Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 3 (52) – 2010
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

COMPOSITIONAL ASPECTS OF *ROSMERSHOLM* BY HENRIK IBSEN AND *LONELY LIVES* BY GERHART HAUPTMANN

Crina LEON*

Abstract: *In this paper a comparative analysis is made between the plays* Rosmersholm *by Henrik Ibsen and* Lonely Lives *by Gerhart Hauptmann, so as to show Ibsen's influence on Hauptmann. The structure and the themes of the two works are taken into account. In both dramas, the characters deal with the conflict between the traditional value system and the will to spiritual freedom. They both feature triangles of relationships, which do not find their fulfilment because of social rigidity or a feeling of guilt. Social criticism expands into psychological dramas, revealing the development of the individual's personality.*

Keywords: *Henrik Ibsen, Gerhart Hauptmann, traditionalism, spiritual freedom.*

1. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen and Gerhart Hauptmann are two major playwrights in the history of theatre. Their dramas *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *Lonely Lives* (1891) deal with the individual's struggle between two worlds, the Christian moral tradition and a newly born world of spiritual freedom, unrestricted by ethical and religious rules, that implies his/her autonomy and ability to create his/her own moral universe.

At the time when he wrote *Rosmersholm*, Ibsen was in exile in Germany where a so-called 'Ibsen school' was formed. Hauptmann was here among his disciples especially with a view to writing naturalistic dramas.

The second half of the 19th century represents a time of crisis of the value system in Norway and Germany, and of revolt of the human spirit. This revolt also characterizes the main male characters Johannes Rosmer in *Rosmersholm* and Johannes Vockerat in *Lonely Lives*. The two plays have several elements in common, proving a clear Ibsen's influence on Hauptmann. In what follows, we will focus on some of the compositional aspects.

2. Structure of the Dramas

Both Ibsen and Hauptmann render the negative moral consequences of the conservative society on the human personality in search of a new kind of freedom, the spiritual one. They both deal with the conflict between society and personal will, a will to ennoble or enlighten other people. Their characters are people trying to define new values.

* Faculty of Letters, "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iaşi.

BDD-A20207 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:32 UTC)

In *Lonely Lives* we re-read *Rosmersholm*, but in a synthetic form, organised in a chronological order. *Rosmersholm* is an analytical drama, with return to the past. Ibsen's triangle Johannes Rosmer - Rebekka West - Beate Rosmer becomes Hauptmann's triangle Johannes Vockerat - Anna Mahr - Käthe Vockerat.

A man with the same name (Johannes), a learned person, is awakened to life from the isolation of the past. He is willing to break free, but is kept prisoner between two women. One of them (the wife) is weak and related to the past, while the other one (an outsider) is strong, looking to the future. The man feels compatible in terms of ideals with this outsider, but the two can become a whole only beyond death or in their souls.

The hope of becoming a whole remains however ambiguous in the texts. It is *assumed* that Rosmer and Rebekka threw themselves over the bridge, that Anna left by train and that Johannes fell into the lake. Each reader is invited to create his/her own ending.

Actually, ambiguity in both plays comes from the polyphony of the dramatic form: there are different voices, different perspectives, and different interpretations of the ending. Death may be interpreted as a victory (freedom is gained) or as a failure (Beate Rosmer and Käthe Vockerat take revenge on their husbands). The inner conflicts referring to the fight for freedom do not take society into account, relying on an individual and not a universal dream.

Regarding the place of the action, the authors present an isolated old-fashioned drawing-room at Rosmersholm, and respectively a living-room of a bourgeois house at Friedrichshagen.

Other common elements in both dramas include the presentiment of death (by the frequent recurrence of the white horses and of water - waterfall, lake), the conflict between generations as carriers of opposite ideologies - old and new, a love polyphony (love seen as simple friendship, as intense friendship, carnal love, brotherly love, platonic love and spiritual marriage, love sealed through a final separation), the child (existent or not) as a key element, the characters' transformation, the manifestations of will (weak or broken by the spirit of the place).

