

# **Self and Style: The Development of Artistic Expression from Youth through Midlife to Old Age in the Works of Henrik Ibsen**

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## **Abstract**

Life-span creativity research has concentrated on the relationship between age and quality performance and has given little attention to qualitative change in manner and matter of artistic expression over time. This paper offers an analytical perspective that examines the interplay between artistic development and stages in the artist's life span, based on the lifetime creative output of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). It is argued that scholars should examine the ways in which cultural and historical influences are filtered through the psychological underpinning of particular life stages. It is suggested that the prevalence of the lyrical modality of artistic expression in Ibsen's young adulthood is intrinsically related to youth, that the rigorous structure of his realistic plays draws from the normative experience of midlife, and that the fragmented abstractions of his late plays constitute an artistic expression of a psychological reality specific to old age.

Whereas much is known about the ways in which maturational processes effect qualitative transformations in artistic behaviour in the formative years, we know very little about effects of maturation later on in those adults who choose art as a career. The considerable body of knowledge, which has accumulated concerning the development of artistic creativity has centered on childhood and adolescence (e.g., Goodnow, 1977; Gardner, 1973; Golomb, 1973; Willats, 1977; Kellog, 1969). There appears to be a tacit assumption in creativity research that beyond a certain point, presumably in early adulthood, age is irrelevant for understanding the artistic personality. To the extent that age has been said to affect artistic production, this effect has generally been regarded as unfavorable, due to detrimental changes, allegedly commencing with midlife, in the physiological structures

supporting creative achievement (Lehman, 1953); to a decline in divergent thinking (Alpaugh and Birren, 1976); or to reduced *self-esteem* (Jaquish and Ripple, 1981). Although qualitative change in manner and matter of artistic expression over time is ubiquitous (Bornstein, 1984) most investigators of life-span creativity have given it little attention. This is due both to the conceptual confusion surrounding analysis of personality development beyond *childhood* (Neugarten, 1977) and to the focus of art criticism upon the formal analysis of isolated works (O'Connor, 1979). Consequently, little has been invested in the effort to link self-development and artistic expression in adulthood and old age, even though such an effort is likely to benefit both developmental theory and art history. This paper *offers* an analytical perspective that examines the interplay between artistic development and stages in the artist's life span, based on the lifetime creative output of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). We chose Ibsen for two reasons: First, because his career is marked by an interplay of continuity and change—two key notions in any developmental discussion. Ibsen himself testifies the distinctness of the changes that his work underwent: "Quite a compact crowd now stands where I stood when I wrote my various books, but I am no longer there myself" (cited in Brustein, 1965, p. 72). There is also a consensus among literary scholars as to a division of his work into three distinct periods, differentiated on the basis of stylistic features: an early period, often referred to as Romantic-Lyrical (to his late thirties), consisting mainly of verse and dramatic poetry; a middle period of Realistic Drama (to his early sixties), characterized by contemporary, topical themes presented in plain prose and noted for well-bound narrative structure, calculated dialogue and well-differentiated characterization; and a late Symbolic period, made up of plays that, while preserving superficial similarities to the realistic convention, are marked by pervasive symbolism, underlying poetic tone, a retreat from strict realism and a deliberately fragmented structure (Koht, 1971; Meyer, 1971, Clurman, 1978).

However, these distinctions by periods are schematic and not always clear-cut; whereas the transition from the poetry of the early period to the prose of the middle period was abrupt, that between the middle and late periods was gradual, making it more difficult to set clear boundaries. More importantly, notwithstanding the sharp stylistic differences, a common thread runs through Ibsen's literary corpus. The author himself urged that his works be examined not in isolation from one another but as a continuous development (Brustein, 1965).

Second, Ibsen's life and work lend *themselves* to analyse from a developmental perspective owing to the author's conscious and intense personal involvement in his creative output, *one* that oversteps the self-exposure common to most artists. This is aptly exemplified by another excerpt from his writings about himself and his work: "Everything I have written has the closest possible relationship with what I have *lived* through, even if that has not been my personal or actual experience..." p. 46).

