

Natural elements: an
exploration of
extramarital sex and
class division in miss
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Strindberg recurrently uses symbolism drawn from nature to great effect throughout his play *Miss Julie*, accentuating the impact of the act of sexual intercourse on the shifting class divisions between Julie and Jean. The evocative imagery Strindberg uses as the play progresses highlights the protagonists' deviation from the socially acceptable behavioural norms of the time. Already in the stage setting, the air is heavy with sexual tension. Egil Törnqvist (1999) writes, 'To a Swede, the birch leaves in the kitchen indicate it is Midsummer, Midsummer Eve being the one day in the year when "all rank is laid aside", when masters and servants come together - and when drinking and love-making are carnivalesque' and 'there is a link between the lilacs on the kitchen table and the lilac bushes outside, suggesting that the two groups share the same sexual needs (lilacs as aphrodisiacs). The combination of Cupid, lilacs and phallic-shaped poplars speaks for itself.' Strategically placed symbols, which are repeated throughout the play, illustrate and provide added emphasis on the chasm between the social classes of the time contributed by the escalating seduction.

Near the offset, both Jean and Julie describe dreams, which are an immediate exposé of their desires in terms of class and thus success or personal freedom. Whilst Julie feels 'dizzy' at the 'top of a high pillar' due to her secluded position in society, Jean is 'lying under a tree, in a dark forest'. The sense of being trapped in dense woodland creates an atmosphere of suffocation; being kept in the 'dark' reveals the extent to which Jean's servant class limits his opportunities. He desires to 'climb and climb' higher up the tree to rob 'the nest with the golden egg', however 'the trunk's so thick, slippery, the first branch is too high, too high...' The 'slippery' trunk

may be perceived as a phallic symbol, with the 'golden egg' being a yonic representation of Julie's pure virginity that he longs to 'steal'. The nest symbolises female genitalia, enclosing an egg made of the most perfect metal gold, symbolic of rich treasure and status. Clearly, climbing the tree symbolises Jean's desire to rise in society as well as a sexual act. According to Sigmund Freud (1920), 'Ladders, ascents, steps in relation to their mounting, are certainly symbols of sexual intercourse.' Through using the concept of theft, Strindberg also illustrates the forbidden nature of Jean's desires. Stealing the innocent egg infers he will steal Miss Julie's virginity through coition. The branch is part of Julie herself in this case. However it is too 'high' as she has not let herself 'fall' to the 'ground' yet; she has not lowered herself by consenting this act, which would result in her 'falling from Grace'. It is further implied that Jean's purportedly long-lived yearning to have sexual relations with Julie is in order to elevate his class through the sentence; 'if we slept on nine midsummer flowers tonight, our dreams would come true'. Bestowing to Swedish tradition, it is said that if an unmarried woman picks seven or nine types of flowers and places them under their pillow, they will dream of their future husband¹. However, as any audience of the time would have known, Julie marrying the servant would automatically spell her own social undoing. She would, indeed, 'fall' from her 'pillar' due to scandal even if Jean would gain a literal leg up from the branch he has not yet 'grabbed'. Una Chaudhuri (1993) writes that 'the crude symbolism of these dreams, their imagery of high and low, up and down, climbing and falling, offers a convenient and schematic key to interpreting the plot, inviting us to read the sexual encounter as a moment of class reversal'. There is a sense of inevitability through Jean's belief that

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he will then 'shin up the rest like a ladder' and Julie's overtly provocative interest in him as a man.

Religious symbols in relation to nature are also particularly telling in revealing Julie's previous innocence, the ramifications of the sexual act on this chastity, and the division between the two characters' class positions. Jean's reminiscence on their childhood is a potent device used by Strindberg to highlight Julie's juvenile purity and thus acknowledge the extent to which she will 'fall' after the act. Jean implies her wholesomeness through describing the white and scented 'jasmine bushes', the colour signifying this pureness. The description of Julie residing in 'the Big House' in 'The Garden of Eden' with 'Apple trees' suggests a biblical environment. Her statement that 'all boys steal apples' again implies inevitability in the sexual act to come, but further casts her as the temptress, Eve, guided by Satan. Jean's reference to 'The Tree of Life' lends this first part of the play further heavy, biblical symbolism. The antithesis between the lush and bountiful 'Garden of Eden' and Jean's youth - a 'wasteland... not even a tree' - colours the divide in class between the two characters.

