



**الواقع المتشظي وطغيان الإدراك:
قراءة تفكيكية لمسرحية أوغست ستريندبرغ
(الأب)**

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الملخص:-

تدرس هذه الورقة مسرحية الأب (١٨٨٧) لأغسطس ستريندبيرج من خلال عدسة نظرية جاك دريدا التفكيكية، مع التركيز على التفاعل بين الإدراك واللغة والقوة للكشف عن كيفية تقويض المسرحية للمفاهيم التقليدية للأسرة والجنس والسلطة.

بالاعتماد على مفاهيم مثل الاختلاف والأثر والتناقض الثنائي، يُظهر التحليل كيف ينتقد ستريندبرغ البنى الأبوية ويكشف عن عدم استقرار المعنى في العلاقات الشخصية. يقع الكابتن أدولف في فخ الشك والتلاعب الدلالي، حيث تتوقف اللغة عن تأكيد الهوية، بل تُفككها.

تشير المسرحية إلى أن البحث عن الحقيقة ينطوي على خلل جوهري، فكل محاولة للتوصل إلى حل تُؤدّ المزيد من الشك والتناقض. وبهذا، تستبق مسرحية "الأب" اهتمامات الحداثة الرئيسية المتعلقة بالهوية ونظرية المعرفة والسيطرة. ومن خلال وضع ستريندبرغ في إطار تفكيكي، تُسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على تأثيره على الدراما الحديثة، وعلى الأهمية الراسخة للتفكيك في النقد الأدبي. وفي نهاية المطاف، تكشف المسرحية كيف يتورط الأفراد في الأنظمة الرمزية ذاتها التي يعتمدون عليها لفهم حياتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أوغست ستريندبرغ، الأب، التفكيك، جاك دريدا.



***Fractured Realities and the Tyranny of Perception
: A Deconstructive Reading of Augst Strindberg"s
(The Father)***

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Abstract:-

This paper examines August Strindberg's *The Father* (1887) through the lens of Jacques Derrida's deconstructive theory, focusing on the interplay of perception, language, and power to reveal how the play subverts traditional notions of family, gender, and authority. Drawing on concepts such as *différance*, trace, and binary opposition, the analysis demonstrates how Strindberg critiques patriarchal structures and exposes the instability of meaning within personal relationships. Captain Adolf becomes trapped in a web of suspicion and semantic manipulation, where language ceases to affirm identity and instead dismantles it. The play suggests that the search for truth is inherently flawed—each attempt at resolution generates further doubt and contradiction. In doing so, *The Father* anticipates key modernist concerns with identity, epistemology, and control. By situating Strindberg within a deconstructive framework, this study highlights both his influence on modern drama and the enduring relevance of deconstruction in literary criticism. Ultimately, the play reveals how individuals become entangled in the very symbolic systems they rely upon to make sense of their lives.

Keywords: August Strindberg, *The Father*, Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida,



Introduction

The Father (1887) by August Strindberg was important for the growth of modern drama since it questioned the basis of authority in families, explored the complicated balance of gender power and examined how people's ideas can differ from reality. The main storyline is about Captain Adolf, a military man and family head, whose role as father and husband is gradually taken away by his wife, Laura, through intentional doubt, lies and the use of social norms. This is not just a story of a family's decline, but a powerful portrayal of how our identities which we may assume are stable, can fall apart due to unspoken pressures, power struggles and the way language can change.

The paper maintains that *The Father* goes beyond the story of a family in crisis to look deeply at the instability of meaning, identity and truth. With the help of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory, the analysis points out that Strindberg illustrates the difficulty in matching our perceptions with reality. The main concepts from Derrida—*différance*, trace and binary opposition—are important here, as they show the binaries within the play—male/female, authority/submission, reason/madness—are not fixed but break down when examined.

This analysis of the text makes it obvious that the play sets up conflicts between patriarchy, resistance from mothers, legal issues and the expectations of society which eventually lead to the deconstruction of each discourse. Laura uses language and perception to gain her power, proving how words can be used both as a weapon and a place where knowledge can fail. At the start, Captain Adolf is in charge, but as the scientific, legal and logical systems begin to fail, he is left doubting his own authority.

