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Reading August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*: A Quest for Agency

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Abstract

This article seeks female agency amid a dichotomous portrayal of the male-female in the characters in the drama, *Miss Julie* with the feminist lens. It finds a relationship between the two is like controller and controlled that leads the work to critiquing pervasive patriarchal influence in the contemporary culture. It draws on critical and theoretical insights from Antonio Gramsci, Hélène Cixous and other critical viewpoints from scholars. These considerations are central to critiquing the male dominance by highlighting female will to search for their agency and space of equality through August Strindberg's play *Miss Julie* that serves as a vivid picture of patriarchal control by illustrating the downfall of the protagonist, Julie, who relinquishes her privileged status through her affair with her father's valet, Jean. Julie is portrayed as a "half woman," grappling with psychological instability and a lack of autonomy, in stark contrast to Jean, who retains his moral superiority and emerges unscathed. The narrative underscores a gendered double standard where women like Julie face condemnation for their desires and choices, while men like Jean evade responsibility. Although Strindberg attributes Julie's tragic fate to her personal shortcomings and societal pressures, he neglects to acknowledge the pervasive gender biases that dictate her life. This article emphasizes how *Miss Julie* upholds hegemonic patriarchal norms that devalue women's experiences and reinforces the stereotypical image of women as less valuable within the confines of patriarchal ideology.

Keywords: stereotype, dehumanization, hegemony, sexuality, discourse

Introduction

The themes of men's supremacy and the societal intoxication that accompanies it are

vividly depicted in August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Maro Panteliedou Maloutas critiques the gender biases present in literature from the 1970s and 1980s, noting the significant underrepresentation of women in power structures and decision-making processes. He states that: "this lack is not only problematic but also inconsistent with contemporary societal values" (Maloutas, 2006, p. 29). In *Miss Julie*, while it was published in the late 19th century, the play reflects similar issues of gender representation and the portrayal of women. For instance, Jean, the valet, refers to Julie as "crazy" due to her behavior, particularly her dancing with the gamekeeper. This dismissal of Julie's actions highlights the entrenched class discourse of the time, which positions the count's daughter as inferior to the count's workers. Jean's judgment reveals how deeply the characters have internalized societal hierarchies and the patriarchal norms that dictate their perceptions and interactions. Furthermore, Kristine's reaction to her broken engagement as a "shamefaced" act emphasizes the patriarchal concept that a woman's value is inherently tied to her relationships with men. This reinforces the notion that women's existences are often defined by male figures, reflecting a broader societal belief that limits their autonomy and decision-making abilities. These dynamics in *Miss Julie* serve as a critique of patriarchal ideology, revealing how it not only shapes the characters' lives but also contributes to the broader narrative of gender inequality in literature and society.

A patriarchal society places men in a dominant role while viewing women as lesser. This idea is perpetuated by those in power through their intellectual and moral guidance. In his book, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (1981), Joseph V. Femia explains Gramsci's concept of hegemony, stating that:

Gramsci states that the supremacy of a social group or class manifests itself in two different ways: 'domination' (dominio), or coercion, and 'intellectual and moral leadership. This latter type of supremacy constitutes hegemony. Social control in, other words takes two basic forms: besides influencing behaviour and choice externally through rewards and punishments, it also affects them internally, by moulding personal convictions into, a replica of prevailing norms. Such 'internal control' is based on hegemony, which refers to an order in which a common social moral language is spoken, in which one concept or reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behavior. (24)

Hegemony involves not only intellectual and moral leadership but also the establishment of

personal opinions as societal norms conveyed to the masses. In this context, Steinberg's play highlights patriarchal hierarchies related to class and gender. He portrays Julie's ordinary act of dancing with the gamekeeper and valet during midsummer as 'a crazy act,' framing a typical situation as peculiar. Julie's choice to remain at home rather than visit her relatives with her father is a personal decision, yet Kristine suggests it is to 'save her face' following Julie's broken engagement.

