

The Subversion of Gender, the Immensity of Desire: ——A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*

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Abstract: The Swedish playwright August Strindberg has been deemed highly as one of the founders of the modern theater. He established his reputation as an outstanding modern dramatist with *Miss Julie*, which demonstrates his preoccupation with what he considered to be the elemental and inevitable conflict between men and women—all the psychological, social, intellectual battles of the late nineteenth century.

The secret of his marvelous appeal is his psychological participation in the destinies of his dramatic characters, and both Julie and Jean suffer from the most contradictory emotions. While Julie—a dishonored aristocrat—might seem to belong to an earlier tradition of tragic heroine, Strindberg is at pains to explain why she represents a new tragic type: she is a half-woman, suffering from neurosis and hysteria, locked in a desperate struggle with her repressed id—her sexual nature; she belongs to a class that no longer has a meaningful role to play in society; she is the victim of a mother's crime, of muddled modern thinking, of her own frail ego constitution, and, finally, of circumstances all of which constitute the modern equivalent of the time-honored concept of the superego.

Julie's constant vacillation between opposed points of view reflects Strindberg's own ambivalent feelings about the issues of class struggle and the battle of the sexes, while Jean embodies Strindberg's divided class loyalties. Therefore, to some extent, both of them can be seen as the projections of Strindberg's own psychological dualism.

1. Introduction

The Swedish playwright August Strindberg is considered one of the greatest dramatists in modern literature. As the father of expressionistic drama and the most versatile of modern playwright, Strindberg was appraised by Eugene O'Neill "the most modern of moderns, the greatest interpreter in the theatre of the characteristic spiritual conflicts which constitute the drama—the blood—of our lives today" [4].

Unfortunately, this man was tormented by mental illness, three disastrous marriages, three bitter divorces, and permanent scars from a trouble childhood. All these sufferings can be reflected in his sensitive and freakish characteristics and in his misogynistic attitudes. Psychiatrists often label these people of outstanding intellectual achievements some obsessional traits of personality—scrupulous, hypersensitive, accurate, controversial, controlled, and honest. These admirable traits emanate not only their wits but also we speak of obsessional neurosis when become exaggerated, "a disorder which ranges in severity from mild compulsions to check and recheck to a state of total disablement in which the sufferer's existence is so dominated by rituals that normal life becomes impossible" [2].

Because of this experience, He read many French psychological and psychiatric works. Personally and possibly, he was seeking answers to some of his own pressing psychological problems. Furthermore, Strindberg's new emphasis on individualism led him towards the study of psychology. Then, after he studied a great number of psychological works with keen interest, they convince him that psychological dissection is the main function of contemporary literature.

2. Freudian Hysteria Study

Freud is the student of the French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology Jean-Martin Charcot. Learning from Charcot's treatment, Freud came to study psychology instead of neurology, in order to understand hysteria. Sigmund Freud rediscovered that a hysteric person suffers from "dissociation of consciousness" [1]. Because patients awaking from the "trance-like state induced by hypnosis" could not recall what had been suggested to them while hypnotized, hypnotic experiments also taught Freud that mental processes, especially the unconsciousness, could have a powerful effect on the patient's behavior [1].

Studies on Hysteria (German: *Studien über Hysterie*) is Freud's first psychoanalytic publication. It included one of their most famous cases—Bertha Pappenheim, which introduced the technique of psychoanalysis as a form of cure. It was not until years later that psychoanalysis was recognized as a legitimate psychiatric tool. In the book Freud described the causes of hysteria by supporting a psychological cause.

In a case of hysteria, Freud suggest that the affect become converted into a physical symptom; hence the term "conversion hysteria". In many cases, the physical symptom expresses the patient's feeling in symbolic pattern. In other types of neurosis, a variety of neurotic symptoms, like obsessions and phobias, resulted from the repressed affect struggling to express itself indirectly.

Most of Freud's patients belonged to the middle and upper classes such as the figures in *the Father* and *Miss Julie*. The type of case upon which psychoanalytic theory was originally based, namely, conversion hysteria in women, is often seen during the early 20th century.

3. Julie's Neurosis and Hysteria

Miss Julie, Strindberg's major drama after *The Father*, coupled one of his favorite themes, the battle between the sexes, with a psychological struggle and love-hate bond. Strindberg was interested in psychology, and the play spends time detailing Julie's pathologies. The protagonist, Julie, must confront the situation, in which she is struggling with her own hysteria, self-pity, malice and vengefulness. And this disease is caused by her psychic contradiction against her gender and her class role.

