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Love, Guilt, Death and Art in Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*

Abstract: This article presents an original interpretation of Henrik Ibsen's work *When We Dead Awaken* by advancing a hypothesis which explains Rubek and Irene's path into death as an act of atonement. The analysis encompasses reflections on the meaning of terms such as love, life, art and guilt in the context of the work. The article emphasises the importance of children's education, which proves itself to be the only effective way to contribute to mankind's refinement – something very important in the main character's view. In its last part the article seeks causes of the altered behaviour of the main characters immediately before their deaths (especially their feeling of attraction to death).

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Introduction

Ibsen's final play leaves great scope for interpretation even in the present day. Most readers and researchers investigate mainly the questions that the characters ask throughout the work, to which they each give quite varied answers. These are above all questions regarding the purpose of human beings in life or, put another way, regarding the correct way of living and the possibility of relieving guilt. In the quest for answers to such questions the play leaves most readers or audience members with a sense of contradiction that can be traced back to the often seemingly incomprehensible and erratic behaviour of the characters. This is a point of view expressed in works by some recent researchers, e.g. Wærp (2002) and Helland (2000). The following article analyses the relationship between the main characters Rubek and Irene and puts forward a new hypothesis to explain their often disconcerting behaviour after their reacquaintance in Norway. The originality of this analysis consists primarily in interpreting the deaths of the main characters as self-sacrifice, which from Irene's and ultimately even Rubek's point of view is the only possible proof of love and of absolution from guilt in the given situation. Further, the article attempts to ex-

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plain the characters' peculiar emotions immediately before their demise – namely enthusiasm and a sense of harmony in the face of the danger of death. Despite confirming that certain aspects of these emotions resonate with the Dionysian perception of life and death, as Nietzsche described it, the present analysis suggests that the origin of Ibsen's characters' feelings lies in a rational understanding of the human condition and life values rather than in the influence of art, as depicted by the German philosopher in his *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*.

It is necessary to begin the study with a short analysis of the main characters and of the relationships among them before the play's final sequence, which will be examined in greater detail in the following sections. The sculptor Arnold Rubek appears in the beginning as a rich older man on a tour of Norway (his original homeland) with his wife. The reader/audience finds out very soon about Rubek's discontent with his own life, which troubles him more and more despite his fame and riches. Rubek has been married to Lady Maja for about four years, but little remains holding the couple together. Maja does not share Rubek's passion for art and their marriage has not borne them any children. Rubek's behaviour towards Maja is without a doubt harsh and inconsiderate. His conversation with her in the second act reaches its climax in his admission that he is "sick and tired and unendurably bored with living with [her]" (McFarlane 1977, 271). He even admits that he took on Maja as "a kind of makeshift" (McFarlane 1977, 269) after his relationship with Irene. Rubek admits that he chose Maja as his wife to be able to live a "life in sunlight and beauty" (McFarlane 1977, 270), to be able to cope with his desired abstinence from art.

Rubek: I began to think that all this business about the artist's mission and the artist's vocation was all so much empty, hollow, meaningless talk (McFarlane 1977, 270).

Maja is rather composed as she tolerates Rubek's surly behaviour as well as his harsh words, yet she can well imagine a divorce from him. Into this situation enters the landowner Ulfheim, who meets Maja, as well as Irene, who had once served as a model for Rubek's most famous work, "The Day of Resurrection."

In the years of her artistic collaboration Irene had stood naked before Rubek, her idolized "lord and master" (McFarlane 1977, 297), who based his artwork on her. The artwork was meant to depict an idealised figure of a woman who reawakens after death and who feels just as at home in the realm of the hereafter as on earth. Meeting him in a Norwegian spa and later in the mountains, Irene reminds Rubek of her feelings of love towards him from the past and of her absolute dedication to him. At that time she promised Rubek to follow him everywhere always and to serve him (cf. McFarlane 1977, 258). After the completion of "The Day of Resurrection" and after Irene's sudden disappear-

