

Discord and Harmony between Human and Nature: An Ecological Interpretation of *The Lady from the Sea*

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Abstract *The Lady from the Sea* is one of Ibsen's symbolic and romantic works in his late years. In this play, Ibsen does not simply advocate to "returning to nature" as Rousseau used to do. He has deeper thinking on the same issue. The core problems that Ibsen focuses on in *The Lady from the Sea* include the following: How can human beings really achieve harmony between human and nature? How can they really find out the spiritual home where they can calm down their souls? Or how can the sea become sea and the nature become the nature? These forward-looking questions are given much attention in the twenty-first century. Ibsen's answer is as follows: Before human beings obtain real freedom and real love, and realize themselves in true love, the sea does not belong to human beings, while the nature is not humanized, either. They must realize that neither the sea nor nature belongs to them. Only true love can create harmony between human and nature and provide a home where they can have their souls released.

Key words Ibsen; *The Lady from the Sea*; human nature; soul's home

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The Lady from the Sea, a drama full of romantic colors in Ibsen's later writing career, whose deep ecological thoughts are still enlightening nowadays, concentrates on spiritual ecology of human and the relationship between human and nature.

The female protagonist, Ellida, in this play changes from "a half-dead mermaid lying in the tide pools" into a free and happy lady who is sound both physically and mentally. This thought-provoking life course focuses on reflecting the deep ecological perspectives which Ibsen endeavors to express in this play.

I. A Mermaid Dying in the Tide Pools

Even towards the end of the whole play, Ellida always leads an extremely abnormal spiritual way of life: she lives in her own world all along; however, it seems to other people that she is strangely ill, nervous, and restless day and night, while the cause of which is invariably unknown.

In Act I, Ibsen has already set a keynote for Ellida's spiritual ecology through

Ballested's words, "She's wandered in from the sea and can't find her way out again. And so, you see, she lies here, expiring in the tide pools" (228). Ballested is no other than a casual passerby in Ellida's life, who has no substantial intimate contact or communication with her; therefore, his opinions can exactly represent Ellida's image in most people's eyes. Thus it can be seen that Ibsen actually inputs a lot of thoughts in choosing Ballested instead of Doctor Wangel or Bolette to draw a global outline for Ellida, and his judgment can be more objective in the common sense. In Ballested's eyes, Ellida is "a mermaid lying, half-dead" "by this rock" "between those islands" (228); imprisoned in her inner "islands" and "rocks", she can hardly step out of her mental defense. She has to conduct desperate struggles in vain as the mermaid does; it is no wonder that Ballested, the clear-minded onlooker, names his painting "The Dying Mermaid" (229), which happens to suggest Ellida's unpredictable future; it is unknown where her beauty and dream will go.

In common people's eyes, Ellida is regarded as "a mermaid half-dead", which is still a beautiful and illusory artistic conception; while in her husband Wangel's eyes, this image is much more material and realistic: "No, not exactly (for reasons of health). Although she's definitely shown signs of nervousness in the past two years. Off and on, I mean. I really can't make out just what the trouble is. But this bathing in the sea—it's become almost the one ruling passion of her life. . . . They call her 'the lady from the sea'" (236–37). It is thus clear that, in the eyes of her most intimate partner, who has closest contact with her, she remains a lonely soul unwilling to open her heart. Therefore, the mighty ocean is the only outlet of her spiritual communication. In 1886, Ibsen wrote *Rosmersholm*. In the summer after the publication of the play, he went to the north of Jutland in Denmark. From the middle of July till the end of August, 1887, he lived along the east coast of the peninsula, where he collected materials and searched for inspiration for *The Lady from the Sea*, more importantly, enjoyed the pleasure of having access to the sea. On October 5, 1887, the year before the completion of *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen spoke at his publisher Hegel's banquet that the summer he had spent in Denmark enabled him to "discover the sea": the calm and gentle Danish ocean brought peace and tranquility to his soul, which played a significant role in (his) creation (Ibsen 268). As it can be seen that Ellida's attachment to sea is actually the thought of Ibsen himself; in his eyes, the sea has a special sense of belonging, which brings him the peace of mind. Thus, Ellida's behaviors fully interpret the poetic imagery of the union of human and sea. On October 30, 1888, after the completion of *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen put in this way in his letter to his friend Brandes: "it would be quite impossible for me to settle for good in Norway. Nowhere would I feel less at home than there" (Ibsen 272). At this moment, Ibsen further explained that, Norway, in his heart, was but a solitary island in the sea, and he could not find out "the feeling of a home" in the far-away north Europe. He could only endow the mightier ocean with his emotions. In *The Lady from the Sea*, this point is also referred to from time to time — being unable to make out what is on her mind, Wangel repeatedly persuades Ellida to move back to the seaside; however, Ellida declines time and again, showing that, she can never ease the pain of her inner emotions. She has to put on a bewildered look ostensibly all

