Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree programme

in Environmental
Humanities

Final Thesis

Corrupted Nonhumans

An Ecocritical Reading of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken*.

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Academic Year
2024 / 2025

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1.Introduction

I believe that if human beings, from the very beginning, had accustomed themselves to a life at sea – in the sea perhaps – then we'd have been rather more highly developed than we are. Both better and happier.
Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea*

I encountered Ibsen several years ago while reading *Et dukkehjem (1879, A Doll's House).*

I felt completely empowered by Nora's final choice, as if I too had been freed from those four oppressive walls. Later on I went to the theatre but was disappointed because I was not convinced by the adaptation I saw. I told myself that I would have preferred the director not to have altered the text and to have kept the play as faithful as possible to Ibsen's words. I was convinced that the play was so powerful that it did not need any changes because the risk of losing something would have been high. Now I find myself on the other side, deliberately reinterpreting Ibsen's masterpieces and exploring themes, such as nature, that I had never considered when reading his plays. In fact, if you look at the author's artistic production, the themes that emerge the most are criticism of bourgeois society, the constraints of social norms, social expectations, the role of women, the disruption of the past on the present, the search for truth, the struggle between science and religion, and between the individual and society. Another reason why it is not immediately obvious to link Ibsen to themes related to human-nature interaction is because this author is an exponent of the bourgeois Naturalistic theatre, which means that most of his plays are set inside the protagonists' homes, leaving apparently little room for the outside world. But it is precisely thanks to these discourses that Ibsen's reflections are still so relevant today, making his ecocritical reading particularly interesting for contemporary criticism and for my study.

Reading about Ibsen's duck in *Vildanden*, (1884, *The Wild Duck*)*,* the sea in *Fruen fra havet* (*1888, The Lady from the Sea*) and the mountains in *Når vi døde vågner* (*1899, When We Dead Awaken*) struck me with the same power as Nora did, without me needing to read between the lines or search

for hidden meanings. What impressed me so powerfully was nature, as if it were the protagonist of all three plays. On my part, there was a desire to listen to it and a need to give those non-human animals a voice through my reading. To provide them with a voice because the vast majority of non-human elements included by the author are loaded with metaphorical meaning aiming to communicate something “else” to the reader. I would like to clarify that by the term non-humans I am not referring only to non-human animals but also to natural elements, thus using it as a broader concept to refer to everything that has life, belongs to the natural world but is not human.

This need to raise their voices stemmed from a question: “Can literature be a place for animal liberation or is it another cage?”[1] I realised that in all my years of literary studies, I had never asked myself this question, but I had also never read a text focusing only on nature and animals. In other art forms, I had always allowed myself to be captivated only by non-human characters, but never in this art made of words. It wasn’t because I lacked imagination, but because I saw the descriptions of the natural environment and of animals, that interrupted dialogues and action, as flat and useless. These were the spaces of nature, yet I always overlooked them.

On the other hand, when reading a play where descriptions are kept to a minimum and nature is only mentioned in the dialogues and in the captions, for examples those at the beginning of acts describing the scene, the latter prevail for me.[2] The attention that non-humans demand within the theatrical sphere is unusual compared to that in other literary forms. I believe it is primarily a question of presence, that is, precisely because non-human elements are less frequent and almost unusual in plays, they capture the reader’s attention, who, when faced with an Ibsenian production, expects a family drama within the four walls where nature hardly finds space. The reader is first surprised and then

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[1] This question was central in the course: *Humans, the natural environment and the animal other in Scandinavian literature*, Professor Sara Culeddu, 2024/2025. During the course, this question was posed to stimulate reflection on certain Scandinavian literary works that were analysed in class.

[2] I would like to clarify that the analysis of these dramas is based on my experience as a reader, so the study of the three plays is literary. There has been no analysis of the theatrical performances of the three plays. For this reason, the observations on the presence of nature are always based on Ibsen’s choices, not those of the directors who staged the plays. I believe it is important to clarify this aspect in order to understand the intended work.

empathises with these elements, noting that most of the time they appear to be exploited by humans. This is what happened to me when I encountered the duck in *The Wild Duck* and the carps in *The Lady from the Sea*. The connection I felt with Ibsen's non-human animals is motivated by one of the founding values of my "ecosophy": recognising the value of all lives by opposing speciesism and cherishing the oppressed categories of non-humans.

I chose not to focus on a single work precisely because I wanted to understand whether the subordination of nature that I found in *The Wild Duck*, the play that started and inspired my overall analysis, was a constant in Ibsen's thinking and how it translated into different plays written several years apart.

The decision to focus on Ibsen was mostly a heartfelt one. From the first time I encountered this author during my Scandinavian Literature course until today in this Environmental Humanities programme, I have never abandoned the idea of devoting myself to in-depth research on Ibsen. Through this master's degree, I understood the form I would give to this analysis, and thanks to Prof. Culeddu's course, I defined my goal. So, although choosing this author was easy for me, I cannot say the same about selecting the plays.

For a long time, I was convinced that my analysis should start with *Brand* (1866), where nature is the absolute protagonist. The unforgiving mountains and the symbolism of the goat gave me lots to reflect on: the theme of innocence and animal sacrifice set against a framework of blind human fundamentalism, humans who feel entitled to dominate and conquer nature for their own ends, and finally the cold natural environment as a mirror of Brand's life. But in the end, I feared that the work might dialogue less intensely with the other plays because of the type of writing and the style of the dialogues.

The trolls in *Peer Gynt* (1867) fascinated me because they were the first semi-humans I encountered and fully represented the idea of an "animality" conferred for the purpose of brutalising. It would have been an interesting meeting point between human and subhuman, where the definition and distinction of the two categories could have led to a deeper exploration of the concept of evolutionism

as a transition from a beastly state to a human one. However, for reasons similar to those of *Brand*, I preferred not to focus on this play.

Hedda Gabler (1890), despite having far fewer natural elements and animals than the other plays, intrigued me because of the different animalisations of Hedda and Thea: the cage in which Hedda lives is a place where poisonous animals are locked up, but it is also the home of a woman who cannot fly, and her subtle animalisation is a way of portraying her as a predatory woman. But according to my initial analysis, inserting this play after reading *The Wild Duck* would not have led to growing tension between humans and non-humans.

The white horse in *Rosmersholm* (1886) caused me a lot of hesitation because, until the very end, I was convinced that I would add this work to the overall analysis. The amount of meaning conveyed by this horse is, I believe, comparable to that of the wild duck in the homonymous play, between the past, purity, premonition and the bourgeoisie. It is definitely overloaded. What caught my attention was its absence in the play, or rather how the horse is so much exploited as a symbol but is never given the slightest space outside of Rebekka's concerns.

In the end, I did not choose the above-mentioned works because they did not fit into the crescendo that I've observed with the other selected plays: *The Wild Duck, The Lady from the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken.* These three plays are not only works that, taken individually, have great potential for an ecocritical and nonhuman-centred analysis, but they are also perfectly capable of dialoguing with each other and complementing each other. Nature appears in the first play as relegated, confined to a small space and almost alienated, it is then transformed into a nature that is a constant and entrapping presence in the second play, until it becomes a decisive element in the last one. Humans' belief that they can control it collapses one play after another. What links the three works is also a constant upward tension, which is characterised differently in each play: for the Ekdals' family in *The Wild Duck*, the high of the sky represents the escape from the watery depths and the attainment of truth; for Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea*, the heights represent distancing herself from the sea and accepting life on dry land; for Rubek and Irene in *When We Dead Awaken*, the heights represent the glories of

the world and the perfection of their art. Even the settings designed by Ibsen show a growing presence of nature, that becomes increasingly prominent, as if his own thinking had matured over the years in search of unravelling the enigma that characterises nature, which he mentions in a letter written to Professor Lochmann in 1888.

> Men intet af de resultater, videnskaben hidtil synes at være kommen til, har kunnet tilfredsstille mig. Jeg har derfor dannet mig min egen personlige og uafhængige naturanskuelse. Jeg tror at både teologerne og naturforskerne stikker dybt i ensidighed. "Naturen" er ikke noget så materielt, som mange synes at ville gøre den til. Men *hvad* der stikker bagved, – det er den store gåde, den foreløbige hemmelighed. (Ibsen 1888)[3]
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> However, none of the conclusions that science seems to have reached so far have been able to satisfy me. I have therefore formulated my own personal and independent view of nature. I believe that both theologians and natural scientists are deeply entrenched in their one-sidedness. "Nature" is not something as material as many people seem to want to make it out to be. But what lies behind it – that is the great mystery, the provisional secret. (my translation)

Here, Ibsen shared his scepticism about the scientific classification of the time, which saw nature as purely material, as Ibsen was convinced that behind it lay something secret, an enigma, which truly characterised it. Through the symbolism of his works, which he rarely explained to those who asked for further details, he sought to investigate the concept of nature and define his own personal and independent idea of it.

The Wild Duck is probably one of the author's most discussed works, together with *A Doll's House*, and is so full of symbolism that the reader can almost feel overwhelmed. This work is the first one I chose because I was familiar with it from my previous studies, and it was the first one that resonated with me when thinking about a possible analysis of the human-animal relationship. It is my starting point and my constant in the analysis of the other two works, as the reference is always alive in these as well.

The Lady from the Sea requires, in my opinion, a great deal of patience in not rushing to judgement on first reading. Behaviours, motivations, words and choices seem to take on ever-changing nuances, to the point of contradicting each other, and it is difficult to determine whether nature and the sea win

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[3] https://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1880-1889ht%7CB18880517EFL.xhtml

in the end. That is, whether Ellida's final decision to stay with Wangel results in the defeat of the sea and its calling, or a rediscovery of Ellida's identity thanks to the influence of nature and the Stranger. The role of the sea during the play is ambiguous: it keeps Ellida captive, preventing her from living her life on land to the full, or it allows her to escape from earthly constraints. It is precisely this multiplicity of meanings that brings out the facetted relationship between humans and nature.
When We Dead Awaken is perhaps more immediate in clarifying the role of nature within the play, and subsequent readings serve more to refine the details. It is clear that nature is the most vivid character in this play, but the same cannot be said of the human characters. There is a stark contrast between the vitality of the thriving natural setting that hosts the three acts and the main characters who appear empty and lost. Within this natural setting, humans move around trying to awaken from their lives and choose to follow the mountain path to do so. Their final ascent to the summit concludes and echoes the overall crescendo of the three works. In this play, which is also Ibsen's last production, the subordination of nature observed in *The Wild Duck* is reversed and humans find themselves to be just one element among many in the natural world, subject to its forces and therefore unable to control it.

My paper consists of six chapters. The first is this introduction, devoted mainly to the choice of topic, while the second is devoted to the theoretical framework, providing an overview of the tools used for analysis and the methods employed. The third, fourth and fifth chapters are each dedicated to a play, in order: *The Wild Duck*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken*. The order follows the chronology of the author's publications. The sixth and final chapter draws conclusions from the entire thesis. I chose to dedicate a chapter to each of the three plays so that I could devote myself to an in-depth study of each one and allow the readers to immerse themselves in the play. I preferred this approach to proceeding by topic because I think that the individuality of the work would be lost and a complete immersion in the play would have been more difficult. I have entrusted my concluding chapter with the task of wrapping up the dialogue between the three plays and emphasising the aspects of continuity so that they can be better understood after analysing the three works in detail. Although

the role of the conclusions is to relate the three works to each other, the central chapters are not self-contained discourses but are interconnected. Each of the three plays is present with thematic references and comparisons in the other two, allowing for a continuous dialogue.

This thesis is a way for me to do my part in the fight for the environment and animals, which, although it may seem small, I think must start from our culture and, in particular, from our literature. I think it is extremely powerful to remember that the literature that has always accompanied, inspired and entertained us can be questioned, and with it the values it conveys. Values such as human exceptionalism and speciesism, which we usually use to justify human exploitation of nature, should be identified, recognised and, if possible, deconstructed. With this ecocritical reading of such a central author as Ibsen I would like to observe the relationship between humans and non-humans from a different perspective, precisely in order to deconstruct these values.

2. Theoretical Framework

I would like to begin my paper by first presenting the framework within which I have decided to conduct my research. Specifically, I place my work within the field of Ecocritical Literature, more precisely Ecocritical Theatre, and Literary Animal Studies. My analysis draws on these two fields of study because it aims to examine the relationship between humans and non-humans within the three plays; bearing in mind that by non-humans I mean both animals and natural elements. Within this framework, I have observed this relationship through an anthropocentric reading and proposed a different one, known as more-than-anthropocentric reading, which aims to recognise the presence and action of non-humans. To identify the latter in the texts, I have used Ecolinguistics, a tool that I will present at the end of this chapter. Thanks to this discipline, agency can be identified in the transitivity of sentences and in the distinction between *actors*, *affected* and *sensers*. Finally, Ecolinguistics facilitates the recognition of the *stories we live by*, the messages hidden behind certain linguistic choices made by the author, and their questioning. A common choice in the three chapters is to conclude them with a section called *Environmental Teaching*, in order to draw conclusions about the lessons that, in my opinion, Ibsen was trying to communicate in his plays from an ecological point of view.

Ibsen lived long before us and the environmental issues of his time, his knowledge and awareness of the environment and of the human exploitation of it, are not entirely relevant today but I will show that many observations drawn from the text are still significant today. As I will explain below, the approach I have chosen to take in this analysis aims not only to understand the lessons the author wanted to convey, but also to free the text itself from its writer. In this way, the analysis of the text will seek new interpretations arising from the questions of the present, without limiting itself to what Ibsen wanted to communicate when he wrote the plays. This is because the themes that today's scholars seek in the texts, such as the human-animal relationship or speciesism, were probably not

topics of primary interest to Ibsen. Questioning the text rather than the author allows me to focus on these issues and, in a sense, to bring Ibsen's plays into relevance today.

Of course, this approach does not detract from Ibsen's thinking, which in many ways I consider extremely relevant and debatable still today not only in Norway or the Nordic countries, that is also one of the reasons I chose Ibsen's work as my subject. His presence in the contemporary world of theatre has great potential because it opens up the possibility that new interpretations can captivate and continue to provoke reflection.

2.1 Ecocritical reading

> As the circumstances of the natural world intrude ever more pressingly into our teaching and writing, the need to consider the interconnections, the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings, becomes more and more insistent. Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue, an attempt to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness. Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly shortsighted, incongruous (Love 2003: 16).

Reflecting the words of Glen A. Love, ecocriticism was created to raise human awareness of the interconnection between the natural world and literature, the study of which, if deprived of knowledge of ecological principles, is incomplete and limited. But literature is also a tool for talking about nature and raising awareness of human impact on it. This need led to literature becoming part of the environmental awakening of the 1960s and 1970s, starting with the desire of scholars and writers to draw attention to the interaction between humans and nature in a changing world. These were the years of the atomic crisis, the tragic consequences of pesticide use, growing pollution and the unbridled exploitation of the earth, which saw writings such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) pave the way for environmentally conscious literature. The sphere of ecocriticism was extremely broad and varied because, as Cheryll Glotfelty argues, in these early years of literature, which we now refer to as ecocriticism, there was no specific term that clearly encompassed these studies or defined their subjects, methods and objectives. This fact led scholars to range widely in their productions, giving rise to different strands or specialisations

under the conceptual umbrella of ecocriticism: environmental justice, deep ecology studies, ecofeminism, animal studies and nature writing. Using Cheryll Glotfelty's definition, we can broadly recognise ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 1996: XVIII), while less broadly, Greg Garrard identifies the subject of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, throughout human history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself" (Garrard 2012: 5).

This last definition clearly presents the subject of my reflection, the relationship between human and nonhuman, and places it within the framework of ecocriticism. But I think that only talking about a certain kind of literature, or of any other form of art, as ecocritical is limiting because it communicates the existence of a restricted type of literature that can be identified as ecocritical, excluding others. Accepting that there is only one type of literature that can be defined as such, would mean excluding most of the literature produced only because it is not expressly centred on humans and the environment. This thought is expressed by Ann-Sofie Lönngren: "this means that ecocriticism has gone from a perspective that applies to a certain kind of literature to being perceived as a theory more generally applicable to a broad corpus that is not predetermined" (Lönngren 2024: 61). According to the writer, ecocriticism is more of an interpretative key, a methodological approach, rather than a predetermined literary genre. It is what Camilla B. Borg, Jørgen Bruhn, and Rikard Wingård define as an "applied perspective" and not "a particular set of materials that is inherently "ecocritical,"' and for this reason, this approach can be applied to any art form (Borg, Bruhn, Wingård, 2024: 2). This concept guided my selection of the works analysed in this thesis, allowing me to avoid choosing plays that are usually conceived as ecocritical or already analysed as such, but different and new ones.

Having established from the discussions of Lönngren, Borg, Bruhn and Wingård the existence of an ecocritical reading other than an ecocritical literature, it remains to be defined what questions and objectives my ecocritical methodology sets out to address in this paper. What my research understands as ecocritical reading is an analysis that focuses on the representation of nature and its functions, on the relationship between nature and humans, all in the perspective of questioning the

worldview of human exceptionalism. So, how is nature represented? What kind of relationship exists between humans and nonhumans? Do we find oppression and exploitation of the latter? If so, how are these carried out and what values underpin them? As far as objectives are concerned, my ecocritical reading seeks to identify the lessons that Ibsen communicated to his audience regarding the relationship between humans and nonhumans. In addition to recognising the ecological messages that the writer is more or less implicitly communicating, this research seeks to find new keys to interpretation and new messages that have been overlooked in previous readings.

One of the challenges of this project is to engage with theatre and dramatic productions, which have long been excluded from ecocritical discourse. According to Theresa J. May, this absence is partly due to the theatrical tradition that "defines drama as conflict between and about human beings" (Maj 2005: 84). With humans at the centre, nature is presented as subordinate to them, often in a metaphorical sense which, as we shall see, is a rhetorical figure that replaces actual non-humans with literary and passive objects. As Una Chaudhuri states: "through images of cherry orchards, wild ducks, and polluted baths, the ideological discourse of realism thrust the nonhuman world into the shadows, from which it emerged in the ghostlike form of strangely menacing yet – inanimate – objects" (Chaudhuri 1994: 24). While those plays that do not relegate nature to small symbols but propose it as a central theme, such as Ibsen's *En folkefiende* (1882, *An Enemy Of The People)*, they still fail to free the ecological theme from the humanist origins of theatre, remaining trapped in the patterns and ideologies of the time defined as anti-ecological (24). "The problem with these plays is that they try to exist within a theater aesthetic and ideology (namely, again, 19th-century humanism) that is, as I shall argue below, programmatically anti-ecological" (24). What Chaudhuri means is that naturalism in post-Romantic dramas presented the environment as a mere setting or stage element, recognising it only as a social framework within which the characters act. Outside of its social role, the environment is not explored and is of no importance, which is why, according to the author, "naturalism is anti-nature" (26). The challenge lies precisely in giving space to the Ibsenian

environment, which is fully situated between realism and naturalism. Indeed, in the three plays, we will see Chaudhuri's words return with regard to the objectification of nature and its metaphorical use, as in the case of *The Wild Duck*. However, we will also question the writer's reflection, noting how the role of nature in *The Lady from the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken* is by no means that of a passive framework, but is decisive for the development of the characters.

As Downing Cless notices in his *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*: "natural environments become dramatic forces, taking action with agency or reacting as enforced victims, not unlike characters. Although theatre is largely human-centred, the drama that I explore powerfully brings on stage the other-than-human world and its endangerment" (Cless 2010: 14). Through my analysis, I focused on nature and non-humans, observing the relationship between them, the role assigned to them by Ibsen through the metaphorical meaning attributed to them, but above all, researching their agency, their presence as characters on stage and in the world.

Another field that has provided fundamental tools for this study is that of Literary Animal Studies. As we have said, they are one of the forms of Ecocriticism and are interested in non-human animals, their interactions with humans and the possible transformations of their relationship (Björck 2024: 163). The aim is to problematise the anthropocentric and the power relations that supports it and make humans "the most significant, if not the only, level of meaning" (167). This is done by allowing the literary animal to take its own space, and to claim its own agency by observing it for the meaning it has in the text, not in relation to humans.

My interpretation is therefore in line with ecocriticism but also with animal studies, especially thanks to the use of a "more than anthropocentric" reading.

2.2 Anthropocentric and More-Than-Anthropocentric Reading

The direction I wanted to take was strongly influenced by the studies of Ann-Sofie Lönngren, particularly with regard to anthropocentric and more-than-anthropocentric reading applicable during

an ecocritical analysis. My thesis is, in fact, an attempt to go beyond a mere anthropocentric reading of Ibsen's three plays, moving towards a more-than-anthropocentric reading, which I believe is the only one that allows non-humans to be considered as living beings. However, before focusing on the different approaches, it is necessary to understand the premises on which they are based and the ideologies that nourish them.

Anthropocentrism is a system of values and ideologies that has been present in our world for thousands of years, according to which humans are in a central and elevated position, making them the measure and model of everything. Everything that surrounds humans exists in relation to them and acquires meaning and identity only as a functional tool for humanity. This discourse is then often expressed in the human-animal dualism, where once again humans are in a position of hierarchy and domination over animals (Weitzenfeld, Joy 2014: 4-5). The modern justification for this hierarchical relationship is a product of the Enlightenment, as it was this movement that identified the natural world as dependent on laws, and therefore passive and determined, unlike the human world, which was seen as active and agentive. This interpretation undoubtedly places the two worlds in two different positions, with human as the determining force and the environment as the determinable object (Lönngren 2024: 65). Through this legitimisation, the power relationship between these two categories has been strengthened, and anthropocentrism with it. Literature is no less important in supporting and confirming this relationship of domination, which relegates non-humans to mere symbolic objects with the function of serving humans. An anthropocentric reading, in fact, focuses on textual non-humans, i.e. on the symbolic or metaphorical meaning they convey. In this case, non-humans are nothing more than tools used by the author to communicate certain characteristics and suggest certain nuances that the reader, perfectly integrated into the anthropocentric vision, grasps. The same applies to natural elements and the environment, which are seen as exploitable capital because they were created for human needs.

There are various discourses that have problematised this view and, in their unity, have allowed for the development of the more-than-anthropocentric tool. I would like to briefly present some of them, which I then took up in my analysis of the various works: Derrida's concept of *animot*, which links the discourse of following to that of Lönngren, then the same author's in-depth analysis of animal and animality, and finally Barthes' concept of "the death of the author".

Starting from the latter, Roland Barthes wrote an essay entitled *La mort de l'auteur* (1967*, The Death of the Author*) in which he argues that: "Writing is ... the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (Barthes 1967: 49). The author exists before writing, he is the one who nourishes the work but who, at the moment of writing, in the performative form, disappears. This allows the text and author to be separated, without limiting the reading and interpretation that one wishes to make of it. In this way, we witness the death of the author and the birth of the reader, who becomes "the very space in which are inscribed ... all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination" (54). This thought fits into the current of Post-Structuralism, paving the way for a deconstruction of the text and its meanings, promoting in our case a consequent deconstruction of the power structures of anthropocentrism, removing the human from his pedestal and leaving room for other possibilities of relationships between human-nature and human-nonhumans. This deconstruction of the relationship between the author and his text is the same as I mentioned in the introduction with regard to the possibility of exploring questions in texts that are not explicitly stated by the writer. Through this methodology, we can observe the various layers that a literary text has and go beyond the purely anthropocentric ones. It is a search for agency, an overcoming of what Iovinio and Oppermann recognise as a "most basic assumption", namely that "the material world – a world that includes "inanimate" matter as well as all non-human forms of living – has always been considered as passive, inert, unable to convey any independent expression of meaning" (Iovino, Oppermann 2014: 2). Another tool I have used in my search for agency is Ecolinguistics, which I will discuss a little later.

The second author whose thinking has enriched and underpinned this new interpretation is Jacques Derrida. In his *L'Animal que donc je suis* (2002, *The Animal That Therefore I Am)*, the philosopher attempts to deconstruct and problematise the category of "animal" in order to invite us to question the rigid relationship between humans and animals to which we have become accustomed. First of all, he introduces the concept of *animot*, a neologism he created to replace the word "animal" in order to demonstrate how animals are trapped in this word and concept. *Animot* sounds like the plural *animaux* and is formed from the words *animal* and *mot* (word). "The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other" (Derrida 2002: 392). Abandoning this word is a way to differentiate and deepen our understanding, to reconsider the human attitude towards literary non-humans, but also an opportunity to look at humans themselves and ask ourselves where and why we draw the line between the two categories. Derrida promotes an interconnection and interchangeability of subjects that questions not only anthropocentrism but also speciesism with regard to the human consideration of different animal species. This transformation can be followed through another tool, that of *following*. The very title of Derrida's work *L'Animal Que Donc Je Suis* allows for a double reading thanks to the phrase *je suis*, which means both *I am* and *I follow*. Derrida was not the only one to focus on the concept of "following" as a tool for learning and connecting with non-humans. The basic idea is to abandon the usual anthropocentric view in order to follow the animal, its movements and its behaviour, to get to know it better and, at the same time, learn how to be in the environment as part of it and not as something superior to it. Derrida then understands "to follow" not only as "to come after" but also as "to come along", thus not necessarily implying a 180 degree reversal of the hierarchical human/non-human relationship, but proposing a juxtaposition of the two categories, a balance. Whether we want to read this as humans coming after animals or alongside them, the key point remains that humans are no longer an example and model, thus allowing us to seek new meanings. Ann-Sofie Lönngren developed this idea by asking how this technique could be applied to a literary text. She took up the thoughts of John Simons, with regard to the proposal to read texts by

following the tracks of animals, or rather their presence, and those of Armstrong, who instead sought the agency of non-humans as tracks to follow (Lönngren 2015: 27). According to the author, this following is not only functional because it allows us to understand the direction to take, but also because it is an opportunity to stop and reflect on the places of contact between humans and non-humans and how they can characterise the two categories. In the areas of contact, another of Lönngren's insights originates, namely the distinction between animal and animality and the literary tendency to replace the existing animal with animality.

> Although previous research does not distinguish between actual "animals" and the concept of "animality", these two terms do not mean the same thing, as has been pointed out within the field of human-animal studies. In summary, the term "animal" here means that the very existence of the animal, the specificity of its species, its potential agency and interests, are acknowledged and respected. In contrast, "animality" has been defined by Michael Lundblad as the translation of animal instincts into human characteristics, a translation that becomes all the more possible in the wake of the "animalisation" of humans in the writings of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. (37-38)

Understanding the distinction between the two is fundamental to a more-than-anthropocentric reading because it allows us to identify non-humans in the text as existing, which is relatively rare, from their use in metaphors, characterisations and comparisons. When they appear in texts following the second case, they can represent freedom like the birds in our texts, superficiality like Rubek's farmyard animals, or even sensuality like Ellida. This animalisation is possible because of the associations and meanings of certain animals that are commonly accepted in our cultures and often have no real connection to the animal itself.

