

Self Absorption in Henrik Ibsen's The Master Builder

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In The Master Builder, a dramatic play by Henrik Ibsen, we see evidence of how the self absorption of the title character, Halvard Solness, affects the lives of those around him. Reasons for his self focus are rooted in egoism, self doubt and guilt. His self-centered actions affect everyone around him, some more so than others. The arena of ethical conflict occurs when the individual mind becomes alienated from purity (Johnston xiv). But living a non-integrous life has its consequences, as Solness experiences during and at the end of the play.

By the time that Solness, the master builder, had become great at his profession, he worried about getting old and losing his edge as the quintessential builder of the region. While the architectural products he had completed had positively benefited many people, he was actually quite self-absorbed. He had been so focused on his own needs and fears that he didn't always do what was right by others. He wasn't egotistic—always talking about himself or boasting. Rather, he was egoistic--silently concerned with his own interests and welfare.

Very early in the drama we see the master builder apparently flirting with his secretary, Kaja. She seems genuinely enamored by him, and he does not discourage her affections. It seems that Ibsen pushes the limits of what is right and wrong in the drama, and viewers of a live performance, or readers of the play, immediately sense something apparently untoward with his actions. We soon find out that he gives her attention to satisfy his selfish machinations. He wants to keep her working with him so that her fiancée, Ragnar Brovik, a promising young protégé, will also stay on with him and not go off on his own to become competition. Ragnar's father, Knut Brovik, was once Solness's employer until Solness broke out on his own and built a career that surpassed his former boss.

Ibsen often allowed his plays to reflect the confusions and complexities of philosophical

problems (Johnston xiii). One major philosophical problem is illustrated with Solness's apparent break with God. He had initially created magnificent churches with awe-inspiring steeples because he thought that God would be pleased with him. But after the incident of a fire in a building and the resulting consequences that led to the death of his children, he felt forsaken. Solness had declared his break from the graces of God when he made the announcement on the church tower at Lysanger. He felt that God had taken his children's lives from him so that he wouldn't be attached to anything. He expressed a sense of alienation when he said, after the death of his children, "I was to be allowed no love or happiness. I was to be nothing but a master builder, and I was to devote my life solely to building for Him. But I soon put a stop to that" (204). Solness proceeded to talk to God and declare that he would be a master builder in his own domain just as God was free in his own domain, and vowed never to build churches again.

The problem with his anthropomorphic view of God was that he thought he knew what God wanted of him. He also thought that God punishes in just the same way as do humans. His ego wouldn't allow him to consider that perhaps he didn't understand God at all, nor could he ever fathom a greatness beyond his own egocentric consciousness. The larger conflict is reflected in Solness's personal and subjective reality.

Ibsen's plays are likely to include a character's facing of a critical hour of the soul's history (Egan 268). That hour is also present with Solness in "The Master Builder." When he promised to never build churches for God again, he vowed instead to only build homes for humans. He said this on the day he climbed the high tower of the last church he built ten years earlier to place the wreath. He idealized God, but later realized that doing something for man was more real in that the rewards would be more immediate and tangible.

He decided to build homes for two reasons. First of all he knew that building for man

meant that he would be honored and acknowledged as each buyer moved in to enjoy the dwelling he had created. He could build homes at a more rapid rate than he could build magnificent churches. Since his perception was that God didn't seem to be pleased with him, he could, on a regular basis, receive acknowledgement from humans.

The second reason he wanted to build homes for humans was that he wanted to have some sort of a role in what happy families experienced. Building for families meant that he could vicariously be a part of a happy family. He wanted a happy family, and he even built his new residence with nursery rooms even though he knew he and his wife Aline would never have kids again, and he believed that their relationship would mean he would never again have a truly happy family of his own. The adding of nursery rooms to the homes he built were his tribute to his wife's loss of the children.

When her children died, Aline had effectively given up her *own* building plans. Her life's dream had been the nurturing of and building of sound and happy lives for her children. She retreated in sorrow and was never capable of or willing to be fully affectionate towards him again. But Solness himself was a builder of structures, and *his* type of building could go on.

