark to escape from an apparently troll-like Icelandic poet, and married a clergyman seventeen years older than herself. Years later she wrote:

While studying in Copenhagen, I met a young man, a wild, strange, elemental creature. We studied together, and I had to yield before his monstrous and demonic will. With him, I could have found passion and fulfillment; I still believe that. ... I met a better person, and have lived a better life, but I have always been conscious that he could have nurtured into flower that love of which my spirit was capable. So I have lived my life oppressed by a feeling of want and longing.

Ibsen himself must have often wondered whether her step-daughter Suzannah harboured similar regrets about marrying him, a man whose passion was reserved exclusively for his work.

In his preliminary notes for *The Lady from the Sea* Ibsen discussed at some length what the sea meant to him and how he wished to use it in this play:

The sea's power of attraction. The longing for the sea. Bound by the sea. Dependent on the sea. Must return to it. One fish species forms a basic link in the evolutionary series. Do rudiments of it still remain in the human mind? In the mind of certain individuals? Images of the teeming life of the sea and of 'things lost for ever'.¹

Ibsen's original title for this play was *The Mermaid*.

Such poetic imagery confronts Ibsen with a problem common to all his late plays: how to incorporate such imagery within the framework of an ostensibly naturalistic drama. There is the constant danger that in a prosaic context it will appear banal, or eccentric or melodramatic. When Ellida speaks of the sea, the naturalistic mode demands that her flights be taken as symptoms of her sickness — of incipient madness. But Ibsen wants them to be taken at face value. He fails to give them an objective correlative outside Ellida's brain-fever. He falls back on the crude expedient of a choric character to announce the theme with creaking artificiality :

BALLESTED: Yes, on this rock in the foreground I'm going to put a dying mermaid.

LYNGSTRAND: Why does she have to be dying?

BALLESTED: She's strayed in from the open sea, and now she can't find her way back. And the water's brackish, you see, so here she lies — dying.

LYNGSTRAND: Ah, I see.

BALLESTED: It was the lady of the house here who gave me the idea of painting something of the sort.²

It is Ballested who wraps up the play with an equally facile moral:

ELLIDA: Once you have become a land animal, there's no going back to the sea again — nor to the life of the sea.

BALLESTED: Why, that's just like my mermaid.

¹ *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane, Penguin, 1970, p.114.

² All quotations are from Peter Watts' translation, Penguin, 1965.

ELLIDA: Yes, it is rather.

BALLESTED: Except that the *mermaid* — dies. Human beings, on the other hand, can acclam — acclimatize themselves.

ELLIDA: Yes, they can if they're free, Mr Ballested.

Nor will the realistic plot accommodate the figure of the stranger, (who did not appear in the first draft), and Lyngstrand's account of him is grossly contrived.

The outer play, the surface play, could be interesting. With sufficient wit and panache it could be like a Shaw play — say *Candida*. With sufficient depth of human insight and delicacy it could be like a Chehov. With sufficient passion and fire and true psychology it could be like Ibsen's *bête noir*, Strindberg. But it has none of these things. It has a creaking plot, stock characters, and dialogue made up largely of clichés. The stage-directions are a recipe for ham acting.

Apart from Ellide herself, the only character who is not stock and whose lines are not clichés is Hilde; but there no scope for developing her within this play. That has to wait for *The Master Builder*.

In the first half of the play the two stories, the realistic and the symbolic, at least match. The symbols are appropriate for Ellide's situation. But as we move towards the resolution of the domestic comedy we realize that it will not do at all as a solution of the symbolic predicament, whose implications are simply evaded. Even in terms of the domestic comedy, the resolution is hardly convincing.

The role of the women in the Wangel household is clearly implied in the first reference to Wangel:

BOLETTA: Hilde, see if you can find the embroidered footstool for Father.

Wangel never really changes: "I should have guided her; I should have done all I could to cultivate and improve her mind" is about as far as he gets. He gives Ellide her freedom only in desperation, and she immediately gives it back to him. Freedom is precisely what she rejects in the stranger. What really sways her is not this merely token freedom, which isn't going to make the slightest difference to her marriage, but her gradual realization that Wangel and his daughters really love her and need her, so that there is a purpose for her. "Here at home there is nothing in the world to hold me", she had said before that realization: "If I had a duty here ..." Now she feels she has a duty. She had felt that she was sacrificing herself for nothing; but now she sees that there is something tangible to sacrifice herself for.

