Master Builder Freudian Symbols Essay, Research Paper

Freudian Symbols in The Master Builder

The Master Builder, by Henrik Ibsen, is a play about individuality, morality, and

self. But beneath those very ambiguous descriptions lies a play with symbols that clearly

depict the collective unconscious. Through a careful psychoanalytical critique of the

text, the relationship between the symbolism and the psychological themes can be

discovered as they interact throughout the play.

Within a play, ?symbolism has a broader role as a kind of natural metaphor, or

mode of comparison? (Neu 115). A psychoanalytic criticism will concentrate in the

symbols within the play and discover their ?hidden meanings,? because ?elements of the

latent content are expressed not directly but symbolically in manifest content? (Erdelyi

152).

Solness, the primary character, is a successful but aging architect who uses others

to fulfill his own selfish intentions. He demands respect and fear from all characters who

interact with him. Even his old carpentry teacher refers to him as ?the chief? and refuses

to make decisions without Solness? consent (Ibsen 13). But, beneath the hard exterior, he

wrestles with instincts and dark forces. And yet, he can not surmount the sexual

obsession that drives him through life; Solness is a nymphomaniac and can not handle his

wife?s infertility which results in the loss of their sexual relationship. In an effort to

obtain sexual freedom, Solness destroys himself.

Hilda is also a nymphomaniac. Because she went through adolescence without a

mother, she was unable to successfully resolve an identity conflict as a child. This results

in her inability to develop her own gender identity, and she can not, therefore, create a

relationship with Mrs. Solness, but turns to Halvard to fulfill her sexual needs instead.

While both of the previously mentioned characterizations may seem, at first

glance, to be quite unrealistic, the actuality of each of them is much more plausible after

a close analysis of the Freudian symbols in the play. Then, an accurate personality for

each character may be obtained.

The first obvious symbol in the play is the characters? perpetual references to

?rooms.? Solness fears that the youth will not ?make room? for him, and the room

symbolizes the womb – a place where Solness can take refuge from his ever-present

desires and return to innocence (Ibsen 115). He emphatically shouts, ?make room – make

room – make room! (Ibsen 540).

And, ?make room? is precisely what Mrs. Solness does. Offering Hilda

hospitality, she immediately becomes concerned with preparing a room for the child.

Again, Mrs. Solness is presented as the mother and quickly welcomes Hilda into her

womb and intends to care for the child as a mother would. In contrast to Solness?

exclamation, ?There?s not that much room here,? (Ibsen 157) Mrs. Solness states,

?There?s more than enough room? (Ibsen 632). In the same way, Hilda is given the

children?s room and this symbolizes her role as Mrs. Solness? lost child. Unfortunately,

Hilda?s identity issues prevent her from assuming the role Mrs. Solness needs and wishes

her to undertake.

While, the room serves as a symbol of the womb, the various entrances and exits

serve a similar function as they designate the entrance to the womb – the uterus. Solness

fears youth will destroy the womb he is trying to create and cries, ?someday youth will

come here, knocking at the door? (Ibsen 542). Then as if on cue, Hilda arrives. Being

the symbol of youth, she implores that he (and his wife) ?open your door to the young.

Let them come in with you? (Ibsen 980).

The symbol of a bird is used to portray the wild passion of Hilda. As the act of

flying symbolizes the capability to perform sexually, the bird epitomizes the sexual

being. And, in the play, Hilda is the character with the wild and untamed carnal appetite.

When Solness asks her if she will return home, she tells him, ?Wild birds never like

cages. Birds of prey like hunting best? (Ibsen 2212).

But, the bird is not the only emblem used to depict the intense sensuality in Hilda.

When the reader gets the description of her, she is full of symbols the denote her

personality:

?She is of medium height, supple, and well-formed. Dressed in

a shortened shirt, sailor blouse open at the throat, and a little

sailor hat. She has a knapsack on the back and a long alpenstock?

(Ibsen 547).

While the initial description is rather self-explanatory, the most interesting section can be

detected through the symbols used in the description. She carries with her a lengthy stick

which is an obvious phallic symbol, and serves to represent her obsession with the male

genitalia. In addition, her clothing is that of a sailors? which can easily be paralleled to

water – the symbol for amniotic fluid. Indeed, this very deliberate depiction of Hilda?s

sexuality cannot be easily ignored.

