



Neurotic Self in Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder*

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Abstract

Background: Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) derives the dramatic tension from the neurotic self of the protagonist in his seminal play, *The Master Builder* (1892). The playwright builds on the repressed content of the protagonist: anxiety, phobia, and obsession appear in him, resulting in a neurosis.

Methods: This study attempts to interpret the abnormal behavior of the central character through the psychoanalytic lens of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who has provided us with a functional model of the id, the ego, and the superego as the three drives in the human mind.

Result: Ibsen employs anxiety, phobia, and obsession as the window to examine the inner composition of his personality and critiques the social contradictions that were rising in Norwegian society in the 1880s and the 18890s. Critically approaching the protagonist and the root of his motivation, this paper argues that Halvard Solness suffers from neurosis that manifests through unusual behavior with Ragner, Kaiza Fosli, and Hilde.

Conclusion: The family tension that Solness undergoes throughout the play can also be explained through Freudian theoretical design of the repression and lack of sublimation in personality.

Novelty: Finally, this paper concludes that anxiety, phobia, and obsession in the protagonist's behavior help us understand the neurotic self, which functions as the central impetus in the play.

Keywords: Norwegian Theatre, Psychoanalysis, Neurosis, Obsession, Phobia, Anxiety



Introduction

Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) presents a neurotic self in his seminal 1892 play, [*The Master Builder*](#). Contemplating the fate of human beings and the course of social life, Ibsen invents a character who is unconsciously guided by his inner drives in his quest for power, success, and pleasure in life. He does not know the rational course as he has completely lost touch of love and compassion in his family life. In this study, I have employed the theoretical insights of Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in order to read the inner drive in the principal character of the play. When Ibsen's protagonist is interpreted from a Freudian critical lens, a powerful neurotic self is perceived in the play.

Critical Readings on *The Master Builder*

Ibsen's [*The Master Builder* \(1892\)](#) has been approached from various standpoints and interpreted accordingly. This section briefly reviews various critics' major, diverse arguments on the text. Many critics have read the text to critique the fleeting spirit of the time when Norwegian society was passing through its own contradictions. Analyzing the play, [*Finney* \(1994\)](#) has argued that the play has raised the issue of the loss of creative potential of the nation through the loss of children. Consequently, the mother's suffering in the play typically resembles the tension the nation was going through at the time. As he has critically observed,

Ibsen's awareness of the difficulties of motherhood on the one hand and of the overwhelming power of the myth of maternity as the proper calling for women on the other hand is expressed by several memorable instances in the major prose plays in which women who have either lost their children or never had any remain trapped in maternal thinking toward metaphorical offspring. [\(1994, p.102\)](#)

Even though [*Finney*](#) attempts to give a reading from the perspective of gender, he ends up locating the text in the historical context. He critiques the text in a specific historical context. In the same line of argument, [*Reinert* \(2010\)](#) has read the texts as he remarked,

Ibsen's plays link to both the future and the past, for in great drama, whatever the changes in subject matter and form and mode and technique and language, there is nothing new under the sun. It makes sense to recognize our contemporary obsession with ambiguity in the endings of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, and of *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder*. [\(2010, p. 218\)](#)

[*Finney* \(1994\)](#) and [*Reinert* \(2010\)](#) have contextually read the text and located the spirit of the age in Ibsen's writing to examine his ways of critiquing them.

The play has also been read as a work of art that upholds the universal themes of human life. For instance, [*Shideler* \(1997\)](#) has explored that Ibsen's plays are filled with universal themes of human life, with the struggle for authority being the most prevalent theme. As he critically observes, "In a number of plays, such as *A Doll House*, *The Wild Duck*, or *The Master Builder*, we see a variety of confrontations between normal human males and the illusion of divinely certified male authority" [\(1997, p. 253\)](#). Halvard Solness encounters the challenges from Ragner as a member of the rising generation in the play. It is as if, in the deep slumber,



the old generation refuses to acknowledge the potential of the new generation. Hence, it was labeled a 'somnambulistic drama.' As [Ewbank \(1994\)](#) has analyzed,

