Re-interpreting *The Master Builder*: A response to J.S. Hurst

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a twenty-first century response to an article written by J.S. Hurst for the July 1968 issue of *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. Hurst's essay tenders an interpretation of Ibsen's arguably most difficult play, *The Master Builder (Bygmester Solness*), but, in light of subsequent criticism, it has been possible to reveal alternative vantage points and in many places original readings of the text that were overlooked by Hurst at that time. This polemical essay responds to some of the questions set up by Hurst in his article of 1968 by focusing on the critical debates that surround the play's central characters and its problematic ending, and concludes with a discussion of the classification of the play as a proto-symbolist drama.

Keywords: Ibsen, Henrik; *The Master Builder*; Hurst, J.S.; drama; 1890s; realism; symbolism.

Since J.S. Hurst's reading of Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1892) in July 1968 the critical community has interrogated many of the concerns raised in his paper. Hurst begins his brief exploration of *The Master Builder* by stating that the play suffers from "problems of interpretation", which he claims is proven by the "bewildering" number of critical assessments (Hurst 207).[1] Certainly, interpretations of *The Master Builder* continue to be as varied, though more subtle, in their approach to the play's complexity as ever. As Hurst found during his brief evaluations, unanswered questions and haphazard summaries of current critical views, different interpretations of the play are not necessarily problematic. The balance between symbolist and realist modes and the inner battle that Solness experiences with God and salvation are the central, though not the only, problems with deciding categorically on an interpretation of the play. Indeed, *The Master Builder* invites debate at every turn; its complexity is "bewildering" and baffling, but is crucial to the play's significance and appeal. Instead of fighting the clamour of critical debate, as Hurst attempts in his article, *The Master Builder* prefers to court it and indeed offers a resistance to categorical interpretation which forms part of the play's unusual attraction.

At the centre of critical dispute are the characters of Halvard Solness and Hilde Wangel, who remain enigmatic and therefore resistant to definitive interpretations. Are they heroic, tragic, pathetic or comical? Should they be pitied, admired, ridiculed or reviled? Disregarding his own directive, to jettison the tendency of critics to only explore "one strand in the [play's] complex web

of meaning" (207), Hurst focuses his article on the exploration of the two central characters. Modern interpretations, on the other hand, tend to be less polarised than the early readings of their characters by B.W. Downs, Desmond MacCarthy, M.C. Bradbrook, K. Muir and Janko Lavrin (all cited by Hurst (208)). Hurst's initial desire for "consistency" in interpretations of their characters gives way to recognition that this is not possible in *The Master Builder*. Solness's character, Hurst concludes, "must be shown as a man torn and ravaged by fear of age and longing for youth, by desire for success and knowledge of success's worthlessness, by guilt and vision" (215). Over the years since Hurst's article appeared these conflicts within this character have caused Solness to be read variously as a man who has idealised himself beyond reality;[2] an artistic genius; a Prospero;[3] an Adam (211); a demon;[4] "a classical tragic hero";[5] a Nietzschian superman;[6] "a Lucifer, a Faust, a Prometheus, even an Apollo".[7] However, "the question of Hilde" according to Hurst, "is more vexed" (215). He notes that Hilde could be read in a number of ways, but eventually reduces her to "a neurotic, slightly fey girl" who is, over the course of the play, "transformed into a woman", thus ignoring the multiple possibilities within her character. Since Hurst's article, Hilde has been read in many different ways by a wide variety of critics. Is she an abstraction of Solness himself;[8] "the synthesis of some of Ibsen's most cherished themes: youth, woman, joie de vivre, light, the abandonment of Christian bondage to duty";[9] a symbol of an amoral ancestry;[10] the offspring of Racine's Phédre and

Aeschylus's Cassandra;[11] a "supranatural" fantasy or an "occult helper";[12] a *hulder;*[13] a replacement child;[14] a therapist arrived to save Solness from himself;[15] a femme fatale, a tempress or a "minx";[16] a muse;[17] a "naturalistic [...] vivacious young woman";[18] or "the ultimate new woman"?[19] Both Hilde and Solness "demand [...] doublevision"; they are not classifiable, not definable and nor should they be.[20] The salient point that Hurst fails to make is that neither Solness nor Hilde *should* be focused; their interest lies in their vacillation between reality and symbol, hero/ine and villain/ess, genius/muse and fraud/temptress and every other shade of meaning in between.

