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Power Struggle in August Strindberg's *The Father:* A Foucauldian Analysis

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Abstract

The bulk of critical works on August Strindberg's The Father use biographical material and Strindberg's misogyny to assert the struggle between the sexes in The Captain's tragic victimization by his domineering wife, Laura, while a few other works have presented the play as a dramaturgy of struggle for power between an aristocratic man and his bourgeoisie wife. Following Foucault's approach on power, this paper argues that although both Laura and The Captain actively participate in exercising power using discourses and knowledge, it is ultimately Laura's manipulation of these two strategies along with allegation of insanity that give her the upper hand and guarantee her ascension to sovereignty in the household.

Keywords: Knowledge, discourses, power, madness, legal, economic

Introduction

Onto the stage in his own home he makes his first appearance—haughty and ingenious—only to be led out in a straitjacket in the span of three acts, stripped of power by his wife, Laura. It is The Captain in August Strindberg's masterpiece, *The Father*. Published in 1884, the play is centered on the discord emanating from the course that Bertha, the daughter, is to take for her future career. In the aftermath of this, and exacerbated by earlier debates about domestic and monetary issues, the household turns to a sort of battlefield.

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In fact, the play has sparked much controversy and set aflame contention between two camps of critics concerning the innocence of the male protagonist. Resting preeminently on the foundation of Strindberg's contempt towards emancipated women and, in the words of K.M. Newton (2008), his antagonism towards Henrik Ibsen "whom he called 'the Norwegian blue stocky' and accused of supporting the feminist cause" (p.111), the majority of critics champion The Captain as a sinless man of science subdued by his diabolical wife, Laura. This again is ascertained by correspondence between Frederick Nietszche and Strindberg, where the former hailed the play for its portrayal of women and presentation of love "with war as its means and the deathly hatred of the sexes as its fundamental law . . . expressed in such a splendid fashion" (cited in Brustein, 1991, p. 101). Against this stream goes the reading of The Captain's conduct as that of an arrogant aristocrat whose strife to vindicate his power in the household fails as Laura wreaks havoc in his attempts.

Both of these readings, however, leave open a gap regarding the means used by The Captain and Laura to keep firm grip on power position. This paper will therefore explore the ways Foucauldian power, knowledge, discourses and madness play role in this hideous war to attain dominance.

Review of Literature

The early critical works on August Strindberg's *The Father* have predominantly regarded it as the tragedy of The Captain who has been ruthlessly victimized by his domineering male-like wife, Laura, thus reflecting the playwright's own misogyny—a trait so notoriously known about Strindberg. Nonetheless, more recent investigation of the play has shifted to classifying the action in *The Father* as dramaturgy of socio-political struggle running on domestic level between decaying aristocracy, represented by The Captain, on one hand and aspiring bourgeoisie, enacted by Laura, on the other.

Primarily, the critics' tendency to read *The Father* in light of the battle of the sexes is biography- based and female- antagonistic. Of the influential works adopting this approach is Robert Brustein's *The Theatre of Revolt* (1991). Brustein is so overt concerning the intermingling of Strindberg's life and works that he claims that the Swedish dramatist's "misogyny" (p.97) and "struggle in . . . mind between the male and female" play a decisive role in the pathway that his career takes (p.99). Thus, Brustein is adamant about The Captain representing Strindberg himself, for he maintains that "Strindberg's identification with his central characters is so explicit that it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the author or the character is speaking" (p.104). Due to this, the play is seen as incarnation of Strindberg's enmity towards the feminine sex. This male-female war is adopted by Karlsson (2009), who sees Laura as "femme fatale" (p.10) and considers the play a ground for "vengeance"

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by the "supposedly weaker sex" (p.9). The case being so, Laura has often been offered to the audience as incarnation of evil—the counterpart of the devil. Emulating this, Brustein (1991) states that *The Father* is an "object lesson to sanguine husbands, urging them to revolt against their domineering wives" (p.107). This, again, owes much to biographical material expounding Strindberg's failing marital experience, particularly with his wife, Siri Von Essen. It is fundamentally because of such an approach that Newton (2008) describes Laura as "a manipulative schemer determined to destroy her husband" (p. 111). Brustein (1991) also sees The Captain as a "victim" who falls to Laura's "treachery", adding that the play draws lines "between intellectual freethinking men and irrational superstitious malevolent women" (p.110) whose actions match the term "quackery" (p.109). Stressing The Captain's innocence, Brustein states that "he is . . . persecuted—not only by Laura but by every woman in the house" (p.110). Consequently, he categorizes the play as "the tragedy of a freethinker" and a "Romantic" (p.107). Nevertheless, such biography-founded, male-biased interpretation fails to see that it is not only Laura who is trying to manipulate, but also The Captain himself is a dictator trying to subjugate his wife and assert his absolute power, and that both of them are exercising power.

