

Rosmersholm.

A middle-aged married man is established in his career and well-respected by his community. From outside that community, from the far north, a place of storms and darkness, comes, suddenly, a strange young woman. She infiltrates the home of the man. He finds her fascinating in her otherness, independence and vitality. She wins power over him and makes large demands on him, involving a complete change in his values and way of life. He is prepared to do anything for her, is putty in her hands. The consequences are disastrous.

This, you may think, is an account of *Rosmersholm*, but it could equally well be an account of two of Ibsen's next three plays — *The Lady from the Sea* and *The Master Builder*, and has much in common with the other one — *Hedda Gabler*. Why was this situation so obsessively important to Ibsen at this stage of his career?

In the great early poetic plays, especially *Peer Gynt* and *Brand*, the war with fiends takes place literally. The trolls actually appear on a stage which is the heart and brain of the hero, where Ibsen sternly passes judgement on that part of himself which is Peer (the selfish un-loving, responsibility-evading sensualist and materialist) and upon that part of himself which is Brand (the single-minded, dedicated, unflinching idealist and martyr to duty), condemning both. But in the five plays prior to *Rosmersholm*, (*The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Wild Duck*) he had moved away from intensely personal poetic symbolism towards more realistic plays about public issues.

After *Rosmersholm* the plays become once more symbolic and psychological. *Rosmersholm* stands at the crossroads, trying to be both kinds of play at once — trying to be simultaneously two plays which pull in opposite directions. Often, in the past, Ibsen had confounded his supporters by using his next play to attack the very idea his previous play had propounded. Peer is condemned for going round about and always compromising. But Brand does even more damage by going straight through everything and everyone.

Pillars of Society, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People* had all argued that nothing can be built on lies, either in private or public life, so that this idea came to seem the quintessence of Ibsenism. But in *The Wild Duck* Ibsen confounded the Ibsenites by demonstrating how destructive it can be to deprive people of the harmless lies on which their lives and happiness depend. *Rosmersholm* is the first play in which the "on the contrary" case is put in the same play. I do not mean that one case is put in the first half of the play and the opposite case in the second. Each case is being developed simultaneously.

From one point of view *Rosmersholm* is the same kind of play as *The Pillars of Society*: John Rosmer is a decent, idealistic man whose life hitherto has been sterile, ineffectual and false because he has lived in bad faith, has not had the courage to live his own life, but has allowed himself to be shaped by his family and class traditions which are embodied in the play primarily by the house itself — *Rosmersholm*. The living-room in which the whole action takes place is described in the first stage direction as "large, old-fashioned, and comfortable". All round the walls hang portraits, older or more recent, of clergy, officers, and government officials in uniform. The clergy, the army and local government: three areas where uniformity and conformity and respectability are everything. The set should affect the audience much as the Municipal Portrait Gallery affects the hero of Sartre's *Nausea*:

None of the people depicted had died unwed, none of them had died childless or intestate, none without the last sacraments. All square, that day as every other day, with God and the world, these men had slipped gently into death, to go and claim their share of eternal life to which they were entitled. For they were entitled to everything: to life, to work, to wealth, to authority, to respect, and finally to immortality. ... They raised fine children, taught them their rights and duties, religion, and respect for the traditions which have gone to the making of France. The general hue of the portraits bordered on dark brown. Bright colours had been banished, out of a sense of decency.

Looking at one of them, the hero Roquentin says: "His judgement pierced me like a sword and called in question my very right to exist".

A production which leaves out the house and its ghostly denizens, as any production in the round must do, is leaving out half the characters in the play and depriving the white horses of their link with the play's more realistic imagery.

Rosmer's marriage is sterile, his ministry is hypocritical, since he has no strong faith, his friendships are with the most reactionary puritanical elements in the community, his idealism is thoroughly dammed and debilitated. But he is not past saving. He is seen as still capable, if he could be released from his bonds, from the spirit of Rosmerholm, of making a useful and important contribution to the great struggle for freedom in which Ibsen felt himself to be engaged. Indeed, only a year before writing *Rosmersholm* Ibsen had made a speech to a workers' procession which comes very close to the kind of speech we can imagine Rosmer making had he gone through with his plans to enter the political arena:

There is still much to be done in this country before we can be said to have achieved full freedom. But our present democracy scarcely has the power to accomplish that task. An element of nobility must enter into our political life, our government, our members of parliament and our press. I am of course not thinking of nobility of wealth, of learning, or even of ability or talent. I am thinking of nobility of character, of mind and will. That alone can make us free. And this nobility, which I hope may be granted to our people, will come to us from two sources, the only two sections of society which have not as yet been corrupted by party pressure. It will come to us from our women and our working men. The reshaping of social conditions which is now being undertaken in Europe is principally concerned with the future status of the workers and of women. That is what I am hoping and waiting for, and what I shall work for, all I can.

