

# **Vocational Vanity and Career Deterioration in Ibsen's The Master Builder**

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**الغرور المهني والتدهور الوظيفي في إِبسن سيد البناء**

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## Abstract:

In The Master Builder, Henrik Ibsen gave the stage Halvard Solness, an architect and businessman as a tragic hero whose fall is precipitated by various factors: psychological, social, and occupational. And while the psychological and social factors are researched and commented on extensively by many scholars and critics, the last area which has to do with Solness's profession is hardly approached. Therefore, in the study, Solness's business world, vocational principles, and work ethics are explored in an attempt to read Solness's tragic end as the natural corollary of his failure to maintain a staunch work morality. Reading The Master Builder from a vocational point of view proved that Solness possessed a flawed business logic that compromised his career and led him blindly toward his end. He is by no means the empowering boss, but a parasitic business owner who plans to promote his occupational interests at the expense of his employee's hard work.

**Keywords:** The Master Builder,

## المُلخَص:

في مسرحيته 'رئيس البنائين' قدّم هنريك إيبسن إلى المسرح هالفرد سولنس وهو معماري ورجل أعمال كشخصية تراجيدية تُعجّل عوامل نفسية واجتماعية ومهنية عديدة بسقوطه. وبينما قدّم عدد كبير من الباحثين والنقاد بحوثاً ودراسات نقدية كثيرة عن العوامل النفسية والاجتماعية إلا أن لا أحد تقريباً درس الجانب الأخير وهو مهنية سولنس، ولذلك فإن هذا البحث يركز على عالم الأعمال الخاص بسولنس ويبحث مبادئه واخلاقه المهنية من أجل قراءة نهايته المأساوية كنتيجة طبيعية لفشله في الحفاظ على أخلاق عمل متينة. إن قراءة 'سيد البنائين' من وجهة نظر مهنية أثبتت أن لدى سولنس منطق عمل خاطئ عرض عمله للخطر وأدى به على نحو أعمى إلى نهايته المحتومة. وهو بأي حالٍ من الأحوال الرئيس الذي يمتلك صلاحيات كبيرة لكنه صاحب العمل الطفيلي الذي يسعى لتعزيز مصالحه المهنية الخاصة على حساب العمل المضنى الذي يقوم به موظفوه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** رئيس البنائين، هنريك إيبسن، البطل التراجيدي، عالم الاعمال، الرئيس المتنفذ، منافع مهنية

Henrik Ibsen, tragic hero, business world, empowering boss, occupational interests .

## Introduction

The Master Builder is a play that revolves on a character that happens to be as Ibsen acknowledged “a direct reflection of...himself” (Storm 21). Ibsen explores the workplace of a builder and architect and reflects on his personal life which is overwhelmed by his occupation. The title character, master builder, Halvard Solness is a man whose existence seems to solely rely on his being a master builder. All his decisions and choices, whether personal or social are made in the context of his profession. For instance, the ease with which Solness converts a couple of rooms in his house to an office is symbolic of the blurred line between personal life and work. But it is also an index that Halvard Solness is a master builder in a rather rudimentary or classical fashion since he is both builder and architect exchangeably. Solness had no academic training in architecture, per se, either because he could not afford it or did not believe in its necessity. Nonetheless, he thinks of himself as an artist whose artistic success is achieved at the expense of his personal life as he confesses to Hilda in Act Two (826). And even though he was apprenticed to Brovik, he prides himself on being self-taught, affirming “Never went through the training [architecture]. Almost all I know I've had to find out for myself” (The Master Builder 824). The standards of business success were determined differently at that time and ingenuity and creativity were measured against expertise and popularity rather than innovation or inventiveness. Solness seems to think that he possesses what it takes to make a successful career though his self-confidence and belief in the superiority of his work do not mount to what Michael W. Kaufman describes as “the uncompromising self-assertion”, which is “the catastrophic result of megalomania” (169). Rather, Solness seems to lag

when the play opens and he is faintly aware of the imminent eclipse of his career, which he is trying to delay as long as possible.