Some critics have continued to read the play as an autobiography with Ibsen as Solness taking the lead. Certainly there are parallels to be made between the master builder's characteristics and Ibsen's own. The autobiographical elements of *The Master Builder* - including Ibsen's relationships with younger women who arguably influenced Hilde's character (Emilie Bardach (dwelt on by Hurst), Helene Raff, Hildur Andersen and Laura Kieler); his description of writing as architecture; the burning of his home town of Skien and the lectures of Knut Hamsun given in October 1891 which fuelled the theme of youth battling age - certainly form one analytical approach to the interpretation of this play. However, Hurst barely acknowledges this reading. He makes parallels between Bardach and Hilde, briefly equates Ibsen's remorse over his illegitimate son with the theme of guilt in the play and skims over Ibsen's religious beliefs. This is in spite of the fact that previous critics, such as

Mary MacCarthy, had already claimed that the work had "a curious confessional closet-smell, as though he were using his play-writing as a form of psychotherapy".[21] Since 1968, Robin Young, among others, has worried that past readings of *The Master Builder* as purely autobiographical are reductive. Young is justified in his assessment that "the problems [*The Master Builder*] explores are those of any creative artist".[22] However, his dismissal of the significance of previous autobiographical interpretations is reductive in its own way, for the play contains enough self-allusion to suggest that aspects of Solness and Hilde, certain images and particular themes do relate specifically to Ibsen the individual as well as to the everyman artist.[23] Inga-Stina Ewbank offers one of the most balanced modern judgements of this critical line: "Ibsen is a writer of dramatic fictions in which autobiography fits where it touches [...] Ibsen liked to stress that everything he had written was 'lived through' ('*gjennemlevet*'), but was also as insistent as T.S. Eliot on the separation between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates".[24] It is an aspect of the play that deserves more attention than Hurst was prepared to give, even if an autobiographical reading has the reductive quality of shrinking everything to fit the author's life. The text cannot account for every single event, character, theme or symbol in this way, but it is worth more consideration than Hurst had time to give it.

One of the play's central concerns noticed by Hurst, and one which a number of critics have attributed to the autobiographical, is "the relation

between desire and fact [...] along with the disabling nature of the guilty desire" (210). This theme (along with the tension between youth and age) becomes the driving force for the action that unfolds in the play. Guilt and its ruinous consequences are the result of the belief that thought is synonymous with action – a philosophy which Hurst argues is biblical in origin and which critics such as Michael Goldman have attributed to pre-Christian primitivism and Freudian psychology: "Freud accounts for the uncanniness of moments like Hilde's knock on the door by explaining that they arouse our fear of what he calls 'the omnipotence of thoughts,' the primitive belief that mental activity, especially unspoken desires, can of itself have physical consequences".[25] Thought and act are one and the same to both Solness and Hilde: "Don't you believe too, Hilde, that you find certain people have been singled out, specially chosen, gifted with the power and the ability to *want* something, to *desire* something, to *will* something... so insistently... and so ruthlessly... that they inevitably get it in the end?" (MB 411).[26] This theory is at the root of Solness's debilitating guilt over the fire that destroys his wife's family home; the subsequent deaths of his twin sons (MB 410-11); Kaya's offer of help (MB 371); and Hilde's memory of his embrace and her appearance at his door: "I must have *thought* it all. I must have willed it... wished it... desired it. And then..." (MB 384). Solness believes that he "willed" these occurrences and, if willing something causes it to happen, then guilt is the natural consequence. It is Solness's "great crushing sense of guilt" (MB 396) over the fire which destroyed Aline's family home that leads to

the rift in his marriage and fuels his arguably destructive relationship with Hilde, who appears almost impervious to the feeling. Aline is also stricken down with guilt which manifests in her cold attention to duty (a word which naturally repels the amoral Hilde).[27] Hurst is correct in his assessment that Aline "mouths the clichés of traditional pietism" (212) thus rendering "righteousness as guilty as vice" (211). Her guilt and transference of that guilt onto the God that gives and takes away contributes to the rift between them as much as Solness's Nietzschean amorality and rebellion against God.

