1 Irony personified: Ibsen and *The Master Builder*

Henrik Ibsen is masterful in his translation of an ironic world-view into the traits and behaviors of his characters, their interrelations, and the organizing structure of his dramatic action. In *Hedda Gabler*, when the title character marries George Tesman and not Eilert Loevborg, becomes vulnerable to the manipulations of Judge Brack and shoots herself with her father's pistols, she is enacting, among other behaviors, an inclusive ironic pattern. When Nora Helmer, in *A Doll House*, performs an elaborate show of domestic dutifulness, all the while sneaking macaroons and engaging in other, more helpful duplicities, she too is embodying the very ironic pattern that brings about the ultimate, and indeed logical, reversal – shutting the door on all that was apparently affirmed on her part in favor of another, more personal duty. And when, in *The Master Builder*, Halvard Solness refers with ironic self-awareness to his "luck," he is intensely aware that the fabric of his life has been transformed – and continues to be fashioned – by a power of fortune that is not only double-edged but contradictory, bringing with it both blessing and catastrophe. Such "luck" is for Solness a manifestation not so much of providential good or ill but of an overarching pattern in its visitation upon individual fate. Luck of this signifying variety is also, of course, related by its very nature to the ironic. In the case of *The Master Builder* in particular, Ibsen's arrangement and juxtaposition of events is planned so that, as in the case of Solness himself, apparent happenstance is invested with degrees of meaningfulness, and a cosmos is created where mystery and sense exist side by side, each reflecting and commenting upon the other.

To be sure, the ironic magnitudes and complexities that are achieved in *The Master Builder* are constructed upon a foundation of

clear and simple interrelations. Is it not supremely ironic, after all, that a man who suffers from vertigo must climb nonetheless to the top of a spire in order to meet and fulfill his destiny? Or that a man who turns from building churches in favor of houses for people to live in can no longer establish a home or family of his own? Or that a man who believes, and even hopes, that a destructive house fire may begin with a crack in a chimney is faced with both the beneficial and disastrous effects of that fire, along with the realization that it wasn't ignited in the chimney at all? These are but a few of the more obvious ironic relations that are simply there, that Ibsen includes as part of the fabric of his play. However, even as Northrop Frye would distinguish between "naïve" and "sophisticated" irony in the context of authorial voice – saying in effect that the former announces and calls attention to its presence while the latter is merely stated – the case of Ibsen is more subtle, and also more complex, than this distinction would imply.[1] By no means does this dramatist comment overtly on his meaningful juxtapositions, yet at the same time they announce themselves too strenuously to be regarded merely as unadorned ironic statements.

Indeed, the ironic magnitudes that are achieved in this play are prepared for on the most unassuming levels. Even in terms of this foundation, however, there is indication of a pervasive world-view that emerges through an overall orchestration of character relations, patterns of behavior, and dramatic events. In effect, Ibsen depends upon a forthright announcement of irony as a basic language in order for the play's grander thematic reaches to be discernible on those same terms. In this regard, Solness, who recognizes and calls attention to his own ironic proclivities, provides the symptoms for a larger and more significant pattern than even the ambiguous crack in the chimney can signal. *The Master Builder* is a play in which apparently natural and seemingly ordinary concepts – youth, marriage, age, fortune – are made to assume broader ranges of implication, and this is accomplished largely through the ironic and contradictory dynamics among such ostensibly common terms. "Youth," for example, is what Solness both fears and craves; it is what he cannot have again yet desperately needs in order to accomplish his deliverance; it is at once ungraspable and yet physically manifest in Hilda Wangel, Kaja

Fosli, and Ragnar Brovik. The Solness marriage, which once brought twin baby sons into the world, is now a hollow vestige of the union that was, with remorse and duty taking the place of any potential for joy. Here too, however, the ironies can serve as components of Ibsen's larger picture, establishing a language and finally enabling the encompassing agon, the ironic vision of a cosmos and the personal relationship to a deity, to "Him," that brings Solness to his fall and overarching tragedy.

As tragic drama, *The Master Builder* conducts an elaborate argument between its title character and the forces that would intrude into, and even define, his psyche and destiny. Solness is tortured by guilt and yet, as purely tragic irony would have it, he is also innocent, absolved, or at least not completely implicated in the actions and events for which he feels such remorse.

> SOLNESS: Put it this way. Suppose it was my fault, in some sense.
> HILDA: You! For the fire?
> SOLNESS: For everything, the whole business. And yet,
> perhaps – completely innocent all the same.
>
> (*Complete* 827)

To a large degree, in fact, it is the depth of Solness's passion and the intricacy of his psychic mood that provide this play with its breadth of vision. *The Master Builder* is, in Robert Brustein's description, "a great cathedral of a play, with dark, mystical strains which boom like the chords of an organ" (*Revolt* 77). Magnitude, in terms such as these, is accomplished through an essentially tragic sensibility and vocabulary – but here that sensibility entails a corresponding ironic philosophy and procedural method. In order for Solness to scale a spire at the end of the play, in a vertiginous mirroring of the earlier climb at Lysanger that was witnessed by the younger Hilda, Ibsen must fashion a character who is, in effect, irony personified, one for whom life's incidents turn into evidence of an inclusive pattern of self-reflexive commentary. From the beginning of the play, attention is called to Solness's "luck," which all of those who know him appear to recognize – Knut Brovik, Doctor Herdal, and Aline all acknowledge or make reference to it in one context or another. It is only Solness, however, who

knows the depth of its repercussions. "Well – I had luck on my side," Solness admits to Knut Brovik early in the action (788). Yet in spite of the apparent off-handedness in this moment, this is the same man who knows exactly what his wife means when she comments on Kaja Fosli's presence in the house: "You've certainly been in luck, Halvard, to have gotten hold of that girl" (794). And then, there is the following exchange with Dr. Herdal:

