When the Shadows of the Past Become Haunting Ghosts: A Comparative Study of Ibsen's Rosmersholm and Gorky's Lower Depths

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the role of the past in two plays, one by the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen *Rosmersholm* (1887), and the other by the Russian playwright Maxim Gorky *the Lower Depths* (1902). The concept of the past in these two plays is treated as a live existence, for it becomes obvious that the past that should be "past" is not dead; rather it goes on living in the present, conducting and dominating the characters' lives and actions. In addition to that, the past in both plays appears in different forms and is related to different memories, yet its destructive effect is the same. So it seems after all that the past is not treated as a dead entity but as a power that is responsible for Man's misconceptions in the present.

"Man... cannot learn to forget, but hangs on the past: however far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him"[1]

This epigraph of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), German-Swiss philosopher and writer, represents an excellent start to make a comparative view of Henrik Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm* (1887), and Maxim Gorky's play *The Lower Depths* (1902), concerning the role of the past in both plays. It seems that Ibsen (1828-1906), the Norwegian poet, playwright and father of modern realism in drama, and Gorky (1868-1936), the pioneer of modern Russian realism, agree on certain point: the modern man is entrapped in a big caldron called the "past". Ironically, life, which should mean past, present and future, does not follow this pattern in *Rosmersholm* nor in the lodging house of *the Lower Depths*. In both plays, there are two layers of life, the painful past and the terrible present without the least existence for the future. Meanwhile, even the present is to be the victim of the past as it is swallowed by its lower depths.

What is well known about Henrik Ibsen's style is the way:"[he] creates stories of the human spirits' actions in the world; of transgressions, conflicts, events, all of which occurred arbitrary in the past and are now recreated through actions in the present"[2]. The plot thus in Ibsen's drama is not intended to transform a "story", rather, it intends to interrogate that story, moving between the past and present, creating different human situations that affect the mind and influence the heart. In this same way, though in a broader sense, the drama of Maxim Gorky can be felt to create these human situations and to create different sorts of characters who are moving between the past and the present for Gorky is "a destroyer bound to destroy everything that deserves destruction"[3]. The intention of those two playwrights after all is to give realistic views of their own environments, attempting to show the conflict between the unworthy past and the miserable present and to give a space to too much criticism and destruction. In other words, both Ibsen and Gorky view the past not as a past memory but as a vital existence that has a powerful effect on Man's life.As for Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, the play revolves around the conflict between what happened in the past and its consequences on the present. Rosmersholm is the name of the

castle inherited by John Rosmer, a former priest and a man who descends from a noble family of priests, officers and statesmen. The play opens one year after the suicide of Rosmer's wife, Beate, who threw herself into the millrace, but it is believed that her soul is still in Rosmersholm through the phantom of the White Horse. Rebecca West had previously moved to live in Rosmersholm one year before Beate's death as her own close friend, and Rebecca goes on living in the castle after the catastrophe of Rosmer's wife. She is a liberal woman who believes in the necessity of change. Rosmer, who is well known in society as a descendant of a wealthy family with respectable social status, intends to declare himself as an apostate or a supporter of the newly elected government and its new revolutionary policies, the matter which represents a great challenge against his society. Rosmer's ideas of apostasy used to be and are nourished by his childhood tutor Ulrich Brendel who, in the past, "stuffed [Rosmer's] head with so many revolutionary ideas that [his] father showed [Brendel] to the door with a horsewhip"[4]. As Rosmer declares himself apostate against all that is traditional, his decision is rejected by the two dominating trends in society. The first is Kroll, Beata's brother and the headmaster of the local school, who keeps fighting all new aspects inside his school and inside his own house as well. The other trend is represented by Peter Mortensgard, who is supposed to be an apostate but he behaves in total contradiction to what he declares. As Rosmer ideas turn to be the cause of his new dilemma, he starts to lose his faith in his ability to change his community. Add to this his new catastrophe as he discovers that the only woman he has ever loved, Rebecca West, is no more than a murder and a woman who has been able to commit horrible crimes and actions in her past. Rebecca admits that she was responsible for the death of Rosmer's wife and that "[she] who lured, - who finally ended by luring, Beate into her delusion" (Act III, p. 60) to increase her power upon Rosmer. All these revelations function as the breakdown point in the play for both Rosmer and Rebecca. Everything now is unfogged. Rebecca acknowledges her own part in Beate's destruction, but at the same time, she confesses that she has done all this because of her powerful love to Rosmer. In addition to that, Rebecca's personal past is widely announced by Kroll who shows the fact that Rebecca has actually committed incest with her father while suspecting that he in reality her natural father. Thus, Rosmer, now becomes greatly disappointed. He has lost his faith in his ideals and the ideals of the first woman he ever loved. Rosmer's ideals have failed just because Kroll and the elite of the community "made [Rosmer] sees that the work of ennobling men's minds – is not for [him] …it is a hopeless idea anyway" (Act IV, p.66). At the same time, he is unable to trust Rebecca any more. Thus he asks her to prove her devotion to him by committing suicide the same way Beate did, by jumping into the millrace only because " Rosmer declares that he will regain his faith in his power to ennoble the minds of men only if Rebecca commits suicide for his sake"[5]:

> Rosmer:[As though powerless, driven against his own will]
> Well, let's see then. You say that you are filled
> with great love. That your soul has been made
> noble through me. Yes? Is that right? Have you worked it

correctly, my dear? Shall we check it and see? out
Well?
Rebecca: I am ready.
……
Rosmer: Have you the courage to – are you willing to –
gladly as Ulric Brendel said – for my sake, now,
tonight – gladly to go the same way – as Beate
went?

(Act IV, P. 75)

As Rebecca calmly agrees Rosmer in his request, she issues her instructions about the way her body should be recovered from the water. Then Rosmer tells her that he will join her. Such decision is not motivated by Rosmer's great love to Rebecca only but also by his powerlessness to go on as a reformist because the rejection against him is so tremendous which he can neither stand nor bear. Thus, if he cannot live the life he wants with the woman he chooses, so at least he should have the ability to choose his own death. If he and Rebecca cannot live together, at least they would die together. The catastrophe hits Rosmersholm once again as both Rosmer and Rebecca throw themselves into the millrace and the play ends up with the cries of Mrs. Helseth (Rosmersholm's housekeeper) that "The dead woman has taken them"(Act IV, P.77).