Unlike Solness and Aline, Hilde is a stranger to the sensation of guilt. Her momentary dalliance with conscience following her talk with Aline (MB 428) is soon forgotten as it stands in the way of her desire to see her master builder climb to the top of the tower and the sexual union that Solness promises following his achievement. Hurst argues that these feelings are of equal strength within Hilde and claims that she "feels the pull of conventional good faith, as she feels the desire for possession" (210). However, he fails to note that all "conventional good faith" is swiftly forgotten in the subsequent conversation when a "robust conscience" (MB 412), handed down from the Vikings, is lauded. Hilde's flirtation with a "fragile conscience" (MB 412) is short-lived; there is little evidence that her "vision has been tested and deepened against the claims of ethics" (211) as Hurst avers. Hurst gives Hilde too much credit for her fleeting principles. This misreading of Hilde leads Hurst into claiming that Solness "must build the most beautiful thing in the world, and now he knows

what it is – a human relationship based on love" (213). This may be true, but there is no evidence that the "human relationship based on love" is with Hilde. Hilde admits that she feels sexual desire for Solness, yet there is nothing to suggest that this feeling stretches further. Her "robust conscience", described through allusion to Viking myth, unruly trolls and Nietzschean images of birds of prey (MB 415), suggests the desire to conquer and possess rather than to love. The reason why Solness falls at the end of the play is personal rather than cosmic; he has nowhere else to go; he cannot return safely to Hilde because the relationship, based on myths and imaginings, would never succeed in reality as it is not founded on love. Hilde and Solness are far from being, as Hurst would have them, the idealistic heirs of the tragic Tristan and Isolde (213), whose relationship, though equally doomed, was founded on courage, mutual respect and love.

The themes of love, guilt and desire are bound up with Solness's view of God, and the play's Christian concerns have often been discussed in the light of Ibsen's well-known dislike for canting religion and, more specifically, of the religious sect led by Gustav Adolf Lammers which infiltrated the minds of the inhabitants of Skien. This religious scepticism is certainly perceptible in *The Master Builder* as Hurst points out. Solness blames the burning of his wife's family home and the subsequent deaths of his twin sons on himself and on a God who, he believes, caused these tragedies in order to force him into life as a master builder (MB 438). Solness has accepted a Calvinist version of a God

who is almighty and predetermines all the actions of men on Earth.[28] Hurst, and Solness himself, seem to overlook the idea that there is another version of salvation opposed to the Augustinian, that of a God who has given Solness the power of choice. If God has given Solness free will, a doctrine favoured, most famously by the Renaissance Jesuit Luis de Molina and modern philosophers Peter van Inwagen and Robert Kane, rather than a controlling puritanical tyrant, Solness becomes a more foolish character, someone who has inadvertently created his own downfall by believing in the wrong type of salvation. Therefore, Solness's "revolt against God ha[s] been a failure" (211) perhaps because God was never at war with him in the first place; because God was not to blame for the tragedies; because Solness has been given free will to change the course of his life which is not predetermined. Hurst takes for granted Solness's interpretation of events, that it is God who strikes down the over-reacher, rather than seeing that it could be Solness's own sense of guilt which destroys him. If anything, God has given Solness the opportunity to heal, an opportunity that he has disregarded due to pride, regret and self-doubt; this moment of salvation is offered in the uncomfortable conversation with Aline, which he chooses to ignore. Solness's ascent and fall are, if we adhere to the argument for metaphysical libertarianism, his own fault; he is not stricken down, he is, like Faust, careless of the opportunity of salvation. Solness has not "flout[ed] the creator's will" as Hurst claims (211); he has not been punished for abandoning the building of churches or for adulterous thoughts by a "hangman god" that

says “thou shalt not”, as Theoharis Constantine Theoharis and Robert Ferguson propose.[29] If the audience believes in a God of love who offers ‘home rule’ to humanity, rather than a Miltonic authority who predestines all action, then this aspect of the play is transformed from the conventionally tragic or heroic interpretations of Solness’s fall into the realm of pathos. Though Ibsen’s brush with traditional religion during his own life might have rendered his interpretation of Solness as a rebel against a faith which has a predestining retributive God at its centre, it is also possible to argue, depending on the reader/audience’s view of predestination and free will, that Solness creates his own downfall by rebelling against a loving God who has never sought his doom. Therefore, the master builder’s struggle is arguably human, not divine (though *he* perceives it as such).

