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IBSEN'S *ROSMERSHOLM*: SOCIO-POLITICAL ELEMENTS

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Abstract. The current study, displaying the reflection of political, ethical, psychological and social life of the times in *Rosmersholm* (1886), one of the middle plays of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, aims at showing the social and political conditions in Norway in the early nineteenth century and the way how they influenced the behaviour and attitudes of people and the dramatis persona in the play. This paper also makes an effort to shed new light on the significance of Christianity on the social life of the time.

Key words: social and political conditions, Ibsen, Rebecca, ethics

> The absolutely imperative
> task of democracy is to
> make itself aristocratic.
>
> (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*)

In modern drama studies, many a scholar has given a great deal of attention to Ibsen's plays which are regarded as the most exemplary and socially realistic works. Ibsen's plays present new points of view; they pursue a definite ideal of beauty and truth conditions relevant for its evaluation. *Rosmersholm* stands at intersection of Ibsen's works. It is a nineteenth-century drama of human histories and destinies reflecting the political, ethical, psychological and social life of the times, which in turn, may be regarded as the most important dimension of the 'play's existence' (Johnston, 1992: 257). It shows a political awareness and a critical attitude towards socio-political thinking in Norway. The title of the play *Rosmersholm* suggests a tradition, a way of life based on and taking its tone from the dynastic line of the Rosmers. The reverend Johannes Rosmer, a retired clergyman and representative of the ancient estate Rosmersholm, is the last descendant of a long line of dignitaries. His wife, with whom he lived an unhappy life, had committed suicide by jumping into the mill-race.

Miss Rebecca West, a lady of advanced ideas and great personal charm, the companion of the late Mrs Rosmer, has remained with her widower since her death. A delightful friendship has sprung up between the two during the years of their relationship, and Rosmer has never enjoyed such contentment as now. Miss West is intellectually awake, and her presence and conversation stimulate him to thought on unusual lines and spread an affable atmosphere about him. His life is invested with a fresh interest.

Before furthering the discussion, we find it reasonable to deal with the political and social changes in Norway of the nineteenth century by descriptive analysis. In the years immediately following 1814 the newly organised state was fighting repeatedly for its existence. Norway was in the paws of the worst economic depression it had ever seen. The common market with Denmark was dissolved and the British market was closed to Norwegian timber. Mines and sawmills were losing foreign customers. Many of the wealthier middle class citizens in southeast Norway went bankrupt. The crisis seemed to be rather severe and lasting. During this period of economic crisis there were a number of trials of strength between Norway's Parliamentary Assembly, the Storting, and the Swedish monarchy. The Constitution was used as a means of abolishing the Norwegian nobility, partly to prevent the Swedish King from enlisting support for himself thought creating more nobles from the newly appointed nobility. In 1821, a crisis arose when the Swedish monarch assembled troops outside Oslo to force the Storting to accept the increase of the power of the monarchy. The proposals were rejected.

Economic developments were followed by intensified class conflicts. The February revolution of 1848 had serious consequences for the workers political movement among the workers. The calls for democratic reforms grew louder.

The year of 1848 also witnessed lots of revolutions in major European countries. Intellectual and cultural nationalism was boosted by political nationalism. The literary renaissance included Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Jonas Lie, and Alexander Kielland (*Encarta 98 Encyclopaedia,* 1997).

As Kildahl states, the early nineteenth century experienced many political changes in Norway. The Eidsvold constitution was established and in 1885 the last aristocratic remnants of power were abandoned by King Oscar II. Farmers united and became an influential power in politics of the nation:

> Labour unions and other groups joined their forces with the farmers as a result of which a complete religious and political freedom was won. Due to these great changes, 'economic upheaval accompanied the political shifts. Crown lands became available to everyone by public sake (Kildahl, 1961: 207).

Laws governing social institutions and borrowing of money were liberalized; lumbering and manufacturing industry were broadened and intensified. The pace of life was increased by the commerce with other nations.