Two concepts from the psychology of Strindberg's age are relevant: hysteria and feminine masochism. Hysteria was historically considered a female disease, and in the late-nineteenth century was defined as an illness brought on when a woman failed or refused to accept her sexual desires and did not become a sexual object, as the psychologists put it. Later, as we have presented, Freud developed and perfected its theories and therapy.

3.1. Julie's Hysteria

Strindberg probably meant for us to read Julie as a hysteric, for she is simultaneously disgusted and drawn to men, both nonsexual and seductive. Strindberg, in his fear of early European feminism, attributes Julie's problems to a mother who believes in the equality of the sexes and, indeed, hates men. He also blames an initially absent, ineffectual father. Julie inherits her mother's hatred of men, attempting to train her fiancé with a riding whip and fantasizing about the annihilation of the male sex. Besides this sadism (pleasure in another's pain), the play is interested in Julie's masochism (pleasure in one's own pain), a masochism explicitly identified as feminine. When Julie proposes suicide, Jean declares that he could never follow through with a plan to kill himself, and says that the difference between the sexes is that men are not masochistic, as women are. Julie confesses her desire to fall, and her brazenly flirtatious behavior with Jean supposedly makes her ruin her own fault. She ends up submitting herself wholeheartedly to Jean's will [3]. Later as we discover in the final scene, Jean stands for Julie's father, the Count.

Strindberg understood the mind as constantly in conflict with itself, and understood this conflict as the primary cause of human anxiety and unhappiness. For the study of *Miss Julie*, the heroine's temperament is important, and Strindberg gives a stage direction that she is "extremely hysteria", "trembling with anxiety" at the end [5]. Although this description says little today, it would have

been of great significance to a physician in the 1880s. Neurosis and hysteria had been an accepted research program in psychology for several years.

Strindberg and Jean describe Julie as crazy twice. While Strindberg balance the action in the play to create the possibility for a plausible struggle on stage, a nineteenth-century spectator would have seen that Julie has little chance in the battle of the brains. Thus, Strindberg adapted these more or less scientific teachings to his own creative works in fiction and in drama, especially *Miss Julie*.

3.2. The Trauma in Julie's Childhood and Her Personality

According to Freud's study, hysteria describes a state of mind, suffering from the fear which is often caused by multiple events in one's past that involved some sort of severe conflict. People who are hysterical often lose self-control due to the overwhelming fear. This kind of fear is called trauma.

Trauma is a type of damage caused by one or a series of traumatic events, which affects the person's ability to cope with stress and leads to disorder in the psyche. The traumatic events involve the experience that completely overwhelms the individual's ability to cope, such as the hunting and slaughter happened in Julie's childhood. And the sense of being overwhelmed can be delayed by weeks or years.

According to Freud, trauma can be caused by various events, but there are a few common aspects. "There is frequently a violation of the person's familiar ideas about the world and themselves, putting the person in a state of extreme confusion and insecurity" [1].

Typical causes of psychological trauma are sexual abuse, violence, the threat, or the witnessing, particularly in childhood. Catastrophic events and mass violence can also cause psychological trauma.

3.3. Julie's Traumatic Female Identity

Obviously, Julie is a victim of her parents' faulty upbringing. The events Julie encountered are totally against her identity from two aspects—her gender and her class.

For Strindberg, men and women have specific roles in society. In that time, feminine conduct was judged from a "male point of view". Because the standard was masculine, all women's transgressions are considered foul, which may not be such. In the play's preface he describes Julie as a "man-hating half-woman" [5]. Julie's problems stem from her heritage as well as the way she was reared.

In this play when Julie tells Jean about her life, what she reveals is not only her family's secret, also her traumatic memory and her loath attitude. Freud thought of the "repressed affection as being associated with trauma, which means some unpleasant event the patient wishes to forget" [2]. This observation is still valid today in cases of so-called "traumatic neurosis", in which a patient has developed neurotic symptoms following an escape from death, an accident, or some horrific experience like being tortured. Take Julie for example, she holds a horrible memory about slaughter in her childhood, in her words "I was made ...to go hunting—I even had to learn how to slaughter the animals. It was disgusting. Awful" [7].

Julie's mother did not bring Julie up according to accepted standards regarding women's roles. She refuses to conform to traditional female roles. At first, she would not marry Julie's father, although she had sexual relations with him, was the mother of his child. Julie's mother has a strong aversion to marriage. Her initial refusal to marry the Count suggests her defiance of the law with all it means to Strindberg. She furthermore doesn't want to bear a child—an even worse sin in their eyes, because a woman who refused to become a mother violates the very distinction which Strindberg's sexual ideologies are based.

