

GEOGRAPHIES OF SUPERSTITION, MYTHS AND FREEDOM: IBSEN AND NORTHERN NORWAY

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Introduction: Ibsen and Northern Norway

Ibsen was preoccupied with the North both as symbolic and geographical locations throughout his whole literary career. Two of Ibsen's plays, *The Vikings of Helgeland* (1858) and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) are set entirely in Northern Norway.¹ A number of characters are associated with the North, like Dr. Stockman and his family in *An Enemy of the People* (1882). Moreover, a number of female protagonists come from the North. Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* (1886), Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), Hilde Wangel in *The Master Builder* (1892) and Irene in *When we Dead Awaken* (1899) all come from Northern Norway.

Why was Ibsen so preoccupied with the North? What does the North symbolise in his plays? What does he try to tell us by using the North as geographical and symbolic locations? In order to answer these questions, I will first account for the opinions that circulated about the North during the time when Ibsen was writing. Thereafter, I will assess what images of the North Ibsen circulated through his plays. Did he contribute to the cementation of already existing images or did he construct new images?

“Up there”: Opinions about Northern Norway before 1900

For a very long time, Northern Norway was considered to be located beyond civilized society – North of civilisation, so to speak. The priest Olaf Holm exemplifies this view when he, as late as in 1923, describes the municipality of Tysfjord as being located quite far beyond what was considered civilization (Holm, 1923, 2). Northern Norway was also often referred to as “up there” because no name

¹ There has been some disagreement about where *The Lady from the Sea* is set. Halvdan Koht's conviction that the location is further South than what we today refer to as Northern Norway has become so firmly established that it has been repeated without comment in the newly published collected works of Henrik Ibsen. To accept this view, is, however, to undermine Ibsen's knowledge of geography. I believe that there is overwhelming evidence that Ibsen intended the location to be Northern Norway, as we know it today, and that this has important implications for the understanding of the play. Here it is important to stress that many scholars have identified the setting of this play to be the West Coast of Norway. In many ways, Molde answers to the scene of *The Lady from the Sea* as there are points of agreement between the real and the fictitious locality. I would argue that this identification is not meant to signify that the action of the play is on the West Coast. According to Archer, “the poet formally disclaims it by placing his scene in ‘det nordlige Norge’, – a phrase commonly applied only to the regions north of Trondhjem” (Archer, x). Ibsen also uses the phrase ‘det nordlige Norge’ to describe the setting of *The Vikings of Helgeland* – a location that like the fjord town in *The Lady From the Sea* is located South of the midnight sun. When *The Lady From the Sea* was first published in 1888, many reviewers made references to the fact that the play was set high up in the North. The play was compared to Jonas Lie's novel, *The Visionary or Pictures From Nordland*. To the early critics, at least, it was clear that the play represented “Something of the dark and gloomy fairy poetry of the Nordland Sea”. Ibsen, himself, approved of these reviews by Alfred Sinding-Larsen.

was needed for such an unimportant, remote corner of the world. Moreover, the official map of Norway depicted the North in half measure far into the twentieth century, which clearly demonstrates how insignificant and irrelevant this part of the country was perceived to be.

Before 1900 it was very common to construct Northern Norway according to a North-South axis, with the “South” as the high status, enlightened, civilized, Christian and cultural centre and, the “North” as the low status, backward, uncivilized, primitive, and natural periphery. According to Professor Nils Magne Knutsen, civil servants who had to take a post “up there” in the North, saw it as a great obstacle to their careers, and in their reports, many painted a very dark picture of Northern Norway and the people that inhabited these regions (Knutsen, 2006, 101).

In these reports, the Northerners generally were described as vulgar, dirty, lazy, slow, naïve, primitive, uncultivated and uninteresting. Many complained that it was extremely lonely in the North and some even lamented that it was impossible to find a single Northerner that it was worthwhile and interesting to talk to (Knutsen, 1995, 10). Although it was common for civil servants to have a derogatory view of peasants no matter where in the country they lived (Fulsås, 2009, 305), evidence shows that the Northerners were considered to be stranger and more primitive than the peasants from the South.

