

Child-Sacrifice in Modern Drama:

A Survey

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TO BEGIN BY ALLUDING BRIEFLY to one observation I have long been in the habit of making about modern drama generally — if not, indeed, all of theatrical history — let me advance the claim that, except for plays in which sex and sexuality are the subjects per se (feminist drama, plays about gay experience, and the like), sex itself can be said to perform a function that is primarily *metaphorical* rather than intrinsically necessary. This is to say that playwrights in general seem to find it convenient to associate certain traits — or their lacks — with either male or female characters, regardless of their personal rhetorical positions. Thus in spite of Ibsen's determined feminism, for example, he nevertheless manages to tie femaleness in its natural state to certain virtues (the "joy of life" and suchlike notions); whereas the late Tennessee Williams seems to have created characters for whom sexual attainment was far more important than delineation into genders. The point of all this, then, is that the dramatic significance of marriage in modern theatre is apt to represent a standing tension between two dramatic forces in or out of balance, as much as (or more than) some sort of comic social reconciliation. (In *Major Barbara*, for instance, the embrace of power by a union of love and intelligence is meant to suggest the future development of a revolutionary order; England is not healed by the wedding of Barbara and Cusins, but is instead about to have her social order turned upon its head.) Marriage in modern drama, then, can be said to represent a synthesis, however tentative, of often antagonistic forces. As a gesture it solves nothing — not, at least, for the attentive theatregoer.

This brings me to the point of this paper, the focus of yet another if inevitably related generalization. It is this: that just as in traditional moral theology the purpose of marriage is defined as primarily the procreation and education of children, in drama of even the newest sort the dramatic function of childhood (or the state of being or amounting to child or offspring of whatever age) is the direct embodiment of the conflict of forces which is the marriage of mother and father. To make the claim even more deliberately sweeping — perhaps outrageously so — children are generally seen and heard in the theatre only as necessary evils. They are there because the playwright just can't do without them — even though he would very much rather do so. If we consider the practical aspects of putting a child on stage, my logic ought to become clearer. Children involve special work rules; they cannot be trusted to remember their lines; they distract the audience with their cuteness as well as their ineptitudes. No one in his or her right mind would employ a child in a play without a good reason. As Edward Albee puts it in a recent interview (in *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*, eds. Julian N. Wasserman, Joy C. Linsley, and Jerome A. Kramer [Houston: The University of St. Thomas, 1983; p. 13]), "Put a child on stage, people listen to the child. The child can't carry a message very well. . . ." True. The child cannot carry the message very well, but the child can *be* the message — sometimes tellingly, often incomparably, even when (as is more usual) not in fact literally present.

This, then, is my topic: the dramatic function of children in modern theatre, along with the frequent necessity of making a point by eliminating a particular child and all it stands for — by child-sacrifice, as it were. Nor need the child actually be present throughout the play: in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, for example, the child is not "seen" until the last chilling moments of the play, when it is carried, a corpse, on — and offstage by Tilden; and yet prior allusions have established the child's significance clearly enough by then — a significance large enough to occupy the position of source of the drama's title. In any event, children in modern drama generally — as well as older theatre — often do not truly "exist" except as a dramatization of the relationship between their parents, or between the ultimate significances of

their parents' existences. Just as the playwright is reluctant to put the child on stage in the first place, he withdraws it — destroys it — in order to make a further point, one often enough expressed in terms of the salvation of the marriage of the parents. In effect, just as though the theatre were echoing the ancient religious origins of its integrity as an art form, in the case of sacrificed children modern drama may be said to resurrect ancient rituals of sacrifice — those especially in which the innocent beginners in life are offered up to placate whatever god might then allow continuance to those older persons who by now are well along in life.

In approaching what may well be the clearest, most archetypal example of the sacrificed-child theme in modern drama, let me posit a series of plays in which the spirit of youth is associated with a bird, specifically a bird which comes to an untimely end. In Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, the protagonist's fate is foreshadowed by the brutal — if expedient — butchering of her greenfinch by Julie's servant Jean, who has just finished deflowering his mistress at her own scarcely-disguised invitation (and for a list of reasons of the author's which just about remove any element of deliberate choice from the play). Bare moments later, Julie herself is seen walking off to her own suicide, razor in hand — a victim of her attempt to cross safely through the barriers which convention has established, but also of her own parentage: she is the child of parents who agreed to exchange sexual roles, their entire state being turned topsy-turvy in the process. Lacking stable "male" and "female" presences in her upbringing, Julie's fate is sealed by her parenting — or its lack. Indeed, were Strindberg — in his eagerness to show women as the victims of their own biology, or physiology — not so careful to list as among Julie's reasons for her dangerous behaviour the fact that she is into her monthly period, one might be tempted to guess that Julie's walking off to commit suicide at play's end is also, in effect, the prevention of her conception of Jean's child. Julie is by this time, of course, only *thematically* still the "child" of what Strindberg considers the misconceived relationship of her offstage parents; yet her inability to achieve full and genuine personal integrity makes her a prime

example of a character whose final disposition is also, dramatically capable of being termed a delayed spontaneous abortion.

