

## Once Bitten

*Once Bitten*, a farcical comedy written by Hennequin and Delacroix in 1875 resonated with surprising humor without seeming the least bit outdated. Its comedic qualities were achieved through farcical techniques, such as improbable situations, fast-pacing/precise timing and mistaken identity and erupted in a frenzy of hilarity. In addition to these qualities each character brought their own distinguishing trait or habit, somewhat of a certain comedic strength (as opposed to a tragic flaw) which gave their character even more depth. The shy maid had a habit of studdering and eventually, this studying primed the audience, so at a certain point in the play, the laughter would begin before she utter a sound. In addition, Fauvinard's mother in law, Madame Laiguisier is always proper, stern with an air of authority and entitlement in her composure. The unraveling events place her in tight situations, where she is found, perhaps in the room with the dog, or under a table and that composure is compromised; the actions that result from those scenes, provide a source of comedy, because she is so out of her niche and forced to engage in the shocking turn of events. Also, Tardivaut who became a doctor through Fauvinard's unexpected predicament, had to juggle with both characters, one having a jaw injury in which he had a speech impediment. We see the character trying to grapple with his mouth's movements and explore strange sounds. And of course Fauvinard's uncle has an uncanny quality to fall asleep during the day when he sits down. He is constantly bustling about with high energy and effervescence, but sits down at times convenient or sometimes not convenient to the unraveling plot. It seems his memory also escapes him at times so his forgetfulness and sleepiness provide that comic relief that allow some of the characters hiding secrets a relief.

This mistaken identity also contributes to the plot and narrative continuity as Fauvinard gets mistaken for Mr. Veradieu, the jewelry thief. He finds himself in peculiar situations (improbable situations) in which he must hide under the table and bring a dead dog "back to life," or pretend to be a piano tuner. This scene was particularly funny because he was trying to be inconspicuous at his mistresses house and the harder he banged on the note, the closer the threat of exposure loomed; he rolled his coat collar up and buried his head in fright. He also tries to conceal his identity by pretending to be a woman with a draped tablecloth in a summers hat! These situations are all improbable; the play in this way is more of a depiction of improvisation, always a surprise, always a shock over the ensuing events. This keeps the audience on its feet as the pace quickened leading to resolve at the end. The beginning build-up was built the narrative foundation and situational conflicts (and there were many) that created the gasping situations which resolved themselves one after another, without missing a beat in the second act.

Also a common element in the farce is the use of doors and spaces the characters occupy. People are constantly entering and exiting spaces, in a circular, quick movement and transition. These transitions through spaces often create an ironic situations where characters who are in the room, shouldn't be in the room. For instance, when Madame Laiguisier is in Cesarine's house, she gets accused of being that mistress leading to her arrest and stay in prison. There were no physical doors in this play, which demanded most of the action to take place on stage, and priviledged that open space. The absence of physical doors in this comedy, did not detract from the realization of space or the comedy in general. In this play, there is also somewhat of a shallow social commentary which pokes fun at marriage patterns and law occupations and thievery. Altogether, this was a most enjoyable play; the timing was fast paced as the events unraveled in a frenzy of hilarity. The situations were improbable, yes, but not altogether absurd.

## The Master Builder

Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder* has an aura of other worldliness, a gothic mysticism that seems to take hold of the character. Its realism was unsettling as it went beyond a tragic play as Solness is doomed with the tragic flaw of hubris. Ragnar was a moral character, repressed by Solness' pride and dominance and never was justly revenged. The conclusion was necessary but not satisfying, still leaving a lot of questions unresolved. Hilde was the most enigmatic character in that her motivations were unclear and her own history, her own past and future was ambiguous, her language almost absurd, suggesting her other-worldliness and providing that complexity. This hint at absurdity in dialogue and in action invites symbolic exegesis as the minimalist staging invites audience imagination. The simple wood delignments over the dirt floor and the staircase in back that was used for Solness' ascent to the top of the Cathedral partitioned the space simply, in doing so, gave the audience more room to imagine the characters' development and more room for the character psychologies to dominate the play. These techniques simultaneously stripped and replaced character veils, providing insight but further complicating their motivations.