ance Rubek no longer achieved any masterpieces and he realised that Irene had been the necessary inspiration for his creations. Rubek also reassessed the original conception of “The Day of Resurrection” and, as we shall see, transformed the work. Rubek’s later conversations with Irene prove that he had desired her as an artistic inspiration above all else. However, from the beginning Irene had seen the meaning of their relationship differently. She had loved Rubek with all her heart and wanted to belong entirely to him. Her love for Rubek was absolutely spiritual as well as physical, consisting of an intermingling of the two. Irene did not desire a one-sided form of love, for example a purely physical relationship. It is in this sense that I understand Irene’s claims that she would have killed Rubek if he had touched her body when she stood naked before him as a model (cf. McFarlane 1977, 258). At the same time, however, she experienced hatred towards Rubek, the artist who, “maddeningly in control of [him] self” (McFarlane 1977, 276), viewed her body as an artistic object, exploiting it. Irene saw the purpose of her life in her love for Rubek and in the bringing up of his children (cf. McFarlane 1977, 280).

The young Rubek, however, had different desires and intentions toward Irene. He understood his artistic work on “The Day of Resurrection” as a sacred task which involved depicting an ideal female who awakens after the “long and dreamless sleep of death [...] not wondering at things new and unfamiliar and unimagined [...] in those higher, freer, happier realms” (McFarlane 1977, 259). The experience of this earthly woman, whose image Rubek saw in Irene, was not to be any different from the ideal experience in the realm of the afterlife. In contrast to Irene, Rubek’s view of love excluded physicality: according to Rubek no “base desires” should be awakened in a man by viewing “the pure woman” (McFarlane 1977, 259). Rubek did not in any way want to see Irene as an object of lust, but rather saw his work on “The Day of Resurrection” as both aesthetically uplifting and morally liberating. The role of the woman was in his eyes exclusively in service to the artist and his project.¹ Only after his reacquaintance with Irene does the aging artist experience what the meaning of life is *in her opinion*.

At the end of the play, Rubek and Irene die under an avalanche during a very dangerous and seemingly pointless ascent of a mountain. Parallel to it, Ulfheim and Maja appear finally as a newly formed couple, so that it may be fitting to compare them with Rubek and Irene. As will follow from the analysis,

¹ The same role of the woman towards the man (service, sacrifice) is also demanded by the sculptor Lyngstrand in *The Lady from the Sea* and by the poet Falk in *Love’s Comedy*. Toril Moi (cf. 2006, 81) makes reference to the motif of female self-sacrifice as an important element in the thought of aesthetic idealists.

however, it is questionable whether Ulfheim and Maja actually represent a better alternative in Ibsen's eyes. In the context of the playwright's work, the fact that Maja shows no interest in motherhood seems to be something disconcerting about her. In contrast to Irene, Maja perceives the presence of children as annoying: "Oh, Rubek ... how can you bear to sit here and listen to that children's noise! And watch all their antics!" (McFarlane 1977, 264). As I will show, it seems certain that children take on the role of bearers of the future – not to be underestimated in Ibsen's understanding.²

Guilt and Atonement

This section examines the final part of *When We Dead Awaken*, so that in turn the behaviour and the deaths of the two main characters can be explained. In conversations between Rubek and Irene in the first and second acts Irene describes to Rubek how she feels he abused her. She accuses him of both stealing her soul to make a work of art out of it and of seeing their relationship as an "episode" (McFarlane 1977, 280), while she had "served [him] with all the throbbing blood of [her] youth" (McFarlane 1977, 258). In the first act Rubek explains the original concept of his statue "The Day of Resurrection" and in the second act he admits to Irene the changes that he made in his work after she had left him. In the final version Rubek used himself as a model for a "man weighed down with guilt" (McFarlane 1977, 279). Rubek remarks that this man has "remorse for a forfeit life. He sits there dipping his fingers in the rippling water – to wash them clean. He is racked and tormented by the thought that he will never, never succeed" (McFarlane 1977, 279). Irene reacts to Rubek's stylised and somewhat theatrical confession of guilt scornfully:

Irene: [*hard and cold*]. Poet!