Arguably, another such example of child-spirit as bird — and one which, like the earlier Shepard instance, involves the title of the entire play — is Chekhov's *The Seagull*, where both Nina and Kostya take on the spirit of the casually-murdered bird, where both are victims of an older generation's meddling in their affairs (and lovers unable to see the appropriateness for each one of the other), and where the playwright of the future (whose early fumbling attempt to define that future starred his misdirected love Nina) cuts off that future by his own — successful on the second attempt — suicide, an act which as the curtain descends has not yet interrupted his prideful actress-mother's game of cards. As Julie dies to prevent her shame from becoming known — shame embodied in the child not yet actually conceived — Kostya dies as a delayed abortion brought on by the parenthood of a sterile past.

But the third play in our sequence, Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, provides the best of examples for our thesis. Its titular bird stands for just about what Chekhov's does, and again there is some dispute about just which character most merits the association with the symbol. Yet there is an actual wild duck in this play, and it is the pet of the child who herself stands on the brink of womanhood — but in whom the tensions of adolescence are still allowed to have their way, Strindberg-like — Hedvig, the supposed daughter of Hjalmar and Gina. Ibsen manages this theme of the sacrificial child brilliantly, tying it in the process to his central metaphors of light and sight. Hedvig works for her supposed father, doing much of the work — such as tinting photographs, in effect sweetening reality — he ought to be doing; at the same time, she suffers from failing vision, the apparent legacy of her actual parenting by Old Werle, her mother's former employer. Thus Hedvig is at once the victim of an inherited disease, venereal of course, and also its embodiment, her own existence a manifestation of familial shame — as well as the desire to keep the truth hidden. At the prodding of young Gregers Werle, the supposedly clear-eyed devotee of the Ideal, she agrees to sacrifice her most favoured possession — the wild duck — in order to redeem her-

self in her father's (her foster father's) eyes. Wild ducks, we are told, would rather when wounded cling to the bottom grasses and die than be profaned by a sordid reality. Hedvig shoots herself in her attic zoo, apparently convinced that only by this means can she justify — or excuse — her existence, and restore the peace of her household. At play's end, she seems to have accomplished this much — though for how long, or to what end, Ibsen leaves us in doubt. Ibsen's final irony, then, is the death of Hedvig, who by abrogating her position as futurity of the marriage of Gina and Hjalmar simultaneously restores it. Thus she "fulfils" the marriage by, in effect, negating it. In this classic example and instance, the existential present is given a dubious renewal at the specific price of future hope. A perpetual Now replaces any chance of growth or development.

In clearer-eyed, classical, tragedy, the child-sacrifice option may not exist, or not work. In *Oedipus Rex*, the attempted child-sacrifice does not prevent the obscure workings of the gods from taking place — unless it is as good as accomplished, in a manner paralleling Ibsen's workings-out, by Oedipus's eventual self-blinding (a question of which is worse?). In that morose play of Strindberg's *The Father*, the reverse happens: the child is "saved" (captured by the mother) over the father's apparently-soon-dead body. So it goes when we dam up the "natural" stream of the sacrificing of children. Shakespeare is full of interesting speculative examples, but they would mean a substantial side-tracking of this pursuit. Suffice it to note that *Richard III* is an instance of sacrificed children that leads to no substitute fathering but, in a reversal meant to please Her Tudor Majesty, a Virgin Queen with no issue. Through a related sophistication on the part of the playwright, *King Lear* aches for the issue never achieved by the union never achieved — that between Edgar and Cordelia; yet it also writhes on the mischief done by that intentional bastard Edmund. (On the subject of children-never-conceived, or "dream children" as Lamb called them, consider what Shaw accomplishes with the unstated attraction between Joan and Dunois in *St. Joan*.) To finish with Shakespeare, however, we need only look at the most famous instance of children being sacrificed to parental obstinacy and identity — and for the

eventual sake of parental reconciliations — *Romeo and Juliet*. Here again, the reversal is worked within the very frame of the children's marriage: their hopes of futurity, of parenthood, are destroyed by the same perverse statements of sexual selfhood as require their dead flesh to bring peace to their city.