In the current paper, Solness's workplace is examined along with the vocational skills attributed to him in the attempt to prove that his final downfall is brought about by vanity and overconfidence as well as highly flawed work ethics. His relationship as a boss with his employees is also explored in terms of power abuse and occupational unfairness. It is argued here that even though Halvard Solness was professional on many levels, his vocational views are smeared with pettiness and immaturity. Ageism looms large as a major operator, clouding his vision and compromising his work ethic, and his downfall can be in part attributed to it as well. At this point in his career, there is an undeniable sense of Solness's unsuitability for vocational adventure and inability to forge innovative and wider business paths for himself. And while his death can be seen as an occupational hazard, it is proposed in this paper that denial, prompted by vanity, accelerated his end which is nevertheless highly anticipated.

## **Ethics of the workplace**

Right from the very opening scene, we are introduced to a trio who seem to be running the office in the absence of the master builder. The three labouring employees include Knut Brovik who was the previous owner of the business before the shrewder and most likely the then more ambitious apprentice Solness took it over and claimed it as his own. As an entrepreneur, Halvard Solness managed to oust and dislodge Brovik many years ago and sat at the business helm in his stead. After Solness pushed his master to the margins, he offered him a steady job, not an equal partnership though, adding insult to injury. The tenacious Knut Brovik swallowed his pride and accepted a subordinate role, but has ever since entertained strong and not altogether baseless hopes that the wheel of fortune that turned against him once and robbed him of his position as

the master builder, would turn again in his favour or rather his son's, Ragnar, favour. To solidify the family aspect of the business, Brovik and his son Ragnar are joined by Kaja Fosli, the former's niece and the latter's fiancé. The play opens with three up to their necks in the maps, designs, and plans of the business in the absence of the business owner, Halvard Solness.

One would expect to see the master builder, Solness, himself working on designs, laying plans, and making necessary calculations, or at least giving instructions or supervising underway projects. Instead, the three subordinates seem to be comfortable with running the business on their own and in Solness's absence. His whereabouts are also undisclosed, but there is no indication that he was conducting business elsewhere, hence, Knut Brovik's exasperation. There is an air of tension in the workplace, which manifests itself in, for instance, Brovik's indignant impatience at Solness's playing deaf and dumb to his demands which we are later going to learn more about. Solness seems to be playing truant and stalling for time in order not to lose the persons who run, de facto, his business for him. Therefore, any claims about Solness's brilliance are to be taken with a grain of salt. There is no evidence that Solness was ever gifted as an architect. Brovik tells him to his face that he had almost no knowledge when he started. Solness himself confirms that luck played a major part in his success and Dr. Herdal seconds Solness's view that he owes his professional rise to luck rather than talent or even hard work. He is the poor country boy who made it from rags to riches (*The Master Builder* 788). Solness has risen high up in the ranks and Herdal's Phoenix metaphor in telling Solness that he "rose from the ashes" (*The Master Builder* 799) is a proof of the latter's tenacity and persistence rather than dexterity, let alone brilliance .

In Solness's workplace, a sense of discontentment, even vexation hangs in the air, and is confirmed in Solness's sneaking into his own office, hoping to find father and son gone. His avoidance of confrontation is a sign of "escapism", one of his "great weaknesses" (Delbrück 31). His

escapism is also evident in his dream-like and impractical disposition. But it could simply be a sign of Solness's displeasure over having to deal with his former master and his son since there is no love lost between the master builder and the Broviks: senior and junior. In this work environment, the boss and employees seem more like putting up than getting along with each other. And this tension may not be necessarily created by Solness, but the latter has made no effort to defuse it. His passivity and tendency towards evasion have allowed indignation and moroseness to take root and fester .