> HERDAL: I must say, to *me* it seems that you've had luck with you to an incredible degree.
> SOLNESS (*masking a wan smile*): So I have. Can't complain of that.
> HERDAL: First, that hideous old robbers' den burned down for you. And that was really a stroke of luck.
> SOLNESS (*seriously*): It was Aline's family home that burned – don't forget.
> HERDAL: Yes, for *her* it must have been a heavy loss.
> SOLNESS: She hasn't recovered right to this day. Not in all these twelve-thirteen years.
> HERDAL: What followed after, that must have been the worst blow for her.
> SOLNESS: The two together.
> HERDAL: But you yourself – you rose from those ashes. You began as a poor boy from the country – and now you stand the top man in your field. Ah, yes, Mr. Solness, you've surely had luck on your side.
>
> (799)

"Luck," even at this early point in the play, is characterized not as happenstance or innocent fortune but as an abstract, aleatory force that attends to this one individual, a quality that is at large in Solness's life, that can intrude or attach itself to his personal relationships, associations, and career opportunities – but never innocently. The same luck that brings building opportunities also brings destruction of the Solness family – the deaths of the baby boys and the end of what Solness calls Aline's talent for building the "souls of little children" (827). Later, when Solness acknowledges to Hilda the true burden and

severity of his fortune, luck has been fully and manifestly transformed into a daimonic presence.

> HILDA (*animated*): Yes, but isn't it really a joy for you then, to create these beautiful homes?
> SOLNESS: The price, Hilda. The awful price I've had to pay for that chance.
> HILDA: But can you never get over that?
> SOLNESS: No. For this chance to build homes for others, I've had to give up – absolutely give up any home of my own – a real home, I mean, with children.
> HILDA (*delicately*): But did you have to? Absolutely, that is?
> SOLNESS (slowly nodding): That was the price for my famous luck. Luck – hm. This good luck, Hilda – it couldn't be bought for less.
>
> (825)

Solness is excruciatingly aware, not only of the contradictions in his circumstances but also of what is, for him, their meaning. Continuing, in the same scene, when he tells Hilda in detail about the cause of the fire and its aftermath, he is not merely recalling events but is demarking the contours of a world, and a world-view, that is defined in essence by an ironic sensibility.

The personification of irony within character extends, however, beyond the figure of Solness, even though he is its primary incarnation. Dr. Herdal, too, is an ironist, as is Aline Solness. The devastation of the Solness marriage is such that the two partners can scarcely endure being in a room together, let alone engage in forthright conversation. As a result, they communicate through a coded subtext, and for Aline this means chiding, deflecting, and upbraiding Solness along the lines of her remark concerning his "luck" with Kaja Fosli. When Solness voices concern about his mental condition to Dr. Herdal – who, in his turn, speaks with Aline – his inquiry is conducted, in effect, within an ironic circle that sustains its own self-commentary. Again, though, the pattern here is but the foundation for a larger manifestation, which is Solness's conviction that what has happened is of a piece, that the interrelations he recognizes

are in line with punishment, with "retribution," with his argument with divinity.

The world that Ibsen has built around Solness is mysterious, even unfathomable. Yet at the same time it is highly ordered, with an omnipresent and palpable impression of sense. The past, which weighs so grievously upon both of the Solnesses, is in one sense open to question, as in the report of Hilda Wangel concerning the early events at Lysanger, yet it is also clear and delineated, as with the facts concerning the fire, Aline's illness, the loss of the little boys, and the destruction of her "nine beautiful dolls." Even Solness's "luck" is without the capriciousness that typically adheres to such a quality, and the very retribution that he imagines is being exercised against him carries with it a reciprocity and an order – this in exchange for or in response to that. Irony, in such a context, can aid in the creation of what appears orderly, conveying a sense of reason even though it might be inscrutable. Irony of this type is suggestive of that which is apt, makes sense, and belongs, yet accomplishes such impressions mysteriously; the ironic appears, in this view, to be utterly fitting and yet with indistinct reason – at the same time. Indeed, Solness conducts his life according to such a system: he believes in the mystery but also the appropriateness and underlying sense within events – the fire, his success, the summoning of "helpers and servers," the hiring of Kaja Fosli, even Hilda's arrival at his door – and he also believes in, even as he wonders about, the power of his own psychic abilities in these respects.

Even within a mysterious world, then, events can be perceived as occurring with reason, and in this case that reason is delivered through ironic means and sensibility. Solness would not fear youth so much if he did not fear another onslaught of "retribution." He would not suffer so much in Aline's presence were it not for his conviction that he deserves the anguish for what has befallen her, even as he suspects his own absolution. He would not climb the building's new tower without a belief that the earlier climb might be duplicated – would *need* to be duplicated – at this exact point, ten years from the original event at Lysanger. In *The Master Builder*, Ibsen constructs a multilayered cosmos of intricate and, at times, only

faintly readable metaphysical associations and daimonic stresses – but at the very same time it is a cosmos with balance, with a precise system of causes and effects. And, as Solness knows better than anyone, this cosmos is neither impersonal nor impervious; it has impressed itself too severely on his mind, his marriage, and his building career for that to be the case.