In more modern times, to bring us back to the subject at hand, we have instances galore of baby-killing in behalf of some epiphany among the adults. (Consider the other arts: the baby's death in Janáček's *Jenůfa*; the effect of the sight of the actual effects of his manner of living on Alfie, in the film of that name, as he views the product of the abortion he has himself instigated — one of the almost exceptionless examples of the artistic employment of abortion for condemnatory purposes in our time. Once again, it does the adults a service, but it's damned rough on the kids.) Consider again, for yet another instance, the finale of Odets's *Awake and Sing*, where the thwarted lovers — not about to be stalled as were those unhappy marrieds in the plays of Chekhov, Odets's mentor — take off together in the play's final moments, presumably awakening and singing to their hearts' delights at the expense of yet another sacrificed — in this case abandoned — child. And in another instance of child-abandonment, we might return to Ibsen, this time to *A Doll's House* — and to its celebrated conclusion, where the slamming of the door that is supposed to usher in a new age of theatre (and with it, a new way of thinking about individual, especially female, integrity) is also the sound of Nora's dereliction of maternal duty. Of course, assertion of the self in face of that horrid abstraction "duty" is precisely Ibsen's point; and it is especially instructive to consider the irony in the situation; Nora's making her claim to adult independence, to freedom from the "doll's house" in which she has been living, by leaving her own children behind, in effect by excepting herself from the games they had been used to playing together.

Thus the sacrificed child need not be put to death; it can be *allowed* to die; be slain; be abandoned to a parentless fate; be aborted or somehow thwarted from coming into its own existence; be mutilated; or — in the current parlance of life in South America — be "disappeared." We might at this point survey a

few examples from the work of Edward Albee, himself biographically predisposed to worrying over the fate of abandoned children: of artificial orphans left to the care (or lack of it) of others. Albee makes children who never come to be — who are prevented, in other words — a core part of the drama of one marriage in *A Delicate Balance*. More interesting is what Albee manages to accomplish in *The American Dream*, where the titular character recounts for us the succession of physical/spiritual losses suffered by his alter ego, the first “bumble” adopted by Mommy and Daddy. In this case, the second “American Dream” survives as a hollow image merely, his/its reality having been sacrificed in order to preserve the lie of the marriage of the foster parents — as well as the lie of their claims on an illustory idealized future. Albee ends the play as absurdist comedy teeters on the edge of tragedy — of mock-Oedipus — as Mommy expresses patent sexual interest in the new young Dream.

Clearly, child-sacrifice is the measure of the extremity of the situation the dramatic parents find themselves in, and of the need for a radical excision of all chance for some sort of futurity for their relationship in favour of achieving reconciliation in the here and now. (Chekhov's plays show such instances in an ironic way; unable to live in the here and now, his characters' plights are confirmed by child-loss. One remembers the empty nursery in *The Cherry Orchard*, the report of the drowned son, and the scene of the strange Governess cradling — and then abruptly discarding — a pretend-baby in her arms.) To complete our discussion of Albee, we cannot avoid mentioning the extraordinary case of George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, who have mutually created a fantastic “son” whose existence hides the extent of their own personal failings, and then suffer the father's “killing” of the son in the play's final moments in order to restore, or to create for the first time, the chance of a genuinely mature marriage between the “parents.” As casually as drama can sometimes dispose of its unwanted children, it can also manage to evoke reminiscences of such models as the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham — at the behest of Abraham's God. As with Shaw's *St. Joan*, Abraham is perhaps an example of a character whose inner promptings require the cutting off of the chance of

posterity — in this case, culturally a form of suicide and a form of cultural suicide at one and the same time. If one takes the last two Albee examples to the point which is so evidently suggested by their proper names, quite interesting extrapolations about American society can be seen to emerge from the plays, and from their fractured children, their child-fragments.

As in *The American Dream*, Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* is concerned with — at least by reference — three generations of an American family. Though one play is fantastic and the other quasi-naturalistic, both manage to suggest that pioneer stock, no matter how dubious its morality and attainments, is still better than the watered-down generations yet to come. Willy Loman represents an apparent descent from the qualities associated with his father, the latter represented in the play by the bright flute tune which also accompanied Willy's excursions into the past. In a sense, Willy himself eventually becomes the sacrificial offering on the altar of his pioneer father's American dream, perhaps because he lacks the sheer rapaciousness of his brother Ben. Similarly, Willy's traits — the weaknesses for petty thievery and women which are his instinctual recourse in moments of especial stress — are split among his own offspring Biff and Happy, themselves the living sacrifices to his own futile dreaming. As in Brecht's *Mother Courage, Death of a Salesman* shows us children — grown ones at that — sacrificed to their parents' self-deceptions.

