

The Destructive Passion
In
August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*
By
Assistant Instructor/ Hamid Hammad Abid

College of Education for Women/ University of Anbar

The Swedish playwright August Strindberg (1849-1912) presented in this play naturalistic views. He showed his genius in writing about the permanent antagonism between the two sexes. *Miss Julie* is published in 1888, it shocked early reviewers with its frank portrayal of sexuality. Although it was privately produced in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1889, the play was banned throughout much of Europe and was not produced in Sweden, Strindberg's native country, until 1906. The play soon gained an underground popularity in both Europe and America; mainstream acceptance and success came a bit slower, but by the early twentieth century the play was considered an important achievement of modern drama.

The root of dispute over the play stemmed from its frank portrayal of sex. Not only does *Miss Julie* contain a sexual encounter between a lower-class servant and an upper-class aristocrat (in itself outrageous for the times), the play clearly describes the sex act as something apart from the concept of love. The idea of intercourse based completely on lust was scandalous to late-nineteenth century thinking and enough to provoke censure. And it was nothing more than the idea of sex without love that caused the trouble. The act is only referred to in the play, not actually depicted on stage. Strindberg wrote in his Preface to *Miss Julie* that " Personally , I find the joy of life in its tense and cruel struggles, and my enjoyment lies in getting to know something, in getting to learn something."¹

Strindberg's drama focuses on the downfall of the aristocratic Julie, a misfit in her society (the author refers to her in his preface as a "man-hating half-woman").

Julie rebels against the restrictions placed on her as a woman and as a member of the upper-class. From the beginning of the play, her behavior is shown to alienate her peer class and shock the servants. She displays a great disregard for class and gender conventions, at one moment claiming that class differences should not exist and the next demanding proper treatment as a woman of aristocracy. Her antics result in her social downfall, a loss of respect from her servants, and, ultimately, her suicide.

Miss Julie is widely regarded as the most important drama to come out of the literary movement known as naturalism. The movement was based largely on the theory of social Darwinism, which proposed that individuals fight for position in society much as animals fight for their survival in the wild, and that, in humans (as in animals) only the fittest can survive (this theory is known as "Natural Selection" and was first proposed by Charles Darwin). As a naturalistic drama, **Miss Julie** focuses on Julie and Jean's struggle for survival in their society. Strindberg claimed that the basis for the plot of **Miss Julie** was a true story he had heard of a young noblewoman who had had sexual relations with a servant, although that young woman did not commit suicide. Strindberg lived in a time in which gender and class roles were becoming more fluid, and the play reflects the conflicts that are inevitable in a society struggling with change. It said that "the very eyes with which we see the problem are conditioned by the long traditional habits of our own society."² It means that society is the arbitrator in indicating what is wrong or right.

Today **Miss Julie** is regarded as remarkable for the same reason early critics and censors found it so shocking: It is the first play in which sex is separated from love. Strindberg's portrayal of the strength of sexual desire (and the often calamitous situations that result when one surrenders to such desires) strongly influenced later playwrights, most notably Tennessee Williams **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**. Desire commands us to run off and get what we want whereas aversion insists that avoid the things that disgust us. Typically, when we do not get what we want, we are disappointed, and when we get what we do not want, we are distressed.³ Although the

play's importance was not widely recognized during Strindberg's lifetime, its place in modern drama, particularly as an example of naturalism, is now virtually undisputed.

Miss Julie, was written about the naturalistic view of human behavior. He symbolizes the behavior through animal imagery. The animal image Strindberg uses helps him exemplify his naturalistic view. The first animal imagery Strindberg uses is the dog. Jean uses the dog imagery to describe to Christine how Julie made her ex-fiancé act before the break-up. “ Why, she was making him jump over her riding whip --- training him like a dog. He jumped over twice, and she whipped him both times.”⁴ A dog is man's best friend only because a dog is an extremely loyal animal. Having Jean compare what Julies did to her ex-fiancé with what some one would do to a dog shows Julies drive to be the dominant one or the master. Strindberg again uses the imagery of a dog when he has Julie say, “you dog with my name on your collar—you lackey with my initials on your buttons!” (p.235) to Jean. She feels that her social status is so much superior to that of Jean that their relationship could be compared to that of a master and his dog. The dog imagery in the play is also used to demonstrate the difference in social classes. In the play Julie's dog, Diana, is impregnated by the lodge-keepers mongrel. Christine demonstrates Julie's disgust when she says; “And at someone like you. And she was going to have Diana shot, because the poor thing ran after the lodge-keeper's mongrel!”(p. 231) The sexual affair between the dogs also represents the sexual affair between Jean and Julie and how the two of them look down on each other. Jean looks down on Julie for being surprisingly easy to obtain.

