



A Study of Ibsen's Late Dramas from the Perspective of Liberal Tragedy

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Abstract. Raymond Williams regards liberal tragedy as a development practice of bourgeois drama in different periods, and its content involves the conflict between individual thrust and absolute resistance. The purest liberal tragedies appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and were represented by the famous Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen. Re-examining Ibsen's late works from this perspective reveals three closely related artistic features in his works: first, self-destruction narrative in the context of death; Second, the retreat of the heroic figure; Third, the self-redemption of romanticism.

Keywords: Ibsen · Liberal tragedy · Self-destruction narrative · Heroic image · Self-redemption

1 Introduction

Bourgeois literature from the Renaissance onwards has invariably required full consideration of the question of human emancipation and freedom. In his book *Chuanyue lishi de shengnu: lun "zhendeju" yu xiju de lishihua wenti* (A discourse on the plays about Joan of Arc and the historicization of theatre), Lu Nuan links the creation of liberal tragedy with cultural forces of society context (Lu, 2019) [1]. Raymond Williams observed by crawling through the rise and fall of liberal tragedy in his well-known book *Modern Tragedy*, because it tells the struggle between "thrust of the individual and an absolute resistance" (Williams, 1964, p.113) [2] from beginning to end, the liberal tragedy is considered as the development practice of bourgeois drama in all periods. In addition, there is a narrower boundary about the unique dramatic situation to liberal tragedy. As for this kind of "purest" (Williams, 1964, p.121) liberal tragedy, the incompleteness of ideal stems from sins of the ideal-sender himself, therefore the character moves from self-fulfillment to self-destruction. After the late nineteenth century, the purest liberal tragedies - the late tragedies of Henrik Ibsen - came to an end. The power of liberalism has been exhausted, and the mainstream of tragedy has entered the dark world of "self-enclosed, guilty and isolated" (Williams, 1964, p. 127). The modern tragedies written by Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill and other writers would appear on the stage. By revisiting Ibsen's transformation after *The Wild Duck* in 1884 in the context of liberal tragedy, we can not only find a breakthrough of "analytical technique" (Szondi, 1963) [3] in the form mentioned by Peter Szondi, but also find the new internal artistic features in his work.

2 Self-destruction Narrative in the Context of Death

According to Raymond Williams, with the proliferation of liberal thinking in the West, the tragedy of liberalism is increasingly established. When the classical tragedies of impermanent fate were interpreted as heroic elegies by the liberal New World, and the characters were portrayed as longing for freedom or liberation, a fierce and confrontational view of drama was gradually established. After the European Renaissance, self-realization became an inevitable writing proposition because individuals were “driven by their own ideals and nature”. However, the great power of the individualist idea has gradually shrunk in the process of development of capitalism, and then the creation has led to the core situation of the liberal tragedy: “that of a man at the height of his powers and the limits of his strength, at once aspiring and being defeated, releasing and destroyed by his own energies” (Williams, 1964, p. 113). This is a kind of self-destruction narrative, and self-fulfillment is moving towards self-destruction. On the divergent path of walking alone, people not only gradually find various external obstacles alien to their individual existence, but also see the weaknesses and tragedies inherent in their personalities.

We can hear this voice of life intervened by death in Ibsen's late works clearly. An individual has a strong desire to realize himself, but at the same time, the past brings him a sense of guilt that he cannot get rid of. This sense of guilt leads him to finally find that he is actually a part of the things he resists. The giant who yearns for freedom turns into a sinner who judges himself. Only when he destroys himself can he truly realize himself. Based on the analysis of *Rosmersholm* (1886), Reverend Rosmer finally found it impossible to realize his ideal, because he finally learned about the provocative words that his soulmate Rebecca, who gave him a wish for freedom, had said to Beata. The friendship he thought was pure was the accelerator that drove his wife to commit suicide, and his ideals stained by crime became blurred. Even if Freud, from a psychoanalytic point of view, attributed Rebecca's refusal to propose to the shame brought about by the incest past (Freud, 1915) [4]. But going one step further, the reason for the destruction of Rebecca's bravery is that she learns what true love is in her encounter with Rosmer, and a sense of morality and guilt ensues in her heart. In the end, when Rosmer put on the priest's robe again, the two judges jump into the ditch together, which was the only way for them to clear their ideals. Self-destruction after the trial became the last step of self-fulfillment. The characters are at a loss in the situation of certain death, and can only turn around and doubt whether the original ideal is correct or not. The past brings an inescapable sense of guilt that cannot be shaken off, and can only clear their own evil with the leap of death in the whispers of ghosts.

From Ibsen's works, Raymond Williams sees that in addition to the core mood of self-fulfillment leading to self-destruction, another process characteristic of the liberal tragedy is the change of the protagonist's identity, that is, the transition from a hero who resists the outside world to a victim who resists the self.