Far better, perhaps, is the plight of Brecht's heroine Shen Te, from *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, who merely imagines the child she, as prostitute, is unlikely to bear, and who suffers within herself the pain of not being able to be simultaneously stern capitalist and loving philanthropist. Far better, too, the outcome of Brecht's other theatrical "parable," *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, where the child of unworthy parents survives on the strength of the love of a serving-girl, living on as if to redeem by so doing its own unworthy heritage. But such a revolutionary happening (compare the radical realignment of familial relationships in Brecht with those of, say, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*) is rare in the drama of the past century or so which we have usually called "modern"; far more common is the sort of use of

the helpless infant as demonstration-piece that characterizes Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, where the young lovers "prove" the depth of a passion that leaps over marriage ties, and parental bonds, through the death by suffocation of their newborn infant — a death they then irradiate by accepting the punishment for. To be a child in drama is quite often to have merited, by that fact alone, a fate as expedient as the child-death in *Macbeth* but also as ruthlessly mechanical as Herod's massacre of the Innocents.

In a play which seems to anticipate Miller's consideration of the theme of self-beguilement and the death of illusions, O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* presents a young man, Parritt, whose motion towards eventual suicide is made interestingly parallel with the confession of the salesman Hickey about his too-faithful wife. Parritt, it seems, has betrayed his mother, with whom his father-figure Larry — who may in actuality be his literal father — had long had an intense involvement. Parritt's mother is identified with the "Movement" in which a younger Larry had rested his hopes for a better America. And so it goes: in order that Larry might maintain his commitment to death as the source of liberation from earthly "pipe dreams," Parritt is finally given his "father"'s permission to jump off the fire escape. It is a most peculiar bequest, especially considering Larry's own self-delusion: namely, that he is free of self-delusions. That he might maintain this notion in a life which is nominally committed to death, his "son" shall die. A similar instance of child-suffering and incipient-dying can be found in another Ibsen play, *Ghosts*, where the drama of poor Oswald's parentage — the philandering father and the dutifully long suffering mother — is enacted in the son's on-stage mental disintegration, and by his poignant asking for "the sun." And all the while his mother, whose crime in refusing to create a scandal by forsaking her erring husband is thus "married" to his sensual indulgences and their resultant transmission of venereal disease to their son, is facing the decision of whether to put the young man out of his misery or let him die "naturally" — if children in such plays can ever be said to die naturally. Or, to put it another way, it is not "natural" for children in drama

of this sort to die? They are truly born dying, born to die, slow-motion-stillborn, etc.

A couple of further examples, and we may conclude: Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* may not, on the face of things, look like apt grist for our child-murdering mill; but we must recall that Hedda herself is misbegotten (that favourite O'Neill term meant to apply to us all, and make us all by extensions of the metaphor sacrificed children of a Father), having been raised by General Gabler in the absence of a female role-model. And she is married to a man who has been raised by women! Small wonder that as he returns from her honeymoon trip apparently pregnant, her mental state is made more precarious by the need to deny the child within her (as well as her femaleness!), to insist that she is just as she always has been — virginal (if not indeed male). That unborn baby gnaws at Hedda like a cancer, and she must have it dead or die herself. Of course, she accomplishes the one by doing the other: we must remember that Hedda's suicide is also a particularly drastic sort of abortion — even more clearly the latter than what has already been suggested is the metaphorical trouble with Miss Julie. Hedda's "beautiful" death by means of what a coroner with a sense of irony might call a "profound insult to the brain" is not literally directed wombwards — and considering the weaponry employed, we might have our hands full of meanings were she to have done so — but the effect is much the same as if it had been. An extra dimension in *Hedda Gabler* is provided by the image Ibsen has his characters employ for the manuscript which Hedda's former lover Løvborg creates under the inspiration of the bland muse Thea — that of their mutual "baby." Considering the fact that Hedda was always sexually jealous of Thea, her act-closing burning of the "baby" yields yet another strange significance to our study; but when one studies the final scene, with Thea and Hedda's husband Tesman busy regenerating the baby and Hedda being ignored, unwived as it were, the moment of her death takes on even greater heightening. For the sake of a "baby," a baby is slain! And for the sake of a "marriage," a marriage as well.

