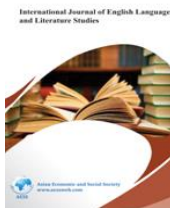




International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies

ISSN(e): 2306-0646/ISSN(p): 2306-9910

URL: www.aessweb.com



HOME IN THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF THE FATHER BY AUGUST STRINDBERG

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ABSTRACT

Strindberg's The Father Home, within the dramatic world of the text in question, becomes a space which the characters, especially Laura inscribes rather than just inhabits. The metaphor of home is a popular metaphor in literature, especially in the postcolonial and social drama of Ibsen and Chekhov and other such playwrights of the modern era. House or home plays a significant role in plays like Hedda Gabler, Doll's House, The Cherry Orchard and also in other plays by Strindberg (2006) like The Dance of Death and to an extent in Miss Julie too. In The Father however, it changes its connotations, especially with respect to Laura's character as the plot develops. It becomes from a place of oppression to that of power for her and finally a Sibyl's cave where she uses her sorcery and creativity in a somewhat twisted way to mould things according to her desire. This paper seeks to critically analyze the space which defines "home" in The Father, how it is used and consequently differed in meaning through the intervention of Laura. For this purpose it will draw upon "The Parables of the Cave" written by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. This essay talks about how the simile of the cave corresponds with womb and the female abode.

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Keywords: Home, Feminism, Strindberg, The father, Laura, Captain.

Received: 6 September 2014 / Revised: 17 December 2014 / Accepted: 22 December 2014 / Published: 30 December 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

Revolving around the well-known idea of the battle of the sexes, Strindberg's The Father, is a play that has received high recognition, all over the world. The plot exposes the main characters,

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DOI: 10.18488/journal.23/2015.4.1/23.1.20.26

ISSN(e): 2306-0646/ISSN(p): 2306-9910

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Captain and his wife Laura, caught in a mental struggle originating from the desire of attaining unquestioned supremacy and authority in the house and related affairs. For the unfolding of the events related to this tragedy, Strindberg has chosen their home as the suitable setting. The home in *The Father* is no ordinary home as its usual connotation is altered and it becomes a space which the characters, especially Laura, inscribes rather than just inhabits. It coverts from the usually perceived place of oppression for females to that of power for her and finally takes the form of a Sibyl's cave where she uses her sorcery and creativity in a somewhat twisted way in order to mould things according to her desire.

This paper seeks to critically analyze the space which defines "home" in *The Father* and how it is used and consequently differed in meaning through the intervention of Laura. For this purpose it will draw upon "The Parables of the Cave" written by [Sandra Gilbert and Susan \(2000\)](#). This essay talks about how the simile of the cave corresponds with womb and the female abode.

The idea of home as a consequential space in literature is not a novel one. With the growing popularity of the use of "space" in genres of literature, as the favoured subject for critics and researchers alike, home as the space, has also come under discussion in many such instances. As an example, Paula E. Geyh's article, "Burning down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping'" has similar concerns as are taken up in the present article. The author describes the scope of her research in the beginning of the article thus,

"I want to focus specifically on the ways in which feminine subjectivity both constitutes itself and is constituted either through or in opposition to the space of the "house" or the "home" in Marilynne Robinson's novel *House-keeping*." ([Geyh Paula](#))

In Geyh's article, she explores and debates in depth on the utilization of home in Robinson's novel, discussing its various manifestations and associations.

Discussion about the space of home can be found in various other works of research, as stated earlier but the present article tends to explore and expose its interpretations with respect to Strindberg's *The Father*, an area that has not come under critical scrutiny with respect to the play in question, till date.

The physical manifestation of home in *The Father* depicts it to be phallogentric or male dominated. The paraphernalia which inhabits the place plays a role in this regard.

"In the middle of the room, a large, round table strewn with newspapers and magazines. To right a leather-covered sofa and table ... At left ... a desk with a clock on it. Game bags, guns and other arms hang on the walls. Army coats hang near door at back. On the large table stands a lighted lamp" (Act I, 11).