Solness has arrived at a point of marked instability as regards all three of these areas: his psychological condition, relationship with Aline, and future as a designer and builder of houses. The situation is, for him, volatile on all sides, and he is exceptionally vulnerable to any sort of catalyst that could prompt such latent areas of tension into full-blown personal and dramatic crises. Ibsen's achievement in this play is such that he can dramatize the sheer explosiveness of this situation, together with its supersensible and transcendent aspects, yet still convey an impression of orderliness threatened by the chaotic – or, inversely, a world of mystery within a broader context of sense. As Bernard Shaw puts it in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Solness is "daimonic" (120), an assignation that in the context of ancient, rather than modernist, tragedy would refer to a connection to some boundary zone of divine activity, not the gods specifically but a level of abstract divinity which exists apart from, but within the sphere of consciousness of, humankind.[2] And, of course, Solness is intensely and self-consciously aware of other beings – devils, trolls, "helpers and servers," perhaps even Hilda herself – that are a necessary part of the "daimonic" realm that he can sense and, possibly, direct. Richard Schechner, in his Jungian reading of Ibsen's late works, writes that, "as each play unfolds, the daemonic is integrated into the personality of the hero – 'introjected into human nature' – with a subsequent 'power which extends the bounds of personality ad infinitum, in the most perilous way.' Knowledge of the daemonic, possession of it, or by it, kills" ("Visitor" 161–162).

To lend a visible order to such a multivalent environment, Ibsen employs irony not only in characterization but also in his dramaturgical strategies. Even as he personifies irony in character, he builds it into the fabric of the dramatic construction, and into a pattern of enactment that includes the stage spectacle. Characters such as

Solness, Aline, and Dr. Herdal maintain and express their own, individuated ironic views and beliefs, but their collective interrelations, movements, and behaviors are also the perceivable symptoms of a sensible, if ironically conceived, order. The universe that Solness inhabits is exquisitely in equipoise: causes will have directly related effects, the young will arrive in "retribution," Hilda Wangel will stand in for Kaja Fosli, the suffering of one partner in marriage will provoke a commensurate penance in another, an exact decade is book-ended by Solness's ascents up the spires.[3] And even the master builder, who at times fears for his sanity and talks of trolls, is not irrational; he's too aware of how in balance and readable his circumstances are, too aware of how his own ironic philosophy plays out and is verified in the world around him.

To make such a world-view tangible – that is, to show and enact it – Ibsen advances the action through an orchestration of ironically appropriate entrances and exits, arrivals and departures that contain their own implicit commentary on the immediate action. Throughout the play, Solness and Aline act out a dance of negative attraction, as if the power than once drew them together had been reversed, and the magnetism repels rather than unites them. Ibsen arranges for Solness and Hilda to be together on stage for lengthy encounters, allowing a world to be created in the duet between them, with any intrusion into that world seen as a violation of something that belongs, increasingly, only to the two of them. But Ibsen's plan is even more precise than such an arrangement would suggest, and his ironic pattern of arrival and departure is more exacting, with more innate meaningfulness implied. In effect, the playwright fashions a succession, not simply of entrances and exits that demark these encounters, but hinge moments that tellingly shift the ironic balance and, in turn, supply a commentary on the developing action. There is, for example, this encounter, early in act one:

> SOLNESS: Then try to rid Ragnar of these stupid ideas. Marry him as much as you like – (*Changing his tone.*) Well, I mean – don't let him throw over a good job here with me. Because – then I can keep *you* too, Kaja dear.

KAJA: Oh yes, how lovely that would be, if only we could manage it!
SOLNESS (*caressing her head with both hands and whispering*): Because I can't be without you. You understand? I've got to have you close to me every day.
KAJA (*shivering with excitement*): Oh, God! God!
SOLNESS (*kissing her hair*): Kaja – Kaja!
KAJA (*sinks down before him*): Oh, how good you are to me! How incredibly good you are!
SOLNESS (*intensely*): Get up! Get up now, I – I hear someone coming!

(791–792)

Here is a theatrical moment of jarring intensity as Solness's relationship with Kaja is brought into immediate visual relief against the one with his wife. Aline has her first entrance in the play, sees the two of them, and remarks: "I'm afraid I'm intruding." And it is not long after her "intrusion" that Aline makes the remark, referred to earlier, on how "in luck" Solness has been to have Kaja in the house working for him, a comment that, in turn, leads to a further ironic exchange on how Solness has grown "used to doing without" (791–792). In addition, of course, Aline's perfectly opportune entrance at this point foreshadows the more significant "intrusion" – that of Hilda Wangel – which takes place soon after, and will prompt most of the ensuing action in the drama.

Later in the first act, Ibsen brings together in deliberate succession the characters who witness the tangible appearance of "youth" at the door (Solness, Dr. Herdal), the character who stands for that quality (Hilda), and then Aline, who has just finished creating a space (one of the nurseries in the house) for that person to stay with them overnight. Here once more, the arrivals are timed so as to accentuate their ironic potentials and underscore them visually:

SOLNESS: Oh, of course I can! Because I feel that you've come, too, almost – under some new flag. And then it's youth against youth–!
(*Dr. Herdal comes in by the hall door.*)

HERDAL: So? You and Miss Wangel still here?
SOLNESS: Yes. We've had a great many things to talk about.
HILDA: Both old and new.
HERDAL: Oh, have you?
HILDA: Really, it's been such fun. Because Mr. Solness – he's got such a fantastic memory. He remembers the tiniest little details in a flash.
(*Mrs. Solness enters by the door to the right.*)
MRS. SOLNESS: All right, Miss Wangel, your room's all ready for you now.

