

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

INGRID AND THE QUEST FOR SECURITY
IN
THE HOUSE WITH THE BLIND GLASS WINDOWS

SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES 17

IBSEN AND NORWAY

BY

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"People like her, who'd once committed great sin could'nt expect to feel secure in their destiny."

The character of Ingrid, in Herbjorg Wassmo's The House With the Blind Glass Window, presents an insightful look into one woman's search for security. Wassmo has created, in the character of Ingrid, a portrait of a woman who is fundamentally insecure. She has created a character who is striving to gain some sort of control over her life. Towards the end of the book, after Henrik has been taken to jail, we are given a vivid picture of Ingrid's state of "being." The scene is played out in the realization that Tora, Ingrid's daughter, must take some responsibility for her mother.² "And a feeling of security enclosed her, swept everything else away and made her strong, strong. They'd taken him away with them!"³ However, we are not concerned with the role of Tora as directly affects Ingrid's life. Rather, we are concerned with Ingrid's quest for security and the statement Wassmo makes concerning the modern predicament. Ingrid's quest for security comes from three different places. First, from that of a German soldier. Second, from her husband Henrik and third from her job.

German troops, under the command of General Niklaus von Falkenhorst, entered Norway with the intent of occupation on 09 April, 1940.⁴ The Germans were to stay for five long years. During the ensuing occupation many Norwegian citizens associated and/or collaborated with the Germans. The story of Ingrid is one such example. Ingrid has fallen in love with a German soldier.

An act for which her family is very much ashamed. She has also become pregnant by the German soldier. Furthermore, the fact of Ingrid's relationship with a German soldier during World War Two has made her an outcast within Norwegian society.

Not much is known about Ingrid's German lover. In fact what we do know comes from Ingrid's sister Rakel. "Your father, Rakel began hesitantly, your father was an ordinary man with black hair and blue eyes and broad shoulders. A fine man. He and your mother fell in love. He wasn't an ordinary soldier."⁵

The fact that Ingrid fell in love with the German soldier is crucial to understanding Ingrid's actions. Implicit within this 'love' is that Ingrid was not out to curry favor with the Germans. Presumably she was not out to prostitute herself either. Rather, she merely fell in love with a man wearing a German uniform. Another indicator of the validity of the relationship is the fact that the German soldier came back for Ingrid. "Well, he didn't have permission to do what he did. He just left, to take your mother to his friends. That was no joke for a man in a German uniform."⁶

After World War Two, and the death of her German lover, Ingrid is left to raise her child. She is also left at the mercy of an angry populace. As Andenaes, Riste and Skodvin write in, Norway and the Second World War,

"[T]he Government as well as the leaders of the Home Forces had forbidden the citizens to take the law into their own hands. In spite of the agitated atmosphere these orders were almost completely observed. One exception concerned the 'German tarts,' women who had kept company with German soldiers during the war.... A

number of them had their hair cut off, and in some cases more severe treatment may have occurred."⁷

Certainly this treatment at the hands of her own countrymen served to increase her need for security. Logically, her next step would be to find a husband.⁸

Thus, Ingrid married Henrik. Henrik is a casualty of the war. (Presumably he was in the resistance movement.) He is also a drunkard and is chronically unemployed. He is lazy and bitter over that which has happened to him. Consequently, Henrik develops a hatred towards those to whom he perceives to have "injured" him. He takes his hatred out on Ingrid. "But he'd already hit her. Several times. The blood was pouring fresh and red from Ingrid's mouth and nose."⁹

As a result of Henrik's chronic unemployment, Ingrid is forced to become the "source" of income for her family. Besides being the source of income for the family Ingrid's job means much more. Her job is perhaps her greatest source of security. Her job as fish-packer is very important to her. When she attempts to get her schedule changed from the night shift to the day shift, in order to be with her daughter Tora, she is fired. "They won't let me work. They say I'm putting on airs because I didn't want to work the night shift anymore. I don't have a job, Tora!"¹⁰ However, Wassmo reveals the importance of the mother-daughter relationship when Ingrid says, "'[I]f only you were able to take care of yourself at night,' her mother complained, 'then I'd still have my job.'"¹¹

Later, Ingrid goes back to her old job. Truly, her job

seems to give her a sense of security. However, for reasons not readily apparent, Ingrid appears to derive security from her job. The reason for her security being that she is able to have a long term relationship to her job. Marit Hoel in, "The Female Working Class," comments on the role of the job in working class women's lives as one of attempting to make their jobs more secure by "defining their ties to employment as a long-term, or even life-long relationship...."² However, true to the modern predicament, Hoel goes on to state that because the post-war period was marked by increased labor specialization and increased mechanization, the outlook for jobs in Norway was not very promising.³

Finally, the search for security is a statement about the modern predicament. The modern predicament can be seen as a decline of tradition. The decline of a traditional way of life. Take, for example, the decline in the profitability of fishing to/in Ingrid's village. "Well, there won't be much to fish for anyway, pretty soon. The purse seiners have been fishing up all the mature fish for years, there's just immature pollack left."⁴ All of a sudden the people who had expected the results of the fishing industry to be bright were forced to question the viability of their assumption(s).

The modern predicament is also manifest in a loss of control of one's fate. Take, for example, the issue of tax-free gasoline. Obviously the imposition of a tax on gas would adversely affect the profitability of fishing for the

small fisherman.¹⁵ Furthermore, the prospect of losing one's livelihood is/would be a most disconcerting thought.