Such relatively crude usage of children on the modern stage must remind us of such related refusals to consider children for

what they are as the style of portrait-painting of the seventeenth century, for example, in which, as often noted, children are portrayed as miniature adults — rather as if the artists had never noticed the difference between immature and mature human beings, or even looked at them. Yet something rather other is going on on the modern stage, for by “crude” I mean naked and explicit — even though an unborn child such as Hedda’s, for example, exists for the audience largely in the mind — if more significantly than Tesman’s Aunt Rina (who lives, off-stage, merely to die, and thus gets everyone into mourning clothes for the final act). As we approach our final extended example, we might remember that the dramatic children we are dealing with, even when they appear onstage, are neither to be seen nor heard — in effect, for the most part.

In preparing a volume of drama criticism called *The Onstage Christ* (London: Vision, 1980) a few years ago, I devoted a chapter out of a series devoted to Christ-figures on the modern stage to the Jimmy Porter who is John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*’s protagonist. I found fascinating the playwright’s allowing of his character to set himself up as a kind of lay suffering Jesus, the writer’s seldom if ever tipping his hand as to what he thought about all this posturing, which involves considerable apparent self-pity. But Jimmy Porter’s limitations as a Christ-figure are compounded by the fact that he explicitly asks of his wife Alison, as Act I comes to a close, that she learn through suffering what it is to be fully alive: specifically, that she bear a child and then lose it. Through Osborne’s manipulation of exposition, Jimmy does not know that Alison is in fact pregnant with his child: that the womb he points at, claiming it contains *him*, in fact contains his developing child. So that when Alison returns at the end of the play having gone through just the sort of treatment this doctor has ordered up for her, we are apparently meant to think that a better sort of marriage is about to emerge from the jungle of their relationship (though critics have argued about just how hopeful the ending is, or can be taken to be). Thus another marriage is “redeemed” by yet another sacrificed child; the true Jesus of this relationship, its actual Christ, is scarcely noticed passing by on its way to death. The modern theatre has gone the

ancient platitude about having children in order to save the marriage one better, by suggesting that by ridding yourself of your sometimes troublesome offspring, you can preserve the harmony of opposites which, when embodied, prove too dramatically explosive: fissional.

What I find most relevant to my book's thesis that the modern theatre of the West, as if echoing its origins in the rituals of "obsolete" religions, continues to demand that individuals play the "Christ" role onstage, is that so many of the plays we have been dealing with consider children the expendable detritus of adult relationships. Many such children do not in fact appear onstage (if they exist at all), nor are their passings always noted more than those of animals slain in traffic; yet their effect as characters is to make the audience take on the role of God of Order approving or disapproving the sacrificial act (that God whom Northrop Frye has recently observed to be inordinately fond of the savour of smoked meats). It is as if this forcing of the audience towards some sort of divine and judgmental afflatus were the ultimate dramatic point of all this child-sacrifice.

Consider, quickly, these final, other, and most disparate examples. Luigi Pirandello presents the questioned (did they really happen?) deaths of children that bring *Six Characters in Search of an Author* to a close as a means of proving the cyclical validity of the characters' perpetual "living" tragedies—a child-holocaust in the name of theories about the theatre, but one which also represents the "natural" results of the tensions of the marriages from which these children have sprung. Thornton Wilder presents the superficially sentimental but aesthetically ruthless *Our Town* courtship, wedding, and post-mortem revisitation of an Emily who, in reviewing her childhood, seems to exist not so much as to marry as to save Marriage. Edward Bond presents in *Saved* a Lem and Pat and Fred who—in a world of gratuitous violence that makes of their tripartite parenthood a spectacularly pre-Christian (death of fornication's product—not the fornicators—by stoning)—seem scarcely poised on the edge of any sort of hopeful state by the play's ambiguous ending scene; in this case, the imagined baby (imagined, that is to say, in the agony of its dying by the horrified audience) would seem to have been an

arbitrary sacrifice demanded by some cruel god of mindless violence.

Such disparities lead us inevitably to aesthetic conclusions which are intrinsically bound up with moral ones. For if the modern stage be, in effect, a sacrificial altar upon which children are regularly put to death to satisfy our senses of completion — of theatrical fullness — then surely we are also confessing something about our system of human values that requires further inquiry. It is one thing to speak of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children, after all, and yet another to treat the children as if they *were* in fact their fathers' sins. Of course, there may be compellingly valid aesthetic reasons for dealing blithely with the off-stage futures of creatures who — given the theatre's existential Now of two or three hours' playing time — will never achieve full personhood anyway, or at least free themselves from the presences in them of their parents, or their parenting. But shall we not also demand of the theatre that it help increase our sensitivity to the plight of those uncounted Lebanese and Cambodian children who have, while we have been thus occupied, been put to death, and without drama, in this world that often seems a Herod's kingdom, a Macbeth's.