

# *A Comprehensive Perspective of Strindberg's Impact in the Development of Modern Drama*

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## *Abstract*

*This study is distinctively restricted to the perspective of Strindberg's impact in modern drama because he is one of the most important dramatists in modern drama and modern theatre. He distinguishes as a great playwright from his contemporaries and the others in his miserable life and creative skill in writing the literary texts. The study aims to shed light on Strindberg's impact in the development of modern drama and his influence on some famous dramatists in modern age such as Shaw, Ibsen, and others. It also shows Strindberg's belief in the continuous war between men and women. It is divided into eight sections, each analyzing a topic. Finally, the study has reached some conclusions that verify the hypothesis of the study.*

*Key Words: Strindberg, Drama, Naturalism, Expressionism.*

## **I. Introduction**

August Strindberg (1849-1912), the Swedish playwright, contributed considerably to the world theatre and world drama. He did much to further the cause of Naturalism, and is considered by almost all those interested in the development of world drama to be the creator of Expressionism in drama. His range of form is so vast that he is described to be a unique writer whose hand, according to (Nicoll, 1964), "touch now the early romantics, now the realists and naturalists, now the expressionists, now the surrealists, and now the existentialists. There is no author whose range is wider or more provocative. In him the entire history of the stage from 1800 to the present day is epitomized."

## **II. Strindberg's life**

Strindberg lived a miserable life. His mother was a servant, and his father, a shipping merchant, went bankrupt when the child was four years old. At the age of thirteen his mother died. After one year, he acquired a stepmother, when his father married the housekeeper. Both women were pietists, fanatical believers in Christianity. (Morgan, 1985) He studied medicine but he failed at the university; and when he went on the stage, he failed also. Throughout his life, he worked as a journalist, a teacher and an actor. He married three times, but none of his marriages was successful. He spent a great deal of his life living away from his own country. In Paris his scientific experiments to make gold failed, and three years he hovered on the brink of insanity. Ironically, he died of stomach cancer.

These biographical details are quite relevant in understanding Strindberg's work, for he is one of the few writers whose works faithfully reflect their own lives. In the words of George Steiner, "No playwright ever made of so public a form as drama a more private expression." (Steiner, 1961)

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In fact, Strindberg thought that literature could not be imaginative, therefore he called the establishment of huge archives centers in which the real life story of each person should be kept:

*I remember that when I was a very young journalist and had already seen the weaknesses inherent in prefabricated literature, I drew up plans. For a literature of the future that would present all the documents relating to the inner story of a human being. This literature would be built up by having every citizen at a certain age deposit his autobiography, written anonymously and with no names in the text, in the communal archives. (Strindberg, 1967)*

### III. Strindberg 's Style

Strindberg's literary works made his style different from the other playwrights in his time in some features such as his manner of expression is greatly distinctive, often very direct, sometimes particularly concise, sometimes slightly contingent, regularly extremely interesting. Carrying signs of having been written in speed, his remarks may irregularly seem unreliable and are at times ambiguous. ( Tornqvist and Steene, 2007) As an autobiographical dramatist , he was to fictionalize, rearrange and falsify the facts of his life in ways that create strange difficulties for objective biographers. ( Morgan, 1985)

Unlike Ibsen who championed the feminist campaign in such plays as *A Doll's House* and *The Pillars of Society*, Strindberg used drama as a weapon to attack women. Despite his emphasis that he was not a woman- hater, he often makes his mouthpieces express such feelings. In *The Road to Damascus*, for instance, the following dialogue takes place between the two major characters, despite the fact that in this later play Strindberg became less hostile in his attitude towards women:

*Stanger: Tell also whether you held me to be a misogynist?*

Lady: A woman – hater? Every healthy man is one, in the secret places of his heart; and all perverted men are admirers of women. (Strindberg, 1979)

### IV. Strindberg's Belief in The War between Men and Women

"Man loves and woman hates; man gives and woman takes; man sacrifices and woman devours." When consumed by resentment and loneliness, August Strindberg saw all men as the victims and slaves of women. While men longed for a peaceful domestic life, women seemed to be born "for the theatre, the restaurant, and the street." (Waal, 1990) Early in his career as a playwright, Strindberg formed his own opinion of women, partly because of his bitter experience with his first wife, the Finnish actress Siri von Essen, and mainly because of his belief in the war between the sexes. Just before he wrote his first successful play, *The Father* (1887), in which he dramatized the war between man and woman, he had been much impressed by an article which he read in a magazine. The writer of that article, Paul Lafargue, "postulated the theory that the family was originally a matriarchy and only became a patriarchy as a result of a long and violent war between the sexes. A return to the matriarchal pattern would involve an equally long and bloody war". (Meyer, 1976)