To a lesser extent, this writer feels that the story of the demise of the brothers Brinch is indicative of a decline of tradition. Wassmo portrays Tobias and Waldemar Brinch as the owners of "everything that lived and moved on the island."¹⁶ However, one day the Brinchs went bankrupt, "[t]he entire village had turned out to have been mortgaged and in hock."¹⁷ Thus, Wassmo comments on not only the decline of tradition but appears to hint that in certain instances the decline of tradition can be a good thing.

The modern predicament is also one of adaptation to that which is new and different. All of a sudden the world has become smaller. The expectation of a boat loading fish bound for America is indicative of the new era.¹⁸

Another example is the arrival of Fritz. Fritz is a newcomer to the island. He is also a deaf mute. Upon his arrival Tora is confronted with a world completely unbeknownst to herself. Suddenly she is confronted with life outside of the narrow confines of the fishing village. "But at Fritz's there were newspapers on the radio shelf, because the radio was in a shiny, lacquered cupboard...."¹⁹ The fact that Tora is fascinated with the discoveries at Fritz's has an affect on Ingrid as well. She begins to question Tora.²⁰ To Ingrid Fritz also represents that with which she is not familiar.

The modern predicament leads us to realize a need for security. The idea of the character of Ingrid is that she is constantly looking for security. Thus, Wassmo introduces two characters as solution(s) to Ingrid's problems. First, she puts forth the character of Elisif. Then, she puts forth the characters of Rakel and Simon. Both, she contends, are attempted solutions to the modern predicament. However, the former succeeds. The latter fails.

The character of Elisif, with her fervent religion, is interesting. Elisif lives in The Tenement. She is characterized as being a hard working woman. One who is devoted to her family and to her God. As is her habit, Elisif has one baby every year. However, one year her newborn infant dies. This leads Elisif into a period of deep depression and eventual incarceration in a nearby mental facility. However, her mental breakdown is characterized by a loss of trust in God. "It was Elisif, who couldn't trust in the divine any longer."²¹ Her loss of trust is indicative of an attempt to understand God's "ways" by incorporating an outdated understanding of the characteristics and expectations of God.

The most important aspect to remember about the character of Elisif and her fervent devotion to God and Religion is that the post-war period preempts the notion of God as omnipotent in the sense that God's primary characteristic is that of free will. Suddenly, after World War Two, man had the power to destroy himself. Suddenly, man can preempt God

by destroying himself before God willed such. With the above, this writer contends that the character of Elisif should be seen as an example of the failure of an outmoded religious faith to come to grips with the modern world.

On the other hand the characters of Rakel and Simon are portrayed as a viable solution to the modern predicament. The relationship, as portrayed by Wassmo, is indeed true and loving. Furthermore, when Simon's business is burned to the ground Rakel is there to provide the support and encouragement needed to rebuild. However, Rakel's most important attribute is that she is able to take a broad perspective on life. Take, for example, the time she and Tora are out picking potatoes. Rakel does not act in a vindictive way towards Tora when she purposely throws a potato into the woods. Rather, she decides that they have had enough for one day and should now go inside and make waffles.²²

In conclusion, Wassmo has presented us with an insightful story of one woman's search for security. In so doing she has also given us an interpretation of the modern predicament. The modern predicament, as Wassmo proposes, stems from a decline of tradition and an introduction of the "new" into people's lives. However, in interpreting the modern predicament she also proposes two alternatives. The two alternatives come in the form of the characters Elisif, Rakel and Simon. Lastly, she ties the modern predicament into Ingrid's search for security by showing Rakel and Simon

overcoming adversity through a strong faithful relationship.

ENDNOTES

1. Wassmo, Herbjorg. The House with the Blind Glass Windows. Seattle, Washington: The Seal Press, 1987, 222.
2. Norseng, Mary Kay. "A Child's Liberation of Space: Herbjorg Wassmo's Huset med den blinde glassveranda." Scandinavian Studies 58 (1986) 57.
3. Wassmo, 223.
4. Andenaes, Johs., Olav Riste and Magne Skodvin. Norway and the Second World War. Lillehammer: Tanum-Norli 1983, 40.
5. Wassmo, 67.
6. Wassmo, 68.
7. Andenaes, 124.
8. Haavind, Hanne. "Love and Power in Marriage" in Patriarchy in a Welfare Society. Harriet Holter,

ed. Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 1984, 155.

9. Wassmo, 143.

One might ask why a Norwegian collaborator would marry a man presumed to have been among the resistance fighters. Mary Kay Norseng in, "A Child's Liberation of Space: Herbjorg Wassmo's Huset med den blinde glassveranda, " states that, "[P]erhaps by marrying him (Henrik) Ingrid has meant to punish herself." page 55.

10. Wassmo, 51.

11. Wassmo, 51.

12. Hoel, Marit. "The Female Working Class" in Patriarchy in a Welfare Society. Harriet Holter, ed. Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 1984, 110-111.

13. Hoel, 110.

Marit Hoel states that "[F]rom the beginning of this century to the mid 1950s only 5% to 10% of all married women had paid employment," page 109.

14. Wassmo, 91.

"The women at the plant were laid off later in the summer. The fishing had been a disappointment and Dahl was left to chew on his pipestem," page 186.

15. Wassmo, 91.

16. Wassmo, 23.

17. Wassmo, 23.

18. Wassmo, 92.

19. Wassmo, 154.

20. Wassmo, 161.

21. Wassmo, 75.

22. Wassmo, 202-203.