the time, while in the meantime, she does not know what she is waiting for at all. Thus she has no choice but to bathe in the sea to seek for the so-called evasion and comfort every day. Lyngstrand's narration of Ellida reveals more or less some similar information as well, "(M)y idea was to have the figure of a young woman, a sailor's wife, stretched out, lying in a strangely troubled sleep. And she would be dreaming, too" (245). Ellida is precisely this kind of woman; she lives in her own dreamland, incapable of facing real life; she takes it for granted that nobody in her family can understand her at all, while the stranger—the only inner sustenance which is deeply buried at the bottom of her heart—is in the middle of nowhere. This tough dilemma can therefore only be peacefully and psychologically balanced in the sea. Ellida often speaks such words as, "I think it's stifling here" (247), which also indicates that she is unable to feel the warmth of her family, on the contrary, she is inflicted with enormous pressure and imprisonment from the family. As a result, she longs for freedom even more, and going to bathe in the sea everyday becomes her only way of relaxing her mind.

In Act II, Ellida says, "Night and day, winter and summer, I feel it — this overpowering homesickness for the sea" (257). Wangel then proposes to move to the seaside, and he believes that Ellida can regain her health and pacify her mind in that way; however, Ellida says that is of no effect—as she well understands that, the constraint of her soul can never be undone by simple change of geographical location, and her inner sorrow can only be relieved in special ways. Ten years before, when Ellida was still a fair young maiden, she met a strange sailor by accident. They talked only about the ocean when they were together. Whenever she recalls their meet at that time, Ellida might cherish not only remembrance of those days, but also great longing in her mind:

About the storms and the calms. The dark nights at sea. And the sea in the sparkling sunlight, that too. But mostly we talked of whales and dolphins, and of the seals that would lie out on the skerries in the warm noon sun. And then we spoke of the gulls and the eagles and every kind of seabird you can imagine. You know—it's strange, but when we talked in such a way, then it seemed to me that all these creatures belonged to him... I almost felt that I belonged among them, too. (260)

This is such a realm that puts an end to all the realistic restrictions and combines human and sea as a unity—it especially highlights amiable feeling of humans towards sea and nature when they experience love and happiness at heart. On those beautiful moments, seafishes and seabirds are all like family members, or even extension of humans' own lives.

Pleasant hours flew past, and then the stranger told Ellida that "he'd stabbed the captain that night" (261), and had to get quickly away. Before his departure, he put both his and Ellida's rings together in a key-ring and flung into the sea with all his effort so as to show that they two "would marry (them)selves to the sea" (261). In Ellida's eyes, all this was romantic, even somewhat resembled the legendary sto-

ries of heroes or knights. She was totally enthralled at that moment, thinking that all the stranger's acts were completely appropriate. Afterwards, the stranger roved all over the world. He sent her six letters in succession from different continents of the world, asking her to wait for him. From Ibsen's regular correspondence with his friends, we can see that he treats the stranger with favor; on February 14, 1889, in his letter to Prof. Hoffory, he wrote that, "He is dressed as a casual tourist, not in traveling clothes. No one is supposed to know who he is or what his real name is. This uncertainty about him is the essential element in the method I have deliberately chosen" (Ibsen 275). It may be inferred that the uncertainty and the consequent mystique of the stranger is exactly where his charm is located, and it is precisely this point which deeply attracted Ellida. After he watched the stage production of *The Lady from the Sea* in person in Weimar, Germany, Ibsen wrote another letter to Hoffory on March 26 of the same year, heaping praise upon the actor who played the stranger: "I could not wish for, or even conceive of, a better performance — a long, thin figure with a hawk face, piercing black eyes, and a wonderfully deep and soft voice. . . ." (Ibsen 277). All the descriptions further confirm the natural essence of the character Ibsen created, a character as uncertainty and mystique as the sea, but also charming and experienced enough to attract Ellida and lead her to indulge him for days to come. She cannot get him out of her mind. She feels the stranger's "inexplicable control in her spirit" even by the sea, "night and day, winter and summer, I feel it — this overpowering homesickness for the sea" (257).

