

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

HALVARD*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Halvard Solness** (in Ibsen's *The Master Builder*) **closed**

Overview Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright—he wrote in Danish, the culture language of Norway at the time—who spent most of his adult life living in Germany and Italy. He is widely considered the modern world's finest social dramatist, after Shakespeare; his courageous look at the social world of his time, in the 'new Europe,' woke consciences, and continues to do so, having won him, in his time, the title of the 'Founder of Modernism.' His ground breaking plays—'A Doll's House,' 'Peer Gynt,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'The Master-BUILDER,' a dozen in all—exercised an intense influence on European cultural consciousness, and, though dealing in social and familial 'scandals' which might seem dated today, continue to raise global theatrical consciousness.

Character Halvard Solness is a provincial, and quite successful, architect in a mid-sized Norwegian city. As the play opens, he is still dealing with a past full of problems, a disastrous fire that led to his children's fatal decline and traumatized his wife, a long-hanging female lover—she has just appeared at the start of the play, raising everyone's tension level and infuriating his wife—while he is considering the challenge of completing a tall steeple like structure for the town to which he has moved. His dreams and his passion are in this challenge, which is the greater for the personal dilemmas, romantic and guilt-ridden, which weigh him down. His acrophobic death, by falling from the steeple of his challenging new construction, seems painfully fated; and only Hilda, his youthful flame who has encouraged him in his ambition, seems joyful, at the fall of the acrophobic master builder, who is now hers forever.

Parallels The figure of the architect and of his structures seems made to inspire strong literary imagery. Horace Walpole (1717-97), a British gentleman architect, was the master creator of his gentlemanly dream manor, the fake gothic castle of Strawberry Hill. (His gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, carries out in words the architectural imagination of real life, with all the necessary crannies and ghosts.) In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1892-94) Charles Dickens included, among his galleries of eccentrics, the greedy Seth Pecksniff, an architect whose dictatorial abuse of his employees meshed with his 'grand artiste' psychology. In *The Fountainhead* (1943) Ayn Rand, the individualist par excellence, immerses us in the independent (Tea Party?) thinking of the 'master builder,' Howard Roark. The latent symbolism in the experience of architecture is given a typically violent turn in J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975), in which the life interior to an urban high-rise becomes a battleground miming the inherent violence of the entire city.

Illustrative moments

Fearful Halvard explains to his old flame, Hilda, that he is not on comfortable terms with the younger generation. He fears and dislikes their new architectural ideas, and senses that they will want 'retribution' against his own architectural constructions. 'That is why I have locked and barred myself in,' he explains to Hilda. 'I tell you the younger generation will one day come and thunder at my door.' At Hilda's suggestion, that he should welcome the young, and win their favor, Halvard blurts out his pathological fear of being replaced. 'The younger generation means retribution,' he says fearfully.

Comfort The memory of the disastrous fire, that ultimately caused the early death of his two sons, has left Halvard eager to create comfortable and reliable house structures for his clients, for 'the people.' 'It was simply and solely by that fire,' he tells Hilda, 'that I was enabled to build homes for human beings. Cozy, comfortable, bright homes...' The dreadful loss of the fire was the price Halvard had to pay, he felt, for the discovery of his kind of devotion and service. In the

end, as the master builder of a high structure which rose on the wings of pure ambition, he went beyond the firm needs of his devotion...and perished.

Ambition As the play unfolds, Halvard discloses more fully, to Hilda, the kinds of dreams and ambitions that now drive him. 'Don't you agree with me, Hilda, that there exist special, chosen people who have been endowed with the faculty and power of desiring a thing, craving for a thing, willing a thing...so inexorably that at last it has to happen?' We suspect that master-building, of the steeple sort, is part of this desiring, yet Halvard, a mystery, implies that the dreadful fire, with the helpers (esp. Hilda) who were generated by it, were part of his own path to discovery of his destiny.

Dream Halvard has been reminded by Hilda, of the castles in the sky which the two of them had promised each other, when she had still been a teen-ager. Now that they have found each other again it is time for them to remember the castles in the air which they will build for each other. They agree that these castles in the air are the loveliest thing they can build for each other, and we have to reference the tall architectural structure Halvard is creating, and from which he will fall to his death. The dreamscape imagery, accumulating at the end of the play, gives the term *master-builder* an eery grandeur and fragility

Discussion questions

Does Ibsen use the term 'master builder' ironically? Is Halvard a true 'master builder'?

What kind of decisive importance has the fire for Halvard? What did that fire do to his relation with his wife?

Is there a religious significance to the spire Halvard is constructing, as the apex of his building aspiration?