Solness' motivations were unclear but his suspicion, fear and hubris were apparent even before the play began as Solness was seated on the stage as the audience trickled in. He was seated slightly sideways on a simple wood chair, his arms crossed over his chest, his legs crossed and his back was hunched as he carefully surveyed the audience. His facial expression was in deep concentration, furrowed brown and tight lips, setting the tone. A similar stylistic effect occurred when Aline first appeared on stage. She slowly descended from the staircase in the back, her movements barely noticeable from one step to the next, camouflaging into the dark stone background she was conservatively dress in all black, depicting her proximity to the grave in mentality and her lack of life, of effervescence, of emotional sustenance. Throughout the play, her asceticism and self-denial, cold sharpness became more and more encapsulating to her being, ultimately determining her character, stripping her of the life Hilde so manifestly represents.

In the introduction of the play, Ibsen describes the play as an exploration of sickly consciences, psychological roots and tensions between individuality and convention. Hilde represents somewhat of an untamed life force, a "wild-bird" rather than a devil or an angel. She represents that uninhibited, imaginative and creative quality in man that pushes him to achieve and realize his dreams. She is seductive, tantalizing to unrestrained beauty of life's potential; and a sexual tension supporting this life zest characterized her relationship with Solness. Her actions, her past is ambiguous, Ibsen writes, "Her expression becomes more and more veiled as if she were looking into herself" (86). This is in strict contrast to Aline who represents that compulsion, asceticism to duty, to convention. Almost all of the actions that she does she claims are compelled by duty and this is an idea that Hilde dismisses. In this way, Hilde represents Solness' life force, her "attendant and familiar" whom he has summoned to represent and to dust off his lively demands, potentially evil; suggesting that both the capacity for good and evil are inside of us and that conscience which determines how we use our internal forces is irreconcilable but distinguishes man from all other forms of life. The introduction of the play suggests this unpredictability and mobility of the human soul; trolls represent "the impulse which human beings feel towards the freedom of irrationality and irresponsibility—and the reaching out for this freedom means that we must surrender to the bestial element which is also part of its makeup" (xviii).

Further developing on this point, Solness invites that internal struggle between realistic life forces and otherworldly motives that may have taken residence inside mankind. He exclaims, “What’s unattainable, how it lures us” to suggest his quest to conquer and build the perfect building to get closer to God and doing so, he will welcome his downfall. But he strives for the unattainable, he strives to reach that perfection, to transcend the glass ceiling and that is his final battle. Solness is dangerously tantalizing the idea of fate and a universal creator (inviting all the Biblical references). He tragically suggests that he has the power to want something, to “need something, to will something so totally, so completely that it...it happens” (64). He is playing with the idea of an omniscient creator, The Master Builder—which could be what Hilde suggests in the final line of the play. Whether or not it is explicitly stated, one could read the final scene in which he falls from the tower as the fall of man, doomed by his divine sin in challenging God. Solness’ preoccupation with God and with fate and retribution is clear when he narrates his encounter with God after climbing up to the tower on that first night in autumn.

The relationships between the characters appeared to be the most troubling, supporting the idea that these characters are inhabited by demons, familiars or trolls that operate in them independent of the conscious awareness of the human they inhabit. Solness is guilty over the death of his children, he feels guilt in his belief that his success as a master builder is how he must pay for Aline’s sorrow, her loss of life. There is no shred of love between Aline and Solness and there was clearly suspicion of Hilde as she occupied more of Solness’ time. Themes of the futility of creation were suggested in the end, where Solness was building more and more ordinary houses, but could never build a home for himself, he is attempting to replace his lack of soul and life with greater structures. Solness was battling a conscience, a conservative conscience that welcomed Hilde’s radicalism. He is always looking to that unattainable achievement; building higher than he can climb, he cannot act as freely as he wishes which suggests his inner turmoil and pressure.