Later on, Ellida married Wangel and gave birth to a boy after two or three years' time. She thought "the child had the stranger's eyes" (266), and "his eyes changed color with the sea. When the fjord lay still in the sunlight, his eyes were like that. And in the storms, too—" (265) This was really baffling! The boy was born several years after the stranger's departure, and he could not be the child of Ellida and the stranger; however, why Ellida deliberately had such feeling? What's more, she even emphasizes that she "saw it well enough" (265). Hither the visual mistake reveals her inner secret: in the depth of her heart, Ellida by no means forgets the stranger; furthermore, she bears deep emotions towards him. In his manuscript notes on the first draft of the play, Ibsen once mentioned that, "The secret of her marriage lies in that, the bewitching power of imagination pulls her back to the past, by the side of the loafer whose whereabouts is a mystery. This is what she hardly dares to admit or even think about. In the last analysis, she fancies by the light of nature that, she leads a couple's life together with him all along" (Hemmer 347). This at least explains that, in her deep heart, Ellida would rather lead a couple's life with the stranger, and she still dreams of the free life which takes after the extensive and unbounded ocean. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the public, she has to preserve her image of Ms. Wangel, without any extreme or sensitive acts; thereupon, she has no alternative but to find sustenance in the changeable and unpredictable sea all day long, so as to feel the spiritual communication with the stranger, and to experience the wandering life all over the world as the stranger has described for her.

While living together with Wangel in the five to six years' time, she loves him wholeheartedly indeed, but in the meantime, she can hardly forget the stranger as

well. Especially after the boy was born, his strange eyes correspond to a certain desire in her subconsciousness. People can faintly feel that the honest and faithful Ellida often feels restless and uneasy in her mind; or we can even say that she bears double sense of guilt at the bottom of her heart; she not only feels sorry for Wangel (as she misses the stranger in her heart), but also feels ashamed and regretful for the stranger (as she stays together with Wangel in real life). Just because of her honesty, she is burdened with the sense of guilt; and just because of the deep sense of guilt, Ellida is often bothered with ominous illusions and scared to death. According to what she says, "Sometimes, suddenly, I can see him standing large as life in front of me. Or actually—a little to one side. He never looks at me. He's simply there. . . . And clearest of all I can see the stickpin he wore, with a great blue-white pearl in it. That pearl is like the eye of a dead fish. And it seems to be staring at me" (265). This is evidently her illusion, just like Rosmer or Rebekka can sometimes see the white horse as described in *Rosmersholm* (1886), the play finished only two years before *The Lady from the Sea* (1888); while behind the illusion, her inner sense of guilt and fear is revealed. Soon after that, her son died mysteriously. The boy's death has aroused great shock and all sorts of imaginations in Ellida's heart. How can such a good boy meet with his death so soon? Is it possible that she has done something wrong and thus brought about the day of reckoning comes? From then on, Ellida carries the sense of guilt day after day, and "no longer dares to make love" with Wangel. In this play, Ibsen avoids on purpose describing all the details of the child's death, which undoubtedly strengthens even deeper mystic colors of the whole story and gives rise to more reveries from readers and audiences: on one hand, the natural father of the child is Wangel, and the boy's death seems to break up the close-knit red line between Ellida and Wangel, which further results in Ellida's not being able to find the spiritual sustenance in real life, and she is thus obliged to entrust her care on the sea day after day so as to relieve her yearning for the stranger; on the other hand, subconsciously, Ellida has already regarded the child as the offspring and the spiritual conjunction point of herself and the stranger; Once she loses this connection, she is like a boat lost at sea. She tries to give her life direction, but as things go against her wishes, she becomes like a solitary island. Her house stifles her and she must go to the sea to search for inner consolation.

In this play, what Lyngstrand says about his plan of the group sculptures might as well be set down as an echo of a certain voice inside Ellida's heart. Lyngstrand mentions that he would carve in the group figures "a young woman, a sailor's wife, stretched out, lying in a strangely troubled sleep. And she would be dreaming, too" (245).

And there'll be one other figure. A kind of specter, you might say. It would be her husband, that she'd been unfaithful to while he was away. And he's been drowned at sea. . . . He was drowned on a voyage. But then the strange thing is that he comes home all the same. It's night, and now he stands there over her bed, looking down at her. He'll stand there, dripping wet, like a man dragged out of the sea. . . . (he) said, "But she's mine, and mine she'll always be.

