

From Narcissism to Empathy: Ibsen's Plays in the Digital Age

This paper examines the plays of Henrik Ibsen in connection with the work of cognitive theorists like Patrick Hogan and Keith Oatley who place empathy at the core of literary analysis. One can only understand fiction insofar as one can imaginatively identify with particular characters. Comprehension of even a very basic work of fiction requires that we empathize at least with a protagonist, if not a variety of characters.

In the midst of the digital revolution, fiction may be of particular value for its ability to deepen our understanding of ourselves and those around us. As our society increasingly relies on technology as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, there is a tendency among people to form online social groups that reinforce their existing biases and exclude alternative points of view. As a result, social networks—though designed perhaps to cultivate connections—may be engendering narcissism.

Literature (including film and drama), by asking us to place ourselves “in the shoes” of different characters, fosters empathy and may offset narcissism. According to Oatley, through active engagement with art and literature, “our conception of selfhood can change, for instance towards understanding in ourselves certain potentialities that we might not normally admit to ourselves, which we might think belong only to others. We discover that we too, as members of the family of human beings, are at least mentally capable of emotions that are not very creditable” (Oatley 117).

In this context, by exploring Henrik Ibsen's drama, we confront our own selfishness, narcissism, desire for control over others, and fear that they may gain control over us. *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* examine constrained individual freedom from a female perspective, and show us

how narcissism—especially in conjunction with intolerance—acts as a corrosive agent to human empathy and compassion.