Rubek: Why poet?

Irene: Because you are soft and spineless and full of excuses for everything you've ever done or thought. You killed my soul – then you go and model yourself as a figure of regret and remorse and penitence ... [*Smiles.*] ... and you think you've settled your account (McFarlane 1977, 279).

² In contrast, Irene's reaction to the same situation is described quite differently: "Irene comes from the right across the plateau. The playing children have already caught sight of her and have gone running to meet her. Now she is surrounded by the crowd of children; some of them appear happy and trusting, others are shy and fearful. She speaks quietly to them and indicates that they are to go down to the sanatorium; she herself wishes to rest a while by the stream" (McFarlane 1977, 273).

The above quoted passage, however, is not Rubek's first recognition of his guilt in *When We Dead Awaken*. Irene's emotive reaction to Rubek's earlier confession of a "heavy conscience" (McFarlane 1977, 275) is particularly striking:

Rubek: You have a shadow tormenting you. And I have my heavy conscience.

Irene: [*with a glad cry of liberation*]. At last! (McFarlane 1977, 275).

Irene's jubilant reaction to Rubek's confession of guilt shows the significance that his words had for her. After hearing them Irene feels temporarily freed from the shadows that tormented her and from the power of which she felt herself captive. At this point she seems to speak honestly of her homecoming as "home to my lord and master" (McFarlane 1977, 275). At a somewhat later point Irene makes use of the same words, however in a clearly ironic sense:

Irene: My love, my lord and master!

Rubek: Oh, Irene!

Irene: [*smiles, and gropes for the knife; hoarsely*]. It will be merely an episode ... [*Quickly whispers*]. Sh! Don't look around, Arnold! (McFarlane 1977, 285).

Irene's desire for revenge at this point comes as a reaction to Rubek's return to his former role of artist striving for fame, one who once more longs for Irene so that he can find inspiration for his work. Rubek therefore at this moment does not display the genuine, deeply felt sense of regret he proclaimed to Irene earlier. After Rubek expresses his longing for the artistically fruitful times of the past and then later desires a "summer night on the mountain" (cf. McFarlane 1977, 285) with Irene, she is on the verge of killing him with her knife – at which point she makes use of words alluding to Rubek's former role of beloved artist.³ Obviously Irene longs for something more than a "game" (cf. McFarlane 1977, 283) – she seems to be demanding proof of love from Rubek. The words of regret uttered by Rubek are not able to convince her of his love:

Irene: I have stood on a pedestal, naked, and shown my body to hundreds of men – after you ...

Rubek: **It was I who drove you to it ... blind fool that I was!** Setting that dead clay image above the happiness of life and love.

Irene: [*looking down*] **Too late. Too late**" (McFarlane 1977, 296, emphasis added).

The hypothesis presented here, that *When We Dead Awaken* ends in a self-sacrifice to prove love, is supported by Rubek's way of addressing Irene as "my bride of grace" (McFarlane 1977, 297) – in the Norwegian original as "min benådelses

³ "My love, my lord and master! [...] It will be merely an episode" (McFarlane 1977, 285).

brud” (Ibsen 1937, 317).⁴ From this point of view Rubek’s life climaxes in an atonement for his guilt towards Irene, for which he has no other means of proof available than to sacrifice his own life.

Irene proclaims throughout the drama that the love in her died after she had been abandoned by Rubek. It is probable that this resulted in her no longer being able to dedicate herself romantically to another man. She states that she had “stood on a pedestal, naked, and shown [her] body to hundreds of men” (McFarlane 1977, 296). Her once dedicated adoration of Rubek turned into bitterness and cynicism. The same change can be seen in Rubek, who began to create portrait busts with animal-like expressions instead of idealised statues (cf. McFarlane 1977, 244).

