



The Lady from the Sea

Henrik Ibsen

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Henrik Ibsen (20th March, 1828 – 23rd May, 1906) is often referred to as the father of realism and ranked just below Shakespeare as Europe's greatest ever playwright especially as his plays are performed most frequently throughout the world after Shakespeare's. He was Norwegian and although set his plays in Norway, he wrote them in Danish and lived most of his professional life in Italy and Germany. His affect on the theatre is still evident today and shapes the distinction of plays being art as opposed to entertainment since he broke down all previous traditions and explored issues, developed characterisation, revealed uncomfortable truths, challenged assumptions and brokedown facades in ourselves as well as society. These factors are clearly demonstrated in The Lady from the Sea, the lady being Ellida, the daughter of a lighthouse keeper who therefore grew up by the open sea and has a deep love for it. She married Dr Wangel who had two daughters by his former wife, Bolette and Hilda and they had a son who died as a baby. Her husband recognises the strains put on the marriage by the infant death and is concerned for Ellida's mental health but more important to Ellida is the return of her former love who she had promised to wait for. She does decide between the two men and her reasons make for good reading in this symbolic play.

The Lady from the Sea Details

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From Reader Review The Lady from the Sea for online ebook

Matthew says

With *The Lady from the Sea*, we see two unusual marriages, both in the story and in the content of the play. In the story, there is the struggling marriage of Dr Wangel and Ellida, the two protagonists, set against an informal marriage she made with a stranger. There is also a rare moment in Ibsen where the characters find a marriage between duty/responsibility and happiness.

In content, there is a marriage of styles too. After writing a number of realistic prose plays, Ibsen seems to be once more straining in the direction of his earlier fantastic plays, anticipating his later works. There are no specific fantastical elements, but there is a poetic tone the action that hints at mysterious forces, even though none actually appear.

The play revolves around Ellida, a maturer Nora Helmer. She has been 'bought' in marriage by the kind Dr Wangel, who genuinely loves her, but feels no commitment to her marriage or to his two daughters by a previous marriage. Indeed, the memory of Wangel's dead wife hangs over their marriage.

However, there is an even darker shadow over their marriage. Before marrying Wangel, Ellida committed herself to a mysterious relationship with a dangerous stranger who had a hold over her, and who regards himself and her as married to the sea. Ellida herself was born near the sea and it carries a fascination for her.

As the stranger returns to claim her, Ellida is fascinated by this choice of a new life, even while she is frightened by the stranger. In spite of Wangel's efforts, she feels impelled to leave him for the stranger.

The play appears to be moving towards an inevitable tragic ending when Ibsen offers a breathtaking volte-face. Fortunately for Ellida, just as she is a maturer Nora, so he is a maturer Torvald. He finally agrees to give her the freedom to choose between him and the Stranger. This proves to be the right 'cure' for Ellida (Wangel acting as her doctor, his profession), and she agrees to stay with him.

After the ill-boding build-up, the ending is surprisingly prosaic, and very much rooted in the realistic prose plays that have gone before. It also offers a surprise happy ending, as a character faces the characteristic Ibsen choice between duty and freedom, both of which typically end unhappily, but this time finds a compromise that can lead to happiness.

There are some hints of a possible unhappy ending – the picture of a dying mermaid and the references to the fjords closing up. However, I would regard those as alternative endings that were averted. She has learnt to 'acclimatise' to repeat an often-used word in the play.

Another important theme in the play is about the narrowness of small-town life. Ellida feels bored and stifled by the life out there, and so do Wangel's daughters, Bolette and Hilde. Bolette openly complains about the backwater she lives in, and eventually chooses to marry her old tutor, who she does not love, but who offers the opportunity to escape her dull existence and seek an education. Hilde is more obtuse and one of Ibsen's harpy-like characters. She occupies her time encouraging the romantic attentions of the sculptor, Lyngstrand, not because she is interested in him, but because she is fascinated by the fact that he is dying and unaware of it. We will see her again in *The Master Builder*.

The balance between poetic fantasy and realistic prose drama sits uneasily at times, but the play is rich in

There's a point near the end of this play that I really like. Ellida has married nice, sensible Dr. Wangel, but her heart still belongs to the sailor she knew all those years ago, who mysteriously disappeared. She can feel his presence through these strange signs. The strangest of them all was the child she had with her husband, who didn't live long. She's telling the story, and at the end she says, almost hysterical, that the child had *his* eyes. *He*, you understand, is the sailor, who's never far from her thoughts.

Then, one day, the sailor turns up again. Ellida is very surprised. Would you believe it? She finds she'd misremembered the color of his eyes. It's a bit like the ending of *Sweeney Todd*, though there's less blood.

