

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*: Man vs. Troll
Diane S. Jones

When I was a little girl--even before I could read--the music of Edvard Grieg's "Peer Gynt Suite" captured my imagination. My parents had the 33 (a long-playing vinyl recording, in case you need me to define it!), and I would play it over and over. If no one was watching I would dance to "Morning Mood" and "Anitra's Dance." A few years ago, I decided that a read of the source material, a five-act play by Henrik Ibsen, written in 1867, was long overdue. I bought a used copy on amazon, read it, and was mesmerized. What shocked me the most about this play, written in Norwegian verse with a plot that is a cross between *Pinocchio* and Chesterton's *The Man That Was Thursday*, was the very deep fingerprint of God on the story.

Set in 19th century Norway and North Africa, much of *Peer Gynt* is realism, Ibsen's modern-day world, which includes references to America's Southern industry of slavery. But woven throughout the story are creatures of Norse mythology, such as trolls and the great Boyg, a giant slimy troll-serpent.

The story follows a man named Peer Gynt from his youth to his old age. Peer is a completely self-centered youth when we meet him. He is a liar, he is lazy, and because of these sins, he causes his mother grief and shame, breaking the commandment to honor his (father and) mother. Much of acts one and two reveal another aspect of his selfishness. Peer takes the virginity of several innocent girls and then leaves them. The first girl is Ingrid, whom Peer carries away on her wedding day, stealing her from her parents and her bridegroom. A sampling of her dialogue reveals the pain she feels as she realizes that Peer has ruined her life: "What lies you've told!...We've sinned, and that binds us together for good and all!... to tempt me away, then disown me!... you pursued me!" But heartlessly, Peer leaves Ingrid on the side of the mountain.

Next, Peer meets a beautiful lady called the Woman in Green. He is immediately attracted to her: "As true as you're a beautiful woman, will you have me?" She tells him that her father is a king and asks him, "Are you a king's son?" "Yes I am," he lies.

As it turns out, her father is the king of the trolls, and, as we know, Peer is no prince. He leaves the Woman in Green with his child, never to return. Years later she seeks him out, and when she finds him, he heartlessly sends them both away.

Acts three and four deal with the span of Peer's life up to his old age. He has left Norway and has lived all over the world. We see brief scenes of his middle age and witness a life wasted in selfish pursuit, including the buying and selling of slaves as well as in his wanting to be worshipped: "...to be emperor of the world...me as God...to dance around my golden calf...I shall build the chief city, Peeropolis...enthroned on self."

In act five Peer is an old man, returning to Norway. He comes across many people who have heard the legend of Peer Gynt, who shamed his mother and ruined the life of many young women. What he learns is an astonishing truth, which leads me to discuss the major themes of the play (I will reveal what Peer has learned a little later on).

In *Peer Gynt* Ibsen explores two major philosophical questions: "What is man?" and "How should we live?" A line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is woven throughout the play in answer to the first question: "To thine own self be true." Peer insists that he is true to himself in all that he does: "His duty is to himself...I am myself...I'll prove to you that I was myself all through my life!" Peer believes that in pursuing what pleases him in his youth, and what exalts him in middle age, he is being true to himself. But what he learns at the end of the play is something that he heard at the beginning from the troll king: If man's creed is "To thine own self be true," the troll creed is "To thine own self be *selfish* (or self-sufficient, depending on the translation). The troll king, called the Dovre-Master, tells him, "You've lived as a troll without admitting it." And he sees it. He is not a man; he has become a troll. Peer realizes with horror that he has sacrificed love for "the sake of remaining my own true self...a mountain troll! An egotist!"

It is here, too late really, that Peer even begins to ask the question, "What, exactly, is being one's self?" This is a question that he might have raised earlier, if he hadn't been so self-absorbed. He does have remorse for a life wasted in selfishness. In a scene filled with symbolism, the elderly Peer walks down a path and encounters balls of yarn, (which symbolize thoughts), dried, dead, leaves, (which symbolize the "good fruit" that he could have produced), an empty sighing in the air, which represent songs that he could have sung, dewdrops (tears) and broken straws (good deeds undone).