Such writings clearly *reflect* the *close* relation self. Ibsen's use of the first person to allude to the evolution of his work can justifiably be considered the development of the

New, a reflection of his evolving self. It is our aim to explore the connection between the development of the *self* over the life span and the development of artistic output, taking Ibsen as a case study. In doing so, we enlist the aid of scholars who have studied human development from a life-span perspective, *Poetry to Prose: Early Adulthood to Midlife*.

The early years of Ibsen's literary *career*, from around the age of twenty to wide public recognition at the age of 37, were spent mostly in the writing of Romantic verse, characterized by lyrical excesses and heightened subjectivity. Towards the end of this period in Ibsen's work, a dissatisfaction with the lyrical mode and a commensurate attraction to prose are notable. Nine years before the actual shift of artistic language, Ibsen wrote in one of his poems: "Sail with caution: your poetical bark will overturn! At the slightest puff of life's irony" ("In the Picture Gallery," cited in Koht, 1971, p. 126).

Ibsen's initial breakthrough into the drama of contemporary life was *Love's Comedy* (1862). Though written in verse, this work is the author's first attempt to incorporate immediate, topical social concern in his medium. It is a declaration, albeit an embryonic and hesitant *one*, of his growing involvement with communal issues.

Brand (1865) and Peer Gynt (1867) constitute a further transition, in that they are dramatic poems, which combine the form of dramatic dialogue with poetic meter and rhyme. The middle-period plays, from *The League of Youth* to *Hedda Gabler*, can be seen as a consolidation of dramatic form (what Gestalt psychologists would call a "good" gestalt, precise articulation of situation and conflict, highly differentiated characterization, objective prose dramatic language and technical mastery. The nature of Ibsen's art at this stage is succinctly summarized by Brustein (1965, p. 65): in order to satisfy a pull toward prose, objective reality, and the problem of modern civilization-[which] focuses on the *collective* as well as the individual...; language becomes *more* thin and chastened, characterization more specific, theme more contemporary. The focus is on prevailing social conditions and the issues they raise, and there is evidence of an underlying belief that social reform and personal emancipation are possible. At this stage in his career, Henrik Ibsen applied himself with the utmost conviction and fervor to representing "*real*" situations, *people*, and *problems*, with the objective of affecting some kind of change in them.

The characteristic stance of Ibsen toward his work in this middle *period* is one of detachment, of *self-suppression* in the service of an objective, structurally rigorous art form. His earlier *lyrical* excesses, defiant individuality and self-expressive freedom of verse are supplanted by keen observation on the part of an uninvolved observer. This functional neutralization of the self (one critic goes as far as to call it "self-denial," see Brustein, 1965) is highlighted by its distance from the intensely personal voice of his early work. Upon his creation of *Ghosts* (1881) Ibsen was able to state with confidence: "In none of my plays is the author so extrinsic, so completely absent as in this last one" (cited in Brustein, 1965, p. 71).

Ibsen's detachment was served by a change of voice from the first person of poetry to the third person of drama. In Ibsen's own words: "I myself have for the last seven or eight years hardly written a single verse, cultivated the much more difficult art of writing language spoken in life" (cited in Brustein, 1965, p. 63).

This personal testimony has important bearing on the problem of artistic change and development. Ibsen's contention that it is more difficult to recreate the prose language spoken in life than to write in verse says much about his creative process. For there is nothing intrinsically and objectively difficult in reaching effective artistic expression through prose. More likely, Ibsen was alluding to a personal difficulty he was facing, namely having to forego certain *indulgences* accorded by verse but not, as he perceived, at the disposal of prose writers—namely, spontaneity and license to immediately relieve emotional conflict.