Maeterlinck greeted *The Master Builder* as a 'somnambulistic drama' in which everything that is said 'at once hides and reveals the sources of an unknown life'. For all that Maeterlinck wrote illuminatingly on what he called 'the inner and the outer dialogue' in *The Master Builder*, what was life to him was death to Ibsen, who thanked Edvard Brandes for emphasizing, in his review of that play, the realistic qualities of the characters, and who generally insisted that he did not 'seek symbols', he 'portrayed people.' ([1994, p. 132](#))

Ibsen derives his insights for his creative works from deep-seated human values and aspirations and weaves a narrative in his own context. Shideler and Ewbank also agree that Ibsen has developed the tension between generations in the most symbolic ways.

Ibsen's contemplation on human nature was often taken as a gloomy presentation of humanity. What he did in *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder* was often viewed as a murky way of looking at humanity. As [Williams \(1994\)](#) has observed, "Then Ibsen was accused of being too gloomy, his characters belonged to hospitals, dissecting rooms, even morgues, and all of them were unpleasant people with whom it was impossible to sympathize" ([1994, p. 170](#)). [Marker and Marker \(1994\)](#) have also agreed that the idea of the Victorian ethos of a gloomy understanding of human life was present in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* when they stated,

From a spacious and gloomy Victorian office-workroom for its first movement, the play was transposed to a stylized, semi-abstract living-room from the 1930s, midway in time between Ibsen's past and our present, and then to an open, timeless space overlooked by a threatening, ice-covered mountain-side, where no crowd and no brass band gathered to bear witness to the master builder's silent fall and Hilde's almost fanatical ecstasy. ([1994, p. 202](#))

The play presents the rise and fall of a man who struggles against his own destiny, dragging himself into the play of the contradictions of middle-class values. Ibsen's unique way of inventing social reality and designing the play sharpened his critical understanding of history at his age.

Even though Ibsen was writing in the age of realism, he has drifted away from the prevailing way of writing. For instance, [Reinert \(2010\)](#) analyzed that the playwright had not followed the existing practice of writing literature in his works. As he has stated,

It even fits *The Master Builder*, which of all Ibsen's late plays is perhaps the farthest removed from what has come to be thought of as stage realism. It is a play of quint imagery, weird psychologies, and mystifying actions. But it also seems removed from the larger meaning of mimesis as "imitation" or "representation" or "imaging" of universal human reality. The play's puzzles are part of its appeal, and both result from Ibsen's extension of conventional realism. ([2010, p. 222-3](#))

Ibsen did not exactly depict reality as it appeared in society. He worked on the bizarre mindset of the age through the portrayal of men in quest of power and their psychological drive.



The critics have interpreted the loss of creative potential at the close of the nineteenth century, comparing it to the worst plight of mothers. The play has been viewed as a work of art that has critically percolated deep down into the contradictions of the age and exposed the inner strands of contemporary society. In this sense, the text has critiqued the prevalent ethos of the age. Also, one of the readings shows that the text presents the tension between the old and the new, in which the new overcomes the dictations of the old and establishes itself. On the whole, the existing readings show that the text has not been approached from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis. The critical readings have focused on the spirit of the age and the individual crafts of Ibsen in inventing and presenting social reality. However, the scholarship has missed the tension in the inner drive to acquire and maintain a certain degree of power.

Freudian Psychoanalysis as the Critical Lens

Austrian psychoanalyst theorist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) has devised a critical design to study the mind by locating three drives: the id, the ego, and the superego. The instinctual, the social, and the moral are continually in tension in the mind. The most powerful moral mechanism, the superego, continually represses the desires it thinks are unacceptable in the moral domain of human society. Mostly, the libidinal desires are the ones that are repressed and stored in the id. However, the mind also exercises another mode of indirect expression known as sublimation. As [Bocock \(2002\)](#) has stated,

. . . people are born with a certain strength to sublimate their sexual instincts, which varies from one person to another. Some people are more able than others to repress their sexuality and to direct their more perverse sexual desires into culturally valued activities, such as scientific and artistic work. This process Freud called *sublimation*. ([2002, p. 45](#))