Further, his approach to conducting business is by no means pragmatic or businesslike. For instance, upon his arrival soon later carrying files, Halvard Solness starts his time at the office, not by requesting updates on the latest projects or seeking information on what he might have missed while idling out. He begins his work day by flirting with Kaja. This mixing of business and pleasure is a token of corrupt business ethics. It does not take readers/spectators long to discover that Halvard Solness has been exercising his masculine charms on the naïve Kaja not for romantic reasons, but for purely professional purposes. "By literally spellbinding the young woman who does his bookkeeping", Rolf Fjelde concludes, Solness intends to keep his company together. He can not do without "his hard-driven staff of three", whom he keeps "in forced servitude" (Fjelde 780). Kaja is indispensable to Solness not because she is a devoted secretary and the master builder is unwilling to lose her professional skills. Rather, it is because her presence in his office guarantees that Ragnar will not leave to set up his own business. Solness goes as far as urging Kaja to marry Ragnar to "rid" the latter of the "stupid ideas" of setting up his own business (*The Master Builder* 791). Wary of rivalry and competition, Solness is determined to keep Ragnar under his thumb, standing between him and any professional advancement and robbing him of his fiancé if he has to. Olivia Noble Gunn points to how Solness is unscrupulously "engaging in behaviors that he believes will safeguard his position" (48). It is no wonder, in this workplace, Solness's ethical attitude is fomenting unrest. There is an undercurrent of discontentment,

a sense of injustice, and a note of impatience on the part of Knut Brovik and his son whom one may mistake at first glance as Solness's partners before one learns otherwise. Instead of an equal partnership, Solness has knocked down Brovik senior and almost made of Ragnar Brovik a slaving office boy. This is what Claudia Johnson describes as the "humiliation" a hired young man like Ragnar suffers at the hands of his boss and "the hopelessness that comes from dashed aspirations" (xviii). Solness has been unjust to both father and son as he confesses to Dr. Herdal that the Broviks are "really a clever pair, those two. They've got ability" and things would have gone well if not for Ragnar's plans to marry and launch his career (*The Master Builder* 796). Kaja who is also family to Brovik and not only the son's fiancé is emotionally extorted by Halvard Solness for personal gains. When Dr. Herdal drops a hint about the ongoing flirtation with Kaja, Solness describes his conundrum in that he "can't help it! If she runs off— then Ragnar will follow, out on his own" (*The Master Builder* 797). The master builder has shamelessly compromised his position as a man of respectable business and cut a poor figure in terms of morality being a married middle-aged man. In today's standards, his behavior with Kaja even with the latter's consent is labeled as sexual harassment. Solness has abused his power and fed on the naivety of Kaja and benefited from the emotional involvement of Ragnar and this is how he has been running his business .

When it comes to flirting with younger women, Solness betrays his principles. Even though he claims that Ragnar is his target for keeping Kaja in his thrall, he readily offers Kaja's job to Hilda Wangel a few minutes after he meets her. Hilda, however, has no plans to play a subordinate neither to Solness, nor to anybody else. She also has the insight to see through his self-centered plans; she even shames and scolds him for thinking of engaging her services. Offended by his job offer, she gives "( him a dark look)" before she exclaims "Yes, wouldn't that suit you! No, thanks— we're not having any of that" (*The Master Builder* 804). Derailed by Hilda, Solness forgoes his determination to use Kaja to blackmail Ragnar and is swept by the charming presence of a new female

admirer, who is also half his age. It remains unclear whether his offer to hire Hilda was genuine or part of his shameless flirtation. Had Hilda accepted his offer, he would have found himself in a bind.

## **A Career on the Decline**

Even though Rolf Fjelde opines that Halvard Solness is “a distinguished architect at the peak of his career” (780), the temporal framework over which the plot line stretches encompasses the nadir of Halvard Solness’s architectural career, considering that the play ends in his death. Solness who was apprenticed to Brovik quickly rose to fame and power due to presumably talent and hard work, and ultimately took over the business, dislodging his boss who had to accept the position of a subordinate. In the presumably capable hands of Solness, the business has thrived and Solness reaped the sweet fruit of his youth’s labour. However, when the play opens, the reader/ spectator is confronted with the fact that the glorious vocational milestones that have established and cemented Solness’s reputation as a man of business belonged in the past. One cannot help, but think that Solness as a career person is caught at a fairly bad time. When Brovik describes his son’s drawings as “new”, Solness finds himself dubbing his construction work as outmoded and worthless compared to Ragnar’s, confessing rather incredulously: “Aha! New! Modern! None of the old-fashioned stuff I build!” (*The Master Builder* 789 ). One learns about Solness’s past conquests in retrospect when he or other characters and especially Hilda Wangel gush over or make references to the buildings he designed and built. The Solness, introduced when the play begins, no longer works on great buildings or monuments of marvelous designs. The latter belonged to a long gone past when he was younger and before personal tragedy cast a long shadow on his life and career.