So as the play begins the Captain dominates the place both physically and figuratively. He is prominent physically, because almost all the items in the setting are associated with his character, and because he is the one from the main characters of the play who is present on the scene since the beginning. Figuratively his authority becomes obvious, because it is he who leads the conversation with the Pastor and Nojd and orders those around him to do his bidding ... he summons Nojd and after questioning him gives his verdict on the case on which the entire play later rests. But, as one

goes deeper into the story one realizes that this is not necessarily the case. As the Captain himself says, "This house is full of women who all want to have their say about my child" (Act I, 13). Later in the play the audience also come to know that sometimes the female majority succeeded in having their say ... the women, for example, were successful in having the tenant of their choice. The house thus appears to be an arena for a tug-of-war, where everybody tries to push the other to have things their own way.

Laura also uses the space of the home and turns it into her very own theatrical with its inhabitants as her audience. She uses the nurse as a pawn in her own plan and makes her tell the Captain that the Doctor had come to see her mother when this was not the case and later in the end when she is made to put the straight jacket on to the Captain. The Doctor too becomes an audience as well as an important character in the play devised by her. This is why she urges the Doctor to listen to her before making any decision and later makes him enact a role when she urges him to lie to the Captain about the real reason for his presence in the house.

She does not really have representation in terms of things present on the scene. She however uses the structure of the house for her disposal. She takes what she has and then uses it for her own benefit. While the Captain inhabits the centre stage, she is free to move about and for this purpose; she makes thorough use of the doors visible in the setting. The multiple doors make the space liminal for Laura and so allow her to move about and manipulate it so that she gets her own way. She frequently goes in and out and in Act II, she is discovered eves-dropping from behind one of these doors. The Captain on the other hand only uses them twice: once to go out of the house and secondly, when he is entrapped by Laura finally. She also uses the things available as her props to complete the drama. For example, she uses the "lighted lamp" and turns the episode of being hit by the lighted lamp to her own benefit to prove the Captain insane. The house therefore works as her ally in the scheme of the plot of the play and consequently Laura's plot to get her own way.

In the Captain's words, "They hint that ... women can do this or that now-a-days ... incessantly, it is a conflict between man and woman" (Act1, 15). The male female divide creeps from the macrocosm of the state to the microcosm of the Captain's home within the text of the play. The state's laws give father all the rights for the children, so the Captain says, "I, who have the chief right to try to form her (Bertha's) character" (Act I, 13) and "She (the mother) has sold her birthright by a legal transaction, and forfeited her rights in return for the man's responsibility of caring for her and her children" (Act I, 17). The law of the land therefore, does not consider all human beings as equal but is biased and works on male, female basis. " 'Father tends to appear as breadwinner/support ... while mother *appears* (as in Freud and Lacan) to be part of the 'natural' order" (Waugh, 1989). On the level of the household, the divide becomes apparent as soon as the play is set into motion.

The men acquire central position here too while the women are at the periphery. In the case of the Nojd, he is summoned into the household and his version is heard while the maid is said to be in the kitchen where she stays till the end of the play and her version is neither heard nor brought into consideration. On the contrary she is rather slighted by Nojd, when the Captain asks him, "...

you told Emma you would marry her” he replies by saying “Oh, a fellow’s always got to say that” (Act I, 12). The verdict is given without listening to her and the justification which the Pastor gives for his reaction is rather sexist too. He says that although he is sorry about the girl yet he sympathizes with the boy because the girl can leave the child in the orphanage and get herself another job but the boy’s career would be over if he lost his job in the military (Act I, 13). The Pastor’s emotions are not fair and on the basis of gender rather than justice.