In short, Northern Norwegians were considered to be different and “other” than people in the South. In 1904, Arne Garborg described Northern Norway as a world apart, unknown to the Southerners (Garborg, 1904, 47) and in 1908, *Aftenposten* described everyday life in the North as so outlandish that the people living there could have belonged to a different race (09.11.1908).

The northerners were not only different; they were different in a negative way. According to Knutsen, this “otherness” was often explained to be a result of the immediate environment, the climate and the nature that surrounded and subdued people in the North. In a report from 1814, the priest Erik Colban, for instance, explained that because the Northerners lived in such close proximity to the ocean, the sea fog inevitably seeped into their blood, something that ultimately made their blood rough and thick (Knutsen, 1993, 108). This particularly thick blood type made the Northern Norwegians lethargic and lazy; and it made them move very slowly. It also influenced their emotional life and dulled their senses. According to Colban, tender love did not exist up North, only animal lust, which, he argues, is satisfied immediately (Ibid. 110). This myth about the Northerners’ thick blood seems to have spread widely, perhaps because it confirmed the negative image of the North and its inhabitants. As late as in 1851, the lawyer Hans Schulze said that: “it is a well-known fact among medical doctors that all Northern Norwegians need a double dose of all medicine for it to work because their blood is so thick” (Knutsen, 2006, 102).

From the viewpoint of those who observed them, the people in the North were living really miserable lives. But the Northerners themselves, it was observed, were blessed because they lacked the necessary wits to understand that they were miserable, so they were never as depressed as they ought to be (Knutsen, 1993, 108).

A more positive view of the North and the Northerner was emerging in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the result was that both negative and

positive views coexisted. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, for instance, became a good ambassador for the North. In his travelogue, “A Holiday-Trip” [En ny Feriefart, (1869)], Bjørnson defended the North, describing both the place and the people living there in very positive terms. Far from being primitive and uncivilised, Bjørnson characterised the inhabitants of the North – Nordlændingen – as intelligent, well-travelled, interesting to talk to, considerate and loving. In his view, the dramatic northern nature had a positive impact on the people living there: “People care for each other under such lonely conditions; deeper thoughts grow in such a grand nature and so dangerous operation, in such a long darkness and so grand light” (Bjørnson, 1869, 226).²

Magdalene Thoresen, the stepmother of Ibsen’s wife, Suzannah Ibsen, also painted a positive portrait of the North in her two-volume *Pictures from the Land of the Midnight Sun* (1884, 1886). In these volumes, Thoresen writes about the nature, history and culture of Northern Norway with great fascination (Fulsås, 2009, 309-11). In this study, Thoresen emphasised the deep connection between nature and the people living by the coast. Unlike most other people, however, Thoresen underlines the similarities between the coast peoples in the North and the coast peoples in the West (Fulsås, 2009, 311).

The myth that the Northerners were different from the Southerners, however, prevailed. In 1869 Bjørnson argued that the Northerner had a kinship with nature that could not be found in other places. He stressed that “up North” one could see Man in a constant battle with nature (Bjørnson, 1869, 215). He compared the nature in the North to the Norse sagas and poetry, arguing that everyone longs to experience this Nature with its connections to the strong emotions and actions of the sagas (Bjørnson, 1869, 216). Suzannah Ibsen also expressed this view, in a letter to her husband, about her voyage to Northern Norway. In this letter, Suzannah describes the North with much enthusiasm and imagination, urging her husband to make a trip to see the wonders for himself:

How can I describe anywhere near adequately all the wonderful things we have seen. I can only say: come and see it yourself. You will never forget the magnificence of nature up there. Just as night and day melt into one and one forgets about time, so also it seemed to me that all that is wonderful had agreed to meet up there. Where in other places one would wear oneself out looking for a single snow-peak, here for days on end one sees hundreds and hundreds of them with glaciers merging into the sea. The big Polar sea comes rolling in, and whales encircle the boat, as dolphins do in the Mediterranean. I must try to give you a more connected account of it all. When we reached Helgeland already Nature was more beautiful than I have ever seen it. There is the famous mountain ‘Torghatten’; we climbed it. The sun was scorching hot and there was a grandeur over everything. You have caught the atmosphere

² My translation from the Norwegian: “Menneskene er glade i hverandre under så ensomme forhold; der gror dypere tanker i en så stor natur og farefull drift, i så langt et mørke og så stort et lys”

completely in *The Vikings at Helgeland* (Suzannah Ibsen in Bergliot Ibsen, 1951, 84).