The climax of *The Master Builder* therefore depends on the interpretation of the God that Solness believes to have controlled his life. If we conclude that the play’s finale is “tragic”, then Solness is cast down by an angry God whom he has wronged; if “heroic”, then Solness has bravely defied God and won in the moment of his death;[30] or if “pathetic”, Solness has fallen because his is a self-created crisis in which God has played no part. Ewbank asks: “Which is the true ending and genre, the heroic romance of the achieved impossible, or the *de casibus* tragedy of the inevitable, even retributive, fall?”[31] Again, Ewbank takes for granted (like Hurst) that the master builder is fighting against a retributive God, just as Agamemnon does (with whom George Steiner equates Solness);[32]

or an omnipotent God who he eventually succeeds in defying. Charles R. Lyons takes a more moderate line when he states, “Ibsen presents Solness’s death as neither triumph not defeat but as an action perceived as both”. Yet, once again, Lyons’s interpretation ultimately presumes that it is an antagonistic God that Solness must battle, not a God of love.[33] Ewbank, Steiner, Lyons and Hurst can only see the heroic or the tragic in the ending of the play, but there is clearly a third reading possible, that Solness is pathetic and precipitates his own downfall regardless of God. The potential pathos of his end is perhaps the reason why critics have found the conclusion of the play so problematic.

Further critical debate has surrounded the last few lines of the play, particularly Hilde’s “Now, now it is finished” and her climactic cry “My... my... master builder!” (MB 445). The first of these closing remarks suggests parallels between the triumph of the architect succeeding in his task to climb the tower, but who must die in consequence and Christ in the moment of his death, though it is important to bear in mind that the Oxford version of this line avoids such connotations by translating the text as “Now, now he’s done it!” (MB 444). Nina Schartum Alnæs shows how the Norwegian “Nu er det fuldbragt!” evokes Christ’s final words on the cross, a connotation which is lost in the Oxford translation.[34] Alnæs argues that “this reference to the crucifixion in the gospel shows that the artist must sacrifice his own life for the immortality of art”, yet Solness is leaving little behind in terms of artistic achievement - he has built mediocre “homes for the people” (MB 439).[35] It is also important to notice that

it is Hilde who speaks the line, not Solness, which might suggest that it is she who is triumphant at the play's end. Indeed, Hurst claims that according to Ibsen, Hilde's shout "My... my... master builder!" (445) is the "triumph of a prophetress" (209), though Hurst worries that her actions throughout the rest of the play do not support this interpretation and that it is ultimately "in danger of being no more than a romantic gesture" (216). The play consistently invites a multiplicity of meanings and Hilde's cry is no exception. Although her cry puts Hilde in the position of Christ rather than Solness, it is perfectly possible to read Hilde's shout as triumphal because she has prophesized Solness's personal victory (to climb to the top of the tower) as wild and egotistical (because he fulfils her almost erotic dream to see him on high); as "a sign that she has not yet re-emerged from the fantasy world into which [she and Solness] have talked each other"; and as a moment of utter despair.[36] The meaning behind Hilde's cry remains as multifaceted as the reason for Solness's fall.

It is also difficult to agree with Hurst's claim that Solness goes to his death "with his hands clean of pettiness and self-regard, now that his old scores are settled" (213). Even in his last moments his desire is selfishly to seek union with Hilde; his signature on Ragnar's drawings is given reluctantly and under Hilde's duress not the weight of his own conscience, as is his release of Kaya, and he wastes his chance to communicate with Aline. The driving force of any "amends" come from Hilde not Solness (perhaps this gives her the right to speak the Christ-like line: "Now, now it is finished"?) although Hilde's motives

appear to be largely selfish. The conclusion is therefore inevitable partly because what exists between Hilde and Solness is not love, but desire, passion and possession, and partly because Solness has failed to be a better man despite having numerous opportunities to "do the right thing". The play cannot end any other way despite the number of critics who have found and still find the ending unsatisfactory. Solness cannot live with Hilde; his marriage cannot be saved; his professional life is finished; how then could the play end? Hilde and Solness's relationship is both complex and contradictory and can ultimately, as Ibsen reveals, lead nowhere other than to Solness's fall. Ibsen does not, as Hurst argues, "evad[e] the issue" (213); as in *Rosmersholm* (1886) he has no choice but to destroy one or both of his protagonists.