From its first publication and performance, August Strindberg's play **Miss Julie** has been the source of critical controversy and debate. Written in the span of little more than one month in the summer of 1888, the play was banned or censored throughout Europe in the late Nineteenth Century. Because it dealt with situations and attitudes deemed morally or socially offensive (the daughter of an aristocrat seduces her father's valet, and he, in turn, compels her to commit suicide) the initial

negative reaction to the play was rooted in generalized, fanatical, self righteous outrage and did not seek to deal with or engage the text in any specific manner. Instead, **Miss Julie** was a convenient target, symptomatic of all that was corrupting and dangerous in an increasingly progressive world. By the early Twentieth Century, however, more focused moral and artistic critiques were leveled at Strindberg's self proclaimed naturalistic tragedy, a discussion that continues to thrive even today. Though some of the moral and social issues may have lost their radical edge in later decades, there is still an ongoing, lively, and deeply divided debate. It should be noted that the one –act play has become a popular medium of expression which has effects even upon such pleasant entertainments as the TV programs since it concentrates on one certain issue or matter. Strindberg is aware of the unpleasant conclusions of the philosophical developments of the time. He does in fact say:

I have had a feeling that, in our time, when the rudimentary thought processes operating through our fancy seem to be developing into reflection, research, and analysis, the theatre might stand on the verge of being abandoned as a decaying form, for the enjoyment of which we lack the requisite conditions.⁵

The play is thus an envoy toward but not a guarantee of the emergence of a more perceptive audience. Drama is literally and metaphorically collaborative. His play can set an audience's imagination in motion within a fictional environment, but each member of the audience will ultimately complete his or her own pictures. Through his preface, Strindberg invites an audience to regard **Miss Julie** as an opportunity to witness and possibly experience the painful but ultimately rewarding process of discovery and change, in short, to learn so that, the theatre might once again become a place for educated people. He wishes us to see an analogy between what he really presents and the natural order.⁶ By replicating observed details of environment, the artist would allow the audience a deeper understanding of the forces acting on characters. **Miss Julie** demonstrates the naturalistic idea that human beings are strictly products of the forces surrounding them - that "free will" and "choice" are illusions..

IN his masterly preface to this play, August Strindberg writes:

The fact that my tragedy makes a sad impression on many is the fault of the many. When we become strong, as were the first French revolutionaries, it will make an exclusively pleasant and cheerful impression to see the royal parks cleared of rotting, superannuated trees which have too long stood in the way of others with equal right to vegetate their full lifetime; it will make a good impression in the same sense as does the sight of the death of an incurable. What a wealth of revolutionary thought -- were we to realize that those who will clear society of the rotting, superannuated trees that have so long been standing in the way of others entitled to an equal share in life, must be as strong as the great revolutionists. of the past! ⁷

Indeed, Strindberg is no trimmer, no cheap reformer, no patch worker; therefore his inability to remain fixed, or to content himself with accepted truths. Therefore also, his great versatility, his deep grasp of the subtlest phases of life. He was one of those not forever the seeker, the restless spirit roaming the earth, ever in the death-pains of the Old, to give birth to the New.

Miss Julie, a one-act tragedy, is no doubt a brutally frank portrayal of the most intimate thoughts of man and of the age-long antagonism between classes. Brutally frank, because August Strindberg strips both of their glitter, their sham and pretense. We in modern dramatic art are there to learn that lesson with the insight of August Strindberg. He who had been tossed about all his life between the decadent traditions of his aristocratic father and the grim, sordid reality of the class of his mother. He who had been begotten through the physical mastery of his father and the physical obedience of his mother. Truly, Strindberg knew whereof he spoke -- for he spoke with his soul, a language whose significance is illuminating, compelling. Once he said that men and women seek to destroy each other in the "act of loving and of creating new life, and the new life is itself always guilty, not so much by inheritance as by the relationships it is inevitably born into." ⁸

Julie as a character inherited the primitive, intense passion of her mother and the neurotic aristocratic tendencies of her father. Added to this heritage is the call of the wild, "Tonight we're all just happy people at a party. There's no question of rank".