The Pastor’s comments play a role in marginalizing the females in the household, he becomes a somewhat minor character who sets the mood of the drama and to an extent voices for the audience what is implied for the characters. He does not take into view his relations with the women referred to by the Captain and speaks entirely as a male chauvinist. He advises the Captain to “keep a tight rein on the women folks ... (because he) let them run things too much” (Act I, 14) and when the Captain tones down his comments for Laura, the Pastor dismisses his softness towards her and tells him that, “it is she who really wears on you most” (Act I, 14). Later in the play he gives similar comments about the Captain and says to Laura, “I have always looked on him as a weed in our garden” (Act III, 42) but while the earlier remarks play a role in strengthening and to an extent creating the man-woman divide, the later comment only voices what is already obvious ... the Captain’s fallen state.

The Captain too makes his condition appear to be a constant tussle with the women-folk. He starts by talking about the majority of the women in his home and their interference in his concerns for his daughter. “This house is full of women who all want to have their say about my child” (Act I, 13) and when the Pastor points out that he has “too many women to run this house” he replies by saying “You’re right! It’s like going into a cage full of tigers, and if I didn’t hold a red-hot iron under their noses they would tear me to pieces any moment” (Act I, 14). He implements this through his hold on the money and very authoritatively gives Laura order to give him accounts for the house hold money by replying to Laura’s argument by saying dismissively, “here is the house keeping money and your pin money. You may give me the accounts later” (Act I, 17). He also refers to Laura as his enemy multiple times and the only time he shows a soft corner for her, his sympathies are dismissed by the Pastor.

Laura’s place in her home as defined by the patriarchal standards represented by the Captain is marginal; she has to account for the household money that she spends and in return has no rights over her own daughter. When Laura questions her authority over her own child, the Captain very straight-forwardly tells her that the mother has no rights for “She has sold her birthright by a legal transaction, and forfeited her rights in return for the man’s responsibility of caring for her and her children”(Act I, 17). Laura is denied a say in her own child’s future because of being a woman. Her home becomes for her a “kingdom of immanence, womb, and tomb” (Susan Alice *et al.*, 1999) or in other words “immanence with no hope of transcendence, nature seduced and betrayed by culture, enclosure without any possibility of escape” (ibid). Laura becomes caved in, only because of her sex and despite the fact that she had the women majority of the house and even Bertha herself in her favour (as she refuses to do anything which might anger her mother), she could not really have

her way with her daughter. She tries to make the Captain adopt a middle course and asks, “if both father and mother should agree?” (Act I, 17), but is told that “This is a knot that cannot be untied” (ibid), by the Captain and when he even refuses to let Bertha be a party in the matter, manipulation is the only course of action which remains open to her and she uses this course boldly and rather cruelly at the end.

Her very source of weakness and limitation becomes her power and she converts the domestic space into a war-zone. “the womb-shaped cave is also the place of female power, the *umbilicus mundi*, one of the great antechambers of the mysteries of transformation” (Susan Alice *et al.*, 1999). Laura says, “Power, yes! What has this whole life and death struggle been but for power?” (Act II, 36). She first uses the law in her favour which the Captain has put to his benefit in the beginning. The dialogue between the Captain and Laura is reflective of it.

Captain. I feel that one of us must go under in this struggle. /Laura. Which? /Captain. The weaker, of course. /Laura. And the stronger will be in the right? /Captain. Always, since he has the power. /Laura. Then I am in the right./Captain. Have you the power already then? /Laura. Yes, and a legal power with which I shall put you under the control of a guardian (Act II, 39).

The first reason that the Captain declares for Laura’s inferiority according to him is due to the fact that he is the provider of bread for the family. He says that a woman “forfeited her rights in return for the man’s responsibility of caring for her and her children” (Act I, 17) and later tells her to keep accounts of the house keeping money so that they may know who is responsible for their precarious condition. Laura uses the same taunt in the end when she dismisses the Captain as unimportant, she says that since he has fulfilled his purpose of providing for the family, she would get money from his pension and so does not need him anymore. When the Pastor asks her what she has been doing after shutting the Captain, she replies, “I am now trying to straighten out the affairs of the household, which he has carried on in a most reprehensible manner” (Act III, 41). This comment when seen in the light of the Captain’s earlier scoffs comes across as pretty ironic. In the light of these remarks the whole situation appears to be topsy-turvy and the one on the receiving end becomes the one on the giving end.