Even the flowers in Mrs. Solness? garden are used to symbolize and contrast the

beauty and lust within Hilda and Mrs. Solness. Coming up from the garden with a

bouquet of flowers, Hilda asks Mrs. Solness, ?don?t you go down even once in a while

and visit all those lovely things? (Ibsen 2002)? Mrs. Solness replies that, ?it?s grown so

strange to me, all of it. I?m almost frightened of seeing it again? (Ibsen 2005). She is

quite unable to appreciate the innocent sexuality of the garden because her age and her

experiences have caused her to become disassociated with sex and love and hope. The

death of her children and the perceived infidelity of her husband has given her an

inoculation against the powerful beauty within the garden.

And yet, the fact that Hilda is referred to as ?princess? and not ?queen? creates a

very distinct dichotomy between the role she plays and the role Mrs. Solness plays with

regard to Solness. While there is evidence to support that Mrs. Solness can be Halvard?s

mother figure, Hilda can only be the opposite. Solness tells Hilda, ?the princess shall

have her castle? (Ibsen 2588). Rather than give her the title of queen (and mother), she is

given the role of the innocent child (princess).

While many of the symbols in the play portray the sensuality of the characters,

there are still more symbols which serve as windows into the psychological minds of the

characters. For example, the castle, churches, and books represent the three components

of personality: the id, ego, and superego. The castles in the sky symbolize the id for

Hilda initially and Solness eventually. The id is the part of the personality containing

energy with sexual and/or aggressive instincts; the pleasure principle. Hilda expresses

her desire for a sexual relationship with Halvard through her wish for a castle in the air

and similarly, Halvard imagines that the kingdom will allow him to give in to his

desperate urge to be gratified through intercourse with Hilda.

If the castle represents the id, then the churches logically symbolizes the

superego. The superego is defined as ?the past of the personality that represents good

and conscience , that distinguishes right from wrong in moralistic terms? (Berger, 39).

However, the death of Solness? children gives him the strength to repress his superego

and, as a result, he ceased creating churches. He tells Hilda, ?from the day I lost them, I

never wanted to build another church? (Ibsen 1410). Interestingly, while Solness did

build churches, they all had terribly elongated towers. As the tower undoubtedly stood

for a phallic symbol, its presence essentially decreased the strength of the superego

image. Where the church failed, the tower was able to defy gravity and led him closer to

redemption – or so he thought.

The third component of the personality is the ego. The ego is the part that

regulates between the demands of the id and the limits of the superego (Berger 39). The

play uses books to represent the ego. Because books contain both morality and sexuality,

they allow a reader to live vicariously without dealing with the repercussions of either.

While the ego might have redeemed Solness and Hilda, both refused to read the books.

Hilda says, ?I can?t connect with them anymore.? And Solness agrees and states, ?it?s

exactly the same for me? (Ibsen 1260). Indeed, the id has gained enough strength to

obliterate both the ego and the superego. The characters are quite doomed to accept the

consequences of their actions.

Notable the consequences which essentially characterize the play?s conclusion are

also very stereo-typical images of sex within Freudian philosophy. It is quite clear that a

number of objects are used to denote the genitals symbolically in the final act. The

climbing of steps is most commonly used to symbolize sexual intercourse. Thus,

Solness surmounts his deadly fear of climbing as he begins the ascent to the top of the

tower (another previously discussed phallic symbol). While Mrs. Solness is afraid for

her husband and wishes he would turn around and descend, Hilda emphatically

encourages him to continue upward saying, ?He?s climbing and climbing. Always

higher. Always higher? (Ibsen 2650)!

And yet, the symbolism does not end there; Solness? death is a portrayal of his

failure to perform sexually. His inability to climb without falling symbolizes his ability

to obtain either gratification of redemption through sex. Instead, he plummets to his

death and Hilda is left staring at the tower of possibilities. Without Solness, there could

be no castle and her superego is refused fulfillment.

It is also very necessary to note the impact Freud?s symbols have on minor

characters as well as the major ones. Kaja is the one character with steady control over

her own identity. She is secure in her sexuality; this can be portrayed by her profession

as bookkeeper. According to Freud, ?weapons and tools generally stand for male

genitalia, while materials (things worked upon) stand for female genitalia? (Sulloway

338). Although Kaja uses a pencil (male), she is a keeper of books (female), and as a

result, has created a very even balance for her sexuality. Unfortunately, even she can not

resist the strength of the superego which is represented by old Solness.

Through a careful examination of the symbols used in Henrik Ibsen?s The Master

Builder, a very successful Freudian analysis of the play and its characterizations can be

revealed. Indeed, it becomes clear that the characters are driven by forces – sexual forces

- quite out of their control, and it is the forces which ultimately destroy Solness? life and

Hilda?s chance for gratification.