Through the story of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, the shadows of the past become a controlling power on people's lives, directing their actions, deciding the way they should live and heading them towards their deaths. This same condition reappears in Maxim Gorky's *Lower Depths* in which all characters are having the same haunting shadows of the past. The play does not concentrate on a particular hero or a character; all the characters are heroes, each on his own way. The play also does not have the usual dramatic structure or a definite plot, it simply tells, through argumentations, different past and present stories of many people.

The play portraits a hideous lodging which gathers a group of social derelicts, the ex-Baron, the thief, the gambler, the ex-Actor, the streetwalker, the cobbler, etc. Each one of those characters had at one time a dream, an ambition or a goal to live a better life, but because of their lack of will and the cruelty of life, they are forced to live in lower depths without having the least ability to choose. They all appear as full of disappointments, whensoever they wanted to search a change or an escapement from this condition, they get lower and lower. The play opens with the argumentation of Kvaschnya, the Baron, Bubnov and Klestch about whether or not Kvaschnya will marry again. Kvaschnya is known to be men-hater woman because, in the past, she was married to a man who used to beat her up brutally. That is why she has sworn never to get married again and never to allow any man to control her life. During the course of the argumentation, the Baron mocks Nastya, a streetwalker, who is totally entangled in the world of her Romance novel. Meanwhile, Anna (Klestch's wife) moans from bed about the noise they are making while she suffers her own ailments. Then, Satin (another lodger in the house who used to be a man of education in the past), rises from bed and a new argumentation breaks out about who will sweep the floor. The Actor claims that he is so distorted by the effect of alcohol that is why he is unable even to move. Through these argumentations, the audience start to know the past life of each one of those characters, such as of Satin's former education, the

Baron's lost glory, the waste romance of Nastya, the Actor's fondness of drama and Bubnov's past career as a fur faker. The play also sheds the light also upon how fake is the life of those people who are supposed to have power such as Kostylyov, the lodging owner, and his wife Vassilissa. Quite strangely, the land lord and his wife have a complicated relation to Peppel, a thief, who brings stolen goods to Kostylyov, but at the same time he has an affair with Vassilissa. Meanwhile, it becomes obvious that Peppel has always been infatuated by Natasha, Vassilissa's sister, the one who keeps suffering a lot at the hands of her cruel sister.

The only sense of comfort to the lodging residents is Luka, an old man whom Natasha brings to live in the lodging lately. Luka's role in the play is made clear immediately as he announces that he sees all men equal and that he will be glad to sleep anywhere in the house. He greets everybody living in the house saying "good health to you, honest people"[6]. This agreement increases a great wonder inside everyone including Bubnov who declares that "[they] were honest, you bet – so far back [they] forget"(Act I, P.290).

The play goes on developing in a very strange way because it develops through dialogues without the least dependence on action. The common subject of these dialogues is the way that sometimes the past is different from the present, but on other times, it seems that they are alike in their depressions and disappointments. Everyone in the house is searching to forget his misery on his own way without having the hope in a change in the present. The only one who keeps hoping is Luka who, by his speeches, comforts Anna, councils Nastya to live her dream through her romantic novel, shows the way to Peppel to declare his love to Natasha and convinces Natasha to go with Peppel away from the brutality of the only family she's ever knew. Luka also tries to be a guidance to those desperate individuals, showing them the way man should live in peace with himself and with the whole world at the same time. The climax in the play occurs when Vassilissa knows about the intentioned marriage between her sister, Natasha, and Peppel, her lover, and that is why she gets mad. She starts to beat her sister up mercilessly along with her husband Kostylyov and everybody shouts to call on Peppel to come and save Natasha. As Peppels rushes in to save Natasha, he strikes Kostylyov to death by accident. Ironically, this is not the only bad thing happens to Peppel for after he kills Kostylyov, Natasha accuses him harshly of planning for all this drama along with her sister:

> Natasha: [Suddenly in a load voice] Oh, now I understand! So that's it, Vassily? Kind people! They're in this together! My sister and him – they are together! They've plotted all this. Isn't that so, Vassily? You talked to me today the way you did – so she'd hear everything? Kind people! She's his mistress – you know that – everybody knows it – they're both guilty! It was she who got him to kill her husband – He was in their way – and I was too. So they've maimed me –
>
> Peppel: Natasha – what are you saying?
>
> Satin: What the hell.

Vassilissa: Liar! She lies – I – it was he, Vasska – he killed him!
Natasha: They're in it together! I curse you! I curse you both!

(Act III, P. 339)

The last act in the play (Act IV) represents the conclusion of the play. Now Luka has gone far away, Peppel is in prison, Natasha flew away and Anna is dead. Luka has been able to create a certain effect on some of the characters as it happens with Satin, but for other characters, Luka's hopes and advices are no more than fairy tales. Therefore, they decide to put an end to their lives as it happens with the Actor who becomes unable to resist the cruelty of life. Thus, he hangs himself and his last words are "pray for me, I am gone"(Act IV, p. 349). No one believes that the Actor can commit suicide until:

[*The hallway door is flung open. The Baron, standing on the threshold, shouts.*]
Baron: Hey, you! Come – come here! Out there – in the vacant lot the Actor – has hanged himself!
[*There is a general silence. Everybody gazes at the Baron. Nastya appears from behind the Baron's back and slowly, her eyes wide open, walks up to the table*]

Satin: [*In a low voice*] Ah, spoiled the song – the fool!