Since the animal becomes a symbol of something else, it is not difficult to understand why it is wrong to consider animality as a representation and proof of non-humans on stage. During the analysis of the three works, it will be clear how often non-humans are used to characterise characters and how rare it is for them to be given space. However, I do not mean to suggest that more non-humans or natural elements should appear on stage, in the sense of the actual stage, so that they can be protagonists, because this would be another form of exploitation. But their presence and agency must be present in the theatre scripts and through the characters' lines.

In conclusion, a more-than-anthropocentric reading aims to observe non-humans, their actions and their existence, not in relation to humans, but as present, existing and thinking beings. Therefore, this type of approach to a text requires its decomposition and that of the relationships decided by the author in order to find new meanings. I think it is a partly subjective process, which allows the reader, as Barthes said, to be the new central figure and creator of a new text. The choice of this approach arose from a question that I have already mentioned in my introduction: "Can literature be a place for animal liberation or is it another cage?" Literature and theatre can be a space for othered categories, such as non-humans, and there is no need to limit the analysis to texts that were written with the intent of promoting actual animals because through each of our readings, the text lives again and promotes the category we choose to focus on.

2.3 Ecolinguistics

The fundamental tool that allowed me to deepen my analysis is Ecolinguistics. This analyses language to search for the "stories we live by", problematises them from an ecological point of view, and attempts to overcome them and construct new ones. The concept of "stories we live by" is presented by Arran Stibbe, who states: "Stories are cognitive structures in the minds of individuals that influence how they think, talk and act. Stories we live by are stories in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture" (Stibbe 2021: 6). These beliefs influence how humans behave towards nature: for example, if one of the "stories we live by" is that of human exceptionalism combined with the view of nature as a pure economic resource, the action that follow will surely be the exploitation of nature. Ecolinguistic research therefore starts from the assumption that language shapes these stories and values that form the foundation of our relationship with the environment and its inhabitants. For this reason, language can be a form of ecological destruction. These stories can be observed through the analysis of multiple texts, because it is through the repetition of certain linguistic choices that certain concepts are affirmed. For this reason, I would like to address their analysis in the conclusions, after observing the linguistic choices in the various texts.

Another equally important tool that Ecolinguistics has helped me to formulate is that of my ecosophy. As I mentioned in the introduction, I perceive that in recent years my ecosophy, or my value system, has changed. Ecosophy, or environmental philosophy, is understood by Arne Naess as: "a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy, as a kind of *so[ph]ia* (wisdom), is openly normative; it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority pronouncements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe" (Naess 1973: 99). It is therefore a set of philosophical positions but also of values, an ethical framework, which ecolinguists use to challenge the stories. Every ecosophy is personal, there is no correct one and it can change with people's beliefs. Mine has come close to Deep Ecology, which recognises the value of all natural elements, including animals and humans themselves, not linked to their immediate use by humans. It also believes that humans have no right to reduce biodiversity, which is fundamental to life, and that the current human impact on nature is worrying and worsening (Baard 2015: 26). Recognising the value of the natural world is precisely the aim of this ecocritical reading. To do so, it is essential to seek out its agency. To do this, I observed transitivity processes, the use of words that express possession or linguistic choices that contribute to the animalisation of characters.

The analysis of transitivity is feasible by observing the clauses in which we find nature and nonhumans and the processes in which they participate. Halliday distinguishes three types of processes: material, i.e. acting; mental, i.e. thinking and sensing; and verbal, i.e. speaking and writing. Within them, different participants move, such as actors and affected in the material ones and sensers in the mental ones (Halliday 2013: 213). Therefore, in our case, nonhumans can be actors if they are seen as agents within the clauses, which happens very rarely; affected when they are objects of the clauses used by humans, which is much more common; and finally, sensers, i.e., capable of thought and feeling. The use of this system on nonhumans and nature is legitimised by material ecocriticism. This new materialism believes that:

> agency assumes many forms, all of which are characterised by an important feature: they are material... Agency, therefore, is not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism. (Iovino, Oppermann 2014: 3)

According to this discourse, everything that has matter is capable of influencing human actions, even if only through its presence. This aspect will be visible in the latest work, *When We Dead Awaken*, where nature, composed of all its natural elements, even though they are almost never grammatically presented as agents in clauses, reveals itself to be the protagonist with the most agency of all, precisely through the influence it will have on the characters.

Finally, one last extremely powerful linguistic element is that of metaphor, once again taken from Lönngren's thinking. The author observes that the presence of metaphors in texts to refer to nonhumans is extremely common, but that its presence does not coincide with the actual presence of the nonhuman. Metaphor is perhaps the most common tool of an anthropocentric approach to literature, in which it serves to replace the non-human with human meanings associated with it. In this way, the animal is rendered "passive, silent, hollow, and invisible, and at the same time it reproduces and further contributes to notions of human uniqueness, significance and complexity" (Lönngren 2021: 39). In our texts, the use of metaphors is very common, motivated also by the profound symbolism of Ibsen's writing, and becomes a tool to amplify the significance and complexity of the human. To overcome this type of reading, Lönngren proposes the use of another rhetorical figure: metonymy. This does not replace, but proposes closeness, similarity and presence, bringing "the actual animal" (41) onto the stage instead of a substitute. As I will discuss in more detail in the fourth chapter, metonymy has been difficult to find in Ibsen's texts, which are mostly populated by tools with animal features rather than actual animals.

3. The Wild Duck

3.1 Context and Summary

It is 1884, the year of publication of *Vildanden*, (*The Wild Duck*), at the height of Ibsen's career and his realist period. Although he has been living in Italy for some time now, the author remains eager to unsettle his contemporaries by uncovering the pretentious appearances of European/Norwegian bourgeois society and their values. He had just completed *Et dukkehjem* (1879*, A Doll's House*), *Gengångare* (1881*, Ghosts*) and *En folkefiende* (1882*, An Enemy of the People*), which established him, not without some criticism, on the Norwegian scene as a celebrated reformer, but it was *The Wild Duck*, first brought to the stage of Bergen's Den Nationale Scene in January 1885, that confirmed him as an undisputed exponent of modern tragicomedy (Zennaro 2015:17).

In a letter to his publisher Frederik Hegel in September 1884, he himself recognises the special place this play will have in his production:

> In some ways this new play occupies a position by itself among my dramatic works; in its method it differs in several respects from my former ones. But I shall say no more on this subject at present. I hope that my critics will discover the points alluded to; they will, at any rate, find several things to squabble about and several things to interpret. I also think that The Wild Duck may very probably entice some of our young dramatists into new paths; and this I consider a result to be desired. (Ibsen 1884)[4]

The theme of truth is the common thread running through these last three plays, but we also find in the first two the role of the past in determining the present through skeletons that the protagonists keep hidden in an effort to maintain their social reputation, the most important accessory for any self-respecting bourgeois. Little by little, keeping the viewer attentive and engaged, Ibsen reveals family scandals and truths senselessly kept hidden and then shows the destructive power of such choices. The lesson appears to be to live an authentic life, to overcome the fear of judgement and the obsession with reputation, to face the truth. So, in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, unveiling the truth turns out to be a good thing: for Nora, because it allows her to open her eyes to her married life, understand her

[4] https://www.hf.uio.no/is/english/services/virtual-ibsen-centre/on-ibsen-s-work/vi/ in *Brief Description*

husband's perception of her and finally choose herself by abandoning her family; and for Mrs. Alving, who realises that she could have avoided building a life of lies that brought her nothing but tragedy.
An Enemy of the People investigates more into the implications and consequences of the revelation of the truth, both on the one who takes upon himself the task of the deed, and on the recipients. The truth here, though well-founded and beneficial, is discredited along with its defender in the eyes of the people by a corrupt government elite eager to maintain economic benefits. It thus enriches the discourse of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* by emphasising how, while having a protagonist who chooses to jeopardise his reputation and social standing for the truth, this is often not enough to have a positive outcome as it is equally crucial to consider to whom this truth reaches.
The Wild Duck fits into this thematic strand by re-proposing as central (1) the role of past choices on present generations, (2) the truth as a destructive and not always *construens* force, and (3) the inextricable link with social reputation often relying on secrets and uncertainties. With this work, however, Ibsen brings something surprising: questioning the idealism that has led him in previous works to advocate for truth as the right and desirable choice. He leaves it up to the viewer to answer the central question of the work: is it better to let the average man live a life-lie that makes him happy or to reveal the truth to him, even though it may be destructive?
It brings to light these life-lies, so called precisely because they are constructed from illusions, and recognises them as coping mechanisms for a life that is too difficult and burdensome to bear.

The play was written by Ibsen while he was living in Italy, but once again demonstrates his profound knowledge and strong attachment to contemporary Norway. It is a play in five acts that revolves around the strong bond between two families: the Ekdal and the Werle families. The second family, which consists of Old Ekdal, his son Hjalmar and his wife Gina, and their 14-year-old daughter Hedvig, has been living in a precarious situation for years, partially ignored by society due to a conviction of Old Ekdal that has completely ruined his and the family's reputation. They stand on a fiction, living in an illusion while ignoring the skeletons that lie at the foundation of their family.

Each in his own way survives on convictions: Hjalmar lives under the illusion that he is a great inventor, a perfect father and husband within a loving family whose true essence he ignores. Gina and Hedvig hold on to Hjalmar's illusion and make it their own, while Ekdal tries to rebuild his old life. In general, all this allows them to maintain their reputation as a cohesive family, ready to clear their name and rejoin the village society that currently shuns them.

The symbol of this fiction is an artificial forest that they have built in the attic of their house inside which they have brought plants, animals, and particularly a wild duck. The element that brings havoc into the lives of the two families is Gregers, son of Old Werle, who after years away from home decides to return, wanting to free himself from his father's control.

He makes it his mission to reveal the skeletons that bind the two families, convinced that his friend Hjalmar needs to rebuild his life and family on a foundation of truth. Thus, in the play, act after act, we learn of Old Werle's relationship with Gina 14 years earlier, before she married Hjalmar, but also of Old Werle's role in the illegal act that cost Old Ekdal his sentence. The heaviest and most insurmountable lie turns out to be the possibility that Hedvig is not Hjalmar's daughter but that of Gregers' father. The latter is not given as a certainty as Gina is not certain, but nevertheless obvious clues, such as the child's age and the genetic eye disease she shares with Old Werle, suggest a high reliability of the revelation. At this point, however, Hjalmar, a weak, selfish man attached to what little reputation he has left, is unable to rebuild his family but decides to abandon it, convinced he has no other option. He thus repudiates Hedvig and begins to distance himself from her, treating her as the one responsible for his misfortune. Gregers tries to resolve the situation by convincing little Hedvig to sacrifice, as an act of love and devotion to her father, what she holds most dear in the world: the wild duck.

The girl, however, feeling guilty about her broken family and probably convinced that eliminating herself would bring her family closer together, decides to turn the gun towards herself rather than the duck. Even this gesture does not bring Hjalmar to his senses, confirming his smallness and inability to live in truth.

This tragedy is proof of how idealism, if blind and unable to recognise family circumstances and affection, can be destructive, tragic and unjust. Although young Gregers' intentions were positive, his mistake was in failing to understand the vital fiction that allowed the Ekdal family's happiness. According to Alonge, it is this obvious disproportion between the absolute of his ideal obligation and the recipient's lack of ability to honour it that gives the work a comic as well as tragic character. (Alonge 2009: 1513).

3.2 Anthropocentric reading

As already mentioned, this is one of Ibsen's most famous plays, which immediately after its publication and staging led many critics to debate the meaning of the play and Ibsen's intention in presenting it. In preparing this analysis of mine, I encountered several feminist readings of this play, others focused on the father-son relationship, some on the metaphysical prospective, but all of them are centred on the symbolism of the wild duck. I believe that all these approaches surely enrich the critical discourse on the work, while remaining focused on an anthropocentric perspective. After the publication of the play, many of Ibsen's contemporaries indulged in finding a meaning to the wild duck, wondering what message Ibsen wanted to communicate. Francisque Sarcey, a French critic, wrote:

> Oh! That wild duck, absolutely nobody ever, no, nobody, neither you who have seen the play, not Lindenlaub and Ephraim who translated it word for word, nor the author who wrote it, nor Shakespeare who inspired it, nor God or the Devil, no, no one will ever know what that wild duck is, neither what it's doing in the play, nor what it means. (Moi 2006: 246)

Many, in fact, felt so lost in the face of this over-interpretation possibility that it makes *The Wild Duck*, according to Errol Durbach: "the most grotesquely over-symbolized creature in dramatic literature" (Gunn 2013: 47). At the same time so elusive that Durbach himself believed that Ibsen did not give any symbolic value to the duck per se but rather used it to hold up the character of Gregers and his symbolism.

However, in this regard, Toril Moi's discourse is very interesting. She agrees on the close symbolic link between the duck and Gregers' revelatory mission, because Gregers, being an idealist focused on a world of transcendental absolutes, sees everyday life as meaningless without a metaphysical narrative. Therefore, he looks at the duck not as a simple duck, but as something that can be elevated with a melodramatic interpretation (Moi 2002: 657).

Nevertheless, she also proposes an overcoming of the metaphorical excavation of the wild duck since the very concept of meaning in a context such as this work where falsehood, appearances and unfoundedness play the leading role, is devalued to the point of becoming almost empty.

> If we get transfixed by the idea that the wild duck must be either a symbol or an allegory, or at the very least some special kind of really deep metaphor, we will fail to notice that the wild duck is just one element Ibsen's much wider investigation of language. The most important question in *The Wild Duck* is not at all what the eponymous wild duck means (and certainly not what in "means" in a *deep* sense), but whether it is possible to hang onto meaning at all in a world of cynics, skeptics, and narcissists, who all do their best to empty words of meaning. (Moi 2002: 658)

Moi opens the doors to another constant in this play: ambiguity, which Hedvig recognises immediately after meeting Gregers for the first time: "I think he meant something else by it ... he meant something different from what he said - the whole time" (Ibsen 2019: 43), is what she says to her mother. Ambiguity and uncertainty accompany the reader to the end of the play and have also given me the opportunity of analysing *The Wild Duck* from many different perspectives, helping me to recognise and then empty the wild duck and other non-humans of symbolic meaning.

In this first part of my analysis, I would like to focus on non-humans as instruments and bearers of symbolic and metaphorical meaning for the play's characters, thus exploiting a conscious anthropocentric reading that can then lay the foundations for overcoming it through a more-than-anthropocentric reading.

To begin with, I consider it useful for my analysis to compose a bestiary of non-human characters present in the play. First, there are the captive animals of the attic: hens, rabbits, pigeons, tumblers, pouters and the wild duck. These are all domesticated animals that live within the four walls amidst vegetation brought by the family to recreate a realistic natural environment. Then another central

animal in the play is the hunter's dog, which appears in the stories of the "rescue" of the wild duck and returns several times in Gregers' speeches. The only truly wild animals are the bears that inhabit the forests, hunted by Old Ekdal in the past. Lastly, we find a series of animals that are named, not appearing in the scene, such as the pig, the swine, the billy goat, a spider and a fish.

Each of these animals can be given a symbolic interpretation, observing the relationship they have with the humans in the work and noting how some of the human characters are animalised through metaphors and lexical choices.

3.2.1 The Dog

The dog, on a more general reading, undoubtedly represents the Werles, this being the controlling and predatory family. Just as a guard dog or a herd dog controls its hens, so the Werles have always held the Ekdals family in check: Old Werle, Old Ekdal's former business partner, has been able to use his knowledge to get only the latter convicted and come out clean; he is the one who finances "far more than his work is worth" (18) Old Ekdal copyright work and thus contribute largely to the financial income of the family. He is also the one who pushed Hjalmar to pursue the photographer's craft, also financing his studio and equipment, and pushed him to marry Gina, a woman he previously employed in his house as a domestic servant. He can be seen as a predator because he pursued Gina and "he didn't give up till he'd his way" (71) and, as we have seen, he also removed Hedvig from his father's love. More specifically, the link between the dog and Gregers is certainly most obvious. Symbolically, their actions are very similar: the dog is the one who dives into the depths of the lake to retrieve the wild ducks that his human hunter has shot and that have hidden in the depths of the water, clinging to the seaweed to escape their fate. Similarly, Gregers is the one who digs into the secret depths of the two families, wanting to bring back the hidden truths, tearing the Ekdal from their safe hiding place. He himself says: "If I could choose, I'd prefer to be a clever dog … The kind that goes to the bottom after wild ducks when they dive under" (42).

But even through a deeper linguistic analysis, it is evident how the choice is to animalize Gregers and make him akin to a dog: "you mustn't hound me, Gregers" (74) says Hjalmar exhausted by his insistence. The verb *hound* (*jage*)[5] recalls the animal sphere, of hunting dogs that chase their prey morbidly, watching their every move and almost breathing down their necks. In this case Gregers becomes a dog panting on his friend' s neck insistently for him to act as expected. The animal sphere is used to negatively characterize Gregers' behavior, communicating anxiety and haste to Hjalmar.

Another negative characterization is given by the nickname "the pig" (45) used by Gina to address Gregers because he has soiled and filled with smoke and stink the room he rented from the Ekdals. Finally, Gina also refers to him as a "queer fish", a strange person (66).

Old Werle, on the other hand, is introduced in the first act with this metaphor by Werle's house servant, Jensen, "he was a right billy goat in his day"(5) alluding to his possible sexual promiscuity and stubbornness. Indeed, we know that Werle gets what he wants, be it a cover-up or a woman, but also that he has had affairs with several women: Gregers's ex-wife and mother, Gina and Mrs. Sorby. Again, another exploitation to bring back negative meanings to a character.

3.2.2 The Duck

> GREGERS: Yes, but what about the unfortunate Ekdal family?
> WERLE: What exactly would you have me do for those people? … There are people in this world who dive to the bottom if they get just a few pellets in their body, and they never come up again. (18)

In contrast, the wounded duck is the symbolic animal of the Ekdal family, and although the association with little Hedvig is the most direct and obvious, it can also be made with all the other members. The wild duck lives in the attic after being shot and wounded by Werle during a hunt and has been surviving in captivity in this artificial forest that imitates her old home. After Werle's dog chased her into the water and took her back to his owner, the hunter probably decided not to finish her because it wasn't as electrifying as killing a healthy animal.

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[5] Original version consulted in https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_Vi|Viht.xhtml

Having associated the Werle family with the dog as predators, it follows that this family is the one who is dependent, economically and socially, on the former and is generally the victim of the other's actions and thus forced to live in a cage. Exactly like the duck, they are a wounded family, whose wings that could allow them to climb socially or simply maintain their status, are wounded, non-functional and limit the family's life on the ground.

The parallels between the duck and Old Ekdal are clear in the similarities of their lives before and after the fall. During the hunt, the duck has fallen, ceased to be the proud free animal of the Norwegian forests, abandoned its independence and, locked in captivity, found itself dependent on its owners. Old Ekdal, on the other hand, is a strong and courageous lieutenant, "man of the great outdoors" (37), who falls into disgrace and after being released from prison is forced to live events passively, depending on the little money he receives from his copy work. Both these characters owe their change of situation to Werle who shot the duck and framed Ekdal.

As for Hjalmar, on the other hand, the exchange of lines between him and Gregers is emblematic:

> GREGERS: My dear Hjalmar, it seems to me that there's something of that wild duck in you.
> HJALMAR: The wild duck? How do you mean?
> GREGERS: You've dived down and bitten tight onto the weeds.
> HJALMAR: You refer perhaps to the near-mortal shot which hit Father in the wing - and me?
> GREGERS: Not so much. I wouldn't say you're maimed, but you've ended up in a poisonous swam, Hjalmar. A disease has crept into your body, and you've gone to the bottom to die in darkness. (58)

Hjalmar is the hidden duck, fearful and reluctant to face the truth. Unlike his father, there is no before, that is Hjalmar has never been a wild animal but has always lived in this illusion within which he deliberately holds himself captive. There he can declare that he is an inventor, that he is in the process of making something that will turn his life and that of his family around, but that is nothing more than a cover to show others how he is trying to get out of this situation, to improve his own status. In fact, if we observe his evasive attitude whenever he is asked about this presumed invention, right up to the confession that he is not really working on anything, it is clear that he has no intention of coming out of the water. He doesn't have a reason to do so: he experiences the comfort of being a father of a

family whom he only provides financially for on the surface, because it is Gina and her daughter who are in charge of running the photography studio, and he experiences the admiration of a daughter who looks up to her father as a man who is extremely committed to reviving his family when in fact he is nothing more than a selfish man. As he himself says: "I'm not cut out to be unhappy, Gregers. I need things to be nice and secure and peaceful around me" (99), he is not made for and consequently is unable to live unhappily. When Gregers unexpectedly yanks him from his depths, we have confirmation that the captive-born duck that is Hjalmar is not ready to be released into the world to adapt and rebuild his life. Templeton observes an interesting comparison between the concept of *thriving* for Hjalmar and the wild duck. When Gregers asks Hjalmar about the condition of the duck in their attic after having left Werles' house, he replays: "Yes, amazingly well. It's got quite *fat*" (41) as if eating, the most basic thing there is, was synonymous with well-being. Hjalmar too is thriving in his life-lie while eating and drinking: "It is not spiritual nourishment that sustains Hjalmar … The real mission of Hjalmar Ekdal is eating" (Templeton 1991: 417) and while doing the very least.

As I said, the deepest connection is also the most obvious one, namely the one between the duck and Hedvig. Both are described as the most precious elements of the family, seen as gifts bestowed on the Ekdal family and both coming from Werle: one as spared prey and the other as a possible daughter. Finally, both are the most fragile and innocent beings in the play: the duck lives wounded in the attic, not having a good chance of survival in the wild, while Hedvig has an eye disease that will probably make her go blind. For these conditions, the other characters feel sorry for them: for the duck because unlike the other animals who live in the attic she has no family and no one knows where she comes from, for Hedvig because she is the most pleasant joy and sorrow of her family, who look at her wistfully aware of her illness, which she ignores. These physical conditions limit the lives of the two creatures, also forcing Hedvig into a form of imprisonment by living in a house that, by her parents' decision, she does not even leave to go to school. Finally, her eye disease does not even allow her to escape through reading, which her parents restrict her from doing in order not to worsen her condition. Towards the conclusion, when her father rejects Hedvig no longer considering her as his daughter,

she becomes a stranger in her own family and, just like the duck in the attic, "has no one of her own" (Ibsen 2019: 53).

Clearly, analysing the finale, and the moment when the shot is heard and for a few lines all the characters live in uncertainty, not knowing who is dead, it is even clearer how the two replace and almost coincide in the ultimate sacrifice. Here both become "an icon of idealized life and innocence… symbol of ultimate and redemptive value" (Gunn 2013: 47).

Another interesting comparison linking Hedvig, the duck and Hjalmar arises from the nickname Relling uses to address the girl: "little wild-duck mother" (Ibsen 2019: 91). Both the girl and the father can be seen as someone's parents, and both are faced with the choice of eliminating their child. Hjalmar chooses to do so by distancing himself from her, but he does so selfishly, not for her sake; while Hedvig seriously considers Gregers' proposal about eliminating the duck as an altruistic act. On the one hand, therefore, we have a father ready to sacrifice his own daughter for his own benefit, on the other a daughter who is ready to sacrifice her "daughter" for her father. These words of Relling's are too precious to be ignored, considering that he is the character Ibsen uses to spread his own thought. They are almost anticipatory in identifying the parent-daughter relationship as central to the tragic denouement.

But it is through linguistic analysis that we see the animalisation of Hedvig proposed by Ibsen. Hjalmar speaks to Gregers about Hedvig, describing her movements, "twittering like a little bird she flutters into life's eternal night" (35), and again to describe his daughter's behaviour whenever the father came home: "she flew toward me with her sweet slightly squinting eyes" (100). While the father acknowledges that he "chased her away … like an animal" (104). This animality, for once, does not connote Hedvig negatively but contributes to presenting her as an innocent and pure-hearted being, increasing the tragic nature of the conclusion.

Other lexical choices that instead recall the world of hunting and weapons, such as “amiss” (35) and “shot up” (35) used by the family members always to talk about Hedvig, call to mind the fate that awaits the little girl and at the same time the hunting episode experienced by the duck.

The only member of the Ekdal family who has no connection with the duck, however, is Gina, who is instead animalised through a metaphor: “Tell me if you haven’t regretted … the web of lies that you – like a spider – have a spun around me?”(71) Once again, animality carries negative connotations, where Gina, because of this metaphor, becomes the lying, deceitful woman who has probably enjoyed reeling her prey, Hjalmar, into her web of lies.

Lastly the swine is used to describe Molvik, an ex-theologian who lives under the Ekdals and sometimes come upstairs to have dinner with the family and Dr. Relling. The latter, being a doctor, cured him by convincing him that he is subjected to a demoniac possession. He made up an illusion about the reason for his desolation and dependence to alcohol. Because of this life-lie he is living, he is used by Relling to explain to Gregers the importance of illusion in people’s life, making a comparison to Hjalmar’s situation. Calling him a swine could be a way to express his greed for alcohol, but also a friendly way to talk about a friend who is living a miserable situation where he has no control over.

3.2.3 The Bears

As already mentioned, bears are the only elements that really belong in the wild. They appear more than once in reference to Old Ekdal, but mainly to his past and his skills as a hunter. The bears therefore appear as victims, but also as prey of great value, requiring great skills and showering the hunter with praise. “A military man, a man who’d shot nine bears, who was descended from two lieutenant colonels…” (57). These are the words used by Hjalmar to describe his father to Gregers. Killing nine bears, together with the other two characteristics, is intended to give us an account of the man Ekdal was before his imprisonment and disgrace. Also, in *When We Dead Awaken* by Hjalmar to characterise the character of Ulfheim, a strong and wild man. In both cases the two men are strong

enough to overcome and dominate the strongest animal in the forest, thus placing themselves in a hierarchical position above nature and non-human animals. They are not just any hunters, but the emblem of the hunter, the realisation of the man who proudly and fearlessly controls the world. Old Ekdal, however, is no longer this kind of man: Gregers looks back with regret, even accusing his father of cowardice for failing to commit suicide, once lost everything he was and that made him a man. Now the nine bears have become rabbits, and their attic is the big forest. No longer being the man he once was, Old Ekdal is content to hunt rabbits to convince himself that he is still a hunter, that he still has a little control and that he does not fall apart. This is confirmed by Relling: "for him, the four or five dried-out Christmas trees that he's tucked away in there (the attic) are the vast, refreshing Hoidal forest… and the rabbits that mumble across the attic floor are bears to tackle" (92). Through this reading, it is possible to observe how all the animals mentioned can be interpreted as nothing more than tools for characterising the characters on stage and that the tendency is for them to be bearers of negative meanings. In my opinion, it seems that animality is mostly given to the characters to belittle them, to make them less than human, but at the same time it feels like Ibsen is using them in his characterization to make the human more human. In this play he isn't proposing the model of the perfect man who Ibsen wants to oppose to animals, so the animalisation doesn't intend to propose negative characters or heroes, if positive, but is a way of showing them with realism and sincerity. I think it's a powerful way to depict humans as they are, not perfect, but real.