Yet more areas of debate arise when we examine the play's thematic shift away from the socio-feminist realism of *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). Despite Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's claims that Hilde represents "the ultimate new woman", the play avoids examining her formation and motivation and does not highlight suggestions for social reform.[37] Although Hilde claims to have escaped from her father's oppressive household in which "All [she] had there was a cage" (MB 429), her rebellion against a tyrannical Victorian patriarch is soon swept away in the tide of fantasy that the following dialogue engenders and is swiftly forgotten. Egil Törnqvist's concern about reading Hilde's behaviour as a "reaction against masculine dominance" in her past is therefore unfounded.[38] Hilde is, as previously demonstrated, much more

complex than “a psychological case” with “personal problems”.[39] Thus, Ibsen’s feminist ethics, like his social didacticism, are side-lined in favour of a closer focus on the relationships between Solness, Hilde and Aline. In many of his previous works, notably *Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll’s House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *The Wild Duck* (1884) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), a patriarchal society acts as the antagonist, precipitating reactions from the characters which lead in many cases to tragedy, yet in *The Master Builder* “there is a sense that characters move in a medium entirely made up of their own obsessive visions of reality”.[40] This is a play in which “the individual [becomes] a battlefield”.[41] The departure from social realism in his later plays is corroborated by Ibsen himself in a letter to Jacob Hegel dated 22 August 1892 in which he states that the play “has absolutely nothing to do with political or social problems”.[42] However, this unconditional statement is difficult to defend, for socio-political currents, intentionally or not, clearly run through the play (most obviously inscribed in the word “duty” that Aline clings to whatever the consequences). Nevertheless, there is certainly less social commentary in *The Master Builder* than in many of Ibsen’s earlier works and this thematic shift is due in part to the rise of symbolism, which required a more abstract and internalised approach to artistic expression. Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* lies at the heart of the theatrical transition from realism to symbolism; where drama moved from a mimetic representation of life to a style which used symbols to express the inner landscape of its characters or to make socio-political and moral points in a more

covert manner than the realist problem play. Though not as obviously symbolist as the post-Inferno plays of August Strindberg, Ibsen's *The Master Builder* with its allusions to Nordic folklore; its interest in the internal battles of its central characters and the use of emblematic figures such as the tower or Aline's dolls was a step in Strindberg's direction. Hurst fails to examine the marks left on the play by its balance of realist and symbolist modes, though he does briefly acknowledge the presence of a poetic symbolism which he finds dissatisfying and "liable to the ridiculous" (215) in the play's quasi-realist context.

Though not generally regarded as a symbolist play, *The Master Builder* certainly moves Ibsen from the realist social drama of his earlier plays towards the work of playwrights such as Strindberg and Maeterlinck.[43] In a letter to Edward Brandes, 27 December 1892, he wrote: "it was of very special importance to me in this case to have my characters [...] vindicated as being real men and women".[44] Though Ibsen himself was clear that he desired his characters to be portrayed realistically, he did not denounce the threads of symbolism woven through their dialogue, costumes, props and settings. In his 1968 essay, Hurst acknowledges Ibsen's symbolist leanings in the play though he worries that "Ibsen was working on the extreme bounds of the possible for the prose dramatist" (215) and suggests that some of the play's imagery (the castles in the air, the tower) would have been better dealt with in poetry. Subsequent critics have mainly taken the middle-line by acknowledging the play's symbolist leanings and have explored, though not necessarily celebrated,

the possibility of symbols within the play. Inga-Stina Ewbank convincingly claims that his last four plays were designed to continue and subvert Ibsen's tradition; they are realistic at the same time as being fantastic: "Ibsen has not abandoned the conventions of bourgeois realism but, even as he uses those conventions, he challenges them with explicit symbolism, melodrama, even allegory".[45] The reasons for this fusion of symbol and reality are difficult to deduce. Perhaps the combination is designed, as Ewbank suggests, to "make us, readers and audiences, take part in the finding out, by destabilising our sense of reality";[46] perhaps they are an attempt to update a style that was in decline; perhaps a means of verbalising the inner experience of being human. Their presence in the text, if we agree that they exist, further confuses interpretations: Why are they there? What do they mean? Once again, there are no obvious answers to either question and nor should there be – this inconclusiveness, though resisted by Hurst, is, yet again, to be celebrated. Readings of the play's symbols, a task that Hurst largely avoids, have been more thorough in recent years, ranging from Trausti Ólafsson's 2008 examination of the play's mythical/religious symbolism to Theoharis's 1996 reading of the imagery of trolls and Vikings as Nietzschean cyphers.[47] Other interesting readings have surrounded the "nine lovely dolls" (MB 425) that Aline "carrie[s] [...] under [her] heart" (MB 425);[48] Hilde's walking apparel;[49] and the tower from which Solness falls. The tower is one of the most obvious and most debated aspects of the play as it has been variously interpreted as a Freudian symbol; an emblem of