Sandy says

Another very enjoyable play from Ibsen. I love his work. He has the ability to enfold a moral truth in a compelling story like a beautiful multi-coloured and multi-textured fabric hiding and protecting a precious gem. One can feast on the beauty of the wrapping while anticipating the surprise within.

I listened to a superb dramatic presentation by Librivox volunteers. Less than three hours of listening pleasure. Surely you can spare that much time? It is worth every minute!

Vale says

Cos'è la libert ? Ibsen: la possibilit  di sentire sulla propria pelle il peso delle proprie scelte.

Mike Jensen says

The plot depends too much on coincidence to be satisfying and the subplot almost seems to come from nowhere. These flaws stall this play as it reaches for greatness, but it does reach and full credit for that. This is Ibsen's first psychological story, but he has yet to master the form. The central conflict of a woman who needs her husband to let her go so that she can choose to leave him or keep him has a profound truth that the author will handle better in the future. Not a great play, but there is greatness in it, and I am glad to have finally read it.

Elena Dru?? says

”Adio doamn ; de acum  ncolo, e?ti doar un naufragiu  n via?a mea.”

Femeia m?rii mi-a l?sat o umbr? de melancolie  n g nd; triste?ea se ascunde undeva  n cuvintele marinarului pierdut  n valurile vie?ii.

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nkx97>

BBC Description: *A translation of Ibsen's sensuous and erotic play The Lady From The Sea adapted by*

Frank McGuinness and starring Lia Williams and Hugh Bonneville.

Needing financial security, Ellida Wangel has settled for a life as second wife to a dull, provincial doctor and is stepmother to his two resentful daughters. However, she is still spiritually possessed by the mysterious Stranger, a former sailor-lover, and she is left with a desperate yearning for the sea; the promise and ecstasy of the unknown. When this figure, a blatant representation of unrepressed sexuality, returns to claim her, it forces a crisis in her sterile marriage. This startling arrival stirs her desires and lures her back to the water's edge where she must confront both the past and a desire for the freedom that could destroy her.

McGuinness poses the question is it better to suffocate on dry land or drown in the freedom of the sea? The radio is an ideal medium to explore this notion with a soundscape that depicts in the mind the vast ocean beyond that is waiting to spirit Ellida away. The surprising ending leaves the listener with a warm sense of hope and well-being.

There I was with my first aid kit, forensic chalk stick, blood spatter chart and both stretcher and ambulance on standby, yet it wasn't needed. What's going on? Did Ibsen go soft on us?

'She looked like something that might have occurred to Ibsen in one of his less frivolous moments.'

'Summer Lightning' - P G Wodehouse

Ellida Wangel Lia Williams
Stranger Hugh Bonneville

Mermaids in Drøbak, Norway

GR Description: *The Lady from the Sea* was written in Munich in 1888. The earliest extant draft is dated June 5th 1888, but as usual Ibsen had been thinking about the subject for some time. A number of elements derive from his stay in Molde in the summer of 1885. It is assumed that Ibsen not only used Molde as his model for the little "town by a fjord in the northern part of Norway" where the action takes place; he was also said to have heard two legends there that made an impression on him, and which he used in the play.

3* A Doll's House

4* Hedda Gabler

3* The Wild Duck

4* Peer Gynt

3* The Master Builder

2* Brand

4* John Gabriel Borkman

3* The Vikings of Helgeland

3* The Lady from the Sea

Mina Soare says

As my first Ibsen play, this is utterly atypical, but hardly lacking. It starts slow, but the ending is spectacular; the characters are complex and engaging and strongly contemplative. *The Lady from the Sea* is strongly symbolic, strange, out of the cultural contest, for a first reader like me, and captivating in its representation of romantic love, especially near the end of act IV. There's a fascinating discussion on the terrible "that which repels and attracts", marriage as something between bargain and union, as a matter of both promise and free choice.

That being said, theatre and poetry benefit much from being read in the original language. This style of translation is tone-specific; the dialogues, but for the strangeness of their content, sound English ("*Fiddlesticks*"). However, despite similarities of structure between English and Scandinavian languages, the former has a wider breadth of slang and vocabulary that translates into nuance. The Scandinavian languages, on the other hand, are terse - to me, almost spartan - which leaves a greater burden of feeling on each of their words. The play feels much diminished.

Antje says

Dem Irrtum erlegen, "Die Frau vom Meer" gehöre zu den Dramen, die ich noch nicht von Henrik Ibsen gelesen habe, stieß ich bald auf die ersten Unterstreichungen, die ich vor fünfzehn Jahren vorgenommen haben muss. Aber selbst bis zur letzten Seite hin erkannte ich keine Szene und keine Charaktere wieder. Ein Umstand, der gegen dieses Werk spricht? - Nicht unbedingt!