The paper demonstrates that *The Father* is a crucial text in the modernist debate on truth, authority and identity, since it anticipates the post-structuralist view that language and identity are not stable. It reveals that what people think is happening is not always the same as what really happens, so the audience is prompted to accept that meaning is always out of reach, broken and always changing with how people and power interact. Because of this, Strindberg's books reveal the worries of his period and also provide a lasting analysis of human life that is still meaningful today.

Theoretical Framework

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction criticizes the metaphysical beliefs that Western philosophy is based on, for example, favoring presence over absence, speech over writing and male authority over female subversion. Derrida's point is that *différance* explains that meaning is always delayed, never solid or static, since it comes from a network of differences in language. In *The Father*, characters try to confuse and manipulate each other through their words and this is most obvious when Laura makes Adolf doubt his role as a father. It makes clear that language does not directly show reality but actually shapes and changes it, making it different from the real situation.

Derrida's idea of binary oppositions is just as important. The main themes in *The Father* are contrasted pairs like father/mother, reason/emotion, sanity/madness and male/female. In the play, the lines between sanity and madness are blurred since the sane Adolf goes insane and it is revealed that the supposedly weak Laura is behind the plot. The text makes clear that these pairs are not fixed opposites, but rather influence each other and gradually break down as the play goes on.



Analysis

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction dismantles traditional Western binaries—such as presence/absence, speech/writing, and male/female—by revealing that meaning is always deferred and never self-evident. This is encapsulated in his term *différance*, the idea that meaning arises through a chain of differences and is constantly delayed (Derrida, 1976, p. 412). In *The Father*, Strindberg dramatizes this linguistic instability through the unraveling of Captain Adolf's identity. As previously discussed, Adolf initially grounds his self-worth in the assumption that he is Bertha's father, the source of his authority, morality, and sacrifice. However, Laura's weaponized ambiguity—"You don't know if you're Bertha's father" (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 125)—introduces *aporia*, a Derridean deadlock where no definitive meaning or resolution can be found (Derrida, 1976, p. 415). This moment does not merely plant doubt; it collapses the symbolic foundation of Adolf's reality. His paternal identity, as Rine (2010) points out, is not a fact but a social perception dressed as truth. The binary oppositions that have structured his world—father/mother, truth/lie, power/submission—are exposed as unstable. Earlier, Adolf confidently declares, "I won't let anyone usurp my rights" (p. 123), but by the end, he pleads, "I lay down the tokens of my power and beg for mercy" (p. 142). This transformation illustrates how *différance* and *aporia* function together: meaning is not lost because a fact has changed but because certainty was never truly possible.

Laura performs what Derrida describes as the function of the "undecidable figure"—a presence that disrupts the phallogocentric logic without offering closure (Derrida, 1979). Her power does not lie in confirming or denying the truth but in suspending it, as we've seen in her refusal to clarify Bertha's paternity. This echoes Sarah Dillon's (2017) observation that deconstruction first engages with existing structures and then exposes their dependence on unstable perception. Laura adheres to her role as mother only to dismantle *the father's* symbolic authority from within.

Yet, as Spivak (1997) warns, this disruption does not equate to true female agency. Laura's power, while disruptive, remains defined by Adolf's disintegration. As previously analyzed, her role is reactive—not liberatory. She exists within the patriarchal binary she undermines, her authority dependent on the very structures she destabilizes. Sylvia Walby's (1990)

identification of the family as one of six patriarchal institutions further clarifies this: Laura may win within the domestic sphere, but male-dominated societal power remains untouched.

Thus, *The Father* is not a triumph of one character over another but a revelation of the fragility of meaning itself. As shown in earlier discussions, Adolf's descent into madness, triggered by language and confirmed by social authority (the Doctor and the Priest), underscores Derrida's claim that language shapes rather than reflects reality. In the final scene, Adolf dies without resolution, and Laura's apparent victory remains suspended—an ultimate manifestation of *différance*. The play ends not with clarity but with a void, a collapse of the very structures the characters depended on to define identity, power, and truth.