Hilde resonated with such unease and instability, hard to localize her motives and judge her morally. The play concludes with a sickly feeling that not all the conflicts were resolved as Brovik’s death went unjustified, Ragnar’s future was dropped and Hilde’s motivation as a character became even more suspicious and even treacherous. Understandably, she wants a castle, she wants a kingdom, but Solness’ death appears to be a favorable outcome as she joyfully exclaims, with an air of treachery, “My master builder, mine!” She represents more of a life force, perhaps more devilish, or troll-like, but representing the destiny of the character. She tore him further apart from his wife and caused his death and never got her kingdom; perhaps possessed by something other than human capacities for emotion, a gothic mist suffocated the play, impossible to label the characters’ motivation, especially in comparison with some of the social commentary plays we had been seeing or the Shakespeare plays in which those classical motivations have been influential in later drama.

Ibsen, Henrik. *The Master Builder*. London: Nick Hern Books; 1997.

The Country Girl:

Clifford Odets’ *The Country Girl* was beautifully and artistically staged in all areas of production, from set design to characterization. The simplicity of set and plot allowed the psychologies of the characters to prevail, carrying with it the emotional strength of the play. Georgie’s strength and the depth to her character was unveiled through her relationship with Frank

and Bernie and by the end of the play, it appeared to be more about Georgie than any of the other characters. The evolution of her character was essential to the plot and significance of both characters. This play also comments on the truth and authenticity that occurs behind the stage and in theater.

In the beginning of the play, Bernie comes to Frank's house to find Georgie nonchalantly making tea, walking barefoot around the kitchen. Bernie arrives from downstage as he walks into the house, Georgie is positioned closer to the audience, that proximity of her to us and her occupation in that space seems to stand out in a way that positions the audience intimately in the house. Her barefooted-ness suggests a fragility or vulnerability that we have yet to refute. She seems dejected, a bit wounded, her voice raspy and quiet and a bit defensive. Further in the play, we will see this kind of staging, where Georgie is backstage and the dressing room is positioned between the audience and the stage Frank occupies—there is a reversal in what traditionally the audience would see; instead of seeing the stage we see backstage, because that is where the real drama occurs. I think this is a poignant set-up that supports Georgie's importance as a character but also comments on theater as an art, specifically the genuineness and authenticity, the truth that composes a play and contributes to what the audience views, it's a whole package of compositional elements.

George represents a progressively feminine character; the relationships challenged traditional gender roles especially for that time period. Georgie's values were truth and authenticity and strength in herself, self-dignity and this appeared to be the initial tension between Georgie and Bernie. Bernie is continuously passing judgments and upholding stereotypes on the futility of women, saying things like, "I don't like strong women" and "Why is it always that women think they understand men better than men do?" George challenges this view and her persistence and patience and loyalty to Frank in the forefront of such antagonism shows her strength. Georgie says that she has "greater love for the truth" and about Frank that she "wants him as the man he once was...and you don't do that by stripping the truth... Did I forget to tell you that I'm proud?" In all these statements her loyalty, her strength and her authenticity prevail. She represents the realism, the authenticity and the truth that is behind and the foundation for every play I think. In her role as woman, also, I think this play could be read in a feminist light. She causes both males' character development without losing her dignity, she never goes through a trauma or a down point, but she is stable and strong throughout the play.

Georgie's strength and loyalty are traits that are not often in plays of this era; the play refused timely social commentary, yet the characters were so morally built and realistically sound. In that way, she as a character is universal, transcends the generation, the age and the time period maintaining this play as a classic dramatic work, not subject to the wither of time. In the end, Georgie is presented with complete freedom and autonomy, she has the volition to decide who she will stay with and has clearly made her impact on both men.