As a result of that Strindberg wrote an essay in which he expressed his apprehension that such a conflict would mean the defeat of man, that if this battle takes place it will herald an age of savagery. To some extent, he even looked at the relationship between him and his wives in the light of this conception. " Ah, " he wrote to his first wife, Siri, even before their marriage, " happy I shall be when I am married and have someone I can always quarrel with!" (Lucas, 1962)

He again wrote from Paris to his second wife, Frida, in Austria saying that he longed to leave everything and "come back to live with her- like dog and cat!". (Luca, 1962)

later on, in *The Road to Damascus*, the Doctor bids the Stranger to take a stick to his wife. Perhaps echoing Nietzsche's advice to go to woman with a whip. Yet this tense relationship between Strindberg and woman in general and the failure of his three marriages seem to some critics to be the cause of the dramatist's creative writing. "His three major creative periods", says Maurice Valency, "were the aftermath, in each case, of his three marriages, and the psychic crises which they precipitated were the immediate source of his masterpieces". (Valency, 1966)

Strindberg dramatized the war between the male and female sexes in some plays, such as *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *The Dance of Death* and others. In these plays he emphasizes the power of woman over man as a result of hypnotism and suggestion which she practices over him. Man in Strindberg's plays is shown as the more refined sex; destined to be crushed by the simpler and stronger female sex, while woman is shown as a vampire. The female role in Strindberg's plays is different from the ancient times as in the plays of Aeschylus and of Shakespeare, when she used a poison or a dagger, but now she refers to her triumph according to the much subtler weapon of unworldly murder through suggestion.

The main matter in *The Father* is this power of suggestion and how it works. In a letter to a friend of his Strindberg wrote describing how his wife, Siri, used that "witchcraft" over him. "she got me to imagine for three years", he wrote, "that I was ill, got me to imagine I was mad and every one pitied and believed her! .... Remember that Siri tricked me into writing to Forssberg (the family doctor).. that I believed I was mad."

In fact, Strindberg has dramatized the idea which he had already expressed in his essay "Psychic Murder", published in 1887. In his essay, he described a series of real and fictional psychic murders and concluded that the struggle for power, formerly purely physical, had become "more psychic, but not therefore less cruel". The world, he goes on, "had been transformed into a torture chamber where strong minds used psychic means to destroy the weaker ones." (Lamm, 1971)

Strindberg's belief in the continuous war between men and women recurs again and again even in his later plays. To the question "Tell me –what is woman?" one of the characters in *The Road to Damascus* (1898-1901) gives the following answer:

*I do not know! Perhaps a larva or a chrysalis, out of whose  
Trancelike life a man one day will be created. She seems  
A child, but isn't one; she is a sort of child, and yet not  
Like one. Drags downward when the man pulls up. Drags  
Upward, when the man pulls down.* (Strindberg, 1979)

## V. Strindberg's Impact in The Development of Modern Drama

Like any other creative dramatist, Strindberg wanted his literary texts to be read and performed outside his small country, Sweden. Therefore, he wrote to a friend of his asking him to urge the French writer, Emile Zola, the originator of Naturalism in the theater, to get a publisher for *The Father*, and to have it, performed in Paris. Strindberg, on the other hand, had been so impressed by the French writer that he tried in 1883 to "persuade the editor of the newspaper, *Puck*, to publish excerpts from Zola's manifesto". (Lamm, 1952)

For coming in contact with the psychological experiments with the power of suggestion made the Swedish writer able to see great possibilities in Naturalistic drama. In August 1887 he wrote a letter to Zola with a French translation of *The Father* to this effect. But three months later he received a reply from the French writer in which he observed that: "he did not consider it a very naturalistic piece of work, despite his polite praise of it .... Zola did not find the characters sufficiently explained and determined by the physical milieu they tended to become abstractions and lacked 'un e'tat civil' complete." (Madcen, 1962) because of that *The Father* was not performed in Paris until 1894.

Strindberg was not discouraged by the fate of *The Father* and so he wrote another play, *Miss Julie* (1888), in which he tried to apply the principles of Naturalism: natural determination, heredity and milieu. "I take the liberty", he wrote to his publisher, "of hereby offering you the first naturalistic tragedy of the Swedish drama, and I beg you not to reject it without serious thought, or you will later regret it, for .... This play will be remembered in history. (Meyer, 1976) indeed, the play has become one of the masterpieces of Naturalistic drama, and the preface Strindberg wrote to it one of the documents of Naturalism: as Strindberg expressed in this preface his understanding of this aesthetic movement in the theatre.