(812)

Such moments are splendidly crafted and layered with successive ironic tonalities. Dr. Herdal is unabashedly arch in calling attention to Hilda's continued presence, and Hilda herself is playfully, wickedly ironic in praising Solness's memory, since his recollections of Lysanger have, from her point of view, been so very fallible. Adding to this tone is the fact that if there is one thing Solness remembers all too well it is what he has helped to bring about in Aline's life – and here, just at this moment, Aline walks in, as if she has been conveniently brought to mind and summoned. Moreover, she appears with the mission of announcing that the room (the "nursery") is prepared for Hilda, thereby giving voice to exactly what Solness most hates to remember – that is, the *other* nursery, the one that once held his little sons. In instances such as this, the ironic planes and tonalities in the action fold in upon each other, creating a collective field of resonant comparisons and effects.

Act two begins with a confrontation between Solness and Aline –"You can build as much as you ever want, Halvard – but for me you can never build up a real home again" (816) – that culminates in his confession of "debt" to her and, again, an exquisitely timed arrival by Hilda Wangel:

MRS. SOLNESS (*rising slowly*): What's back of all this? Might as well tell me right now.
SOLNESS: But nothing's back of it. I've never done anything against you – not that I've ever known. And yet – there's this

sense of some enormous guilt hanging over me, crushing me down.
MRS. SOLNESS: A guilt toward *me*?
SOLNESS: Toward you most of all.
MRS. SOLNESS: Then you are – ill, after all, Halvard.
SOLNESS (*wearily*): I suppose so – something like that. (*Looks toward the door to the right, as it opens.*) Ah! But it's brightening up.
(*Hilda Wangel comes in. She has made some changes in her clothes and let down her skirt.*)
HILDA: Good morning, Mr. Solness!

(818)

In this instance, Hilda brings a change so immediate and powerful that Solness's whole demeanor shifts to its opposite mood, from the source of his greatest guilt, embodied in Aline, to his best chance for deliverance.

Ibsen's dramaturgy of ironic entrance is, however, best exemplified in its most intensified form – that is, in Hilda's initial appearance at the Solness home, an occasion that represents, in fact, the arrival of an embodied catalytic power. Here again it is worth noting the condition that Solness is in at the onset of the play's action with respect to his mental and marital states and also his career status. These conditions, if understood as latent potentials for drama, await the sort of provocation that can bring forth, to the fullest possible extent, the crisis that is promised by Solness's status as the play begins. Seen along these lines, Hilda's arrival brings a catalytic agency to the latent and extremely volatile personal situation in which Solness finds himself.[4] Hilda, with her unique qualities, desires, and recollections – and, not least, her ability to hear Solness, to join him on his particular wavelengths – is able to affect matters on all levels: psychological, marital, and in relation to his vocation as master builder. She is, indeed, the ideal reflector for Solness, in that her personality is so complementary and also so contrapuntal to his own. There are many points of entrance in the play that supply their own ironic and self-reflexive demonstrations; there are a number of such instances

that serve as important hinges in the developing action; but there is none so potent as this one, the arrival that, in effect, enables the entire tragedy to unfold as it does.

Hilda's first appearance in *The Master Builder* is made dense with an explosive power awaiting release. Ibsen, in creating this volatility and its associated ironic potentials, directs deliberate attention to the perfected irony and, implicitly, the related components of sense or predictability in Hilda's arrival. In one way, certainly, her entrance can be perceived as happenstance – that is, "luck" – the appearance of a young woman who, in search of Solness, simply happens to arrive at the house at a fortuitous moment. But once her story is told, it is clear that she is, rather, a messenger of cosmic symmetry; it is ten years to the day since the earlier events at the spire at Lysanger. Even before she appears, however, Ibsen deliberately announces and underscores the ironic charge that will be concentrated and thus magnified in this moment:

> SOLNESS: The change is coming. I can sense it. And I feel that it's coming closer. Someone or other will set up the cry: Step back for *me*! And all the others will storm in after, shaking their fists and shouting: Make room – make room – make room! Yes, Doctor, you'd better look out. Someday youth will come here, knocking at the door –
> HERDAL (*laughing*): Well, good Lord, what if they do?
> SOLNESS: What if they do? Well, then it's the end of Solness, the master builder.
>
> (*A knock at the door to the left.*)

The ensuing moment is, certainly, a "*coup de théâtre*," providing a singular impression of stage spectacle along with the heightened coincidence of timing.[5] Hilda has arrived in immediate fulfillment of Solness's prophecy; "youth" has come knocking, and soon thereafter Herdal, ever the ironist, points the fact out to Solness:

> HERDAL: You read the future, all right, Mr. Solness!
> SOLNESS: How so?
> HERDAL: Youth *did* come along, knocking at your door.

SOLNESS (*buoyantly*): Yes, but that was something else completely.
HERDAL: Oh yes, yes. Definitely!

(800–802)

Even Doctor Herdal, however, cannot possibly fathom the extent of what is implied by Hilda's knock at Solness's door, and certainly not the full ramifications of the cry that Solness had imagined – "Step back for *me*!" – in relation to this young woman. As Joan Templeton describes the arrival: "Not since *Ghosts* has there been such a sense of fatality in an Ibsen play. Hilda enters bringing Solness' death with her as though she were carrying it in her knapsack" (266). Hilda's appearance is, in Ibsen's construction, more than a primary hinge in the action, and more even than the instigation of the play's central dialectic. It is a point of mastered interrelations, an ironic contraction, in which all of the dramatic force that is yet to come is focused into one isolated instance of potentiality, embodied in this singular character's reunion with her master builder. The remainder of the play's action does, indeed, issue almost solely from this meeting, and from the density of its ironic associations. Here is the character who can fulfill Solness's desires yet at the same time bring him to destruction – and on the same path of dramatic action. As Henry James writes, Solness "encounters his fate all in the opening of a door." James, too, calls implicit attention to Hilda's catalytic power; as he puts it, she is "only the indirect form, the animated clock-face, as it were, of Halvard Solness's destiny; but the action, in spite of obscurities and ironies, takes its course by steps none the less irresistible" (268).[6]