(p.202) Julie feels, when too late, that the barrier of rank reared through the ages, by wealth and power, is not thrown aside with impunity. Therein the vicious brutality, the boundless injustice of rank. The people on the estate of Julie's father are celebrating St. John's Eve (a religious festival or holiday in Christianity) with dance, song and mirth. The Count is absent, and Julie graciously mingles with the servants. But once having tasted the simple abandon of the people, once having thrown off the artifice and superficiality of her aristocratic decorum, her suppressed passions leap into full flame, and Julie throws herself into the arms of her father's valet, Jean -- not because of love for the man, nor yet openly and freely, but as persons of her station may do when carried away by the moment.

The woman in Julie pursues the male, follows him into the kitchen, plays with him as with a pet dog, and then feigns indignation when Jean, aroused, makes advances. How dare he, the servant, the lackey, even insinuate that she would have him! "I, the mistress of the house, am good enough to come to their dance, and when I feel like dancing, I want to dance with some who knows how to lead"(p.201) she with excitement forgot her status with whom she danced and played, and the result would come in form of regret and sadness. Thus, Strindberg himself commented that " the dance of sexual excitement is again the dance of death."⁹ Strindberg knows well the psychology of the upper classes. He understands that their graciousness, their charity, their interest in the "common people" is, after all, nothing but arrogance, blind conceit of their own importance and ignorance of the character of the people.

Even though Jean is a servant, he has his pride, he has his dreams. "I'll have to speak more plainly. It just doesn't look right for you to prefer one of your servants to the others who are hoping for the same unusual honor"(p.201) Strange, is it not, that those who serve and drudge for others, should think so much of themselves as to refuse to be played with. Stranger still that they should indulge in dreams. Jean says:

Have you an idea what's the world looks like from below?

of course you haven't. no more than a hawk or eagle has. You hardly ever sees their backs because they're always soaring above us. I lived with seven brothers and sisters and- a pig- out on the waste land where there wasn't even a tree growing. But from my window I could see the wall of the Count's garden with the apples trees sticking up over it. That was the Garden of Aden for me, and there were many angry angels with flaming swords standing guard over it. But in spite of them. I and the other boys found a way to the Tree of Life.... I'll bet you despise me. (p.210)

What rich food for thought in the above for all of us, and for the Jeans, the people who do not know what they want, yet feel the cruelty of a world that keeps the pauper's child out of the castle of his dreams, away from joy and play and beauty! The injustice and the bitterness of it all, that places the stigma of birth as an impassable obstacle, a fatal imperative excluding one from the table of life, with the result of producing such terrible effects on the Julies and the Jeans. The one passive, made helpless and useless by affluence, ease and idleness; the other enslaved and bound by service and dependence.¹⁰ Even when Jean wants to, he cannot rise above his condition. When Julie asks him to embrace her, to love her, he replies:

I can't as long as we are in this house.... There is the Count, your father.... I need only to see his gloves lying in a chair to feel my own insignificance. I have only to hear his bell, to start like a nervous horse.... And now that I see his boots standing there so stiff and proper, I feel like bowing and scraping.... I can't account for it but -- but ah, it is that damned servant in my back -- I believe if the Count came here now, and told me to cut my throat, I would do it on the spot.... Superstition and prejudice taught in childhood can't be uprooted in a moment.(216)

No, superstition and prejudice cannot be uprooted in a moment; nor in years. The fear of authority, humiliation before station and wealth -- these are the curse of the Jean class that makes such cringing slaves of them. Cringing before those who are above them, tyrannical and over-bearing toward those who are below them. For Jean has the potentiality of the master in him as much as that of the slave. Yet degrading as "the damned servant" reacts upon Jean, it is much more terrible in its effect upon Christine, the cook, the dull, dumb animal who has so little left of the spirit of

independence that she has lost even the ambition to rise above her condition. Thus when Christine, the betrothed of Jean, discovers that her mistress Julie had given herself to him, she is indignant that her lady should have so much forgotten her station as to stoop to her father's valet.