3 The Retreat of the Heroic Figure

The change of identity reflects the dynamic process of the creation and development of liberal tragedies, but the change of times is only the superficial reason for the change

of the role image. After the contours of the tragic hero extended to the rising bourgeois image of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Robinson, 2011), [5] the character undergone an important transformation from the solitary, Stoic Mann, who challenged the world alone, to Reverend Rosmer, who judged himself and his lover to jump into the ditch together. The feeling of siege can be seen everywhere in *An Enemy of the People*. Dr. Stockman's plan to renovate the baths is difficult to sustain under the obstruction of many parties. However, he still relies on strong cries to launch the final breakthrough: the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone. Dr. Stockman's unflagging makes him a purely heroic individual. And in *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen asked with a meditative attitude: how do people live in the world? Gregers's "claims of the ideal" is already questionable, but Hjamlar's self-deception is also difficult to affirm. The injured wild duck could not fly out of the attic, and Hjamlar's lofty ideal could only sink again in the sad honey of praising and pitying himself. After that, the liberal tragedy almost fell into the inner world of the "victim", and the emotional structure centered on "desire-guilt" is fully established. The desire for self-realization makes people firmly grasp the possibility of becoming a hero, and also urges him to complete a self-destructive statue. But more importantly, the guilt that accompanies him always haunted the character. Of course, this is partly due to the excellent use of analytical techniques, so that the past can become a lingering sight. But after all, Ibsen didn't use this method with *The Wild Duck*. In fact, Szondi had already discovered that Ibsen's late dramas are quite different from his previous ones, but he only discussed them in terms of the distance between form and content.

Making the material dramatically function, which would otherwise serve to work out the causal-final structure of unified action, here serves to bridge the gap between the present and the past, a past which cannot be presented objectively. Ibsen seldom achieved an equality between the action in the present and the thematic action which the play conjures up. In this respect, Rosmersholm again seems to be Ibsen's masterpiece. The topical political theme can hardly be separated from the internal theme of the past. This past is not hidden in the depths of the characters' souls, but lives on in the house itself (Szondi, 1963).

The forged signature is just an untimely bomb that sets off the family crisis, but the flashback white horse is a ubiquitous shadow of the past. Nora only needs to worry about when the old balance in her heart will be broken, and new impulses and thoughts will emerge from this breaking. But for Rosmer and Rebecca, the balance between past and present has already shifted at the beginning. In *A Doll's House*, the hidden past pulls Nora and Helmer in the direction of their marriage, and a sense of dread that a secret is about to be revealed hovers over the theatre from the start. It could be argued that the discovery of the forged signature is the foreseeable end, but the point is that in the midst of this manoeuvre we are more interested in the direction of their relationship and in Nora's awakening and departure. And while Rebecca's deception is revealed far before the story of Rosmersholm reaches its conclusion, Rosmer still chose to propose to her. The way in which the past is used as a valve to reveal the present relationship is abandoned by Ibsen, the visible end disappears, and it is the shadow of the white horse that might be said to govern the development of the plot of Rosmersholm. Thus, the

rebellion of the self no longer has a place to rest, and sin calls for the destruction of the character.

As the liberal world fell into the soft wetland, the once heroic tradition became vulnerable. Ibsen discussed the difficult situation of people on the road to realization. Even though the hunched individual who stooped forward finally moulded the hero's body for himself by death, he cannot erase the guilt filled in his heart. In Ibsen's later works, the self-destruction narrative in the context of death relies on the protagonist's deep-seated guilt and his desire to clear evil, and also breeds a false heroic image that is infinitely close to the victim.

4 Self-redemption of Romanticism

When the liberal tragedy developed to the end of the nineteenth century, that is, the period of perfection, the emergence of a hypocritical society weakened the power of the human power in the tragedy. It was the superimposition of romanticism temperament that injected the last shot for self-realization. Ibsen pushed the liberal tragedy to its peak and also to the edge of the precipice. Solness, in *The Master Builder* (1892), fell from the air, and his sense of guilt led him to a new transcendence of the self. However, poetic romanticism is not limited to the character's assiduous pursuit of idealism, nor is it simply attached to the symbolic elements such as falling from high places and grapevine leaves. It shines in the fact that the action of death is completed by the character's initiative. The tower is where mortals challenge God. Under the continuous shadow of the fire, Solness, who suffers from acrophobia, finally chose to climb to the limits of individualism.

In using such a sweeping proposition as "the death of tragedy", George Steiner anchored the boundaries of tragedy, for that tragedy which is dead is in fact a specific reference to the classical tragedy handed down from ancient Greece-high tragedy, or absolute tragedy (Steiner, 1961) [6]. For him, the tragic situation is a dark world of irrationality and disorder, in which the characters suffer punishment far beyond their sins, but at the same time, the demand for dignity revives the human spirit, which has disappeared from the body. One of Williams's original intentions in writing *Modern Tragedy* is to challenge Steiner's thesis that tragedy has been dead, but he did not deny Steiner's view of tragedy outright, but showed that there was not just one meaning of tragedy. The tradition of tragedy is not absolute and essential, but rather "an interpretation of the past" (Williams, 1964, p.38) in different ideologies of different times. He thus expanded the boundaries of tragedy and built a "downgraded" (Ouyang, 2022) [7] stepping-stone for its entry into the modern world. In this sense, liberal tragedy has its own developmental justification.