Solness's fear and guilt; a tower of Babel and a monument to his victory. However, for every critic who reads symbolic depths into *The Master Builder* there is an opponent who denies these interpretations. Lyons, for example, is sceptical of such readings of the tower, arguing that it "is neither symbol nor metaphor; the tower is, simply, a tower".[50]

Despite the scepticism of Lyons, among others, as to the symbolist elements of *The Master Builder*, one cannot deny the unusually dense quantity of imagery more generally in the play's dialogue. Language in its everyday form is clearly unable to effectively communicate the feelings of the characters. Aline and Solness resort to silence when their attempts to discuss the past fail, while Hilde and Solness must converse in densely imagistic language in order to express themselves to each other. Hurst argues that this miasma of metaphor is better suited to the "poet-dramatist" (215) and hints that this does not suit the reality of the play, but he fails to expand and clarify this position in his analysis. Trolls, Vikings, castles, harps in the air, flow through their speech, though Hurst barely acknowledges their significance or at best gives a limited interpretation. Hilde's harps in the air are taken by Hurst to be "a symbol of harmony and unity achieved" (212) though subsequent interpretations have offered numerous alternatives including: wind harps hung in Scandinavian churches;[51] an echo of Faust's salvation;[52] the cries of the "troll-demons" and the "ringing singing of death".[53] Ewbank notes that "Hilde and Solness get nowhere in rational dialogue [...] It is only when they converse in metaphors, and when he is – as it

were – released by taking over her language and her vision, that they do communicate".[54] Goldman, on the other hand, attributes this symbolist use of language to the "stress" that the characters are under.[55] John Northam takes the symbolism of Hilde and Solness's dialogue further when he claims that they eventually "both come to take their symbols for reality itself. We reach the stage in Act III where Hilde's verbal description of her lofty balcony can make Solness literally and physically dizzy [...]. At the end of the play, [...], Solness is killed by falling from a symbol that for him has become a fact".[56] To Northam symbolism becomes reality, it is not merely the poetic ramblings of two lovers struggling to communicate. It certainly seems that Hilde's arguably incongruous reaction to Solness's fall at the end of the play suggests she is trapped in a level of symbolic unreality – she has come to believe in the fantasy woven with symbols and cannot see Solness's fall as a tragically real event.

E.M. Forster offered perhaps the best judgement of this peculiar union in which reality and symbol exist symbiotically when he declared that "symbolism never holds up the action, because it is part of the action, and because Ibsen was a poet, to whom creation and craftsmanship were one".[57] It is the unusual in the everyday that keeps critics in constant debate about where Ibsen's later plays should sit in the complicated world of literary classification. *The Master Builder* straddles both worlds, adapts the best from each and creates an alternative genre. Though it appears that this reading of the play's symbolism and realism

sits firmly on the proverbial fence, the openness to interpretation which *The Master Builder* engenders is part of the play's strength.

Henry James rightly called *The Master Builder* "an obscure and Ibseny tale, or psychological picture, requiring infinite elucidation", an opinion shared by Eric Bentley, who described the play as "bewildering".[58] Ultimately, Hurst's desire for "a consistent interpretation of the play" (216), from the characters of Hilde and Solness to the symbolist/realist debate, will never be achieved. It is a play in which complications multiply and resolution is neither reached nor desired. It is precisely this resistance to classification and clarification that continues to render the play so fascinating and challenging for audiences and critics alike and will secure *The Master Builder* a place in critical debate for many years to come.

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1 J.S. Hurst, "Interpreting *The Master Builder*", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 4:3 (1968), 207-216, 207. Hereafter, references to Hurst will be made in the body of the text.

2 N. Zeineddine, *Because it is my name: Problems of identity experienced by women, artists, and breadwinners in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller* (Braunton Devon, 1991), p. 63.

3 T. C. Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy* (New York, 1996), p. 135.

4 R. Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography* (London, 1996), p. 371.

5 Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama*, p. 153 and E. Törnqvist, "Individualism in *The Master Builder*", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (1977), No. 3, 133-145, 137.

6 Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama*, p. 153.

7 I. Ewbank, "The Last Plays", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. J. McFarlane (Cambridge, 1994), p. 133.

8 Zeineddine, *Because it is my name*, p. 76; also Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama*, p. 150; B. Bennett, *Theatre as Problem: Modern Drama and its Place in Literature* (New York, 1990), p. 22.

9 K. Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre: 1890-1900* (Westport, Connecticut and London, 1997), p. 134.