Hilda's entrance also has a direct and immediate effect on how the play's particular realms – realistic, psychic or prescient, metaphysical and supersensory – might be perceived. It is clear from the beginning that Solness is troubled, mercurial, and wrathful in his insistence on his own course: "I'm not giving up! I never give ground. Not voluntarily. Never in this world, never!" (790). Once Hilda is present, however, and then when she recounts her story and begins her lobby for a "Kingdom of Orangia," the extent of the play's domain and, correspondingly, its tragic magnitudes are widened enormously. Regarding

Hilda's entrance, Inga-Stina Ewbank writes that in his late plays, "Ibsen thrusts such coincidences and pointers at us, as if to challenge the very principle of verisimilitude" (130–131). Yet "coincidence," in a play such as this, must be regarded with suspicion, particularly in its relation to irony, to "luck," and to what may be quite sensible but only in the context of the play's more abstract or inscrutable realms. Brian Johnston speaks directly to this proclivity, to Ibsen's "audacity" in the design of this ironic moment:

> The militant army of the young, in Solness's alarmed vision, will, he believes, come "knocking at the door," and there follows that audacious stage direction of the knock on the door that, at first seeming a too blatant irony, is, on further reflection, seen to have exactly the right shock value for the audience, for we are now seeing onstage the mysterious power Solness has described: his uncanny ability to will into existence his wishes . . . The knock at the door thus is as effective as that of *Macbeth*: it suddenly lifts the whole drama from the psychological plane upon which, up to now, it has existed, and suggests a direct intervention from the spirit world. It brings onto the stage the presence of the wonderful and awesome over which Solness's mind, in solitude, has been brooding, and the reactions of the two men to the knocking emphasize this dual nature of the reality being presented.
>
> (314)

Strictly in the ironic context, however, the relationship between Solness and Hilda can be understood as standing for, or embodying, a dialectic that, while suggestive of the play's varied realms, also reflects the sense and symmetry of its cosmos. Hilda is not only the ideal catalyst for Solness in his present travails, but also his necessary partner in the mastered irony that Ibsen fashions, forming the relationship that Kenneth Burke refers to, in his "Four Master Tropes," as "kinship" with a character's necessary antagonist. "True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him" (*Grammar* 514). In terms such as these, Hilda and Solness belong to one another on both

dialectical and ironic terms. Solness *must* have Hilda – to hear him, to share "the impossible," to recognize and know his trolls – and yet her partnership is exactly what brings about both his ascendancy and his fall.

"She is of medium height, supple, and well-formed. Slight sunburn. Dressed in hiking clothes" (800). Here the visual image is, in one sense, unprepossessing, at least in Ibsen's brief description. Yet Hilda's entry, in its perfection, is exemplary of what Roland Barthes would term *le comble*, an acme, an event which, while apparently a happenstance, nonetheless achieves meaning – that is, which signifies – and does so through ironic means. The acme is the moment of fateful perfection in drama, ideal in its symmetries and concentrated range of implications. In Barthes's illustration, "it is precisely when Agamemnon condemns his daughter to death that she praises his kindness; it is precisely when Aman believes himself to have triumphed that he is ruined" (192–193). Or, as dictated by the law of the acme and with reference to another theatrical father and daughter, it is inevitable that Lear's favorite child is the only one who can say "Nothing, my lord" – and thus provide another instance in which a tersely mastered expression contains within it a play's instigating power, in this instance the catalytic prompting for Lear's fury and ultimate tragedy. In the case of Hilda and Solness, however, the acme (which by its nature is connected to the aleatory as well as the ironic) must be seen in direct relation to the latter's "luck." As Barthes inquires:

> What does this predilection signify? The acme is the expression of a situation of mischance. Yet just as repetition "limits" the anarchic (or innocent) nature of the aleatory, so luck and mischance are not neutral, they invincibly call up a certain signification – and the moment chance signifies, it is no longer chance; the acme's precise function is this conversion of chance into sign, for the exactitude of a reversal cannot be conceived outside of an intelligence which performs it; in mythic terms, Nature (Life) is not an exact force; wherever a symmetry is manifested (and the acme is the very figure of symmetry), there has to be a hand to guide it.
>
> (192)

Solness's "luck," of course, adheres to his destiny on all fronts, affecting virtually all aspects of his experience. When seen in terms of Barthes's acme, however, the quality of this luck takes on another, even more inclusive connotation. The clarifying mission of the acme is, as Barthes points out, to change happenstance into significance, to convert "chance into sign," to endow fortune with sense and inevitability. Whereas Johnston points to the "spirit world" that Hilda's entrance opens up, the acme provides, through symmetry and its related ironic balance, the indication of another sort of exertive force at work in the drama. It is this exertion, in Barthes's terms a performative intelligence, that also is manifest in Hilda's knock at Solness's door. The "audacious" mastering of that scenic moment provides so ironic an impression of symmetry, in other words, that there must be a "hand to guide it."