3.3 More than anthropocentric reading

In this second part, I would instead like to focus on the previously mentioned non-humans, but this time as themselves, that is, as living beings who take their space within the play. To do this, it is important to question the relationship between humans and non-humans and to understand its implications.

My analysis is guided by two questions: is the duck that is so dear to the Ekdal family actually treated with such love that we can consider it as a pet? Can someone living in captivity be wild?

To answer the first question, I will look at the processes of objectification and transitivity in the play.

3.3.1 Objectification

In answering the first question, I asked myself about the connection between humans and the duck within this specific play and the tool that helped me the most was linguistic analysis. Whenever Hedvig and his family talk about the duck, they use possessive verbs such as *to borrow* and *to use*, and adjectives and pronouns such as *my, mine, your, ours*, which clarify the relationship as subordination and possession. Even more illustrative is this exchange between Hedvig and Gregers:

> HEDVIG: Yes, because it's *my* wild duck.
> GREGERS: Indeed, it is.
> HEDVIG: Oh yes! I *own it.* Though Father and Grandpa can *borrow it* as often as they like.
> GREGERS: I see; so what do the *use it for* then?
> HEDVIG: Oh, they tend to its needs, build things for it, that sort of thing. (Ibsen 2019: 52, italics are mine)

In addition to the already mentioned possessive pronouns and adjectives, two other aspects jump out at us, both related to the concept of objectification of the duck. This is indicated with the neutral object complement pronoun *it*: although correct according to English grammar to indicate animals, one would perhaps expect a different pronoun such as he or she from a little girl talking about her beloved duck. Such a choice would have helped communicate the idea that the duck enjoys an emotional attachment from the family, who see her as a pet or almost as a family member. It is not unusual, in fact, for animal owners to speak of them through these two last pronouns. It is true, however, that it happens several times in the work that the subject pronoun *she* is used to refer to the duck, and this lack of a common and constant line contributes, albeit subtly, to the objectification of the animal.

Two other terms that further reinforce the objectification are *to borrow* and *to use*: according to the former, the duck is an object that family members can borrow from its owner whenever they need it, while for the latter, it is something that has a value as it is functional to humans. The duck exists because she has a use for the family: she is a pretext for the Ekdals to build something, to keep

themselves busy with practical work while they avoid devoting themselves to their lives. Furthermore, the attic is for them a place of leisure, to read, dream, build and a place to feel happiness. For example, Hjalmar takes refuge there to think about his great invention, escaping from his duties of owning the photo shop and letting his family run the studio for him. Another interpretation is certainly seeing the duck as a key element that underpins the whole fiction of the Ekdal family. To this aspect, however, I will return later as I attempt to answer the second question I posed at the beginning.

Having ascertained that a process of objectification is evident, the next question is how this process serves the unfolding of the story and the characters. It is pertinent to quote Ann Sofie Lönngren's reflection on the concept of "make others killable" (Lönngren 2015: 33) which refers to a process through which a character, in this case through lexical choices, can transform the other by making him inferior to what he is to justify his killing. Accepting that the relationship between human and non-human is hierarchical, imagining it as a ladder, and that humans are on the top step, we can say that making someone less than they are means relegating them to one or more steps lower than their original position. In the case of August Strindberg and his *Tschandala* (1889) it means for Törner to animalise Jensen, another human, to make him a sub-human and at the end a non-human, while turning him into a dog. In our case, however, we start with a domestic duck, a non-human who enjoys a higher and better position than the other animals in the attic, and who is, through language, transformed into a thing, an *it*. The duck thus descends a step further, occupying the place of that which has no life, of that which is not sentient and has no agency: no longer a victim. Whoever "kills", or rather eliminates, an *it*, is not guilty, is justifiable. Just as Törner had felt morally at ease with his conscience in planning Jensen's murder because he had turned him into a dog and so it was no longer in his eyes a deplorable act, the same thing happens in our play.

And indeed, if we notice Hedvig's attitude when confronted with Gregers' proposal to make the sacrifice, we do not see extremely emotional reactions but more one of astonishment. Although she is closest to the duck, she communicates detachment with her reaction, confirming once again the

absence of deep and sincere attachment to the duck and displeasure at the act she is supposed to perform.

> GREGERS: But what if you sacrificed the wild duck for his sake of your own free will?
> HEDVIG: The wild duck?
> GREGERS: If you were willing to offer up the dearest thing you own in the entire world?
> HEDVIG: Do you think that would help?
> GREGERS: Try it, Hedvig.
> HEDVIG: Yes, I will try.
> …
> HEDVIG: … when I woke up this morning and remembered what we'd talked about, I thought it was very *strange*.
> GREGERS: Strange?
> HEDVIG: … Last night, in the moment, I thought there was something *wonderful* about it. But when I'd slept, and remembered it again, I didn't think much of it. (Ibsen 2019: 86-93, italics are mine)

Even the father is no less: when they hear the shot and are still unaware of Hedvig's suicide, Gregers communicates that Hedvig shot the duck as a gesture of love and sacrifice to regain his father's love; in that moment, the latter and the family present are not particularly shaken by hearing that the duck is dead, but more moved by the gesture made by the daughter. These two reactions do not befit people who love and respect their pets.

This key is extremely interesting and fitting for this analysis, especially considering the proposed future of the wild duck. In our deconstruction of the text, we can observe this linguistic belittlement from the family and conclude that probably the relationship wasn't as deep as we would have expected, but Gregers didn't. He proposed the sacrifice because he felt that the duck held so much value to them that she would have been the most emotional and meaningful sacrifice.

3.3.2 Transitivity processes

Another useful linguistic tool for analysing the role of the duck as a living, acting and thinking being within the work is to observe the transitivity of the sentences within which the duck is present (Stibbe 2021: 33). As previously mentioned, there are three types of processes, but we are only interested in the material ones, specifically with concrete actions, and the mental ones, which instead require thinking and sensing.

Starting with the material processes, we can distinguish between sentences with structures within which the duck plays the role of actor and sentences in which it plays the passive role of affected. Clearly, all sentences in which the animal is the object complement fall into the second category and mostly express the duck's current fate of being owned and used by its masters. She plays an affected role when her capture is recounted, from Werle, the hunter who shoots her, to the canny dog who retrieved her from the bottom of the lake. Her condition remains the same when she is subjected to the threats of the characters who want to wring her neck or shoot her. But it is the sentences in which she is the actor that are particularly interesting, as in them we can observe how there are no real actions performed by the duck inhabiting the attic. The free duck before capture was indeed an actor and able to fight to protect its life: "she dived to the bottom" (Ibsen 2019: 40) and clings to the seaweed on the seabed to escape its fate. The captured duck, on the other hand, performs limited actions: it enters the basket to go to sleep, stays in the basket, drags its wounded foot around the attic and screams when someone enters the attic probably to hunt. They cannot really be defined as actions because there is really no choice, but more like expressing a behaviour that is consequence of the captive situation she lives in, as if they were automatic movements performed unconsciously or reactions to external stimuli. They are in fact very similar to the phrases that see the duck as passive, at the mercy of human actions and consequences of what it has undergone. On the other hand, "she has no other injury or *fault*" (55) except those inflicted by the man, and she bears no responsibility for what happened to her and what led her to be in that penthouse. The man is "at fault", the Ekdals and the Werles are responsible for everything she suffers and does, and in this play that ironically bears her name she seems to disappear. We know she has lived in the form of a proud wild duck in the past, we know she has never become a proper family pet after, and so she is not there, she is an absence. It is at this point superfluous to ask whether the duck ever appears in mental processes, that is, whether it appears as a thinking or feeling being, because this privilege is certainly not given to Ibsen's duck. Moreover, she never appears on scene, the characters enter in the attic but she's never actually present.

This conclusion is useful and anticipatory of the answer to the second question I posed as to whether the wild duck in this state of captivity can still be considered as such.

3.3.3 Captivity

Now giving space to the duck as a living being, we can reconstruct her events with the information provided in the story. We know that during a hunting trip Werle, who was on a boat, shot the animal, but not having very good eyesight due to his illness, he ended up wounding her without killing her. The duck tried to escape, dives into the depths and clung with its beak to the plants and seaweed on the seabed, counting on remaining underwater and never surfacing again to avoid capture. The hunting dog, however, dived into the water and brought her to the surface; she was then taken to the Werles' house where her condition didn't not improve and so the landlord ordered the house servant to dispose of her. Old Ekdal, who knew the servant, managed to convince him to hand her over and he took her to the attic.

Here the animal began to improve, she gained weight but is still scarred forever by the wound to one wing and the paw bitten off by the dog that "rescued" her. However, this rescue will never give her back the ability to fly, remaining forever an animal deprived of her agency and forced into human dependency. The family took care of her by changing her water every day and creating baskets for her to rest in. It is unclear whether the attic was set up with plants and the other animals after the duck's arrival or whether this was already there, but the fact remains that the duck becomes a prisoner of these four walls.

At this point, the duck "has strayed so far away from her own kind" (Ibsen 2019: 52) that she no longer has a family or a habitat that allows her to continue to be that "genuine wild bird" (52). This condition of captivity and detachment from her forgotten past is reinforced in various ways by the family: in order not to reactivate the animal instinct in her, that would lead her to attempt to escape, Gregers advises "don't ever let it glimpse the sea or the sky"(41), not that the animal would really be able to escape, considering her physical condition. Another mode of subjugation is the practice of

terror that we can read in Old Ekdal's habit of hunting inside the attic. We know that almost every day the man goes into this room to distract or amuse himself, as Gina says, and shoots some of the other animals, then skins them and takes them into his room. This violence is nothing more than a way of reaffirming, day after day, the kind of hierarchical bond of domination and subordination between human and non-human animals. The duck relives the trauma of hunting incessantly, seeing her acquired family eliminated with such violence day after day, and she probably lives in fear awaiting the day when it is she who will be killed. On this occasion, her helplessness is heartbreaking: she cannot escape and cannot act trying to save her companions. In conclusion I think that the wild duck isn't a free animal and not even a wild animal.

But then, why does everyone in the text keep referring to her as a wild duck?

3.3.4 Keystone element

Keystone species are species that play a key role in maintaining an ecosystem in which they play roles that allow multiple species living in that ecosystem to live and have a suitable habitat. This is exactly what the duck does in the play: she holds and maintains a place that is vital for the Ekdal family. She is stuck in a forced agency, where again she has to be there, she has to live but not for herself. As we seen in the last paragraph, every time she has agency it's never truly acting for herself, she is more surviving or living the conditions she was put into by humans. Her key role it's again an imposed one, where she experience a forced existence that can be interpreted as a forced agency as well.

We have said that the attic is the symbol of the illusion in which the members of the family live, as it is an artificial place created in the likeness of a real forest in which the characters can go to distract themselves and fully immerse themselves in a place that makes them happy and allows them to escape from reality. One element that facilitate this escape is the fact that time doesn't pass in the attic, the clock is broken and the place is "like a world of his own" (Ibsen 2019: 51). As Gregers repeatedly calls the attic "watery deeps" to refer to those depths where the duck and, symbolically, its human

counterparts take refuge, hiding from the dog. But the attic, to be the place where all these fictions hold and just another room in the house or even a domestic garden, has to be a true forest and in order to be one needs to have a *genuinely* wild element that characterises the place and makes it so. This is the role of the duck, it cannot be any other element, not rabbits, pigeons, nor chickens, and the Christmas trees themselves are domestic, human elements. Take away the duck and the forest collapses, the fiction collapses and, consequently so does the family.

Thus, although for the first question we concluded that, concretely in her bodily dimension, the duck as such is no longer a free and wild being, but a pure inhabitant affected by the choices of others, now we realise that, symbolically, the duck can only be wild. Being a central symbol, she must remain as such, otherwise the symbolical structure of the play collapses.

At this point, it is interesting to wonder: what would have happened if Hedvig had really killed the duck? I think the ending would not have changed because, just as the suicide of the little girl destroyed the family, the killing of the duck would have done the same. But then, does it really matter who dies of the two? Have they not become one? Through the numerous choices we have analysed so far, it's rather evident that Ibsen wanted to play with this couple to such an extent that they overlap and become one?

Was Gregers aware of this dynamic? Was his purpose in asking Hedvig to eliminate the duck not only that of a demonstration of love and loyalty, but also the elimination of the bottom that still protected his friend Hjalmar and his family from its bite?

I believe that Gregers was aware of the role that the attic and that house played for the family, and this can be guessed from the fact that he repeatedly accuses the house of being a swamp and the people in it of being sick:

> GREGERS: Personally, I don't thrive in the atmosphere of a *swamp*.
> RELLING: A swamp?
> …
> GINA: Pardon me, Mr. Werle, there's no swamp-smell round here. For your information I air this room every single day.
> GREGERS: The stench to which I refer cannot be aired out. (Ibsen 2019: 62)

The swamp is an uncultivated place, where the vegetation is dense and the water is so stagnant that it is impossible for those living underwater to see the sky. The air one breathes is dirty and unhealthy, carrying disease with its poisonous fumes. This is a strong metaphor that recalls the conditions of the family, stuck in an insalubrious place, and taken unhealthy by the lies that trap them without allowing them to see the reality outside. Like the duck in the attic, who must not be allowed to see the sky and the sea to prevent the desire to escape being born in her, the Ekdal family also live locked away with no desire to get out. Hjalmar thrives in such environment, he does not show any symptoms of illness, but his friend reveals to him that this apparently beneficial state of being is the result of the poison itself. It is the illusion that keeps the family members both sick and symptomless, and this illusion is so powerful and realistic that it does not seem to reveal itself. Gregers, who professes to knows reality, feels a different air when he enters the house, he sees the symptoms manifested by the Ekdal's family members but cannot be understood, at least not as long as the illusion holds. In Act IV, in fact, when Hjalmar confronts Gina and finds out about the relationship she had with Old Werle, he then recognises his life and home as a swamp of lies and realises that seeing his home as a positive place was nothing but a delusion.

3.4 Environmental teaching

One aspect I have not yet addressed is the role of the forest within the story.

We know that chronologically the forest opens the story as we know that the crime committed by the two older members of the family is related to the forest: the two partners wanted to buy a part of the forest but, according to Werle, Ekdal mapped the area incorrectly and illegally cut down more trees than he should have. But even in the second act, the state of the forest is as if foreshadowing the conclusion of the play:

> EKDAL: … Is the forest doing all right up there now?
> GREGERS: Not as lush as in your time. An awful lot's been felled.
> EKDAL: Felled? That's a dangerous business, that. Has consequences. There's revenge in the forest. (Ibsen 2019: 37)

In the end, however, Ekdal's statement "the *forest* takes its revenge" (103), after witnessing the terrible scene of his granddaughter Hedvig lying dead on the ground, does not go unnoticed. In this sentence, the term *forest* can be interpreted in two ways: one could consider the wild forest or the artificial one, the attic. In the first case we can interpret it almost as a personification of the forest, which, as a character in the story, takes revenge for an affront suffered by the two elders so many years before. She takes revenge on Werle by killing his probable daughter, because the latter was never legally punished for what he did but she especially takes revenge on Ekdal and his family, because he was found responsible for the felling of part of the forest.

It is interesting to observe how the relationship between Old Ekdal and the forest evolves over time: at the beginning of the story, we have a strong man who, within the relationship between human and non-human, is certainly the one who dominates by being a hunter and a woodcutter. As a hunter, as already mentioned in connection with the symbolism of the bear, he was able to defeat the king of the forest nine times, while as a lumberjack he took more than his due. After his conviction he is a transformed man, still "drawn to everything free and wild" (38) but now he is no longer in control of the forest, no longer feels strong and able to go hunting or return to his work, and so he reinvents himself. To keep intact that relationship of dominance that gave him security, allowing him to boost his ego and enjoy himself, he decides to build an imitation of the forest in which he can still be his old self, fully in control, the dominant species. This illusion serves him to relive the past that made him an honourable man, and of which his son was proud. As Downing also observes "the loft is his rehabilitation from ruination, but results in recurring ruin" (Downing 2010: 194): the forest eventually takes revenge, reverses that initial relationship and punishes Ekdal. He, in fact, had only been punished according to the law of men, while the forest follows the law of nature and Hedvig, thus animalised and become a duck, also responds to the latter, allowing the final revenge.

To conclude the evolution of the relationship between Ekdal and the forest, it is interesting to observe the last two lines pronounced by this character: the penultimate one is "the forest takes its revenge"

which we have already analysed, but the last one is "the revenge of the forest. But I'm not scared *anyway*" (Ibsen 2019: 104, italics are mine) and with that he leaves the scene, entering the attic and closing the door. From the moment the family realises that Hedvig has committed suicide, the only thing Ekdal can say are these two sentences, the only thing he can see is the forest's revenge.

What does he mean by that *anyway*, and why does he re-enter the attic? Could it be that he re-enters the attic to take revenge in turn for the death of his niece by destroying the forest and killing all the animals? So that *anyway* means that despite the forest's vengeful act on his granddaughter, he is not frightened enough to desist from taking his own revenge?

Or maybe he re-enters his human-made forest because, despite this being the place where the suicide took place, for him it remains first and foremost not a place of fear and revenge, but a place of deep healing to which he forgives every act.

Or he re-enters the attic because he wants to escape once again from the destructive reality of his living room which he can no longer stand and thus re-enters his trusted refuge where he can pretend nothing has happened.

If in the sentence "the forest takes its revenge" we consider "the forest" as the artificial one, that as a way of revenge against humans and specifically the Ekdals who have built her and constrict her, decides to make a symbolic killing: Hedvig. She is the weaker, purer member of the family that still comes to the attic to commit a crime and kill the duck that the forest sees as part of itself. In a personificated way, by killing Hedvig the forest is revolting against the owner of the attic but it's also protecting the wild duck from harm. In "The paradox of a man-made nature" (Downing, 2010: 194), creation rebels against the creator who has been guilty of *hubris* building something he was not meant to, and for this he is punished.

This is not the first time the theme of the man-creator being punished for his ambition and for defying the laws of nature appears in Ibsen's work: Ibsen had also presented a tragic ending for Harvard Solness, the master builder, in *Bygmester Solness* (1892, *The Master Builder*). In *The Wild Duck*

Ekdal does not build a simple domestic garden as Solness did not build a simple tower; in their own way, they both create something that is not theirs to create. The artificial forest is indeed paradoxical, almost an oxymoron, because a man cannot artificially create the "wilderness" that a forest needs. Solness has built a tower too high, defying the laws of physics and nature, blinded by his desire to maintain his reputation as a builder.

In both cases, it is clear how the human/non-human relationship is reversed in the work by seeing the natural world break free from human control and take revenge for abuse.

It is difficult to say if it was Ibsen's intention to include an environmental lesson as a warning to mankind about the manner and over-exploitation of nature, but in support of this idea, I would quote Mary Kay Norseng's brilliant work. In her "The Woods Take Revenge: No Place To Hide" she suggests an eco-critical reading of *The Wild Duck* and, thanks to a study of historical sources from the 19th century, she reports that at the time Ibsen was writing this work, Norway was facing a huge growth of paper industries that were destroying the Norwegian forests. To support her thesis, she highlights the role of paper within the play: Ekdal's copying work, Hedvig's retouching of paper photographs, her fascination with books and the gift of a menu printed on paper that Hjalmar gives his daughter instead of bringing her real food. With this in mind, it is much more believable that there was a little warning in the background for the humankind who destroy nature for its own benefit.

4. The Lady from the Sea

4.1 Context and Summary

“Human beings are sea creatures... In time, all people will live on it, when the land becomes swallowed up” (Cless 2010: 189). This note that Ibsen wrote for *The Wild Duck* demonstrates a long period of reflection and a strong interest in the relationship between humans and the sea, which would later become the focus of *Fruen fra havet* (1888, *The Lady from the Sea*). Once again, we see water as a powerful symbolic element, no longer the small lake where wild ducks used to take refuge, but now Ibsen brings the ocean and its fjords to the stage. This openness to the outside world introduces a new scenic element compared to the author’s early bourgeois dramas, and more besides. It is certainly also an evolution from the semi-claustrophobia of the spaces in *The Wild Duck*.
In 1885, he spent the summer in Molde, which probably inspired the author to the point that it became the setting for the events of the play, and where he immersed himself in local legends. He was particularly inspired by two of them: one concerns a Norwegian man of Finnish descent who had magical eyes capable of hypnotising people, while the second tells of a sailor believed to be dead who returns home to find his wife remarried. As we shall see, they merge in Ibsen’s story. The influence of earthly mythology is evident both in the author’s initial choice of title for this work, *Havfruen (The Siren),* and in the name of the protagonist, Ellida, which in the Nordic dialect means “she who goes into the storm” and was also the name given to Vikingsson’s ship by the god of the winds in the Frithiof saga[6] (Quazzolo 2012: 21).

Equally important for the research for *The Lady from the Sea* was the fascinating summer of 1887 spent by Ibsen in Sæby in North Jutland, Denmark. Here, Ibsen was completely captivated by the ocean, a feeling he described in this note dated 5 June 1888:

[6] The Frithiof Saga, an Icelandic saga from the 1300s, tells the story of two brothers, Helgi and Halfdan, sons of the king of Sogn, and the hero Frithiof, son of the valiant Thorstein Víkingsson.

> The lure of the sea. Longing for the sea. People's affinity to the sea. Tied to the sea. Dependent on the sea. Compulsion to return to it. A species of fish forming a prototype in the development of species. Are there still rudiments of this in the human mind? In the mind of some individuals?
> The images of the turmoil of life in the sea and of "what is eternally lost".
> The sea has power over moods, has its own willpower. The sea can hypnotise. Nature can in general. The great secret is the dependency of the human will on "what is without willpower". (Ibsen 1888) [7]

The work then received contributions from sketches for *Rosmersholm* (1886): two daughters of Rosmer initially became Hilde and Bolette, while in the text itself Rebekka is called "my alluring mermaid" (Ibsen 2019: 187). *The Lady from the Sea* was completed in 1888 while Ibsen was in Munich, and the play premiered on 12 February of the following year, simultaneously at the Hofyheater in Weimar and the Christiania Theater in Oslo.

The five-act play recounts the psychological struggle of Ellida Wangel, trapped in a life she does not feel as her own and from which she feels she needs to escape by listening to the call of the sea. Ellida is a misunderstood girl, deeply attached to a past that is the cause of great unease, which we discover together with the characters in the first two acts. She lived with her family in Skjoldviken, where her father was the lighthouse keeper, and saw her mother die of madness. She now lives as the second wife of Dr. Wangel, a respected doctor, a kind man older than her, who was widowed after the death of his first wife, with whom he had two daughters: Bolette, the eldest, and Hilde. The couple has been going through a difficult period for the last two years caused by the death of their first child, who died as a newborn, leading Ellida to distance herself from Wangel, who, although he does not understand her deep pain, does not pressure her. The family lives in a house with a large garden in a seaside village on the fjords in northern Norway, and every element of nature, from the garden to the high point behind the house, together with the sea, play a central role in the play being central to the family's well-being, so much so that the play, almost by its very nature takes place outdoors. However, this should not deceive us into thinking that Ibsen is presenting us with a play outside the walls of

[7]https://www.hf.uio.no/is/english/services/virtual-ibsen-centre/on-ibsen-s-work/fh/ in *Brief description*

bourgeois society and all that it entails; the outdoor space is another form of imprisonment, more illusory and treacherous.

The play opens with the introduction of a character who upsets the precarious balance that is Ellida's state of health: Mr. Lyngstrand, an aspiring sculptor who has lived at sea for some time. At the end of the first act, he tells Ellida and Mr. Arnholm, Bolette's former teacher and Ellida's friend, about a mysterious man he met on his last voyage, who had discovered that his partner had married another man while he was at sea. Ellida is extremely disturbed by this story because she is convinced that this sailor is in fact the man she was once involved with and who is now coming back to take her away. In the second act, Ellida reveals to her husband her past relationship with this man, whom she had ended by letter, a decision he had not accepted, and which had prevented her from removing him from her life and her thoughts. The memory of the man haunts and terrifies her: she saw him in the eyes of their child who died a few years earlier, and she sees him again in Lyngstrand's description of the missing sailor. In the third act, the man Ellida fears, called the Stranger, appears at the Wangel's home to take Ellida away with him in accordance with the promise she made to wait for him forever. She is torn, and the Stranger decides to return the following night to receive her final decision, which must necessarily be "of her own free will" (Ibsen 2019: 245). In order to do so, Ellida asks her husband to set her free, that is, to give her back the freedom of choice that she has not had for some time because she believes it is necessary to face the Stranger as a free woman, free from any constraint and therefore capable of making the right choice for herself. It is only in the final confrontation, when the Stranger returns for the last time, that Wangel, in a gesture of pure love and understanding for his wife, grants her this freedom. It is precisely this gesture that awakens Ellida, who consciously refuses to follow the Stranger and chooses to remain, living as Mrs. Wangel. She chooses responsibility, family and the mainland.

The central story is accompanied by those of the doctor's two daughters. The first sees Bolette and Mr. Arnholm deciding to marry for mutual benefit: Bolette is eager to travel the world, educate herself and leave her father's house, while Mr. Arnholm feels the social pressure of still being unmarried at

his age and needs someone by his side. Bolette therefore enters into a marriage with her former tutor to fulfil her dreams and discover her freedom, using her marriage to a man she has no feelings for as a means to an end. This compromise is very reminiscent of the central theme of Ellida and Wangel. The second story, on the other hand, features the youngest daughter, Hilde, and Lyngstrand, but does not have a truly romantic ending. Hilde is too cynical to be with a man who will never reach old age and who deludes himself into thinking he can do great things.

It is a complex play made up of emotionally charged and profound dialogues that enrich the symbolism of the story and the possibilities for critical analysis. Although apparently only romantic and melodramatic, *The Lady from the Sea* recounts the nature of Ibsen's times with great depth.