By 1886, the year the play was published, these great social changes and innovations were in the process of damaging almost all the traditional foundations of the society. The Norwegian social structure, based on a strict model included in aristocrats, officials of the state, landowners and army officers, formed the leisure class.

> The second in line were professional classes and merchants and third in line were the middle classes, small businessmen, artisans [...] at the bottom of the social scale were the landless farmers and labourers (Kildahl, 1961: 208).

In the play Rosmer is representative of the first group. Ibsen got involved in Norwegian politics was set on fire again by his visit to Norway in 1885, after his eleven years of self-imposed exile. The year of 1884 was important for the government of Norway; 'the election of the first Liberal administration under Johan Sverdup signalled the advent of democratic parliamentarianism' (McFarlane, 1997: 108).

Ibsen conscientiously tried to hold the balance between the conservatives and liberals, though he spared neither. Ibsen's views on the new administration are stated in a speech he made to the workers' procession in Trondheim on 14 June, 1885:

> I have found that even the most necessary rights of the individual are still not as secure under the new regime as I felt I might hope and expect them to be. The majority of those in control do not permit the individual either freedom of faith or freedom of expression beyond a certain arbitrarily fixed limit. Much remains to be done here before we can be said to have achieved real freedom. But for our democracy, as it now is, is hardly in a position to deal with these problems. An element of nobility must find its way into our public life, into our government, among our representatives and into our press. Of course I am not thinking of nobility of birth, nor of money, nor a nobility of learning, nor even of ability or talent. What I am thinking of is a nobility of character, of mind and of will. (qtd. in McFarlane, 1997: 108).

Ibsen favoured neither the old nor the new regime represented by Kroll and Mortensgoord respectively. 'Rosmer has a vision of a third way: the creation of an aristocracy of mind. A generation of happy noble men is what he will inspire' (McFarlane, 1997: 109). However, the continuation of Ibsen's speech should make us pause; for the new nobility, he says, will come from two new directions, from two groups which so far have not suffered any irreparable damage under the party pressure. It will come to us from our women and our workers. Rosmer appears to be from the group which is affected by this pressure.

While reading the play, we can easily grasp that the warfare between the progressive and the reactionary elements in society, and the weapons which the latter employed against the former were to be the theme of the play. Ibsen would have had to be a partisan of the one cause or the other to deal with such a theme effectively. And Ibsen sees the relativity of things too plainly to be a partisan. His view is too Olympic, too remote and rising above the petty concerns of the hour. In *Rosmersholm* he holds 'the balance precisely even between the conservatives and the liberals, and though he spares neither, it demonstrates the justification' (Boyesen, 1893: 268).

Rosmersholm is not a play to love and be happy and glad with, but it is intensely interesting. Furthermore, it is the key to the Ibsen puzzle (qtd. in Egan, 1972: 176). In *Rosmersholm* Ibsen centres his drama not within a working class environment, but within that of the aristocracy. The heroine of the play exhibits

her tardily acquired nobility of spirit only at the cost of her will to live. 'The play's subject is the structure of the present and its complex heritage' (Johnston, 1992: 238). Ibsen describes the play as follows:

> For different spiritual functions do not develop evenly and abreast of each other in any one human being. The acquisitive instinct hurries from conquest to conquest. The moral consciousness – what we call the conscience – is, on the other hand, very conservative. It has its roots deep in traditions and in the past generally. Hence the conflict within the individual (qtd. in Johnston, 1992: 239).

Rosmers' words come to turn out more meaningless as the play progresses and he seems to have suffered from some irreparable damage. Rosmer thinks that 'a man weighed down with baggage from the past, in both political and personal sense' (McFarlane 109). In the first words of the play we learn that Rosmer does not dare to cross the footbridge on his way home. Rosmer is not strong enough to face the establishment on his own, and he is aware of that. He desperately needs to get the support of one of Ibsen's "undamaged" groups; and this clearly shows how important Rebecca is to him. She will support him in his challenging task and help him communicate his ideas. However, even with her help, it never begins to look like a practical proposition. 'Rosmer's ideas not only fail to bear any conviction, but also they are so unclear as to be practically incoherent. They are based on notions of purity which seem to include sexual abstinence' (McFarlane, 1997: 109).