The plot twist that causes Irene to appear again as the artist admirer that she once was comes only when Rubek admits that he is dead and returns to his grave: “Then let us two dead people live life to the full once more – before we go down into our graves again!” (McFarlane 1977, 296). With these words in the finale Rubek aligns himself with Irene’s claims, from which he had tried to distance himself only moments before. Rubek “throws his arms passionately about [Irene],” to which she reacts with a scream (McFarlane 1977, 296). All of this occurs in the high mountains at the time of a dangerous storm. Irene and Rubek walk “[as though transfigured]” (McFarlane 1977, 297) up the mountain and towards the storm instead of hiding in the hut, as Ulfheim had urged them to do (cf. McFarlane 1977, 294). Despite the warnings they allow themselves to be swept away by an avalanche and then be buried alive. I would like to emphasise that in my opinion Rubek and Irene are not playing a meaningless erotic game in this passage, as this would stand in total contradiction to Irene’s earlier rhetoric.⁵ Furthermore Irene’s consent in an erotic adventure with Rubek would contradict her earlier rejections of similar suggestions by Rubek. In my opinion this proves among other things Irene’s claim that she would have killed Rubek if he had laid a hand on her when she stood before him naked as a model (cf. McFarlane 1977, 258).

The tragedy of the individual deaths of Rubek and Irene may be assuaged in Ibsen’s eyes through one circumstance – through the playwright’s belief in the future of humanity. The rising sun at the end of *When We Dead Awaken* represents a glorious new beginning. Death and the rising sun can obviously

⁴ Vigdis Ystad (1999, 70) and Tom Eide (2001, 258) go into detail on the interpretation of the expression “min benådelses brud” (Ibsen 1937, 317).

⁵ Cf. the love and absolute dedication to Rubek that Irene once had, as well as her numerous references to her love no longer being able to be awakened. When Rubek recommends to Irene a “summer night on the mountain” (McFarlane 1977, 285), she is on the verge of killing him.

stand in strong contrast to each other, yet this inconsistency can be explained, as the following text will show.

The ideals in Ibsen's later works (beauty, truth, morality, liberty, etc.) are constantly being analysed. It seems that these dramas attempt specifically to answer the question of whether these ideals are compatible with living, in other words to what extent it lies within human powers to live within ideals or what the benefits are of life with them as a basis. Ibsen characteristically shows in his work the inability of his contemporaries to live out their ideals. In this way he shows the gap between theory and practice, i.e. between the ideals and the tendencies or urges of human beings. Ibsen's later works often illustrate how the contradiction between ideals and the dispositions of his characters destroys human happiness. This is the situation of e.g. Borkmann, Solness, Allmers, Rosmer, Werle, Stockmann and other characters. They each have an altruistic goal in their life, but throughout the plays it turns out that the realization of it is quite impossible or even harmful for them. As Alfred Markowitz and Toril Moi (cf. 2006, 67–104) show, what Ibsen's characters seem to long for is harmony between dispositions and obligations. *When We Dead Awaken* presents the artist Rubek, who has created a piece of art ("The Day of Resurrection") which was meant to express allegorically the possibility of humans to realize their highest ideals during their earthly lives. But after creating the first version of his sculpture, Rubek becomes deeply unhappy, because he was able neither to live out the idea of the allegory in his own life nor to convey it through art to other people. As early as 1913 Alfred Markowitz proposed in his book *Die Weltanschauung Ibsens* [The Worldview of Ibsen] the idea that Ibsen's tragedies depicted collisions of two opposing forces in human beings: "the striving for goals" (the will for ideals) and "heredity" (of sensuality and of urges).⁶ Human progress to lofty ideals stands in contradiction to inherited attributes. These high goals (above all unlimited love and forgiveness) cannot be attained at present, as human tendencies and ideals develop over time and time needs to be allowed so that harmony can be created between the two. It follows from Ibsen's later works that the contribution of mothers towards the refinement of humanity is greater than that of artists or philosophers, as mothers bring new generations into the world and educate them. The ideas put forward by Markowitz illuminated many things from a new perspective – for instance the high value that Ibsen placed on women and the role of the mother, which can be seen in all of his works. At the same time one can better understand Rubek's and Irene's adoration of a "normal" life (love, marriage, educating of children),

⁶ Markowitz (1913) calls them "Zielstrebigkeit" and "Vererbung."

which, without children, reveals itself as useless and empty (e.g. Rubek's life together with Maja). Recently, Toril Moi has elaborated similar thoughts in her book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (2006).