Balls of yarn:

We are thoughts:
You should have thought us
Taught us
How to use our own legs
We should have soared aloft
Like ringing voices
Instead we have become
Gray balls of yarn

Withered Leaves:

Look how your lethargy
Stripped us to the skeletons
Worms have devoured us
Down to the veins
We have never held fruit
In our cupped green hands

A Sighing in the air:

We are songs
You should have sung us
Thousands of times
You have stifled us
We have been waiting
Under your heart
But we were never sent for

Dewdrops:

We are the tears
You never let fall.
We could have melted
The skewering ice
But the point has gone
Far into your breast
And the flesh has closed up
We can do nothing now.

Broken Straws:

We are the deeds
You left undone.
Doubt, like a strangler
Choked and destroyed us
On judgement Day
We shall come crowding
And tell all we know
You'll pay for it then.

There is much tragedy expressed in these poems of a life wasted in selfishness. Peer is face to face with the thoughts he could have thought, the songs he could have sung, the tears he should have shed, and good deeds he should have done. All these things *could* have brought joy and meaning to his life. And so, what Peer has learned at the end of his life is that because he has lived selfishly, he is no longer a man: he is a troll.

I want to turn a corner here and do biblical evaluation. In Ibsen's play the creed of man is, "To thine own self be true," and in Judeo-Christian theology, man is made in God's image; in other words, to be to oneself means to seek to acquire God's character, to be an image-bearer, as some have said. To bear the image of God means to be, among other things, loving, just, kind and self-sacrificial, the opposite of the troll, who lives to be selfish and self-sufficient.

To answer the other philosophic question "How should we live?" Ibsen shows us in the character of Peer how should we *not* live. What is the proper answer to the question? We find it in Micah 6:8:

He has told you, O man, what is good;

and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The important words in this verse that contrast with Peer are “good,” “justice,” “kindness,” and “humbly.” Peer has lived as a troll and has scorned and rejected these character qualities; he has especially had a complete disregard for the feelings of others. He has come close to being sorry for his “mistakes” in the course of the play, but even in his old age, when clinging to a life raft that can only hold one, Peer pushes a young husband and father out of raft, leaving him to drown, even while the dying man pleads with him, “You are old! You have already lived your life! I have a young wife and small children!”

Interestingly, as Peer travels along the path, he encounters a character called Buttonmoulder, who tells him, “To be oneself is to kill oneself.” What do we make of this? In his fallen state, man, though made in the image of God, bears the sinful stamp of Adam. It is this sinful, selfish self that must be “killed” as the Buttonmoulder says. Jesus put it like this, “If you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it.” Matthew 16:25 GNT. Buttonmoulder is not advocating suicide, but, seemingly, telling Peer to kill the troll within.

This brings us to a summary of the philosophical ideas explored in the story of Peer Gynt: a life lived in selfishness. Follow this progression:

To thine own self be true.
You are made in the image of God.
Do justice; love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.
To your own (troll) self, be selfish.
If you kill your troll self, you will find your true self.
To thine own self be true.

And there is the hope. Can Peer be redeemed, even so late in life? I will not spoil the ending for anyone. Go to the library and read Peer Gynt: it is worth it.

Afterword:

What is the cultural significance of Peer Gynt for 2017? We find ourselves in a world of trolls. What is the name for cowardly people who leave hateful comments on the internet? Trolls. Road rage is more and more common, making streets and highways dangerous. Our family word for road-ragers? Road trolls. Peer Gynt is a story for 2017. Theatre is, as Shakespeare expressed, a mirror to be held up to society. I would love to see Ibsen’s play of man vs. troll put on the stage and in the cinema and be the substance of many discussions.

Further reading: *Peer Gynt*, by Henrik Ibsen, published by World Classics, with Introduction by James McFarlane.