10 Trausti Ólafsson, *Ibsen's Theatre of Ritualistic Visions: An Interdisciplinary Study of Ten Plays*, Stage and Screen Studies 12, (Oxford, 2008), p. 258; John S. Chamberlain, *Ibsen: The Open Vision*, (London, 1982), p. 185 and Errol Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays*, (London, 1982), p. 129.

11 S. Critchley, “Noises Off – On Ibsen” in *Ibsen Studies* 7:2 (2007), 132-149, 139.

12 Theoharis, *Ibsen’s Drama*, p. 150 and Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, p. 371.

13 “an alluring, sensuous female nymph who lives in the hills or mountains and who appears frequently in Norwegian folklore” (N. Schartum Alnæs, “The Master Builder: The Myth of the Artist Between Heaven and Hell”, *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (1988), No. 6, 81-91, 86).

14 Zeineddine, *Because it is my name*, p. 75.

15 Zeineddine, *Because it is my name*, p. 77; Vigdis Ystad also reads Hilde as a liberator and transformative element in “Tragedy in Ibsen’s Art”, *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (1988), No. 6, 69-80, 77.

16 J. McFarlane, *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 234 and J. McFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning: Studies, Essays and Prefaces* (Norwich, 1989), p. 274. Simon Critchley takes one step further arguing that she is akin to Hedda in her “malevolen[ce]” (Critchley, “Noises Off – On Ibsen”, 137).

17 Paul Taylor, ‘*The Master Builder*, Haymarket Theatre, London’, *The Independent*, 16 October 1995.

18 Theoharis, *Ibsen’s Drama*, p. 150.

19 Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre*, p. 135.

20 Theoharis, *Ibsen’s Drama*, p. 150.

21 M. MacCarthy, “The Will and Testament of Ibsen”, *Partisan Review*, 1956, in: *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. McFarlane, p. 276. Other critics, past and present, who have examined the autobiographical elements of the play include: An unsigned notice, *Black and White*, 25 Feb 1893; An Unsigned Review, *The Saturday Review*, 4 March 1893, both in: *Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. M. Egan (London, 1972), pp. 224 and 288-93; B. Downs, *Ibsen: A Study of Six Plays* (Cambridge, 1950); P. Binding, *With Vine-Leaves in His Hair: The Role of the Artist in Ibsen’s Plays* (Norwich, 2006); Edmund Gosse argued that ‘in the conversations between Solness and Hilde much is introduced which is really almost unintelligible unless we take it to be autobiographical’ (E. Gosse, *Henrik Ibsen*, (Reprint of 1912 edition, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2003), p.171).

22 R. Young, *Time’s Disinherited Children: Childhood, regression and sacrifice in the plays of Henrik Ibsen* (Norwich, 1989), p.152.

23 Ibid.

24 Ewbank, “The Last Plays”, p. 129.

25 M. Goldman, *The Dramaturgy of Fear* (New York, 1999), p. 15.

26 H. Ibsen, *The Master Builder*, in: *The Oxford Ibsen*, ed. J. McFarlane, 8 vols (London, 1966), Vol. 7, p. 411. Hereafter, references to *The Master Builder* will be made in the body of the text.

27 Goldman also interestingly suggests that the cycle of willing and guilt is perpetuated by Ragnar, the young architect whose genius Solness tries to

suppress: “the new Master Builder is filled with horror because his desires have been realized. Ragnar’s life is repeating Solness’s. The cycle of guilt that started with the fire has begun again” (Goldman, *The Dramaturgy of Fear*, p. 19).

28 See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), trans. John Beveridge (Peabody, Massachusetts, 2008). Calvin’s belief in predestination was derived from the teaching of Augustine, in this belief he was joined by Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther. The debate between predestination and free will is still current today.

29 Theoharis, *Ibsen’s Drama*, p. 136. Ferguson writes: “God’s commandment to men like Solness is ‘Thou shalt not’, and to ensure that he does not break it God throws him off the tower. A more orthodox statement of Old Testament morality could hardly be imagined, nor a bleaker defence of marriage. [...] After forty years of trying, Ibsen, who wrote so passionately to Bjørnson of his longing to remove *munkedomsmærket* (the mark of the cloister) from people’s minds, still could not remove it from his own” (Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, p. 373).

30 This view is supported by Vigdis Ystad in his essay “Tragedy in Ibsen’s Art” in which he describes “Solness’s last act” as “a decisive victory” (in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (1988), No. 6, 78).