In this context of being focused on the future and on hopes for a new era of humanity the individual deaths of Rubek and Irene in *When We Dead Awaken* appear in a new light. Immediately before their deaths Rubek and Irene are surrounded by thick mist and clouds as they hurry towards the sunrise in the early morning on "the promised peak" (McFarlane 1977, 296), where they hope to celebrate their wedding. Although the sunrise and the wedding celebrations remain denied to them, they have overcome their inner uncertainties and it remains only a question of time as to when the cloud and mist in the mountains will dissipate and their successors will show glory to the world.

The Dionysian in *When We Dead Awaken*?

This last section focuses on the ending of *When We Dead Awaken*, in particular on the behaviour of Rubek and Irene immediately before their deaths. In contrast to their previous responses to each other, at the end we see the two main characters march towards death with a seemingly incomprehensible type of enthusiasm. The pair completely avoid fear of death and feel a strengthened connection to each other and to their surroundings. They look back on their lives with a harmonising gaze – even if they shortly before have shown deep regrets and remorse.

It may appear fitting to explain this anomaly in *When We Dead Awaken* with reference to the "Dionysian" as presented in Friedrich Nietzsche's early book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. The young philosopher developed the Dionysian as an important term in his theory of culture, which would influence many future prominent artists and philosophers.⁷ Ibsen never admitted to having explored Nietzsche's work in much depth, but the name of the German philosopher was in no way unknown to him (cf. Sträßner 2003, 17). In response to a direct question from the journalist Tostrup on his stance toward the then fashionable Nietzsche, he reportedly answered thus:

⁷ The Dionysian did not only fascinate Nietzsche in his early creative phase but also quite strongly in the final stage of his philosophical output – as his late *Dionysos-Dithyramben* proves, for instance.

Tostrup asked Ibsen's opinion of Nietzsche, who had died in Weimar that August [1900]. Ibsen replied that he 'did not know so much about him', but that he was 'a rare talent who, because of his philosophy, could not be popular in our democratic age'. When Tostrup remarked that some people regarded Nietzsche as 'a spirit of darkness, a Satan', Ibsen cut in: 'No, he wasn't that' (Meyer 1971, 318–319).

Matthias Sträßner (2003) searches for parallels between the thought of Nietzsche and Ibsen in his book *Flöte und Pistole* [Flute and Gun] and in doing so summarises a till then little-explored common mode of perception between the two authors. Concerning Ibsen's reading of Nietzsche, Sträßner (in agreement with Harald Beyer and Fritz Paul 1969) believes it to be probable that Ibsen read Lou Andreas Salomé's book on Nietzsche, titled *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen Werken* [Friedrich Nietzsche in his Works] (1894). In this book the author interprets Nietzsche's life and work psychoanalytically and in the process she also discusses *The Birth of Tragedy* and Nietzsche's use of the Dionysian. Another way Ibsen could have become aware of Nietzsche might have been communication with Georg Brandes, Ibsen's friend and an early proponent of Nietzsche who had given lectures about the philosopher as early as 1888. Brandes tried to awaken in Nietzsche an admiration for Ibsen, but in vain (cf. Sträßner 2003, 17).

What does Nietzsche associate with the Dionysian? The principle of the Dionysian is seen by Nietzsche in the force to destroy any boundaries, above all else the boundaries of individual existence. The Dionysian represents ecstasy and madness, sexuality, song and dance, the destruction of any barriers between individuals as well as any desire to destroy or for self-destruction. In contrast to the Apollonian, it represents truth, eternity and liberation from illusions. The death of the individual appears in the Dionysian mode of perception as redemption – as overcoming individuation and a return to unity with the "will" as defined by Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche observed the development of the Dionysian as a phenomenon within art in pre-Socratic Greek tragedy, which had its roots in choral singing (i.e. in music). In Nietzsche's scheme the Dionysian opens up in the performing actors and the audience a perspective into the real character of the world. In the Dionysian mode of perception one is in a position to perceive the *being of the world* (the "will" in Schopenhauer's understanding) as unified and indestructible. In Nietzsche's view the actors and audience of pre-Socratic tragedy experienced the plot of the play through the Dionysian influence, by which they were able to accept death and the destruction of forms (i.e. any person, animal or thing), and even to take pleasure in this. Nietzsche explains this as follows:

[I]t is only through the spirit of music that we can understand the joy involved in the annihilation that we see clearly the eternal phenomenon of Dionysian art, which gives expression to the will in its omnipotence, as it were, behind the *principium individuationis*.

nis, the eternal life beyond all phenomena, and despite all annihilation. [...] he hero, the highest manifestation of the will, is negated for our pleasure, because he is only phenomenon, and because the eternal life of the will is not affected by his annihilation (Nietzsche 1967, 104).

The Dionysian in Nietzsche's early work implies both the joy in life driven by physical urges as well as the longing for death. The yearning for self-destruction is reduced to some extent in pre-Socratic plays through the effect of the Apollonian. However, Nietzsche obviously sees the driving force behind pre-Socratic tragedy's effectiveness in its insight into Dionysian wisdom. He writes explicitly: "The *tragic myth* is only to be understood as a symbolisation of Dionysian wisdom through Apollonian artifices" (Nietzsche 1967, 131). Despite Nietzsche's affirmation of life, in his early work this Dionysian wisdom appears to be clearly connected with a lustful longing for death. According to Nietzsche the effectiveness of music, for instance, comes about above all as a "premonition of a highest pleasure attained through destruction and negation" (Nietzsche 1967, 126).

It is not surprising that a number of Ibsen researchers have sought out the Dionysian in the final work of the Norwegian author.⁸ At the end of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* we seem to encounter the same phenomenon that Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In her article "Livet som kunstverk" (1999) [Life as a Work of Art], Vigdis Ystad discusses Ibsen's final work in terms of Nietzsche's conception of art in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In both texts she finds the same relationship to the philosophical line of enquiry concerning art and life. According to Ystad, phenomena such as art or life are not treated as two contrasting things in the works of either author, but art is made use of as an effective means of coping with and understanding life with all its difficulties. Ystad argues that both main characters, Rubek and Irene, represent as actors the second version of Rubek's sculpture "The Day of Resurrection" in the second act of the play. And so the two land back into the phase of their life together they once had – this time, however, in the mode of art. Thanks to the power of Dionysian art, Rubek and Irene are able to see their love and their separation through a harmonising gaze. Ystad believes the drama culminates in a reconciliation between the two main characters, but only in the mode of art (i.e. in the form of Dionysian tragedy) in which both of them appear as performers. The expression of this resolution, according to Ystad, is their mutual embrace at the end of the play almost immediately before their deaths. This reconciliation between Rubek and Irene cannot, however, be realised in life. As it only lasts a moment, it remains a utopia.

⁸ Cf. Haakonsen (1981), Theoharis (1996) and Ystad (1999).

Thus Ystad argues that both characters' behaviour at the end of *When We Dead Awaken* can be analysed in terms of the Dionysian. This is expressed through Irene and Rubek in their joyous and passionate feelings in the face of a life-threatening danger, in their increased connection to each other and to their surroundings. We see this in the third act in the meeting of Irene and Rubek with the other newly formed pair, Ulfheim and Maja.

Ulfheim: [...] But can't you see the storm's right overhead! Don't you hear the wind?

Rubek: [*listens*]. It sounds like the prelude to the day of resurrection.

Ulfheim: It's the wind blowing from the mountain, man! Look at the clouds rolling up on us, and closing in. They'll soon be all round us like a winding sheet. (McFarlane 1977, 293–294)

The fact that Rubek and Irene play out the second and then the first version of Rubek's artwork seems to confirm the Dionysian way of perceiving, as Ystad suggests. It is questionable, however, whether the *origin* of the characters' feelings in *When We Dead Awaken* corresponds to Nietzsche's account. Music – as source of the emergence of tragedy – would seem to be missing in *When We Dead Awaken*. Furthermore, as the present analysis shows, the demise of Rubek and Irene is a consequence of their accepting guilt and attempting to atone for it. Hence, it is a conscious act rather than unconscious behaviour under the Dionysian influence.