In accordance with the aforementioned gap, one can see a divergence in reading of *The Father* presented by Krasner (2012), who integrates politics by pointing out that Strindberg's plays dramatize "the decay of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie" (p.37). Interestingly, Krasner (2012) sees The Captain himself as having hand in his own destruction due to his obstinate persistence to secure a position of "royalty" where "monarchy" has in fact ended. Hence, Krasner locates The Captain's fall under the category of an "aristocrat's disintegration" (p.86), which is obviously far from acquitting this military figure. Likewise, Szlaczer (2011), states that *The Father* dramatizes "a shift in the societal power structure represented by the late nineteenth century bourgeoisie" (p.72). It is precisely this that motivates Krasner (2012) to regard The Captain's "breakdown" not as an outcome of Laura's witchcraft or Satanic manipulation, but rather as output processed by several agents altogether, of which he cites The Captain's "faith in strict codes of moral conduct" and "patriarchy" (p.88). Therefore, it is not only Laura who seeks power and victimizes The Captain. Rather, The Captain's own attempt at positioning himself as the rightful one to control Bertha, his daughter, has in fact been a point that incriminates him. Similarly, Fahlgren (2009) notes that the play dramatizes "fight about power . . . to define the laws of society and control financial matters" (p.26). Subsequently, Fahlgren reads Laura's actions as resembling those of her husband's in using the same tools "to exercise power" (p.27). However, such approaches of the play still fall short of exploring the ways through which the protagonists exercise this power.

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To wrap up, various analyses have limited *The Father* within the boundaries of an innocent male victimized by his monstrous wife, whilst other critical works propound the viability of investigating the play from socio-political perspective of exercising power between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Despite that, there seems to be a deficit of clues as to the means manipulated by the two characters to exercise power and secure sovereignty. In so far as this is true, the paper at hand will attempt to investigate these means, which seem to match Michel Foucault's concepts of power, knowledge, discourses and madness.

Methodology

Inasmuch as *The Father* seems a platform for exercising power between the Captain and Laura, this paper will rely on Michel Foucault's concepts of power, knowledge, discourses, and madness in the nineteenth century in order to examine Laura's success at goading the Captain to insanity, thus ascending the social ladder as a bourgeoisie.

A fervid advocate of human freedom, the French historian, philosopher and literary critic, Michel Foucault is regarded as one of the most influential figures in literary theory. Investigating historical material in a variety of books, Foucault has attempted to study the relationship between power, knowledge and insanity. Bressler (2011) presents the Foucauldian notion that history is a form of power. In fact, Foucault has done extensive studies on this latter notion. One of his main arguments in *Power/Knowledge* is of power being a "right" that can be owned, transferred or even usurped "through a legal act or through some act that establishes a right" (Foucault, 1980, p.88). In the course of *The Father*, and conspicuously so, both the Captain and Laura compete to have the upper hand at a legal right to control their daughter, Bertha. The Captain boasts of his legal right, and Laura attempts to reach at a point where she can strip him of this right through proving him insane.

Furthermore, in *Power/Knowledge,* Foucault presents arching concepts in direct connection with exercising power. Cuddon (2013) postulates that, according to Foucault, "knowledge and power are joined together through discourse" (p.556), so one is apt to observe a symbiotic relationship overlapping power, knowledge and discourse. By definition, Guerin et al. (2005) affirm that discourses are "accepted ways of thinking, writing, and speaking – and practices that embody, exercise, and amount to power" (p. 276). In fact, throughout the play, ownership of knowledge shifts from The Captain to Laura. Consequently, the use of dominant discourses transfers from the husband to his wife, resulting in the change of the person in whose hands power resides.

Concomitantly, Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* contends that, historically, power is not an independent entity, for its "raison d'être . . . is to

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be found in the economy" (p.89). As such, power struggle according to Foucault is initiated so as to safeguard an individual's economic interest. The moment the latter clashes with another person's economic goals, individuals start a war. Taking this into account is a must since the dialectic of power between The Captain and Laura in *The Father* rests on economic roots, essentially due to who the breadwinner in the house is and how to run the money in the domestic circle.