Christine: I'm not going to stay in this house a moment longer, not when I can't have any respect for my employers. (p.230)

JEAN: Why do you want to respect them?

Christine: Don't try to be smart. You don't want to work for people who behave immorally, do you?(pp. 230—31)

JEAN: oh, I don't know. I think it's rather comforting to find out that they're not one bit better than we are.

Christine: well, I don't. if they're not any better, there's no point in us trying to be like them—and think of the Count. Think of all the sorrows he's been through in his time.

No sir, I will not stay in this house any longer.(p.231)

Such dignity and morality are indeed pathetic, because they indicate how completely serfdom may devastate even the longing for something higher and better in the breast of a human being. The Christines represent the greatest obstacle to social growth, the deadlock in the conflict between the classes. On the other hand, the Jeans, with all their longing for higher possibilities, often become brutalized in the hard school of life; though in the conflict with Julie, Jean shows brutality only at the critical moment, when it becomes a question of life and death, a moment that means discovery and consequent ruin, or safety for both. In effect, persons who respect themselves and others as moral patients also will come to respect themselves as moral agents. The well known moralist Kant speaks of this as " noble pride or proper self-esteem" ¹¹

Jean, though the male is aroused in him, pleads with Julie not to play with fire, begs her to return to her room, and not to give the servants a chance for gossip. And when later Jean suggests his room for a hiding place that Julie may escape the approaching merry-makers, it is to save her from their songs full of insinuation and

immorality. Finally when the inevitable happens, when as the result of their closeness in Jean's room, of their overwrought nerves, their intense passion, the avalanche of sex sweeps them off their feet, forgetful of station, birth and conventions, and they return to the kitchen, it is again Jean who is willing to bear his share of the responsibility. "I don't care to shirk my share of the blame," He tells Julie, "you're beautiful woman, much too good for the likes of me. You got carried away by your emotions and now you want to cover up your mistakes by telling yourself that you love me. " (p.222)

There is more truth in this statement than the Julies can grasp, namely, that even servants have their passions and feelings that cannot long be trifled with, with impunity. The Jeans know "it was good to find out that what I saw glittering up above was only fool's gold, to have seen that the eagle's back was as gray as its belly,"(p.221) For Jean says, "I'd be doing myself an injustice if I didn't admit that part of the credit for this seduction belong to me. But do you think a person in my position would have dared to look twice at you if you hadn't ask for it? I'm still amazed--!" (220) It is this force that helps to transform the blossom into dirt that August Strindberg emphasizes in *The Father*. For the child born against the will of its parents must also be without will, and too weak to bear the stress and storm of life.

In *Miss Julie* this idea recurs with even more tragic effect. Julie, too, had been brought into the world against her mother's wishes. Indeed, so much did her mother dread the thought of a child that she "I was born against my mother's wishes, as far as I can make out. My mother decided to bring me as a nature child--- and she would hide herself in the attic or in the garden, and some times she would stay out all night." (p.223) Added to this horror was the conflict, the relentless war of traditions between Julie's aristocratic father and her mother descended from the people. This was the heritage of the innocent victim, Julie -- an autumn blossom blown into fragments by lack of stability, lack of love and lack of harmony. In other words, while Julie is broken and weakened by her inheritance and environment, Jean is hardened by his. Walter E. Houghton mentioned in his book **The Victorian Frame of Mind** that to

keep body and mind untainted, the body must taught to view women as objects of the greatest respects and even fear. He has to think of them as "sisters, whether they lived in palaces or in the cold sepulcher of shame. He was to consider nice women (like sister and his mother, like his future bride) as creatures more like angels than human beings--- an image wonderfully calculated not only to dissociate love from sex, but to turn love into worship, and worship of purity."¹²