And if I go home and fetch her, she'll have to go off with me, even if I came as a drowned man up out of the dark sea." . . . I can see the unfaithful wife so vividly in my mind. And then the avenger, drowned, and yet coming back from the sea. I can picture them both so clearly. (245 - 47)

All the voices stand for "other's" criticism of "self", which corresponds to the dull anxiety in the dim recess of Ellida's mind, and can also be regarded as the collective and unconscious manifestation at the bottom of her heart. A restless and guilty person sometimes can feel an upbraiding voice flooding from a certain corner or even from all quarters far and near, yet the voice actually tends to come from the traditional depth, the collective unconsciousness repressed in thousands of years. It is precisely this deep sense of guilt that forces Ellida to carry a big mental burden on her shoulders, which enables her dare not to open her mind even to the nearest and dearest family members. she feels sorry for the stranger's entrustment, while at the same time, she also fails her husband's great kindness. Accordingly, she lives in self-reflection and condemnation everyday without any sense of happiness. Revelation of herself to the sea is her only outlet of true feelings.

Probably, what Ellida fears most in her heart is the real death of the stranger. If he really drowned in the sea three years ago, then Ellida would almost make sure that her illusions of these three years are not illusory at all, but the drowned ghost coming for revenge on her. Human beings may not fear living creatures, but with regard to unknown "ghosts," nobody can be exempt from being overcome with horror. Therefore, as soon as Ellida hears from Lyngstrand about the sailor's "definite death", she becomes even more frightened, and eagerly asks Wangel to "help me! I feel it's tightening—tightening around me. More and more" (265). Thus it can be seen that, Ellida is seriously ill indeed; the disease of the body can be cured by medicine, and Dr. Wangel is right the person for solving the problem; while the disease of the soul can only be healed by mental medicine, and the stranger is supposedly the only person to work out the trouble. Ellida's entrusting her emotions on sea everyday is but an expedient measure as what Chinese often identify as "temporary medical relief."

II. Approaching of True Love and Happy Singing of the Sea

When Ellida sees the stranger with her own eyes, Ellida's fear about "the drowned ghost" fades completely; while in the meantime, her yearning for freedom and new life in her deepest heart is relumed and strengthened. At this critical moment, the person who really loves her and is ready to give her freedom for a sensibly inspiring life, will play a key role in her choice. Out of care for her, Wangel by no means agreed to let her go in the very beginning, which stirred her revolt all the more, and deepened her sympathy on the stranger. It grieves Wangel inwardly:

Wangel (in quiet pain). I see it so well, Ellida. Inch by inch you're slipping away from me. This hunger for the boundless, the infinite—the unattainable—will finally drive your mind out completely into darkness.

Ellida. Oh, yes, yes—I feel it—like black, soundless wings hanging over

me!

Wangel. It's not going to come to that. There's no other way to save you. At least, not that I can see. And so — so I agree that—our contract's dissolved. Right now, this moment. Now you can choose your own path — in full freedom.

Ellida (stares at him briefly as if struck dumb). Is that true — true—what you're saying? You mean it — with all your heart?

Wangel. Yes, I mean it — with all my miserable heart.

Ellida. Then you can—? You can let this be?

Wangel. Yes, I can. Because I love you so much. (319)

Once she obtains freedom, Ellida immediately feels that “this transforms everything” (319). Why? What Ellida cherishes most is freedom and true love. At this moment, both Wangel and the stranger are willing to give her freedom and ask her to make her own choice and take care of her own business, and thus in the aspect of “freedom”, Wangel at least does not lose to the stranger; however, in the aspect of “true love”, the stranger loses greatly to Wangel. The stranger never shows sincere thoughtfulness and gentle love to her; what he behaves can only be related to “not being able to losing his hold of” the beautiful young lady and his willingness of “not letting go of the beauty.” Maybe this is only out of his own principles of “insisting for the sake of insistence” (320). And upon it, he leaves at ease.