Yet the gain in relevance and moral import outweighed the perceived loss, at least at that point in his life and career. Therefore, even though his creative temperament was initially more conducive to Romantic poetry, he felt an inner drive to cultivate the new language of artistic expression, reinforced by the conviction that it was more important to find an artistic expression of what he called "genuine, plain language of daily life." In short, the deliberate, conscious transition from poetry to prose was partly induced by an inner necessity, which, as we argue later, is of life-span developmental "nature." This detached and impersonal examination was aimed primarily at the manifold problems of modern civilization. From the uncertain probings of —*Youth* to the technical assurance of *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen focused on contemporary social reality in terms of individual freedom and fulfillment. His protagonists are tied to their social *milieu* their conflicts, as well as their actual or implied resolutions, derive from the particular circumstances of that *milieu*. They take part in an ongoing/dialogue with the cultural establishment. Though Ibsen might have remained an anarchist deep within (see Brustein, 1965), his revolutionary disposition resources were channeled into an impartial examination and constructive (if fierce) criticism of the *illnesses* of his environment. His subject matter was comprehensive, and few aspects of Ibsen's contemporary society escaped his perceptive scrutiny during this period.

Underlying the dramatic treatment of social issues is an essentially positivistic and pragmatic premise. The core problems presented are assumed to be amenable to change and solution *once* the right attitude is taken and the individual is liberated from the tyranny of prejudice and other distorted ways of the mind. In this sense, Ibsen's midlife plays are intensely optimistic, tragic endings notwithstanding. In stark contrast to the dizzying heights of Peer Gynt's messianic revolts and escapades, Ibsen's characters of this period are grounded in hard-core reality, which provides manageable solutions and eventual happiness. With the exception of *The Wild Duck*, Eosmersholm and Hedda Gabler (all written toward the end of the realistic period), Ibsen's middle-period plays are not genuine tragedies (see Steiner, 1961). They *all* point to the possibility, if not always the actuality, of relief—not by tragic catharsis but through objective measures. Had there been a system to purify spring water, the conflict and grief of Dr. Stockmann in *An Energy of the People* would have been avoided. Had there been equal opportunity and massive social change with regard to women, Nora of *A Doll's House* would not have had to leave home to find *her* true identity. Had there been a cure for syphilis in Ibsen's lime? His Alving and her son in *Ghosts* would have been spared the tragedy, which befell them.

Ibsen's realistic dramas are pervaded by the underlying assumption that social faults are correctable. Ibsen's move, then, from poetry to prose is a move from emotional introspection and Realism to a realistic reflection of society's woes and a basic optimism as to their chances of resolution. Stylistically, it entails containment within a rigorous art structure, even at the expense of self-suppression. As old age approached, this became a price that Ibsen was less and less willing to pay Realism to Symbolism: Midlife to Old Age. As Ibsen progressively gained control over the dramatic form of realism, certain transformations became apparent. The affirmative tone was gradually toned down under the weight of self-reflection as Ibsen turned his well-developed critical faculties inward. Social reality progressively ceased to play the central thematic role. Ibsen's growing awareness of the limitations of realism is voiced by the character of Rubek, the aging sculptor in his last, and openly autobiographical play *When We Dead Awaken*. The analogy between the busts he had been making to order and Ibsen's realistic portrayals is self-evident:

There is something suspicious, something concealed behind these images—something clandestine that others cannot see... Superficially there is “such a striking resemblance” as it is generally termed... but if you look at them with a deeply perceptive (eye, they have worthy, respectable horse faces and pig-headed mulish snouts, and flap-eared, low-browed skulls and... brutal, bull physiognomies... (Act I, Scene I).

Doubt in the viability of self-reformation is foreshadowed at the height of Ibsen's realistic period, in *Ghosts*. Faced with a personal tragedy, the heroine discovers she cannot forge an effective practice out of her liberated convictions because she, like the rest of her household, is haunted by the powerful ghosts of her past: “ghosts of innumerable old prejudices and beliefs, often cruelties and betrayals—we may not even be aware of them—but they are there just the same—and we can't get rid of them.” (Act I, Scene II).