*Miss Julie* was presented by two of the famous independent theatres in Europe which furthered the cause of Naturalism. Otto Braham's Freie Bühne put it on in April 1892, and Andre Antonie's Theatre Libre in Paris, in January 1893. It was characterized by some French critics "as a daring naturalistic drama .... very similar to the French naturalistic dramas performed by Antoine." (Madcen, 1962)

But despite Strindberg's attempt to justify the use of the technical devices in the play to make it as Naturalistic as possible, the play remains in most of its parts as an echo of Strindberg's own tormented life. Darwinism and its doctrine of the survival of the fittest are used to reflect Strindberg's conception of the class struggle in which Jean, the valet, wins the battle over Julie, the aristocrat; in other words, the struggle between Strindberg, the son of a servant, and his wife, the baroness, reversed.

Besides, the use of symbolism in the play, such as the whip of Julie's father, the killing of Julie's bird which symbolically foreshadows Julie's fate and the occasional heightened, exaggerated style of dialogue mark the play as a departure from Naturalism.

To justify his break with Naturalism, Strindberg announced in December 1888 that he was on the point of abandoning Zola. "Zolaism", he said, "seems to be on the way out. Therefore, do not be surprised that I do not want to trail behind, since I'm used to being in the vanguard." (Lamm, 1952) Like many other writers such as Ibsen, Shaw and Zola himself, Strindberg, found Naturalism a burden on his art. A year later, he published an essay in the Danish paper, *Ny jerd*, in which he violently condemned Naturalism. Calling it the "objectivity that is so beloved by those who have nothing to say, by those devoid of temperament- the soulless ones, as they ought to be died."

He was bored with the photographic realism which reproduced even the speck of dust on the lens of the camera. In his later period, Strindberg wrote completely symbolic plays. Examples of these are *Swan white* (1901) and *The Crown Bride* (1902).

Between 1894 and 1896 Strindberg had a serious mental crisis which he later called the inferno. Just before and during this period, he began to see a series of "images in which natural objects appear to have human features, sometimes distorted but often accurate." (Milton, 1962) Even this crisis, according to John Milton (A critic), is a part of Strindberg's search and striving for something out of his reach. He could not stand still, "nor could he accept a particular dramatic form as the ultimate end."

The Inferno experience was a transition period during which the dramatist was desperately looking for a new direction in his career." It seems quite plausible to assume that the search caused the experience, not that the experience was the cause of the search." (Milton, 1962) Whatever real cause of the Inferno crisis, it is a matter of fact that Strindberg emerged from it more powerful than ever.

## VI. Strindberg's Expressionism

Strindberg's greatest achievement in drama is Expressionism. The plays which he called his dream plays, such as *The Road to Damascus* (1898-1901), *A Dream play* (1901) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), are indisputably considered to be the foundation of this aesthetic movement in drama which appeared mainly in Germany in the second decade of the twentieth century. In fact, Strindberg's plays became so popular in Germany that in "the two sessions, 1913-14 and 1914-15, there were all together 1035 performances of 24 different strindberg plays in 62 German cities." (Dahlstrom, 1968)

Expressionism can be characterized as in the plays of such German dramatists as George Kaiser, Ernest Toller and the younger Brecht and others. In the German Expressionistic plays the following aspects are simply investigated:

*Confusion, the radiation, expansion and unfolding of the ego, lyricism, abstractness, rhetorical ecstasy, pure untrammelled feeling in man, dream-character, telegram-style, pantomime, typification of character, social-political framework and the abandoning of psychological in the search for what is essentially human.*  
( Dahlstrom, 1968)

In his attempt to cut below the surface of things, Strindberg used startling symbols, unrealistic patterns of speech, fragmentary characters and he dispensed with the logical sequence of time, place and action. Yet in his dream plays Strindberg succeeded to expose the inner struggle of the main characters. " Never before in the history of drama", says Martin Lamm, " has the inner struggle of a soul been so graphically ... so tangibly, exposed to an audience." ( Lamm, 1952)

After the writing of Strindberg's dream plays , a new function of drama was revealed, to present a state of mind. Whether it is the result of the strange and dreadful experiences of the Inferno crisis during which period Strindberg was at his best as he had said in 1884:

" My best writing comes when I am suffering from hallucinations", ( Lamm, 1952) the dream plays are Strindberg's masterpieces, as they are entirely his own creation. Like some other playwrights who had their own theaters, Strindberg was able in 1907 to found his Intimate Theatre in Stockholm. For this theater he wrote his last four chamber plays, *Storm, Rhe Burnt House, The Ghost Sonata and The Pelican*. In these plays and some other short ones such as *Pariah, The Stronger and Simoon*, Strindberg experimented freely with the form of drama. The plays are very short and the characters are sometimes reduced to two in number and they are just labelled as Mr X and Mr Y, as we find in *Pariah*.