Since everyone does not innately have such a mode of expression, the libidinal energy begins to have negative consequences in their personality after a long time. The victim in question shows anxiety, phobia, and obsession that later hamper the ability to make the right decision. In this sense, the collected libidinal energy defeats the rational choice of the subject under question and forces the person to behave in unpredictable ways, paving a road to the neurotic self. [Freud \(1997\)](#) has critically observed it in the following words:

. . . neurotic anxiety has its origin in the sexual life and corresponds to libido which has been deflected from its object and has found no employment. The accuracy of this formula has since been demonstrated with ever-increasing certainty . . . the anxiety-dreams are dreams of sexual content, and that the libido appertaining to this content has been transformed into anxiety. ([1997, p. 69](#))

The moral system from above imposes censorship on the libidinal desires that originate in the id, and later, such desires are repressed in their source. In the absence of proper sublimation, the desires pave the way to anxiety, phobia, and obsession. The subdued content finally results in a neurotic personality with a bizarre outlook on the social milieu.



Neurosis from the Repressed

Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1892) builds its narrative around a neurotic personality who suffers from anxiety, phobia, and obsession. Ibsen tells the story of a rising member of the middle class in Norway in the 1870s and the 1880s. The central character, Halvard Solness, prepares to take up challenges to transform his class. The playwright moves around his obsession to rise to the seat of power and remain there forever. Even though a person is living with acrophobia right from the beginning, the contractor climbs to the tower. He knows that a new generation is going to supplant the construction business in the future; however, he never acknowledges it. He continues to suppress the young generation and exploit them. Devoid of sexual pleasure for a dozen years, Solness feels giddy when he goes to the height. Viewed from a Freudian critical lens, his fear can be viewed as the result of a high degree of repression of the superego.

Solness also knows that he has paid a huge price for the success that he has achieved at this point in his life. He says that he has to subdue his natural instincts in his quest for the transformation of his class. Ibsen writes:

SOLNESS. Who better than I? Considering the price I've had to pay to get where I am.

HILDE. Oh yes ... you mean your domestic bliss ... or whatever you call it.

SOLNESS. And with it, my peace of mind. (1892, p. 319)

In his fourteen years of conjugal bond with Aline, Solness has never sought any physical intimacy with her. A firm person, he completely represses his libido, which does not allow him the bliss of conjugal life and the pleasure of physical union. As Fischer-Lichte (2001) has critically analyzed,

Halvard Solness is a successful builder who has not only won recognition in society but also led a bourgeois lifestyle. He manages an office with three employees, he is married and lives in a representative house in which the honoured members of the city, such as Dr. Herdal, and ladies of good society are welcomed. (2001, p. 265)

Acrophobia is presented as the early symptom of neurosis in Solness. Social contradictions have also found their way into Solness's self, turning it into a space for the play of opposite polarities: He is afraid of the youths whose power and innovation always fascinate him. He knows that he has grown all the malice to destroy his wife's life for his success. The spilt self is largely governed by the repressed instinctual drives collected in the id.

Phobia results from any triggers like open air, spiders, or snakes in a neurotic person. Sometimes, water, height, stars, or the sound of cicadas can also frighten such people. Freud (2001b) has shown the connection between the libido and fear in the following words:

If, however, the libido belongs to psychical impulse which has been subjected to repression, then circumstances are re-established similar to those in the case of a child in whom there is still no distinction between conscious and unconscious; and by means of regression to the infantile phobia a passage is opened, as it were, through which the transformation of libido into anxiety can be comfortably accomplished. (2001b, p. 409)



Anxiety, phobia, and obsession can cause the person to behave unusually in regular circumstances. From the unconscious level, neurotic anxiety manifests in the personality of such people as [Freud \(2001b\)](#) states, "... the deflection of libido from its normal employment, which causes the development of anxiety, takes place in the reign of somatic processes" ([2001b, p. 404](#)). The repressed content pivotally guides the subject under the influence to act in the most bizarre manner through anxiety, phobia, and obsession.