(Act IV, p.353)

Due to the plots of the two plays mentioned, it becomes obvious that both Ibsen and Gorky are viewing the concept of the past not as a mere 'memory', rather, they treat it as an entity that is controlling the worlds of their plays. The past is responsible for every advantage or disadvantage in both plays. The past is alive with its heavy shadows, dominating the characters lives, controlling their actions and leading them sometimes to their catastrophes. Such dramatic views of the past might be related to the fact that both dramatists have seen in the 'past' as the personification of all that is traditional in their countries and how the past, or more accurately tradition, is affecting and beslaving every aspect or will to change. Henceforth, the past is transformed into an existential reality that one can neither ignore nor cope with. Such 'Realistic' treatment of the past might be attributed to the fact that both Ibsen and Gorky are "Social Realists". They depend on their audiences to find the huge effect of the past that prevents any sort of newness, seeking at the same time fruitful changes in their communities. But as Ibsen and Gorky are "Social Realists", they are also "Social Satirists" in the sense that the two plays present ironic views of the change that seems to be so fragile and not powerful enough to face tradition. This happens basically because there is such a tremendous absence for the 'Will to Change' and to destroy all the obstacles of tradition because mostly all the characters in both plays are themselves destroyed by the memories of the past. Thus, they lose their faith in the present. Rosmer's past, for example in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, has been so problematic and so complicated especially concerning his relation with his father. Rosmer's father used to be so cruel with all family members. Strict orders and unhappy atmosphere used to be shadowed in Rosmersholm while Rosmer's father was alive. The Rosmers do not laugh nor cry nor allowed to have any sort of emotion as Mrs. Helseth

describes them. Hence, in his belief in the reformist tendency, Rosmer is revolting against his own father and against all what this father presented or believed in. In addition to that, Rosmer's bad memories of the past have been renewed with his suffering from his wife's madness and her consequent suicide the matter which makes Rosmer live always an irremovable sense of pain causing his life to be turned upside down. This fact is directly communicated in the beginning of the play as Rosmer speaks about Beata that as if she is living still with them in the house and that she is not dead at all as he tells Kroll that: "it doesn't hurt me any more to think of Beata. We talk of her every day. We almost feel as if she was still part of the house" (Act I, P.9). So Rosmer after all is a victim of a past that is very dark and a present overwhelmed by guilt not because of his own actions but because this is the sort of life imposed on him by force. Rosmer's past is responsible for forbidding him the slightest happiness and stealing from him his own freedom. Moreover, Rosmer's suffering could not stop with the death of his father or his wife for the past now takes the form of guilt. He feels guilty and responsible for the death of Beata just because he could not stand her madness. Actually Rosmer feels such guilt because Beata committed suicide when she discovered that she was unable to give Rosmer a child and a heir of Rosmersholm.[7] That is why "when Rosmer expresses his unwillingness to go through life with a "corpse" on his back, he is referring to his feeling of guilt about Beata"[8]. Rosmer now is searching a relief from this 'corpse' by attempting to start a new life with Rebecca and his apostate ideas, to be totally a new John Rosmer, but even this simple wish is swept away from him. Rosmer realizes that the woman he loved and believed in is no more than a liar and a murderer. At the same time, he realizes that his ideas are so fragile in comparison with the tradition. So the only solution left to him is to end a life which has always brought nothing unto him but repeated sufferings and disappointments. On the other hand, Rebecca's past is also tormenting her for she is the woman who committed three great unforgivenable crimes in her past that are practicing incest, causing the death of Beata and attempting to seduce Rosmer so he would cling to her and her only. As a matter of fact, Rebeccca's character is not a sort of a character that can be easily analyzed for she combines goodness and evilness at the same time in a very strange way. She used to have a goal in her life, to be the lady of Rosmersholm so that she can be accepted in a descent society and to compensate her lost past years. That is why she has committed her evil actions in a very cold blood up to the extent that, now, Rosmer cannot abandon her nor letting her leave his castle. So Rebecca succeeds in her plans, but the revelation of her past actions by Kroll makes her purify herself for the first time in her life. As she confesses all what she has done, one can see that Rebecca seems to be so true and so sincere. Love has purified her, transforming her into a woman who searches her own death to prove her passion towards her lover for Rebecca is now totally lured by Rosmer as it happens in the world of the Norwegian myth *Rosmer Havmand*. Ibsen basically chooses the name of his protagonist to be Rosmer in a direct echo to the Norwegian myth of the merman who lures a young woman and leads her to her death by drowning.[9] Rebecca thus sacrifices her own life for the sake of her love in the same way she rejects Rosmer's proposal of marrying her out of her sense of guilt and dropping by her hands her only chance to be happy for once and for all. This behaviour of Rebecca has been analyzed

by Sigmund Freud in his paper "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work", and according to Freud:

> There is only one way to explain Rebecca's puzzling behaviour: she had unwittingly been her father's mistress, and the feeling of guilt resulting from the shame of incest leads her to reject Rosmer: …she feels responsible for the death of the man towards whom she had felt intense ambivalence, and whom she discovers to be her father. It is this guilt which leads her to reject Rosmer's offer and provides the primary motivation for her suicide.[10]

Moreover, Rebecca's sense of guilt is not lacking on what she has done to her father, rather, she feels guilty for what she has committed against Beata which was to her a matter of "a choice between two lives", and as she tells Rosmer and Kroll that:

> Do you think it was done coldly, cunningly? I was not the same person that I am now, standing here telling you this. Besides, I think there are two sorts of will in everyone. I wanted Beata out of the way. Somehow or other. But I never thought it would happen all the same. With every step I took, with every step I ventured forward, I felt as if something seemed to shriek inside me. No further! – But I couldn't stop. I had to venture just a little bit further. Just one step – and then another – always one more. And so it happened. That's why thing like that do happen.
>
> (Act III, P.62)

Rebecca's description of herself that she is not the same person she used to be shows the fact of her inner change. Now she feels guilty but at the same time she overwhelmed with Rosmer's love It is impossible for her now to redo any of her past actions because:"it's the Rosmer family view of life or [Rosmer's] view of life anyway that has infected my will…bound me under a law that used to mean nothing to me…[and] living with you here has made me noble" (Act IV, p.68).

