



Sexual, Textual and Traumatic subjectivity: August Strindberg representation of class and sexual conflict in Miss Julie

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims at understanding the importance of sexuality and the ways in which sexuality is accorded central status in an attempt to understand human relations, pleasure and satisfaction, sexual subject in culture, to reveal varying degrees of trepidation and anxiety about the ambiguities of sexuality i.e androgyny represents the resolution of the anxieties and tensions of sexual difference in favor of complementarity. In terms of class and gender this paper explores the patriarchal and misogynistic frameworks in which gender and sex were constructed in late 19th century and early 20th century; and how class and power mean that, that sexual never signifies in social isolation i.e power comes into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups and institutions. In terms of traumatic theory, this paper will see at how sexual trauma takes form of a psychological and ontological angst after reaching sexual maturity.*

Keywords: *Sexuality, trauma, androgyny, misogyny, masochistic, subjectivity*

To quote Eugene O' Neil: " Strindberg was the precursor of all modernity in our present theater." August Strindberg, a Swedish playwright, is one of those authors who embodied the notion of art as a product of torment and neurosis. Strindberg exerted a comparable influence on modern drama as a source for naturalism, expressionism, and various experimental modes on the modern stage. Strindberg's writings gives the readers an insight of his mind which searches for answer in every ideology, from spiritualism to occult, from Darwinian determinism to Rousseauistic progression. Strindberg was a misogynist, admirer of authoritarianism, as well as a supporter of women's suffrage and social democrat. His famous and controversial drama *Miss Julie*(1888), in which the battle for sexual mastery takes on profound, universal meaning, was banned throughout Europe in the late 19th century as it dealt with situations and attitudes which seem morally and socially offensive.

August Strindberg openly admits his morality towards women through the portrayal of Miss Julie, and he gives an ambiguous and complex account of women. The play is of the age when old beliefs were crumbling and new beliefs and dogmas were making their way; the fundamental truths were being replaced by a kind of relativity of truth which depended on the position and aspirations of individuals, and emergence of a psychologically realistic drama that breaks with theatrical convention. Miss Julie has two characters- Julie and Jean who are subjected to each others authority. While Julie is superior in terms of class, Jean is superior in terms of morality as he is a man and Julie is a woman who displays a blatant disregard for her class and gender conventions claiming that class difference should not exist and later, demands proper treatment as a woman of aristocracy. In the play, Jean becomes an instrument to aristocrat due to his masculine strength, but his inferiority due to the social environment which he inhabits expresses the discrepancies between the classes. Further, an innumerable number of power reversals occur along class and gender lines. Thus, sexuality occupies a center stage as it becomes the instrument of shifting power, as Miss Julie, by sleeping with Jean (a servant) degrades herself and is reduced below Jean's level; the power shifts again, when Julie reasserts her superior class mocking Jean's name and family lineage. As explained in the preface to *Miss Julie*, these battles reflect Strindberg's social Darwinist notions of revolutionary history and hierarchy as he writes: "I have added a little evolutionary history by making the weaker steal and repeat the words of the stronger." By this, Strindberg suggests that the difference between man and woman is that, that women are masochistic and want to ruin themselves, while men are better equipped for evolution and want to survive. Linking the argument to the theory of power, Foucault contended that sexuality is "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power...

Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations but one of those endowed with great instrumentality.”

Foucault’s work (History of sexuality) is important in understanding *Miss Julie* because it explains that sexuality is not simply the natural expression or some inner drive or desire. The discourses of sexuality concern the operation of power in human relationships as they govern the production of personal identity. When sexuality is inscribed in or on the body, then it is texts and discourses (literary, medical, legal, and religious) which take the sexual into something that is also textual. To argue that sexuality and textuality are linked is to propose that the sexual is conceived in relation to words, sign systems, discourse and representations. That is why, Jean and Julie are succumbed to the authority of the Count-unseen and unheard- who is father and master, and objects like shoes, speaking tube and ringing bell symbolize the working of masters authority. The count’s authority demand Jean’s return to servitude and Julie’s death. The denouncement of the play is sadistic, demanding that the heroine kill herself by hypnotizing Jean as she lacked the courage to commit suicide, and claiming through Jean that it was the only way. The class and gender battles end Julie and Jean’s submission to their absent authority foregrounding the fact that sexualities have more political and discursive leverage and it can excite textual as well as theoretical trouble.