It is under these circumstances, in fact, that the full impact of Hilda's timely appearance in the Solness household may be understood. If her entry is catalytic, containing its own incipient and unreleased power, then such a potential dynamism can be seen in terms not only of possibilities but of direct consequences and results. Hilda's arrival in Solness's life points directly toward the final confrontation between the builder and his deity – "Him" – and then to the master builder's death. What is suggested in such a pattern is not only a dramatic development but, in ironic terms, a ratio – seen here as a specific relation of potential, catalytic, and released power that creates another type of symmetry between forces that are latent and ones that are realized. Solness, in the volatile state in which he begins the action, meets in Hilda the ideal catalytic agent, designed by Ibsen in a way that is suited precisely to his title character's condition. In their initial meeting, a synergy takes shape but cannot yet be fully expressed or enacted. Yet all of the subsequent action of *The Master Builder*, including Solness's developing passion and its consequences, is contained within the singularity, the symmetry, and the ultimate order and sense behind this one character's appearance.

To fully comprehend the impact of Hilda Wangel's intrusion in the Solness house, in all of its dynamism and resonance, it is necessary to consider Ibsen's own relationships with certain inspiring figures in

his own life, and Emilie Bardach in particular. Although much has been written (and with several points in dispute) on which of the young women known by Ibsen may have provided inspiration for the character of Hilda Wangel, the discussion does not often pertain to dramaturgical or theoretical matters having to do with the playwright's use of irony. And yet, the fact that Ibsen created a fictional character such as Hilda, who wields so profound an influence on the stage figure that is generally believed to be a direct reflection of Ibsen himself, indicates a strong correlation with the effect that these inspirational figures were able to exert. If Solness and Hilda are "consubstantial," to borrow Burke's term, and if they enact a trope of supremely ironic interrelations through interpersonal need and indebtedness in this context, then the affinity of Ibsen and Bardach might be consulted for an analogous relation, not with "the enemy" per se, as Burke would have it, but rather with the "fundamental kinship" and its implications.

The core issue here is the nature and extent of the effect that Hilda has on Solness, in its direct relation to Ibsen's most likely point of reference for such an influence. If Ibsen's strategy in *The Master Builder* is to personify through characterization a pervasive ironic substrate, and one that it is manifested in relationships and behaviors as well as in the dramatic pattern, the degree to which such conditions may have a tangible personification in his own life bears investigation. In brief, the reference here is to Ibsen's first encounter with Bardach, a meeting that took place at Gossensass, in the Austrian (now Italian) Tyrol, in 1889, when the playwright was sixty-one and the young woman eighteen. Although the relationship appears to have continued from that summer primarily through letters, the depth of their revealed feelings for one another has led to generally shared opinions concerning her influence on given plays, including *Hedda Gabler* but, in particular, *The Master Builder*.[7] In the view of Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer, in fact, it is against the background of these letters and this particular relationship that one must apprehend *The Master Builder* ("Introduction" 124).

Regarding the connection of Ibsen and Bardach's relationship to that of Solness and Hilda, biographer Halvdan Koht reports that, "An open declaration of their feelings seems to have taken place on

September 19, as the summer drew to an end, for that is the date in *The Master Builder* of the encounter that Hilde reminds Solness of: 'You seized me in your arms and held me back and kissed me ... many times.' Whether this actually happened in Gossensass cannot be certain, but Emilie's diary clearly indicates they had experienced some great upheaval" (391). In further alignment of the character of Hilda with Ibsen's experiences with Emilie, Koht says: "The Hilde who comes to the master builder derives many traits from Ibsen's relationship with Emilie Bardach; she is the 'princess' in Solness' dreams, and her kingdom is called 'Orangia.' He likens her to an untamed beast of prey in the forest wanting to capture him. He yields to her saying, as Ibsen had said to both Emilie and Helene [Raff], that he needs and longs for her youth" (434).

Emilie Bardach was, in fact, only one of three young women who may have been suggestive in Ibsen's depiction of Hilda Wangel, and it bears noting, too, that a younger Hilda appears in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*.[8] Helene Raff and Hildur Andersen were also admired by the playwright, and as Templeton suggests, "Hilda Wangel is to some extent, and in different ways, a mixture of Bardach, Raff, and Andersen" (262). Still, it is Bardach who appears to have provided the most persuasive and enduring influence. Based on Ibsen's letters to her – "whose authenticity is not in question" – Templeton believes that the playwright "felt a strong romantic attachment to her" (237), and despite the fact that there was no sexual relationship with any of his "three princesses" (257), that he was in love with her.[9] What is more significant for the discussion here, however, is the degree to which the feelings of Ibsen are reflected in those of Solness, and on this point we have the testimony of both Emilie Bardach and the playwright himself. Ibsen acknowledged that *The Master Builder* "contained more of his own self than any other" (Koht 433). And, as Meyer recounts: "In 1908, in Munich, Emilie Bardach saw *The Master Builder* for the first time. After the performance, she commented: 'I didn't see myself, but I saw him. There is something of me in Hilde; but in Solness, there is little that is not Ibsen'" ("Introduction" 128).[10]

For Ibsen, the emotional depth of his relationships with Emilie Bardach and other young women has not only an autobiographical correlation but a corresponding intensity in the dramatic arrangements

of *The Master Builder*, particularly in regard to the personality of Hilda Wangel and its effect upon Halvard Solness. Indeed, Ibsen's own associations in this respect provide yet another instance of meaningful personification in the play, in this instance a transference of the playwright's own feelings and experiences and the manner in which these are translated into the play's action. As David Grene argues: "The love affair with Emilie Bardach and the later relationship to the Norwegian pianist [Hildur] Andersen, both women very much younger than himself, and Ibsen's intense emotional involvement with both, are certainly echoed in *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*" (2).