Solness seems to have lost interest in the current state of his business and is only biding his time after the death of his sons. He is



unaware of his lassitude, therefore, he pretends to have developed higher standards and claims he wants to change direction. As such, he professes a lack of interest in building a villa for a rich couple because it fails to captivate his attention. Upon Brovik's endeavour to revive Solness's interest in the Løvstrand's villa on account of the couple's wish to have a home of their own, Solness snaps :

SOLNESS (as before). Good God-they all want that!

BROVIK (looking up). They said they had such a longing to move into their own place.

SOLNESS. All right, all right-we know that! So they'll make do with anything-any kind of a-a roost. Just a peg to hang their hats. But not a home. No--no, thanks! They can go find somebody else. Tell them that when they come again (The Master Builder 787).

In his rejection of this job, Solness seems to be sincere on the one hand and final on the other. One suspects that Solness thinks that building a villa at Løvstrand is not on par with his new architectural vision. However, once Brovik who is anxious to get his son's hands on any project, suggests that Solness might leave this job to Ragnar, the master builder is stung by jealousy. Solness fears that history would run a full circle as it usually does. Ragnar might steal a march on him since after all that was how Solness managed to get to where he is now. Solness is not confident that Ragnar Brovik would not be able to beat him at his own game and therefore he would take every measure for that not to happen to him:

BROVIK (hesitating a bit). He could build that house at Løvstrand.

SOLNESS. That! But I'm building that!

BROVIK. Oh, but you have no more interest in it.

SOLNESS (flaring up). No interest! Me! Who says so? (The Master Builder 789).

He contradicts his original argument and is even unashamed to deny his earlier disinterest in the job. He does not seem to be aware that he had a quick change of heart and is oblivious to his former reservations. So, his emphatic “They can go find somebody else” (The Master Builder 787) shamelessly excludes Ragnar Brovik; if it is a choice between him and Ragnar, Solness would build the villa just to spite Knut Brovik and ensure that Ragnar never has a chance to rise in the ranks. All the while, we have reasons to argue that Solness has been possibly blocking Ragnar's way probably for years, much to the dismay of the latter's father.

Knut Brovik has the tenacity of an old man on the verge of his death as he wields logic, common sense, and entreaty to persuade Solness to give up and withdraw, making room for Ragnar. The talk about withdrawal reinforces the notion of war between the two and urges Solness to succumb to defeat. Brovik's importunity almost unhinges Solness who is determined not to offer Ragnar a chance to outshine him especially now that the old man talks about his son's designs and drawings in terms of difference and novelty. Solness must have found the words “new”, “different”, and “make room” very alarming. He has panicked to learn that he should step aside and make room for the young :

SOLNESS: So that's it! Halvard Solness—he ought to start giving up now! Make room for youth. For even the youngest. Just make room! Room! Room! (The Master Builder 790).

He incredulously and hysterically examines the proposition in the light of his professional expertise, wondering if time is up for him to endure at Ragnar's hands what he had inflicted on Brovik. The reversal of the master-apprentice roles is looming large on the horizon, throwing its dark shadow on Solness's judgment. His determination grows stronger not to have a taste of his own poison. The confrontation between the two men is an index of the waning days of Solness as a master builder .

Solness is not yet ready to embrace change that would probably dethrone him. He thinks that he can exercise his powers to block the way before Ragnar who symbolizes youth and champions change. Therefore, it was easy for Hilda to wake up Solness's dormant ambition with her schoolgirl's stories that flatter his ego and inflate his self-worth:

HILDA (vivacious again). It was so terribly thrilling and lovely. I'd never dreamt that anywhere in the world there was a builder who could build a tower so high. And then, that you could stand there right at the top, large as life! And that you weren't the least bit dizzy! That's what made me so-almost dizzy to realize (The Master Builder 805).