What is noteworthy is the way in which both Rosmer and Rebecca are combined in a very bizarre manner concerning the effect of their pasts. They are haunted by the figures of their fathers and the most important reality now is that both are haunted by Beata. From the beginning of the play Mrs. Helseth speaks about a strange phenomena happening in Rosmersholm: the dead people of the castle come back in the form of a charging White Horse. This White Horse may represent Beata as the white shawl of Rebecca may represent Beata as well. The critic John Northam assumes that "in the white shawl, we see the ghost of Beata active, haunting Rebecca"[11]. Actually, the white color motif is known to be the color of ghosts, so in order to give the audience a better clue about Beata's continual existence, Ibsen is using white color motif to refer to Beata. That is why Beate represents the real protagonist in Rosmersholm, or more obviously it is the past that is taking the leading role in the play.[12] After all this might be Ibsen's way to declare a very pessimistic

issue: the present is so fragile doll in the hands of the powerful past. Symbolically speaking, both Rosmer and Rebecca represent the new change and the reformist tendency that is so weak in front of Beata, who represents all that is old and traditional which causes the utmost failure for all the attempts of change. No matter how noble are the ideas of Rosmer of Reformation in society and in love, all his efforts end up with nothingness and despair because he is a man who cannot be colored by anything except the real color of his character. Since he cannot find satisfaction, since he is considered a traitor, Rosmer cannot live in the shadows of these accusations and he finds the courage to put an end to his life. For the first time in his life Rosmer dares to go to the footbridge, a place which he couldn't even look at, but now Rosmer is dare enough to face his fears and end his life in the only way he sees it to be appropriate as Rebecca is dare enough to sacrifice herself. Crystal enough, despite the fact that the play presents a dark vision for the loss of Christian and ethical faith, yet its end sheds the light upon a tremendous purity inside the two heroes[13]. Since they cannot stand the sense of guilt nor the sense of disappointment so they decide to "go" together trying to accomplish in death what they couldn't do in life: to be united as husband and wife. The role of the past and its destructive effect found in the "Rosmer-Rebecca" episode might be compared to the "Baron-Nastya" and the "Peppel-Natasha" episodes respectively in Gorky's *Lower Depths* though in less dependency upon psychological conflict. Like Rosmer's noble origin, the Baron is the descendant of an aristocratic family. The Baron's past has two dimensions: the first is its condition as a glorious memory and the second as a catastrophe that never stops existing. The glorious past of the Baron is communicated in Act IV, as he speaks about his past life as a wealthy Baron, a nobleman with huge fortunes and large number of servants

> Baron: That reminds me of our family. An old family- goes back to the time of Catherine the Great – noblemen – worriers! The founders came from France. They served the government, kept rising higher and higher. In the reign of Nicolas I my grandfather, Gustave Dedil, held a high post – there was wealth- hundreds of serfs – horses – cooks…A house in Moscow! A house in St. Petersburg! Carriages – with the coat of arms!
>
> (Act IV, P.344)

The second face of the Baron's past represents the breakdown point in his life when he stopped to be a Baron and transformed into a vagabond by a very strange game of fate:

> Baron: ever since I can remember myself I've always felt a sort of fog in my head. I could never understand anything. I have an awkward feeling as if all my life I've done nothing but change clothes – But to what end? I can't figure it out. I was given education, wore the uniform of a college for the nobility – but what did I study? I don't remember. I got married – to a woman who was no good, wore tails, then a dressing gown - why? I don't know. I went through my fortune – came to

> wear an old grey jacket and faded pants – But how did I go broke? I didn't notice. I got a job on a government board – wore a uniform, a cap with a badge – then embezzled government money, had prison clothes put on me, and later changed into this. And all that as if in a dream. It's funny.
>
> (Act IV, p. 348)

It is really funny how man's fate changes from everything to nothing. The Baron expresses the absurdity and the meaninglessness of his life that is so contradictory. The Baron's glory is swallowed by the past and as it happens with Rosmer, The Baron now stays alone in this world, spiritually bankrupted, surrounded by nothing and hoping for nothing. He is even unable to look forward for " there is nothing to wait for…everything has already happened, it over and done with"(Act III, P. 322).

As for the Baron's pair Nastya, whom the Baron keeps on disturbing, the poor girl also has the same condition of the Baron's two dimensional past. Her past is both happy and painful at the same time. She used to live a romance with a respectable handsome young man with whom she has lived her own "Cinderella dream". Unfortunately, this dream vanished quickly before it comes to be a reality as the parents of this young man refused to make their son to be married to a common girl:

> Nastya: My adorable one, says he. My parents refuse to give their consent, says he, to my taking you for my spouse and Threaten to put an eternal curse on me for my love of you. On account of this, I'm obliged to take my life. And the revolver in his hand is ever so big and has ten bullets in it. Farewell, dear heart, says he, nothing can make me change my mind, for I could never live without you – never! And I answerd him: My never-to-be-forgotten friend – Marcel - … joy of my life! My bright star! For me too it's positively impossible to live in this world – because I love you madly and will go on loving you as long as my heart beats in my breast. But, says I, you mustn't destroy your young life – as it's needed by your dear parents for whom you are their only joy – forget me! Better that I suffer – the heartache of missing you.
>
> (Act III, PP. 320-321)

In this respect, Nastya seems like Rebecca: she is the one who sacrifices herself for the sake of her love and she chooses to die, at least spiritually, after she's lost her chance to be united with him. To go on living after this great shock, Nastya started to work as a prostitute as the only profession that can guarantee her an income. However, in order to remain in the world of her past dream, Nastya decides to live her imaginary happy life through her book that the audience see in her hands from the beginning of the play until the end. As if this book stands as the personification of her lost dreams and that only through this book Nastya can survive the hardships of life. Thus, the Baron and Nastya are much more alike in the condition of their pasts, but what one can notice through the different acts of the play is the way the Baron is

always upsetting Nastya, attempting all the time to prevent her the only happiness she's got. In one occasion, Luka tells the Baron to let Nastya read her book and cry, recommending him that "you should leave her alone. Let her amuse herself by crying. You know she cries for her own pleasure" (Act III, p.323). So Nastya is crying for the sake of pleasure. She comforts herself through her book to remember and through these tears, it becomes obvious that Nastya is so fragile and powerless before her present. May be because of this the Baron hates her great attachment to the book. He might see in Nastya and her waste life a live reflection of himself and of the life he used to live and then lost, a life which turns to be no more than an illusion for him. The only difference between them is that whereas Nastya rejects her past to past, the Baron lives the here and now for he is totally aware that he cannot change his reality.

