**Introduction to Private Tragedy- Strindberg [1849-1912]**

**[from Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, London: Vintage, 1966]**

What became naturalism, and what distinguished it from the more important movement of realism, was a mechanical description of men as the creatures of their environment. The tragedy of naturalism is the tragedy of passive suffering, and the suffering is passive because man can only endure and can never really change his world. **Sex and class are true protagonists of the drama of naturalism.**

The endurance is given no moral or religious valuation; it is wholly mechanical, because both man and his world, in what is now understood as rational explanation, **are the products of an impersonal and material process in which** human will is tiny and insignificant within the vast material process, universal or social/ **The presupposition is the bare and unaccommodated man, an isolated creature, who desires and eats and fights alone.** Society is at best an arbitrary institution, to prevent this horde of creatures destroying each other. And when these isolated persons meet, in what are called relationships, their exchanges are forms of struggle, inevitably. **Tragedy, in this view, is inherent**. It is not only that man is frustrated, by others and by society, in his deepest and primary desires. It is also that these desires include destruction and self-destruction. **What is called the death-wish is given the status of a general instinct, and its derivatives, in destructiveness and aggression, are seen as essentially normal.** It is inevitable that satisfaction, however intense, is temporary, and that it involves the subjugation or defeat of another. **Men and women seek to destroy each other in the act of loving and of creating new life, and the new life is itself always guilty, not so much by inheritance as by the relationships it is inevitably born into.** For it is used as weapon and prize in the parents’ continuing struggle, and is itself unwanted, not only as itself, in its own right, but continually unwanted.

For Strindberg, **naturalism** was primarily an attitude to experience, which determined the substance of his art. Strindberg wrote, for example: “The naturalist has abolished guilt by abolishing God.”

The sentence quoted comes in the middle of an explanation of why Lady Julie is tragic:

She is a victim of the discord which a mother’s ‘crime’ has produced in a family; a victim, too, of the delusions of the day, of circumstances, of her own defective constitution—all of which together are the equivalents of the old-fashioned Fate or Universal Law. The naturalist has abolished guilt by abolishing God; but the consequences of an action—punishment, imprisonment or the fear of it—these he cannot abolish, for the simple reason that they remain, whether his verdict be acquittal or not; for an injured fellow-creature is not so complaisant as an outsider, who has not been injured, can well afford to be.

Thus there is no justice and no external law, but there is hurt and revenge, exposure and hatred: a simply human struggle. This is sufficient ground for human beings to destroy each other, and indeed to destroy themselves, as Strindberg goes on to argue, driven by their own ideas and illusions. Yet still, while the outward connection is made, an alternative standpoint is available. In *Lady Julie*, particularly, Strindberg connects the destructive passions with a struggle of social classes:

So the valet, Jean, continues to live, while Lady Julie cannot live without honour.

He suggests, even, that Jean is a stronger and higher type, and that we ought to see the struggle in this way:

There is no such thing as absolute evil; the ruin of one family means the good fortune of another, which is thereby enabled to rise.

This, certainly, is a kind of naturalism, of the type popularised by the false analogy of biological evolution to the struggles of classes and individuals. **The ‘survival of the fittest’ was translated as the victory of the stronger type.**

**From Strindberg’s Preface to *Miss Julie* (1888)**:

“Miss Julie is a modern character; not that the half-woman, the man-hater, has not existed in every age, but because now that she has been discovered, she has stepped forward into the limelight and begun to make a noise. The half-woman is a type that is pushing herself to the front, nowadays selling herself for power, honours, decorations and diplomas, as formerly she used to for money. She is synonymous with corruption. It is not a good type—for it does not last—but unfortunately it transmits its own misery to another generation; moreover, degenerate men seem unconsciously to make their choice from among them, so that they multiply and produce offspring of indeterminate sex, to whom life is a torture. Fortunately, these women perish, either through lack of harmony with reality, or through the uncontrolled mutiny of their own suppressed instinct, or through the shattering of their hopes of attaining equality with men. The type is tragic, offering, as it does, the spectacle of a desperate fight with nature; tragic, too, as a romantic inheritance now being dispersed by naturalism, whose sole desire is happiness; and for happiness strong and hardy types are required.”