Methods and Materials

This section explores reviews and literature on August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888), analyzed from multiple perspectives. Employing a qualitative research method, the study utilizes textual analysis through feminist lens. Secondary sources, including library materials, books, research journals, and articles, have been critically examined. Insights from scholars such as Josheph Femia are considered to explore concepts of inequality and the male hegemony on women. The narrative is analyzed with a focus on the rhetoric of female subjectivity and masculine dominance over females. A closer analysis of the text reveals significant argument that the male behavior to the female is manipulative and rather controlling.

Result and Discussion

In *Miss Julie* (1888), Jean recounts an incident in which he observed Julie and her fiancé in the stable. Julie was playfully moving her whip while her fiancé repeatedly jumped over it. Jean noticed that the young man was even struck by the whip at times. However, on the third attempt, he grabbed the whip and broke it. Since Jean is merely an observer, he lacks full knowledge of the situation and its true context. He assumes that Julie was acting irrationally and mistreating her fiancé, misinterpreting the entire event based on his own perspective. The event in the stable may have had different meanings—Julie could have been punishing her fiancé for his mistreatment of her, or they might have simply been engaging in a playful interaction. However, the scene is entirely misinterpreted, reinforcing the idea that women's actions are often framed as unnatural or manipulative within a patriarchal context.

Judith Baxter critiques mainstream discourse for suppressing alternative perspectives, stating that it “seeks univocally to silence, displace and suppress the interplay of alternative or oppositional voices” (Baxter, 2003, p.37). Julie, as the only figure in the play who challenges patriarchal and feudal norms, is deliberately depicted as abnormal. As Hélène Cixous asserts, women historically have “never turn to speak” (Cixous, 1981, p.30), and Julie's voice, along with

her entire existence, is misrepresented. In contrast, Kristine is portrayed as the ideal, submissive woman. She obediently serves Jean and the Count, catering to Jean's wishes in the kitchen and following the Count's commands without question. Her conformity to traditional gender roles makes her seem natural and acceptable. Jean even affirms this by saying, "You're a pretty smart girl, Kristin, and you ought to make a good wife" (Stenberg, 1988, p. 5). In the novel, Julie is perceived as lacking refinement because she is unconcerned about her appearance and interacts casually with the workers, despite being the daughter of a count. This behavior leads others to view her as vulgar. Jean comments, "But when the highborn wish to unbend they become vulgar." (Stenberg, 1988, p.3) When Julie expresses a desire to dance again with Jean, he hesitates, citing the social norms of their feudal society: "Well said—but not wishing any offense, I wonder if it is prudent for Miss Julie to dance twice in succession with her servant, especially as people are never slow to find meaning in..." (Stenberg, 1988, p.4). To this, Julie responds assertively, questioning the implications of his words: "In what? What sort of meaning? What were you going to say? . . . I, the lady of the house! I honor the people with my presence, and now that I feel like dancing, I want a partner who knows how to lead to avoid being ridiculous" (Stenberg, 1988, p.5). Her reasoning is clear; she believes it is perfectly acceptable to dance with anyone capable of leading, regardless of their social status.

At the start of the play, Jean appears highly obedient and deferential. He is astonished when Julie compliments him after he puts on his coat and refrains from sitting in her presence until she explicitly commands him to do so. Assuming that beer is beneath her social standing, he is surprised when she expresses a preference for it over wine. Even when drinking together, he hesitates to make a toast until she insists, and he submissively kisses her feet at her command. Jean also recounts societal perceptions of a woman drinking alongside a man, highlighting the rigid social hierarchy. These moments in the play underscore the deep divide between social classes, reinforcing the idea that people are not considered equal but are ranked based on aristocratic birth or material wealth. This system creates an artificial boundary between the working class and the elite, dictating interactions and reinforcing societal roles.