31 Ewbank, “The Last Plays”, p. 144.

32 “There are in these fierce parables occasional resonances from classic and Shakespearian tragedy. We do, I think, experience a related sense of tragic

form when Agamemnon strides across the purple carpet and Solness mounts to his tower", G. Steiner, "from *The Death of Tragedy*, 1961", in: *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. McFarlane, p. 305.

33 C. R. Lyons, "Introduction", in: *Introduction to Critical Essays on Henrik Ibsen*, ed. C.R. Lyons, (Boston, Massachusetts, 1987), p. 18.

34 Alnæs, "The Master Builder", p. 90.

35 Ibid.

36 Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, p. 371.

37 "In The Master Builder, Ibsen presented a different pairing of female types – youth with old age, soaring confidence and enthusiasm with depressed listlessness, sexual energy with asexual barrenness – and placed the key to the drama in Hilde's youth. She succeeds where Hedda had failed in exerting absolute power over another human being, and she conquers without herself being conquered, her "robust conscience" intact. This is the ultimate New Woman" (Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre*, p. 135).

38 Törnqvist, "Individualism in *The Master Builder*", p. 140.

39 Ibid.

40 Ewbank, "The Last Plays", p. 137.

41 McFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning*, p. 273.

42 H. Ibsen, Letter to Jacob Hegel, 22 August 1892, in: *The Oxford Ibsen*, ed. J. McFarlane, 8 vols (London, 1966), Vol. 7, p. 530.

43 Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892) and August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902) are the most notable examples of plays to come out of the symbolist movement. The term "symbolist" is defined by *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* as a "reaction against dominant realist and naturalist tendencies in literature... The symbolists stressed the priority of suggestion and evocation... and to the symbol was ascribed a pre-eminent function in the effort to distil a private mood or to evoke the subtle affinities which were held to exist between the physical and spiritual worlds" (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. M. Drabble (Oxford, 1998), p. 952).

44 H. Ibsen, *Letters of Henrik Ibsen*, trans. John Nilsen Laurvik and Mary Morison (Hawaii, 2002), p. 441.

45 Ewbank, "The Last Plays", p. 131. See also H. James, "Ibsen's New Play", *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 Feb 1893 and an anonymous reviewer in the *Saturday Review*, 4 March 1893, also called the play, "A fantasy piece it is, though crossed and dashed with the social-drama strain" in *Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Egan, pp. 268 and 289. Trausti Ólafsson describes it as: "the extraordinary energy of a constant flow between fantastic visions and psychologically realistic enactment" in *Ibsen's Theatre of Ritualistic Visions*, p. 247.

46 Ewbank, "The Last Plays", p. 133.

47 Ólafsson, *Ibsen's Theatre of Ritualistic Visions*, pp. 245-64 and Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama*, p. 164.

48 Aline's dolls initially caused controversy when the play first opened as many viewers found the idea of an adult woman cherishing childhood dolls vaguely ridiculous, but sensitive readings are revealing of her character. Robin Young, for example, highlights them as "symbols of a lifeless marriage, a fear of emotional and sexual development, an irretrievable failure to live in time and fulfil her potential" (Young, *Time's Disinherited Children*, p. 155).

49 Hilde's walking apparel leads Ólafsson to equate her with the *Mystai* of Roman mythology who would follow grieving goddesses with a staff, while her veil, she argues, is suggestive of the goddess Isis (Ólafsson, *Ibsen's Theatre of Ritualistic Visions*, p. 258).

50 Lyons, "Introduction" in: *Introduction to Critical Essays on Henrik Ibsen*, p. 18.

51 Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre*, p. 118.

52 Ibid., p. 119.

53 Critchley, "Noises Off – On Ibsen", pp. 133 and 138.

54 I. Ewbank, "Ibsen's Dramatic Language as a Link Between His 'Realism' and his 'Symbolism'", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (1966), No. 1, 96-123, 117.

55 Goldman, *The Dramaturgy of Fear*, p. 44.

56 J. Northam, "Ibsen – Romantic, Realist or Symbolist?", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (1977), No. 3, 155-162, 159.

57 E.M. Forster, “Ibsen the Romantic” (1928) in *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. McFarlane, p. 234.

58 Henry James, Letter to Mrs Hugh Bell, 16 November 1892 and E. Bentley, “from *In Search of Theatre* (1950)” both in *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. McFarlane, pp. 148 and 261.