Many a time, however, the alliance of discourses and knowledge may not suffice to subdue an opponent. This is precisely where Foucault's work on madness intertwines—particularly his historical investigation in *Madness and Civilization*. Whilst Foucault (1988) asserts that the allegation of madness has ever and anon been adopted to "exclude . . . those whose transgressions risk compromising the social order" (269), he further notes that, at the end of the eighteenth century, the family "played a decisive part" to distinguish between "madness and reason" (p.253). This whole network matches the action in *The Father* at once as Laura manipulates her right to judge the Captain's unreason, thus estranging him in his own house.

Foucault also specifies the generics against which modern insanity is categorized. In *History of Madness*, he states that insanity "expresses itself visibly through signs such as error, fantasy, illusion, and vain language devoid of meaningful content" (p.173). This remarkably befits the Captain's behavior in the second act of the play. Harmonizing with the means used by the bourgeoisie to ascend to power, Foucault also argues that madness is the "paradoxical condition of the continuation of the bourgeoisie order" (p.379). Hence, the juxtaposition between disorder (the mad) and order (the bourgeoisie), guarantees the survival of the bourgeois, quite a conspicuous stratagem embraced by Laura to overthrow her aristocratic husband.

In a nutshell, power—enacted at the levels of knowledge, discourses and alleged madness—appears as an active player in the realm of *The Father*. Through exquisitely manipulating all these apparatuses, Laura does finally secure the sovereignty position she has aspired to as a bourgeois, a pivotal claim in the framework of Foucault's approach.

Discussion and Analysis

Expounding Foucault's notion of power, Sara Mills (2003) states that it is a performed strategy, and that power relations may exist in "family relations" (p. 35). In *The Father*, these power relations are exercised by both Laura and The Captain, as evident when the former asks, "What has all this life and death struggle been about except power?" (Strindberg, 1958, p. 56). Clearly then, this exercise of power is maintained by the ownership of knowledge, and there is shift of power positions between The Captain and Laura pertaining to acquisition or loss of knowledge. The shift in knowledge

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per se, as the play demonstrates, necessitates the shift in using dominant discourses from The Captain to Laura to assert power, yet it is by substantiating The Captain's insanity that the bourgeoisie Laura ends up victorious.

To begin with, in her "Theosophy as Catalyst: Strindberg's Theater of the Self and Other", Szalczer (2011) contends that knowledge is the medium through which The Captain exercises power, for he "[represents] institutionalized power based on knowledge" (p.113). The Captain is evidently the powerful figure at the opening of the play, emerging on the stage as a personage highly aware of his legal privilege—being the ruler of the household. This status, he is totally cognizant, is guaranteed by the Napoleonic Code, which, Blanc-Jouvan (2004) affirms, came into light in 1804 (p.1) and was the established code of law in the whole of Europe for a long time. At this point in the play, The Captain tells Laura that she is at disadvantage concerning the educational course their daughter, Bertha, will take. As a result, he informs Laura that "[b]y law [a woman] surrenders all her rights and possessions to her husband" (Strindberg, 1958, p. 32). Such a standpoint harmonizes with Foucault's analysis noted in *Power/Knowledge* that the "legal codes of Europe" begin "with the Napoleonic Code" (p.105). This preliminary position of power is fostered by a different kind of knowledge—the scientific. In fact, being a scientist himself, The Captain realizes his supreme rank, and this sees its outcome in subjugating others, for he "wanted to redeem [his honor] by some noble action—some achievement, some discovery", so he "immersed [himself] in science" (p.59). With the progress of action, however, he starts to lose grip on knowledge, and his power undergoes a process of undermining. Basically, addressing Laura when he turns skeptical regarding the fact of his being Bertha's father, he anticipates his own downfall by accusing Laura that she has "gnawed and gnawed at [his will] so that soon it will slip its cogs and then the whole works will whirr to a standstill" (p. 54). In just a few pages, he admits his defeat and begs for mercy by saying, "I implore you, as a wounded man begs for the death-blow—tell me everything" (p. 57). Therefore, the deficit of knowledge concerning his fatherhood seems to have paved the way for his being overthrown by his wife.

With Laura, the case is the reverse of The Captain's. She is apparently the subjugated at the starting point of the play. However, Szalczer (2011) maintains that she gradually gains "strength through the appropriation of knowledge" (p. 113). In accordance, Laura exercises power so that she ultimately appears as the one in control. While she is subordinate to The Captain at first due to lack of awareness concerning the means by which she may use power, she proceeds to exploit forms of knowledge she acquires further on. First, upon realizing that no man can be sure concerning who the father of his own child is, she manipulates this knowledge to drag The Captain