Julie's natural demeanor and her treatment of her workers as equals are viewed as flaws because they challenge the class boundaries established by a patriarchal society. When the conversation shifts to more personal topics, Julie displays boldness and a lack of concern for public opinion, while Jean is acutely aware of how others perceive them. When Julie expresses a desire

to step down from her elevated position, Jean cautions her, saying, "Don't step down, Miss Julie. Listen to me—no one would believe that you stepped down of your own accord; people always say that one falls down" (Stenberg, 1988, p.8). This highlights that, as a woman, Julie lacks true agency in society, a fact that Jean seems to recognize, while Julie appears either oblivious to or defiantly confident in her choices. In this dynamic, Jean exhibits a kind of anxiety about societal judgment, focusing more on public perception than on Julie's autonomy. Julie, on the other hand, is actively using her freedom to challenge the classifications imposed on her and to break down the hierarchies between the feudal lords and their workers.

Julie perceives herself as equal to men and believes she has the freedom to act according to her own will. She challenges societal expectations and resists traditional boundaries, particularly those dividing men and women, as well as aristocrats and servants. Sawaki defines: "freedom as the ability to recognize historical patterns of domination and resist being categorized by dominant ideologies. He argues that true freedom comes from redefining identity through alternative perspectives rather than accepting societal labels" (Swaki, 1992, p.44). Julie embodies this idea by questioning rigid class and gender roles. However, while Julie exercises her autonomy, Jean consistently reminds her of societal norms and expectations. As a result, she ultimately becomes a victim of patriarchal oppression, while Jean emerges victorious, reinforcing the very structures she sought to defy.

Foucault attributes the hindrance to rational discourse about sex to various forms of resistance, including moral, economic, traditional, and political factors in *History of Sexuality*. He states, "It is as if a fundamental resistance blocked the development of rationally formed discourse concerning human sex, its correlations, and its effect" (Focault, 1976, p. 55). As a result of these resistances, opinions about sex remain unclear and shrouded in taboos. Within this framework, a character like Julie may be perceived as unconventional because she does not conform to the established gender norms of her society; instead, she is adventurous and experimental in her behavior. Una Chaudhuri, in her article "Private Parts: Sex, Class and Stage Space in *Miss Julie*," argues that the play should be viewed not as "psychological" but rather as "ideological" and "theatrical" (Chaudhuri, 1993, p.1), as it addresses the ideologies surrounding sex and class. The play powerfully illustrates the experience of women in aristocratic society, depicting it as a trap similar to Julie's own situation. Given that the play is tightly structured to fit within a 90-minute timeframe, it was well-received during its time. This suggests that the play's setting and

technical elements were crafted to meet the demands of the theater.

Alice Templeton views the play as a "naturalistic tragedy" (Templeton, 1990, p.448-80). But this analysis suggests that naturalism merely serves as a facade for the underlying gender biases and hierarchical class dynamics. The proposed sexual interaction between Julie and Jean marks a pivotal moment in the narrative. Despite Jean's initially low status and lack of confidence, he suddenly asserts a position of power over Julie. He adopts a masculine persona, referring to himself as a 'fire' and warning that it is dangerous to engage with him. This reflects the patriarchal culture in which men hold dominant roles in matters of sexuality. Jean manipulates the situation to evoke sympathy, fabricating a story about his supposed love for Julie, claiming he even attempted suicide by throwing himself into a "dam" and lying on an "elderberry bush" (Stenberg, 1988, p.12). Seizing the opportunity, he persuades Julie to enter his room, stating, "Into my room then. Necessity knows no law. You can depend on me for I am your real, genuine, respectful friend" (Stenberg, 1988, p.14). This statement is ironic and contradictory, as Jean ultimately proves to be neither respectful nor a true friend to Julie. When his plan to escape to Switzerland and become a 'count' fails, he exacts revenge on Julie by taking her life.