In the middle-period plays that follow, Ibsen explores epistemological alternatives to the hard logic of the realistic convention, but he does so tentatively, without overstepping the convention's set boundaries. Thus, for example, in *The Wild Duck* (1884), he remains superficially faithful to realistic conventions while challenging the very foundation of realism-truth. The play is illusion and of the reality, as long as a penetrating examination and eventual vindication of individual's right to hold onto an illusory version of it provides comfort and preserves threatened human dignity (Trilling, 1967).

Ibsen veils the play throughout with “a shadow of troubled questioning, perhaps even of despair, at the near impossibility of dispelling its own doubt at answering its own question” (Clurman, p.135). Self-doubt, a questioning of established values, and thematic as well as formal ambiguity characterize Ibsen's last four plays (1892-1899, written between the ages of 64 and 71). In these openly autobiographical works, which revolve around the fall of the man in power, art and life are presented in their bare essentials. The author reintroduces the subjective self in a way reminiscent of, yet by no means identical to, the

poetry of his early adulthood. He clearly identifies with his protagonists, three of whom—Solness in *The Master Builder*, Borkman in *John Gabriel Borkman*, and therefore mentioned poet-artist, Rubek—are successful, dominant, aging men, past their peak. They are characterized by disillusionment, remorse, and a thorough reconsideration of former ideals and priorities. The Shift in subject matter is complemented by a stylistic change. The manipulative, artificial aspect of artistic creation is deliberately deemphasized; the overt, incisive speech, so characteristic of the works of Ibsen's middle period, is transformed in his old age into hesitant, broken lines and self-contradictory statements. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a dialogue between the aging sculptor Rubek and his wife in *When We Dead Awaken*:

I am happy Maja, perfectly happy. In one way, at least for, of course, there's a certain happiness in feeling totally free and independent—in having plenty of everything one could imagine wishing for. In material terms, anyway; Don't you agree? (Act I, Scene I)

The underlying rhythm of this and numerous other passages in the last plays underscores the irony, which features so prominently in them. The reassurance of strong, positive statements (“perfectly happy,” “of course,” “totally,” “plenty of everything”) is immediately negated by equally powerful expressions of doubt (“in a way,” “a certain happiness,” “anyway,” “Don't you agree?”). Ambiguity of speech and motivation—even of action—becomes an integral part of the total design. The characters in these plays inhabit a world dominated by oxymorons, wherein successes are “in fact I failures, defeats are victorless and death is a momentous awakening. Related to the ambivalent and broken” speech is the deliberately ambiguous literary genre. Translating *When We Dead Awaken*, Meyer reports he found himself continually feeling how much easier my task *would have been had he written it in poetry?* (1973, p. 107).

Yet, the highly evocative, uncertain “poetry of defeat” (Steiner, 1961) of Ibsen's late years is a far cry from the passionate poetry of his youth. Essentially, the earlier stylistic element is integrated into the fabric of the maturer work so as to facilitate and regain a measure of spontaneity—that spontaneity which Ibsen believed he had had to sacrifice to the rigid formality of his midlife works. For many readers and theater-goers, including a number of important critics, Ibsen's last dramas constitute an uncomfortable coexistence of theatrical idioms, creating a “cloudiness, an ineffectuality, which was very little like anything that Ibsen had displayed before” (Edmund Gosse, cited in *Gassner*, 1964, p. 371).

Critics have been quick to point out weaknesses, including fragmentation, inadequate coordination of scenes, and factual contradictions. For instance, criticism has been leveled at the extreme brevity of the final act in *When We Dead Awaken* (lasting a mere quarter of an hour), in which the action gains momentum toward the “awakening of the dead spirits.” Meyer (1973) offers two hypotheses to account for the fragmented brevity. The first is in line with the age-decrement hypothesis relating intellectual functions to biological aging (see Botwinick, 1977). According to this fundamental worldview, the

brevity and incompleteness of the act was due to physical exhaustion under the immense strain of “executing an appropriate final act, especially to so self-revealing a play” (Botwinick, 1977, p. 308).