We find the fascination with death not only in *When We Dead Awaken*, but also in other works by Ibsen. For instance Rosmer in *Rosmersholm* speaks of “a horrible fascination in this” when Rebecca informs him of her decision “to go the same way ... Beate went” – on the path into death (McFarlane 1994, 308). A similar fascination with death is also described by Allmers, the main character of *Little Eyolf*. During his solitary wanderings in the mountains he loses his way. It occurs to him that he may never find his way back home and could die. However, instead of a fear of death he describes his feelings of tremendous peace of mind: “I clambered along the precipitous cliffs...and enjoyed the peace and serenity that comes from the nearness of death. [...] Absolutely no fear. I felt that Death and I walked side by side like two good travelling companions” (McFarlane 1977, 101). This experience drove Allmers to make a final decision on giving his life a new direction, to give up his life's work – the book on “Human Responsibility” – and devote his life instead to raising his disabled young son, Eyolf.

Allmers: I want to bring light to bear on all the rich potential now dawning in his [Eyolf's] young mind. I want to encourage growth in all the budding ambitions he holds within himself – so that they put forth blossom and bring forth fruit. [...] I want to do more than that! I want to help him to achieve a harmonious relationship between what he desires and what lies within his reach (McFarlane 1977, 53).

In this moment Allmers' harmonious experience of the phenomenon of death can be seen as an expression of his newly gained wisdom. Allmers now understands, perhaps instinctively, that the possibility of refining humanity begins with the bringing up and education of children. A consequence of this insight is a modified view of his own life; Allmers sees the limited possibilities of his influence. Instead of thinking of himself as a "genius" who brings higher values to the world, he now sees himself as a small part of humanity with a special obligation towards his son. From now on he seems to believe that the future generations of humanity will be able to achieve harmony between ideals and possibilities. The excerpt quoted above regarding Allmers' "peace and serenity coming from the nearness of death" (McFarlane 1977, 101) are strongly reminiscent of the sentiment of the Dionysian of which Nietzsche writes. These feelings, however, may also have their origin in Allmers' belief in the power of humanity that will one day in the future be in a position to attain human ideals – in whatever form they might be. Allmers' trust in the regenerative powers of nature that stand behind human evolution seems to give him the strength to come to terms with his own death.

I understand Rubek's reunion with Irene and his long conversations with her during all three acts as, first, a painful and profound process of acceptance of his guilt and, second, as his lessons learned from it. The later words of Irene about her task in life as a woman bringing children into the world (cf. McFarlane 1977, 280) seem particularly important. Irene's judgement of herself and her values in life bears crucial meaning in the context of the play. That she served the artist, instead of bringing children into the world, "was suicide. A mortal sin against [her]self" (cf. McFarlane 1977, 280). This is the same significance of bringing up children for life in the future discussed earlier. The chance for a harmonious life seems to lie only sometime *in the future*. Only then may the gap between ideals and dispositions (urges of humanity) be closed.

If we examine Ibsen's pessimism with regard to the present and at the same time consider his hopes for the future, the longing for death of his aging, childless characters appears less disconcerting. It seems that Irene longs to discover a passionate and uncompromising man in the aging Rubek, who does not shy away from death after realising that his life and his artistic aspirations are pointless. After the two arrive at a new worldview and are prepared for its consequences (self-sacrifice), they look back on their lives with a harmonising gaze, trusting that one day in future humanity will achieve harmony between ideals and individual dispositions. This idea seems to be expressed by the rising sun at the play's end. In regard to their own lives, the pair seem to have become proud of their final ability to go the path into death when there is revealed to be no other proof of love available to them and when their individual (childless) existences prove themselves to bear no meaning.