As for the second important episode in Gorky's play, the "Peppel-Natasha" episode, one can see also the effect of the past as quite dominating this pair's present no matter how hard they are seeking to forget the past memories. Unlike Rosmer's and the Baron's noble origins, Vaska Peppel is a thief and a son of a thief whose past and present are mixed up with filthiness. Actually, Peppel's characterization is not presenting him as totally evil person, rather, one can feel sympathy upon a man who after all is the victim of his society's outlook. Because his father was a thief, Peppel is called thief from his early childhood. In other words, it is the society that has trained Peppel to be a thief and not his own father, the society that is overlooking all good human features and clings to bad ones. Now, this thief wants to steal one last thing from life: living a happy and a pure life with the only woman he loves, Natasha. He promises Natasha that he will change, all he wants is a chance to start a new life in a new place:

> Peppel: I said I'd give up thieving. I swear I will. And I mean it. I'm not illiterate – I'll work. Luka here says one ought to go to Siberia of his own free will. Let's go there.
>
> Don't you think I'm sick of my life?...
>
> ……
>
> I've been a thief from the time I was a kid. Everybody called me Vasska the thief! Vasska the thief's son!
>
> Ah, so? Then have it your way. Here I am – a thief!
>
> You must understand – I'm a thief maybe only out of spite – only because nobody ever thought of calling me by any other name. you'll call me something else, Natasha, won't you?

(Act III, P. 328)

Love has transformed Peppel as it has transformed Rosmer to search happiness away from the evilness of the past. Nevertheless, it seems that this wish is dropped repeatedly for no reason just because it is the plan of life. The life that forbids Rebecca to live a change is the same life that steals from Natasha the hope in, at least, a different life. Natasha's dream of getting rid of the hands of her sister has been exploded because of the absurdity of life. The dream now is gone and the two couples end up as one in prison and the other's place is unknown whether she is above the ground or beneath it.

These two episodes in Gorky's play show to a great extent Gorky's view upon the past: sometimes the past is Man's foe and other times it might be Man's friend. This same idea is found in Ibsen's *Rosmershom* not only through the leading characters whom they are past's foes, but through other characters such as Kroll and Mortensgard whom are the past's best friends. The past that betrays Rosmer and Rebecca is not such a cruel with Kroll and Mortensgard. Despite the way those two men pretend that they are different from each other, yet, their past and present reveal them to be totally the same. Both used to live and are living fake lives, pretending to be ideals with perfect characters. With all their pretensions, they are totally exposed as opportunists who conduct their ideals towards their interests. Kroll describes Rosmer as a traitor to his wife, family name, society and country, but through the current of actions, it becomes obvious that Kroll is the real traitor. Rebecca used to live in his house before she moved to Rosmersholm. During her stay in Kroll's house, Kroll attempted to lure her so she would make a relation with him behind his wife's back, but Rebecca has rejected all his attempts repeatedly. Moreover, Kroll's policies with his family have been the major reason for his children to be apostates and to attempt an opposite trend from that of their father's. So Kroll's dark past actions and attitudes are lied crystal in front of everybody now. His pretension is now transformed into a great shame that he tries to hide behind a mask of social civility. He comes to Rosmer asking him to support tradition against radicalism and to take the responsibility as an editor of a newspaper that aims to attack any efforts to change the society just because:

> The mere name of John Rosmer will help the paper. The rest of us are all looked upon as party politicians. I hear that I'm thought of as a raging fanatic. So we can't use our own names if the paper is going to influence the people-the misguided mass. But you now-you've always kept out of the fight. Everyone here knows and respects you: your gentle honest nature, your polished mind, your absolute integrity, and then there's the deference and prestige you still have as a former clergyman. And above all, there is the lustre of your family name.
>
> (Act I, p.13)

So Kroll doesn't have any validity in his community but ironically he controls this community quite precisely as Mortensgard does.

Peter Mortensgard, at the same time, is a doubled face man. He is known to be an apostate, but his apostasy is a fake one for it is directed to where so ever his benefit directs him. As a matter of fact, Mortensgard is a type of a character who is totally out of any morals or as Ulric Brendel describes him that "[he] managed to live without ideals"(Act IV, p.73). When Mortensgard hears about Rosmer's intention to be an apostate, he hurries to him asking him enthusiastically to allow the publication of the news related to his decision concerning "supporting the liberal and progressive party" (Act II, p. 35). As much as Mortensgard desires Rosmer's support, it is the priest and the conservative Rosmer and not the radical and the reformer Rosmer that Mortensgard wants. Thus, Mortensgard rejects Rosmer's

radical ideas once he knows that Rosmer has abandoned priesthood and how now he adopts the reformist tendency[14]:

Mortensgard: May I be allowed to announce in the *Signal* that you have changed your ideas? - That you now support the liberal and progressive party?

Rosmer: You may certainly do so, indeed I request you to announce it…. I must tell you that I have freed myself entirely. From everything. I now have no connection with the church. Such things will not concern me in the future.

Mortensgard: [Looking at him amazed] Well – If the moon fell out of the sky, I couldn't be more – Pastor Rosmer says himself –

Rosmer: yes, I stand now where have you long stood. You can print this in tomorrow's *Signal* as well.

…….

Mortensgard: Well, I will only point out to you Mr. Rosmer that if you come forward openly with all this about your leaving the church, you immediately tie your own hands…. I 've made it a rule recently not to support anyone or anything that is anti-church.

Rosmer: you yourself have returned to the Church?

Mortensgard: That is my business.