Rosmer is obviously surprised when Rebecca argues that a big sorrow is also an honour. It seems that Rosmer must establish a new relationship with the world, and not let the recurring spectre of the past persisting in rising before him, strangle his aspirations. 'To Rosmer there is only one way to shake off all the painful memories, that is, to marry Rebecca' (Boyesen, 1893: 273). However, the suspicion has entered his mind that their beautiful friendship, in the purity of which he has rejoiced, is hardly distinguishable from love. And, moreover, he needs the inspiration of Rebecca's presence in the life work which he is about to undertake. 'Great is therefore his surprise when, with a cry of joy, she refuses him' (Boyesen, 1893: 274).

A superstitious idea and fear of taking the place of the dead wife prevents Rebecca from accepting what she has so fiercely desired. Nothing within him now responds to Rebecca's eager appeal. His humanitarian enthusiasm refuses to be re-awakened. With gruesome persistence he resides in the circumstances between his wife's life and death and the tragedy of her love for him. 'She looked at our relation with the eyes of her love, he says to Miss West; 'judged it from her love's point of view. Inevitably Beata could not have judged otherwise than she did' (Boyesen, 1893: 274).

In conscientious self-torture, Rosmer is tormented by his sense of guilt. He feels in himself a great capacity for a happiness which his self-established principles forbid him to enjoy. All the grave, well regulated, self-denying Rosmers of the past rise in a shadowy procession.

> [...] these two incontinently committing suicide when matrimony should, according to ordinary usage, stare them in face. But it is not according to the logic of actual life than Ibsen's creations act; rather is it in accordance with an ideal that draws them as a magnet towards an end that may be imagined (qtd. in Egan, 1972: 173).

Ibsen was for an equal unity between man and woman. The personal becomes entangled with the political. 'The Pan-Scandinavian *sexual morality debate* was raging during this period, and supporters of chastity versus free love were competing with each other in the press' (McFarlane, 1997: 110). One of Ibsen's great contemporaries Bjørnson was a bold champion of purity for both men and women before marriage (McFarlane, 1997: 109). But supporters of chastity after marriage were not many and they were not the males in the debate. Rosmer's insistence on this point and Rebecca's compliance with it, are rather personally than politically motivated. Repression and suffering are synonymous with *Rosmersholm*, and it seems for us that both characters are locked in mutual guilt.

It is obvious that Ibsen suggests that the drama of many characters on the stage should be really the drama of consciousness of spirit. Nevertheless, Ibsen adds, 'the play is first and foremost a story of human beings and human destiny' (Ibsen, 1960: 249). The truth of an Ibsen play is only the totality of its developing relationships; it is not the result of this development. In fact, the subject of the play could be regarded as the confrontation of civilization of tradition and the forces of evolution.

Beata's, Rosmer's first wife, suicide death in the mill-race, has left an imprint on their feelings; Rosmer feels and believes that he might not have done enough to help his wife to get rid of her neurosis, and later in the play Rebecca confesses, she purposely had made Beata feel inferior as a wife for not giving Rosmer a child and had made her suspect that Rosmer cared more for her than for Beata. This discovered, Rosmer realizes the extent of his complicity in Beata's death. Rosmer does not seem to be willing to explore his impossible involvement in the causes of her illness. His wife was an unbalanced and unreasonable woman, neurotically obsessed with giving him a child. 'If he were obsessed with purity to the extent of not consummating his marriage or having stopped sleeping with her, then her childlessness might be his fault rather than hers' (Boyesen, 1893: 277).