Solness falls willingly for the fawning adoration of juvenile memories. As the conversation between the two progresses, one can learn that Hilda has not grown out of her twelve-year-old self. It seems that due to her arrested emotional and even intellectual development, she is stuck in the past. She relishes in reliving over and again the day when the master builder's performance, Solness's, swept her off the ground ten years ago. Otherwise, one does not expect a mature twenty-two/three-year old young lady to wait for Solness to honour his promise to take her to "Spain or someplace" and "buy" her "a kingdom" (The Master Builder 806). No wonder that the room Mrs. Solness arranges for Hilda to spend the night in is one of the three nurseries in the house. Solness is drawn to this young, dreamy girl who takes him on an illustrious trip down memory lane. This nostalgia and the forlorn hope to find inspiration blunt his wits and that is going to be the cause of his undoing.

This encounter between Solness and Hilda lends proof to the former's selective memory as well. In his conversation with Dr. Herdal, Solness remarks that he did not hire Kaja and that Kaja assumed he had on her own. Likewise, Hilda's recollection of the day they met a decade ago is far more detailed and vivid than Solness's. He was in raptures, unsure whether to deny certain particulars that either did not take place at all or he fails to remember. He even compliments her on her thorough account of that day and exceptional attention to tiny details even though

if accurate and true, it includes a compromising memory in which he behaves like a pedophile, flirting with and even hitting on a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl (*The Master Builder* 806-7). Of course, he cannot remember because he was poking fun at her naivety and he was too ravingly thrilled with his success to have any moral consideration.

## Disempowerment

Gretchen M. Spreitzer defines psychological empowerment 'as a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role' (1444). Solness is by no means the empowering team leader that rejoices in the success of the members of the team apart from himself. He is unable to praise and give credit to the talented work of the Broviks whom he describes to Dr. Herdal as:

SOLNESS... they're really a clever pair, those two. They've got ability, each in his own way. But then the son went out and got engaged. And then, of course, he was all for getting married-and launching his own career as a builder. Because the young people today, that's all they ever think about (*The Master Builder* 796).

Earlier, he taunted Knut Brovik, refusing to acknowledge whether Ragnar's work has any merits, sending the old man into a fit of despair:

SOLNESS (not looking at him). Do you think Ragnar has really enough talent for that?

BROVIK. Don't you see, that's the worst of it. That I'm beginning to have my doubts about the boy. For you've never said so much as-as one word of encouragement about him. But then I think it can't be any other way-he must have the talent.

SOLNESS. Well, but he hasn't learned anything yet-nothing basic. Nothing but drafting.

BROVIK (looking at him with veiled hatred, his voice hoarse). You hadn't learned anything either, back when you worked for me. But you got along all right. (Breathing heavily.) Pushed your way up. Cut the ground out from under me-and so many others (*The Master Builder* 788).

Olivia Noble Gunn finds Solness “anxious to preserve his status as master by undermining any potential for those around him to rise professionally” (48). His self-defense mechanism boils down to his incapability to recognize Ragnar in any light other than a potential threat. His discouragement of Ragnar stems from his lack of self-esteem as Solness realized that he owes his present success to the talented young architect in his office. He is even unwilling to appease his old master and remains unfazed by the latter's importations because giving in to them means self-harm or even self-ruin to Solness. He stands his grounds firmly for any relenting on his part would compromise his position as the chief architect and mastermind:

BROVIK (rising with effort). And I— must I give up life without hope? Without joy? Without faith and trust in Ragnar? Without seeing a single one of his works? Is that it? (*The Master Builder* 790).

