

# Henrik Ibsen's use of '*Friluftsliv*'.

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## Summary

This paper intends to explore Henrik Ibsen's concept of "*Friluftsliv*", as he incorporated it into his writing.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is probably best known for his plays, which cast light over existential human issues. Freedom in life and obligations in marriage society, how one chooses right from wrong, and how one realizes his own talents and abilities, all are fundamental in his works.

The concept "*Friluftsliv*" appears no more than *two times* in his writings, once in a play and once in a poem.<sup>1</sup> Both were written in a period when Ibsen was struggling to find his life's purpose. The poem "On The Heights" is considered to have a biographical strain (Hemmer, 2003). The poem's main character chooses a free life in the wilds of nature and away from the village in which he grew up. Ibsen chose to be a writer, to experience his freedom in this fashion, instead of following the wishes of his father, a pharmacist, who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. In fact, Ibsen moved from Norway to Italy in 1864, when he was 36 years old, where he lived for 27 years.

Henrik Ibsen's meaning with "*Friluftsliv*" might best be interpreted as the total appreciation of the experience one has when communing with the natural environment, not for sport or play, but for its value in the development of one's entire spiritual and physical being. At its heart is the full identification and fulfillment of body and soul one experiences when immersed in nature.

## Ibsen's youth as expressed in his poetry<sup>2</sup>

Ibsen's experiences in childhood probably had major influence on his life view, and thereby on his writings. Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 in Skien, Norway, a small town of 3,000 on the southern coast of Norway. His father was a pharmacist and owned a pharmacy. During Ibsen's first 4 years his family lived close to the church in the center of town. In his "Child Memories", he writes that "all was architecture, nothing green, no natural landscape. To the right of the church was the pillory, and to the left the jail. The two open half-loops of the pillory rings [where criminals would be restrained in public] seemed to me like two open arms that sincerely wanted to cling onto my neck." (Gran 1914, p. 185).

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a search for 'friluftsliv' on all Ibsen's plays and poems published at <http://ibsen.net>.

<sup>2</sup> Based mainly on Gran, 1914 and Beyer, H., 1934.

Young Henrik could hear the sound from the waterfall in the river nearby his home, and these sounds followed him later in life, to wit: "Through the waterfall - from morning to evening, there was a noise similar to the groaning cries of a woman. It was the saw blades. Later, when I read about the guillotine, I would always remember these saw blades." (ibid, p. 184).

When the family moved to a more fashionable part of town when the boy was 4 years old, his mind's fantasy was still bound to the surroundings in the center part of town, to the pillory with the iron chains, and to the bars restraining the prisoners in the jail. Ibsen's writings of his childhood display his many inhibitions. He did not play with other boys but just observed them. He felt isolated at this tender age. His favorite place in his home was a small room where he would lock himself in and study picture books, made drawings and paintings, and even learned magic tricks. Once a week his parents would invite the neighbors for one of Henrik's magic shows.

His father was strict, with a sharp tongue. His mother was a quiet and lovely woman, but also reticent and reserved. She would often keep to herself. According to Gran, these influences must have given Ibsen's soul its dark aura, his brooding mood, his sense of righteousness, his sick conscience. (ibid, p. 184).

In an 1867 letter to the Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Ibsen writes about his relationship to his parents: "All through my life I have withdrawn from my parents, from all my relatives, because I could not manage to stay in a "half relationship". (Gran, ibid, p. 180)

The young boy was lonesome, consumed with his own hobbies and thoughts. He lived a life full of dreams. But then his family became financially destitute. The y were forced to sell their house, move to poorer quarters, and in this narrow-minded society to be a fallen citizen was a heavy mental burden to bear. To be the reticent 8 year old son of a fallen citizen made it all the worse for him.

Thirty years later he wrote in a poem:

"Steadily they sneer behind one's back  
Whisper so it burns right through  
Glances, sharp thoughts and smiles,  
It screeches as the saw blade under a file.  
Could I with a butcher's grasp  
Tear their contempt  
Disdain  
Scorn out of their chest." <sup>3</sup>

What is known from his school years confirms this mindset. He was lonesome, and if someone said anything disparaging or he otherwise felt the object of ridicule, he kept it all to himself.

He lived at home until he was 15 and then was sent to the town of Grimstad, smaller with only 800 inhabitants, to learn to be a pharmacist and follow in his father's footsteps. During these years Ibsen gradually became opposed to life in society.

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<sup>3</sup> Gran ibid, p 187, without ref to the title of the poem. My transl.

In several of his plays he characterizes a "home", and generally, it is not as good as it ideally could or should be. In "Pillars of Society" (1877), the character Concul Bernick's home is called "humbug and just a facade". In "A Doll's House" (1879), the lawyer Helmer's home is a "house of cards". In "Ghosts" (1881), Alving's home is more of a low-class flop house than anything else. And, in "The Wild Duck" (1884), wholesaler Werle's home is a racetrack for pigs.