The scent of flowers is used by Strindberg to emphasise the contrast in class divisions on several occasions. When Jean is recounting his hiding in the sweetly-scented Turkish pavilion before escaping through the stinking privy, Strindberg includes in his stage directions Jean breaking off a lilac twig and holding it out for Julie to smell, flowers that are sometimes said to symbolise youthful innocence, but which in Sweden (and by Strindberg himself in his preface) were considered aphrodisiacs. Anna Westerståhl Stenport (2012) considers this a 'deodorising' act. Nevertheless, Julie 'has taken the lilac, <https://assignbuster.com/natural-elements-an-exploration-of-extramartial-sex-and-class-division-in-miss-julie/>

and now lets it fall on the table'. This action could be seen as a willingness on her part to let herself 'fall' into the dirt. Jean describes how, when he watched Julie as a child in the 'rose-garden', he 'dived into the compost heap... thistles, mud, stink'. Through this comparison, it is made clear that she is 'higher up' than him in terms of class whereas he is a 'peasant', not merely low in physical position, but in the filth, assaulted by the stench from his escape through human excrement and scratched by the thistles. As a young innocent child, Julie has not yet 'fallen from grace' and is still 'pure'. However, once the sexual act has occurred, Jean describes Julie as 'worthless', illustrating this opinion with 'I'm sorry you've sunk so low, lower than your own cook. I'm sorry the flowers are trampled, trampled in the autumn mud and rain'. It is evident here that the roles have reversed; the repetition of the metaphor of mud, now used to depict Julie's social position instead of Jean's, emphasises the extent to which inappropriate sexual relationships were once a significant determining factor in class position. Furthermore, the white flowers being 'trampled in the mud' denote the desecration of her purity and the fact that she has now joined Jean in the 'dirt'.

The repetition of metaphors is especially prevalent with regards to Jean's dream; in the first description, although it is implied that Julie is literally 'his first branch' to give him a 'leg up' in the class system, this concept is not yet fully portrayed. However, after the power balance has been overturned through the act of sexual intercourse, Julie has a revelation and realizes this truth with the very same image, saying 'so I was your lowest branch'. Jean agrees without hesitation, with the reply 'and how rotten this was!' Not only

was this act considered 'rotten', one may infer that this word was also used to depict decaying wood, therefore perhaps highlighting Strindberg's view on Miss Julie 'rotting' and becoming damaged as a result of her 'sin'. This image further reveals the deceptive gloss and hypocrisy of the upper classes and especially Julie, depicted as a feminist. Whilst a dying branch may look sturdy and polished at first glance, once stepped on it collapses, revealing its true fragile and impaired nature. In conjunction with Jean's description of Julie's feminist mother as having 'manicured nails', which are 'black underneath' and carrying a 'dirty perfumed handkerchief', Strindberg makes it clear here that class can be simply an illusion, as is the deception of decomposing wood of appearing stable on the outside.

In conclusion, the organic symbols used by Strindberg are indeed an efficacious mechanism that magnify the effect of extramarital sex on the shifting class divisions between both characters. Initially, it is revealed through their dreams that they are unsatisfied with their current societal positions and almost wish to 'swap' these with each other in order to grasp their goals. It is made evident that Jean's view on achieving his climbing up the social ladder is through coition with Julie, revealed through the reference of her being his 'first branch'. Symbols of religion are successfully used to provide a clear distinction between Julie's previous upper-class purity and her later 'filth', thus increasing the effect of one act of sex on this aspect. Reiteration of botanical symbols further heightens this impact, foreshadowing the devastating fate of Julie as a consequence of her fall.

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