

A Comparative Feminist Reading of Henrik Ibsen and LesiaUkrainka

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Abstract: Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen and the Ukrainian writer LesiaUkrainka have some common themes in their dramas, to name a few – emphasis is placed on the conflict between the individual and society as well as the place of the artist in society. This paper makes an attempt to compare and contrast the traits found in their heroines in a feminist perspective.

Key words: destiny, feminism, hereditary, patriarchal, society

I. Introduction

The dramas of LesiaUkrainka(1871-1913) have been widely analyzed in Ukrainian and Western scholarship. Many critics mention HenrikIbsen's(1828-1906) feminist ideas as a possible intertext for Ukrainka's works especially in her dramas. For example when juxtaposingThe Azure Rose to Ibsen's Ghosts, one can note the theme of hereditary illness, which is developed in both works.

The intertexts in Ukrainka's dramas, which point to feminist ideas in Ibsen's writings have not been studied or documented on a textual level since many critics take Ibsen's influence on Ukrainka simply for granted. This article makes an attempt to trace how a female author, Ukrainka, develops feminist ideas found in a male author like Ibsen. It seeks to establish intertextualrelations betweenUkrainka's and Ibsen's works within a feminist conceptual framework.

Ibsen's A Doll's House was the first attempt to break away from the stereotypical `destiny` of heroines as depicted in 18th and 19th century narratives. Nora, the main protagonist of the drama is one of the most widely analyzed personages in world literature. Nora introduces the possibility of a female protest against her position in patriarchal society, which constructs femininity as something inferior to masculinity. A woman's role in a family is greatly challenged in his later play, HeddaGabler.HeddaGabler, the main character from the eponymous drama, occupies a prominent place among Ibsen's female protagonists. The heroine was indeed so strong that she was ahead of the time for which she was created. She wants to take complete control over her own destiny. Fully understanding society's laws and principles, she realizes the need to marry in order to occupy a decent place in society. So she marries Tesman. The only thing she desires is power. She wills to rule, be it her own destiny or the fates of other people. In this play also Ibsen continues the topic of heredity, which was of such interest to him. He allows Hedda to incorporate the masculine features of her father. Hedda freely chooses her own destiny and fulfill it beautifully. When she shoots herself, he acts destructively and wantonly butwithout meanness or rancor.

Ukrainka's interest in Ibsen and her familiarity with his dramas are well attested. In her critical works she raises the women's question in the context of speaking about Ibsen and another Scandinavian dramatist , Bjornson.

In Ghosts, Ibsen 's main female character is Mrs. Helene Alving who functions in the role of wife. He discovers that her husband was unfaithful to her. He occupied a high position at court- that of Chamberlain, a title which entails certain duties and privileges at the court. However ,in reality, he was nothing but a rogue. When she discovered his cheating initially, she was in despair and decided to escape. If A Doll's House ends with Nora walking out the door, Mrs. Alving's story in Ghosts begins precisely with such `leavetaking`. Her escape from the abusive relationship becomes not only a protest against her husband, but also a remonstrance against the social environment and its patriarchal code, which shuts its eyes to woman's mistreatment in the family. In this respect, Mrs. Alving's character gain strong features. She takes a step against the patriarchal order by trying to run away. However the escape never takes place. Ibsen does not give his heroine enough courage to fulfill her plan. Having left her home, Mrs. Alving goes to no one else but Pastor Manders for counseling, who tells her to perform her duty as a wife and return to her husband. Thus, as events later demonstrate, Mrs. Alving succumbs to the authority of the patriarchal order by following Manders instructions on all issues. Hence, her strength becomes only an illusion.

Bound by society's norms and principles, Mrs. Alving returns home to her husband and tries everything possible to conceal the vile nature of their marriage, atleast on the surface. The only way for her to

survive is to overcome her husband, to occupy his place in the house, that is, to become the man of the house. To explain her actions, Ibsen develops the fate of runaway wives. A conversation between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving reveals Pastor's sudden estrangement from the house of the Alving's after Mrs. Alving made an attempt to escape. The heroine herself understands the reason for this estrangement. Mrs. Alving has realized that the only way to achieve something in society is to work in the shadow of her husband, who, despite his debauchery and drinking habits, still occupied a high social position. To do otherwise, to protest openly, would have meant that Mrs. Alving would have had to follow the destiny of an outcast.

