

Miss Julie
Contextualising the Play

August Strindberg was born in 1849 and deceased in 1912. He was Swedish dramatist and novelist. He was a master of the Swedish language and an innovator in dramatic and literary styles. Strindberg was the unwanted fourth child of a once well-to-do father and a mother who had come to his father's house as a servant. His mother died in 1851 and his father re-married almost immediately. He studied intermittently at the University of Uppsala, but poverty forced him to leave without a degree, taking work as a tutor, journalist, and librarian.

Strindberg's first mature drama, *Master Olaf* was written in 1873, showed the influence of Ibsen and Shakespeare, in representing the personality of the author in all three characters. The play was refused production until 1881 because of its realistic portrayal of national figures. With the novel *The Red Room* (1879), Strindberg achieved renown. *The Red Room*, which helped initiate Swedish realism, revealed Strindberg's remarkable style, brilliant visual, and was precisely suited to his ideas. He developed it more fully in the next decade, pouring forth an impressive assortment of novels, plays, stories, histories, and poems.

Strindberg's life was complicated by an unsuccessful suit brought against him for blasphemy as a result of his stories in *Married* (1884–1885), which derogated women and denounced conventional religious practices. Although this conflict stirred a persecution complex in Strindberg, he remained for a time prolific and creative. His bitter and revealing autobiography *Tjänstekvinnans son* (*Son of a Servant*; 1913) appeared in 1886.

In the late 1880s he began to experiment with free verse and created the great dramas; *The Father* (1887), *Miss Julie* (1888), and *Creditors* (1888). These plays follow naturalism in their emphasis on the pathological and in their realism, but they depart from its objective, documentary techniques to achieve a subjective and emotional tone. *The Father* vividly expresses Strindberg's view of the war between the sexes, in which he saw man as victimized by woman.

Miss Julie is a psychological study of the seduction of an upper-class woman by an insensitive chauffeur. Britain's ban of

“Miss Julie” was not lifted until 1939 due to the complete innovative nature of this piece. It not only included sexual relations, but sexual relations between a man of a lower class status and a woman of an upper class status. To add to the complication the sexual relation was not based on love at all but that of pure lust, and this was seen as scandalous in the late nineteenth century. In Miss Julie. Strindberg’s main message which he’s trying to portray is the power struggle between the classes, and even though Miss Julie is socially stronger, Jean’s mental dominance overcomes Miss Julie, resulting in the usurpation of Miss Julie’s social rank. These works show the influence of the ideas of Zola and Nietzsche.

Origin Of Species was published in 1859 by the author Charles Darwin. It was a revolutionary breakthrough in science, identifying the idea of natural selection, and that the stronger species will evolve, taking precedence of the weaker species. Many say that ‘Miss Julie’ was a play based directly on the ideals of natural selection. Strindberg takes the dominating factors of the male sex, and incorporates them into the character, Jean, and then all the aspects of women and incorporates them into Miss Julie. However, the play may seem bias towards men, because for instance, for most of the play Miss Julie is made to seem naïve, arrogant, and at times dominating, but only due to her social class (when she loses her social respect from Jean, she no longer acts dominant).

In 1891 the first of Strindberg's three wretched marriages ended in divorce, and his second marriage and separation soon followed. He was precipitated into his “inferno crisis” (1894–96), in which he explored the occult and entertained the delusion that he was persecuted by creatures from another world, an experience later described in *Inferno* (1897). Strindberg was married to three women, Siri von Essen, Frieda Uhl, and lastly Harriet Bosse. Though he had children with all of them, his character led to bitter divorces with them all, and he lost also lost custody of his children after the divorces. In the dramas of this period Strindberg began to experiment with visual effects and other aspects of dramatic form, initiating changes that still remain living influences in the modern theater.

. In 1859 Charles Darwin published the "Origin of Species". This book was a scientific breakthrough and identified the idea of natural selection and stronger species evolving and taking precedence over weaker species. It encapsulated the idea of organisms competing for living space and resources. Many will say that "The Origin of Species" was a direct influence on the creation of Miss Julie and Strindberg tries to capture the dominance of one organism over another and how they evolve to achieve this final goal. This combined with his mother and father's differing social background gave way to the creation of Miss Julie and what conflicts may arise between two contradictory people, of potentially different aspirations and morals. As an audience we see all these factors combined to witness the suicide of Miss Julie and the prevailing of the emotionally and sexually stronger male.

One of Strindberg's main concepts was to break down the usual way in which plays were devised and relate them much more to Stanislavski's Naturalism. For example Strindberg did not want to use foot lights on stage and preferred to turn the stage in to a room and replace the fourth wall with the audience. This idea of rebelling against society is very apparent in his play "Miss Julie". For example Miss Julie is a lady and can be considered as a misfit in her society. She rebels against the restrictions placed on her as a woman and that of an upper class lady. From the beginning of the play she strives to rebel against the social order and become something she has not been bought up as. She often tries to lower herself to the level of Jean, "I'm sitting on top of a pillar that I've climbed up somehow and I don't know how to get back down. When I look down I get dizzy. I have to get down but I don't have the courage to jump." But then in an instant uses her social status to order him to engage in sexual things, such as the kissing of her foot. This confusion can be representative of Strindberg's life in the way that he was bought up in a lower class family and often strived to be higher than he was, but still wanting to maintain the respect from his peer group.

Some critics believe that the play was meant as a warning to the first of his three wives, Baroness Siri von Essen, and when confronted with this question he responded that he could hardly be sure enough to deny it. It is said that Strindberg's hatred for woman grew over time and this is clearly represented in his work, as he intended to portray Miss Julie as a "monster". Miss Julie's often naive and harsh character is a real representation of what he thought woman were like and how the sexually

dominant man will always prevail over the physically weaker woman.

Strindberg lived in a time where aesthetic qualities were that of grave importance and appearance was everything, and often differentiated between that of upper class and lower class. He obviously tries to represent this in "Miss Julie" by using many visual images to portray the differing social classes for example, "I crawled under a pile of weeds, under well, you can imagine what it was like under thistles that pricked me and wet dirt that stank to high heaven. And all the while I could see you walking among the roses." This visual image of the lower class servant having to crawl under a pile of rotting weeds to only catch a glimpse of an upper class lady is extremely effective at portraying the severity of the differing social classes. The idea of aesthetic qualities representing class and dominance is still very prominent in today's world; as a result "Miss Julie" has been a large success and is considered as grave importance to modern theatre.

Strindberg was an atheist and solemnly disliked pious people. He represents this in "Miss Julie" with Christine and how she believes she can sin and then go to Church to revoke all her sins, but worst of all how she feels she is better than others because she does this – "God help us".