The close connection between nature and Man also gave rise to the belief that the Northerner was more closely connected to the mysterious, invisible powers found in nature than others (Taylor, 1887). This gave precedence to another well-established myth about Northern Norway, namely that the region was associated with the practice of magic, witchcraft and pagan religion. This was particularly true of the northernmost region of Norway, Finnmark. According to Weigand, Finnmark “was long a surviving outpost of paganism” (Johnston, 1975, 130). The belief that the people in the North were pagans was strengthened by the fact that the North was the home of the Sami-people. Throughout history they have been known for their knowledge of magic, their supernatural gifts and their paganism. Even though Northern Norway was Christian like the rest of Norway, these myths reminded incredibly persistent.

The connection between magic and the North dates back at least to the writing of Old Norse literature. One of many examples is the story of Gunhild, Mother of Kings, in *Harold Fairhair's Saga*. Gunhild comes from Hålogaland in the North. She has learned magic from the Finns, which makes her a very dangerous woman.

In Scandinavian folklore, the North has been associated with the supernatural and the magic (Mathisen, 1993). The association between the North and magic became even more firmly established in nineteenth-century Norwegian literature, particularly with Jonas Lie's novel *The Visionary or Pictures from Nordland* – a powerful story of northern life, nature and superstitions that Ibsen read and liked.

Despite the increasingly more positive view of Nordlænderen throughout the nineteenth century, the view that the Northerner was different from the Southerner in a negative way, continued to be voiced with the greatest naturalness. Just how prevalent this view was, can be exemplified by the fact that Eivind Berggrav saw the need to clarify a view that evidently was quite controversial: “The northerner is just like the rest of us” (Berggrav, 1937, 25).

In Ibsen's day, most people thus considered the North to be “other” and different from the South. Ibsen's family in-law had many connections with the North and many of Suzannah's relatives lived and worked in the North for short or longer periods of time (Fulsås, 2009). Ibsen must, therefore, have been exposed to many of the prevailing myths and ideas about the North. How then, did Ibsen construct Norway and the North in his writing?

Ibsen and Norway

Although Ibsen lived abroad for nearly 27 years, virtually all his plays are set in Norway. Most of his contemporary dramas are also set in small coastal towns where traditions, norms and conventions have a strong hold over people's lives. In a number of plays, Ibsen demonstrates how duty and convention inhibited people and destroyed human happiness. In *Ghosts* (1881) and *The Master Builder* (1892), for example, Mrs. Alving and Mrs. Solness have internalised a philosophy of life that emphasised duty and self-denial at the expense of the joy of life. Both women

sacrifice their own happiness in order to fit into the narrow confines of respectable society.

Ibsen himself had experienced the painful condemnation of small-town mentality in his youth and when he returned to Norway for a short visit in 1885, he did not find things much improved in terms of individual freedom. In a speech addressed to a meeting of workmen in Trondhjem on June 14, 1885, he said that the years of his absence had brought “immense progress in most directions,” but that he was disappointed to observe that “the most indispensable individual rights were far less secured than he had hoped and expected to find them under the new order of things” (Ibsen, 1965, 249). According to him, “the most indispensable individual rights are not as yet safeguarded” because the “ruling majority does not grant the individual either freedom of belief or freedom of expression beyond a certain arbitrarily fixed limit” (Ibid). In his view, much remained to be done:

So there is still much to be done before it can be said that we have attained real liberty. But I fear that it will be beyond the power of our *present* democracy to solve these problems. An element of *nobility* must enter into our national life, our administration, our representative bodies, and our press. Of course I am not thinking of a nobility of *birth*, nor of that of *wealth*, nor that of *knowledge*, neither of that of *ability* or talent. I am thinking of a nobility of character, of a nobility of will and spirit. Nothing else can make us free (Ibid).

According to Ibsen, the nobility he hoped for would come from two sources. “It will come to us from two groups that have not as yet been irreparably harmed by party pressure. It will come to us from our women and from our workingmen” (Ibid). Based on an analysis of Ibsen’s prose plays, I would add that Ibsen also envisioned that the nobility of character, will and spirit could come from the North.