Rosmer is aroused to a passion he cannot satisfy. Rebecca admits to have a similar feeling; when she first came to *Rosemersholm* 'she was overwhelmed by a wild and uncontrollable passion for Johannes Rosmer' (McFarlane, 1997: 110). The mainspring of her actions was the resolution to take the place of Beata and take over as mistress of *Rosmersholm*. It appears that Rebecca achieved her aims too, when Rosmer asks her in Act II to become his wife, she refuses.

> Rebecca too conceals a deeper level of guilt than the acknowledged crime against Beata; and her guilt, like Rosmer's is concerned with sex, though in her case it is a sin of commission rather than omission (McFarlane, 1997: 110).

Rebecca knows from the very beginning of the action that her foster-father was in fact her real father and so she feels guilty not just of immoral conduct, but of incest. Freud in his essay on *Rosmersholm* suggests that she is vaguely aware of this fact before Kroll spells it out to her and that it has helped to decide on her actions. She has transferred her original *Oedipus Complex* to her new situation, that is supplanting Beata with a new father when the new father is bound to become a husband; by this old incest fears are reactivated and her desires block her impulse of delight.

Rosmer has confessed to Rebecca that now he has lost the one thing that makes life wonderful; 'when she asks expectantly what that is his reply is: quiet, happy, innocence' (McFarlane, 1997: 110). This is the one thing she cannot give him, it makes her realize how far apart their aspirations are.

As Boyesen (1893) in his *Commentary on the Writings of Henrik Ibsen* states, Rosmer wants to break the chains of the past and labour to make men free and noble. He wants to make 'joyful noblemen', he says, 'for it is joy which ennobles the mind' (275).

Rosmer wants Rebecca not because he returns her desire, but because she must relieve his feeling of guilt. He finally offers her freedom, joy, and passion, but these are hopeless words from a hopeless man, who cannot deliver on his promises. We feel driven to ask why a man like this should be reliant on help from others and incapable of sexual passion. Ibsen's notes on the play from around the time he was composing the first draft can give a clue to this:

> She is an intriguer and she loves him. She wants to become his wife and she pursues that aim unswervingly. Then he becomes aware of this, and she openly admits it. Now there is no more joy in life for him. The demonic in him is roused by pain and bitterness. He determines to die, and she is to die with him. This she does (qtd. in McFarlane, 1997: 112).

For him Rebecca is a woman not only of transcendent intellect, but of a moral purity even more exalted. In sorrow rather than in anger he repels his brother-in-law's accusations, and expresses an innocent amazement at the latter's tactics, which he is yet far from penetrating. In the following phrases the *saviour of society* is unmasked.

> KROLL. What I mean is this: if your present mode of life with Miss West is to continue, it is absolutely necessary that the change of views the unhappy backsliding brought about by her evil influence should be hushed up. Let me speak! let me speak ! I say, if the worst comes to the worst, in Heaven's name think and believe whatever you like [...] But you must keep your views to yourself. It is purely a personal matter, after all. There is no need of proclaiming these things from the housetops (Boyesen, 1893: 273).

Ibsen shapes the subject of each act and of the whole of the play to create a formal structure. He sees to it that the first half of the play deals with Rosmer, the

second with Rebecca that Act I deals with Rosmer's present, Act II with his past; Act III treats Rebecca's past and Act IV her present (qtd. in Johnston, 1992: 242).

Let us have a look at the play's shape.

Act I *Evening*. Rosmer's present. Rosmer and Rebecca prepare to challenge society. Brendel appears, sharing this challenge. Rosmer and Rebecca seem firmly united. Action opens with reference to mill-race beyond the window. Act II *Morning*. Rosmer's past. Society begins to strike back at Rosmer and Rebecca. Rosmer and Rebecca begin to move apart. Act III *Morning*. Rebecca's past. Society defeats Rosmer and Rebecca. They seem to split apart totally. Act IV *Evening*. Rebecca's present. Rosmer and Rebecca give up their challenge. Brendel appears, also giving up challenge. Rosmer and Rebecca reunite. Action closes with reference to mill-race (Johnston, 1992: 243).