Solness's family has also discussed the acrophobic tendency since his wife, Aline, knows about it. The builder cannot tolerate standing at a high place, so she talks to Hilde about it. She requests Hilde not to inspire him to climb up the tower of their newly built house ([1892, p. 330](#)). When Aline says that he feels dizzy from a height, Hilde does not accept it as she had seen him climb up a tower long ago. She still believes that Solness can do it. She says, "But I've seen him myself right at the top of a high church tower" ([1892, p.330](#)). As a self-made man of the 1870s in Norwegian society, Solness has always run after the impossible to happen in his life. He has achieved unprecedented success in his life. By marriage, he inherited his in-laws' property and made a huge profit for himself. As a contractor for the construction project, he climbed up the Church tower in Lysanger to challenge the authority of God. Despite giddiness, he accomplished the impossible and impressed Hilde at the time.

Ibsen designs Hilde as the voice of the id for Solness. As soon as she enters his life again, she distances Solness from Kaja Fosli. For one thing, this can be read as a stepping stone in Ragner's freedom. For the other, she further distances Solness from Aline. She reminds Solness that he had challenged the authority of God ten years ago in Lysanger and inspires him to repeat the same thing now. Like the alter-ego to Solness, she critically questions Solness's inner essence as she asks if it is true "That *my* master builder dare not ... cannot climb as high as he builds?" ([1892, p. 331](#)). Solness finds himself completely shaken by the question, and he comes to realize, "I'm beginning to think no part of me is safe from you" ([1892, p. 331](#)). Even though Hilde was a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl at the time, Solness kissed her after climbing down from the Church tower. The self-made man who has never relied on anybody for help finds himself empty and seeks out the possibility of enlivening his life through Hilde. As [Gosse \(1907\)](#) critically evaluates,

Upon such a man descends Hilda, the disorganizer, who pierces the armour of his conceit by a direct appeal to his passion. Solness has been the irresistible sorcerer, through his good fortune, but he is not protected in his climacteric against this unexpected attack upon senses. ([1907, pp. 209-10](#))

Hilde has always appeared as a prospect for expressing the libido stored so far in the id. Even if he realizes the danger in what Hilde wants him to take up at the moment, Solness feels drawn to the girl.

Generally, the superego commands the ego to impose moral order upon the instinctual drive, for the instincts mostly search for ways to pleasure. In a neurotic person, the superego loses its ability to properly function and regulate the social self. The id is added with extra momentum to implement the agenda of the repressed. The weak social self fails to regulate



itself, and distortion and split occur in the subject's psyche. In other words, the latent repressed energy gives way to anxiety, phobia, and obsession in such a person. As [Freud \(2001a\)](#) argues,

In obsessional neurosis and paranoia, the forms which the symptoms assume become very valuable to the ego because they obtain for it, not certain advantages, but a narcissistic satisfaction which it would otherwise be without. The systems which to obsessional neurotic constructs – flatter his self-love by making him feel that he is better than other people because he is specially clearly or specially conscientious. ([2001a, p. 99](#))

In the absence of proper sublimation of the repressed content in the subject, the repressed impulses trouble the social/moral self by weakening the functioning of the ego and the superego. Such a person experiences tensions resulting from continuously haunting worries of unknown factors, morbid fear of some unknown things, and excessive inclination towards something or somebody: each of them is known as anxiety, phobia, and obsession, respectively, in the technical vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Hilde ignites an obsession to climb up the tower in his newly built house even after Aline repeatedly reminds him of the possible danger of such an act. After the death of her children, she has lost her inner spirit. However, she continues to live as Solness's wife. Since Hilde has promised to give Solness the future he had ever craved, he agrees to accept Hilde's request to go up to the tower and defy the authority of God once again. The neurotic obsession completely breaks the chains of social and moral self of Solness as he can overtly state without any shame or guilt that he was chained to "this dead woman" ([1892, p. 338](#)), who is his wife, Aline. The troll takes over his social/moral self, and under the spell of the repressed libidinal energy, he soars high in his own imagination. Ibsen portrays the scene in the following words:

HILDE [*slowly*]. My castle shall stand on high ground. Very high it must stand. And open to all sides. So I can see into the far, far distance.