***An Enemy of the People* (1882)**

In many ways, *An Enemy of the People* confirms the stereotypes about Northern Norway that were circulating in the late nineteenth century. Thomas Stockman has worked as a doctor in the North for a number of years, during which time he has constantly longed for the South. We don’t know where he has lived as Dr. Stockman only refers to the place as “up there in the North” (Ibsen, vol. 6, 32).

Describing his situation, he says that he has been living on the edge of starvation (Ibid, 28). Stockman has been very unhappy in the North, a place he characterises as a dreadful and damned northern backwater (Ibid, 94).

Doctor Stockman has nothing positive to say about the people inhabiting the North either and like many of the civil servants who wrote reports about life in the North, he felt lonely, isolated and under-stimulated in the North. In his words, he “hardly ever [saw] a new face” and he “never [had] the chance of any decent conversation” (Ibid, 28). Doctor Stockman also repeats the view that the people up North are uncivilized and primitive. According to him, it is not even enough with a double dose of medicine to cure the Northerners, because they are so degraded that they need a veterinarian, not a medical doctor.

[F]or many a long year I sat up there in the far North, in a miserable hole of a place. Coming across some of the people living here and there in the rocky wilderness, I often used to think they would have been better served, poor half-starved creatures that they were, if they had sent for a vet instead of somebody like me (Ibid, 94).

In this text, Ibsen confirms the North–South dichotomy with the “South” as the enlightened, civilized, Christian and cultural centre and, the “North” as the backward, uncivilized, primitive, pagan and natural periphery. I would, however, argue that Ibsen put a positive spin on these dichotomies.

Stockman does not, for instance, live long in the illusion that the place that he has come to in the South is a good place to be. His illusion that the South represents civilisation and enlightenment is shattered as he understands that people here is more preoccupied with profit than with the truth. “I am going to speak about a tremendous discovery I have made in the last few days... the discovery that all our spiritual sources are polluted and that our whole civic community is built over a cesspool of lies” (Ibid, 93).

It is a hard realization for Stockmann, but he comes to understand that there are far more positive things to say about the North than he previously has thought. Like Ibsen, Dr. Stockman called for “freedom of thought and freedom of speech beyond the limit arbitrarily fixed by the dominant majority”, and like Ibsen, Dr. Stockman would like his fellow countrymen to develop “nobility of character, of will, of soul” (Ibsen, 1965, 249). This, he comes to realize, is impossible in the “civilized” South, but in the North it is possible. In short, he can thank the North for his spiritual freedom and his unconventional thinking – and so can his family. His son, Morten, wants to become a pagan Viking when he grows up and his daughter, Petra, has developed the freedom of spirit and thought necessary to fight for her ideals. When she no longer is allowed to work in the public school, she starts a private school where the new ideals of freedom and independence will be taught.

The idea that the North fosters spiritual freedom is a view that Ibsen repeats often throughout his career as a dramatist.

***Rosmersholm* (1886)**

In *Rosmersholm*, Rebecca West comes from Ibsen’s North of paganism and spiritual freedom. It has been argued that: “she is the Viking woman of *The Vikings at Helgeland* in a new guise” (Grey, 1980, 119). Rebekka is born and bred in Finnmark. Here she has been fostered up on liberal thoughts and has developed an emancipated view of life. She thus comes to the Christian society of the West Coast of Norway (represented by the old estate Rosmersholm), as a northern pagan with a revolutionary mind and a wish to “educate” those around her to “the new ideas” that was part of “the new age” (Ibsen, 1971, 290). She wants to help Rosmer to get rid of all his “old-fashioned prejudices” and to help him move forward in freedom.

Like Dr. Stockman, she has conceived her emancipation project in the isolated North, because here, as Bjørnson argued, deeper and more profound thoughts had the

potential to develop. Nobility of character, of will, of soul could be cultivated in the North.

From the start of the play, a North-South conflict is thus established where the North, representing paganism and nature and the South representing Christianity and civilisation are contrasted. Again Ibsen challenges the traditional North-South axis, suggesting that the North enlightens rather than oppress people.