The title itself, *Rosmersholm*, refers to a defender of conservatism, while *Lonely Lives* suggests the absence of real communication, the impossibility of overcoming traditionalism and hence the appearance of loneliness.

3. Thematic Universe

The central theme of both dramas is the will to revolutionize the human spirit, to set it free from the constraints of conservatism and render it ennobled to genuine liberalism.

Rosmer's entire development is in accordance with this theme. From a pastor he becomes an atheist, and this decision confuses both the conservatory and the liberal groups in the community in which he lives. The same orientation is evoked by Johannes Vockerat, who is an admirer of Darwin and Häckel and an atheistic philosopher. In his case only the respect for his parents makes him choose certain compromises, such as his son's traditional baptism.

The struggle between the old and the new, the dilemma between respect for traditional beliefs and the family's feelings on the one hand and the progressive thinking and desire for truth in dealing with old convictions on the other hand are in fact variations of the above-mentioned central theme.

Although the two main male characters are accompanied by two strong women and emancipated partners for dialogue, their wish to revolutionize and ennoble the

BDD-A20207 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:32 UTC)

human spirit is not fulfilled. The old morality, by its rigidity, holds back one's conscience in its struggle for liberation. The drawing-room at Rosmersholm is constantly supervised by the ancestors' severe looks coming down from the portraits on the walls.

By their influence on the community Rosmer's predecessors (pastors, officers and officials) had also earned an important position in the family history. Rosmersholm had always been a place of discipline and order, of opinions accepted by the most respectable people of the society.

The entire region bears the mark of Rosmersholm. But its atmosphere and mentality annihilates one's will and audacity. Thus Rosmer, the last descendant of the ancient noble family, is himself a weak man (especially at the beginning of the play). Also Rebekka, the femme fatale, full of ideals, ready to sacrifice anything including herself for Rosmer's liberation from a Christian moral confinement that suffocates him, gradually becomes weaker under the destructive pressure of conservatism. This is consequently the effect of the traditional morality on the bold spirits.

Conservatism becomes a danger in one's way to freedom, to changes, to the new. Unfortunately, its opponent, liberalism, was connected at that time to opportunism and for a personality troubled with ideals that can be fulfilled only in genuine freedom neither way is worthy. Rosmer and Rebekka will succeed in reaching this freedom together, after they become a whole. Liberation will be gained only after sharing a new type of morality, based on love, sacrifice and altruism.

In Hauptmann's play the old Christian bourgeois morality is embodied by the Vockerat parents, respectable persons, devout Catholics, very rigid when it comes to breaking traditions. Everything in their life is defined as black or white, good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak. There is no middle way, no compromise. Their life is simple; they work and pray, leaving everything in God's hands. The life they live and preach is marked by routine, which the dreamer Johannes, the misunderstood scientist, the searcher for truth, cannot accept. He feels just like Rebekka, crushed under the weight of conservatism. This is the reason for his revolt against the same morals hampering freedom of thought and action.

Anna Mahr, a sociable, intelligent Russian girl, appears as a breath of oxygen in this traditionalist environment. She gives the joy of life, of dreaming and action back to Johannes. His life receives a meaning, that of replacing the old value system with a new one, having its sources in nature and philosophy.

The new system of values involves a selfless attitude that the young man also puts into practice towards the dear ones such as Käthe, whom he realizes that he loves and towards which he changes his behaviour. Johannes and Anna mutually support each other, but do not become a whole; their relationship remains one of friendship. Their sacrifice takes different forms: on the one hand, Anna leaves Johannes giving in to the old morality under the Vockerats' pressure, and returns to her studies. On the other hand, the young dreamer does not have the power to overcome this failure and cannot go back to his old routine. He will find his liberation in suicide.

The predecessors' voice present through symbols (white horses, white shawl), through the social customs or the family involvement is a recurrent theme, which constantly intertwines with the main theme. People cannot get rid of tradition, of the ancestral voice, as much as they dream of change and emancipation.