In his dialogues, Jean promotes male myths, claiming he can control his emotions, is wise rather than harsh, and views their intimacy as foolishness. He simultaneously expresses contradictory beliefs about women, suggesting that they cannot manage their feelings, lack wisdom, and regard physical relationships as something significant. Like the playwright, Jean openly asserts male dominance, stating that he can elevate Julie to the status of countess, but "she can never make him a count (Stenberg, 1988, p.16). Julie, having been influenced by Jean, begins to internalize his views, becoming aware of societal judgments, humiliation, and dishonor. Although a physical relationship is typically a private matter, it is scrutinized by society and family. The playwright's portrayal of differing consequences for men and women regarding physical intimacy is unjust. Willmar Sauter, in his article "Reflections on Miss Julie: The New Scandinavian Experimental Theatre's Miss Julie in Copenhagen, 1992," notes: "one might wish Julie could escape her situation like a modern woman by finding a job or a stable relationship, but such options were mere fantasies for her at that time (Sauter, 1988, p.5). This critique highlights Julie's lack of agency and the play's depiction of the triumph of patriarchal norms, culminating in Julie's demise and Jean's victory, ultimately suggesting that women cannot truly connect with men.

Jean reduces Julie's status from "Miss Julie" to "whore" (Stenberg, 1988, p.17) and admits

that his earlier expressions of love were mere deception. He confesses that his romantic words were only “romantic to capture a woman” (Stenberg, 1988, p.18) and shifts the blame onto Julie, accusing her of initiating their relationship. He likens his social ambition to climbing a tree, with Julie as the first branch he intended to grasp. However, realizing that she lacks financial power, he dismisses her as a weak and useless step in his ascent. Jean then confidently presents his own perspective on the aristocracy, reinforcing his pragmatic and opportunistic view of social mobility:

It is the glitter of brass, not gold, that dazzles us from below, and that the eagle's back is grey like the rest of him. On the other hand, I'm sorry to have to realize that all that I have looked up to is not worthwhile, and it pains me to see you fallen lower than your cook as it pains me to see autumn blossoms whipped to pieces by the cold rain and transformed into--dirt! (Stenberg, 1988, p.18-19)

Jean views physical intimacy as a means to understand women, linking knowledge and power directly to sexual relationships. This perspective underscores the patriarchal norms that establish male dominance over women. Jacqueline Martin describes the play as exploring the dialectics of sexual ritual and death, noting that Strindberg's concerns encompass social dynamics, but ultimately center on ritual—both sexual and death-related. He emphasizes the play's focus on sexuality over other themes, asserting that the politics of sexuality is central to its narrative. However, this analysis critiques the sexual politics depicted in the play as biased and reinforcing gender inequality.

The play upholds traditional patriarchal ideology, as emphasized by the author in the preface. Jean's transformation from a mere servant to a dominant male, contrasted with Julie's downfall and ultimate demise, highlights the dehumanization of women. The author's portrayal reinforces gender inequality, presenting Julie as weak and powerless while elevating Jean's position. As Knut Ove Arntzen notes, the play follows “a very stiff and conventional Scandinavian tradition of performing the classics” (10), failing to maintain a balanced perspective on gender. However, the brutal on-stage killing of the bird and the implied suicide of Julie effectively sustains the haunting atmosphere of Scandinavian drama. The play ultimately suggests that the idea of gender equality, once believed by Julie's mother, is nothing more than an illusion. Julie's mother, who raised her daughter like a boy, becomes a tragic parody by the play's end, her beliefs proven futile through Julie's downfall. In contrast, she once succeeded in maintaining power over her husband—first through her strong personality and later through manipulation. Julie, realizing her

mother's failure, reflects on her upbringing with regret: "Through her I learned to distrust and hate men and I swore to her never to be a man's slave" (Stenberg, 1988, p. 21). Yet, despite her defiance, Julie remains trapped by a rigid social structure. Even though she resents Jean and imagines him being shot like a dog, she ultimately succumbs to the very sexist conventions she once sought to resist, proving that escape from such oppression is nearly impossible.