Solness was once a father who lost his children, but his egotism and desire to protect himself make him lend deaf ears to Brovik's heartfelt pleas. Daniel Johnston writes that Halvard Solness “is [so] driven by a fear of the next generation nipping at his heels” to the point of heartlessness (129). Solness is adamant about not to allow anyone to emotionally blackmail him. Even his most ardent admirer, Hilda Wangel, is not blind to his poor character, telling him that “it was terribly mean. And hard and wicked and cruel” ( *The Master Builder* 828) of him to deny Brovik his dying wish and continue to ignore Ragnar and unfairly dash his professional hopes away. His paranoia affects his better judgment even though he is ready to speak the truth to Hilda when he

tells her in a whisper “If Ragnar Brovik gets his chance, he'll hammer me to the ground. Break me-same as I broke his father” (The Master Builder 834) .

## Vanity and downfall

Elizabeth Wright cogently argues about the diverse critical views that Halvard Solness inspired over the years and which capitalize on how the master builder “idealised himself beyond reality”. As such, Solness is described as “an artistic genius; a Prospero”; he is dubbed as “an Adam”, “ a demon”, “a Nietzschean superman”, “a Lucifer, a Faust, a Prometheus, even an Apollo” (Wright 298). On a related note, Frode Helland and many other researchers explore the relevance of Nietzsche's views to The Master Builder (55). But a closer and deeper look at Ibsen's characterisation of Solness tells an opposite or at least a different story. Solness's actions and language do not exhibit any of the superiority of character that many critics prefer to think he manifests. When the events unfold, Solness has neither the talent nor the confidence he once possessed. He is stubborn and willful, but by no means inventive. We do not get introduced to the great architect Solness when the play opens, but only hear others refer to his past achievements. And when the action progresses, readers learn that Solness is afraid of Ragnar's superiority; Solness is very certain that the survival of the fittest would go in favour of the young and against him.

Struggling with feelings of self-doubt and impotence, Halvard Solness meets Hilda Wangel who storms into his home out of the blue to inspire him to be the man and architect he was ten years ago. If he is an artist as he likes to think of himself, then he welcomes Hilda as his muse. She is a vision from that glorious, carefree summer when he “went up and built a tower on the old church” (The Master Builder 801). Hilda reminded him of his youthful, energetic self that he must have missed so much and revived in him the desire to be again the young fellow he used to be before the traumatic experience that left him emotionally and spiritually

stunted. She awakens his adventurous side, charging him with new energy as she is determined to “to see you [Solness] great. See you with a wreath in your hand-high, high up on a church tower! (The Master Builder 835). He is first amused by the recollection of his past achievement, but soon that memory takes hold of him. At the end of this hypnotic episode, the Harpy-like Hilda, being a “a bird of prey” in Solness’s description sinks her “claws” deep into his egoism (The Master Builder 833) ready to tear and rip. She manages to persuade Solness to acknowledge Ragnar’s designs presumably out of charity and in kindness to his dying father. In putting his signature on Ragnar’s portfolio, Solness realizes that he is signing more or less his death sentence. This awareness culminates in his firing of both Ragnar and Kaja at one go a few minutes later and he hands the portfolio to Kaja to take with her (The Master Builder 836-37). It was a rare and quite contrary gesture on Solness’s part towards the dying Knut Brovik; that gesture ushers the beginning of the end. On the evening of that same fatal day, the master builder, Halvard Solness, will throw caution to the wind and plucks courage to hang a wreath on his new house’s tower. He ignores his fear of heights and his wife’s warning and promises to give Hilda the spectacular performance she was looking forward to these ten years.

Ironically speaking, Solness was discussing with Dr. Herdal how much he dreads the upcoming change along with the notion of the young replacing the old:

SOLNESS. The change is coming. I can sense it. And I feel that it's coming closer. Someone or other will set up the cry: Step back for me! And all the others will storm in after, shaking their fists and shouting: Make room-make room-make room! Yes, Doctor, you better look out. Some— day youth will come here, knocking at the door-

HERDAL (laughing). Well, good Lord, what if they do?