The film version, directed by George Seaton in 1954, starring Grace Kelly as Georgie and Bing Crosby as Frank offered a different adaptation and perspective on the play. Some ambiguities and uncertainties left open in the play are more decisive in the film, for instance, the final scene, where Georgie decides which man to take. It is left open by the staging although we assume she will go to Frank as she peers onto stage. Grace Kelly's portrayal of Georgie was a bit too melodramatic and aggressive, whereas Jenny Seagrove, in the opening appeared more wounded and sorrowfully nostalgic. We spoke of Stanislavsky's acting technique in its approach to acting that elicits the inner self, demanding a more authentic, emotional embodiment of the

characters.. This play is meant for theater and not for film because of the depth of the characters was really exaggerated through that physical presence of stage actors. Cinematic effects were all too powerful in keeping the authenticity and genuineness of the characters. For instance, when Bernie kisses Georgie, the melodramatic music in the film begins before the kiss even starts, priming and prompting that moment, whereas in the play, there was a complete silence and utter shock. That tension buildup was executed through body tension and intonation and those physical qualities alone, are enough to sufficiently depict that visceral, raw human emotion.

## The Potting Shed

*The Potting Shed* (1958) was a play by Graham Greene who is known for his common Catholic themes and realistic and unemotional prose. It was perhaps this religious core that obscured the play for me, personally. The Potting Shed was put on at a small theater in Knightsbridge, called the Finborough with a small, intimate audience of about 25. The directing and staging was solid and the characters were well played. The mother captured that 1950's sternness and curtness in the way she dismissed her son and her refusal to address certain obvious conflicts. The granddaughter played a strong role through her curiosity and detective-like suspicion of the history of the family that has led to years of silent turmoil breaking the familial relationships. The play itself, independent of this production, seemed to lack narrative continuity causing gaps in the plot and leading to the reader's disorientation as to the cause of event that ensue. In the beginning of the play, we are told that the father is dying and no family member invited a particular son, James. The reason for this is never explained, but their avoidance and disdain of him is clear and evident.

James is a troubled character who doesn't seem to feel emotion. He is rather boring, has blasé job working at the newspaper during the day, eats dinner with his one friend and goes to bed, day after day. It is assumed, that this flaw in his character, this lack of motivation is due to that mysterious incident which caused the family to dismiss him and it is only by the end of the first act that we are told that there was a potting shed incident that may contribute to his isolation. His lack of a character was depicted really well, he didn't appear to have any peculiarities as a character, his actions were blasé, his mannerisms were learned. The audience never works up any sympathy for him, but struggle with him to decipher what happened in the potting shed that has led him to be ostracized by his family and left him devoid of human feelings and emotions.

The mother stubbornly refuses to tell James about the incident (of which he knows nothing about, as his memory has mysteriously vanished from before the age of 14, when the potting shed incident occurred) and only after seeking out the uncle, who was also exiled by the family, do we begin to understand what Greene was trying to depict in this play. The uncle is a priest, who has lost faith in God and put it instead, into alcohol. He is a drunkard who does his duty, performs mass everyday, hears confession but doesn't believe in what he preaches. His characterization was disheveled, he was drunk hiding bottles behind bibles and his hair messed, he appeared to be carrying a load, a burden that he couldn't escape but attempted to drown out through alcohol. His stature was slouched, slow reactions, not fumbling but just a little more time was spent on body movements, a bit more contemplation. What we find out, is that James tried to kill himself when he was 14 by hanging himself in the potting shed. He succeeded, but when he

was taken out, his uncle found him and prayed (because at that time, he had the faith, and believed in God). He begged God to save the boy and take away his faith. And this surprising and shocking realization is why the family has renounced both James and his uncle, because a miracle may have saved James. This anagnorsis is saturated with religious context and with religious belief in a way that maybe doesn't resonate with many readers. Upon hearing this, James slowly understands why he feels incomplete.

The anagnorsis was not precise, illuminating or crisp. It wasn't a startling realization, but took a good long segment, perhaps the entirety of act 2 for that realization and its consequences to take effect. The uncle quickly retreats to bed and the scene is over, but the reason for his exile is still unclear. Could it be that there may have been a miracle and any suggestion of religious faith is grounds to renounce a family member? I had trouble with the ethics of this play because the probability of the events seemed to rely on the reader's own personal religious faith. After this realization takes effect, the family members lock him in a room and debate amongst themselves whether or not he should go to a mental hospital. There was no direct assumption that James has faith after his startling past is revealed and the potential that someone may have religious faith does not mean that they are mentally ill. This improbability detracted from the play.