SOLNESS. With a high tower, I suppose?

HILDE. A tremendously high tower. At the very top of the tower, there's to be a balcony. And out up there I shall stand ...

SOLNESS [*involuntarily clutches at his forehead*]. How you can enjoy standing at such a dizzy height ... ([1892, p. 341](#))

The anxious self meets with the excitement of life under the spell of the troll, which Ibsen uses in the play to refer to both positive and negative energy rooted in the depth of the mind. The climb connotes the phallic symbol and the possible union that Solness had long been missing in his life. Anxiety, phobia, and obsession are the early symptoms of neurosis in the subject. Ibsen builds on these early symptoms in Solness to explore the tension emerging from the neurotic self. For instance, [Atkinson \(1953\)](#) notes,

Freud believed that neurotic anxiety was the result of an unconscious conflict between *id impulses* (mainly sexual and aggressive) and constraints imposed by the *ego* and the *superego*. Many *id impulses* pose a threat to the individual because they are contradictory to personal or social value. ([1953, p. 431](#))



Devoid of the physical union from his conjugal life, Solness has undergone complete repression for a long period of time. Technically, [Atkinson \(1953\)](#) explains, "In some instances, repression may divert unacceptable thoughts to unconscious before they ever become conscious. The unconscious is believed to be responsible for dreams, mannerisms, slip of tongue, even symptoms of illness" ([1953, p. 167](#)). Atkinson refers to the need for sublimation for the healthy and smooth functioning of any person. Since Solness has not been able to channel the repressed, he has fallen victim to anxiety, phobia, and obsession as the early symptoms of neurosis.

As the early symptom of neurosis, Solness experiences acrophobia. However, Hilde excites him by promising to settle with him in the castle in the air to the extent that he forgets about the problem. Under the spell of Hilde, he loses his social self. He openly passes remarks upon his wife's loss of interest in life after losing her children. The neurotic self does not know anything beyond the immediate prospect of pleasure from Hilde, whom he asks to "hold tight on to" ([1892, p. 347](#)) after climbing up the tower. In *Lysanger*, he realized that it was not worth building Churches ten years ago, and he had taken a vow to build only houses for people from then on. However, he realizes he has built nothing in the end ([1892, p. 350](#)). Then, the construction work would sublimate the repressed content. He could enjoy the sublimation of the inner content of the id through his work till he challenges the superego. In the play, Ibsen shows Solness challenging the authority of God as Ibsen writes,

SOLNESS. And as I stood there on high, at the very top, and as I hung the wreath on the weathercock, I spoke to him: Listen to me, Almighty One! From this day forward, I too will be free. A master builder free in his own field, as you are in yours. Never again will I build churches for you. Only homes for the people. ([1892, p. 349](#))

He breaks off the authority of the moral principles in his self, further enhancing his neurotic personality. From the ground, Hilde hears the most pleasant sound like the harps in the air as he spoke the words as she tells him, "Yes, you have. You sang then. It sounded like harps in the air" ([1892, p. 292](#)). Then, he descends from the tower and kisses the thirteen-year-old schoolgirl: she says, "You took me in your arms and bent me backward and kissed me. Many times" ([1892, p. 294](#)). As he descends from the tower, he loses the moral standard restrained in life and lets his inner desire grope out its way in society.

Ibsen has designed many of his characters who move from darkness to light. Solness also remarkably journeys from ignorance to knowledge, repression to sublimation, and morality to pleasure. [Ewbank \(1994\)](#) studies the mythical aspects of the play and explores the meaning of his name in the following words:

Solness, whose very name evokes myth (Norwegian 'Sol' meaning 'sun', and 'ness' an 'isthmus' – placing him half-way between gods and men?), challenges the Almighty from the church tower at *Lysanger* ('lys' meaning light) and aims to do so again from the top of his own tower. Ibsen evokes resonances of a Lucifer, a Faust, a Prometheus,



even an Apollo – but without locking Solness into an identification with anyone of these myths. (1994, pp. 132-3)