SOLNESS. What if they do? Well, then it's the end of Solness, the master builder. (The Master Builder 799-800)

Solness's offhand replies augur ill and while he thinks of youth and change in the shape of Ragnar Brovik, it is, in fact, the arrival of Hilda Wangel, the twenty-two- or three-years old girl that would set the clock ticking for the end. Hilda is going to wake up his nostalgia for those carefree, daredevil days of his when he could climb up and down the highest church tower of the time without breaking a sweat. Unlike the present, he used to design and build monumental buildings in the likes of churches. Times have changed and now he works on smaller, but numerous commissions which must be financially more lucrative and less time-consuming than churches and towers. His work lost its grand standards and acquired a quotidian quality. Hilda reminded him of the architect he used to be and revived in him the desire to return to that phase in his career (*The Master Builder* 810). His current commissions bring him money, but fall short of the mark of greatness that he used to achieve. The puerile Hilda thrusts the supposedly experienced and worldwide master builder into the turmoil of a wounded pride .

As Hilda goes through the drawings on Solness's desk, the conversation that follows chips further at Solness's professional vanity. She inadvertently deals his confidence one blow after another:

HILDA. Did you do all these designs?

SOLNESS, No, they're done by a young man I've had helping me.

HILDA. Someone you've been teaching.

SOLNESS. Oh yes, I guess he's learned something from me, all right.

HILDA (sitting). Then he must be quite clever, hm? (Studies one of the sketches a moment.) Isn't he?

SOLNESS. Oh, could be worse. For my work. Though —

HILDA. Oh yes! He must be dreadfully clever (*The Master Builder* 821).

Solness seems to be fighting to have this young lady's attention and adoration all to himself. It is a moment of honesty in which he owns



rather without any embarrassment that the designs are not his and they are pretty good despite his reluctance to admit their superior quality. It scares him to think that his honesty costs him the admiration of this apparition from the glorious past. She weighs in on his endeavour to teach others and tells him point-blank that he must be stupid to try to help others learn a profession he should keep its secrets for himself:

HILDA (rising, half serious, half laughing). Oh, come on, Mr. Solness! What's the point of it? Nobody but you should have a right to build. You should be all alone in that. Have the field to yourself. Now you know (The Master Builder 821).

As such, while Hilda gives his self-confidence a shake at the beginning, she redresses the situation quickly, boosting his egotistical attitude. Hilda seems to have a double influence on Solness's awareness. She encourages his ambition, but also evokes his reservation, and reluctance. In consequence, Solness exposes two opposed polarities: one is prompted by fantasy, hope, and visions. The other is poignantly pragmatic and hopeless. In Act Three, for instance, Solness drops a hint about his intention to retire. In response to her question "What are you building next?", Solness shakes his head and says "Don't think I'll build much more now" (The Master Builder 846). After the death of his twins, he stopped building churches in a motion of protest against or anger at religion and faith. He also took it upon himself to build houses for big and poor families rather than make fancy homes for the wealthy. These families are currently dwindling and "Who knows if there'll be any use for such homes in the future" (The Master Builder 846). Unfortunately, his youthful dreamscapes revisit him at a turning point in his career when the need for the kind of work he does is significantly diminishing. Solness is caught at a very precarious moment in the trajectory of his career. Deep down, he is certain he has nothing to offer, therefore, he has at least to make his exit memorable. Whether or not he knew, he would roll down to his death from that house tower remains a matter of speculation.

## Conclusion

Ibsen's The Master Builder touches upon many issues that weigh on a career person who finds himself in a rut. Life around him progresses very fast while he grows older and feels he cannot keep pace with the vigor of the young. Solness feels threatened and while he is busy combatting his insecurities, he brings about his ruin. He thinks that playing blind and deaf along with stubbornness can save his name and prolong his already fading career. Denying his young apprentice, Ragnar, the credit and praise he deserves have almost worked if not for the arrival of Hilda Wagnal who played on his vanity and nostalgia. She reminded him of his past achievements and in so doing, she inflated his sense of professional superiority. As a business owner, Solness's conduct is by no means exemplary. He neglects his duties, blatantly abuses his authority, refuses to empower the talented among his team members, and even emotionally manipulates the young vulnerable Kaja who performs secretarial tasks at his office. This neglect of the immediate present reflects badly on his self-image; therefore, he finds the past enticing. Ultimately in his attempt to relive his past glories, he meets his end. His death marks not only the end of his life and career, but also infects his entire legacy and posthumous memory with failure and defeat .

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