> At first glance, *The Lady from the Sea* is an oddity in Ibsen's Realist Cycle. One of its levels seems to be that of melodramatic romance or romantic (and Romantic) melodrama.... But the play explores depths and indicates a degree of loss (for humanity) that goes far beyond romance or melodrama. (Johnston 1989: 194)

Ibsen writes about women who want to escape but are forced to settle for unhappy marriages. He talks about a present that, with its rationality, does not satisfy but entices people to seek something else in the occult and the mysterious. This questioning of reason fits perfectly with the historical period in which Ibsen wrote, when positivism proved unable to answer all human questions and irrational currents were gaining ground in Europe. This need for transcendence is evident in the crisis of Wangel, a doctor and man of science who realises that he has failed in his attempt to cure his wife by drawing on his knowledge because she is suffering from something deeper. This is where Freud's studies and the advent of psychoanalysis come in, tools that would allow Ellida to discover herself and be discovered.

But in addition to bringing something new, it is interesting to observe how some constants already seen in *The Wild Duck* are turned upside down in this play, for example, the theme of the unresolved past that returns to affect the present with the figure of the stranger who reappears before Ellida to redeem her. In both works, the past holds crucial secrets that are revealed due to the arrival of an external character who breaks the balance. As in *The Wild Duck*, it is Gregers' return to the village

that reveals the Ekdals' family's past, here it is the anticipation of the Stranger's return, and then the Stranger himself, that pushes Ellida to reveal her past to Wangel. In the latter case, Ellida, unlike Hjalmar, is aware of this and does not live carefree in this life-lie but shows the symptoms of a sick and restless person, symbolising how this secret is destroying her day after day. It is as if, because of this unresolvedness of the past, *The Lady from the Sea* sees in most of Ellida's development, before meeting the Stranger, a life of suffering and of detached relationships that are never explored in depth by a protagonist who does not know herself. While in the second part, with Ellida's choice to stay with Wangel, she recovers her relationship with her stepdaughters, rediscovers herself and abandons her malaise. In *The Wild Duck*, we see the opposite: Hjalmar lives happily with his family because he is unaware, he values himself and is satisfied with who he is, while after the revelation of Hedvig's paternity, relationships break down, his illusion collapses and so does his happiness. *The Lady from the Sea* is more in line with previous works, where the revelation of the truth has positive implications at the end of the play allowing Ellida to finally integrate into the family picture and find peace. As the first family collapses, the second consolidates.

Another interesting interpretation, also in terms of ecocriticism, is evolutionism. It is fairly certain that Ibsen had read Darwin and Spencer and was therefore aware of the evolutionary process that saw humans and land creatures originate in the sea. A possible reference is noticeable in this exchange between Ellida and Mr. Arnholm:

> BOLETTE: No, we shall probably have to make do with dry land.
> ARNHOLM: Well, that is where we belong after all.
> ELLIDA: No, I don't believe we do.
> ARNHOLM: Not on dry land?
> ELLIDA: No, I don't believe that. I believe that if human beings, from the very beginning, had adapted themselves to a life at sea – in the sea perhaps – then we'd have been rather more highly developed than we are. Both better and happier. (Ibsen 2019: 240)

So Ellida's temptation is also to evolve and transition from being human to return to being a subhuman and primitive sea creature. The choice is also between the Stranger, who represents that initial state of evolution, and Dr. Wangel, a man of science who represents the highest step of evolution

(Rosengarten 1977). Linked to this concept is that of *acclimatisation*, which we find several times in the play. Connected to the concept of adaptation, Ibsen shows us how essential it is to be adaptable in order to survive in a specific environment, so that we can acclimatise and then, in an even higher environment, achieve specialisation. Dr. Wangel is an example of a perfectly acclimatised man, emblematic of modern man, while the other characters, such as Lyngstrand, struggle to be so. The latter also becomes another demonstration of Darwinian discourse with the concept of survival of the fittest, as the future sculptor, due to his illness, will not reach an advanced age.

For the analysis of this work, I have chosen to divide the creatures, as Ibsen calls them himself, into aquatic creatures and land creatures. I have further separated the first category into marine and freshwater creatures, where in the former I have analysed Ellida as human and non-human, trying to define her also through her relationships with other central characters. Among the sea creatures, I found an example of a more-than-anthropocentric reading thanks to the presence of real animals and the character of the Stranger. Finally, the freshwater creatures, the carps in the pond, have a strong symbolic interpretation and are reminiscent of the animals in the Ekdals' attic. As for the land creatures, I tried to understand whether they can be considered a positive point of arrival in human growth.

Finally, before proposing the usual environmental understanding of the play, I focused on the moment of the final choice as an opportunity for reflection across the entire discourse.

4.2 Aquatic creatures:

The protagonists of the work are undoubtedly aquatic creatures, both marine and freshwater, but before analysing the most obvious aquatic creatures, it is essential to present Ellida as one of them. In fact, only by recognising Ellida in her non-human traits and as a non-human character is it possible to grasp all her interactions with the other creatures, since the mermaid Ellida carries with her a significant and almost excessive amount of meaning.

4.2.1 Ellida

I chose to present her among non-humans precisely because Ibsen never spares himself throughout the entire work in identifying the woman as a sea creature belonging to the world of the sea.

This overlap is already evident in Ellida's introduction in the first act, where, before appearing on stage herself, she is mentioned several times by other characters, allowing us to grasp three of her characteristics. The curtain opens with Ballested painting a view of the fjords, but he senses that something is missing from the scene, namely a half-dead mermaid: "she has strayed in from the sea and can't find her way out again. And so here she lies, expiring in the brackish water..." (Ibsen 2019: 198). The man reveals that it was the lady of the house, Ellida, who inspired him to add this subject to his painting. The name he gives to the finished work is "Death of the Mermaid". With this simple image, Ibsen symbolically introduces us to the content of the work and its conclusion: a natural landscape, the fjord, with a mermaid in the foreground who is almost dead because she has found herself in "brackish water". These waters, being the meeting point between salt water and fresh water, have characteristics that make it difficult for marine life to adapt and, in our case, will lead to the death of the mermaid. The second thing we discover, again at the beginning of the first act, is that while the other characters are on stage, Lyngstrand tells us that Ellida is bathing, an activity we discover she does every day during the summer, regardless of the weather. Mr. Arnholm therefore asks Dr. Wangel if there is something "wrong with her" (206), since people who bathe frequently usually do so for health reasons. But the word *wrong (fejler*)[8] suggests another possibility, namely that there is something incorrect with her, something not right, as if she were not right for society, not like the others. Wangel answers this question negatively, but at the same time admits that he cannot understand her, and "going into the sea, well, that seems to be her life passion" (206) is the justification he finds. Finally, we discover her nickname: The Lady from the Sea. "That time out there left a deep mark on her, you can be sure. People here in town have absolutely no understanding of

[8] Original versions consulted in https://www.ibsen.uio.no/skuespill.xhtml

that. They call her "The Lady from the Sea"" (206) are Wangel's words to Mr. Arnholm. So, the name comes from misunderstanding, perhaps from the superficiality of the villagers who do not know Ellida and her past. Wangel seems to want to imply that this name does not represent her, precisely because it was given to her by people who are strangers to her, but at the same time we know that this is not the case, because he and his daughters also call her that on more than one occasion. In our analysis, this makes sense: it is not difficult to admit that these three characters do not understand Ellida, do not know everything she experienced in her childhood and undoubtedly do not understand her relationship with the sea.

Finally, Ellida appears and Wangel calls her "our mermaid", once again clarifying the author's identification with Ballested's work. Furthermore, Ellida "has a unique relationship to the sea and everything in it" (207) and is called "The Heathen" because her father had baptized her with the name of a boat instead of a name of a "Christian *human being*" (208, italics are mine). She herself says she feels she has become kin to seabirds and seabeasts, one of them, so she is kin to the sea, part of the sea as a sea creature and at the same time belonging to it and to the sea-people. To feel good, she needs to cure her homesickness, so she must return to the sea and her "rightful life" (*rigtige liv)* (271). Once again, the adjectives *right-wrong* have a strong impact, and the choice to use them is important. Ibsen does not use *favourite, old, good,* or other positive adjectives to characterise Ellida's life, but *right*, which evokes the presence of a natural law that is immutable and according to which Ellida belongs to the sea.

Having established Ellida's identification with a non-human marine creature, I would like to understand the relationships between her and the other characters in order to understand what she represents for each of them.

Wangel

The reason why the two spouses do not understand each other can be found in the fact that Wangel is a society-oriented character, i.e. someone who prioritises social relationships and social norms and

prefers to interact in closed spaces, while Ellida, as a nature-oriented character, is the opposite. She prefers to develop her relationships outside and create relationships with the natural world (Akçeşme, Şarlar 2024). "Wangel's failure to comprehend the relationship between Ellida and the Stranger stems from his low level of eco-affinity and eco-awareness, leading to a complete alienation of culture from nature".[9]

Wangel sees Ellida as a patient to be cured, as a medical mystery that he does not understand but wants to see well. "Oh, if you only knew how difficult it is for a doctor to make sound judgements about a patient for whom he has such deep feelings! And then, of course, this isn't any ordinary illness. No ordinary doctor can help here – and no ordinary medicine" (Ibsen 2019, 256). As a doctor and as a husband, he understands that "the surroundings here are too much to bear" (225) and suggests moving to the open sea to make her feel better. This is his first attempt at "medicine", which we see him propose to his wife in the second act in an attempt to heal their marriage. But Ellida does not see this as a cure for her illness and, both because she doesn't want to see him sacrifice himself for her and because she is probably aware of her husband's inability to understand her without knowing the original of her oppression, she tells him about her past.

Only at the end does he understand the right cure: to let her free to choose, and this proves to be healing. Ellida confirms it: "…You have been a good doctor to me. You *found* – and you dared to *use* the right medicine – the *only* medicine that could help" (285).

But Bolette seems to suggest that his dedication to his wife's care is not purely altruistic and medical but has a selfish motive in that he needs to be surrounded by happiness: "Father always wants to see happy faces around him. The house must always be filled with light and joy, he says. So I'm afraid he often lets her have medicine which does her no good in the long term". (239) This need is reminiscent of Hjalmar's, when he says to Gregers: "I'm not cut out to be unhappy, Gregers. I need

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[9] Akçeşme Banu, Şarlar Çağrı, 2024, p. 79. Larson et al. (2010) distinguish between two terms, eco-affinity and eco-awareness. Eco-affinity refers to an individual's specific inclination toward nature, while eco-awareness encompasses a broader understanding and concern for ecological appreciation and environmental issues (p.42). In the play, while nature-oriented characters have cultivated eco-affinity and eco-awareness, society-oriented characters lack ecological consciousness.

things to be nice and secure and peaceful around me" (99); they both need superficiality and appearances to nourish their lives. In fact, Wangel allowed Ellida to replace his first wife only superficially, never helping her to put down roots in their family, but letting her remain an outsider. Wangel admits that he did so because he did not want to push her, but perhaps it was because he just needed a replacement to take his wife's place, again to meet social expectations, and that was as far as he went.

With this speech, Ellida is undoubtedly objectified by Wangel, bought, as she says:

> ELLIDA: ... The absolute, plain truth is this: you came out there and *bought me.*
> WANGEL: Bought? Did you say bought?
> ELLIDA: Oh, I wasn't one bit better than you. I agreed to the deal. *I sold myself to you.* ... is there another way to name it? You couldn't bear *the emptiness in your house* any more. You were looking around for a new wife –
> WANGEL: And for a new mother for the children, Ellida.
> ELLIDA: That too, perhaps – along the way. Although – you had no idea whether I was up to the task. After all, you'd only seen me – and talked to me briefly a couple of times. *You took a fancy to me*, and so –
> WANGEL: Oh yes, call it whatever you like.
> ELLIDA: And I, for my part –. I just stood there helpless, clueless and completely alone. Of course, it seemed reasonable for me to take the deal – when you came and offered to provide for me for the rest of my life … I should not have accepted it nonetheless. I should never have done so. Not at any price! Nor sold myself! Better to do the most menial work – better to live in the poorest conditions – but of my own free will – and of my own choice. (262-263, italics are mine)

Since the whole village knows the story of Ellida and her family, when Wangel took a fancy to Ellida he probably knew very well that he was making a proposal to a girl who was different from the other village girls. There is the thrill of *domestication* that Wangel feels when trying to fit her into the family picture, but at the same time "he is fascinated by the otherness of Ellida" (Garton 1994: 115). Ellida's elusiveness and the stubbornness with which she continues to behave like a child make her an exotic animal in his eyes. An animal that he spoils in a certain sense by allowing her to remain comfortably distant from the ritual spaces belonging to the bourgeois world, such as the veranda where Bolette and Hilde spend their time: he builds her a summerhouse in the garden where there is more air and Ellida feels less constrained (Quazzolo 2012: 23). In this way, Wangel is also encouraging her to remain outside these patterns, to remain herself, so perhaps rather than domestication, it seems more like captivity in a gilded cage.

Although privileged, Ellida has no choice: their relationship remains one of power, where Wangel, the human, has decision-making power over her. The patient Ellida, the substitute Ellida and the exotic animal Ellida are all non-humans exploited by Wangel to get something. Here, Ellida exists to boost the man's ego; she has no value for who she really is or what she needs, because even though Ellida tells him this over and over again, Wangel does not understand or, rather, does not want to understand. It is in the fourth act, while talking to Mr. Arnholm, that he examines his conscience and, thinking back on his decision to marry Ellida, realises the damage he has done to her:

> WANGEL: Oh, deep down I knew it, of course. But I didn't want to admit it. Because I was so in love with her, you see! So, I thought first and foremost about myself. That is how irresponsibly selfish I was back then.
> ARNHOLM: Hm - no doubt every man is slightly selfish in these situations. Besides, I've never noticed such a fault in you, Dr. Wangel.
> WANGEL: Oh, but I was! And I have continued to be so ever since. I am so much, much older than her. I ought to have been like a father to her – and a guide. Ought to have done my best to develop her mind, bring clarity to her thinking. But unfortunately that's never happened. I haven't really had the drive to do it, you see! Because I wanted her just as she was... (Ibsen 2019: 257)

It is only in the final climax that Wangel abandons his selfishness and breaks his bond with Ellida, allowing her to choose. In reality, his decision could also be interpreted as resignation, because Wangel has finally understood that he can neither protect nor control the part of Ellida that is in difficulty, namely her soul.

Bolette and Hilde

Both live in a forced relationship with Ellida: they do not understand why their father chose her, when "she doesn't suit us. Nor we her" (223) and she is completely incapable of helping her husband in any way. Like the villagers, Bolette and Hilde call Ellida "The Lady from the Sea" because they believe she is strange; they see her as a sea creature alien to their world. Ellida's nature prevents her from being the mother they would like her to be or the wife who supports her husband; instead, she is "totally incapable" (238). Hilde is more hurt by these shortcomings and treats her with detachment, trying not to show her need for contact and tenderness. Bolette is more restrained, sparing her criticism for the sake of her father, even though she is the one who pays the highest price for her

stepmother's disengagement from the family. She says of Ellida: "But she's not the least equipped for all the things Mother had such a firm hold on. There's so much this one doesn't *see.* Or perhaps she doesn't *want* to – or *can't be bothered* to see. I don't know which." (238) The doubt that shines through Bolette's annoyed and critical words is actually very interesting and requires a thorough analysis of Ellida. The question is whether she is pretending, as Hilde thinks: "BOLETTE: You see, deep down she's nice after all. HILDE: Trickery! She's just pretending, so as to please Father" (Ibsen 2019: 218). Is Ellida a "trickster" or sorceress who has enchanted Wangel and pretends to be a good wife in front of him, while letting her daughters break the illusion? Considering her essence as a sea creature and given that the entire work has a mystical thread, it would not be difficult to believe.

The relationship is certainly not that of mother and daughters, both because they still live in the memory of their deceased mother and because Ellida has never tried to replace her. Bolette is also slightly younger than her, so she does not see her as a mother figure. Nor is it a fairy-tale relationship of control, where the stepmother orders her stepdaughters around, because according to their father, the two "refused to be told anything, either by me or by Ellida" (256).

In conclusion, on their part, there is certainly a process of othering Ellida who, being a mermaid, is "too little of" a mother, "too little of" a wife and "too little of" a woman. However, their point of view is mostly hidden because, having been born into a middle-class context, it remains important for the two girls to appear as a perfect family.

4.2.2 Marine creatures:

The non-human figures that we can define as such are the sea-beasts and sea-birds mentioned by Ellida when she tells her husband what she and the Stranger used to talk about when they spent time together. Ellida's description has a romantic tone, with vivid images that leave the reader and viewer to imagine.

> ELLIDA: About stormy and calm waters. About dark nights on the sea. The sea on those sparkling sunny days. But most of all we spoke about the whales and dolphins, and the seal that likes to bask on the skerries in the midday heat. And then we talked about the gulls and the eagles and all the other seabirds, you know. - Imagine - isn't it strange - when we talked about these things, it seemed to me that all the sea-beasts and sea-birds were his kin. (228)

These lines are intended to show the intimate bond that ties Ellida to the sea and to the Stranger. But in this case, I would not speak of animal exploitation because the impression here is that of recounting the wonders of nature, making us understand the bond that Ellida feels with this world. The vividness of these images helps us to put ourselves in her shoes, to perceive the charm of this world and contrast it with the claustrophobic and sick world of the fjord and the mainland. The animals here are presented for what they are, they are protagonists of the scene and live without caring about humans. The seals that "like to bask on the skerries in the midday heat" are animals, actors capable of acting and not subject to the actions of humans, who are absent from the scene. They are even sensers who take pleasure in their existence. The emotions aroused by this ethereal scene create a nostalgic effect for Ellida as she thinks back on this life and her kin, and also for us readers, who would like to be present on the scene described and admire its beauty.

Here there are no power relations, but Ellida and the Stranger are part of nature just like the marine animals, creating a balance that Ellida can no longer find in her present. We know that every day the woman goes to bathe in the fjord, probably to return to her home and that of her sea cohabitants. But it is also very likely that she is disappointed every time because the animals mentioned above hardly ever live in the waters of the fjords, preferring, like her, the open sea.

The only function that the sea creatures have, which I do not see as exploitation, is to be part of the whole, or rather to be a synecdoche for the sea. Thus, the wonder felt in the presence of these non-humans is transferred to the entire sea.

In this case, I refer to Ann-Sofie Lönngren's discussion of the challenging reading of literary animals through rhetorical figures such as metaphor and metonymy.

> In relation to human-animal studies, a refocusing from the text's depth to its surface makes space for understandings of literary animals along the lines of the rhetorical figure that is often put forward as the opposite of metaphor: metonymy. Whereas metaphor functions according to principles of difference, substitution, and distance, metonymy is characterised by similarity, presence, and closeness, and the latter is thus particularly apt for readings of animal figures as "actual animals". Indeed, while metaphor has been accused of substituting and usurping the animal, metonymy is understood as a call for self-signification, connection, recognition, relation, and correspondence. The distinction between symptomatic, metaphorical, and hierarchical readings on the one hand, and metonymic and parallel readings on the surface on the other, can thus be situated in the larger field of tension between "alienation" and "association" which has been defined as characteristic of the history of the human–animal relationship. (Lönngren 2021: 41)

Metaphor is the main tool of symptomatic readings, which assume that every text has hidden meanings that can be revealed by this rhetorical figure. If we take the example of animals, they become metaphors for the human condition and are subordinated to humans, creating a hierarchical relationship between the signifier and the signified. Metonymy, on the other hand, challenges this power relationship by creating interconnections, known as surface readings, where the animal has value for itself as an "actual animal" (Lönngren 2021: 41). In the case of the marine animals in our text, this latter reading allows us to see also that "the human is an animal among other animals", i.e. that Ellida and the Stranger are connected and recognised as marine animals.

The Stranger

Following the same reasoning, I would analyse the Stranger among the sea creatures precisely because I believe that his character is part of the sea and fully represents it, unlike Ellida, who also has experience on land.

Most of what we know about this character comes from Ellida's account of him to Wangel in the second act. We do not know his true identity: initially he calls himself *Friman*, but later, in the letters he sends to Ellida, he signs himself Alfred Johnston. He is a Finnish immigrant who arrived in Norway as a child with his father and has lived at sea since he was a young man. He meets Ellida when an American ship on which he was sailing as second mate docks at Skjoldviken one late autumn day, and the sailor climbs up to the lighthouse to visit it. The Stranger reveals that he killed his captain for "right and proper" reasons (229), which Ellida does not judge in any way, and that for this reason he had to leave. The two separate, but not before marrying at sea through a ritual in which the sailor ties

two rings, his own and Ellida's, to a keychain and throws them into the sea. He then leaves for America and writes her several letters, to which she replies asking him to end the relationship, but the sailor always ignores her requests, keeping his promise to wait for her when he returns. The events leading up to his return are recounted by Lyngstrand, who met him on his last voyage. We learn that during the voyage, while the two were alone in their cabin due to a storm, he became enraged while reading a newspaper, muttering that someone had married while he was away. The ship then sank in the Channel and the two were separated on different lifeboats, and the sailor was presumed dead. From here, his story rejoins Ellida's present, and we have already seen how it unfolds.

I think this character is particularly interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, because of his relationship with Ellida, which leads the girl to behave in a certain way, and on the other hand because of his relationship with nature, being part of it.

With regard to the first point, it is useful to observe the use of modals when Ellida describes the actions she did or did not take while under the control of the Stranger. We find *"*he said I *should"(skulde) (*228), "I *couldn't* do otherwise" (*kunde*) (229), "things *had to* be over between us" (*måtte*) (230), "I *was to* come out to him" (*skulde*) (229), and "I *was to* go there immediately" (*skulde*) (229 all italics are mine). All these expressions demonstrate the complete control that the Stranger exercised over Ellida, which she herself confirms when her husband asks her if she had no will of her own and she replies: "Not when he was around. Oh – later it seemed quite incomprehensible to me" (228). Only after the Stranger's departure is Ellida able to think for herself, notice this control and write to him to break off the relationship. She remains unable to understand how he could nullify her in this way when at the same time he gave her an identity, a belonging. Throughout all these processes, she undoubtedly remains passive, unable to speak or act freely when he is on land with her. This passivity is reinforced by the objectification of the Stranger's language, who uses the verb *"fetch"* (*hente*) to indicate his gesture of going to retrieve her. The use of this verb brings to mind the story of a dog bringing something back to its master, and I could not help but imagine the Stranger, whom

we have already established as non-human, going to retrieve Ellida, who is something of his, who has strayed, and then bringing her back to her master: the sea. The Stranger himself says, "she belongs first and foremost to me" (245), but at the same time, contradicting himself, he needs Ellida to go with him of her own free will. However, we have seen that since they met, Ellida seems to have had little, if any, say in their relationship: she went to him because she could not do otherwise and accepted the marriage because she felt it was meant to be. Now, however, the Stranger asks her to choose, as if the instinctive Ellida, who is already his, needs the approval of the conscious Ellida.

This instinctive, feeling-based nature confirms Ellida as a senser, driven mainly by misunderstood and unconscious sensations. In fact, we find many phrases spoken by her such as: "I almost *felt I* become their kin too" (228), "I *felt* as though it was meant to be" (229), "and that it is with him I *feel* I belong" (267) and even when the Stranger returns, she feels him close, "He's here! Yes, yes – I *feel* it" (synes) (281, italics are all mine). She feels a deep, inner connection that she does not understand but follows because it is stronger than her. In this way, Ibsen makes us understand how central the theme of the subconscious is in this work, where our understanding of the intimate and primitive bond that binds Ellida is subordinate to psychological insight. The entire play revolves around Ellida's search for identity, and this journey can also be traced through psychological liberation. The Stranger is much more than a man she has married; he represents everything Ellida wants to be, i.e. free, but also everything she fears. I will explore this theme further later, focusing on the final choice.

Finally, another way of explaining the relationship between the two could be that proposed by Janet Garton, who, focusing on the Stranger as a merman, argues that Ellida was bewitched, becoming a victim of this character's dark and magical abilities.

> The Stranger is a merman, is even the sea itself. His eyes, like the baby's, change with the sea. Ellida has been enticed by this sea creature as is the maiden in the eighteenth-century ballad of *Agnete og Havmanden* (Agnete and the Merman), and in the play based on that ballad by Hans Christian Andersen, *Agnete og Havmanden* (1833), to which Ibsen's play bears many resemblances. Another story of Andersen's with which comparison is clearly invited is his *Den lille Havfrue* (The Little Mermaid, 1837), in which the mermaid chooses life on land at great sacrifice to herself and without ever finding a home in her new environment. (Garton 1994: 117)

In fact, she says to the Stranger: “Don’t *tempt* me like that” (281, italics are mine), characterising the merman as a tempter, a quality commonly attributed to sirens who bewitch sailors. Again: “Oh, this thing which pulls and *tempts* and *seduces* – into the unknown! The entire power of the sea is gathered within it” (282, italics are mine).

Another feature that supports this hypnotic nature is the terror that Ellida feels in the eyes of the Stranger, whom she perceives as an irresistible force of attraction. She is obsessed with his gaze, constantly repeating that he must not look at her, as if his magnetic gaze had the power to hypnotise her and deprive her of what little reason she has left. The power of the eyes reflects one of the legends that Ibsen discovered before publishing *The Lady from the Sea.* Following this interpretation, Ellida would be passive because she is completely subjugated by the magnetic power of the sea, personified by the magical figure of the Stranger, who may have transformed her into a mermaid.

The other aspect that makes the Stranger such an interesting and fully interpretable non-human character has nothing to do with his role in relation to Ellida, but with his own identity and story. As a sailor, he represents an extension of the sea itself, a small part of it. He belongs to the sea much more than Ellida does: the sea raised him, shaped him, protected him and gave him back his life. Several times we think he has drowned, first after killing the captain and then after the shipwreck in the Channel, but each time he comes back to life as if drowning were not synonymous with death, as it is for any other man, but for him, whom we recognise as a sea creature, it is nothing more than a momentary reunion with his whole, his original matter.

This interpretation is reinforced by the expression used by Ellida when talking about their marriage: “the two of us were now wedded to the sea” (229), not to each other, but to the sea. It is as if he already belonged to the sea and wanted to make Ellida part of this whole, instead of just his own. This marriage is reminiscent of the ceremony held in some seaside towns, such as Venice, to propitiate sailors’ voyages or to seal inviolable pacts. I cannot confirm that Ibsen was really inspired by the Venetian “Marriage of the Sea ceremony” as there is no evidence to support this, but it is also true

that the author lived in Italy for years and this ceremony has ancient origins and is moderately well known throughout Italy.