But building for man without the inner guidance of the God consciousness meant that he assumed a self-centered approach to life. He relied on himself and acted with impunity to protect his interests. He actually came to believe that he could *will* things to happen. Solness already thought that he was great enough to create almost anything. If someone wants, then desires and ultimately wills something to happen, then surely one must get it. Desire is a more focused emotion than want. And to will something is stronger still than to desire the same thing; it is evidence of self determination. He wanted the fire so badly that it did actually happen, but it didn't start from the place in the house where he expected it to start. A lesson to be learned is to

be careful what is wished for, because it might actually happen.

As great as Solness was in the building profession, he still carried with him the burdens of self doubt and guilt. He had self doubt in that he feared that the younger generation would pass him by¹. He felt guilt as a result of the fire and the eventual deaths of his children. He thought he could overcome those burdens by building magnificent churches for God. Those who feel a sense of lacking tend to hoard. Solness hoarded people and circumstances to suit him.

Solness was afraid that a future youthful individual would “knock on his door” and pass him up professionally. At just that moment in the play, Hilda Wangel, a Norwegian girl, actually does knock at the front door. In fact, Solness had met her ten years prior, and had flirted with her inappropriately, promising her castles in the sky in ten years. She was an imaginative young girl who had built up her inner world in such a way as to think that Solness could create miracles. Indeed, she had not only seen him at the grand opening of the church at Lysanget, but she had also seen him climb high² up on the scaffolding to place the wreath for its christening. During those ten years of maturing from a naïve young girl of about 12 or 13 to an idealistic young woman, she had created an inner world so lofty and far out that she could hear “harps in the air” (147).

Some critics have written of Hilda as being detestable, insane, mean, cheap, hateful and dishonorable (Egan 280). Whether or not she is deserving of these descriptions, she would only have developed them as a result of Solness’s prior untoward actions ten years earlier. While Solness and his life are the center of the play, Hilda proves to be the play’s catalyst (Clurman 171). She is the one who helps Solness regain a sense of self confidence. She is indeed one of the younger generation, but not one that threatens him. Rather, her presence invigorates him. She

¹ Ibsen admitted that the character of Halvard Solness was a little like him in that both were worried about failure (Clurman 168).

² Climbing high was not easy for him due to his decided fear of heights.

also brings it to his attention that he does not appear to have a very robust consciousness (178) when dealing with others. Hilde was absorbed with her own dreams, but her ingenuous manner and impassioned insistence caused the master builder to see her vision. Solness's confusion and fear of getting old needed to take their course towards resolution. Hilda's exuberant presence helped him to take that course. She had fantasy beliefs all along, and Solness wanted or needed something like that to buy into. Hilda was the singular individual with whom he could be honest and non self-absorbed.

Solness had used everyone and everything for the purpose of his work. He had passed over his former boss and made him his assistant. Ragnar had excellent design skills, but Solness wanted to keep him from establishing himself independently since he feared that any competition could potentially destroy his mission to build homes. Solness used the fascination he professed to have over Kaja to keep Ragnar working for him. Through Hilda's urging, though, he finally releases Ragnar, and also dismisses Kaja.

He was on track for redemption, thanks to Hilda. Acknowledging her youthful vision eventually leads him to climb high again, but this apparently fearless action ultimately results in his demise as he lost his footing and fell far to the ground. By climbing, he was actually trying to overcome his acrophobia. Forcing oneself to come face-to-face with a fear affords the opportunity for valuable positive inner growth. Sometimes it takes only a moment to be on the right path to have an awakening.

Solness might have died anyway, as anyone can at any time and without warning from Providence. However, his association with Hilda helped him make an attempt to overcome his egoism, guilt, and fear of losing his professional dominance; his heroic attempt led him up to the high tower at the end of the play. He chose this path for himself. In the end, he actually *did*

create his life's fate; he was a master builder in the most fatal sense in that he created the path that led to his demise.

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