When Jean kills the bird which Julie wants to rescue from the ruins of her life, it is not so much out of real cruelty, as it is because the character of Jean was molded in the relentless school of necessity, in which only those survive who have the determination to act in time of danger. Thus, he decided to kill the bird "let me have the little pest, and I'll wring its neck." (p.234) For as Jean says, "Miss Julie, I can see that you are unhappy, I know that you are suffering, but I simply cannot understand you. We make love for the fun of it, when we can get any time off from our work. ...if you ask me , you're sick, Miss Julie. I'm sure that's it, Miss Julie" (227) Here we have the key to the psychology of the utter helplessness and weakness of the Julie type, and the brutality of the Jeans. The one, the result of an empty life, of parasitic leisure, of a useless, purposeless existence. The other, the effect of too little time for development, for maturity and depth; of too much toil to permit the growth of the finer traits in the human soul. Undoubtedly, it is our attitudes and reactions that gives us trouble. We cannot choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how we respond to them.¹³ In this play the two sexes attempt to show which one is correct. Thus, each one releases his passion and desire to guide him or her, forgetting the role which their minds would play to direct them properly. In this field, Eric Bentley has confirmed that "immorality is not the doing of certain things, but the deception of self in refusing to see what should and what should not to be done." ¹⁴

August Strindberg, himself the result of the class conflict between his parents, never felt at home with either of them. All his life he was tormented by the irreconcilability of the classes; and though he was no sermonizer in the sense of

offering a definite remedy for individual or social ills, yet with master touch he painted the degrading effects of class distinction and its tragic antagonisms. There are two kinds of spiritual law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and another, altogether different in woman. A woman cannot be herself in society of the present day, " which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by man and with judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view."¹⁵ In *Miss Julie* Strindberg popularized one of the most vital problems of our age, and gave to the world a work powerful in its grasp of elemental emotions, laying bare the human soul behind the mask of social tradition and class culture. Nowadays and even in the past a woman should be submissive wife whose whole excuse for being was to love, honor, obey—and amuse her master, and to manage his household and bring up his children. In that role her character and her life were completely distinct from those who run after their destructive passions.

August Strindberg attempts to affirm in this naturalistic play that heredity and environment are the major forces that shape human beings. In other words, like lower animals, humans respond mainly to inborn instincts that influence behavior in concert with—and sometimes in opposition to—environmental influences, including economic, social, cultural, and familial influences. Julie, for example, responds partly to her inborn female instinct for male companionship and partly to her environmentally induced hatred of men. Consequently, she both desires and despises Jean, causing her deep internal conflict. Human beings have no free will, or very little of it, because heredity and environment are so powerful in determining the course of human action. Human beings, like lower animals, have no soul. Religion and morality are irrelevant. As a naturalist playwright, Strindberg believes that a literary work should present life exactly as it is, without preachment, judgment, or embellishment. In this respect, naturalism is akin to realism. However, naturalism goes further than realism in that, it presents a more detailed picture of everyday life. Whereas the realist writer omits insignificant details when depicting a particular scene, a naturalist writer generally includes them. He wants the scene to be as “natural” as possible. The naturalist writer

also attempts to be accurate objective and detached. Rather than manipulating characters as if they were puppets, the naturalist writer prefers to observe the characters as if they were animals in the wild and then report on their activity. Finally, naturalism attempts to present dialogue as spoken in everyday life. Rather than putting “unnatural” wording in the mouth of a character, Strindberg attempts to reproduce the speech patterns of people in a particular time and place. Both the two movements (Realism and Naturalism) did not last long because of the scientific progress that the world has really witnessed. Every man or woman is a mercurial creature, sometimes acting impulsively in response to the hereditary and environmental influences that motivate them. Both Julie and Jean act unpredictably from time to time, suggesting a certain course of action one moment and neglecting it the next.

Notes

¹Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*. (London: Chatto and Widus LTD, 1966), p. 107

²Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers , *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life* , *Introductory Readings in Ethics*, 5 edition (U S A: Thomson Wadsworth, 200), p. 241.

³ Ibid., p.513

⁴Norris Houghton (ed.), *Seeds of Modern Drama*. (New York: Dell Publishing Co. INC.1968), III, 198. all the subsequent quotations are from the same edition.

⁵Leo Aylen, *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World*.(London: Methuen & CO. LTD, 1964), p. 234.

⁶ Ibid., p. 234

⁷Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of The Modern Drama*. (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914), p.51

⁸Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*. P.108

⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of The Modern Drama*. P. 54

¹¹Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers , *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life , Introductory Readings in Ethics*. P.509

¹²Walter E. Houghton , *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1968) pp. 354—55

¹³Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, P.514

¹⁴ Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker, A Study of Drama in Modern Times*, (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, 1964), p. 110.

¹⁵Allardyce Nicoll, *World Drama From Aeschylus To Anouilh* . (London: George G. Harrap & Company L T D, 1966), p. 535.

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