In "Love's Comedy" (1862), the main character Falk exhibits a parallel attitude:  
"Strawman: My home, Mr. Falk! Yes, do you know what a home is?  
Falk: I have never known."

The probability is high that Ibsen never experienced a "home" in its real and important sense. "The Wild Duck" has a line on this:

"Relling: How many sincere marriages have you seen in your life?  
Gregers: I don't think I have seen an only one."

Gran asserts that these lines capsule Ibsen's experiences of a "home". He further argues that Ibsen's "homelessness" is a basic element in his work and a foundation for his greatness as a playwright. (ibid, p. 182 -3). The underlying theme in many of Ibsen's works is a call to people to liberate themselves from the expectations of society.

Ibsen is known for using his mother as a model for some of his main characters.<sup>4</sup> Two instances: The tender Mother Aase in "Peer Gynt" (1867), and Inga in "The Pretenders" (1864). Of special interest is the relationship of the son to his mother. In both of these plays none of the sons has the right understanding of this mother's love and affection. Both boys walk away independently, the first because of his ego, the second to follow his life's calling. They rarely reflect on their mothers' gift of love and tenderness. These accounts clearly mirror the author's own childhood.

As a youth Ibsen learned about the February revolution, the revolt in Hungary, and a war in southern Denmark. He wrote poems to support the Hungarians, for FREEDOM and HUMANITY, encouraging them to fight against tyranny. Ibsen wrote about himself during this time: "While there were great storms in the world outside, I was in war with the smaller society where I was squeezed between customs and circumstances." (Gran, ibid, p. 190).

During this time, Ibsen struggled to overcome the limits he felt society had placed on him. He worked at his father's drugstore, but saw no future in taking it over as his own business. He used his spare time to study the high school curriculum (*Examen artium*), which included the Roman classics such as Cicero and Catilina.

A few years later "Catilina" became the title and the hero in Ibsen's first play. It was finished in the spring of 1849, but he never succeeded in having it printed. After a friend loaned him the necessary funds to have 250 copies printed, it was in the bookstores by April 1850. Ibsen had used the pseudonym "Brynjolf Bjarme" as the play's author. One year later only 45 copies had been sold.

In the play Ibsen argued for the rights of the citizen, against the Roman Empire. "Catilina" is the only Norwegian fictional work from that time which mirrored the spirit of revolt that was

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<sup>4</sup> Confirmed by Ibsen in a letter to P. Hansen. In Gran, ibid, p 182. In "Letters" vol I, p 215.

rife throughout Europe. It was an indication that Ibsen was to become a leader of a new generation of writers.

During the 1848 revolution, Ibsen expressed sympathy with the oppressed working class. Ibsen didn't support the teachings of Marx and Engels, who argued for a stronger state, but rather he simply wanted to abolish the state as a governing entity. Ibsen loathed any form of collective control of an individual's life.

Ibsen, however, still had a long way to go before he developed his own style. The poems "Spillemaend", "Edderfuglen", and "Bjergmanden" all express his lonely moods and his desire for understanding better both himself and other human beings.

Ibsen moved to Bergen in 1851 and became an instructor at "Den Nationale Scene", the local theater. And then he fell in love with a 16 year-old girl, and with her he was able to discuss his feelings and his moodiness. He wrote a poem to her ("Meadow flowers and potted plants") in which he asked for her hand, "... For she is a child of the open air."<sup>5</sup> Flowers of the meadow are nurtured by their natural environment while potted plants are created by people. Clearly his ideal love was a girl influenced by nature as opposed to conforming to the norms of society. However, her father rejected his proposal.

### **Ibsen's "On The Heights" (1859)**

This poem is primarily a monologue which develops into dialog when a decisive situation arises. Nature plays an important role, both as the environment in which the plays are set, but also in its symbolic meaning in life.

Following Hemmer, I would assert that "On The Heights" mirrors Ibsen's difficulties in his personal life (Ibsen was 30-31 years old when he wrote it).

In the poem, the protagonist, a young farmer, struggles with his dilemma: should he take over the farm and continue in his forefathers' footsteps, lead a life in the village as the neighbors expect him to do, or live the free life of the hunter? Is it wise to follow his inner voice for his calling in life? This dilemma causes him great anguish. In this scenario, the life of the farmer is pitted against the life of the hunter. "I", the protagonist, decides to leave the village, meets his girlfriend by the village gate, and invites her up the path into the woods to spend the night with him. And now, even though he can choose to have her as his mate, he decides to leave her and continue his trek up to the mountain plateau. He now has an overview of the village and the valley, and is faced again with the existential challenge of choosing a stable life in the village or continue his trek, searching for his calling in life.