Even though tragedy may not be born out of human's original sin, as Steiner recognized, it is possible to analyze the artistic features in Ibsen's late works by borrowing the concept of "redemption" that he threw out in the chapter IV. Rousseau placed the human spirit in the highest place, since it is the environment and education that are responsible for sin. It is for this reason that Steiner argues that remorse becomes the Romantics' primary attitude towards sin, and that human sin is at this point completely revocable and amendable. When comparing the images of Faust in Christopher Marlowe and Goethe, Steiner argues that in the former's works, the character's awareness of the truth and his

assumption of responsibility shaped him into a tragic hero; In the latter's writing, "the supreme bliss for which Faust bargained with the infernal powers turns out to be an act of Rousseauist benevolence – the draining of marshes toward the building of a new society" (Steiner, 1961, p.134). From Marlowe to Goethe, Faust crossed the shoreline of "remorse" and obtained a "compensating Heaven" (Steiner, 1961, p.129), which is a long overdue romantic remedy filled the tragedy with the power of redemption. This redemption is a departure from the "irremediable suffering" (Steiner, 1961, p.128) at the heart of high tragedy, and thus Romanticism kills tragedy. Yet in the dynamic vision of the tragic tradition under ideological interpretation that Williams upheld, human self-redemption can be the very self-salvation from the impasse of liberal tragedy. At the junction where liberal tragedy was about to fall into modern tragedy, salvation came in the form of Ibsen's conscious transformation.

After listening to the prophecy of his descendants' change of throne to Banquo, Macbeth, who was taken over by madness, went to slaughter his subjects with restless ambition. Blood casts a ladder under his feet, and redemption is beyond reach. In the face of inevitable death, Macbeth still stands up like a hero to face the sickle of death. However, while an individual shows his heroic posture in the breakout, his inner sneakiness flows secretly. Where is the abode of Macbeth's dead soul? It was Ibsen who finally found this answer, and also found a period in the liberal tragedy, that is, the self-redemption beyond guilt. For Ibsen's later works, sin brings with it still an internal struggle of the mind. Ultimately, the characters complete a cleansing of their sins and a return to their ideals with death. It could be argued that death brings a Romantic self-redemption to these frail heroes, and saves the self-image at the center of a macrocosmic liberal tragedy that has fallen all the way. In other words, the remedy still exists in Ibsen's real world - the characters who are trapped in a sense of guilt pry out the last individual power in their souls, and exchange death for a heaven.

Thus, Solness ascended to the top of the tower, Rosmer jumped into the waterwheel ditch, and death cleared their guilt. In *The Lady from the Sea*, self-redemption does not even require a return kiss from death. After seeing what true "freedom" is and understanding that she should take responsibility, Ellida decided to return to her family. When torn between two men, it was Mr. Wangel's voluntary renunciation that makes her understand the importance of "free choice", so that she could easily get rid of the unknown world in the head and no longer float in the fantasy about the sea. The romanticism in Ibsen's tragedies comes from self-redemption after transcendence, "a chance of miracle" (Steiner, 1961, p. 296) is always waiting for the call of man. The road must exist in his theatrical world, even if after the breakout, the character may meet with the ending of death. The hope of man still glows with weak vitality in the collapsed world picture, which is the ending of the liberal tragedy.

5 Conclusion

Re-examining Ibsen's late works, we can find a gradual retreat of the heroic figure under the self-destructive narrative, and the supplement of romanticism elements to the increasingly disempowered liberal ideal world. However, we cannot ignore a hidden frequency that still flickers in these works, which pulls the widely recognized author

image who is good at social criticism in the opposite direction. This contradiction has been looming since his early and middle works: Browder, who spread his faith all his life, was buried in an avalanche, and where Nora went after she left is unknown. Similarly, *The Pillars of Society* does not reveal the essential corruption of the moral landscape in the present world, nor does it “expose the sinful culture of a money-oriented capitalist society that ‘laughs at the poor but does not laugh at the prostitutes’”. On the contrary, Ibsen has great faith in the moral order advocated by the society, so “the moral model must preserve his fame by covering up his crimes, meaning precisely that the people who worship him are not wagging their tails at his wealth, but are deceived by him and mistakenly believe that he has pure, upright virtue” (Lu, 2019). It can be said that Ibsen's dramas are still confined to the order of the bourgeois world, and only the distance between ideal and reality changes. Even though he saw the dark power of a hypocritical society, he could not elucidate its sinful nature. Similarly, even if Ibsen's dramas do show a clearer shift after *The Wild Duck*, in these turn-of-the-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century writings he looked back at guilt after the desire derailed when uncertain about the positive and negative meaning of “ideal”, and finally inclined to believe in the individual power.

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