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to an inferior position by pouring the henbane of doubt into his ears. Besides, Laura succeeds at gathering information about her husband's scientific attempts and his obsession in reading to twist facts. This she uses in order to persuade The Doctor that the ventures of The Captain are fantastical and subsequently shift power to be her own. Particularly, Laura describes to The Doctor the "whole crates of books" that her husband buys but "never reads". She also refers to The Captain's attempt to look at other planets using a "microscope" (Strindberg, 1958, p. 35). Ultimately, it appears that her knowledge concerning symptoms of insanity and how they may be evoked in a patient gives her the upper hand. Indeed, Laura elicits this information from The Doctor who asks her to "avoid bringing up any topic that is likely to affect the patient strongly" because it "may easily turn to obsessions or monomania" (p. 36). When she knows of him that "an insane person loses his civil and family rights" (p. 46), the means to subjugate becomes accessible to Laura, assisting her to drive The Captain to insanity and to drain his power.

This alternating ownership of knowledge serves as stepping stone to the shifting use of dominant discourses between the protagonists in an attempt to subdue one another. Cuddon (2013) expounds the relationship between power and knowledge by stating that "knowledge gives one power to make valid or invalid truth claims about specific 'subjects' as well as to control what can be said about them" (p. 556). Mills (2003) further argues that discourse refers to "all statements, the rules whereby those statements are formed and the processes whereby those statements are circulated and other statements are excluded" (p. 62). Thus, these discourses, quite evidently employed in *The Father*, are mainly apparent through exploiting terms in various disciplines and using forceful language along with a few acts and practices that The Captain and Laura manipulate.

It is The Captain who commences this manipulation of discourses. He proceeds to make use of sensual and visual discourses even as the play is just opening. The audience is at once aware of his show of power, where he displays military items in the domestic sphere. In *The Father*, the audience first notice the weapon on the wall and the hanger with the Captain's uniform. The Captain is also aware of legal discourses of the time, particularly on the level of the family, where he refers to the Napoleonic Code that regards the father as the head in the domestic sphere. This is particularly why he thinks highly of his position as he says "I'll have no one – woman or child – encroaching on my rights" (Strindberg, 1958, p. 42). Such a position is reminiscent of the description of The Captain as a "bully" (Krasner, 2012, p.89). In keeping with this, The Captain employs economic discourses by stating that "[o]nce you've sold your goods, you can't expect to have them back *and* keep the money" (Strindberg, 1985, p. 32). With the Captain, scientific discourses play an active role as well. Through this, he appears to

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control both Laura and Bertha. To illustrate, one may note his reference to medical and psychological discourses, for he contends while addressing The Pastor, Laura's brother, that "she sometimes flies into such a rage that I'm really afraid she might be ill" (p. 28). Moreover, The Captain relies on his mathematical awareness to secure a position of control about where Bertha should live, so he tells Laura that a compromise between them would mathematically mean that she stayed at the railway station, half-way between the two different places chosen by the father and the mother.

All the while that he manipulates such discourses, The Captain safeguards his rank through forceful words and rhetorical language, albeit with skill less than Laura's. For instance, he is sarcastic towards Laura, as the previous example illustrates. In addition, his use of a simile about the women in the house to describe his plight to The Pastor is a means to win Laura's brother over to his camp, for he says "It's like going into a cage full of tigers" (Strindberg, 1985, p.27). More obviously, his use of the words "enemy" (p. 39), "ignorant" and "conceited" (p. 43) to categorize Laura and the women supporting her is conducive to positioning himself as the one in need for help so as to remain in power. Therefore, throughout the play, The Captain is actively involved in the race for power; he is by far guilty for participating in the struggle to control Bertha's future.

Even as the case is so with the male protagonist, it is Laura who asserts her power by noticeably exquisite manipulation of the same discourses her husband uses. Herself apparently at legal disadvantage, Laura gradually uses legal discourses to communicate her acquisition of a higher power position. Particularly, she tells The Captain that if Bertha were proved not to be his daughter, he would "have no more rights" (p. 43). Conspicuously, she confirms her ascension to power by legally referring to The Captain's confession to The Doctor that he is insane, so he is no more entitled to rule the household as the "breadwinner" (p. 60). Again, she dominates the scene as she speaks of her knowledge on the economic and military levels: "I've sent a message to the Colonel, and now I'm trying to look into the household accounts" (p. 62). Nevertheless, it is through medical discourses that Laura's ascension to power is harvested. Conversing with The Doctor, she uses terms that confirm her position, for she states of her husband that "his mind wandered", "he has such wild fancies", and that they have to stop any further "outbreaks" of his (p. 47).