With this character, it is as if the relationship between human and non-human is dissolved or equalised, where the Sailor, as a man, becomes part of the whole and is seen as a being among many others. There is no human exceptionalism or hierarchy, but a natural one in which there is balance. Reading it from an evolutionary perspective, we have said that the Stranger represents a primordial natural state, a subhuman state where humans had not yet come to earth and was detached from other species by culture and technology. The Stranger, in fact, has no name and no clear belonging, fully representing Spencer's idea of evolution as a transition from the undefined to the defined, from simplicity to complexity (Rosengarten 1977: 470). Consequently, the relationship between him and other creatures is nostalgically equal. From an ecocritical point of view, the comparison between these two states of human existence and between harmony and disharmony is natural.

4.2.3 Freshwater creatures

The freshwater non-humans are carps; old animals raised in captivity in the pond in the Wangel family garden. They live repetitive lives, swimming around in the same pool, passively facing each day as if it were a sentence. The two sisters' views of the pond are diametrically opposed, emblematic of their different personalities and worldviews. When asked by Mr. Arnholm about the condition of the carps, Hilde replies that they are still alive: "They're so tough. But we'll make sure to catch 'em now." (Ibsen 2019: 235). This phrase in particular, with the verb *catch* (*få*), suggests that the pond is a fishing spot and that the carps have managed to escape the fisherman's hook for a long time. In this case, this place is seen as a place of leisure, preferred to the open sea because it is considered more mysterious and "more exciting" (236). We know that Hilde is looking for thrills and excitement, as if to fill the void left by the love she lost from her mother. As if she was emotionally illiterate, she feels "wrong" emotions in situations that would move other people differently, such as when she sees others in difficulty and imagines tragic endings. Faced with the young and sick Lyngstrand, who we know will

never reach old age, she describes how exciting it is to be dressed as a young widow and to flirt with the poor man, implying that she could be the woman who mourns him as her husband. But she also describes as exciting the thought of the poor man who deludes himself that he can travel and fulfil his dream of becoming a sculptor, when it is very likely that he will not live long enough to do any of these things. In the case of the pond, does Hilde feel excitement at the thought of capturing such resilient animals? Is she attracted by the tragedy of ending the lives of these old and strong animals that have survived all the harsh weather? Or has she already grasped their symbolic and metaphorical function, which her sister Bolette sees, and is it precisely because of this awareness that she wants to eliminate them?

Bolette, on the other hand, feels very different emotions: she is compassionate and saddened by the plight of the poor fish who will never know their free and wild counterparts.

> BOLETTE: After all, we're so completely cut off here from everything that's going on. Well, nearly, at least.
> ARNHOLM: But, Bolette dear, you can't quite say that.
> BOLETTE: Yes, we are. I don't think we live such very different lives from the carp in the pond down there. They've got the fjord so close, where great shoals of wild fish stream in and out. But these poor domestic fish know nothing of that. And they'll never get to join the others. (236)

With these words, Ibsen clearly presents the pond as a representation of human life in this play. Bolette sees herself in the pond: she lives in a small seaside town, enclosed by the fjord, where shoals of wild fish pass by, representing tourists from the outside world, who allow her to experience that breath of worldliness that every dark winter takes away. Their passing revives her desire to know the world, to escape from her pond that forces her to take responsibility for always going round in circles, doing and seeing the same things. It is also interesting to note how the sea fish in these lines are described as shoals, in groups, as if to emphasise the loneliness of the condition of humans locked in their natural prison. She sees no hope in her future: "I think I'm probably destined to stay here in the carp pond" (239), but again, as with Ellida, it will be a man who pulls her out of the water and takes her away: Mr. Arnholm.

But it is undoubtedly also a representation of Ellida's life, locked in a fjord, far from the open sea and forced into monotony. Her situation, however, is perhaps sadder because Ellida knows what is on the other side, she hears the call of the sea that the carps ignore, and this awareness increases her suffering. This situation of helplessness is reminiscent of the Ekdals' family's attic and the animals that live there passively, frozen in time. Like them, the carps are objectified and seen as mere instruments of pleasure for the man who can hunt and fish them at will. It is therefore clear that the type of relationship we see here between humans and non-humans is exactly the same: hierarchical, based on power and exploitation. Once again, the pond seems like an attempt to enclose wild nature, in this case the sea, replicating an artificial, miniature version, just like the artificial forest in the ancient world. At the same time, however, the pond "is a very negative setting that is symbolic of the characters' choices in life and ironic because, despite its stagnation, the characters who sit near it ultimately choose not to stagnate any longer" (Thompson 1986).

To summarise, we have seen how an anthropocentric interpretation is extremely immediate with the character of Ellida and the carps in the pond, while the sea creatures and the Stranger are more easily freed from this constraint. An anthropocentric interpretation of Ellida sees her as a creature objectified by her husband, who "bought" her through marriage and considers her a clinical case to be solved, but at the same time a rare exotic animal to be proud of. The lady from the sea is exploited to boost the ego of a man who wants to possess something so peculiar, even though he does not know how to relate to her. Bolette and Hilde also do not see Ellida for who she is, but for what she should be but stubbornly refuses to be: a stepmother and a housewife. For the two stepdaughters, the woman is a symbol, with a specific role in family dynamics, and cannot be anything else. The Ellida they relate to from the beginning has no value for them precisely because she is not functional.

Similarly, the anthropocentrism in all the characters' interpretation of the carps is obvious: they are not actual animals but tools, either as prey to be caught or as symbols of the characters' existence. Bolette's emotional reaction at seeing them cannot be interpreted as empathy towards captive animals, precisely because the comparison she makes between humans' lives and those of the carps is clear.

Whereas if we think of The Stranger and the sea creatures, it is easier to go beyond their literary role and see them for what they are. I have already mentioned how their vivid description allows the reader to imagine them and therefore consider them as actual animals. Again, we are not talking about symbols, metaphors or tools, but synecdoche, or rather part of the whole, an interpretation that frees them from any anthropocentric meaning. The animals are there, but neither the characters nor Ibsen attach any meaning to them, thus allowing us to avoid seeking any hierarchical relationship between human and non-human.

The same applies to the Stranger: he is not in a relationship of dominance with the land creatures, but the only two relationships he has are with Ellida and the sea. In the first case, since neither of them are human, I do not think we can question what kind of human/non-human relationship binds them because it is an "interspecies" relationship. This does not mean that it is an equal relationship because, as we have seen in Ellida's language, she feels obliged to do the Stranger's will because she belongs to him. However, analysing this aspect does not translate into an anthropocentric reading of the Stranger. Furthermore, he does not present himself as a symbol of anything other than the sea, but just like marine animals, rather than being exploited, he is presented as part of nature, a manifestation of it that wants to draw Ellida to him. Consequently, the second type of relationship involving the Stranger, that with the sea, is nothing more than an equal one, where the non-human is harmoniously counted on the same level as other marine creatures and the sea itself.

4.3 Land creatures

This distinction is proposed by Ellida herself at the end of the play:

> ELLIDA: ... once we've become *land creatures*, we can't find our way back to the sea. Nor to the life of the sea. ...
> BALLESTED: … Human beings, in contrast – they can acclaim-acclimate-atise themselves!
> ELLIDA: Yes, with *freedom* they can, Mr. Ballested
> WANGEL: And *responsibility*, dearest Ellida. (Ibsen 2019: 286, italics are mine)

The entire Wangel family and all the other characters we see on stage return. Ellida and Wangel identify what the two main characteristics of earthbound creatures should be: freedom and responsibility. Ellida means the freedom to choose, to live carefree and to free herself from the past that haunts her, while her husband completes his wife's thought with the responsibility that comes from the very freedom to make choices. But is this really the case? Looking at the lives of the individual characters, are they really free or are they also prisoners of the mainland?

Bolette, for example, Wangel's eldest daughter, undoubtedly cannot be defined as free, nor does she define herself as such. In the first part of the work, she is a young woman who has become a mother to her younger sister, a housekeeper being the only one who takes care of the house, and in doing so has put her education and future on hold. She is a woman who, even when she is outside her home, prefers to stay on the veranda; therefore, she is not completely separated from what is also her prison, as if she too has a constant call to responsibility that she cannot silence. It is only in the second part of the play that she chooses to leave and agree to marry Mr. Arnholm, seeing him as the only means of escaping from that house. Once again, even though she could escape from those walls, she will live a life of compromise, alongside a man she does not love, but who is the only support she believes she can receive in order to find herself. She was free to choose, but we are not sure that she will actually be able to do so, as she has not yet received her father's consent. So even in this regard, having reached a possible turning point in her life, she depends on her father's decision, which seems to be delayed, considering that his full attention is focused on Ellida.

Wangel also defines himself as free: more than once we find him described as "as free as the wind" (208), but we also know that the air is dreadful, suffocating, there is "not enough strength and fullness in the breeze" (225), all characteristics that do not make us think of a free wind. In fact, Wangel is as free as *this* wind, which is not free at all, because, as a member of bourgeois society, he is bound by reputation and he wonders what will become of him and Ellida if they divorce. Remaining in the semantic sphere, Ellida says to him: "You have everything you live and *breathe* for here. Your life's

purpose is right here" (226, italics are mine), because this kind of air is enough for him. He was born and raised in this place, he is perfectly integrated into society and his goal in life is perfectly achievable within this environment. Those who have acclimatised live an apparent freedom made up of compromise and adaptation, and this is precisely what characterises all the creatures of the play.

So, the choice to call them land creatures is not an attempt to animalise or naturalise them, but rather to question the opposing creatures, belonging in the world of Ellida.
These land people are in fact presented to us as a model of humanity, but not a perfect model to aspire to, rather a model of pure realism. Through the evolutionary undertones he gave to the work, Ibsen wanted to question humans as the end point of an evolution that is not necessarily synonymous with perfection. This is important because, observing the general morality, we see a relationship between humans and non-humans where the usual hierarchy that sees humans as superior beings, which the characters in the play are convinced of and reproduce in their symbolisation of Ellida and the other non-humans, is overturned.

4.4 The choice

Ellida's choice is undoubtedly the most discussed passage by Ibsen critics, as it can be interpreted in one way but also in its opposite. I guided my reflection by trying to answer three questions I asked myself. The first, which I have already answered in part, is whether the relationships between humans and non-humans that we have encountered so far can be rewritten as a result of this choice. So, whether Ellida will be seen and treated differently by her new family and by the Stranger.
The second concerns the essence of Ellida and what she becomes with her choice, always considering the evolutionary interpretation. Finally, having characterised Ellida as a non-human, I wondered about the concept of captivity and imprisonment: whether and why this concept is interrupted and how it became a tool for Ellida's growth.

To answer the first question, I observed the Stranger's behaviour towards Ellida during their first encounter: she already tells him that she does not want to see him and that she does not want to go with him, and she asks him to leave, but he never takes her seriously. The same thing happens in their second encounter: initially, she repeats that she does not want to follow him, but he continues to ignore her words. The Stranger takes her choice seriously and considers her words definitive after her husband gives her complete freedom. Why is this? Throughout the first part of the speech, but also throughout the first part of the play, she has never been truly free and, above all, she has never been completely human. As a result, her words had no value; she could not choose. The moment she receives full freedom from her husband, Ellida becomes human, and at that point her words carry weight. This is why the mermaid in the painting dies on the beach, because she is unable to acclimatise, unable to choose and unable to evolve. Ellida, on the other hand, has finally had the chance to become human and as such she can survive, and therefore evolution can continue. By valuing Ellida's words only when she becomes human, it is possible to interpret a devaluation of non-humans, whose voices do not count. It does not matter that it is another non-human, the Stranger, who ignores her words, because the silence of their voices is seen as a general condition. When she becomes human with the freedom granted by Wangel, a human/non-human relationship is created in which the Stranger must listen to her, because her voice now has more value than his.

That said, the relationship between Ellida and the Stranger certainly changes, not only because he will disappear from her life and she will no longer feel this pull, but because the Stranger's hypnotic hold over her is broken. She ceases to be the passive companion, incapable of making a decision that has not already been made by the sailor and becomes an actor both in this relationship and in her family life. Ellida changes her relationship with her stepdaughters and decides to accept being the bourgeois woman that everyone expected her to be. A life full of disappointment and devoid of freedom lies ahead for her, where once again we see a woman imprisoned by her nineteenth-century role. The final lines, accompanied by the steamboat sailing away at the end of its last summer voyage and the consequent realisation that with the arrival of winter the fjords will freeze over and the sea

will become inaccessible, convey a feeling of melancholy (Quazzolo 2012: 29). “Once we’ve become land creatures, we can’t find our way back out to the sea. Not to the life of the sea” (Ibsen 2019: 286). So we can say that the human/non-human relationship does not change but is eliminated and another one is reconstructed between humans.

This leads to the second question: who and what does Ellida become after her choice? Ellida chooses to abandon her essence as a mermaid and become a land creature because:

> in being allowed to choose *she (re)discovers her own humanity...* Choosing the stranger would, according to the argument of the play, mean choosing to become submerged and dissolved into the prehuman, into what is characterised by fluidity and constant change – between ecstasy and horror. Staying with Wangel, however, before he gives her the freedom of choice, would mean remaining oppressed by the laws and conventions of society, and being forced to serve a husband on demand. Whereas going with the tide, so to speak, would mean the dissolution of individuality, living according to conventions imposed by society would mean its stifling. (Johansen 2007: 33)

Once again, following evolutionary theory, Ellida chooses the acclimatisation offered by a life with Wangel as a way to define her identity and stop living at the mercy of the waves and nature. As Wangel himself acknowledges: “your mind is like the sea. It ebbs and it follows” (284), meaning that Ellida had no control over her mind, but her thoughts and moods fluctuated and followed the tide. She was dependent on her surroundings, influenced by memories and unable to fight back. So, following evolutionary theory, she conquers dry land, but here another doubt arises: could she have done otherwise? Are we really talking about choice if we consider this scientific interpretation? As a transient creature, is Ellida not deterministically compelled to become human? I believe that in order to give value to her choice as a turning point in the work, it is essential to recognise the relative and non-deterministic importance of Darwin’s theory, giving the decision back to Ellida.

The theme of captivity, on the other hand, can be interpreted in different ways.

Ellida may be a prisoner of her own mental illusions linked to her past with the Stranger, and this captivity can be seen in her obsession with bathing every day as if she were under the spell of the sea. In this case, therefore, this mental captivity prevents her from enjoying her marriage and her life on

earth. According to Forshey, this fantasy leads her to interpret her marriage to Wangel as imprisonment and alienates her from her daughters and her social role (Forshey 2008: 20). Only in the final confrontation, when Wangel gives her complete freedom, can Ellida destroy her mental captivity: "Since the Stranger only represents for Ellida her own imperfect understanding of what she wants from life, it only takes a final maturity of will to break his power and let him sink into nothingness" (Andreas-Salomé 1989: 107). The return of the Stranger to Ellida's life is therefore essential to allow her to escape from this imprisonment in which she would otherwise have continued to live. This imprisonment is also a place that protects her, and it is clear from her behaviour that Ellida is afraid of autonomy and freedom. We see this when she asks Wangel to protect her and save her from herself: "Oh Wangel – save me from myself" (249). This line is interesting because it allows us another interpretation linked once again to Ellida's psychological depth and search for identity. If, as Robert Raphael suggests, we consider the sea as a metaphor for the depths of selfhood that continually call Ellida with her daily baths to maintain control over her, it means that for her the sea represents her unconscious. Something that attracts her with its "pull" but also frightens and terrifies her. So this terror and, at the same time, this imprisonment is inside her; therefore, Wangel must not protect her from the Stranger but from herself. And this is the same reason why he cannot really do so, just as he cannot control her, because that part of her is not controllable even by Ellida herself, let alone by Wangel. "It simply means that Ellida's true sense of identity, her real self with all its hell and disturbance, is threatened with extinction in the carp pond, in her being forced to play a social role in her legal union with Wangel, a role which endangers and violates her personality" (Raphael 1963: 47). So her imprisonment is leading to the complete annihilation of her personality, and Wangel, by denying her the choice, saying "my wife has no choice here" (Ibsen 2019: 282) and presenting himself as the only one capable of making decisions, is in fact replacing her. It is only her husband's gesture of pure empathy towards her that unlocks her.

And yet, another interpretation of this imprisonment can be linked to being trapped in a life that Ellida did not consciously choose. When she reproaches her husband for buying her and regrets having

accepted this exchange, she feels as if she had no choice. Ellida was probably a young girl tired of the judgements of her fellow villagers, who wanted to try to be part of her community by entering into the patterns outside of which she was born, and for this reason she agreed to the marriage. We know that her mother died of madness, we don’t know how long before, but it could be that Ellida was afraid of ending up the same way and wanted to escape this possible future, forgetting for a moment the comfort that life at the lighthouse brought her. Here we see Ellida as a child, looking around for guidance but finding only figures ready to exploit her. First, the Stranger traps her by making her believe that he can give her a sense of belonging, make her part of his kin, and she, needing company, follows the Stranger’s decisions without question. But then she realises that this is a form of imprisonment with a man obsessed with her and from whom she cannot escape. She thus enters another cage, that of marriage to Wangel, hoping to forget the first, but once again she has to change her mind. At first, it would seem that the memory of the Stranger has faded, but when Ellida gives birth to a son who has the eyes of the sailor, she realises once again that she has remained in captivity. Ellida’s growth comes through these mistakes, experiencing one extreme after another, leaving us wondering where the balance lies. We would not want to sell her back to Wangel, but rather see Ellida in her natural form, a woman outside the box, living self-sufficiently off her relationship with nature. But Ibsen must bring us back to realism and return Ellida to her 19th-century bourgeois box.

4.5 Environmental teaching

Ibsen’s proposal of non-humans in the play allows us to reflect differently than in the previous play. Here, carps and marine animals represent the two extremes of the condition of non-humans: alienating captivity and inviolable freedom. The question seems to be where Ellida, and humanity in general, should position themselves in relation to these two poles in order to be “better and happier” (240). If we consider this positioning as synonymous with the concept of *acclimatisation*, how can we do

this in order to seek human well-being? If we think of the acclimatisation of Ballested, who abandoned his passion for theatre to reinvent himself as a handyman in the village, just to fit in, we wonder whether his adaptation is introduced by Ibsen as a mirror or a warning for Ellida's journey. The woman in fact follows Ballested's actions and also abandons what is most dear to her, namely the sea, so that she can reinvent herself as a woman of the village. But we know that the outcome of this choice will not be the human wellbeing we are seeking, because Ellida renounces her relationship with nature. This play aims to show how fundamental it is for human wellbeing to have a healthy relationship with nature in order to evolve better and happier. Ellida's relationship with nature during her marriage is not authentic and without limits as it used to be: for example, although she prefers to be outside, she spends her time in the garden, which is separated from the natural world outside by a gate. Furthermore, the Wangel house is located in a position from which the sea is barely visible, the element that allows Ellida to be at peace with herself is almost completely invisible from the scene. This may have been a necessary choice, as it is difficult to render the sea on stage but much more feasible to create it in the background in the distance, but I think Ibsen was aware of this limitation and wanted to exploit it. This cancelled centrality is reminiscent of the wild duck, which, despite being the key element of the whole play, is never present on stage, serving only as a symbolic element.

Ellida's path of acclimatisation can be defined as wrong, ecocritically speaking, because she severs her roots with nature in order to continue her evolution. Ibsen seems to suggest that life in nature and social life cannot coexist and that in order to fully participate in one, it is necessary to abandon the other. And since nature represents freedom, he seems to be telling us that in order to fit into social and bourgeois patterns, we must abandon freedom and follow social expectations and roles. Ibsen remains within realism, showing us what is sadly rather than what we would like it to be.

Although Ellida does not choose nature, it is not dormant or completely passive but becomes active through certain non-humans. Among the active non-humans, we have identified sea creatures and the

Stranger/the sea. But in the first case, the creatures' actions do not affect Ellida's life or that of the other characters, while in the second case, the sea is the determining factor. We can also see this in the reference to the theme of revenge that we find in this play. Ellida, talking to Wangel about the unattached life she has led since the beginning of their marriage, says: "But there's a payback in this. Something taking its revenge. Because now there's no power to bond me here – no support for me here – no help – nothing to pull me towards the very thing that should have been our innermost joint possession" (271). Ellida, in attempting to live a life that did not belong to her and did not value her, denied her authenticity and is punished for it. But it is an inner punishment; she is her own jailer, where her mind and subconscious terrify and confuse her. Once again, indirectly, nature takes its revenge: her essence as a sea woman who felt betrayed sent the Stranger to take her place, first in the form of minks, but then in flesh and blood, to Ellida to bring her back to the right path. Just as the humans in *The Wild Duck* challenged nature, in *The Lady from the Sea* Ellida did the same, as did Wangel, by trying to trap a sea spirit.

5.When We Dead Awaken

5.1 Context and Summary

Although *Når vi døde vågner* (1899, *When We Dead Awaken*) did not receive the attention it deserved and has not been staged countless times, it carries with it an important value in Ibsen's dramatic production. First of all, it has a strong autobiographical character, clearly traceable to the protagonist Rubek's search for a home where he can feel comfortable after many travels. During the years he was writing this play, Ibsen was experiencing the same difficulty, having returned to his homeland but feeling homeless. In a letter written to Georg Brandes in June 1897, Ibsen wrote:

> Oh, my dear Brandes, one is not unaffected by living abroad for 27 years in a free and liberating cultural climate. Here, or rather up here beside the fjords, is the country of my birth. But – but – but: where can I find my home country? The sea is what I am most drawn to. – – – Otherwise I go round here on my own, planning some sort of new drama. But I can't see clearly yet what it's going to be. (Ibsen 1897)[10]

From this letter, we also understand that this is the year in which he began to think about the work, although he would not write it until 1899, the year of its completion and publication. The work takes its full name from *When We Dead Awaken. A Dramatic Epilogue in Three Acts* and it is precisely because of the term "epilogue" that it has been interpreted by many contemporary critics as a declaration by the author of the end of his artistic production. In fact, Ibsen himself specified during an interview that this was not the case because what he meant by the term epilogue was:

> ... that the play forms an epilogue to a number of my dramas, beginning with "A Doll's House" and ending now with "When We Dead Awaken". The latter work comes under the experiences I have wanted to describe in these plays. They form a unity, a whole, and thus I have finished. If I come to write something more hereafter, it will all be in quite a different connection, and perhaps in a different form as well. (Ibsen 1899)[11]

Conclusion of what? It is not entirely clear what Ibsen meant because in different situations he spoke of an epilogue to all his works, or only to those following *A Doll's House,* or even the conclusion of

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[10] https://www.hf.uio.no/is/english/services/virtual-ibsen-centre/on-ibsen-s-work/nv/ in Brief Description
[11] Ibid.

his tetralogy. It remains clear that many thematic paths begun in previous works are taken up again, some of which I have analysed in the two previous chapters, and that here symbolism is the protagonist of the scenes more than ever. Even the dialogues, which seem more like intersecting monologues, lose the literary complexity of previous works, such as *Ghosts*, to leave room for a freer and more complex interpretation. Among the themes we see unfolding is certainly the resolution of truth, a theme that accompanied Ibsen throughout his works. Joan Templeton believes that "the commonly noted vertical movement of the drama's three settings – from a sea level spa to a mountain resort to a high mountainside – marks a clear, spiritual ascension" (Templeton 1997: 317), which corresponds to the final attainment of truth. This is accompanied by the upward tension of the characters, which we have already seen in *The Wild Duck*, where the abandonment of the watery depths and, in this case, the ascent to the heights represent the point of arrival and liberation. Social expectations return, in the form of a life lived in the name of art and professional affirmation, which rob the characters of the possibility of truly live their lives.

We also see an overcoming and questioning of idealism, also a companion of Ibsen's dramatic journey, to make way for a hint of modernism, where art is no longer seen as a means of achieving the true and the right. All the works in the tetralogy, *The Master Builder, Lylle Eyolf* (1894, *Little Eyolf*), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken*, see their protagonists idealising their lives, building and seeking something that can elevate them, but which distances them from real life. One example is Harvard Solness in *The Master Builder*, who, in his boundless desire to establish himself as the best builder in town, exploits his family tragedy to use the land for his aspirations and subsequently ignores his wife, the last anchor in his real life. Another theme that unites the four works is the reckless selfishness of the four characters who, in their "denial of finitude", are unable and/or unwilling to understand and recognise those around them. "These characters wreck their own lives and those of others because they don't know how to see others, don't know how to love and don't know how to begin coming to terms with their own morality" (Moi 2014: XXXIX). These last plays

are a reflection on the finitude of life, questioning success and happiness as if Ibsen himself, nearing the end of his career, was trying to look back and reflect on his life as an artist.

Another recurring theme is the past, a past that this time was happy, when Rubek was at the height of his fame, but which torments him by reminding him of the man he no longer is. This intersects with a critique of bourgeois society, with its superficiality and appearances; once again, we find women as victims of men's choices: Irene has never lived except as a muse, and she sacrificed herself. We see Nora again in Irene and Maya, who have lived as if locked in a prison because, as Lyngstrand reminds us: "she should live for his art too" (Ibsen 2019: 252), this is their duty.