In many ways Rebekka, is a positive force in the struggle between the old and the new. Rebekka has a mind to change the Rosmer tradition from “oppression and darkness” to “joy and light”, something she has managed to an extent. The first indication of this is that she has brought “fresh birch twigs and wild flowers” into the old rooms of Rosmersholm (Ibid, 223). An opposition to the old and settled order of Rosmersholm in the past, the flowers suggest renewal, vitality, and a sense that the forces associated with nature have invaded the house and are opposing its nonnatural, civic and civilised values.

Rebekka herself is also a symbol of nature. When Rebekka came to Rosmersholm she was like the sea element of her native North – “a natural force rather than a tamed human being” (Brandes, 1899, 102). From the beginning of Ibsen reception, Ibsen scholars have pointed out the connection between the North and Rebekka’s character. According to George Brandes: “Rebekka in Rosmersholm is like a personification of the Nordland whence she came, the land of extreme alterations, of unbroken darkness and uninterrupted light, and the violent, uncontrolled temperaments” (Ibid). Rebekka also borrows from the stormy surroundings in which she has grown up when she attempts to portray her own nature. “Her passion for Rosmer, for instance, she likens to a Nordland winter storm, resistless in its might” (Ibid). In Rebecca’s words she experienced a “wild and uncontrollable passion” for Rosmer. The passion “swept over me like a storm at sea. Like one of those storms we sometimes get in the winter up North. It takes hold of you... and carries you away with it... for as long as it lasts. It never occurs to you to resist” (Ibsen, 1971, 299).

When she arrived at Rosmersholm, she was free, energetic, and ready to commit crimes to reach her goals. To begin with, Rebekka was the incarnation of recklessness. Her will is as strong as the harsh weather that had influenced her so greatly. She had no scruples. “I believe that then I could have carried any point whatever,” she says. “For then I had my courageous, free-born will. I took heed of nothing, gave way to no condition” (Ibid, 298-9).

The triumph of “the new idea”, does not, however, materialize because Rosmersholm tames and breaks Rebekka. “Rosmersholm has broken me [...]. Completely and utterly broken me. When I first came here, I had some spirit; I wasn’t afraid to do things. Now I feel crushed by a tradition quite foreign to me. I feel after this as though I hadn’t any courage left for anything” (Ibid, 297). Her passion is crushed by the oppressive Rosmersholm tradition, which saps her spirit and cripples her willpower. A “great transformation” takes place within her, - a transformation that emphasises civilised love and negates pagan passion. Like Rosmer, she comes to consider sensual desire as “ugly” and bad compared to the purity of love cultivated by Rosmer.

But this was a love that made her “sick”; a love that took away her strength, broke her courage and paralyzed her will. The high ethical standards of Rosmer “ennoble” Rebekka but rob her of energy, joy, sensuality and finally also of life. The South might have civilised her, but it has also made her unhappy. For “the Rosmer philosophy of life ennoble all right. But... but...but... But it kills happiness, Johannes” (Ibid, 301).

The Lady from the Sea (1888)

In *The Lady from the Sea*, the whole action takes place in a small fjord town in Northern Norway called Lysanger.

Ellida Wangel, the protagonist of the play, is married to Dr. Wangel, a native inhabitant of Lysanger. From the start of the play, Ellida is presented as a strange outcast in Wangel’s world. The other inhabitants of the town don’t understand her and often she is treated as though she is a creature from another world – she is “the lady from the sea”. Like Rebekka, she is referred to as a pagan.

Like Rebekka, Ellida is also profoundly influenced by the nature and the open sea that she has come from. Many critics have noted that: “the very spirit of the sea, its vastness and its uncontrollable freedom has possessed her” (Jæger, 1901, 277). She is changeable as the sea and in many ways she has always longed for the freedom represented by the sea. As a woman, freedom has, however, largely been denied her, but she is no conventional woman and she has a past that demonstrates that she is captivated by the thought of a free and irresponsible life – although this thought also scares her.

In the past, while she still lived in the lighthouse, Ellida became totally infatuated by the free and mysterious lifestyle of a sailor she met there. (The Stranger – as he is called in the play – is a kvæn, which means that he is an immigrant to Finnmark from Finland). One day, the Stranger tells Ellida that he has murdered a captain in self-defence. He must flee, but before he does so, he insists that they should become engaged to each other. He takes one fingering from himself and one from Ellida, bind them together on a key ring and throws the rings into the sea. According to the Stranger, this is a marriage good as any, binding them together as “solemnly as any church wedding”. Leaving her, he thus promises to get back to Ellida as soon as possible (Ibsen, vol 7, 1966, 79).