The effect that Hilda has upon Solness is felt most strongly as a psychic affinity, an experience that he has not, presumably, encountered in this way before. Solness suspects that he is prescient, able perhaps to prompt events through an exertion of will. It is early in the play when he first suggests evidence of this proclivity for Dr. Herdal, with reference to his hiring of Kaja and the desired retention of employee Ragnar Brovik. Solness reports that he was struck by a thought: "suppose that I could get her here in the office, then maybe Ragnar would stay put too."

> HERDAL: That was reasonable enough.
> SOLNESS: But I didn't breathe a word of any of this then – just stood looking at her – every ounce of me wishing that I had her here. I made a little friendly conversation about one thing or another. And then she went away.
> HERDAL: So?
> SOLNESS: But the next day, in the late evening, after old Brovik and Ragnar had gone, she came by to see me again, acting as if we'd already struck a bargain.
> HERDAL: Bargain? What about?
> SOLNESS: About precisely what I'd been standing there wishing before – even though I hadn't uttered a word of it.
> HERDAL: That *is* strange.
>
> (796–797)

It is this sense of a power over events, and people, that later in the first act prompts Solness to confess something similar to Hilda, this in response to her story about the events at Lysanger and the promise for a

"Kingdom of Orangia." She says: "You caught me up and kissed me, Mr. Solness." And then: "You held me in both your arms and bent me back and kissed me – many times." At first, Solness is disbelieving, and offers that she must have dreamt such memories. Then he is "struck by a sudden thought": "I must have willed it. Wished it. Desired it" (807). It is this power of wishing and desiring, this power of will that Solness believes he may possess, that not only finds repeated expressions in the second act – including Solness's report of the fire and the crack in the chimney – but also leads to a key transitional moment in the play's overall iteration of an ironic reversal of circumstances, in this instance a suggestion of the power shift from Solness to Hilda:

> SOLNESS (*confidingly*): Don't you believe with me, Hilda, that there are certain special, chosen people who have a gift and power and capacity to *wish* something, *desire* something, *will* something – so insistently and so – so inevitably – that at last it *has* to be theirs? Don't you believe that?
> HILDA (*with an inscrutablel look in her eyes*): If that's true, then we'll see someday – if I'm one of the chosen.
> SOLNESS: It's not one's self alone that makes great things. Oh no – the helpers and servers – they've got to be with you if you're going to succeed. But they never come by themselves. One has to call on them, incessantly – within oneself, I mean.
>
> (830)

Here Solness is so consumed with his own command of desire, and the extent of his personal will, that he only glancingly perceives the potential power of the young woman – "youth" – that he is confronting. The depth of their psychic rapport, however, is by now clearly established, providing the groundwork for a duet that can include the "helpers and servers" and also a mutual awareness of "trolls" and of "the impossible," reifying the terms of a shared spiritual world. Ewbank refers to the special and cumulative range of associations that creates their rapport: "Jointly, completing each other's sentences, they build their identification with these images, across a sub-text of sexual and spiritual affinity, charging every word with significance and creating a mythical world of their own" (143).

If Hilda Wangel's presence in the Solness house provides the catalytic prompting for the title character's ensuing passion, igniting what was abiding and latent in his circumstances, it is the shift of power dynamics within a shared psychic arena that provokes the play's later movements toward its tragic end. In this case, too, the synergy between the characters has, in relation to the overarching shape of the play's action, a basis in irony. In this instance, however, it is the irony of peripety rather than of the mastered moment or of a dramaturgical pattern in which one character's qualities are precisely and, in this instance, devastatingly appropriate for another's. The ironic peripety adds, in effect, a new dimension to such appropriateness, extending the implications from the individual characters into the dramatized turn of events. Kenneth Burke describes this phenomenon as the progressive pattern of reversal that, precisely because of its innate qualities, achieves a fateful, determinate, and thus unavoidable quality. If one imagines Solness, in this view, as the "prior" character, the peripety follows from the addition of Hilda as the "new" character: "The point at which different casuistries appear . . . is the point where one tries to decide exactly what new characters, born of a given prior character, will be the 'inevitable' vessels of the prior character's disposition. As an over-all ironic formula here, and one that has the quality of 'inevitability,' we could lay it down that 'what goes forth as A returns as non-A.' This is the basic pattern that places the essence of drama and dialectic in the irony of the 'peripety,' the strategic moment of reversal" (*Grammar* 517).

Irony of this sort, pertinent to both situation and dramaturgical process, is related directly to what Bert O. States points to, in *Irony and Drama*, as a play's "principle of curvature," a cumulative tendency in the drama that, in effect, unites the various instances of the ironic into an overmastering ironic progression (27).[11] "As ironies proliferate in a play," he writes, "we may begin to anticipate the inevitability of a master irony" (26). Confronted with "impossible" situations in his home as the play begins, Solness advances toward a renewed confrontation with "the impossible"; beginning the play with a terror of youth, he ends with a dependency upon it; in each instance, the reversal of field is contingent upon the "master irony," the arrival and then the progressively increasing influence of Hilda Wangel.

HILDA: Tell me, Mr. Solness – are you quite sure that you've never called for me? Within yourself, I mean.
SOLNESS (*slowly and softly*): I almost think I must have.
HILDA: What did you want with me?
SOLNESS: You, Hilda, are youth.
HILDA (*smiles*): Youth that you're so afraid of?
SOLNESS (*nodding slowly*): And that, deep within me, I'm so much hungering for.