Historical and Social Background

In the late 19th century, rigid and clearly defined social roles shaped and upheld the patriarchal structure of masculinity and fatherhood. Within this framework, men were perceived as the stronger sex, endowed with authority over their children and tasked with providing for and protecting the family. In contrast, women were expected to submit to the authority of their husbands and to fulfill domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing and emotional caregiving. These roles were not merely descriptive but prescriptive, establishing a hierarchical structure within the institution of marriage that reinforced male dominance and sustained patriarchal order (Szalczar, 2011).

Stephanie A. Shields (2007) argues that traditional conceptions of masculinity viewed male emotionality as rooted in evolutionary competitiveness, suggesting that "male emotional attributes were described as evolving because men compete with other men for resources" (Shields, 2007, p. 96). This competitive edge was historically valorized, as it was believed to be essential for leadership and survival. Shields further reflects on the idealized structure of gender complementarity within the family, stating:

There is nowhere, perhaps, a more beautiful instance of complementary adjustment between the Male and Female character... the predominance of the Intellect and Will, which is required to make a man successful in the 'battle of life,' and of the lively Sensibility... which give to woman the power of making the happiness of the home (Shields, 2007, p. 93).

In this social context, men were expected to suppress emotional expression, as any visible vulnerability was construed as a deviation from the ideal of manhood (Strindberg, 1958). Yet in *The Father*, Strindberg subverts this convention through the character of Adolf. Despite his efforts to assert masculine authority, Adolf undergoes an emotional breakdown—crying, collapsing, and



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ultimately relinquishing control. His decline illustrates the gap between societal expectations and personal experience, exposing the fragility of the social hierarchy that defines masculinity. As Newton (2008) notes, Adolf's emotional trajectory is not self-determined but orchestrated by his wife, Laura, who manipulates language and perception to destabilize his authority. Strindberg challenges dominant gender norms by dramatizing their collapse. Social expectations are sustained by collective perceptions, particularly those of the audience, which Strindberg deliberately unsettles. In *The Father*, authority does not stem from reason or natural order but from constructed belief systems vulnerable to disruption. The play thus illustrates the discord between perception and lived reality, revealing how quickly the illusion of patriarchal control disintegrates when confronted with emotional truth and discursive manipulation.

In the article "The Defective Image of Man in Modern Drama: A Critical Study of August Strindberg's *The Father*", Kareem (2024) argues that the late nineteenth-century ideal of masculinity was profoundly influenced by shifting philosophical paradigms. Drawing on existentialist thought and emerging scientific theories, Strindberg crafted his characters to embody a sense of epistemological uncertainty, reflecting broader cultural anxieties about identity and knowledge during that period. He was deeply interested in Einstein's theory of relativity, Dostoyevsky's psychological depth, and Henri Bergson's concept of subjective time. Although Adolf is not a scientist, he is a scholar immersed in intellectual pursuits and philosophical inquiry. Like Strindberg himself, he attempts to reconcile reason with instability, seeking truth in a world increasingly marked by doubt and ambiguity (Kareem, 2024).

These philosophical undercurrents are not overtly articulated in the play but are embedded in Adolf's fractured perception of reality. His emotional collapse is emblematic of the modern crisis of meaning, wherein language, reason, and emotion form an unstable nexus. Despite his reading, observation, and intellectual engagement, Adolf fails to attain certainty. Strindberg draws upon existential and relativist frameworks to create a protagonist who embodies the modern subject: intellectually aware yet epistemologically disoriented. Adolf is caught between the illusion of rational control and the anxiety that accompanies its disintegration.

The Father closely follows the principles of the Naturalist movement. As indicated by its subtitle, *The Father: A Naturalistic Tragedy*, the play aligns with the genre's core aims. Emerging in late 19th-century France under the influence of Émile Zola, Naturalism sought to represent human behavior with scientific objectivity—treating individuals as products of heredity, environment, and social forces (Abrams, 1988). This literary movement viewed characters as subjects in a kind of social experiment, dramatizing how forces beyond personal control shape human destiny. Within this framework, tragedy arises not from individual flaws, as in classical drama, but from deterministic external forces. Adolf's collapse in *The*

Father exemplifies this idea: he is not a victim of a moral failing but of the sociocultural systems that define and constrain him.