Arnholm buys Boletta: "I'll get you out of here into the big bright world, but the price is you must marry me". Boletta shrinks back in fear. She sees quite clearly what he is doing, but on second thoughts accepts the bargain. Clearly he will not be able to deliver the goods. His conception of marriage is exactly the same as Wangel's, and Lyngstrand's. She is exchanging one fishpond for another. Both women end up dutiful pets. "I shall write no more controversial plays", Ibsen had said before starting *The Lady from the Sea*. The sell-out which had begun when he wrote an alternative, happy ending for *The Doll's House* is continued here.

What a different ending would have been demanded by the submerged mermaid story. The sea is Nature itself calling to Ellide's own innermost life not to sacrifice itself on any altar. The stranger is not a person but the sea's messenger, or a projection of Ellide's own buried life. The dead child is a clear symbol of the inner life she has sacrificed by marrying Wangel. (As Blake wrote: 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'.) Of the stranger Ellide says: "He's coming to offer me my last and only chance to live my own true life. It's with him that I feel I belong"; yet she claims that what is threatening her is 'no force from outside'. What the play

cries out for is a frankly non-realistic, poetic development of this theme such as that employed by Emily Brontë for the very similar relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff — “Nelly, I am Heathcliff”. When Ellide says that to her the stranger is henceforth a dead man, she is admitting that her innermost, truest self is henceforth dead. “Soon the ice will bar the way”, says Ballested, “It’s hard to reconcile oneself to the dark days”. At the end darkness is closing in and the ice is tightening its grip on Ellide’s heart. Mermaids die in stagnant water or out of water, but human beings can acclimatize themselves to a living death.

This, surely, is the inescapable meaning of the entire subtext — a far cry from the spurious harmony of the surface ending.

Why did Ibsen do it? Why did he suffocate a potentially fine poetic drama under the supposedly realistic but in fact contrived domestic comedy? It is not a problem which applies to *The Lady from the Sea* alone, but to all Ibsen's middle period plays. Ibsen was a poet until he was forty and produced at least two great poetic dramas, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. Then his nerve failed, or he was seduced into thinking that it was more important for the dramatist to concern himself with immediate social problems:

Verse has been most injurious to poetic art... It is impossible that verse will be employed to any extent worth mentioning in the drama of the future; the aims of the dramatists of the future are almost certain to be incompatible with it. It is therefore doomed.

Perhaps the rejection, not only of verse, but almost of imagination itself, was a reasonable short-term decision. He became the idol of the Ibsenites, and actually contributed to some improvements in his society. But it was a disastrous rejection in the long term. The problem plays are now period pieces. Ibsen only becomes interesting again when, in his last years, poetry forced itself through the realistic surface of his work, and his theme became more and more his belated realization that he had made the great refusal., sacrificed life to vocation and then betrayed the true vocation.

The Master Builder makes clear that Ibsen had come to admit to himself that his rejection of poetic drama, like Ellide's rejection of the stranger, had been an act of cowardice. He had been afraid of where the poetic imagination might take him. He lacked the courage to let go, to leap into the unknown. Battles with the compact majority were much less daunting to him than with the trolls within. He tried to keep them at bay with his formal appearance and clockwork habits, but they gnawed away at this humbug from within.

When We Dead Awaken is Ibsen's merciless obituary on himself, and seeks to redress the lie of *The Lady from the Sea*. In this his last play the ageing sculptor Rubeck, who clearly represents Ibsen himself, meets again his former model Irene who had offered to give herself to him "in frank, utter nakedness.. with all the pulsing blood of my youth". He had rejected her, feeling that she would distract him from his art, which involved standing at a distance from life and using it as mere raw material. But he had also in rejecting her spurned his own capacity for growth and creativity. Afterwards Irene had been forced into a life of prostitution, then into a nunnery. Rubeck has also spoiled the life of another young woman, his wife Maja, to whom he had promised to show all the glories of the world from a mountain top, but had in fact condemned to a sterile life. A stranger comes, as in *The Lady from the Sea*, and offers to take her away from the "brackish ditchwater" of her life to a life of freedom and joy away from the haunts of men. His name is Ulfheim. He is a bear-hunter with nothing of the artist or idealist in him, "goatish and lecherous" — clearly a Pan figure. At the end Rubeck and Irene climb the mountain to meet their deaths by perfect cold in an avalanche. Ibsen has come full circle from the avalanche in which Brand met his death. Ulfheim leads Maja to safety and the play ends with her cry: "I'm free as a bird".