Rosmer: Ah. Now I understand you.

(Act II, PP. 35-37)

Actually, in all his life Mortensgard used to be a liar. He claims that he adopts Christian faith and ethical codes, but he has spent his life as a scoundrel who is making various illegal relations with married women. He also has kept showing himself as an apostate, while in reality he feigns apostasy so that by him, a strong leash will be put upon the radicals by the traditionalists. Despite all these negative features in Mortensgard, yet, he is known to be the "lord and master of the future" simply because he has an "almighty power and he can do whatever he wants"(Act IV, P.72) as Brendel speaks of him in a very bitter way. Symbolically speaking, through the figures of Kroll and Mortensgard, Ibsen satirizes those men in power for they are responsible for dragging their society down in the past and in the present as well simply because what they used to do in the past defines them right now. Both are searching to manipulate Rosmer's name, but once they know of his intentions, they turn harshly against him. That is why both Kroll and Mortensgard are very much alike in essence: they are holding society down for their personal interests and standing against anyone or anything that may contradict these interests. Each one of them has spent his life living a life of full pretention and each has a double face: one is real and the other is a social mask. Thus, when their false past lives are directly exposed in the present, it becomes quite clear that those two men are dishonest and unscrupulous, but they are now more powerful than ever and totally respected by a society that views men of principles (such as Rosmer and Brendel) as to be more likely outcasts.[15]

Using the past as a means of satire and criticism reappears in Gorky's *Lower Depths* though in a slightly different way. In Gorky's, there are two contrastive forms of satire depending upon the past: the first shows the ugliness and corruption of people in power as it happens in *Rosmersholm*, and the second shows how hellish is the life of those who have been always degraded by society. The first form is transformed through Kostylyov and Vassilissa who represent the harshest image of social manipulators. They have the power of money, the matter which makes them the most powerful and dominating. They have the ability to be slave all other individuals. Their past actions and hidden deceiving personalities prove them to be identical with Kroll and Mortensgard in Ibsen's play. Kostylyov has spent his life feigning Christian faith and his speeches are full of religious incantations while in reality he is Pepple's collaborator upon stolen goods. His second career is a usurer who makes everybody materially indebted to him. Thus, in contrary to all his feigns, Kostylyov is loved by no one except by the devil as Klestch attacks him.

Kostylyov's wife, Vassilissa, on the other hand, has also manipulated and stolen any goodness from everyone in the past and the present. Actually, Vassilissa is presented as the most mean character in the play. She has kept on beating her sister mercilessly, cheating her husband and threatening her lover, Peppel. She has the ability to do any evil action, but she has one weak point: her love to Peppel. She used to have an affair with Peppel until he discovers that he "is fed up with all this business" (Act II, P.311) in reference to their affair. As she discovers the plans of Peppel and Natasha, Vassilissa decides to ruin their lives. She offers Peppel a bargain: she agrees to his marriage to Natasha only if he kills her husband. By such bargain, Vassilissa is revenging herself from Peppel because she intends to get rid of her husband and sends Peppel to jail so as to destroy his plans with Natasha. When Peppel rejects the offer, Vassilissa takes her revenge from her own sister as she starts beating Natasha harshly shouting that " I'll tear her in pieces, if it kills me too" (Act III, P.337). Such reaction reveals deep hatred inside Vassilissa. She behaves as a possessive woman, if her past couldn't stay with her, she would ruin every one's present and future. This view becomes a reality when Peppel accidently kills Kostyloyv and Vassilissa announces that Peppel has killed him on purpose. Ironically and in contrary to what happens in happy endings, Vassilissa ends up as the only winner in the play as it happens with Kroll and Mortensgard. The second form of satire in *Lower Depths* is completely different from the first except from elaborating the concept of the past as its major means. This time satire is communicated through the figure of Anna, Klestch's wife. Anna symbolizes an excessive image of the individual who spends her\his life surrounded by pain and continuous suffering for no reason. Anna's past is not different from her present. She cannot remember from her past life anything but pain. She has been sick for a long time now and more particularly sick from the sort of life she used to live and how now there is nothing allowed to her but to lie down and wait her own death. Actually, Anna appears as the most character in the play that the audience may feel great pity for. There is a huge and horrible pain inside her that she starts to release to Luka of how her life used to be dominated with specific sort of pain: hunger pain. Now she is filled, filled from her meaningless life and from the ideas of the approaching death:

Anna: I don't remember a time I didn't feel hungry. I counted every piece of bread. All my life I've trembled and worried that I might eat more than my share. All my life I've been wearing rags – all my miserable life. What have I done to deserve this?
Luka: Poor child! You are worn out. Never mind.
(Act II, P. 302)

To other characters such as Brendel in *Rosmersholm* and Luka in *Lower Depths*, the importance of the past lies in its condition as an aggressive memory with neutral effect: it is both positive and negative. Add to this that the two characters have identical roles as social consolers who believe in the necessity of change and turn against all that is past. Furthermore; both of them suffer a great deal and have been treated as outcasts because of their ideas. Brendel's past, for instance, is related to his utmost sense of sacrificing everything in life for the sake of the cause of liberty. He has suffered a lot at the hands of Rosmer's father and the society as well, and in all his life, he has been treated as a vagabond. All these hardships couldn't prevent Brendel to maintain to his same trend since he was a young man until the moment he steps into Rosmersholm and he is an old man. Thus, Brendel appears as a man of sincerity who is able to sacrifice everything to serve the just cause of change. In one occasion, Brendel describes, in a wonderful metaphor to Rosmer, how dear and precious his ideas and ideals are to him, and how he is unable to regret all the sacrifices he has ever given to justify his cause:

Brendel: You know my dear John, that I am a bit of a Sybarite – a feinchmecker. Have been all my days. I like my pleasures in solitude. Thus I enjoy them twice as much, ten times as much.
When golden dreams drifted over me, enfolded me, when new thoughts were born in me – shadowy. Infinite-wafting me away on their sustaining pinions. I shaped them into visions, poems, pictures: only in rough outline of course.
Rosmer: Yes, yes.
Brendel: Oh, I have known joy, rapture, the mysterious ecstasy of creation – in the rough, as I said. Applause, gratitude, fame, the laurel wreath- I have garnered all with joyful, trembling hands. In my innermost thoughts tasted a delight- so intoxicating! So intense!
Rosmer: But never written it down.
Brendel: Not a word. The drudgery of pen pushing nauseates me. And why should I prostitute my visions when I can enjoy their purity all by myself? But now they shall

> be sacrificed. You know, I really feel like a mother laying her little daughter in the bridegroom's arms. But all the same, I shall sacrifice them. Sacrifice them on the alter of freedom. A series of well planed lectures-all over the country-
>
> (Act I, pp. 17-18)

As Brendel decides to give his last sacrifice, as he attempts to release the treasure of his life in front of the public, his greatest disappointment becomes true. Instead of being valued, Brendel is beaten up savagely. Such scene brings back to mind the same action of Rosmer's father when he has beaten up Brendel just because of his influence upon Rosmer. It seems that the very simple view to change the past is totally rejected by Brendel's community no matter how harsh this past has always been. Brendel then realizes that the society has transformed, but its transformation is a disastrous one as he explains to Rosmer:

> Brendel: … when I last bestrode these halls – I stood before you, a man of substance, slapping my breast pocket.
> Rosmer: What! I don't quite understand –
> Brendel: But as you see me this night, I am deposed monarch amid the ashes of my burnt castle.
> ……
> Can you spare me an ideal or two? ... One or two cast-off ideals? You will be doing a good deed. I am cleaned out, my dear boy, absolutely and entirely…. For five and twenty years I have sat, as a miser sits, on his locked treasure chest, and then yesterday – when I went to open it to take out the treasure – there was nothing. The teeth of time have ground it to dust. There was not a blessed thing left of the whole lot.
>
> (Act IV, PP. 72-73)

The society that Brendel has been always looking forward to clean is now cleaning off its faithful servants and casts them "downhill". In fact, besides his importance in the play as a man of great sincerity, Brendel's importance lies in his great effect upon Rosmer. In the first Act of the play, Rosmer shows his admiration in Brendel as the man "who had the courage to live life on his own way", something which is "not small at all" (Act I, P. 19). Brendel has always kept on fighting for his cause concerning the revolution against the past, trying at the same time to implant his ideas in his students' minds such as Rosmer.[16] Rosmer believed in Brendel more than he believed in his own father. So when Brendel gets down, Rosmer gets down too. After all the horsewhip of the deceased Rosmer gets back to life once again, casting out this time, not only Brendel, but Rosmer as well. Ironically, in tribute for all his sacrifices, the consoler takes a huge reward that is mockery and cynicism. In his last visit to Rosmersholm, Brendel asks Rosmer, not for money or clothes, but to spare him one or two ideals because he is totally bankrupted. Such request represents how harsh is the community that is without ideals, the matter which reflects a biting criticism against

Norwegian community. Ibsen's intention after all is to give a realistic image of a society that is hold firmly by the powerful fist of the past which one has to face it because according to Ibsen "Truth shall make you free"[17]

Luka in Gorky's play looks very much like Brendel concerning his role as the consoler who is mocked instead of being valued. The only difference between the two is that whereas Brendel keeps his same past life trend, Luka's past is rather shocking in comparison with his present. In the past, Luka used to be "the thieving elder of a peasant community. He cheats his neighbors, seduces a peasant's wife, and brings about the suicide of the betrayed husband…[thus] one can find in Luka an interesting example of a guilty conscience rather than the irreproachable source of wisdom"[18]. Meanwhile, Luka's nature is totally altered. He appears now as a man of ideals who aims at preaching individuals to have better lives. He has tramped to different parts of Russia and Siberia and has met all sorts of people. Through all these travels, Luka attempted to create beauty and ideality, believing that everyman, however demoralized or degraded by society, still he\she has an inner purity that can be touched[19], and in this respect, Luka represents a Christ figure due to his moralistic and comforting nature. Due to all these views, Luka appears as character full of contradictions, the matter which:

> has always disconcerted the audience and the critics: was he meant as a positive or as a negative character? A liar and a cheater, he wove illusions for his listeners in the dark and gloomy cellar, and he did sweeten their misery, if only for a brief space. Subsequently denied his sympathy from Luka, but readers and spectators are tempted to take him as a protagonist of the Romanticism of falsehood.[20]

Such contradictions in Luka's personality are generalized in relation to the contrast between his past and present. Moreover, by Luka, Gorky is able to announce his own concept of social satire and to show Man's fragility to stand against the world with all its powers and absurdities. This opinion is reinforced through Luka's episode of the "just - land" which shows the impossibility for Man to get a just life, a just reality and a just community:

> Then there came to that place – all this happened in Siberia – a man exiled by the government, a learned man, with books, maps and all sorts of things like that. So our man says to the scientist: Do me a favor, please, show me where the true and just land lies and how to get there. The scientist at once opens his books, spreads his maps – looks here, looks there – there's no true and just land. Everything is right, all the lands are shown but the true and just land is just not there.
>
> ……
> ……
> My man doesn't believe him. It must be there, says he, look harder for it. Otherwise your books and maps, says he, they're all worthless if they fail to show the true and just land. The scientist is sore at that. My maps, says he, are the truest of all,

> and the true and just land doesn't exist anywhere. Hearing that, my man too gets angry. What? Says he. I've lived and suffered all these years believing it exists, and your maps make out it doesn't? it's robbery! And bang! He punches him in the nose, and bang! Again! After that he went home – and hang himself.
>
> (Act III, P.326-327)