This is, of course, an indication of the Stranger’s unconventionality and his freedom of mind. This view is strengthened by the fact that the Stranger is called Friman and that when he returns to Ellida, he insists that she belongs to him and that she should come to him in full freedom. Anything else would, according to him, be meaningless. “Promises bind nobody. Neither man now woman. I hold on to you like this because I cannot do otherwise” (Ibid, 119).

After much tormented contemplation, Wangel also gives Ellida the freedom to choose what life she wishes to live and who she wants to follow. Given this freedom, Ellida is permitted to choose as a full human being and for the first time she is asked what she wants instead of being told what she needs. As a result she is able to cast off her obsession with the unknown and with the sea because as Wangel has come to understand: “Her longing and yearning for the sea – the fascination that he – the

stranger possessed for her – have been an expression of an awakening and growing need for freedom within her – nothing else” (Ibid, 129).

Some scholars have argued that Ellida’s rejection of the Stranger is a defeat. Sandra Saari, for instance, means that she has surrounded to the “monocular” vision of “Christian bourgeois domesticity” (Johnston, 1989, 201). I do agree that the ending of the play is ambiguous and that Ellida loses something by rejecting the absolute and infinite freedom offered by the stranger.

I do not, however, believe that a life with Wangel necessarily represents conventional, Christian bourgeois domesticity. When the play was first published, the feminist writer Gina Krogh noted that Dr. Wangel is a very rare example of a man who is prepared to sacrifice much for the health and well-being for his wife (*Ibsens Skrifter*, bind 8, 2009, s. 448). As many have noted, Wangel is one of the only men in Ibsen’s authorship who is not selfish and self-obsessed (Zucker, 1930, 23; Binding, 2006, 57). There is no indication that he is preoccupied with conventional thinking either. On the contrary, he is very open-minded in his quest to help his wife overcome her mental disorder. He even asks a man whom he believes that his wife has been in love with to come to visit her because he thinks that this can help her to recover. Not many men would do that! Can this be an example of the Northern benevolence Bjørnson observed when he said that: “people care for each other under so lonely conditions”?

Moreover, his children have not been brought up under the constraints of conventionality either. They are free to do what they want and to see who they want and when the schoolmaster Arnholm points out that it is not respectable for Hilde to spend so much time with the quasi artist, Lyngstrand, Wangel replies that even if he tried to prevent this, the girls would not obey him. This is an observation that doesn’t seem to bother him. He does not want to act the role as the great patriarch who controls his wife and his daughters.

Both daughters have been allowed to develop a mind of their own. Hilde, his youngest daughter is not a conventional girl. She is exuberant, lively and tomboyish. She wants adventures and the excitement that will enable her to live her life to the full without moral concerns. She can therefore seem cruel, but she is also very emotional and loving, something we will see when she returns as the heroine of *The Master Builder*. Bolette, his oldest daughter, has an inclination for learning and she always wanted to study, something her father has promised her that she could do. When her father is unable to fulfil his promise, Bolette marries the schoolmaster to get away from the Northern Norwegian fjord town that she so desperately wants to escape from. Bolette: “Here we live so completely outside of all that’s going on – or almost”. Will she miss the freedom she had in the North when she moves to the South? It is not possible to say anything for certain about this.

It is also impossible to say anything for certain about why Ibsen chose to set the whole play in Northern Norway. It is, however, important to stress that this fjord town in the North of Norway is the only provincial town that Ibsen don’t portray in an ironic light. The town is not perfect, but after all, it is possible to live here without jeopardizing one’s ideals entirely. Moreover, *The Lady from the Sea* is the only one of Ibsen’s later plays in which the institution of marriage is shown in a positive light.

What is the explanation for this? I would suggest that this can be explained by the fact that the town is situated in the North where conventions have less hold over people and where morality doesn't kill people's happiness. This is at least an argument that can shed some light on the happy and conventional ending that has puzzled so many.