The movement of the play is circular, beginning and ending in evening: its beginning is in the shadows of a tormented past and it is about to be overcome and end with the shadows of this past completely in control of the present.

> It is also possible to see a distinct interplay of inward and outward, individual and social-subjective and objective forces, and linked to this interplay, that between past and present (Johnston, 1992: 243).

They represent the Rosmer – Rebecca relationship and conflict in the larger world of European order and revolution. Revolution and politics are those functions of the spirit that divide men and society, creating traditions which unite. 'The political references in the play, therefore, are not presented for the audience to take sides with liberal or conservative but to present onstage an image of spiritual battle' (Johnston, 1992: 243). Under this light we could say that the Rosmersholm tradition is founded upon force and passion.

Rebecca's will have become enslaved to laws which she had never before recognised. Rosmer's moral purity and noble disinterestedness had formed, as it were, an atmosphere about her, which she had breathed so long that it had changed her substance, and made her afraid to seize the fruit of her evil scheming. Her passion for him had changed to a love as pure, as capable of sacrifice, as that of his late wife. He is prone to believe, but, having been so cruelly deceived, cries out for a proof. Even though she has shaken his faith in her, his love, which has struck deep roots into his heart, cannot be torn up in an hour. Rebecca offers the same proof as she who died; and Rosmer, being now convinced, resolves to follow her in death. And they walk out into the night together, hand in hand, mount the foot-bridge, and, embracing each other, leap into the waterfall (Boyesen, 1893: 277).

Rebecca's confession to Kroll and Rosmer, in Act III, where she describes how she was self-trapped into the crime against Beate, portrays the same condition of consciousness as Shaw states in his *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* 'Hegel Saw as typical of the northern or Germanic spirit' (Shaw, 1994: 54). Shaw contrasts Rebecca's northern passion with the southern type of passion. Rebecca confesses that she had an uncontrollable passion for Rosmer, she purposely made up the story of their illicit relationship.

> REBECCA (vehemently): Do you think I set about these things in cold blood! I was different then from what I am now, standing here talking about it. And besides, it seems to me a person can want things both ways. I wanted to get rid of Beata, one way or another. But I never really imagined it would happen. Every little step I risked, every faltering advance, I seemed to hear something call out within me: "No further. Not a step further!" And yet I could not stop (Ibsen, 1960: 363).

Besides, Rebecca, as she confesses, has been infected by Rosmersholm's traditions, has been purged of passion.

'The action of the play is essential but accidental because the spiritual dialectic it expresses is one that transcends any particular time and place' (Johnston, 1992: 263). The action discovers parallels with past history. Even before the action of the play starts, we can find out a dialectical tension in the scene of Act I. The living room of Rosmersholm is old fashioned, its walls hung with portraits of officers, state officials, who supply a silent but impressive chorus to the action.

Rebecca brings to Rosmersholm natural vital forces alien to its civic, traditional way of life and Christian values and moralities. This scene shows the collision in the play to be between the civilized, constraining darkening powers and the powers of natural energies, life, renewal and Christian principles.

The play opens with the apparent victory of Rebecca, but will go on to show that she hardly is conscious of the powers she is fighting against. As Boyesen claims, Beata is only greatly *missed* and greatly *mourned* and the house of Rosmersholm is empty. Above all, it sets up the idea of the past as something safe, comfortably contained in the present when Kroll explains that he stayed absent from Rosmersholm in order not to be a reminder of past unhappiness; Rosmer and Rebecca react in the following ways:

> ROSMER: How good of you to think like that. You always were considerate. But it was quite unnecessary for you to stay away on that account. Come long now, let us sit down on the sofa. (They sit) No, it really doesn't upset me to think about Beata. We talk about her every day. We feel as though she still belonged to the house.
>
> KROLL: Do you really?
>
> REBECCA (Lights the lamp): Yes, we really do. (Ibsen, 1960: 299).