It is also important to note that in *Ghosts*, Ibsen further develops the theme of hereditary transmission of the predecessors' sins to subsequent generations. Mrs. Alving attempts to keep her child away from his father so that he inherits neither his father's disease nor his dissolute behavior. She is even determined that her son inherits none of his father's money. Mrs. Alving calculates the exact sum of her husband's estate and puts it into an orphanage, intending to have Oswald benefit it only from her account. Therefore, Mrs. Alving consents to live in the shadow of her husband in order to earn money and provide for her son. Hence, her motivation for becoming a strong woman, theoretically capable of living on her own, is conditioned by feminine motives, i.e., the maternal instinct to protect her child.

Ukrainka's awareness of, and familiarity with, Ibsen's works- the first to represent a woman as a protagonist of tragedy and a *dramatis persona* of history- is clearly stated in her first drama, *The Azure Rose*, where the main female protagonist, Liubov Hoshchynska, in a conversation on hereditary transmitted diseases. Ukrainka's switch to the genre of a drama might have come as a result of Ibsen's influence. There is no doubt that Ukrainka was inspired by Ibsen's feminist ideas, and his interest in heredity, which she also raised and reconsidered in her works. While in *Ghosts*, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* Ibsen raises the question of hereditary transmission of disease or character traits from the father to either female (as in the case of Nora Hedda Gabler) or male (as in the case of Oswald, Mrs. Alving's son) heirs, Ukrainka centres her attention exclusively on women. *The Azure Rose* presents an interesting reconsideration of the father-son tandem in *Ghosts*, by focusing on a female pair: mother-daughter. In *The Azure Rose*, she makes her male character, Orest, suffer from precisely the same nervous "female" illness that Liubov was considered to have inherited from her mother. Ukrainka's first female protagonist, Liubov, is already a much stronger woman than Ibsen's early female characters, Nora and Mrs. Alving, and can be compared to his famous Hedda Gabler. Liubov is portrayed as an educated woman, who has read much from the works of "scientific authorities". She has a modern vision of life and even contemplates the issue of free love. In her aspirations, Liubov very much resembles Hedda Gabler. Like Hedda, she chooses her own destiny. She is willing to accept the only option a woman has in society, i.e., becoming a marriage partner. In Liubov's view this path is impossible primarily because she is certain of her own mental illness and also because of her aspirations to engage in alternative social roles. As a result she chooses suicide. Ukrainka's dramatic poem *The Possessed* further demonstrates the development of a female protagonist- "a new woman"- whose nascent image is seen in Liubov. Here the female character, Miriam, dares to argue with the Messiah himself, who is sent by God to perform God's will on earth. By disagreeing with his orders, she attempts to oppose not only a man's or society's will, but also that of God. Miriam refuses to submit as a slave to God's will, and challenges society's and divine law, both of which require the Messiah's death for the sake of the people's salvation. In spite of the Messiah's command to love her enemies, Miriam curses them and gives up her life because of her love for Him, all the while understanding that this will lead to her eternal damnation. Thus the Messiah's sacrifice, in her case, was in vain. Nevertheless she chooses to follow her own will, and not the one assigned to her from above, which is in her opinion, hostile and unjust.

Ibsen uses Mrs. Alving and Hedda Gabler to show that woman has the potential to lead and occupy traditional masculine positions; however due to the deeply noted ghosts of patriarchal ideology in society, she might not have a chance to prove herself or fully develop her potential without risk of becoming an outcast. Ukrainka, in her turn, especially in the late works *The Possessed* and *The Stone Hest*, chose to transform themes from the past. Ukrainka, like Ibsen, demonstrates that society is not ready to receive a "new woman". Despite the tragic endings, however Ukrainka's dramas are significant for the fact that she places all levers of action in the hands of the female protagonists. Liubov and Miriam drive the play rather than being driven by its plot.

II. Conclusion

Ukrainka's female characters obtain much stronger characteristics, than Ibsen's. Ukrainka's dramas depict a more advanced vision of women. She moves in a new direction, starting thematically and conceptually where Ibsen ends. While the male writer, only recognizes the woman's right to protest against the patriarchal society and hints at the possibility of female power, independence, and ability to earn money, Ukrainka, a female, straightforwardly argues that men are not alone in desiring power; in her view the "new woman" is an

equal to the man. In his dramas Ibsen examines the liberation of women – i.e., the process, by which women are able to establish their independent existence, while Ukrainka never doubts it.

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