As mentioned above, the setting of the three acts of *When We Dead Awaken* always remains outside and changes as the characters tend upwards. The first act takes place in the garden of a spa hotel by the sea, where a husband and his wife drink and read a newspaper. This peaceful and quiet setting introduces us to Professor Arnold Rubek, an accomplished sculptor who, having achieved fame with his famous work "Resurrection Day", lives emptied of his inspiration and creates busts on commission for the bourgeoisie. His wife, Maja, is younger than him and certainly more joyful and lively than her husband. The woman has lived with him for many years, convinced that he would take her "up on to a high mountain" (Ibsen 2014: 244) to show her all the glory of the world, but she has been disappointed and bored. The monotony is broken by the appearance of two unusual figures who intrigue the sculptor: a pale-faced woman dressed in a white dress, Irene, enters the scene accompanied by a sister of mercy. Her appearance is almost ghostly, and her composure and rigidity make her look like a spirit or a ghost. Shortly after she disappears, the fourth and final central character of the play enters the scene: Ulfheim. He is a renowned bear hunter in the area and enters accompanied by Lars, his servant, and his hungry hunting dogs. From his arrival, we can guess the two new pairings: Maja follows Ulfheim to see how his dogs eat, while Rubek approaches Irene. We thus discover that Irene was Rubek's model for many years, until the creation of his most famous sculpture, after which the woman fled. Their meeting is more of a confrontation, with Irene accusing

Rubek of having used her like an object and of never having seen her as a woman in the flesh. The woman regrets not having destroyed Rubek's creation, which she calls their child, before leaving, because perhaps this gesture would not have caused her to live in misery for all these years. The man reveals that without her he has lost his creative ability and has devoted himself to commercial works lacking in personality and depth. Irene suggests that Rubek should go higher in the mountains instead of continuing his journey along the coast with Maja, so that the two of them can meet again. Meanwhile, Maja, being fascinated by Ulfheim, has abandoned the idea of a cruise on the fjords. The desire of the two to move upwards leads to a change of setting in the second act to a sanatorium in the mountains. Here, the choices of the four characters and the formation of the two couples become even more defined. Maja is completely captivated by Ulfheim's normal life, which takes her hunting and allows her to breathe the freedom she lost years ago when she married Rubek. The two spouses are aware that their union has become deleterious and harmful to both of them: Maja does not know who she really is, and Rubek is bored with their life together. But while she pushes him to make a decision about their separation, probably hoping to be freed from this bond, Rubek once again shows his selfishness by expressing his need to have Irene by his side, the only one capable of opening the treasure chest of his heart, without giving up Maja. Irene and the sculptor thus return to confront their past: their dialogue is filled with remorse, resentment and pain. Rubek makes confrontation difficult because he continues to put himself and his worldview on a pedestal, justifying himself by saying that he is an artist and could not do otherwise. Irene, however, had abandoned herself, stopped being a woman, given up the idea of having children, all for a man she loved but who saw her only as an "episode" (279) in his artistic production. Rubek idealised her to create "the world's most noble, pure, ideal woman" (258), but in doing so, he achieved the opposite effect: by not acknowledging his love for her and, above all, by not recognising that she was in love with him, he stopped seeing her as a living being and turned her into stone (Moi 2014: XXXVII). However, the idea arose between the two to recover the life they had never lived and, inspired by Maja, who was radiant with joy at the possibility of freedom in the mountains, they decided to meet again and climb the mountain. Maja

and Ulfheim, among the mountain peaks above the sanatorium, where the man has a cabin, have consolidated their agreement regarding their future life together from which the woman gains her freedom while the man gains a companion for life. Maja does not explicitly agree to Ulfheim's proposal not to separate, but she does so implicitly by accepting the man's help in descending the steep mountain. Maja is aware that she is giving up beauty: the hunter is not a handsome man, the house he offers her is not as luxurious as she was used to and has no beautiful works of art to admire, but she is happy with her sacrifice, as if she were aware of the price to pay for a free, authentic and normal life. With the storm approaching, the two decide to descend into the valley, while Rubek and Irene, heedless of the danger and driven by a blind urge to climb higher, continue their ascent. But before they reach the promised bright glory, the two are swept away by an avalanche that, heedless of their efforts and ambitions, destroys them. The work ends with Maja's song as she carefree continues her descent from the mountain towards her new life.

This conclusion is undoubtedly reminiscent of the ending of *Brand* (1866), and for this and other similarities, many critics have seen *When We Dead Awaken* as the epilogue to *Brand*. The two plays feature two men who, blinded by ambition and pure idealism, remove from their lives all the figures dear to them that allowed them to anchor themselves to real life. While Brand climbs the icy mountain in search of his Ice Church, symbol of his absolute ideal, Rubek climbs to the summit to reconnect with his past idealism and overcome it thanks to the presence of Irene. The two avalanches overwhelm the man who dared to seek too high, who was not satisfied but sought the absolute. It is thought-provoking that one of his first works and his last reach the same ending, as if it were a circle closing, as if the entire journey that Ibsen's dramatic characters, and the author himself, have taken throughout the production leads back to the starting point. What did Ibsen mean? That his journey was futile and led him nowhere? That regardless of what you do, "destiny" will fall upon you? Or perhaps that no matter how much man convinces himself that he can bend, subjugate and create nature, he always remains inferior to it?

The theme of nature and human's relationship with it returns in a disruptive and central way. After *The Lady from the Sea*, where the presence of the sea was all-encompassing and decisive for Ellida's story, here we see how the mountains with their high peaks are not just a backdrop, but the personification of nature itself. The reason I chose to analyse this work is because I believe that here the epilogue of the human/nonhuman relationship reaches its peak and fulfilment: "their reunion through and with the mountain is what Ellida only envisions with the sea, but not unlike what Hedvig achieves in her self-induced union with the inner forest that is an inner sanctum of sorts" (Cless 2010: 199). The nature locked up and exploited in the Ekdals' attic, which has become Ellida's life companion, finally becomes the protagonist and defines human existence.

What I wanted to do with this analysis is precisely this: by observing the non-humans in the play and considering nature itself as one of them, to understand how relationships have evolved. There will be relationships within the play that seem not to change the relationship of subordination we are used to, but the framework that refers to the larger and more all-encompassing relationship of all will reverse the roles of actor and affected. What is alive and what is dead in this play? How can we interpret the conclusion and what did Ibsen want to communicate?

5.2 Bestiary

I have decided to divide this bestiary into two parts: first, I will present those non-humans that are created by humans through artistic skill or imagination, namely the farmyard animals carved in rock by Rubek, and the birds that are created with the imagination of Rubek and Irene by throwing petals into the stream. Then there are animals such as dogs, bears and other hunting animals that exist but never appear on stage. We can see how all of these can be interpreted symbolically and metaphorically, but only a few have a deeper meaning. The text also contains other references to animals, mostly birds, always in a metaphorical sense, such as a crow and a generic bird. Another distinction I would like to propose is that between land animals and flying animals, because if we

look at which characters they are associated with, we can see another type of symbolic characterisation for humans.

5.2.1 Farmyard animals

In the first act, Maja and Rubek discuss his artistic production in the years following the creation of his famous sculpture "Resurrection Day". The sculptor devotes himself to commissioned busts, which, however, are not "really portrait busts" (243) but, beyond their superficial resemblance, conceal something secret that only Rubek himself can see.

> RUBEK: ... at the deepest level they're all worthy, respectable horse faces, stubborn donkey muzzles, low-slung, lop-eared dog skulls and fatted swine heads – as well as the occasional brutish, flabby likenesses of oxen –.
> MAJA: – all the best-loved farmyard animals, then.
> RUBEK: Only the best-loved farmyard animals, Maja. All those creatures man has corrupted in his image. And which in turn have corrupted man. (243-244)

These non-human animals are used by Rubek to represent the true appearance of the people who commissioned the busts. This is probably a way for him to continue digging deep, but also to entertain himself and convince himself that he is not doing work that is less worthy than what he used to do. Or it may also be that, having been disappointed by the masses' lack of understanding of his masterpiece, he decided to conceal the true form of his work because he knew that it would not be appreciated anyway, as a form of resignation. As Anne-Marie Stanton-Ife notes in the Penguin Edition, the choice of resemblance between humans and non-humans "in terms of character and moral habitus is indebted to *Physiognomica* (from around 100 BC), and more generally to the popular pseudoscience of physiognomy" (Ibsen 2014: 309). So, one justification would be that Rubek, after getting to know his clients, decided to represent them first superficially as they requested, but then, based on the impression he had of them, decided to link each of them to an animal. It is not certain that Ibsen had any knowledge in this area, but given his interest in evolutionism, Darwin and Spencer, it would not be surprising.

Beyond the possible physical resemblance, the curious question is why these non-humans?

What they have in common, as Maja noted, is that they are all farm animals. Horses, donkeys, dogs, oxen and pigs are all domesticated animals, a term that in this case is replaced by the word "corrupted", thus becoming objects exploitable by humans and by Rubek in his art. They are also all common animals, stubborn and clumsy, characteristics that echo Ibsen's image of the bourgeoisie, and we cannot help but read those "worthy" and "respectable" as ironic. Undoubtedly, the creation of the double face can be read as a social critique of the bourgeoisie, probably the commissioning class, which lives on appearances, while Ibsen, through Rubek, wanted to unmask them. Through this choice, Rubek expresses his disgust for society, which he conceals, producing an inauthentic work in line with the decadent art he has been producing in recent years.
I wonder if this is the opinion Ibsen had of these animals to use them in such a sad animalisation. The result of these lines is not only the ridicule of the clients, but also of the animals themselves, because they are juxtaposed with the bourgeoisie, whose average opinion we know from Ibsen. Because of this choice, Rubek himself is tainted by corruption because, like the other men, he "has corrupted in his image" (244) by exploiting the animal for this comparison.

It is also very interesting to analyse the second part of Rubek's statement: "and which in turn have corrupted man" (244). A theme discussed when talking about othering is that of boundaries, i.e. for two categories to be considered separate from each other, there must be borders that mark the end of one category and the beginning of another. In our case, we introduce the concept of "becoming an animal" when this boundary is crossed and one is infected by the animal group. I refer here to Ann-Sofie Lönngren's study on *Tschandala*[12], already mentioned in previous chapters, with regard to the metamorphosis that the character of Jensen undergoes by being continuously animalised. Jensen is linguistically, and not only linguistically, brought into existence in this border, which is an extremely

[12] A. Strindberg, *Tschandala,* 2007, Norwich, Nordvik Press. In the novel, Jensen is animalised through his closeness to animals, with whom he lives in close contact; furthermore, he wears animal-derived clothing, alternates between a pleasing and docile attitude and a restless one and is dirty. In the end, this process is completed in the final scene, when Jensen – by illusion – "becomes a dog" and dies among them.

productive place: by comparing the human and animal categories, we can see both differences between the two and similarities resulting from their mutual influence.
In our case, the place of contact is the farmyard, where domesticated animals and humans live in close contact and influence each other. This is where contagion occurs: humans, probably feeling protected by their belonging to their category, are not afraid of contagion and do not avoid contact. The human thus becomes both domesticated and animalised. In the first case, we can read another criticism of bourgeois society: the members of this class are docile, dull people who follow rules and expectations in the hope of a reward, that is social praise. In the second case, animalisation, which has negative and derisive connotations, contributes to the creation of sub-humans.

To conclude this discussion on becoming animal, I would also like to present the case of Maja, who in the third act becomes a "wolverine" (284). It is the transformation of a woman who has been annihilated, who does not know herself or her desires, but who, through the play, rediscovers herself and embraces freedom in all its forms. In her, I see the convergence of two discourses: the fulfilment of Deleuze and Guattari's process of "becoming-animal", but also that of Derrida and Lönngren's "following the animal". The "following the animal" methodology is developed by the two writers as a learning experience where humans descend from their pedestal, abandon their convictions, observe and retrace the steps of the animal to relearn how to live. The example of the hunter who follows his prey to get to know it better is apt for the example of Maja, who in two acts follows Ulfheim and his dogs in search of animal tracks and in this following she finds herself. She abandons her certainties, the woman she was, her husband, her concern for the judgement of others, and simply follows in order to rediscover herself and, simultaneously, learn to be in nature. This process of following effectively transforms her into an animal itself, and Maja becomes a wolverine. However, her journey is not one of animalisation, and to better understand this transition, I would like to briefly introduce Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of becoming-animal. According to the two, through this transformation, humans can break free from the constraints of the self and discover and experience

other things, but to do so, it is not enough to simply imitate animals or convince oneself in one's mind that one is an animal.

> Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equaling," or "producing." … wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual, and it is with that individual that an alliance must be made in order to become-animal. (Deleuze Guattari 1987: 239)

Becoming requires alliance, possibly with a multitude, a pack of animals in our case, and requires creating a specific connection with a special individual, Ulfheim, who is on the border of this pack and therefore more easily accessible. This transformation is in fact a "line of escape" for her, a way to escape the constraints that she was already experiencing: the triangle with Rubek and Irene, her life as a mere companion of her husband and boredom. What attracted Maja is not the animal itself, i.e. the animalised Ulfheim, his pack of dogs and the bears they hunt, but the freedom that characterises them and the possibility of becoming "other". Deleuze and Guattari's concept of transformation does not, in fact, envisage the birth of another animal as the final product, so becoming animal does not really result in Maja becoming an actual animal, but rather an "other" Maja who can now experience and embrace the characteristic that led her to begin this process: freedom.

5.2.2 Birds

There is a scene in the second act where Irene and Rubek are talking on the banks of a stream, and the woman decides to throw mountain rose petals into the stream and watch them being carried away by the current. With this gesture, she resumes a game the two had already played during their stay in Taunitzer See, where she throws flowers into the water to create birds, while he throws leaves to chase them as if they were boats.

> IRENE: Look, Arnold. *Our* birds are swimming.
> RUBEK: What kind of birds?
> IRENE: Can't you see? They're flamingos. Pink as roses.
> RUBEK: Flamingos can't swing. They're waders.
> IRENE: Then they're not flamingos. They're seagulls.

> RUBEK: Seagulls with red beaks; could be, yes.
> ...
> RUBEK: You made birds swim in the stream then too. They were water lilies that you –
> IRENE: White *swans*. (279-280, italics are mine)

The birds in question are therefore flamingos, seagulls and swans, each of them the fruit of Irene's imagination and associated with a particular flower whose colour recalls the animal created. From the moment of their creation, they are symbolic animals that could serve different purposes. First of all, considering Irene's remark just before the dialogue I quoted: "let us banish all things dark and difficult from us" (279), we could interpret Irene's gesture as a liberation from everything that oppresses her because, according to Rubek, she takes everything too much to heart. Removing these petals from herself and watching them disappear on the horizon could be a liberating gesture, and her need to transform them into birds can be read as a childish act typical of a woman who has put her youth on hold to devote her life to a blind man. Her need to romanticise this moment is in keeping with an emotional and sensitive Irene. But if we think of the Chinese tradition and custom of entrusting flowers and messages of good luck and protection to the waters of rivers, we could interpret these flowers as laden with meaning and good omens. So it is not a case of throwing away evil, but of hoping that what these birds and flowers represent will return to Irene.

Why these birds in particular? What do each of them represent? If we accept this interpretation as valid the immediate association that comes to mind when thinking of a seagull is freedom, that of a swan is beauty and purity, while a flamingo represents balance and charm. This is everything Irene desires and has to give up by being with Rubek: she has never been free with him but locked inside the ideal that Rubek needed, her beauty has always been merely an object of contemplation, and her life certainly cannot be described as balanced but rather unbalanced towards what Irene was supposed to be. These birds are a form of idealisation of what is unattainable for her and what she constantly sees slipping through her fingers. But it is also what she wants to protect, and what she fears will end up in the hands of the "hunters" in Rubek's imaginary boats. Confirming this, it is Irene who sums

up what Rubek thought of her: “You said that I was the swan pulling your boat” (280). A swan that shows the way to Rubek’s boats, allowing him to continue in his stream of creativity. Rubek remembers attaching a dock leaf to one of Irene’s swans, creating a Lohengrin’s boat, recalling Richard Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin*, where the hero Lohengrin goes to rescue a maiden on a boat drawn by swans. The swan, and therefore Irene, is born from water lilies, which according to folk culture are associated “with water spirits, and with temptation and danger, especially of an erotic kind” (Ibsen 2014: 311).

Once again, humans are the creators of non-humans at will, in order to fill a void and a need they have. Just as Rubek created farmyard animals inside sculptural busts to continue to feel alive and idealise his art, here Irene, with Rubek’s help, creates non-human fantasies to free herself from evil. We are accustomed to humans’ claim to be the creators and rulers of nature, but finally, in this work, we see this belief crumble, and humans, who in their own small way have experienced such control, are powerless in the face of the grandeur of the whole.

Irene is not the only one associated with birds. In fact, three other birds appear metaphorically in the play: the raven, a generic bird, and a bird of prey. Starting with the latter, as Maja is leaving to go hunting, her husband asks her what she will bring him back, and she replies, “a bird of prey you can model” (282). So, a bird of prey that she will not bring back dead but only wounded. I found it curious that Maja suggests to her husband that she’ll bring him a bird of prey that feeds on other birds and animals, because I thought back to the paper animals that he and Irene had created shortly before. I don’t think Ibsen wanted to suggest a hint of revenge on Maja’s part, wanting her bird to devour her husband’s and lover’s birds, but at the same time I think it is a provocation. In fact, if we consider the second animal I mentioned earlier, a bird, Maja sings several times: “I am free! I am free! I am free! Prison’s life is over for me! I’m free as a bird! I am free!” (282). She identifies herself with a bird that has now escaped from its marital cage and can now fly free in the mountains. Her goal of bringing back to her husband the king of the sky, the predator of all, has somewhat the same concept as killing

the bear as the strongest animal in the forest: it is a demonstration of her strength and cunning. Maja seeks revenge and wants to prove to her husband that now that she is free, she can achieve anything she wants. It is Rubek himself who acknowledges that he has kept her prisoner and wounded: "*inadvertently* – that's been you all along, hasn't it?"[13] (282, italics are mine). It was Maja who was winged and could no longer fly, and the adverb "inadvertently" suggests that Rubek was unaware of this, but that he is now surprised to realise that he has kept her in a cage. Another consideration emerges in the third act when Maja and Ulfheim are near the cabin and the girl says she sees a bird of prey "sitting there keeping watch over me" (290), which the hunter suggests shooting. It is not clear whether the two really see the bird of prey or whether Maja is referring to her husband, whom they see climbing towards them a few lines later. In fact, when Ulfheim sees them climbing up, he says, "it's only your bird of prey – and his strange lady" (290), clearly identifying Rubek with the animal. This observation is also in line with the previous analysis: Rubek, as king of the sky, controls little Maja, who needs to get rid of him in order to free herself. So, her proposal to bring her husband a bird of prey as a hunting souvenir is a clear symbolic gesture to make him understand that his control over her is over.

The last one is a black crow used to characterise the Sister of Mercy following Irene, and this association has a premonitory function:

> ULFHEIM: Would you look at her over there. The black crow. – Who's being buried?
> RUBEK. I don't know that anybody here is –
> ULFHEIM: Well, either that or someone's lying here ready to croak. Somewhere or other. – The sick and dying should have the decency to go and get themselves buried sooner rather than later. (252)

The crow is a symbol of death, and according to Ulfheim, it foreshadows that someone will die or is dying at that very moment. This last sentence is too fitting to be ignored and undoubtedly anticipates

[13] RUBEK: What will you bring me back from the hunt?
MAJA: A bird of prey you can model. I'll wing one for you.
RUBEK: Yes, wing one - inadvertently – that's been you all along, hasn't it? (Ibsen 2014: 282)

the ending of the play and the death of Rubek and Irene who, as we will see later, are "sick and dying" and effectively go alone to meet their fate and are buried by the snow. Due to its premonitory and somewhat sinister nature, it is reminiscent of the white horse in *Rosmersholm* (1886), which, according to legend, calls the characters to their death through its appearance. Both are tragic symbols that lead to a tragic ending in both works.

Finally, the last division I would like to propose in this reading is between animals of the sky and animals of the earth and the characteristics they share with the characters associated with them. Ulfheim, with the dogs and the bear, is the only character associated with animals of the earth, while Irene with the swan, Maja with the bird and Rubek with the bird of prey are all animals of the sky. It is curious to note that Ulfheim is in fact the character with his feet on the ground, taking part completely in earthly life made of concrete things, just like a land animal. The other three, on the other hand, cannot be said to be characters anchored to anything, but are rather in search of something to help them remain anchored to the ground. Rubek, being a man of art, rises above things and has a privileged vantage point on the world around him. As we will see towards the end, he is also a man who has lost his way and allows himself to be guided by the winds of his clients. The two women who have always lived in the shadow of the bird of prey cannot say that they have lived on earth either, and in fact Maja, after spending time with Ulfheim, becomes a wolverine because she has learned to anchor herself to the ground.

5.2.3 Bears

Once again, we encounter bears as tools used by Ibsen to characterise a character in a certain way. As we saw in *The Wild Duck,* characterising Old Ekdal as a bear hunter enriched the image of a strong man, fully in control of nature and capable of bending it to his will, killing its fiercest inhabitant. Here we find another bear hunter in Ulfheim, whose connotation, however, is not entirely similar to that of Old Ekdal. While for the latter the appellation "bear hunter" served to glorify the man, a lieutenant in the prime of his life and career, in Ulfheim's case, when considered alongside his overall presentation,

we see animalisation. First of all, the hunter's name itself derives from "wolf", then he is presented as the "bear killer" (*bjørnedræberen*) (249), an epithet that brings to mind a wild, crude and brutal man, not a glorious one. His entrance also follows this characterisation: he is dressed for hunting, "he is a tall, thin, sinewy figure with unkempt bears and hair" (249), he is followed by his dogs and wears a feather on his hat, the only character to "dress" in animal attire. We immediately understand that his figure is diametrically opposed to that of Rubek, who is presented as a "distinguished older gentleman wearing a black velvet jacket" (239).

His crudeness is also perceptible through his language. For example, he is very explicit in describing how his dogs eat: "Big, fat, meaty knuckles, they swallow them whole. Spew them back up and wolf them back down again" (253). Or it is significant how Ulfheim compares his craft to that of Rubek: while the sculptor struggles with marble, he struggles "with tense, throbbing bear sinews" (251) and describes the two materials as "awkward", as if a bear fighting for its life were nothing more than a strange material. When Maja asks him if he is a real, genuine bear hunter, Ulfheim lists other animals he usually kills if he cannot find a bear: eagles, wolves, elks and reindeers. What matters to him is that they are healthy and full-blooded, another gruesome element. From this description we can recognise the initial appellation for the hunter as more appropriate, namely "bear killer", not because the action changes, but because this term conveys much more crudeness than the other. Furthermore, in common usage, the term "killer" is usually used to refer to interspecies killing, i.e. when one person kills another. Here, thanks to the animalisation we have observed in the hunter, we can interpret the latter as belonging to the animal species. In support of this thesis, we should also consider the fact that he himself refers to his dogs as "fellow creatures" (250) and his "nearest and dearest" (252).
This animalisation is also reinforced by Maja, who in the third act describes him as a satyr: "like a he-goat: with a goat's beard and goat's legs" (286). This figure, being an intermediate figure between human and non-human, is reminiscent of the *trolls* in *Peer Gynt* (1867), creatures that have suffered a regression from the human to the beastly state. Both are primordial, instinctive figures, not

belonging to the social sphere but accustomed to living in solitude in the mountains. Ulfheim doesn't live in society: he descends to the hotel where he meets Maja once a year and then returns to the mountains, and even his lifestyle echoes the trolls' motto: "be to thyself sufficient" (Ibsen 2016: 209), meaning to be enough for oneself and that one's self is all that matters. The man is in fact self-sufficient, living off his hunting, in his hut, with the little company he has, and although he laments the lack of a companion, I do not believe it is essential to his existence. The satyr also touches on the magical realm, making us wonder whether Ibsen's intention was to present Ulfheim as an unreal and ideal figure in a world where living on little and in contact with nature no longer exists.

So, while there is no doubt that the bear is used as a tool for emphasise Ulfheim's belonging to the wilderness, is also true that the same nuance already seen in *The Wild Duck* remains. In fact, man returns as lord of nature through the killing of its inhabitants. The hunter, in fact, in the same speech in which he compared his profession to that of Rubek, says: "in the end both of us manage to subdue our material. Make ourselves lord and master over it. Don't give up till we've got the better of what resists us so fiercely" (251). Through his decisions, Ulfheim proclaims himself master but, unlike Rubek, he is not a creator, but a destroyer. Needless to say, the relationship between humans and non-humans in this latter sense is one of subordination and inequality.

5.2.4 Dogs

The animals that the characters see as flesh and blood beings in the work are dogs. We encounter them for the first time when Ulfheim enters the scene in the first act and we hear them barking in the background, because the dogs do not follow their master on stage. As already mentioned when discussing the characterisation of the hunter, thanks to the bear, the dogs also become a tool for achieving the same end. The type of relationship that binds them is not entirely clear to us, because while on the one hand the hunter confirms that the dogs are his "nearest and dearest" (252) as part of his family, on the other hand he takes care of them not according to their needs but according to his own. In fact, when the hunter asks Lars, his servant, to feed them, these are his instructions: "Take

good care of my fellow creatures, Lars. But keep them good and hungry, you hear. Fresh bones. Not too much meat on them, mind. Make sure they're raw, feeling and bloody" (250). So feed them, yes, but just enough to keep them efficient in their task, which is hunting. We also know that when they get sick, Ulfheim prefers to shoot them rather than take care of them or retire them. Even the dogs themselves are part of mountain life, which does not wait for those who are sick and can no longer keep up. Ulfheim, who probably grew up in this environment, has always known only this approach. Although it may seem like objectification of the animal, which becomes a hunting tool, I don't think this is the case, but rather that it is the only way Ulfheim knows how to care for his companions. In fact, there are numerous occasions when he addresses them with words of affection: the aforementioned "nearest and dearest", he calls them "friends" and his "honest, faithful, impeccably honourable hunting companions" (252). He feels joy watching them eat, and although the passage is described in a crude manner, I think Ulfheim means that he is pleased to see his dogs feeding, not that he enjoys witnessing such a bloody scene. Among other things, the dogs certainly have a positive function in this scene because they allow Maja and the hunter to bond when she agrees to go and watch the scene with him. The dogs live in harmony with their master, who lets them hunt and roam freely in the mountains while he stays at the hut with Maja. Although Maja sees this as a pretext for Ulfheim to get Lars, who is forced to chase the dogs, to leave them alone, it can also be interpreted as a moment of freedom granted to working dogs. When they are not needed by their master for hunting, they are allowed to hunt for themselves or simply wander around. It is as if there is a respect for their basic needs, while he devotes himself to his own, namely interacting with women, in this case Maja.

I interpret this concession positively in the sense that Ulfheim could have kept them tied up and sent the servant away, or he could have sent both of them away, but again keeping them tied up. Instead, he chooses to grant them a moment of leisure, as if there were a certain respect for them and a desire to maintain a balance. With this additional reflection, concluding my thoughts on the relationship between Ulfheim and his dogs, I believe that his behaviour towards them, which may seem

discordant, is simply complementary. In fact, contextualising the character of Ulfheim, it is not difficult to believe that the relationship between them is not the usual one we might expect between humans and non-humans. I certainly do not think it is an equal relationship because the hunter still controls his dogs and has power over them, but neither is it the usual power relationship. It is as if he is in an intermediate position between subordinate and equal, once again the result of a man who has followed and learned from his animals and nature. If we think back to the relationship between the Ekdals and the duck, I believe that although the latter may seem more loving and profound, it is actually below that between the hunter and his dogs, where "below" means still too close to the classic power relationship between these two categories. While the relationship with the duck is superficial and reflects the nature of the humans in that house, here it is more visceral, intimate and true because it is forged among the rugged peaks.

5.3 Ascension

The entire work is underpinned by an upward tension that is evident both in the characters' desires and words, but above all in the change of setting that we witness act after act. "The mental landscape of Ibsen's protagonists had always been a vertical one; their thrust is upwards, as they strive, or at least yearn, for "something higher than this life"" (Ewbank 1994: 131). This is not the first time we perceive this need for the characters to rise upwards: in *The Wild Duck*, from the watery depths symbolising lies and secrets, the ducks of the play, or rather the Ekdals, are pushed to let go and take flight again to reach the truth. In this case, for Maja, Rubek and Irene, the climb was initially synonymous with glory and success but then became a symbol of rebirth and freedom for them.
The tension has its two extremes between the putrid waters of the fjord and the high and glorious peaks.