The relationship between the past and present are seen here in the minds of the three speakers. The action of the play reveals it. '*Rosmersholm* is unable to comprehend the power of the past in the larger realm of ideology' (Johnston, 1992: 267).

Act I has exhibited the full conflict upon the stage and suggested the wider ideological and historical perspectives that surround the human drama. The

events in the microcosmic world of *Rosmersholm* begin to take on the shape of archetypal events in the evolution of human consciousness:

> enlightenment against traditional prejudice, pagan energies against Christian traditionalism. The mythic, historical, aesthetic and philosophical perspectives of the play are discoverable by paying close attention to the particular details of play (Johnston, 1992: 273).

Act II opens quite vaguely; Rosmer's consciousness is divided. Rebecca has been frightened by Kroll's reference to the dead Beata. Rosmer attempts to avert the process of separation with his offer of marriage, but Rebecca's refusal emphasizes the presence of some huge cause of divisions. Act II ends with Rosmer, asking in perplexity, 'What…is…this' (Johnston, 1992: 278).

After a brief scene between Rebecca and Rosmer, it appears that she has, without his consent, given Ulric Brendel a letter of introduction to Mr. Mortensgaard, the editor of *The Beacon*, and the radical leader in the district. The shrinking selectiveness of the man of many ancestors is hinted at in Rosmer's admonition of her act. He bluntly reveals to him that his wife killed herself in order to enable him to marry Miss West. She had confided to him her distress at Rosmer's religious apostasy; and she believed that a man who doubted God's word would be capable of anything. She had declared that 'they might soon expect the white horse at *Rosmersholm*' (Boyesen, 1893: 293). This is a portent of a death in the family. When Kroll had tried to talk her out of her melancholy fancies and soothe her agitation, she had answered: 'I have not long to live; for Johannes must marry Rebecca at once' (qtd. in Boyesen, 1893: 293). The surprise, the shock, the horror, of Rosmer at this revelation may well be imagined. He knows that his relation to Miss West is perfectly lameless, and it hurts him to have it desecrated by foul suspicions. To him Rebecca is a woman not only of transcendent intellect, but of a moral purity even more exalted.

At the end of the play Rosmer's Christian and Roman traditions could be compromised and Rebacca's spiritual transformation is achieved by means of the test of sacrifice. 'It is the sacrifice of physical life for that of spirit and honour to which the Romans sacrificed their lives' (Johnston, 1992: 283).

> […] with regard to the lovers' suicide, these two – the man of broken faith and shattered ideals, the woman of vanquished vice – could never have been happy, though married, for the shadow of the dead wife must have always haunted him […] (qtd. in Egan, 1972: 175).

The play begins with Rosmer who is attempting and failing to cross the path over the mill-stream and quite interestingly ends with the fall into the same water into which his wife fell. That repeatedly reminds us that the Romans were right in offering sacrifices to the Manes of their ancestors. For the hands of the dead are upon the lives of the living; and, whether we would or not, we have to yield our daily tribute of sacrifice. They walk out into the night together, hand in hand, mount the foot-bridge, and, embracing each other, leap into the waterfall. The

death of Rebecca and Rosmer cannot be regarded a defeat, but it is an affirmation of the reality of a spiritual action that will outlive them. The story is a tragedy, not a melodrama and naturally it ends tragically. Fate has broken the lives of these three beings and they all must go the same way, the sinned against and the sinner.

All in all, the politics in the play could be traced in exactly the same way as the psychology; both indicate spiritual forces that have overtaken on a particular locality. The story is a tragedy, not a melodrama and naturally it ends tragically. The ending of the play could be rendered as an answer, as some scholars claim, to the ongoing contested question whether or not Christian ethics may be expected to survive the death of Christian religion. Rebecca has not abandoned only the myth of Christianity but the whole ethical system of Christianity as well. So we could possibly take Rebecca as Ibsen's answer to that question.

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