The Master Builder (1892)

When we meet Hilde again in *A Master Builder* (1892), she has travelled from her hometown in the North to the master builder's house in the South to claim the kingdom that Halvard Solness has promised her. At first, Solness does not remember any of his promises, but she tells her story with so much conviction and so much spirit that he gradually accepts it as true. One detail is, nevertheless, undisputable. They both agree that Solness had been "up at Lysanger" ten years earlier to build a church. During this visit he climbed to the top of the church tower. According to Hilde, Solness stood strong and free on top of the church tower, singing. And his song sounded like "harps in the air". When Aline hears this story, she doubts that it is true because Solness suffers from acrophobia, which makes him dizzy in the heights. The fact that he has climbed all the way to the top of the church building is, therefore, perceived to be "the impossible".

Solness: [Vehemently.] Impossible – impossible, yes! But there I stood all the same!

Mrs. Solness: O, how can you say so, Halvard? Why, you can't even bear to go out on the second-storey balcony here. You have always been like that. (Ibsen, vol. 7, 1966, 405)

When Halvard Solness stood at the top of the tower at Lysanger, it was thus an act he never before had been able to accomplish. This is the most triumphant day in his whole life, because he "did the impossible". And when he stood there, high above everything, at the top of the church tower, he defied God. Halvard Solness, who had been brought up as a God-fearing Christian, rebels against the oppressive power of God: from now on he seeks liberation, human happiness and the joy of life.

It is not a coincidence that Solness finds the courage to defy God in Northern Norway, because, as we have seen, here the norms, conventions and duty have less hold over people. "Up there", in the new surroundings, he maintains that he was able to see more clearly. Like so many of Ibsen's characters, he conceives of his liberation project in the North. Freed from God, the North has enabled him to do "the impossible".

Hilde saw the Master Builder on his most glorious day in the North and this day also became the most glorious day for her. This was the day when Hilde fell in love with the Master Builder. And according to Hilde, the feeling was mutual. Hilde's story continues: After the ceremony, Hilde's family had invited Solness for supper. When he came to the house, he found the 12-13 years old Hilde alone. According to Hilde's story, he grabbed her and kissed her many times. He then said that she would be *his* princess when she grew up. Moreover, he promised to "come

back in ten years – like a troll – and carry [her] off. To Spain or somewhere”, where he promised her that he would buy her a kingdom (Ibid, 383).

Solness does not, however, honour his promise. This infuriates Hilde, but as the emancipated woman she is, she decides to pursue her own destiny. She is determined that the kingdom and the prince will be hers and she has no scruples about the methods used to achieve her goal.

When we first meet Hilde, she is, thus, much like Rebekka, – a personification of recklessness. The thought of duty and convention repels her. She enters the stage with a tanned complexion, dressed in a skirt that is hitched up and we are soon informed that she has neither money nor a change of clothes, except for some dirty underwear in her rucksack. The fact that she’s got no money and no luggage does not bother her. “But, hell! What’s it matter?” – she exclaims in a very unwomanly manner (Ibid, 380). She does not care that she might be talked about or stared at either. She thinks that it is “fun” to be sensational (Ibid, 397). In this way, she demonstrates her complete disregard for the traditional standard of feminine behaviour, beauty and attire.

The fact that she is breaking conventions does not, however, go unnoticed in the small town that she now finds herself in, and Hilde soon learns that life in the South by and large is dictated by conventional thinking and duty. Even the “free” and “strong” master builder of Hilde’s imagination is guilt ridden because he has failed to act as the dutiful husband and employee that he ought to be. Hilde notices this, and according to her, Solness was “born with rather a fragile conscience”. What she means is that his conscience “won’t stand up to things. Can’t bear much weight” (Ibid, 412). This is a weakness that Hilde finds repulsive. In her view, a conscience should be “thoroughly robust” (Ibid). Hilde’s ideal is the Vikings in the old Sagas because they were not cowards. They plundered and burned and killed and carried off women and “behaved towards them like... like the worst of trolls”, without losing their appetite, sleep or happiness over it – all because they had a “thoroughly robust” conscience (Ibid, 414). Hilde wants her master builder to live according to the Viking philosophy. Her mission, then, becomes to help the Master Builder develop a ‘Viking Spirit’, to free himself from a sickly conscience and to rise above traditional Christian concepts of good and evil, right and wrong.