Conclusion

This article has presented an unconventional interpretation of the work *When We Dead Awaken* by depicting Rubek's and Irene's path into death in the mountains as an act of atonement. At the centre of my analysis therefore is the motif of guilt and the possibility of redemption. Earlier, Rubek and Irene were brought together to work on a common project, the creation of the statue "The Day of Resurrection." After Irene understood that Rubek felt no deep sense of love for her, but rather only exploited her body as a means of artistic inspiration, she felt dead in the innermost part of her being. She placed the blame for this on Rubek. The motif of guilt is understood in the article as the trigger for the plot in *When We Dead Awaken*. Irene's placement of the blame on Rubek and his reaction to this is investigated. It becomes evident that Rubek is increasingly identifying with Irene's stance and he accepts his guilt towards her. Irene reacts to Rubek's confession of guilt in some passages with enthusiastic outbursts of joy and in other sections with doubt or even ridicule. She indirectly challenges Rubek for proof of his love,⁹ but at the same time emphasises that a loving relationship between the two of them is no longer possible, as the two of them are both already "dead." As for actually proving the power and passion of his love for Irene, Rubek has only one option available to him, and that is to walk into death out of love for her. In the dangerous storm he relinquishes any possibility of rescue together with Irene. She follows him on his path into death, resulting in the two of them being buried under an avalanche. It appears that Rubek's guilt is paid off in Irene's eyes at the end of the story. Irene then remains resurrected and transfigured, albeit at the price of an immediately approaching death.

In seeking the causes of the altered behaviour of the main characters immediately before their demise (i.e. especially their feeling of attraction to death), the article has outlined two possible paths that may have led to this state of mind. The first way is analysed in comparison with Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967) and Vigdis Ystad's study "Livet som kunstverk" (1999) [Life as a Work of Art]. Although Rubek's and Irene's behaviour at the end of *When We Dead Awaken* could be labelled Dionysian, to me it seems to have its origin more outside the sphere of art. I interpret Rubek's and Irene's deaths as more rational and conscious than Ystad does, as a consequence of an indirect request and of a decision. The Dionysian, as Nietzsche describes it, is said to

⁹ Irene to Rubek: "What has become of that burning desire you battled against when I stood naked before you as the woman risen from the dead?" (McFarlane 1977, 295).

have its origins in tragedy and the tragedy is furthermore said to have sprung from the effect of music. Should this be the case in *When We Dead Awaken*, then the emergence of Dionysian feelings would be more a result of a completely unconscious behaviour, which does not fit with the evidence. I have searched for other explanations for the distinctive emotions that Rubek and Irene experience at the end of the play. In doing this I have pointed out passages in *Rosmersholm* and *Little Eyolf* in which the fascination with death is spoken of. Alfred Allmers's loss of the fear of death in *Little Eyolf* seems to be very similar to the situation at the end of *When We Dead Awaken*. Alfred Allmers lost his way during his lonely wanderings in the mountains and as a result ran the risk of death by not being able to find his way back home. Despite this, he felt an unexplainable peace in his soul, so the threat of death did not seem horrible to him. What links his situation with that of Rubek and Irene is the fact that all three arrived at the view of the importance of education shortly before, which gave them clarity about their priorities in life. Allmers decided to give up his work on his book on "Human Responsibility" – his life work – so that he could devote himself even more to the upbringing and education of his disabled son. His son was meant to learn "to achieve a harmonious relationship between what he desires and what lies within his reach" (McFarlane 1977, 53). In *When We Dead Awaken*, Rubek and Irene are able to recognise at the end of their lives that Irene's unfulfilled life project (motherhood) had a much better chance of success than Rubek's intended influence on people with the help of his idealising art. It is important that both Allmers as well as Irene and Rubek eventually arrive at the view that while the attainment of a harmonious life sentiment remained inaccessible to them, it is within the reach of future generations. Rubek and Allmers see the illusionary nature of their earlier efforts. The death of the individual no longer appears gruesome to them, as they see themselves only as a *part* of humanity, in which future generations have a chance at living life without the conflict between their wills and their dispositions.

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