Strindberg wrote about 60 plays, a number of autobiographical books and novels and articles. The reception of his plays and his influence on other dramatists are still raising controversies. In his life time he was quite amused to find that he was causing an uproar. " An old lady fell dead in the theatre," he wrote delightedly to Nietzsche ( A German philosopher) describing the effect of the performance of *The Father* on the audience, " another woman miscarried; at the sight of the strait-jacket three quarters of the audience rose as one man, and ran from the theatre madly bellowing." ( Lucas, 1962)

As an innovator of drama, Strindberg has been greatly imitated all over the world. But his imitators, according to Raymond Williams, " never reached his own level". (Williams, 1982)

## VII. Strindberg's Influence on Some Famous Dramatists

In England, and as early as 1892, the critic Justin MacCarthy wrote an article in which he described Strindberg in these " A new star has arisen in the North." He labelled *The Father* as the " most profoundly tragic play that the literature of the North has yet produced, Ghosts not excepted." The influence of Strindberg on Bernard Shaw ( The Irish dramatist) is quite clear in such plays as *Arms and the Man*, which has many affinities with *Miss Julie*, and *Man and Superman*, with the analogy between some of its scenes and those of Strindberg's *The Father*. " Indeed, the later Shaw", says Margery Morgan, " might never have continued open, as he did , to new dramatic influences if he had not been familiar with Strindberg's work." (Morgan, 1964)

As a matter of fact, Shaw was very well acquainted with the dramatic work of the Swedish dramatist, and once he witnessed a special performance of *Miss Julie* at Strindberg's Intimate Theatre in Stockholm. " in 1908 Strindberg arranged a special performance for Bernard Shaw, who was on a visit to Stockholm, and watched it with him." (Michael, 1976) Besides, Shaw's admiration for the Swedish dramatist was so great that in 1926 he donated the Anglo-Scandinavian Foundation with his Nobel Prize money, Strindberg's Swedish writings as literary texts should be translated into English language, then should be published. ( Morgan, 1964)

Moreover, Strindberg was largely produced in England in the period between the two world wars, and " it became the thing, for the avant-garde, to prefer Strindberg to Ibsen". (Lucas, 1962)

Henrik Ibsen ( A Norwegian playwright) , himself, was quite aware of the influence of his contemporary rival. He , therefore, kept a painting of the Swedish dramatist on his office wall, not, he illuminated, because

the compassion or friendship with either the painter or Strindberg, but because, he said, "I am now not able to write a word without having that crazy man staring down at me!" (Meyer, 1976) While he lived in Paris from 1894 to 1897, "six of his plays were running simultaneously on the Parisian stage." (Wescher, 1953)

In America, Eugene O'Neill (American dramatist) proclaimed himself a disciple of Strindberg. "To me," he said, "like Nietzsche in his own sphere, he remains the master, still more modern than any of us, even today; still our leader." (Lamm, 1952) As for the Irish dramatist, Sean O'Casey, he was so touched at seeing a performance of *The Father* in London 1927 that he sent a note to the leading actor, Robert Loraine, in which he wrote, "you were great artist in a great play. Strindberg, Strindberg, Strindberg, the greatest of them all." (Loraine, 1983) O'Casey also wrote "Strindberg shakes flames from the living planets and the fixed stars". (Robinson, 1998)

Another great writer, Maxim Gorki (Russian writer), admired Strindberg for another aspect of his work. It was his powerful, uncompromising voice in the Viking spirit. "it is the duty of any honest writer", said Gorki, "to make himself disagreeable to the public, and the greatest art is the art of annoying people." (Vowels, 1962)

### VIII. Conclusion

Strindberg's impact on the development of modern drama gives a complete and comprehensive understanding for the readers that Strindberg is an expressionist and certainly a great artist whose impact is evident in modern drama all over the world. But what makes him great is not only his innovation in drama but also the strange life of the dramatist himself, that life which he faithfully reflected in his work. That is why, Strindberg used to dramatize the war between the males and the females. In this respect, Strindberg could surely claim position in the first ranks. So the hypothesis of this study is accepted.

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