

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

THE MASTER BUILDER

Henrik Ibsen

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 consciousnesses, 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.

Story

Halvard Solness is a middle aged master builder—pre modern; *director of a construction project*—who has become prominent and successful in a small town in Norway. One day he has a visit from a young lady of 23, who reminds him that he knows her—though he is at first blindsided by the visit. They had previously met, she reminds him, ten years before in her home town, when she was only 13. At that time, she continues reminding him, he made advances to her, clearly having a 'romantic' intention, and promising her what he called 'a kingdom.' She wonders, she says, whether he has work for her in his house, and need for help with household duties. He takes Hilda into his house.

We soon realize that Halvard Solness is mired in various difficulties. As the director of an architectural firm he is the boss of one Ragnar, who is ambitious to rise in the firm, and conflicts with Halvard's preference for keeping him in his place. Halvard also has an uncomfortable relationship to his wife, thanks to their shared suffering. In their past lies a domestic fire which has killed a couple of their children, and although the event is deeply buried in the past, the memories of it are irrepressible, and take their tolls on Halvard and Aline. It is clear that Halvard's growing closeness to Hilda, with the passage of time, is related to his need for a comfortable female relationship. Hilda herself grows increasingly involved in Halvard's architectural projects.

As success has gone to his head, Halvard has undertaken increasingly challenging prospects, and now, with Hilda's encouragement, he is completing a lofty structure, with a high steeple. Hilda is by his side encouraging Halvard, as he proceeds with this project, although she has knowledge which bears directly on what her lover is attempting. She has learned that he will be expected to climb the steeple, and wave to the people, at the ceremonial completion of the project. She also knows that Halvard suffers from *acrophobia*, a fear of heights. Despite these reasons for concern Hilda supports the master project.

Right up to the opening ceremony, Hilda provides the background encouragement to Halvard's work, and on the day of the opening ceremony it is she who provides the needed enthusiasm and support. Inspired by her words, Halvard makes it to the top, but at that point he loses his footing, and crashes to the ground, and to death before the amazed spectators of his masterpiece. All the spectators remain frozen and aghast, except Hilda, who charges forward waving her scarf, and crying out 'My Master Builder,' in triumph.

Critics have debated hotly over the meaning of this play, in which Ibsen has passed from the realism of earlier works like 'A Doll's House' or 'Hedda Gabler,' to a far more abstract, and even allegorical theater. One line of interpretation traces the play to autobiographical elements in Ibsen's life, especially to projects and dreams he generated in the ambience of the several girl friends who were shapers of his life-consciousness. Psychological views have also been offered. The 'kingdom' the Master-Builder once offered Hilda, may represent a megalomaniac dream condition that forever lured Ibsen himself.

Themes

Megalomania. The master builder, haunted by the terrible domestic fire that killed his children, dreams grandly and dangerously of the glorious achievements he is capable of. This is his megalomania.

Romance. Halvard is of a romantic temper, as we see from his growing dependence on Hilda. He had offered her a kingdom, when she was only 13, and he is swept up in her encouragement, as he undertakes the supreme achievement of his career.

Competition. As it happens, in a purely circumstantial fashion, Halvard has enjoyed increasing success at the expense of competitors—victims of hard luck, or losers of contracts—who fell back before the 'good luck' of the master builder.

Characters

Halvard. Halvard, the master builder, has himself suffered the dreadful loss of children, and is perhaps especially sensitive to the child Hilda, whom he meets when she is only 13. He promises her a kingdom, and he keeps his promise, all the way to death, by constructing a dream steeple for her.

Hilda. Hilda is a romantic follower of the master builder, and, as we see at the very end, she has identified with his megalomania. She rejoices in his fate, which she has made her own.

Ragnar. Ragnar is Halvard's architectural employee, who is ambitious to rise to higher professional projects, but whom Halvard restrains and opposes.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Halvard Solness (Closed)

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?