“Motherhood is our present social state, is the sign and seal, the means and method of a woman’s bondage. It forges chains of her own love and instinct” (Mona Caird qtd. In Susan Alice *et al.* (1999)). Laura derives power from this same motherhood, when it is put under threat The child metaphor runs throughout the play. Since the very beginning the problem is that of the illegitimate child of the Nojd and the kitchen maid. It then transfers to Laura and the Captain, as the problem of Bertha’s education arises. She becomes a commodity rather than a flesh and blood person as both the parents refuse to take her into confidence concerning her future. Both the parents become opposing parties with respect to her and make the house a battleground, as the Captain tries to take her away from Laura; she retaliates by taking her away from him eventually. The nurse declares that for Laura, her daughter is everything, she says, “A father has something besides his child, but a mother has nothing but her child” (Act I, 22). The Captain declares what the child means to him, himself, more than once. He declares that his idea of immortality is to live through

one's children. The child therefore stands for the source of power and life for both the characters and while Laura derives her power from the danger of Bertha being taken away from her, when the Doctor asks, "You must have felt yourself how the mind rebels when one's deepest desires are thwarted and one's will is crossed" she replies "Haven't I felt that!" (Act II, 29). The Captain is literally broken once she is taken from him. Bertha then stands for power which Laura has at the end.

Laura uses her femininity which wears her down since the beginning as her source of power. From her discussion with the Captain about Nojd's case she finds out that the Captain thinks that only the mother can know who the father of the child is. Similarly from her conversation with the Doctor she finds out that one can make a patient like the Captain believe in anything. She uses this information to her own benefit and without really saying it makes the Captain believe that he is not the father of Bertha. This turns the Captain almost insane and by proving him so she acquires absolute power ... both physical and monetary. She herself admits to the Captain that, "... love between the sexes is strife. Do not think that I gave myself; I did not give, but I took – what I wanted" (Act II, 38). Captain's complete breakdown comes when he starts crying and admits Laura's victory (Act II, 37), after that he merely admits Laura's power.

"... the cave is a female space and it belongs to the female hierophant, the lost Sibyl ... last parable is the story of the woman artist who enters the cavern of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition which might have generated that power" (Susan Alice *et al.*, 1999).

In the end the Pastor draws a parallel between Lady Macbeth and Laura when he says that she has committed the crime in such a manner that it has not even left blood stains on her hands. The Captain calls her Omphale three times, he says "Omphale, Omphale! Now you play with the club while Hercules spins your wool" (Act III, 48). These analogies make her appear as a mythical figure ... a Sibyl in her own right who weaves her magic to turn things around. She is also the creative writer who uses the situation created for her to her own benefit and comes out triumphant. "Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without', from the heath where witches are kept alive: from below, from beyond 'culture'; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget" (Cixious, 1996). She weaves her plot, uses information from the Captain himself and the Doctor, asks the Doctor to listen to her first before meeting the Doctor so that she could turn her charm on him and influences all those around the Captain to believe that he was insane and literally turns the Captain insane. Then it becomes his turn to be trapped inside the darkness of the womb (symbolized by the inner private room) which he declares to be a redundancy of his rejection by his mother. The metaphor of the mother and the child is carried forward till the end (through Laura's declaration that he saw in Captain a child rather than a lover) and the analogy of the house with the cave and consequently the womb is therefore also established till the play ends.

She is a prophetess who not only knows her future she makes it for herself and in this way moulds the cave like home which appeared to be her tomb into her castle. Laura comes across as a

woman denied her rights because of her gender and also a mother who is denied motherhood twice ... once when the Captain becomes the husband by exercising his male power and secondly when her daughter is taken from her. Like a wounded tigress she retorts and uses the meagre means she is provided by turning her home into her castle where she rules supreme.

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