Into Rosmer's life at this point comes a young woman, Rebecca West, from a very different background, free from prejudices, her wild northern courage and independence not yet killed in her. She gives him faith in himself and the cause of freedom, frees him from his barren marriage and faithless ministry, and gives him the strength to enter the struggle on the side Ibsen himself favoured. She is on the side of life and freedom and the future and against the ghosts of past Rosmers, Dr. Kroll and his reactionary cronies, and superstitions about white horses.

That is one play. But in the other Rosmer is hopelessly weak and impractical and guilt-ridden. Ibsen's friend, the critic Knut Hamsun, said of Rosmer at lecture given in Ibsen's presence in 1891:

Between you and me, I find it a little difficult to associate a real person with this character, especially in the last act. But if I am required to see a real person in him, then I have to re-create him privately and I am left with an unfrocked priest who goes around talking about nobility. ... Rosmer's mind is soft and tender; he is so helplessly noble that he is positively glad when Ulrik Brendel wheedles money out of him to get drunk on. He is so consistently *good* from head to toe that he speaks as gently and as lovingly about the old boots that Brendel is to have as he does about his late wife. There is a gentleness about him that has no end; he is gentle to the point of softness. There is no more power in his noble body than I can hold in one fist, he goes elegantly to pieces at the first opposition. He is delicate and tender and thoroughly wet. But he is made like this because he is supposed to be a noble man.

Rosmer's horror of sexual passion has driven his first wife to insanity and suicide. His impotence and sterility extends also to his idealism. His political programme is "to make all the men in the country into noblemen by emancipating their minds and purifying their impulses" — in other words by emancipating their minds and enslaving their emotions. This is an unholy combination of Rebecca's freethinking and his own Rosmer family values. Fortunately he has the opportunity to try out this kind of ennoblement on only three people, Beata, Rebecca and himself. It proves fatal to all three.

Ulrik Brendel is in some ways the opposite of Rosmer, rash, confident, careless of public opinion and of discrepancies between ideals and conduct. He is quite prepared, after years of nursing his ideals in seclusion, to enter the public arena and become overnight the saviour of Norway. His ideals prove no more than bubbles, quite without substance in the world where real living goes on. In spite of his quite different temperament, he is just as ineffectual in that world as Rosmer, to whom he returns for "one or two cast-off ideals". He defines an idealist as someone who wants to do more than he can. Rosmer and Brendel are two sides of Ibsen's own idealism, and he condemns them both, at the same time that he goes on making speeches about ennobling the masses, refusing in real life to take to heart the lesson Rosmer learns: 'People don't lend themselves to ennobling from without'.

In this second play we also have a very different Rebecca, ruthlessly using Rosmer as a front man in her struggle for emancipation. And what is her love of political freedom and free-thought but an attempt to exorcise her own ghosts, to avoid facing her own deep-seated guilt over her affair with her guardian. To achieve a world without guilt she is prepared to murder Beata and coax Rosmer himself into overreaching himself as suicidally as the Master Builder. She has violated the most potent of all taboos, the incest-taboo, and her life is even more thoroughly, because less consciously, controlled by the past than Rosmer's. She overreacts to Kroll's revelation that Dr West was her father because it marks the final defeat of her long struggle to repress her own knowledge of it. Freud's analysis of her character is, as one might expect, perspicacious:

Rebecca's feeling of guilt has its source in the reproach of incest, even before Kroll, with analytical perspicacity, has made her conscious of it. If we reconstruct her past, expanding and filling in the author's hints, we may feel sure that she cannot have been without some inkling of the intimate relation between her mother and Dr West. It must have made a great impression on her when she became her mother's successor with this man. She stood under the domination of

the Oedipus complex, even though she did not know that this universal fantasy had in her case become a reality. When she came to Rosmersholm, the inner force of this first experience drove her into bringing about, by vigorous action, the same situation which had been realized in the original instance through no doing of hers – into getting rid of the wife and mother, so that she might take her place with the husband and father. She describes with a convincing insistence how, against her will, she was obliged to proceed, step by step, to the removal of Beata. [‘Some Character-Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work’]

Rebecca lures Rosmer into a spurious 'freedom' (in fact subservience to her) which goes against his character and which he cannot cope with. Nor is she able to cash in on her success in this, for simultaneously the house and its ghosts, the Rosmer view of life, has been infecting her will and killing her capacity to experience passion or joy when Rosmer finally offers her these things. They have crossed over and, in the process, cancelled each other out.

This second play is profoundly anti-idealist. Idealism is presented as self-indulgent, a cloak for weakness, immaturity, an attempt to subtly bully and use others, and, often, a manifestation of psychological problems in the idealist. It is sterile and anti-life. Yet Rosmer and Rebecca are, for all their faults, finer souls, we feel, than Dr Kroll and Peder Mortensgaard, who inherit the world.

Not only do Rosmer and Rebecca cancel each other out, but the two plays, as I have described them, also cancel each other out, painfully arriving at a stalemate which can only be resolved by tipping the protagonists into the mill-race. It has always seemed to me that the ending of this play is unperformable. It really comes too close to the ludicrous. It seems that something of the lack of a sense of humour (and therefore of a sense of proportion) of the Rosmers carried over into Ibsen too.

In *Mr Punch's Pocket* Ibsen F. Anstey in 1893 gave us what is, perhaps, an improvement on Ibsen's ending:

ROSMER: It's no use, Rebecca – we must put it off till another evening. We can't be expected to jump off a footbridge which already has a White Horse on it. And if it comes to that, why should we jump at all? I know now that I really *have* ennobled you, which was all *I* wanted. What would be the good of recovering faith in my mission at the bottom of a mill-pond? No, Rebecca – there is no judge over us, and therefore –

REBECCA: We will bind ourselves over in our own recognizances to come up for judgement when called upon.

[MADAM HELSETH *holds on to a chair-back*. REBECCA *finishes the antimacassar calmly as Curtain falls.*]

What drove Ibsen into this cul-de-sac? Let us return to the question from which we set out. Why does Ibsen at this stage of his career become so obsessively concerned with the situation of a middle-aged man (Ibsen was 58 when he wrote *Rosmersholm*) destroyed by an emancipated young woman. The trolls with which he fought in the vault of heart and brain are now presented dramatically as young women from the sea or the dark stormy north, projecting forces at work in his own unconscious (for which sea and darkness are primary symbols in all literature). The plays of this period are all battles for the soul of the hero between opposing principles — the Rosmer principle of tradition and duty and responsibility for others and respectability (from which Ibsen never swerved an inch in his outward life from this

time on), against freedom and passion and joy in life which the young women seem to offer. These things — both the young women and what they seem to offer — are very attractive, offering a renewed youth and a new access of creativity, sunshine, freedom, and sexual satisfaction, and very dangerous because of the risk that they may prove illusory, or that the hero may be too far gone to be able to survive the transformation, or that he might have to sacrifice too much, including his social and family responsibilities, including the happiness or even the lives of others who stand in the way.

Ibsen's visit to Norway in 1885, the year he began *Rosmersholm*, was a prelude to his permanent return in 1891 after 27 years spent in Italy and Germany, to become for the rest of his life a pillar of society and an automaton of respectability. In real life the trolls were defeated, but they continued to maraud in his unconscious and they triumph in his imagination in the last plays. When he wrote *Rosmersholm* the battle must have been at its height. There Ibsen contrives the defeat of the troll Rebecca, but only at the cost of going down with her. But *The Master Builder* testifies that it might have been equally fatal to have given the troll (Hilde in that play) the laurels of victory, if only because the hero has left it too late. The last play of all, *When We Dead Awaken*, is the clearest. There Ibsen recognizes that the troll, which is his own creative demon and link with everything else that lives, released in old age after a lifetime of repression, can only now give him the courage to make a last gesture, repudiating all he had sacrificed himself for. His last creative work was a repudiation of his whole mature life.

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