The play presents an ironic view of human emotions, particularly love, as illustrated by the reference to The Lake of Como, where couples often rent villas for six months but leave after just three weeks. Jean remarks that love "does not last long" (Stenberg, 1988, p. 22), which foreshadows the fleeting nature of his attraction to Julie, which also fails to endure beyond a brief period and ultimately leads to her downfall from her aristocratic status. In response to Julie's predicament, Jean advises her to "stay at home and say nothing," but Julie appears to be in a trance, as if hypnotized. This reflects the notion that once a mistake is made, it is likely to be repeated, leading to further daring actions until the truth is revealed. The play critiques the rigid belief that one should never err, contrasting it with the common human experience that "to err is human." It is striking to consider that a normal adult intimacy could be viewed as so shameful that death seems preferable to facing the consequences. The reference to John the Baptist symbolizes how Miss Julie is metaphorically beheaded by the discriminatory norms of her patriarchal society.

Jean is unfaithful—not only to his prospective wife but also to Julie and his master. His character is defined by selfishness and deceit. In contrast, Julie is trapped within patriarchal norms, psychologically too fragile to break free. She resembles a caged canary, unable to soar freely, with death being her only escape from oppression. Norman Fairclough, in *Discourse and Social Change*, explains that discourse is both shaped by social structures and actively shapes them in return. She notes, "On one hand, discourse is constrained and shaped by social structure... on the other hand, discourse is socially constitutive" (Fairclough, 1992, p.64). This idea is evident in *Miss Julie*, where discourse not only reflects societal expectations about gender but also compels individuals to conform to them.

The play reinforces these harmful gendered discourses, depicting love, honesty, and loyalty as mere illusions. Fairclough further states that discourse "constructs social identities," defines "the self," and plays a role in "cultural change" (Fairclough, 1992, p.137). However, instead of challenging norms, *Miss Julie* upholds the patriarchal status quo. Through Jean's voice, it perpetuates discriminatory attitudes toward women, ultimately reinforcing male dominance rather

than questioning it.

The portrayal of an innocent character as flawed by allowing Jean manipulative and victorious attributes is inherently unjust. *Miss Julie* reinforces male dominance over women, both thematically and structurally. Terry Locke, in *Critical Discourse Analysis*, explains that analyzing a print text involves critically examining “the potential social effects of the meanings that a reader of the text is positioned or called upon” (Locke, 2004, p.54). Applying this approach to *Miss Julie* reveals its troubling impact on readers. The play’s effect differs based on gender. Male readers may develop a false sense of superiority, interpreting the text as a reinforcement of the idea that women should be controlled. Female readers, depending on their perspective, may either internalize feelings of inferiority—especially if they adhere to patriarchal beliefs—or react critically, recognizing and resisting the problematic representation of women. Those who lack critical awareness may simply be left unsettled by the grim narrative, unable to question its deeper implications.

Conclusion

Miss Julie reflects a discriminatory attitude toward women and highlights a stark division between the aristocracy and the working class. It portrays gender and class in stereotypical ways, emphasizing gender as a rigid and dominant force that supersedes class hierarchy. While the play presents a somewhat liberal view of class by depicting Jean, a valet with aspirations to become a count, it is harsh toward Julie, who ultimately sees no escape from her circumstances other than ending her life. Despite being raised by her mother to believe in gender equality, Julie is unable to attain the same status as men, which the author critiques as a misguided upbringing that contributes to her downfall. The play tends to excuse Jean's actions as he seeks to climb the social ladder, while it punishes the female characters. This unequal treatment and the author's biased perspective on gender roles in the preface highlight the socio-cultural constraints imposed on women. Through the concept of the "half-woman," the playwright perpetuates the biblical notion of women as mere extensions of men, driven by emotions and lacking intellect, ultimately suggesting the demise of women who aspire to achieve equality with men.

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