In terms of traumatic subjectivity, *Miss Julie* provides accounts about the effect of trauma on memory. In this context, Freud’s theories of sexuality are important because of the impacts they have had on developments inside and outside psychoanalytic accounts of sexual subjectivity throughout 20th century. The character of Miss Julie depicts a kind trauma, a sexual trauma in which the event takes place in childhood, but it is only understood as traumatic later, after reaching sexual maturity; and later in adult life produces a jolt in which there is a sense of belatedness about responses or what the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche has called the ‘afterwardsness’ of trauma. It is Miss Julie’s androgyny which is source of her trauma as it is not only a source of revenge but also a mode of consolation. Though at one point Julie describes herself as “half-woman and half-woman”, we should not take her word at face value. Julie is not a figure of gender effeminacy, rather the play conventionally depicts her “half-ness” as consisting her mother’s emotions and her father’s thoughts. Julie’s mother believed in equality of sexes and, indeed, hated men; thus Julie inherited her mother’s hatred for men. Julie’s father was a misogynist and from him she inherited hatred for women. Thus, Julie’s parents are the cause of her traumatic androgynous cum masochistic behavior. Miss Julie’s confusion over her sexual identity lead her to the path of destruction. In the preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg describes Julie as ‘man hating half woman’, and she is introduced as a predatory version of the new woman, a man hater who makes her fiance jump like a dog. Her androgyny is becomes a curse from her very childhood, as she came into the world, unwanted by her frustrated mother who recreates in her daughter a male companion she could not find in her husband. In addition to her conventional training Miss Julie was made to wear boy’s clothes, perform boy’s chores and ride horses in order to demonstrate her mother’s predicament that woman is as good as any man. It is due to androgyny that Julie cannot differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sexuality as result of this chaos good sexuality burdens the young woman’s (Julie) body with enormous cultural responsibility which she is not ready, making her psychic economy into masochistic and like a abused child, perceives pain where pleasure should be. In feminist psychoanalytic thinking “sexual difference” refers to sexuation that Lacan points to when the human subject enters the “symbolic order”, as he calls it a ‘psychic sexuation’ into masculine and feminine. Sexual innocence and sexual experience are converged in young woman’s body as she becomes the legitimate conduit for generalized sexual arousal. The ubiquity of the image is partnered by a cultural intrigue and responsibility which asks young women to be sexually adventurous, sexually giving, but through the paradoxical maintenance of their youthful ‘unknowing’. The need for constant arousal and constant change, the seeking of new sexual territories, is attached to the symbol of the young female body; her sexuality is good sexuality provided it holds true to the ultimate ideal of maturity and immersion in a mature, maternal relationship. All these ideals are discarded and desecrated by Miss Julie who shows no concern for class and gender and had to pay the price of her arrogance in the form of death. It is said that “arrogance destroys the footholds of victory” and it was Miss Julie arrogance that led to her downfall. In the play, trauma is a crux, and memories from childhood are requisite in the study of human psychology, providing a causative account of mental development: early experiences produce effects on later ones, a psychoanalysis helps us. To quote Johnson:

“Psychoanalysis is, in fact, the primal scene it seeks: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation- called “castration” or the “parental coitus” or “the Oedipus complex ” or even “sexuality” - the traumatic deferred interpretation not of an event, but as an event that never took place as such. The “primal scene” is not a scene but an interpretive infelicity whose result was to situate the interpreter in an impossible position. And psychoanalysis is the reconstruction of that interpretive infelicity not as its interpretation, but as its first and last act. Psychoanalysis has content only insofar as it repeats the discontent of what never took place.”

If psychoanalysis is the repetition of the trauma of interpretation, of the “interpretive infelicity”, that is sexuality and literature, Johnson argues, is one of the scenes of the impossibility. “If human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would be no need for literature” is the opening line of her essay on Stephane Mallarme’s “The white water lily”. It is not that literature is able to produce any deep truth of mysteries of sexualities, nor is it even a question simply of literature being able or unable to speak that truth. It is rather that literature is implicated in sexuality: “It is not the life of sexuality that literature cannot capture; it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals. Literature is not only a thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of sexuality.” When seen this way, there can be little wonder that in the 1970 literature and psychoanalysis came to be inextricably linked

Archibald Henderson points to Strindberg’s emphasis of class conflict between aristocracy and peasantry as particularly artificial, unconvincing and unrealistic. Strindberg’s individual subjective psychology is valued above his ability to create a coherent and universal portrayal of human mind, even though *Miss Julie* itself is marred by “sexual disillusionment”. Henderson supports this claim most directly, however, not from Strindberg’s experience with women, but from the misogynistic statements in the preface: “Miss Julie is a modern character”, “half woman”. As a critic and creator, Strindberg has effectively dictated the direction of discourse surrounding his play, and has dealt with the serious issue of class and gender in a rich and complex manner. At the very core, all of Strindberg’s plays, whether realistic or anti-realistic, attempts to embody the essential conflicts of life and a search to uncover universal motives. As Otto Reinert has observed:

“Strindberg’s recurrent dramatic motifs define rather than explain the human situation: the ambiguities of childhood guilt, the uncertainty of identity, sex as the fatal mutual attraction of two hostile species whose struggle serve some mindless life force, vampire figures that drain others of their vitality, endless household drudgery, disgust with physicality, the eternal return of same sorrows and frustration, myths of expiation of personal and collective sins... He writes about souls that break under pressures from somewhere out of a dark chaos.”

August Strindberg’s remarkable artistic development marks out the major boundaries of modern drama, derived from his intense self-analysis and the tormenting conditions of modern life. Strindberg emphasized the shift the conventional of a well made play towards a new attention to character, and this what is explained in *Miss Julie* which concentrated on the passionate relationship between the two main characters, a feminist aristocrat and her father’s valet, rather than a formally structured plot because he believed that “people of today are most interested in the psychological process. Our inquisitive souls are not satisfied just to see something happen; we want to know how it happened. We want to see the strings, the machinery, examine the double bottomed box, feel for the seem in magic ring, look at the cards to see how they are marked.” For Strindberg, psychological plays are more realistic than those with well formed plots. August Strindberg’s plays dismantle traditional notions of character, just as Anton Chekhov’s plays dismantle plot.

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