BDD-A20207 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:32 UTC)

Love in its various forms, of nature, of self and of the partner is another important theme common to the two plays. Love takes the erotic form only expressed in the body language suggested by the stage directions and by the dialogue hints.

Losing faith in God, in an era of positivism and religious conflicts, is also present with both Ibsen and Hauptmann. Beside it, the guilt awareness causes a crisis of conscience. Awareness of the loss of innocence, which becomes obsessive, occurs in the key moment of the dramatic action, when the male characters hope to experience the satisfaction of the fulfilment of their dreams. Thus the ideal becomes in fact an illusion. When one feels to have touched it, it hopelessly moves away and can be further reached only through the ultimate sacrifice. It is Rebekka's case marked by the guilt of incest, Rosmer's case obsessed with guilt towards Beate, Johannes' case marked by his inability to keep hold of Anna.

4. From Social Criticism to Psychological dramas

The two dramas, *Rosmersholm* and *Lonely Lives,* are naturalistic plays at first sight, presenting as seen the conflict between the conservative and liberal view in Norway, respectively Germany at the end of the 19th century.

But social criticism is only a modest target of the authors. Their interest is directed as well towards the psychological depth of characters, their evolution, with ups and downs. Both Ibsen and Hauptmann are fascinated by the nature of the created characters, and go deeply in their unconscious to discover what is beyond their psychological transformation.

The characters of the two works have something pathological in their features, an incarnation of an unconscious trauma. Like a marine troll, coming from the enigmatic North, Rebekka makes use of all means to take roots at Rosmersholm: she wins Beate on her side, makes Rosmer ask her to marry him after Beate's death and makes him commit suicide.

The immoral circumstances in which Rebekka was born and educated - a heroine of adultery and incest - lie in the unconscious and feed her desire to become an upstart, lead to the birth of carnal passion for Rosmer, and the lack of scruples in reaching her goal.

Rebekka follows a psychological transformation. Her mind and soul host a struggle between the immoral and the moral, between spiritual love and physical attraction, between cynicism and regret. The morality of Rosmersholm has put a stamp on her, too. Rosmersholm has ennobled her, turned her into a better person, capable of true love.

The heroine's psychological evolution is so obvious that in the end she is capable of the supreme sacrifice, the suicide, so as to remove her lover's doubts, to restore his faith, to prove worthy of his feelings and Beate's equal, to prove to him that she has changed.

Rosmer, in his turn, goes as well through a mental ascent, gives up the conveniences and opens to the world although he had originally been a weak man, helpless and frightened by his wife's unhealthy love. Willing to help the other people to become better, Rosmer is pleased to have fulfilled his mission, at least in relation to Rebekka, whose sacrifice in the name of change gives him confidence and courage.

The corresponding couple in Hauptmann's play, Johannes and Anna, also undergo an inner radical transformation, just like Rosmer and Rebekka. Their friendship is born spontaneously, due to spiritual compatibility and generates joy, even happiness. Incompatibility with the members of their family, with their friends,

BDD-A20207 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:32 UTC)

with the society and morality of the 19th century leads to guilt that finally causes the separation of the two. This happens because "those who struggle for an ideal, those who attempt to cut themselves loose from the old, from the thousand fetters that hold them down, are doomed to lonely lives". (Goldman 51)

The action of the dramas is primarily internal, we particularly follow a clash of ideas, the characters' transformation, the influence of the society and environment on the mind, the way in which human minds influence each other.

The constraints of the society hamper people's personality. The will of the temerarious human being is in conflict with the morality of the time, hence the psychological dimension of drama. Unfortunately, as shown in both dramas, the individual, even in the presence of moral support, is finally defeated by society. However, the individual becomes more responsible, admits guilt, and advances on the moral scale.

If the two plays are interested at the beginning in moral and socio-political aspects, in which the new faces tradition (liberalism versus conservatism, atheism versus religion, the ideal of the younger generation versus the predecessors' ideal, the courage and initiative of the emancipated women equal to men versus submissiveness of the traditional women overwhelmed by the superiority of the opposite sex), both dramas become dramas of ideas about life philosophies, attitudes, and psychological conflicts.