Ellida Wangel, die besagte Frau vom Meer, kann meinem Empfinden nach der Nora aus "Ein Puppenheim" nicht annähernd das Wasser reichen. Ihnen ist immerhin das Hauptthema gleich. Ibsen verleiht auch hierin der Frau des auslaufenden 19. Jahrhunderts eine kritische Stimme, was die damalige Hochzeitspolitik bzw. den gesellschaftlichen Status der Frau betrifft. Ellida sieht sich wie Nora im Ehedilemma gefangen. Sie erkennt, dass sie Wangel den Zuschlag zur Ehe aus Absicherungsgründen gegeben hat. Sie hat sich nicht frei entscheiden dürfen, sondern unter der Last des gesellschaftlichen Druckes, kein Auskommen ohne Ehemann zu haben.

Doch mit der Rückkehr des Fremden, dem sie Jahre zuvor das Eheversprechen gegeben und nicht eingelöst hatte, erkennt sie endlich ihr Problem, das sie die ganzen Jahren ruhelos dahintreiben ließ. Sie muss, nein sie will, sich endlich BEWUSST und FREI entscheiden . . .

Das Thema als solches wurde von Ibsen sensibel vorgetragen und kurzweilig geschildert. Und dennoch versteht Ellida mich nicht so sehr in ihren Bann zu ziehen, wie es Nora vermag.

Duane says

I enjoyed this play, something mysterious about it; not a mystery, just a somewhat strange story line that is less about the sea than you might think from the title. Ibsen's characters were beautifully conceived, probably the best thing about the play, and the ending has a bit of a twist.

Sheelalipi Sahana says

My second play of Ibsen's.

I thought I had really liked the first one 'A Doll's House' until I read this one. This definitely beats that one for me.

So enchanting!

He had such a strong stance when it came to women's causes and their upliftment. This portrays that beautifully.

All the men in this play are egotistical a-holes. The women are free-spirited and inspiring.

Fascinating read!

Review to come soon!

Everett Darling says

Regarding Ibsen, Maugham said it best. Although the quote is lost to me now, it goes something like this- So Ibsen spent a really long time writing plays, he was always wracked for plot ideas, until at last would fall back on the same plot he had used time and time before-some people are together, one has a secret, someone from the past comes down from the north, secret is exposed...doom and depression. I do actually adore Ibsen, but I can't refute Maugham's shrewd assesment. As an Ibsen fan, this happy go-lucky ending was bewildering as I expected something more like The Wild Duck or The Master Builder.

Ali says

Something quite different about The Lady Of the Sea, compared to other Ibsen plays, is the honesty between the characters. Ellida and Dr.Wangel have been married for a number of years, but for the past 3, she has become depressed and distant. Dr.Wangel, who has 2 teenage daughters, assumes that she is bothered by his previous life: his beloved dead wife and his daughters' reluctance to accept her as a suitable replacement. What he doesn't know however is that Ellida had a love life of her own before she ever even met him. A number of events prompt her to tell him about her Seaman lover who has linked them to one another forever in a symbolic marriage by joining two of their rings and throwing them into the ocean, before embarking on a long voyage. Though she tried to end it with him, he refused to listen, promising (threatening?) to come back for her. 3 years ago, when Dr. Wangel and Ellida lost their first child, she was convinced the baby had his eyes, and couldn't bare to share Wangel's bed anymore.Now, the fateful day has come, the Seaman is back for his bride and Ellida must choose her destiny. Surprisingly enough (for an Ibsen play), she chooses Dr.Wangel, finally free of her past. There is an implication however that difficult times are always looming on the horizon, despite the prevailing calmness.

Other important issues are present in this play as well: Bolette, one of the daughters, agrees to marry her ex-teacher because it'll allow her to see the world. Here, one wonders if she isn't selling herself, in much the same way Ellida did to escape her past, and if her decision will be as successful as her stepmother's.

There is also the young dying artist, Lyngstrand who is portrayed as terribly self-centered and oblivious to the lives of those around him. His vanity makes him seem arrogant, assuming that the world around him and the people in it are there to serve him. When he first appears in the play, he seems to be the only one unaware of the tension between the daughters and their stepmother. Then, he describes a sculptor to Ellida that he hopes to create which is actually a representation of her past love life, but he is blind to her uneasiness and to the real tragedy of the scene he has described. Later on, he asks Bolette to think of him while he is away at

sea, he asks her to pine after him for the rest of her life, and he tells her she can take pride in knowing she is a part of his greatness.

I couldn't possibly analyse all that is present in this play, or any of his other plays for that matter, without spending hours on it. To my dismay, I currently don't have the time nor the patience to devote so much energy to one single project. Needless to say, the depth and the questions raised are overwhelming. All his plays are worth reading, and rereading.