In the poem we follow the man through his one-year solo trek through the mountains as he struggles to get a clear conviction of his life's calling. He meets a stranger who challenges him:

"Why, come evening, yearn for mother's  
House down yonder? Tell me whether  
You sleep better under covers

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<sup>5</sup> <http://ibsen.net/index.gan?id=26891&subid=0>

Than on the plumed brown highland heather?"

"Reindeer race across the moorland;  
After them, go hell-for-leather! -  
Better that than clearing poor land  
Down there, piling stones together!"<sup>6</sup>

The stranger emphasizes the superior quality of life in the highlands as compared with that of the valley below. "I" decides finally to follow the calling of his inner voice, but continues again and again to doubt his choice. He wonders whether he can combine both fashions of living into one, both fulfill his dreams and be with his family. If he remains true to his convictions, he posits, he can invite his beloved and his mother up to the plateau to be with him, or perhaps even visit with them for a day in the village.

"If till Spring this loft's to house me,  
Then I'll strive for its expansion -  
Raise them from their chores, and rouse me,  
Bench them in the highlands' mansion ...

Just one day, then break the tether,  
Hers, my loved one's, and my mother's -  
Scale again my realms of heather  
Which, come Spring, shall house two others."

He dwells on this novel solution to his dilemma, hoping to achieve satisfaction and happiness at both extremes. In the end he chooses to live his life in the mountains, evidenced in the poem's last verse:

"I'm resolute now, respond to the call  
That bids there are heights to wander!  
I've lived out my life as the lowland's thrall,  
Up here there is freedom and God withal,  
The rest merely grope down yonder."

The young farmer's son chooses the lonesome hunter's life. He will lead a life based on his inner conviction of freedom and meaning, independent of the demands and expectations he feels his village neighbors will place on him. By making this choice he sacrifices a life with his beloved and his mother. He liberates himself *from* something to achieve something else.

Ibsen was in a similar situation at the time he wrote his poem. He was the artistic director at Christiania Norske Theater. The theater was in financial straits, and so was Ibsen. His wife was pregnant, he had taken out a loan to manage his expenses, and, when he began to drink to

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by John Northam. English translation of Ibsen's complete production of poems. Source: <http://ibsen.net/index.gan?id=27191&subid=0>

forget his problems, he had problems with the governing board of the theater.

During this time in his life Ibsen remembered the good times he had during his mountain trips and wrote the poem "Høifjeldsliv" ("Life in the high mountains"). The poem idealizes the life of the farmers at their seters, their summer farms in the mountains. According to Østvedt (1972), the depression expressed in this poem shows Ibsen's strong longing for the problem-free life in the mountains.

Several scholars have interpreted this poem. According to Gran (1914), the "I" figure suppresses his feelings for his beloved in the village, and when he sees his family's home burn to the ground, he looks through his "hollow hand - to gain perspective". And when he has seen his beloved ride to church to marry another man, he concludes: "Now I am free. I follow the bidding of the heights to wander". Gran sees this as an example of Ibsen's aestheticism. "It is hysterical in aesthetic inhumanness". (p. 245). Gran does *not* discuss the main character's dilemma of which of life's paths to follow.

The biographer Edvard Beyer (1975, p. 244) focuses his analysis on the process at play in the main character, from impulsive love and the problems inherent in life to a "higher light over the sight"; or as John Northam puts it: "A nobler radiance bathed the scene (part IX, verse 8). Beyer does not conclude whether Ibsen agrees with the free life in the mountains or not, and does attribute this conflict to his personal dilemma of whether or not to be a writer.

I believe Ibsen had a deeper meaning than just describing the existential dilemma of the young farmer. He believed that everyone should be able to chart their own life, without the influence of the family, their neighbors, or their society in general.

Now let's back to the use of "friluftsliv":

The young farmer arrived at his decision after spending a full year, all four seasons, in the mountains, and had plenty of time to think. Late in autumn he considers the village to be a prison, for cattle as well as men. It is in this moment of conviction that he uses the word "friluftsliv":

"Autumn's near, below the ranges  
Hark, the last few herd bells falter!  
Upland freedom's lost - life changes  
Back to cattle stalls and halter!

Home? Is *that* my home then, truly,  
Where my mind's no longer turning?  
He's long chastened my unruly  
Thoughts, I've steeled myself, my yearning

Dale life stifles emulation!  
Drudgery for mere survival;  
I found *here* my stimulation,  
I need fells and moors to rival.

Here in this deserted dwelling  
I have housed my wealth of treasure;

There's a bench, a stove, sweet smelling  
Air, and time to think at leisure."

The last line is crucial to the connection, for this is where the word "friluftsliv" is used, apparently for the first time in Norwegian literature. In Norwegian, this single word combines three separate words: "free", "air", "life". Ibsen used the word in the expression "friluftsliv for my thoughts".