Though he appears like a mythical rebel, he has failed in his responsibility towards his family and society. Obsessed with accomplishing success for himself, he has done anything possible to rise to the rung of the social ladder. Ewbank's comparison is partially valid in that he lacks the qualities of Lucifer or Faust. As Moore (1977) critically observes,

In the play beginning with *The Master Builder*, however, Ibsen allows himself a looser structure. Though Solness can evade his fate no more than earlier protagonist, “he is free within the dramatic narrative to choose the events that will reveal and constitute it.” What happens is truer revelation of his own powers and perceptions. “Nothing Solness does issues from the past like a time bomb going off, nothing has to happen simply because something has happened earlier.” (1977, pp. 170-1)

Solness certainly wants to reach a more prosperous state in his life. Ironically, his free will is controlled through the spell of the id. He fails to exercise any rational power to redeem himself from the grip of irrational forces. A victim of neurosis, his id inspires him to follow the glittering advice that Hilde passes to him to climb up the tower. He does not even realize that he cannot stand the height that had already troubled him ten years ago.

Obsession and anxiety compound the effect of phobia. A neurotic person with these three symptoms fails to understand the implications of even life-threatening circumstances. Ten years ago, Solness had vertigo in Lysanger: he knew how he would feel giddy at a height when he climbed up the tower of the Church. When Hilde appears in the scene, the repressed content from the id completely takes hold of him, and he prepares to take up the challenge again. For instance, Ibsen writes:

SOLNESS. I shall say to him: Hear me, Great and Mighty Lord! Judge me as you will.
But henceforth I shall build one thing only, quite loveliest thing in the whole world ...

HILDE [*carried away*]. Yes ... Yes ... Yes!

SOLNESS. ... Build it together with the princess I love ...

HILDE. Yes, tell him that! Tell him that!

SOLNESS. Yes. And then I shall say to him. Now I go down to take her in my arm and kiss her ... (1892, p. 351)

Hilde controls him through the use of the castle in the air. Solness rejects the reality principle that seeks equilibrium between the id's desires and the superego's moral codes. The ego fails to govern Solness: it cannot inform his mind about the impact of acrophobia. He is wrapped in the labyrinth of pleasure.

The neurotic person follows the calls from his id. In the play, Hilde represents the wildest of the fancies of Solness. The protagonist, who could defy the authority of God just ten years ago, fails to understand the impending threats to his own life when Hilde excites him to climb the tower and put the garland on the newly constructed house. Ibsen has employed God as the superego, Aline as the ego, and Hilde as the id. Since Solness rejects both God and his



wife in his life, he falls prey to the calls of instinctual drives only. Now, he listens to Hilde, who promises him to build a castle in the air and settle there. Aline sees that he might fall as he reaches the middle of the tower. Hilde cheers for him as he weaves a white shawl as a symbol of victory. However, the man loses control over himself and falls down onto the ground, as a voice declares, “His head is all smashed in” (1892, p. 355). As the victim of neurosis, Solness never knew that he was preparing for his death by climbing up the tower.

Conclusion

Hendrik Ibsen’s 1892 play *The Master Builder* builds the tension around the activities of a neurotic self. The protagonist, Halvard Solness, kills himself because he fails to understand the implications of the calls of his desires. Freudian critical lens helps understand the problems that Solness undergoes in the play. The neurotic person does not recognize anxiety, phobia, and obsession, which weaken his ability to think critically about himself and society. Ibsen designs the play with a triangular relationship between Hilde, Aline, and God and places Solness in the middle of the triangle. Hilde represents the id trying to find ways to channel the repressed content, while Aline stands as the ego. In other words, Solness’s wife balances moral and instinctual needs in his life. Finally, God implies the superego, which is also known as the morality principle. In *Lysanger*, Solness defies the authority of God as he vows not to build Churches any longer. Solness also rejects his wife after Hilde appears in the scene after ten years. The neurotic person aligns himself with the id (the pleasure principle) only by rejecting the superego (the morality principle) and the ego (the reality principle). Solness’s fall results from his inability to understand himself and his neurotic self.

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