While this interpretation cannot be ruled out, it meets with some difficulty. Firstly, it is based on the unsupported assumption that a final act for an autobiographical, self-revealing play demands more physical energy than a less self-revealing work. Secondly, although the first two acts of *When We Dead Awaken* are a considerable departure in dramatic language from preceding plays, there is no evidence of creative or intellectual weakness in their carefully wrought construction of dialogue. The alternative hypothesis is that Ibsen “felt a strange compulsion to leave [the act] as a fragment” (Meyer, 1973, p. 308).

The expression “strange compulsion” is a significant one, as it connotes a sense of urgency and inevitability, suggesting that Ibsen had been driven from within toward the fragmented brevity of the last act and the stylistic features which are largely characteristic of the other late plays. Contrary to the age-decrement hypothesis, the evidence points not to a quantitative decline but to a qualitative transformation. The stylistic changes of the last period were a deliberate effort to create a structure that accommodates imperfections, impurities and contradictions.

That is, Ibsen consciously set out to affect a dramatic form, which would accommodate the inherent contradictions that occupied him at this point of his life and that defined his late work. The structural “flaws” of these last plays should therefore be seen as a “failure by design” rather than as an inevitable consequence of fatigue or energy depletion brought on by old age. It is noteworthy that audiences and critics have only recently come to fully appreciate these features of Ibsen’s last plays (similar expressions are found in works of many an aging artist; see Clark, 1972; Munsterberg, 1983; Arnheim, 1986). In *Artistic Style and Life-span Development*, we contend that the sequence and nature of Ibsen’s three distinct literary periods are not arbitrary, but rather are affected by life-span developmental processes. Although purists, who oppose the employment of factors extraneous to art in discussions of artistic development, are likely to reject such an approach, the reference to the relation between artistic expression and life-span processes is by no means intended to undermine the role played by cultural, historical and domain-specific influences. Rather we argue that scholars should examine the ways in which these influences are filtered through the psychological underpinning of particular life stages.

We thus suggest that the prevalence of the lyrical modality of artistic expression in Ibsen’s young adulthood is intrinsically related to youth, that the rigorous structure of his realistic plays draws from the normative experience of midlife, and that the fragmented abstractions of his late plays constitute an artistic expression of a psychological reality specific to old age.

The association between poetry and youth is so prevalent that it has become something of a popular myth, occasionally served by poets themselves. An Israeli poet once commented on the designation “young poets:”

The age cross-section of “young poets” is unusually high, because it is hard for poets to detach themselves from the magic of this term.... The Romantic period bequeathed to *all* of us the idea that the poet must die young.... By the same token, Teasers who prefer to hold onto the dark magic let the poet remain young in spite of themselves and their age. It is like an obsession (*Haaretz*, November 16, 1963).

The poet Keats aptly captured the mental attitude necessary for the making of poetry in what he called “sublime egotism.” This coinage embraces the essence of the correspondence of self and style in young adulthood, in that it connotes the intense involvement of the artist in the works produced, the messianic ambition and grandeur of protagonists (Brandis a prototype) and a movement of the creative spirit above and beyond the social *milieu*. This association between emotional lyricism and youth is supported by scholars of adult development from various theoretical vantage points. In a sample covering several historical periods and cultural backgrounds, Simonton (1975; following Lehman, 1953) found that lyrical poetry tends to peak in the late teens through age thirty, while novelists appear to excel later in life. Simonton accounts for this by referring to poetry as a vehicle that lends itself to the conveyance of subjective moods.

It might be said that verses set the reality of the poet apart. “By not being prose, by having meter or rhyme or a pattern of formal recurrence, language imposes on the mind a sense of special occasion” (Steiner, 1961, p. 239). From a psychoanalytical perspective, Jaques (1965) speaks of young adulthood as a period of precipitate, hot-from-the-fire creativity, in accordance with the young adult’s propensity for projection and acting out defenses. From a Jungian perspective, Neumann (1959) sees the creations of youth as the perfect expression of an archetypal fusion between self and reality (Numinosum). Lyrical poetry, then, is the art of the first person. External, “objective” reality does not have an independent existence; it can be rejected, transformed by the author’s imagination, ignored, or magnified, but it is always perceived and responded to from within.