Added to that, the audience notices the discursive aspect that Laura's behavior and speech entail. For instance, her skill at maneuvering stands out while pretending that she sympathizes with her husband's case, for, in Act 1, she takes out her handkerchief to suggest that she is crying. This way she may sway The Doctor to her side. The same applies to her pretension of crying in Act 2, as The Doctor recognizes that The Captain is starting to be violent.

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It remains that Laura is, in terms of language, more capable of manipulating others. Thus, she bears as arms the strategy of insinuating, by which The Captain is challenged and becomes "vulnerable" (Fahlgren, 2009, p. 28). Hence, she succeeds at exacerbating her husband's psychological deterioration by hinting at the possibility of her being "unfaithful" (Strindberg, 1985, p. 33). Likewise, while conversing with The Captain, she argues concerning responsibility and deploys the stratagem of positioning, using such dynamic words as "ridiculous" to categorize her husband's actions of frenzy and the term "superior enemy" (p. 44) to describe herself. The case being so, she asserts to him that she is the one in power. Furthermore, she is aware that hiding facts or omitting details during conversations – a stratagem Mills (2003) calls "exclusion" – is quite important in discourse so as to control addressees (p. 54). That is essentially why, in Act 1, she hides from The Doctor the fact of her husband being in the house so as to have time to talk with the former and attract him to her own camp. Besides, Laura experiments with irony in her retorts against The Captain as means of showing her own superiority, for she calls him and her brother "my lords" (p. 31), with the intention of challenging her husband's so-called superiority. Compounding this strategy is the female protagonist's effective use of rhetorical questions to earn other characters' support – precisely that of The Doctor's – where she asks, "Then is it reasonable for a man to see through a microscope what's happening on another planet?" (p. 35). In the same context, she relies on repetition of the word "microscope" (Strindberg, 1.35), for example, as means of hinting at The Captain's divergence from reason and the subsequently descent from power. It is through the aforementioned discursive practices that Laura's rise from an earlier position of an inferior bourgeoisie against her aristocratic husband is validated.

Be it as it may, Laura ensures her ascension by winning the whole household to her side and having them coerce with her to subdue The Captain. Consequently, she is fain to annihilate this enemy by adopting a quintessential scheme that Foucault attributes to the bourgeoisie— allegation of madness. Foucault (1988) notes that such a strategy was used by the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century to get rid of the undesirables, "those whose transgressions risk compromising the social order" (p. 269). Thus, through her insinuations and discourses, Laura manages to call to the foreground some symptoms of madness identified by Foucault. First, she speaks to The Doctor of her husband's "mania" (Strindberg, 1985, p. 35) and his "most extraordinary fancy" (p. 47). There also appears persistent plunging into paranoia in The Captain's treatment of Laura and other characters, including all the women in the house, and even The Doctor himself, whom he calls a "telephone, relaying all [the women's] chatter" (p. 66). In fact, Laura herself provokes him to be suspicious by her insinuations. Gradually, she goads him to violence as he

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hurls a lamp at her at the end of Act Two. This condition aggravates as he, talking to Bertha, explodes to frenzy and describes himself as an animal, for he says, "I'm a cannibal, and I want to eat you" (p. 69). Then, he takes a revolver, which is an indication of turning uncontrollably inclined to murder. Foucault (2006) refers to this in *History of Madness,* where he shows how "madness is demonstrated in violence, wild gestures, and occasionally murderous acts" (p. 525). Inasmuch as The Captain fits into this category, Laura ultimately justifies that he is insane and earns the approval of The Doctor so as to lead him to an asylum, which Foucault categorizes in *Madness and Civilization* as a place that "eliminates irregularities" (p.258). Only then does Laura proclaim her sovereignty as being legally entitled to control Bertha. Exhilarated, she addresses the young lady, "My child—my own child!" (Strindberg, 1985, p. 74)

Conclusion

Thus adopting Foucauldian analysis, the discussion has shown that none of the two protagonists in *The Father* is innocent as concerns power struggle. Both The Captain and Laura enact a cross-exercise of power that manipulates knowledge and discourses as demonstrated by Foucault. This struggle ends with the triumph of the woman who manipulates the two apparatuses more skillfully and aggravates The Captain's psychological degeneration. It has also been shown in the course of the discussion that Laura's ability to confirm The Captain's insanity befits the Foucauldian interpretation of madness as a means of exclusion of those not desired by the society. Inevitably, then, the paper has proven, based on Foucault's principles, the Laura has succeeded at ascension to power by gaining the upper hand at discourses, knowledge, and madness. The action thus dramatized, the curtain is ultimately drawn on the overthrowing of an aristocrat by allegation of madness, and the crowning of the bourgeoisie as domestic sovereign.

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