Breivik (1978) comments that originally "friluftsliv" meant "for my thoughts". The prevailing understanding now is that "friluftsliv" is a combination of body, feelings and thoughts.

Helberg, a man who devoted most of his life to promote "friluftsliv" through the Norwegian Tourist Association, mentions this poem in his book about the first wanderers in the mountain (1994). Helberg believed this was the first time the concept was used in written form, but however, gave no interpretation of Ibsen's possible meaning.

Pedersen (1999) focuses on the gender perspective. It can be no coincidence that *a man* is the first to use this concept, that *a man* can say farewell to the fiddling work in a narrow mountain valley. An independent and free life in the mountains was an option for young men, but not for women, neither for an old farmer's wife or the healthy farmer's daughter.

In my opinion the farmers' daughters had a certain amount of freedom. During the summers they cared for the cattle up on the mountain farms, or *seters*. Surely they were bound by their work of milking and tending the cows, but they were free in a social sense. Bachelors from the valleys were known for roaming about these *seters* in search of possible fiancées.

I believe that Ibsen had a broader intention than stressing the freedom of the male gender. He used situations that were real in his lifetime and brought universal human rights issues into public debate. One reason that Ibsen's plays enjoy their continuing performances is that they still relate to the issues of the day, more than a century after he wrote them. Further, Ibsen himself rejected the notion that he had contributed to the struggle for women's liberation (see Leirhaug, this volume).

Composing this poem could be Ibsen's way of clarifying his own thoughts concerning his own dilemma. He chooses a common situation, a young man facing life's major decision, whether to be a farmer or a hunter. On a deeper level the poem is about whether to follow the expectations of the fellow farmers or to follow his inner calling; whether to fulfill social duties or go his own way; whether to lead a life wedged in between customs and circumstances or be as free as a falcon; whether to lead a life where all of his years will be predictable or choose freedom and uncertainty. Ibsen argues for and against, pro and con, and finds a solution, indeed for the farmer, but more sincerely for himself.

I believe the expression "friluftsliv for my thoughts" can be understood in the freedom one feels up in the mountains. There a man can think freely, not bound by the norms of society. He can seek out his mission in life unbound by the expectations of the villagers. He can judge different ways to live his life and balance their pros and cons, and come to a decision. And Ibsen believes it most important that a person follow his inner voice, rather than follow the expectations of others.

**Ibsen's second use of "friluftsliv": *Love's Comedy***

The first play Ibsen wrote after "On The Heights" was "Love's Comedy" (1862). Here Ibsen uses the term "friluftsliv" for the second time.

The theme of the play is whether ideal love can survive in a decent but ordinary marriage. The principal character with the name "Falk", Norwegian for "falcon", has the ambition of being a writer. He had succeeded rather poorly so far. He argues for his right to live a life that he sees as ideal, just as the "I" in "On The Heights". The woman in Falk's life is "Svanhild", Norwegian for "swan". Ibsen has given both main characters *birds' names*. This may be a symbol of the importance of having the ability to fly out of their nests, to their individual destinies.

After a while both realize that their ideal love will not survive during the hardships of a long marriage. They decide to split up, each living independent lives but keeping the memories of their idealized love. Another man then proposes to Svanhild. She acknowledges the reality that a life of a single woman would be a difficult one. She accepts his proposal, even if she would lose her freedom. In this last dialog of hers as she contemplates the choice, Svanhild uses the word "friluftsliv": <sup>7</sup>

*Falk (with a smile for the whole company)*

"I'll seek out future challenges - I'll soar!

Good-bye! (*quietly to Svanhild*)

God bless you, my spring-season's wife; -

You'll hear of me, where'er my quest may take me!"

(*waves his hat and follows his students*)

*Svanhild follows him with her eyes for a moment and says, quietly but firmly)*

Now I have finished with my outdoor life ("friluftsliv")

The leaves are falling, now the world can take me."

According to Hemmer, Ibsen uses "the world" as a symbol for a lower level of life, a negative power, in contrast with "friluftsliv", the ideal life she wanted, but felt obliged to leave.

Why *Comedy of Love*? According to Gran, because of the glaring contrast, the comic antagonism between ideal marriage and reality. Interfering with the Knights of love and their Misses and Mrs., the main character, Falk, is portrayed as a rebel, a poet, an idealist. He falls in love and they decide to marry, but before they marry, they separate, because he believes that the good feelings will sour as the years go by. And so they decide to separate, living with their memories but accepting reality, agreeing to separate while their lives are still good.

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<sup>7</sup> Translated by John Northam. Source: [http://ibsen.net/asset/114051/1/114051\\_1.pdf](http://ibsen.net/asset/114051/1/114051_1.pdf)



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