Both works have a similar development and tragic ending. The spectator experiences in turn terror and pity, approval and disapproval, the feeling of guilt, the effects of cowardice and courage. The interpersonal relationships, particularly within the central couple and those with the rest of the world, do not reach the expected ideal as they are not in accordance with the mentality of the epoch.

The male character fulfils his dream only beyond death. The attitudes of the female characters differ. If Rebekka, ennobled by the spirit of Rosmersholm, becomes more responsible, assumes guilt and commits suicide to prove this, Anna prefers to go away, although also becoming aware of her own guilt regarding the Vockerat family.

The traditional female characters of the two plays also have a different evolution: if Beate disappears from Rosmer's life so as to clear his way towards happiness out of love for him, Käthe undergoes a discrete emancipation throughout the play, and her womanhood only begins to awaken. At the beginning of the play she is dependent and helpless. Moreover, she does not share her husband's thoughts and does not understand him in spite of loving him.

The ending of the drama is open: something is seen, heard, felt, but there is no certainty. The spectator, a witness to the whole psychological drama is invited to think about an ending himself/herself, according to his/her way of understanding and feeling.

5. Conclusions

The common structure of *Rosmersholm* and *Lonely Lives*, the developed themes, the psychological approach to characters, the way in which they grow out of conflicting ideas, the traditionalism of the plays - aristocratic or simple, the final solution are some of the compositional aspects that show Henrik Ibsen's influence on Gerhart Hauptmann.

Ibsen's ideal of free development of the individual, the admiration of the Norwegian playwright for the pioneering human spirit are also constant characteristics of Hauptmann's work, who filters them through his own personality.

BDD-A20207 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:32 UTC)

The issue of freedom as well as the troubles of the psyche are treated by both.

"Ibsen's characters never attain higher freedom and insight than in the moment of death [...] The values that are presumably destroyed through the death of the main character are given continued life through the suicide as an act of sacrifice." (Ystad 268) Sacrifice and death appear as forms of purification in the two plays, the only ones capable of liberation.

References

1. Beyer, Edvard. *Ibsen: The Man and His Work*. London: Souvenir Press, 1978.
2. Goldman, Emma. "Lonely Lives". *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama,* New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005. 46-52.
3. Hauptmann, Gerhart. „Oameni singuratici". *Teatru*, vol. I, Bucureşti: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1968. 127-221.
4. Hemmer**,** Bjørn. *Ibsen. Kunstnerens vei*. Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2003.
5. Huneker, James. *Iconoclasts, a Book of Dramatists: Ibsen, Strindberg, Becque, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Hervieu, Gorky, Duse and d'Annunzio, Maeterlinck and Bernard Shaw*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1905.
6. Ibsen, Henrik, "Rosmersholm". *Nutidsdramaer*, Oslo: Familievennen Forlag A.S., 1997. 245-287.
7. Leland, Charles. "'Å gå den samme veien som Beate gikk': Another Look at *Rosmersholm*". *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*, vol. VII, Eds. Bjørn Hemmer, Vigdis Ystad. Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1991. 205-212.
8. Maurer, Warren R. *Understanding Gerhart Hauptmann*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1992.
9. Osborne, John. *Gerhart Hauptmann and the Naturalist Drama*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998.
10. Pailler, Jeanne. "*Rosmersholm* d'Ibsen, un drame de l'impossibilité". *Vox poetica*. 1 Dec. 2006. Web. 3 Jan. 2007.
11. Vartic, Ion. *Ibsen şi „teatrul invizibil". Preludii la o teorie a dramei.* Bucureşti: Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, 1995.
12. Ystad, Vigdis. "Sacrifice, Suicide and Tragedy in Ibsen's Drama". *Proceedings, IX International Ibsen Conference, Bergen 2000*. Eds. Pål Bjørby, Asbjørn Aarseth. Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 2001. 265-272.

BDD-A20207 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:32 UTC)