5.3.1 Sea level

The climb begins in the first act in a coastal town. Maja and Rubek are in a spa hotel, from where they will take a luxury steamer to go on a cruise north to the Arctic Ocean. The idea for this trip came from Maja, who wanted to return home after four years of travelling with her husband. In reality, as soon as she arrives, she realises that her expectations have been disappointed and she feels out of place, convinced that everything has changed. Rubek is not particularly happy with the situation either, and his lines reveal his tiredness and boredom. We can therefore say that both express discomfort in this place, but not only because everything "has changed so horribly back here" (241), also because the environment in which they find themselves, including nature, amplifies this sense of discomfort that the two feel:

> RUBEK: ... You can really hear silence.
> MAJA: Yes, God knows you can. When it's as utterly overwhelming as it is here, then –
> RUBEK: As here at the spa, you mean?
> MAJA: I mean everywhere here at home. There was enough noise and unrest in town. But even so – I thought that noise and unrest itself had something dead about it. (240)

The silence that surrounds them is representative of their starting point, both as a couple and as individuals. For Rubek, the silence represents the stagnation of his artistic creativity and his career, while for Maja it represents the dissatisfaction she has felt over the years alongside her husband. As a couple, it represents their inability to understand each other deeply and to help each other. Here, in their home, in a quiet place far from the hectic life they are used to, this silence is deafening and leads them to reflect on their condition, as we shall see. Maja wants to escape the oppressive unease in any way she can, even if she doesn't know how: she wants to leave immediately and return to their travels, even though she was the one who wanted this holiday, or she wants to take that cruise in the hope that it will help them both, or she wants to go even further south, to their new house. We understand from all these proposals that Maja is effectively lost, she does not know which direction to take, whether to go back or go up, but in any case, she cannot stay still.

Once again, it is water that accompanies this stagnation of the characters, as we saw with the Ekdals but also with the "lukewarm, sluggish and sick" waters (Ibsen 2019: 207) of Ellida's fjord. Who calls these waters "those putrid, hellish gutters... brackish water. – Puke-water, more like" (Ibsen 2014: 251) is Ulfheim, who is in fact the only character who lives detached from this environment and, in a sense, not being immersed in it, maintains a certain objectivity that allows him to judge its unhealthiness. A characterisation of the superficiality of this environment is provided by the big luxury steamer that was supposed to take the couple on their trip. Through their journey, the passengers quickly pass through the various stages of their trip and, as Maja says: "that way you won't get to see anything of the country – of life" (242). This form of tourism fits in with the idea of the bourgeoisie that Ibsen has always represented in his works, i.e. a class that cares more about appearances than substance. Abandoning this direction, the two make the first of several decisions that allow them to break out of social norms.

It is at the end of the first act that the two decide to go up to the sanatorium, abandoning their initial idea, and it is significant to note that we witness two distinct decisions. Maja expresses what she wants for the first time: "I want to go up into the mountains and into the forests – that's what I want" (260) and in fact already makes the decision to go on her own: "I just wanted to tell you – you can do what you like – but I will not be joining you on that ghastly steamer" (259). Even immediately afterwards, when she asks her husband for permission to leave, it seems like a superfluous request, a formality. At this point, Rubek announces his decision to go up too: "I *want* to go up into the mountains. I've made up my mind now" (260). His decision is based on his desire to follow Irene and be able to meet her again at the sanatorium, but he only makes it official after Maja's decision. In this way, the two not only begin the ascent, but also interrupt their scene in that cold and damp hole that was their life.

5.3.2 Sanatorium

In the second act, the story moves to the mountains and Ibsen describes the setting through his stage directions, allowing us to imagine it and immerse ourselves in this environment. It is stage directions such as these that make us understand how difficult it was and still is for directors to stage such a landscape, even though Ibsen was very keen on fidelity to the original.

> At the sanatorium high up in the mountains. The landscape of a vast treeless plateau extends out towards a long mountain lake. On the other side of the lake rises a range of mountain peaks with stream trickles down over a sheer rock face, branching into rivulets as it falls, and from there runs an even course over the plateau out to the right. Scrub, plants and stones alongside the course of the stream. In the foreground to the right, a hillock with a stone bench at the top. A late afternoon in summer, towards sunset. (Ibsen 2014: 262)

The place where the characters live is a sanatorium, a very common structure at the time, usually built in cold, dry mountain environments where the clean air provided relief from physical ailments. The cure that Maja and Rubek seek is not so much for the body as for the spirit, and this will be the place for them to put their lives back in order and make final decisions. In this ethereal place, time seems to stand still, and the characters have the opportunity to look back on their past and come to terms with it. In fact, everything takes place in nature, like the entire play, particularly near the stream between the rocks: it is here that Rubek and Maja, and then Rubek and Irene, have their central dialogues. However, this is not the putrid water we left behind in the first act, but the water that gives life to the entire landscape: on its banks we find scrub, plants and flowers, while the surrounding mountains are bare and the plateau is barren. We know that the forests are further down and that only bushes grow among the rocks there. It is therefore no coincidence that the dialogues take place here. The first dialogue sees the two spouses, and from the way they sit down to have this conversation, we understand how distant they already are. Maja "throws herself down on the heather" (263) while Rubek "sits up on the bench with a plaid over his shoulder" (262). She refuses his request to join him on the rock bench, preferring to remain among the flowers. Maja's rebirth has already begun: she has donned the clothes of a mountain woman, avoiding that "flytrap" (263) that is the sanatorium and prefers contact with nature to comfort. It is as if she has already reached the promised "high mountain"

and is now ready to descend into the valley, but not by retracing her steps, but as a woman aware that what she is looking for, which is metaphorically the bear hunt, lies further down. She has re-evaluated her desire to see "all the glory of the world" but prefers to pursue the excitement that this new life is offering her. What she fails to understand is her position and role in Rubek's life. In fact, in this barren landscape, he sees a way to rediscover himself and feels an even stronger need to fill his treasure chest and not feel so empty. It was Irene's absence that made his life a "wasteland" (274), and only she can fill it.

It is here that Rubek presents the finished version of his sculpture "Resurrection Day" to Irene, who discovers that it is very different from what she expected, as she saw herself as the sole protagonist, "a young, untouched woman – without any experiences of life on this earth – one who awakens into light and glory without anything ugly or impure to tie herself down". (276) In the new version, Rubek decided to move the statue sculpted with Irene as a model a little backwards so as not to make her too dominant, and from his description, the transformation of his art is evident, "from a Romantic idealist to some kind of naturalist obsessed with the animality, or bestiality, lurking behind the human face". (Moi 2014: XXXVI). Rubek describes his sculpture as follows:

> I enlarged the plinth – made it big and spacious. And on it I laid a section of the bulging, heaving heart. And now, swarming up out of the cracks in the earth there are people, people with animal faces concealed beneath the skin. Women and men – just as I knew them in life. ... In the front beside a stream, just like here, sits a guilt-marked man who cannot quite free himself from the earth's crust. I call him regret over a wasted life. He sits there dipping his fingers into the running water – to rinse them clean – and he is tortured and plagued by the thought that he will never, never succeed. He will never, in all eternity, be freed into the life of the resurrection. He'll remain forever sitting there in his hell. (277-278)

There are many possible interpretations of this creation: Rubek's life, the condition of the artist, the abandonment of real life to satisfy art, and many others, but what I would like to do is to suggest an analysis that takes up the themes and the natural elements of the play. The main elements are the earth's crust, water and the woman who, connecting her to the mountain, we see as the three natural elements that guide the play. First of all, the stream: the water could be linked to that of the fjords and the coastal city, and therefore to their state of immobility, or to the stream on the plateau that

carries away their evils transformed into birds. But since we know that the man washes his hands in this water, the second interpretation of water as a stream makes more sense. The earth's crust, arid, made of rocks and the shore of life, represents the environment surrounding the sanatorium with the plateau and the rock face. Here, the main characters, whom we have noticed to be animalised and therefore corresponding to those "people with animal faces", struggle to act. Each of them is trying to free themselves from something that keeps them crushed to the ground, trapped in the crust. The woman, on the other hand, on whose face "the transfiguring joy of light" (277) is still shining, is the only figure standing tall above the others like a high, pure and luminous peak, the destination of all those who want to awaken. The trapped man represents the human reality that Rubek has stopped idealising and for this reason now feels stuck and unable to look up or even hope to get there. I believe this can also be read as a maturation of Ibsen's thinking, where human evolution is not simply connected to that of the environment but is embedded in it, thus removing man from his usual position of exceptionalism. Ibsen brings everything back into perspective, where man is a small part of the whole and therefore his life is determined by his surroundings. "The sea, the forest, the mountains – all are immense forces of both life and death, natural entities that have their own full ecological cycles of birth and decline, as well as evolutionary changes over time" (Cless 2010: 199).

5.3.3 Mountains

Returning to the general tension of the work, the third act opens with a new change of environment: "wild, high mountain ravine with sheer precipices in the background. Snow-capped peaks rise to the right and are lost in the floating mist high above" (285). We have arrived in the heart of the wild and frightening wilderness, which hinders human presence with its precipices, narrow paths and adverse weather. At these altitudes, plant and animal life is scarce, leading us to imagine a desolate and dead landscape, but on the contrary, it is here at the peak of our ascent that nature is reawakened with life more than ever. Proof of this is the storm and the mist that precedes it. For a man like Ulfheim, who knows the mountain, their presence is synonymous with danger, and he urges Maja to descend with

him and the other two to take refuge in the cabin. The role of the storm is to protect the high peaks and prevent them from being reached by them, like a guardian of Paradise. In fact, it is as if the wind wants to chase them away, "blowing down from the peaks" (291), and the clouds, "swelling and sinking" (291), want to crush them. The roar that precedes the avalanche is the last warning ignored by the humans who, either out of carelessness or arrogance, continue on their way. But this brings us to a key point: why does the avalanche overwhelm the two? We know that in an early draft, the two lovers actually reached the mountain at the end of the play and there was no avalanche (Johnston 1992: 81). In this analysis, the reason why Ibsen chose to end the play in this way is actually secondary, but I am more interested in understanding the role of the avalanche from a symbolic and non-symbolic point of view. First of all, from a more positive perspective, we can say that the avalanche, by sweeping away the two lovers, freezes them together in time forever, exactly as they wished. But it is also proof of the cycle of life in nature, where the two people who are buried return to the earth both metaphorically and literally, decomposing. Everything returns to the earth, and once again they will be forced to struggle to emerge from the earth's crust and begin the cycle again. The avalanche is also an instrument of spiritual liberation and, linking back to the two works already analysed, "their reunion through and with the mountain is what Ellida only envisions with the sea, but not unlike what Hedvig achieves in her self-induced union with the inner forest that is an inner sanctum of sorts" (Cless 2010: 199).

In a more tragic and critical vein, we return to the theme of hubris, which we have already discussed in relation to nature with the decision of old Ekdal to build an artificial forest in his attic. Just as he was punished with the death of his granddaughter, Rubek and Irene are punished for not heeding the warnings and attempting to reach the summit anyway. As Johnston points out: "The avalanche that sweeps Rubek and Irene to their deaths, denying them the final summit vision (as if the earth itself will not permit its creatures to transcend it)" (Johnston 1992: 81).

One final interpretation we can give to this conclusion, which cannot be defined as either positive or tragic, is that the avalanche swept away the characters not for any particular reason, not because the author wanted to make us read between the lines once again, but simply because nature is completely alien to humans' quest for fulfilment. Nature's indifference to the conclusion that the characters needed in this play is striking not so much as a punitive gesture but simply because avalanches in the mountains are part of the ecological cycle. So, it is not so much nature that punishes and strikes, but nature that simply exists in its processes, transformations and needs. Humans simply found themselves in the middle of one of these processes and were destroyed as a result. I think this interpretation is very powerful in reminding us that it is not actually possible to control nature, let alone expect it to behave according to our needs, but that as an unpredictable element it is to be feared and respected. This interpretation is also significant in considering the new type of relationship, if there is one, between human and nature, which I will analyse a little later.

But what does the summit represent for them? The couple realised that they were dead and that a total resurrection that would allow Rubek to live the life of the earth rather than live for art was not possible for them. Rubek understood that he must continue to create and subdue his desire for reality to satisfy the needs of his art, and for this reason he knew that as soon as they returned down to the valley, it would be like "stepping into their graves again" (Ibsen 2014: 293). That is why he now wants to live every last moment to the fullest with Irene before returning to his duties, to truly unite with her in a moment dedicated only to them as a man and a woman and not as an artist and a muse. The summit is therefore the place where they come together to celebrate their wedding in the sunlight, living for a moment what their life could have been if they had not been what they are, namely two people inextricably linked to art and creation. So, it is as if they woke up from death but realised that there can be no life for them as living beings, because that would mean abandoning art, and for this reason they are forced to return to death.

Maja, on the other hand, completes her rebirth on the mountain, even though what afflicted her was not the same death as Rubek and Irene. Here, after sharing their past, Ulfheim and Maja make the unspoken decision to stay together after their descent. Maja accepts the hunter's proposal because it is completely opposite to what Rubek had offered her years earlier: no more castle and works of art, but a simple cabin, no more highest mountains but hunting grounds down in the valley. For her, therefore, the valley wins over the peaks and her rebirth is complete.

Through this climb, we have seen how the initial premises and hopes have been scaled back for Rubek and Irene who, despite undergoing growth, come to the conclusion that the period of stagnation in their lives, which coincided with the years they spent apart and led them to embark on this journey, was such because it lacked pure art. So, Irene's dream of being seen as a woman by Rubek and of changing their relationship is dashed when she realises that Rubek is dead and cannot give her anything more than what the two had already been to each other. Irene understands and accepts this condition, calling Rubek "my lord and master" (294).

5.4 Reversal

At this point, I would like to return to the questions I left unanswered at the beginning of the analysis: why is it possible to see in this play that the usual subordination of nature is limited only to internal relationships, whereas if the look is at the overall picture, this subordination is reversed? Who are the real actors and the real affected in this play?

First of all, by internal relationships, I mean the relationships that the humans in the play have with the four types of non-humans presented in the bestiary: birds, bears, dogs, and farmyard animals. I consider them internal to distinguish them from the relationship that humans have with nature, which, as an element that links all the acts and is present in all the scenes, I define as a framework.

As we have seen through the analysis of the bestiary, the relationships between humans and non-humans do not change particularly from previous works. As far as birds, bears and farmyard animals

are concerned, they are all subordinate to human actions, presented as tools to characterise humans and devoid of individuality. Humans remain the creators, objectifiers and destroyers of non-humans, whom they corrupt to make them in their own image. They are not given the space we saw with the sea creatures in *The Lady from the Sea*, there are no descriptions to help us imagine and recognise them as living creatures, but their presence is more reminiscent of the metaphorical use in *The Wild Duck.* The only ones who stand out from this erasure are the dogs. Their relationship with Ulfheim is complex and ambivalent, but my reasoning ended on a positive and hopeful note. The dogs are not objectified, and although they are domesticated, the contagion that has occurred between them and the hunter is not demeaning to either of them. It is certainly not an equal relationship, but it seems to be on the right track. So, this note of hope stems from the possibility that, given the growth and change in his previous works, Ibsen might propose other relationships of this kind. Clearly, we know that this will not be the case because there will be no other plays after this one, but I still feel I can say that this does not prevent me from thinking so.

If *When We Dead Awaken* had been set in a different location, for example indoors, we would have been faced with another of the usual stories that only emphasise power relationships between humans and non-humans, and between humans and nature.

What makes the work so powerful and different, however, is the setting in which it is set. Through the characters' ascent, we saw the environmental change of the three altitudes, and not for a moment is it possible to forget where the characters and events are taking place. This is because the presence of nature is completely all-encompassing and envelops the characters, allowing each of them to develop. It is nature that conditions man, guides him and punishes him.

In the first act, the setting itself is described as natural and "the main building is partially visible" (293), as if Ibsen wanted to make it clear that there would be few artificial elements and that they would take up little space on stage.

> Outside the spa hotel. The main building is partially visible to the right. An open area resembling a park, with a fountain and clusters of tall mature trees and shrubs. To the left a small pavilion, almost completely covered in

> ivy and Virginia creeper. Outside it, a table and chair. In the background views over the fjord all the way down to the sea, with headlands and small islets in the distance. (Ibsen 2014: 239)

In fact, the description of the second setting does not include any artificial elements, except for the rock bench. In the third act, only Ulfheim's old cabin is present. From a visual point of view, therefore, artificial and urban elements are eliminated, immersing the viewer and reader in the natural space. It is also interesting to note how closed, and therefore artificial, spaces are seen as inhabited by the dead, while open, natural spaces are seen as inhabited by the living. In the first act, when the manager suggests that Ulfheim have lunch in the dining room, he replies indignantly: "in among those half-dead flies and people? No, thank you so very much, sir, I'll pass" (250). Maja, using a similar image, replies to her husband's question as to whether she has just left the sanatorium by saying that she has just escaped from that "flytrap" (263). Thus, both evoke not only environments for the dead, but also imprisonment. In contrast, in the second act, the plateau next to the sanatorium is inhabited by a group of children who sing, dance and surround Irene as she passes by. Rubek, watching them from afar, rejoices in the harmonious and musical scene. This second image contrasts with the one just seen in the sanatorium, bringing life and colour to the stage.

Furthermore, nature is always present: if we think of the first act, while the husband and wife are sitting outside the coastal hotel, the silence caused by the location and the absence of people was overwhelming. In the second act, nature is mentioned and influences all the characters' movements in space: from Maja "entering from among some bushes" (262) as she approaches Rubek, who is sitting on the bench above her, to the woman's choice to remain in the meadow among the flowers talking to Rubek instead of sitting next to him. It is as if being in the grass makes her feel more comfortable than next to her husband, as if she needs to be away from him to face the subject of separation. Furthermore, Maja does not tell Rubek that she wants to be free, but she does say where she wants to go to be free: to the mountains with Ulfheim, hunting in the forests, or down in the valley. Her needs are expressed through her desire to be in certain natural environments and to do

something. Rubek himself, when he tells his wife about the difficult period he went through immediately after becoming famous, says that it “nearly drove me deep into the darkest forest” (268), where the black forest represents despair for him, a complete detachment from the light of creativity from which he would never emerge. The description of Irene’s entrance in this second act also leads us to follow her with our eyes as she crosses the plateau and the rock face to cool off with mountain water. When Rubek asks her where she has been that day, she replies: “deep, deep inside death’s vast territories” (273), as if her spiritual perdition were linked to a desolate place, recalling Rubek’s darkest forest. Nature is still present when the two converse by the river and throw flowers and leaves into the water. Through this gesture, nature allows them to free themselves from what was weighing them down. In the third act, however, the dangerous conformation of the rocks allows Maja and Ulfheim to finally come together and accept life together. In fact, when the two are talking about the possibility of a life together, she interrupts him and asks: “come along then and carry me down the ravine” (290), as if this request were her consent. Finally, the ending of Rubek and Irene, as already seen, is determined by natural elements such as the mist and the avalanche.

It is clear at this point that the humans in this play can do nothing without the presence of nature, which, if we consider the big picture, makes them the subordinates in this relationship. They are the affected, who try to act with the means that nature offers them, the true actor of the play. Therefore, those internal relationships between humans and birds, bears and farmyard animals could be just a fundamental tool for humans to continue their evolution. A tool in the sense that it allows for certainty, namely human exceptionalism, which reassures the characters in their ascent. However, it is illusory because they do not really have control over nature; they are the ones being controlled. This reasoning also answers the question of who the real actors or affected parties are in this play. Although there is no personalised, talking or overtly acting nature, all the natural elements can be traced back to a single great actor.

5.5 Environmental Teaching

I believe that this play teaches us several environmental lessons, first and foremost that man cannot control nature and that it is a mistake to underestimate its power. This point ties in with the avalanche we have already analysed, but I would like to return to it briefly for the sake of provocation. If we consider the final interpretation of the event, namely that there is no particular symbolism behind the avalanche but simply nature acting as it usually does, the question is whether there is a relationship between nature and humans at that precise moment. Let me explain: the avalanche acts independently of everything else and is indifferent to the consequences it may have for the humans below, but at the same time, the couple could also be acting in a state of alienation from nature, so neither side considers the other. I think this idea is only feasible at this point in the play because, in general, we have already seen that the relationship between the two sides exists and is quite strong.

The second lesson concerns the alienation of humans from nature. We can say that the three main characters, except for Ulfheim, are experiencing alienation for different reasons, but all of them are seeking a reconnection with the real life they have lost by living for art. This ascension is also a growing closeness to nature. At the beginning of the play, Maja and Rubek were planning to take a cruise north, probably another way to reconnect with nature, albeit more superficially, and leave the cities where they had lived for years. The detachment from this urban life is perceptible thanks to the train they take to approach the coastal city: the two realise "that we'd crossed the border" (241) when everything around them becomes so quiet that it is palpable. This silence prepares them for the climb, it is like a purifying passage to eliminate everything artificial and urban that the two were carrying with them before ascending to the peaks. Although their choice to go to the sanatorium is not motivated by the same reasons as the other guests, the two need this place to reconnect with nature through the cool air and fresh air. The real, concrete life they are seeking is exactly the one led by Ulfheim, the only character who is not alienated. This resurrection is a reconnection with nature but also with their own human nature. But while Ellida, who suffered from her alienation from the sea

and from herself, was ultimately able to choose, here it does not seem that Ibsen is leaving Rubek and Irene any choice. The final reconciliation they desired from the top of the mountain under the sunlight does not happen because the inhospitable nature prevents them from doing so. A reconciliation takes place in the sense that, by being submerged, they become part of the nature they were seeking.

In the introduction to the chapter, we said that this work is defined by Ibsen as an epilogue because it brings many themes to a close. One of these is certainly the relationship between human and non-human. This is because the characters, who are used to being agents in all of Ibsen's stories, some more than others, reach their peak here, where the characters of *When We Dead Awaken*, who enclose them, are placed in an environment that transforms them into passive beings. In fact, they are the dead of the play, and it is difficult to imagine the dead as agents. The only act that we could define as an attempt at awakening is the choice to continue towards the top of the mountain, a gesture that we have seen how it ends. Is this a lesson that Ibsen wanted to convey? The agency of nature in our lives? Given the increasing space he devoted to it in his works, it would seem so.

6. Conclusion

Having reached the conclusion of the analysis of the three plays, I would like to devote this space to a dialogue between the texts by means of common themes and by tracing that crescendo I mentioned in the introduction regarding the importance of nature. For this reason, I intend to divide this chapter by first presenting the recurring themes, then devoting an in-depth analysis to the *stories we live by*, identifiable thanks to ecolinguistics, and finally asking myself whether this thesis can enrich Ibsenian and ecocritical criticism. I would like to point out that the main reason I chose to analyse these three plays is because they exemplify the growth of Ibsen's thinking about nature and human's relationship with it. In my analysis, it immediately became clear to me that, play after play, we are faced with an unprecedented and growing appreciation of nature, during which Ibsen's characters are confronted more and more realistically with what is an uncontrollable and unsubduable nature. I say "realistically" because their belief that nature is something that can be imprisoned and created by humans slowly crumbles, and they must face the reality that humans are part of the natural world, just like all other species. Thanks to the conclusions drawn in environmental teachings, it has been possible to identify the evolution of the role that Ibsen chose to assign to non-humans in his works. What remains a constant, albeit attenuated in *When We Dead Awaken*, is humans' ability to always consider themselves superior to the environment, to objectify it and exploit it at will. This observation is one of the *stories we live by* discovered in this analysis and which I will discuss later in the chapter. I believe that each play taken individually does not allow us to understand the facets of the human/non-human relationship proposed by Ibsen because many processes are transformed from one work to another and are never fixed. This is why I believe it is necessary to devote this last section to a final conclusion that summarises the respective conclusions of the three plays already provided.

6.1 Common themes

6.1.1 Growing Presence

What links *The Wild Duck*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken* first and foremost is the growing presence of nature, which consequently leads the characters to relate more closely to it. In *The Wild Duck*, we find nature in the Ekdals' attic forest and in the family's memories of the real one where Old Ekdal used to hunt and work. Focusing on the first case of forest, I would like to remind that it is an attic where the family had brought plants and animals such as hens and rabbits to recreate an artificial forest where they could take refuge when needed. The central element that made this place wild was the presence of the wild duck, an animal wounded during a hunt and brought here. While considering this artificial composition as true nature may seem exaggerated, this element is in fact the only constant natural presence we find in the play. For the rest, all the dialogues take place indoors, in the Werle or Ekdal's family homes, but always in closed spaces. This is our starting point: nature relegated to a cramped and dark room.

The setting of *The Lady from the Sea* is completely different because all but one of the acts take place entirely outside the home, making use of the garden. Here, nature surrounds the characters: from the enclosed garden with its veranda, the summerhouse and the pond, to the high peaks behind the house, to the fjord with the sea washing the coast just below the Wangel's house. Nature is present in Ellida's childhood memories of life at the lighthouse, with her daily baths and her constant thoughts of the Stranger. Moreover, Ellida herself, the protagonist of the play, is a siren, a woman who belongs more to the sea than to the mainland where she cannot live happily. It is the call of the sea that is the constant in the play and is personified in the figure of the Stranger, who has come to claim Ellida. So, there is undoubtedly a growth in the presence of nature compared to *The Wild Duck*.

But nature takes the stage figuratively for the entire play only in *When We Dead Awaken*, where she is one of the main protagonists. Here, every scene takes place outdoors and, at the beginning of each act, Ibsen devotes a long description to the natural environment that will host the characters. It is not a simple description of a setting, but rather the presentation of nature that plays the role of a character

in the play, so central is its presence to the growth of the protagonists. The first act takes place by the sea, in a coastal town from which Rubek and Maja must depart to begin their cruise on the fjords; the second moves outside a sanatorium in the mountains, which stands in an idyllic location among grassy plateaus and streams. Finally, the last act sees the characters climbing higher, approaching the mountain peak, from which they then decide to descend or climb further. The characters are immersed in nature and their every desire or action is linked to it. From Maja, who instead of telling her husband that she wants freedom, tells him that she wants to climb mountains, thus indicating the place where she would feel free rather than saying: "I want freedom"; to the avalanche that destroys Rubek and Irene's climb to glory. It is a nature that I would describe as all-encompassing because it engulfs and involves everything.