An interesting detail needs to be paid attention to here: the stranger uses Norwegian “de,” which is supposed to address an alienated person, to call Ellida for the first time at this critical moment; and before this scene, he uses “du,” the address especially for intimate people, for Ellida every time they meet. This also shows that the stranger is more likely to put away their friendship or “love” easily for his own sake, and further proves that Ellida makes a right choice in her life. Previously, maybe Ellida thinks that the stranger is also afflicted with the lovesickness of missing the sea all day and all night just like herself, but now the reality has broken her fantasy and she cannot really see herself in the stranger. A man who does not love her sincerely and wholeheartedly is obviously not worth cherishing. Furthermore, Ellida finds recently that Wangel's two daughters, Bolette and Hilde, also need her emotionally and she is sure of herself being their real mother. All this makes her longing for the possibly new life to come in the near future:

Ellida. They're not mine—but I'll win them to me.

Wangel. Ours—! (Joyfully and quickly kissing her hands.) Oh—how can I thank you for that one word!

Hilde (in a whisper to Lyngstrand). Why, she and Father—they look as if they're just engaged!

....

(The great steamer glides silently out over the fjord. The music can be heard closer in toward shore.) (321 –22)

The final scene further describes Ellida's real inner world to readers: at this moment,

her attitude towards life also changes tremendously. A thereupon comes her “smiling gravely” (322), which seems to indicate that, she has fully understood the true meaning of life; looking back at all the past experiences, she cannot help sighing with emotions that, “Once you’ve really become a land animal, then there’s no going back again—into the sea. Or the life that belongs to the sea, either” (322). At this moment, being not sentimentally attached to the stranger at all, she is able to lead a really happy and enjoyable life with Wangel, without concerning herself with anything else. Wangel is just like the land which brings her a feeling of perpetual steadiness and practicability, and this characteristic is precisely the greatness of everyday life. While the sea-like mysterious and uncertain stranger can only occasionally stir waves in her maiden’s heart without any sense of belonging. Once the thrill and excitement is over and the mysterious mask is unveiled, she can no longer discover her past attachment on him. With the great steamer’s carrying away the stranger “silently out over the fjord,” Ellida’s attachment to the sea is also predicted to gradually come to naught; while in the meantime, the music symbolizing the good life “closer in toward shore” (322), seems to declare publicly of Ellida’s happy future—the real life of returning to the land.

The sea reveal itself the core subject of the play from the very beginning. In the earliest notes on the play on June 5, 1888, Ibsen wrote that, “Temptation of the sea. Desire for the sea. Human beings’ affinity towards the sea. Bond of the sea. Attachment to the sea. Impulsion of returning back to the sea. Fishes are the archetypes of the evolution of species. Are there still this sort of memory rudiments in people’s minds? Maybe in certain people’s brains?” (Salome 38)

The highly dynamic life of the ocean, which is imbued with adventures and excitements, fills one with special longing indeed; the sea can control one’s emotions and wills; the sea can also make one fascinated about it. *The Lady from the Sea* gives us the following answer; it is exactly the nature that possesses such power, and the biggest secret within is that human beings’ wills rely on “something without wills.” The so-called “something without wills,” or something even more powerful than human beings’ wills, is precisely the precious love and wish in the heaven and earth.

In this play, before Ellida, “the lady from the sea”, resolves her innermost doubts and conflicts, no matter how she goes to bathe in the sea everyday, her mood is still hardly cheered up; Dr. Wangel is prepared to move to the seaside for her, while she says that would be helpless. The stranger is like “the free ocean”, while he does not really love Ellida, and he can not help the lady from the sea find the soul’s home, either.

How can human beings really achieve harmony between harmony and nature? How can they really find out the spiritual home where they can calm down their souls? Ibsen clarifies the topic through *The Lady from the Sea* for his readers and audiences: Before human beings obtain real freedom and real love, and realize themselves in true love, the sea does not belong to human beings, while the nature is not humanized, either. Only in free and self-conscious situations with true love can human beings really achieve harmony between human and nature and find out the home where they can have their souls released.

Karl Marx says, “The completed naturalism equals humanism, and the completed humanism equals naturalism; it is the real solution to all the contradictions between human and nature, and between human and human; it is the real solution to all the conflicts between existence and essence, objectification and self-assurance, freedom and necessity, and individualism and species. It is the answer to the mysteries in history, and it knows for sure that it is exactly the answer” (81). These words are precisely the thoughts which the deep ecological ideas manifested in *The Lady from the Sea* leave for us.

【Note】

1. All the lines of *The Lady from the Sea* in this article are taken from *Henrik Ibsen: Four Major Plays*, vol. II, trans. Rolf Fjelde (Signet Classics, 2001). Only page numbers are indicated. Same hereinafter.

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