Significantly, it is once again a girl from the North that represents the pagan, Viking will. Unlike Rebekka West, Hilde’s will is not, however, crushed by the ethical dilemmas and the ideals of duty and self-sacrifice that inform life in the South. Her own robust conscience is momentarily broken when she thinks about what implications her actions might have for Aline. “I can’t hurt someone I *know*! Can’t take what belongs to her”, she says (Ibid, 428). However, when Solness returns to the pagan and Viking themes of a ‘robust conscience’, she immediately changes her mind. In her view, it must be wrong “not daring to reach out and lay hold on happiness. On life! Just because standing in the way happens to be somebody one knows” (Ibid, 429). She even wonders if it is not right to push aside those who stand in the way of one’s happiness (Ibid). At the end Hilde succeeds in helping Solness to overcome his guilty conscience and to give him the power and strength to repeat the impossible heroic act performed ten years earlier. Once more Solness defies his dizziness and climes as high as he builds, but this time the victory ends in his tragic

demise. He reached the top of the tower of the new house he is building only to fall to his death. Hilde does not estimate this. The most important thing for her is that the master builder managed to reach the top. She is triumphant. “My... my... master builder”, is her last jubilant cry! (Ibid, 444).

Many critics perceived Hilde to be Ibsen’s most fascinating and enchanting female character. According to Edvard Brandes, there was nothing false in her character. She was the epitome of life, unsullied by convention (Brandes, 1947, 55). The Norwegian feminist, Ragna Nielsen also perceived Hilde as the symbol of the New Woman of the future. In her view, a more lovely, fun, sweet, natural, and more spirited girl than Hilde had never been depicted in any literature.³ According to Nielsen, Hilde is the hope for the future (*Ibsens skrifter*, bind 9, 2009, 265-6).

Conclusion: Ibsen’s North of Freedom and hope

The hope for the future thus came from the “uncivilised”, “unchristian” North! In the conference proceedings from the first International Ibsen Conferences to be organised in Northern Norway, it feels extra special to conclude on this positive note.

Like many of his contemporaries, Ibsen expressed a longing for Norway’s glorious pagan Viking past. In his early plays, Ibsen often looked to the Viking past to find an alternative to the oppressive regime and the strict moral values of the Christian establishment. In Ibsen’s contemporary plays, the North becomes the substitute for the Viking past and also the symbol of freedom and liberation, of grand feeling and impossible deeds. The “uncivilised” North is perceived to be a place where nobility and spiritual freedom can thrive.

For a very long time, Northern Norway was perceived to be a backward, unenlightened, uninteresting and primitive place beyond civilisation. Such negative myths have persisted. Through his dramas, however, Ibsen challenged some of the negative myths about the North that existed in his day. In Ibsen’s view, northern Norwegians had more nature and rebellion in them than other Norwegians, but these qualities were perceived, at least in part, to be positive. This nature and rebellion made people freer, more independent, more unconventional, and perhaps most importantly, more happy. In other words, Ibsen did not challenge the idea that the Northerners were different from the Southerners, but he created a completely new and positive image of the North. This new image is in some ways related to a much more modern image of the North and its inhabitants (non-bourgeois, non-conforming, relaxed, happily immoral, humorous, etc.). In this respect, it can be argued that Ibsen was a hundred years ahead of his time.

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³ ”Har der nogensinde i nogen Literatur været beskrevet et friskere, sødere, morsommere, naturligere, dejligere Pige barn end Hilde? Det den unge kvinnen sier og er, gjenspeiler hennes status som bilde på framtidens kvinne”.

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Abstract

Ibsen visited Northern Norway only once in his lifetime and this was in the summer of 1891. Despite this fact, Ibsen was preoccupied with the North both as symbolic and geographical locations throughout his whole literary career. Why? This article will explore how the North is represented in Ibsen's prose plays. It will assess whether Ibsen contributed to confirm already existing images of the North or whether he contributed to the construction of new images. The article will also explore how Ibsen used images of the North to construct meaning for contemporary audiences.

Keywords

Ibsen and Northern Norway, superstition, magic, myths, freedom, emancipation, nature, Christianity, paganism, Vikings.