David Sarkies says

A lost love returns

15 March 2015

Okay, I have mentioned before that reading a play can be somewhat more difficult than watching it performed; one of the reasons being that sometimes it is difficult to differentiate the characters. However, after being forced to put this play down after reading the first act because I had to go to work (and unfortunately I don't work in a job where I can put my feet up on a desk and read a book while video cameras monitor the outside of a warehouse making sure that nobody is trying to break it – I did have a friend who had a job like that, and that is basically what he did all night), I suddenly discovered another problem with plays – they are meant to be read in one sitting. Unfortunately they are not like novels where you can put them down and pick them up later, because it can be a lot easier to lose your place in a play than in a novel (or maybe it is just me).

Anyway, this play is about a woman who grew up in a lighthouse. She then met and fell in love with a sailor but when the sailor left to go out to sea he got into a bit of trouble (he killed his captain) and was forced to abandon ship – thus becoming lost and presumed dead. After a period of mourning the lady, Ellie, goes off and marries a doctor and moves inland. However, years later a stranger rocks up at her front door, introduces himself to her as her highschool sweetheart (for want of a better word) and asks her to elope.

One of the things that strikes me in this book is how the loves of our youth can hold on to us for years. I'm not talking about pining over somebody who is probably not all that good for you and rejecting all other advances because you want that one person, I am talking about a romance that happened years ago, back in our teenage years (or early twenties) and then, for some reason or another (maybe they moved school), the relationship comes to an end. However what Ibsen is exploring here is how these loves can linger on, and how a part of us wishes that our lost lovers will someday return and we can begin from where we finished.

I'm not so much talking about those relationships that ended because we broke up, but rather those ones that ended because of inconvenience – such as the case in this book, namely he went away, a disaster happened, and he was left for dead. In my mind I picture the highschool romance that ended because the parents found a job in another city (or even another suburb) and because of that we parted company as one of us moved away. There was no Facebook, or email, or even mobile phones, back in those days – if somebody moved, they were gone, and gone for good. Maybe, one day, we would meet again, but I think of all the people that I knew from school, and only a handful of us have reconnected over social media (usually Facebook).

The other interesting thing about this play is how Ibsen uses the image of the mermaid. At the beginning of the play somebody is painting a picture of a mermaid, and at the end of the play Ellie makes a comment

about how she, the mermaid, has made her decision. It is interesting how Ibsen uses this imagery as there are a couple of things I have noticed. First of all, as we are aware, the mermaid is tied to the sea, but the other interesting thing is that mermaids aren't necessarily good creatures (unlike our modern legends, thanks to Hans Christian Andersen). Some legends have mermaids luring sailors to their deaths, while others would stir up storms and tempests – in general heralding bad luck. This is not necessarily the case with this play, even though Ellie grew up in a lighthouse, which adds to the mermaid allusion as they are generally built on rocks out at sea, the traditional home of the mermaid. However, instead of being an ill omen, they are a warning to passing sailors, crying out 'beware for here lies danger'.

Anyway, while it would be good to continue on exploring the allusion, I think I will leave it at that because that would end up giving away the ending, and for some reason I really don't want to do that.

Dawn says

I came to the end of this play and thought it seemed to be based on the premise of *If you love someone, set them free. If they come back they're yours; if they don't they never were.*

While I didn't really care for the long ago lover part of the story, I did think that the family dynamics were a little interesting. A stepmother who hasn't managed to fit into the family in any way, a father who doesn't see, or want to see, the problems and daughters who still mourn their mother are all brought together in the end. Not an unusual storyline in this day and age but still pretty well done.

Adrian Colesberry says

I went on a tear on 2007 and read all of Henrik Ibsen and all of August Strindberg. Before I could get to all of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, I had to turn back to writing, and I can't read while I write. Ibsen is wonderful. The thing I like most about Ibsen is that he loves and respects women at least in his writing. Not all of his plays are tragedies either. Many are very funny and many have mixed endings, not all are downers. Though I'm not a big fan of *Peer Gynt*. Strindberg's parody of *Peer Gynt*, *Lucky Per's Journey* is a hoot. If you ever have a chance to see it performed, definitely go.

This is my review for all of Ibsen.

Laura says

Available at BBC Radio 3.

A new version of Ibsen's late drama, adapted for radio by Frank McGuinness.

Before her marriage to Dr Wangel, Ellida, his second wife, had promised herself to a sailor who then disappeared. Years later, Ellida's family life is strained. Her relations with her step-daughters is poor; she has no child of her own. She seems unhappy with her life. Then the sailor reappears to make his claim on her promise. Faced with the decision of what to do, she persuades her husband that she must have the chance to make her choice

With Lia Williams as Ellida, and also featuring Hugh Bonneville, Katherine Parkinson, Ellie Kendrick, Tim

McMullan, Sam Crane, Geoffrey Whitehead and Christopher Obi.
Directed by Hannah Eidinow.