This extreme subjectivity is linked to oscillations between a generalized feeling of manic omnipotence and an overwhelming awareness of frailty and insignificance (as in the character of Peer Gynt). Reality is an abstract idea that is appropriated by the creative self and freely, even capriciously, manipulated. With the advent of middle age, constraints dictated by reality are on the rise. Socio-psychological studies on aspects of adult development highlight the need of individuals approaching their midlife to carve a niche in their community and gain recognition for their professional achievement. Their tendency to be concerned with effectiveness in the broader social world often leads to a search for objective information on the external environment. They must be willing to align desires and capabilities with the demands apparent in their environment (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988).

Indeed, a number of studies document a pragmatic disposition and a preference for the attainable among adults in their thirties and forties (e.g., Vaillant, 1977; Levinson,

1978; Lowenthal, 1976). These theorists conceive psycho-social development in midlife in terms of a deepening embeddedness in professional and familial systems regulated by well-defined social contexts. The normative tasks generally facing the middle-aged individual consist in the establishment of professional (career) and familial nuclei. Similar notions have been raised by psychologists of a psychoanalytical persuasion. Several scholars have pointed to the developmental significance of the mid-thirties for people in general and artists in particular. These include Lehman's (1953) findings of the peaking of outstanding creativity in general and of tragedy in particular between the ages of 35 and 40, and Guttman's (1977) characterization of 40 year olds as actively mastering their environment and boldly taking risks. Levinson (1978) refers to the psychological reality of the middle-aged (person in terms of a higher differentiation of the self, leading to affirmer and more resilient structuring of the social self, a stage he terms "Becoming One's Own Man." In a similar vein, Vaillant's (1977) notion of Career Consolidation focuses on occupational performance.

Middle age brings an awareness of finality, and consequently, in psychoanalytic terminology, reactivation of death anxiety (Jaques, 1965). In terms of artistic expression this often results in a certain tightness of structure, a formal closure as a defense against the threat to creative longevity. While technical skill and practice-based facility increase, so does one's awareness of finality and shrinking opportunities. This reevaluation leads middle-aged people to "focus on control within a framework provided by realistic and attainable objectives" (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988).

The middle-aged Ibsen "mastered" his social environment by containing it within a highly differentiated structure. The transition to midlife entailed for him a move from intuitive syncretism to rigorous analysis, from free-flowing meandering to systematic articulation, and from impulsiveness to meticulous calculation. The author began to act from within the system, even as his work undermined that system. Revolt ceased to be messianic and became social (Brustein, 1965). The constraints of reality are mirrored in the formal structure, internal consistency and rule abeyance one finds in Ibsen's midlife dramas. With the transition to old age, however, the rigorous structure is often seriously questioned, supplanted by ambivalence and ambiguity. Ambivalence often grows out of a psychological reorganization which typifies old age, and which has received attention in several life-span personality-development theories, in concepts such as Integrity versus Despair (Erikson, 1982), Interiority (Neugarlen, 1968) Individuation (Jung, 1933) and Life Review (Butler, 1963) the inward movement characteristic of these notions help in understanding Ibsen's late plays. With increasing individuation and progressive physical and psychological vulnerability, there is a tendency to strip down artifice. This might suggest that the "strange compulsion" attributed to the elderly Ibsen, to leave the last act of *When We Dead Awaken* as a fragment, was the outcome of an aging process characterized by growing ambiguity and ambivalence toward the positivistic conception of realistic drama.

The above case study of Ibsen's literary corpus, viewed from the perspective of life-span processes, suggests that there is a logic ingrained in human development that underlies transformations of artistic expression.

Further research into the nature of personality development in adulthood and old age, which has recently gained impetus, is likely to shed more light on the revealed correspondence between the artist's style and self.

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