(833)

Solness needs Hilda, must have her, if for no other reason than to attempt, one last time, "the impossible." She is the only one who can sanction, or even comprehend, such an attempt. And yet, by the end of the play, it is he who belongs to her, rather than vice versa. In his heroic ruination, Solness is for Hilda "*My – my* master builder!" (860). Or, in David Grene's words, Hilda is "the retributive agent who will do to Solness what he has done to others – make him an instrument for the achievement of her desires and fantasies." Solness himself has, of course, experienced his share of personal reversal, as a corollary aspect of his "luck," with respect to his plans to establish home and family, and – especially – in his relationship to the deity that he refers to and argues with. With reference to "Him," following the death of his twins: "From the day I lost them, I never wanted to build another church" (824). And yet, the change brought about by Hilda's arrival can only be seen, for Solness, as the most profound turnabout yet. Hilda becomes, in Grene's phrasing, "the ironic symbol of the retributive power of youth" (11).

The play moves in two directions simultaneously, toward an enhanced understanding and identification between Solness and Hilda, and also toward an increasingly abstract conception of what is truly "possible," either between them or as a consequence of the master builder's efforts in particular. At first, the concept of the "impossible" is simply a discovered common ground, a shared experience and language:

SOLNESS (*seriously*): Have you ever noticed, Hilda, how the impossible – how it seems to whisper and call to you?

HILDA (*reflecting*): The impossible? (*Vivaciously.*) Oh yes! *You* know it too?
SOLNESS: Yes.

(826)

Here once more is a briefly defined exchange between the two characters that becomes a significant hinge in the action, containing as it does a deeply ironic strain, a sense of change that is, if not foretold, then more and more implicit in the ensuing action. For Johnston, this single moment is "a turning point in the play"; in his view, "the word 'impossible' (*umulig*) now will be used with extraordinary frequency, reaching a climax of iteration when Solness, in the last act, climbs his tower. We notice that Hilde receives Solness's concept of 'the impossible,' *reflects* upon it, thus taking it into her mind, then 'vivaciously' (*livfull*) assents to it – another of the many moments in the play when either Solness or Hilde receives a concept from the other, takes it over, and thus spiritually 'grows' onstage, like a master and a devoted disciple" (330).

For Solness, though, the "impossible" is contradictory; it can have no tangible or reified manifestation despite its immediate corroboration in the figure of Hilda. For him, in fact, it becomes the representation of an ultimate, abstract irony. There is no way, in spite of his assurances to Hilda, to build their castle in the air "on a solid foundation" (856). Indeed, by the end of the play Solness's building plans are, in themselves, impossible, and can only come to what Shaw terms "dead men's architecture" (*Quintessence* 118). The master builder's argument with divinity is surely impossible to win, in spite of what Solness reports to Hilda about what occurred at Lysanger: "Then I did the impossible. I no less than He." Solness was able to climb the tower there, to hang the wreath atop the spire, and even to announce: "Hear me, Thou Almighty! From this day on, I'll be a free creator – free in my own realm, as you are in yours" (854). Now, however, Solness is neither free nor actively creative, in spite of his avowal to "Almighty God" to "build only what's most beautiful in all the world," a castle for his princess "on a solid foundation" (856). It is just prior to his death, in fact, that Solness continues his "impossible" argument – at least in Hilda's ecstatic vision:

HILDA: Yes, it's the impossible, now, that he's doing! (*With the inscrutable look in her eyes.*) Do you see anyone up there with him?
RAGNAR: There's nobody else.
HILDA: Yes, there's somebody he's struggling with.
RAGNAR: You're mistaken.
HILDA: You don't hear singing in the air, either?
RAGNAR: It must be the wind in the treetops.

(858–859)

The scene at Lysanger, from exactly ten years earlier, is thus recreated and enacted with a deliberately symmetrical irony at the play's end, with Hilda hearing a "tremendous music" and returning Solness's last wave of his hat with her own waving of a shawl in place of the younger girl's banner.

To achieve this magnitude – that is, the extraordinary degree of tragic and metaphysical import – Ibsen has built a play that unites a realistic plane of action with levels of supersensory activity and implication. In Johnston's phrasing, he has fashioned a "mediation" between realms of "everyday appearances" and "universals" (350). To accomplish this intricate interplay among realms, the dramatist uses irony in several key ways, including the investment of an ironic world-view in his characters, creating a dramaturgical structure with ironic turns and hinges, emphasizing the appropriateness of the acme in Barthes's sense of the term, and engaging a continual, unfolding process of ironic reversals of circumstance. In doing this, Ibsen successively constructs a complex and interactive field of irony on several levels. More importantly, the playwright is able to condense this field, to concentrate its intensities in such a way that a potential dramatic power is compressed into singular and definitive moments in the action and then powerfully released. This compression is given its most clarified and representative form in the arrival of Hilda Wangel at Solness's house, and from that point on the ratio between her appearance and its effect is used to broaden Solness's sphere of psychic awareness even while delimiting his range of possible action. In one sense, certainly, *The Master Builder* is concerned with the terrible double bind of Solness's fortune, what Gosse calls the "tyranny"

of his luck (192). Even more significantly, though, the drama highlights another double-edge, the builder's construction of his own destiny and doom, with this very contradiction ironically personified in Hilda Wangel. Each of these two characters is, in fact, a personification of ironic exertions in the drama; irony is instilled into the persona of each figure and into what they do, especially with respect to one another – in this sense, again, they are "consubstantial." As Schechner suggests, Solness gradually arrives at the knowledge that he has "summoned" Hilda, that she is the "daemon," his "helper and servant" ("Visitor" 165). It is this recognition, perhaps, that provides Solness with the most ironic luck of all:

> SOLNESS (*looks at her with bowed head*): How did you ever become what you are, Hilda?
> HILDA: How have you made me into what I am?