6.1.2 Dependence

Closely linked to the previous point is that of human' dependence on nature. In all three plays, we see how nature, or a particular natural element, plays a central role in the characters' existence. In *The Wild Duck*, the artificial forest is the place that sustains the illusion of the Ekdal family's life: it represents something, the forest, that is not real and symbolises their happy and perfect life, which is not actually perfect. It keeps alive the life-lie of the characters who would otherwise have to face an unhappy and shameful reality: old Ekdal continues his usual hunting trips in the fake forest because he no longer feels comfortable in the real one. He was in fact a great hunter who, having fallen into disgrace, is no longer able to control and tame the forest as he once did but in order not to abandon himself to this truth, he has built a substitute that allows him to live in the belief that he is still that hunter.

The sea attracts Ellida every day, calling her to it with her daily swims, but it is also inside her: as Wangel says: "your mind is like the sea. It ebbs and it follows" (Ibsen 2019: 284) so it is even in her ways of doing and thinking. The lady from the sea is a woman who owes part of her identity to the sea: her childhood and her first love are linked to it, and she cannot and does not want to free herself

from it. It is an addiction that keeps her anchored to a part of herself that prevents her from being anything other than Ellida the mermaid. It is also and above all an addiction to the Stranger, who represents the sea. Finally, it is an addiction that, by keeping alive the non-human part of her, forces her into a life of captivity and objectification by her husband, who keeps her with him without understanding her.

Maja and Rubek's relationship is maintained thanks to the promise made by her husband: "you said you would take me with you up on a high mountain and show me all the glory of the world" (Ibsen 2014: 244). So, in this case, the dependence is between the symbolic mountain that represents the glory of the world and the characters who from the beginning of the play to the end are engaged in their ascent in response to the call of the mountain. Maja then abandons her desire to conquer that glory and consequently the summit, but even though her new goal is happiness, the place where she is convinced she will find it is still the mountain. The bond of dependence therefore does not dissolve. We see how nature, from a small element that supports everything, becomes everything that supports the small humans who are trying to find themselves in the world. It is the mountain and in general verticality and the need for humans to ascend that allow the play to develop. This upward tension felt by the characters in *When We Dead Awaken* is another constant in all the three plays. The ducks in the first play, the Ekdals, will rise from their watery depths and fly towards the sky, a symbol of truth and freedom. Ellida, with her final choice, abandons the sea and returns definitively to Wangel's house to remain there as a model wife and mother. She too, as a mermaid, metaphorically abandons the depths of the sea and embraces her life as a human on dry land.

6.1.3 The search for authenticity

If we think about the dependence that humans have on nature, one of the reasons for this is the need for authenticity that the characters desperately seek. By this I mean the search for one's own needs, passions and values, and therefore a more inner discovery of one's own personality. The starting point is always an unhealthy place that prevents the characters from finding themselves: from the swamp

in which, according to Gregers, the Ekdals are stagnant, to the “warm and sluggish” (Ibsen 2019: 207) and sick waters of the fjord in which Ellida bathes, to the waters of the fjord that Ulfheim describes as “putrid, hellish gutters... brackish water. – Puke-water” (Ibsen 2014: 251). These starting points are not places of freedom but are for the “taint of people” (251-252), i.e. those who are contaminated, polluted and impure. Their search for themselves takes place thanks to their closeness to nature. Hedvig is fascinated by the attic and in that mysterious space she allows herself to be intrigued, reads and lets her imagination fly. It is a place that allows her to be herself, far from her overprotective parents and her duties. For her grandfather, it is a place to reconnect with himself, the indomitable old colonel, and to be happy forgetting his misfortunes and everything he has abandoned. Here he seeks and finds his needs through hunting and takes refuge when he needs to detach himself from the truth that oppresses him and reminds him of his failures, both as head of the family and as an entrepreneur.

As I have already said, the sea represents a deep part of Ellida that she cannot define. Her daily baths seem to be a continuous search for herself, for her true identity, as if she was seeking confirmation or preservation of her marine nature by bathing every day. Bath after bath, she tries to understand whether she is more mermaid or more woman and whether that constant call she hears is her psyche trying to awaken. But the problem with these baths is that they are always her starting point: the water of the fjord is not the open sea water she needs. The one who really helps her define herself is the Stranger, who, I recall, is part of the sea and represents it in its entirety, like a synecdoche. His sudden appearance leads her to look inside herself and try to put her thoughts in order. The choice that the Stranger leads her to make is the greatest stimulus that Ellida receives from nature but paradoxically leads her to distance herself from it. Nature, among other things, is also what gives her her uniqueness, making her a woman outside the norms of bourgeois life and her adoptive family. It was also her authenticity and uniqueness that attracted Wangel to her, so much so that he wanted to keep her unchanged.

Finally, Ibsen initially presents Maja as an empty woman, devoid of impulses and desires, a woman who does not feel at home anywhere and who hopes to fill this void with her husband's constant job transfers. In fact, she is a woman who does not know herself, who has never had the opportunity to ask herself who she really is and what her desires are. Always devoted to following her husband, hoping for his glory, she has always been content to be a passive companion. It is her encounter with Ulfheim, a man completely opposite to her husband, that moves her to such an extent that she says: "I *want* to go up in the mountains and into the forests – that's what I want" (260 italics are mine). Her first *want* is the first brick in the construction of her true self, and this search has the mountains as its destination. Step by step, Maja manages to free herself from those stagnant waters and build the future she wants, free from Rubek and a life of monotony.

Nature, therefore, in all three paths, accompanies humans in their search for identity or in maintaining it.

6.1.4 Captivity

Another central theme linking the plays is the concept of captivity and imprisonment experienced by non-humans. Assuming that anything enclosed represents a space of imprisonment for them, it's possible to notice the attic, the enclosed garden and the sanatorium as prisons. All artificial places inhabited by numerous people limit the actions and desires of non-humans. First and foremost is the duck, which, as I discussed in its chapter, living in captivity within those four walls loses its true identity, namely its wilderness. It is a captivity from which it cannot escape, it has no way out, and even if it managed to get out of the attic it could not fly away to escape because it is injured. Inside, day after day, she forgets what is outside, partly because the Ekdals do not let her see the sky, and so she does not know what she is missing out. In a sense, therefore, she does not experience the conflicted suffering of Ellida, who as a prisoner sees her sea every day and hears its call. In *The Lady from the Sea*, I hypothesised two types of imprisonment for Ellida: one within her life on land, where her life with Wangel imprisons her and does not allow her to fully live her relationship with the sea,

but we could also interpret an imprisonment by the sea, which, through its call, intrigues her but also terrifies her. If we consider the first case, we do not see Ellida living her imprisonment inside the house, but in the enclosed garden that surrounds it. This fence creates a limited natural space within which Ellida spends most of her time looking beyond the fence, trying to glimpse the sea. What reminds us that this is a place of captivity is the presence of the pond with the carps that live out their captivity swimming in circles throughout their lives. Ellida also spends her time in the garden in the summer house, which she herself says Wangel built "for my sake" (Ibsen 2019: 208). This last sentence reminds us of Hedvig's words when she tells Gregers about her family's attitude towards the duck: "they tend to its needs, build things for it" (52). In both cases, there is a master who does something for his non-human possession so that it can live "better" in captivity. In fact, Ellida spends her time in the summerhouse and cannot bear to sit on the veranda, both because it is an extension of the house, which for her represents the ultimate prison, and because her stepdaughters, with whom she feels she has nothing in common, sit on the veranda.

If we think of the other characters in this play that I have defined as land-creatures, namely Wangel, Bolette and Hilde, we could also say that they live in captivity because they are caged by social and bourgeois constraints. A striking example is Bolette, who, in order to leave one cage, her family home, must enter another, namely an unwanted marriage to Arnholm. Her situation is so unhappy that she even has to ask her father's permission to enter this new prison: she cannot make the decision to marry on her own, she has no freedom of her own but is bound by the decisions of the man of the family. Another aspect that I find curious about Ellida's captivity is what Ann-Sofie Lönngren describes as: "the extreme consequences of 'the powers of pet keeping' that would come to characterize the modern, Western middle class and the bourgeois home. And this tragic fact, which, by the end of the story, renders violence and death also to a human literary character" (Lönngren 2015: 54). Considering Ellida's imprisonment as an expression of *pet keeping* on the part of her husband is possible thanks to the observations made in the *The Lady from the Sea*'s chapter regarding Ellida being seen as an exotic pet that Wangel chose to bring home and keep as she is without trying

to change her. The powers of *pet keeping* refer to the ability of this phenomenon to question certain aspects of Ibsen's bourgeois society. Indeed, this specific case involves a mermaid woman who, as a non-human and as a pet, cannot conform to social norms and be both a wife and a stepmother at the same time. Because of these shortcomings, she is pointed out by her fellow villagers and stepdaughters, who find themselves having to rearrange their roles and take on the tasks of bourgeois housewives. As a conclusion to this *pet keeping* or imprisonment, in our case we do not witness the death of a literary human being but the death of the pet itself, or rather the non-human part of Ellida. If, on the other hand, we look back at the ending of *The Wild Duck*, the pet keeping of the duck leads to the tragic death of Hedvig.

Maja also lives her entire married life in captivity, caged by Rubek without being able to escape and find herself. It is a condition she entered into convinced she would find happiness, but here too, as with Ellida, there is a man who takes or buys a wife for his own selfish needs, in this case because Rubek was alone after Irene's abandonment. Maja herself recognises her imprisonment by telling her story in the third person to Ulfheim: "He lured her into a cold, damp cage, where to her it seemed there was no sunshine, no fresh air" (Ibsen 2014: 288). Above all, she recognises her freedom: "I'm free as a bird!" (282), echoing her identification with a bird that has escaped the clutches of its bird of prey, Rubek. In this case, therefore, we note that Maja is the only non-human of the three who, in her conclusion, manages to obtain freedom thanks to nature without having to renounce it. She is the wild duck that managed to fly away and escape her sad fate. With this fact is possible to observe another case of crescendo between the three plays.

All three non-humans, the duck, Ellida and Maja, undergo a process of alienation during captivity. All three lose their connection with themselves, but only the latter two, thanks to nature and the search for authenticity, try to rediscover it.

All three can also be described as *corrupted*, a term Rubek uses to refer to the farmyard animals he uses to characterise the statues commissioned from him: "all those creatures man has corrupted in his image" (244). I had described this corruption as contamination between two categories, the human

and the animal, where traits are mixed together and the boundary between the two categories is more difficult to identify. In fact, captivity itself is a case of corruption where the non-human loses some of its traits because it becomes accustomed to something different: it loses the ability to feed itself, its autonomy, it loses the ability to make decisions freely but depends on humans and it is emptied of its desires. In this description, we can easily see both the duck, Ellida and Maja in their respective conditions of captivity.

The presence of female captivity in Ibsen's works is a constant and is not limited to these three plays. "This theme of captivity, as a tool in the development of the female protagonist, ... is often observed through relationships. Ibsen creates a large number of father-daughter relationships in which the daughter is a replica of the father. The daughter is often a prisoner of the memory, expectations or person of the father" (Forshey 2008: 7-8). It is reminiscent of a *bildungsroman* in which all the female characters, because even the non-human characters who are trapped are female, must face challenges in order to grow. This maturation of female characters that occurs in a state of captivity can have a positive outcome, as in the case of Maja, but it can also have a negative one, as in the case of Hedvig. However, the sacrifice made by the girl is not simply an abrupt interruption of her growth or a drastic decision, but a reasoned escape from her state of imprisonment. In order to escape, the Ibsenian woman chooses to annihilate herself (Culeddu 2008: 111). This applies not only to Hedvig but also to Ellida, who, in order to escape, renounces her non-human nature to fully embrace her role as a woman.

6.1.5 Revenge

"The forest takes its revenge" (Ibsen 2019: 103), "There is punishment in all this. Something that takes revenge" (271) and "suddenly a thunderous roar is heard coming from the snow-covered field, which slides and falls at a furious speed" (Ibsen 2014: 294) can be read as three demonstrations in each of the three plays of acts of revenge that nature carries out against human beings.

The first, “the forest takes its revenge” (Ibsen 2019: 103), refers to the conclusion of *The Wild Duck*, where Hedvig commits suicide by taking the place of the duck in an attempt to prevent the final breakdown of her family. In my analysis, I had motivated this vengeful action on the part of nature as a desire to punish the human for creating an artificial forest, staining himself with arrogance by feeling entitled to become the creator of something that was not his to create. Nature takes its revenge on Hedvig, the most innocent of all, as the most severe and cruel form of punishment.

“There is a payback in this. Something taking its revenge” (271) is a phrase uttered by Ellida as she realises that the life she has led up to that point, during which she has always been torn between life on land and life at sea, has not allowed her to live either to the full. She, who is a creature of the sea, is punished because in all those years she has never fully and deeply accepted her nature. For this reason, the Stranger appears at her door, to take her away with him so that nature can reclaim what belongs to it. But it is also revenge against Wangel, forcing him to live an unhappy married life because he dared to trap a mermaid and therefore a part of the sea. Here too, it is the human who does not accept his limitations but acts out of pure selfishness. The same thing happens with Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken*, where, although the word revenge does not appear explicitly, it is possible, among the various interpretations, to read the final avalanche that overwhelms him and Irene as an act of revenge by nature. The phrase that helps to convey this anger towards humans is as follows: “suddenly there is a thunderous roar from the snow-covered field, which slides and falls at a *furious* speed” (Ibsen 2014: 294, italics are mine). Here, it is the adjective *furious* that conveys the anger behind human destruction. The human does not listen to or abide by the warnings not to reach the summit: Ulfheim, as a mountain expert, warns the couple to take refuge, and the signs of the impending storm are visible in the sky. The blind human, eager only to reach his goal, defies nature arrogantly.

If we think about Rubek and Irene’s goal, which is ultimately to be happy, to unite in their joyful marriage and then return to the valley and resume their lives, their need is to seek relief from their discomfort or rather from their living conditions. Their immersion in nature to seek relief is the same

interpretation I made of Old Ekdal's choice to take refuge in the attic immediately after discovering his granddaughter's death. Even in such a tragic situation, he needs to escape from reality, to pretend that what has just happened is not real, and for this reason, taking refuge in his artificial forest is once again synonymous with taking refuge in his illusion of happiness. I think this interpretation overturns that of the arrogant human to show broken, empty humans who are unable to cope with the suffering of their lives. They turn to nature for relief, even though they are aware that it may lead to their death, as in Rubek's case, or aware of its role in Hedvig's death. There is no recklessness, but perhaps there is no other way for them but this.

Returning to revenge, in all three cases Ibsen's message is clear: the human is not superior to nature and its laws, he cannot behave recklessly and disrespectfully because the nature that governs everything, including the human, is capable of punishing him. In a sense, by personifying nature by the means of giving it agency, he gives it more space and forces the viewer to pay attention to it. This is linked to another lesson that had already emerged in the finale of *The Lady from the Sea*, namely the need for the human to learn his place in the world and to relate to nature in a balanced way. Only in this way, as Ellida says, would the human "have been rather *more* highly *developed* than we are. Both better and happier" (Ibsen 2019: 240 italics are mine). The character who seems to best represent this phrase is Ulfheim who, living his life as a hunter in the mountains, far from contact with society, has developed with his dogs one of the healthiest relationships between humans and non-humans that we have encountered in all the plays. This does not eliminate the fact that he is a hunter, a killer of animals free in their habitat, but my pointing to this character as the one who comes closest to Ellida's words does not mean presenting him as an absolute model of Ibsenian literature. It is ironic to observe the words *more developed* applied to Ulfheim, who throughout the entire work is animalised to express crudeness and a cruel attitude. This expression is certainly not synonymous with polite or cultured, but I do not think that is what Ibsen meant by *developed*. If we observe how critically he treats men of science, such as Wangel, and artists, such as Rubek, there is no clear desire to present them as perfectly developed, better and happier humans. This is why I believe that the character of

Ulfheim is unusual but that, precisely because of his visceral relationship with nature, he deserves attention. What we can see when comparing Ulfheim with the other humans in the three plays is that he is one of the few characters, along with the Stranger, who does not submit to the rules of society and therefore does not depend on the yoke of reputation. This is significant because he is not limited in his actions like everyone else and has the opportunity not to depend on anyone. As we have seen in the choices made by the protagonists in the other works, it is often their fear of losing their reputation that leads them to act in a certain way that often proves to be destructive. If we think of Hjalmar, faced with the revealed truth, he could have made the "right" choice, repaired his relationship with Gina and stayed with Hedvig. Instead, he chooses to destroy everything because he is not a man strong enough to bear the judgement of others and see his reputation collapse. His decision to flee leads to the tragic epilogue and his daughter's suicide. The same thing happens to Wangel, who, out of a sense of duty as a husband, prolongs Ellida's suffering by depriving her of the freedom to choose whether to stay with him or follow the Stranger. It is again social roles that lead Wangel's daughters, Bolette and Hilde, to behave coldly towards Ellida because they cannot accept her as the woman she is, but only as a stepmother and wife, something Ellida is not ready to be. Finally, only Maja and Rubek seem not to care about their reputation, choosing to separate in order to pursue a happier life. Throughout the three works, we see a growing freedom made possible by distancing oneself from the shadow of reputation. Starting from a condition of complete subjugation in *The Wild Duck*, we move on to overcoming it in the finale of *The Lady from the Sea*, finally arriving at *When We Dead Awaken*, where the two spouses make a decision halfway through the play that does not care about people's opinions, but above all where we meet the character of Ulfheim, who represents complete detachment from this obstacle. Could this be the key for Ibsen to rediscover this healthy relationship with nature and be happier? Abandoning bourgeois society, of which he has always been particularly critical, in order to seek authentic truth.

6.2 Stories we live by

What I previously presented as *stories we live by* are those cognitive structures shared among individuals of the same culture, which influence thoughts and actions. The task of Ecolinguistics is to unmask these stories, which are often harmful and destructive because they fuel and legitimise wrong behaviour. Since it is preferable to carry out this type of analysis on several texts rather than just one, in order to identify repetitive linguistic choices and therefore possible linguistic signals of a particular story, I would now like to offer some thoughts on this subject, emphasising, however, that I will focus only on those relating to nature. The central and most obvious *story* that contains and summarises all the other stories is that of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. As we have already seen from the themes, it is more than evident that behind every text lie these narratives that fuel human exploitation of the natural world. Focusing on a linguistic point of view, however, it is possible to demonstrate this through two insights: the objectification of nature and the animalisation of characters. Both clarify the hierarchy that places humans, specifically men, at the top, followed by women, then animals and finally nature. When one wants to belittle someone or something, they can characterise that someone with the lower category: a human becomes an animal and an animal becomes an object.

6.2.1 Objectification

First encountered in *The Wild Duck*, in relation to the linguistic choices used by the Ekdal's family to refer to the duck. The use of the personal pronoun *it*, which demonstrates detachment, and possessive adjectives and pronouns such as *my*, *mine, yours*, and *ours.* In addition, expressions with verbs of possession such as "I *own* it" or "they can *borrow* it" and "what do they *use* it for then?" (Ibsen 2019: 52 italics are mine). The repetition of these expressions communicates to the reader that the duck, and non-humans in general, are objects, creatures that can be exploited and exchanged by humans at will. Another example of objectification can be seen in the case of the carps in the Wangel family's pond. Not only are they used as a clear metaphor for the lives of the characters in the play,

but they also become miniature models that the land-creatures observe and onto which they project their emotions about their own lives. In addition, they are also objects of amusement: Hilde sees them as resilient objects to be captured for her amusement. Thus, the relentless pursuit worsens the condition of objectification and amplifies the *story we live by* of anthropocentrism.

Two other examples of objectification can be seen in *When We Dead Awaken*. The first is in the description of Rubek and Ulfheim as "lord and master over it" (Ibsen 2014: 251), where by *it* Ulfheim means the material that in his case are the hunted animals and in Rubek's case his creations. The choice to talk about the killing of animals in these terms, comparing a living being to marble, is a clear example of objectification: "We both work with awkward material, madam – your husband and I. I expect he struggles a bit with that marble. And I struggle with tense, throbbing bear sinews. In the end, both of us manage to subdue our material" (251). If we then consider that what Rubek creates in his commissioned statues, beneath the busts of the bourgeoisie, are the faces of farmyard animals, the connection becomes even stronger. Human is not only the subjugator but also the creator of non-humans from blocks of marble, from inanimate bodies in which he traps his creations. Even more so, the reason he creates them is probably to mock his clients, so the creation of non-humans for pure mockery is doubly unjust. The high point at which the protagonists of this play allow themselves to become creators of non-humans by objectifying them is the scene in which Rubek and Irene pluck mountain flowers and throw them into the stream. On this occasion, it is Irene who creates non-humans, namely birds such as swans, flamingos and seagulls, so that they can become a means of carrying her troubles and desires far away from her. Once again, human becomes a creator for his own benefit, feeling free, as a superior being, to exploit his surroundings, in this case flowers, plucking them and transforming them into something else, more functional at that moment.

In both cases, we can see how there is a constant objectification of the weakest, a way of devaluing them more and more. This process is not only destructive for non-humans, but also for humans, especially the weakest and most innocent. If we think of Hedvig, in fact, as the duck's double through her animalisation, it is she who pays the consequences of the objectification that the duck has suffered

throughout the play. Even after her death, the little girl will not cease to be belittled: "within three-quarters of a year little Hedvig will be no more to him than a beautiful motif for a declamation" (Ibsen 2019: 205). Relling's words are meant to make us understand that her death was in vain, and that the girl will remain in her father's memories not as herself but only as a sacrificial victim who performed an act of pure love for her father. Therefore, all that will remain of her will be her final gesture, her annihilation and her father will exploit this memory to wallow in "self-admiration and self-pity" (205). Her fate is the result of the cognitive structures that have been established in the minds of her family members, including Hedvig, who, word after word and through objectification, legitimised the child's death.

6.2.2 Animality

The second and equally evident sign of the presence of human exceptionalism as the *story we live by* is animality. During my analysis, I observed how many of the characters undergo this type of process – animalization – , which usually has the aim of making the character who undergoes it a sub-human distancing them from the human category. The latter category is characterised by the use of reason, modesty and controlled sexuality, respect for social norms, freedom and agency. Furthermore, this process makes use of a fundamental tool: metaphor, synonymous with the replacement of the actual animal to make room for animality, or "the translation of animal instincts into human characteristics" (Lönngren 2015: 38), thus conferring traits such as sexuality, bestiality and stupidity.

In *The Wild Duck*, we encounter several animalised characters: Old Werle is described as "a right billy goat in his day" (Ibsen 2019: 5), where animality is used to convey stubbornness and probably a strong sexual appetite. Gregers is a pig according to Gina because he dirtied his room. Gina, "like a spider" (71), has woven a web of lies around Hjalmar, becoming a poisonous woman who plays with her prey. All three cases are examples of metaphors used to translate animal instincts into human characteristics and neither of them features an actual animal. Gregers and Hedvig are animalised through the use of verbs that evoke the animal realm, such as "flew" (100) for the girl and "hound"

(74) for the man. These are just two of the choices made by Ibsen to animalise these two characters and symbolically construct, word by word, the two doubles: Hedvig/duck and Gregers/dog.

In *When We Dead Awaken*, we also find a good amount of animality, which most of the time uses birds as instruments. Maja becomes a bird several times, both in her own words: “I’m free as a bird!” (Ibsen 2014: 282), and through her reference to her past life spent in a cage. This metaphor does not negatively characterise either the animal or Maja but is still considered animality as it transfers the connotation of freedom commonly associated with birds. The same applies to Irene, who is a swan: “You said that I was the swan pulling your boat” (280). The beauty of the swan is attributed to Irene as the muse who inspires Rubek’s art. But an animalisation that really reinforces the story of anthropocentrism is that of the commissioners transformed into farmyard animals. This is a more complex situation because it involves marble, an inanimate object, sculpted in the likeness of humans who “at the deepest level” (244) are animals. Therefore, for this reflection to hold up, we must accept that the stone is transformed into humans and animals and that the sculptor created the busts of the latter to better represent the commissioners. In this way, we can see how humans are animalised by the animals hidden beneath the surface, and the animality conferred is a mixture of brutalisation and mockery. “...at the deepest level they’re all worthy, respectable horse faces, stubborn donkey muzzles, low-slung, lop-eared dog skulls and fatted swine heads – as well as the occasional brutish, flabby *likenesses* of oxen –” (244, italics are mine). The use of the word *likenesses* was certainly intended to clarify the connection between superficial human and animal appearances. The mockery we saw in the objectification of carps returns: in both cases, there is a certain complacency about the condition of human superiority.

What seems to combat this story of anthropocentrism, however, is the growing agency of nature. As already mentioned when discussing the growing presence of nature that runs through the three plays, non-humans with agency are on the rise. This is certainly visible with the Stranger who, as part of the sea, acts for it and represents the sea on stage. He is one of the central and decisive characters in the

play and accepting him as a non-human allows us to find in him a first sign of growing agency. Other non-humans in this play who have agency are marine animals, namely seals, whales, dolphins, eagles and seagulls, but they do not actively interact with the characters in the play as the Stranger does. An obvious demonstration of nature's agency is the avalanche, which I have already discussed at length. In conclusion, I believe that although the linguistic contribution to supporting anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism and legitimising the exploitation of non-humans throughout the play is evident, through a more-than-anthropocentric reading that recognises and focuses on the presence and agency of non-humans, it is possible to oppose these stories.

6.3 Contribution

I firmly believe that this research can enrich Ibsenian criticism. Although incomplete and limited to only a few works from the author's long artistic production, this thesis aims to provide an inspiration for future ecocritical reflections. This is both because there are few studies in this field on this author and because there is still much to be said by observing the same or other works of his. One of Ibsen's most analysed works by ecocritical scholars is *An Enemy of the People*, clearly because of the centrality of nature and its exploitation in the play. Reading an ecocritical study of this work allowed me to feel justified in considering Ibsen for my own ecocritical analysis. This is because it made me think that there really could be a general theme of nature in the author's work and that it just needed to be brought out. I share this observation because I think and hope that the same thing will happen to others reading my thesis and imagining other possible avenues. I also think that greater interest in the subject would contribute to the creation of stimulating and supportive literature. I realise that my analysis is largely based on my own observations and therefore on my subjectivity, which in some respects may make the work seem arbitrary, but I believe that this aspect is a demonstration of Barthes' thinking about leaving room for the reader.

One final observation I would like to make is that, given that my research has looked at the plays from a purely literary point of view, I think it would be equally interesting to continue the discussion but taking into account the theatrical aspect. This would involve analysing the choices made by directors, the composition of the set design and the possible use of animals on stage. Another very interesting aspect could be to understand whether some of the animalisations observed in the linguistic analysis are reproduced on stage by directors or actors, and in what way. This would require a significant and difficult task, especially since most theatrical performances are not preserved in video format, at least not after the first few years of publication, and one would have to rely on reviews by critics who have seen the shows. In any case, I believe that such a contribution could complement and further stimulate my proposal.

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