Now we can sum the unnatural action of Julie's mother: she insisted on reversing gender roles and went insane, plausibly enough. As her daughter, Julie could not escape the legacy of her feminist mother. "The man-woman descends from a higher to a lower physiological level and soon shows the evidence of biologic regression" [5]. Thus the influence of Julie's mother's training is not just behavioral, as we would argue, but physiological. Julie grew up to hate men as her mother did. "I loved my father, but I took my mother's side because I didn't know the whole story. She had taught me to hate all men" [7].

Julie was very much dominated by masculine figures, and she controls over the decisions in her life. However, Julie certainly did not possess enough autonomy to leave her family as Nora does in the end of *A Doll's House*. Instead of creating a gracefully self-governing lady, Strindberg creates his character Julie to have man-like autonomy, but on an extreme level. The character interprets her sovereignty as meaning she can do as she likes, with a disregard to social constructs as the same as her mother.

Strindberg states that he does not hate women at all, but hates their “intrusion into the male working-place”. In view of the above observations in *Miss Julie*, his opinions should not be dismissed as mere subjectivity. Such intrusion creates, Strindberg claims, a class of “androgynous” [6]. Though the theories of Darwinism and evolution are of great importance to Strindberg, it is unnecessary to refer to them since the theorized of neurology offer sufficient evidence for his notion that a woman would be “incapable of achieving a man’s mental output” and would destroy herself in “departing from her evolutionary niche” [2]. Therefore, Strindberg was not just paranoid or even misogynistic when he criticized aggressive women. Considering the state of research at the time, his arguments are well-founded. “As naturalist he outlined what he conceived of as an unnatural, potentially catastrophic biological aberration” [3]. Although the dramatic details are quite subtle, not as realistic as the clinical notes, the physicians who watch *Miss Julie* would agree that Julie was typical of the deviant, modern, hysteric woman, with a high vulnerability to control.

3.4. Julie’s Traumatic Aristocratic Identity

Freud shows that, in many cases of hysteria, the trauma which ostensibly provoked the onset of symptoms was often too trivial to be an adequate determinant. In such cases, Freud alleged, “the ostensible trauma had awoken memories of an earlier trauma, and it was this combination of present with past trauma which constituted the true provocation” [1]. In an early paper, based on a lecture which he delivered in Vienna in 1890, Freud affirmed that:

No hysterical symptom can arise from a real experience alone, but that in every case the memory of earlier experiences awakened in association to it plays a part in causing the symptoms. [2]

Julie’s mother’s rule, then, is misrule. For Strindberg, the natural law is for the male to assert his authority, while woman is who must be conquered or transcended. Blaming the mother is a rationalization for Strindberg, because the conflict between man and woman arises primarily due to the patriarchal authority’s needs to keep women in the position of “other” in order to retain its position as obedience.

While Julie—a dishonored aristocrat, the last scion of a noble race—might seem to belong to an earlier tradition of tragic heroines, Strindberg is at pains to explain (in the preface to the play) why she represents a new tragic type: she is a half-woman, locked in a desperate struggle with her own sexual nature; she belongs to a class that no longer has a meaningful role to play in society. Julie is the victim of her mother’s crime, of muddled modern thinking, of her own frail constitution, and, finally, of circumstances.

In spite of being an aristocratic child, she has to work with the servants under her mother’s order. As a noble lady, she incurs the breaking in engagement by a middle-class boy. At last for this sensitive and lordly girl, it makes her feel ashamed, angry and bitter that she has sex with a footman, who later claims he just pretend to love her. This experience makes her associated with her miserable memories, which causes a near trauma in her heart.

Recalling this unhappy precontract of marriage, she recalls her experience during childhood and her growing. Therefore, a series of grievous traumas emerge, making her more and more torturous. Julie’s state of existence is a hyperbole, embellished as a child in a fit.

In her life, Julie is waving between her mother’s toughness and father’s weakling, suffering from the most contradictory feelings: masculine and feminine, love and hate, tenderness and contempt, ecstasy and irony, erotic desire and chaste modesty, attempting to escape an existence cramped by social mores

4. Conclusion

Combining with Freud's unconsciousness theory and his study on hysteria, Miss Julie is suffering unmanageable anxiety and emotional excesses. Only through the catharsis, including the physical and psychical, she comes to her consciousness.

In this play, Strindberg's egalitarian vision of gender roles and his acceptance and usage of the psychological elements in his plays are radical for its day and age. Julie causes her own tragic fate. Unable to arrive at any reasonable plan, she orders Jean to hypnotize her into committing suicide. As a precursor, August Strindberg creates a hysteric and exaggerated version in *Miss Julie*. Julie's tragedy is the graceless, squawking hysteria, because the author wants to exemplify the failures of women's struggle.

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