Such speech represents a harsh satire against Russian Community through a very exaggerated humorous style because "Gorky's humour verges on satire in its level of exaggeration"[21]. That is why Gorky's *Lower Depths* is considered a play of all Russian plays that reflects Russian morbidity, the Russian despair and the gloomy nature of the Russian spirit[22], because as a whole the play "epitomized the New Russian Realism"[23]. Basically, Gorky has derived all these stories from real outcasts lives as he himself was one of them because Realism to Gorky means "the truthful, unembellished portrayal of men and the conditions of their life"[24]. So though Luka stands for Platonic consoler, yet, in Gorky's opinion "in our days, the consoler can be presented on the stage only as a negative and comic figure"[25]. Clearly enough, the effect of Luka in Gorky's play is just like the effect of Brendel in Ibsen's play. The two characters have much in common for they are seeking to change the human spirits and rigged beliefs of the individuals in their communities, but the only thing they get is mockery. Still, they may have a very slight influence on others as Brendel for example influences Rosmer and as Luka influences Peppel. Yet both Rosmer and Peppel have a much more painful reality to deal with. They cannot go on in life depending upon what is considered to idealism. Each used to a troubled past that they can bear their lives anymore so one of them decides to kill himself and the other is transformed into a killer. What is noteworthy is the way Ibsen and Gorky transmit their messages into their communities. Despite the fact that they belong to two different countries, one is Norwegian and the other is Russian, yet both playwrights share the belief that their communities need change, a change that can purify the individual and not to criminalize him, a change that cancels the rigged and pave the way to the new away from the evils of the past. As for Ibsen, he realizes the catastrophe and thus he shows an important view that "A Man shares the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which he belongs"[26]. However, in *Rosmersholm* Ibsen does present the social dilemma but he gives no tangible solutions. Thus, Ibsen's tendency in drama is just like Rosmer's tendency in *Rosmershom*: he knows of a huge problem eating the society away, yet he cannot face it. In other words, Ibsen in *Rosmersholm* diagnoses the disease but he gives no cure. While in Gorky's play the cure is presented through Luka. Luka spends the first three acts speaking about social diseases and he gives their cures. Luka believes in forgiveness, in pure spirit, in any peaceful aspect that can bring goodness and change the modern beast into his first pure heart away from the complications of Modernization declaring a very important view: "let a man become conscious of his dignity and capacity, let him adopt an ideal which is possible for man, and he will realize happiness as an individual"[27]. Then, looking forward to happiness and better life is always what makes any human being goes on but forgetting at the same time a very important fact: the past that chases him, the past that in both plays takes many forms and images. One character looks at it as a source of evil, another views it as the

source of goodness, and another cannot bear its dominating shadows any more. Nevertheless, in every condition there is an explicit reality: the past is not an illusion, it is the chain that is always arresting the individual, no matter how hard he\she wants to run "that chain runs after him". Henceforth, the two plays attempt to present a very important question, Is it any human's fault that he\she has a past?, and is it right to call it past or it is more appropriate to call it "life" for it is regenerating itself, sticking people to it and dominating their dreams and future expectations.

Notes

[1]Friedrich Nietzsche, Famous Quotes, cited in www.proverbia.net, accessed on 2-3-2012

[2] Brian Johnston, "Ibsen Voyages: Ibsen's Dialectical Method", www.ibsenvoyges.com/e-texts/play/vi/htm, 9-12-2011.

[3] , "Maxim Gorky (1868-1936)", www.kirijast.sci.fi, accessed on 9-12-2011.

[4]Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, Ann Jellicoe (trans.), cited in *Four Modern Plays*, Henry Popkin (ed.), (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), (Act I, P.14). All references to the play are taken from this edition, henceforth; all subsequent references to the play will be parenthetically cited within the research paper.

[5] Yael Greenberg, "The Hidden Architecture in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*", (*Modern Language Review*, Vol.89, No. 1 (Jan., 1994), PP.138-148), cited in www.jstor.org /stable/3733157, accessed on 9-12-2011, P.146.

[6] Maxim Gorky, *The Lower Depths*, Alexander Bakshy (trans.), cited in *Four Modern Plays*, Henry Popkin (ed.), (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), (Act I, P. 290). All references to the play are taken from this edition, henceforth; all subsequent references to the play will be parenthetically cited within the research paper.

[7]James E. Kernas, "Henrik Ibsen: Kindermorde and Will in *Little Eyolf*", cited in *Modern Plays: Essays in Criticism*, Travis Bogard & William I. Oliver (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, PP. 192-208), P. 192.

[8] Greenberg, P.143.

[9] , "*Rosmersholm*", www.wikipedia.org/wiki/rosmersholm, accessed on 9-12-2011.

[10] Sigmond Frued, " Some Character-Types Met With in Psych-Analytic Work", cited in Yael Greenberg, "The Hidden Architecture in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*", P.138.

[11]Greenberg, P.138.

[12] James Huneker, "*Rosmersholm*: an Analysis of the Play by Henrik Ibsen", (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), cited in www.theatredatabase.com/19th-century/rosmersholm.htm/, accessed on 9-12-2011.

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[14] Huneker.

[15] Henry Popkin (ed.), *Four Modern plays*: Introduction, P. xii.

[16]Thomas Van Laan, "The Tragic Vision of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*", (*Modern Drama*, Vol. 49:3, 2006, PP.370-86), cited in http://depts.washington.edu, accessed on 8-11-2011.

[17] Sarah Barnwell Elliott, "Ibsen", (The Johns Hopkins University: *the Sewanee Review*, Vol. 15, No.1, (Jan. 1907), PP. 75-99, cited in www.jstor.org/stable/27530829, accessed: 12-12-2011, PP.84.

[18]Popkin (ed.), PP. xi-xii.

[19] Emma Goldman, " *The Lower Depths*: A Synopsis and Analysis of the Play by Maxim Gorky", (*Social Significance of the Modern Drama*, Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914, PP.295-301), cited in www,theatrehistory.com/Russian/gorky002.htm/, accessed on 20-11-2011.

[20]Alexander Kaun, "Maxim Gorky: In Search of a Synthesis", (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 17, No.50 (Jan. 1939), PP. 429-444), cited in www.jstor.org/stable/4203499, accessed on 15-1-2012, PP.432-432.

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[24]Kaun, P.439.
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[26] Elliott, PP.84-85.
[27]Muchnic, P.125.

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