A central tenet of Naturalism is its emphasis on heredity and environment: individuals are born into social systems they cannot escape and shaped by inherited psychological tendencies. In Strindberg's play, characters are locked into roles they neither chose nor fully understand. The family unit becomes a microcosm of deterministic struggle, where efforts to assert autonomy are undermined by institutional and emotional forces. Unlike classical tragedy, where protagonists fall from grace due to a tragic flaw or moral error, the characters in Naturalist drama are often trapped from the outset. As Abrams (1988) notes, Naturalist narratives portray a world in which trust and control are illusions, and outcomes are predetermined by the circumstances of birth and the weight of social expectation. Strindberg's contributions to the Naturalist movement are evident in early works such as *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, which helped define the contours of modern psychological drama. While *The Father* adheres closely to Naturalist conventions—portraying characters as products of their heredity and social environment—Strindberg would later gravitate toward Expressionism, as seen in *The Road to Damascus* and *A Dream Play*. Notably, the seeds of this aesthetic and philosophical shift are already present in *The Father*, particularly through Adolf's internal fragmentation, pervasive doubt, and the destabilization of language that unravels his perception of reality.

Thus, *The Father* becomes a transitional work: it begins as a naturalistic drama and gradually incorporates expressionist dimensions, ultimately bridging two major theatrical movements. Strindberg's innovation lies not merely in blending these movements, but in using their contradictions to critique one another. Naturalism in the play is associated with societal structures—patriarchy, rational authority, and the deterministic hierarchy of gender roles. Captain Adolf is cast as the embodiment of Naturalist logic: a man who believes in reason, discipline, and intellectual mastery. However, the erosion of his authority and his psychological disintegration expose the fragility of these supposed "objective" truths.

This internal collapse resonates with Jacques Derrida's concept of logocentrism, which critiques the Western philosophical tendency to privilege fixed meaning, rationality, and centralized authority. In *The Father*, logocentrism manifests through the ideal of the patriarch as the unassailable locus of reason and power. Strindberg initially situates Adolf within this ideological framework but then deconstructs it from within. As Adolf loses control over language, certainty, and perception, Strindberg reveals the instability of the very structures that Naturalism aims to portray as objective. Language in the play becomes a tool of manipulation rather than clarity, and reason collapses into paranoia—subverting both Naturalist determinism and logocentric metaphysics. In this way, *The Father* operates not only as a naturalistic tragedy but also as a philosophical



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interrogation of representation itself. It undermines the reliability of objectivity, revealing how social “truths” are maintained through unstable and contested systems of meaning. Strindberg uses Adolf’s downfall to expose the limits of Naturalism and to foreshadow the expressive, symbolic interiority that would define his later works. By navigating between these aesthetic and philosophical tensions, *The Father* becomes a unique dramatic achievement: a text that simultaneously enacts, critiques, and transcends the movements it draws from.

Madness in the play thus functions not simply as a plot device but as a philosophical critique. It becomes the embodied signifier of epistemological uncertainty—where truth, identity, and power dissolve into ambiguity. Strindberg’s integration of Expressionist fragmentation within a Naturalist structure enables a structural deconstruction of perception and meaning. The rational world Adolf inhabits gives way to psychological chaos, revealing the fragility of the systems—both social and linguistic—that sustain patriarchal authority. His inability to maintain control mirrors the broader failure of Naturalism to account for the multiplicity of lived experience and the instability of meaning. Ultimately, Adolf’s madness symbolizes the collapse of naturalistic order into expressionist chaos. In doing so, it dramatizes the erosion of patriarchal constructs and the breakdown of fixed social roles. Strindberg, through this interplay of movements, offers a theatrical exploration of *différance* in action: what seems coherent disintegrates under the pressure of perception, and what is assumed to be absolute reveals itself to be contingent, fluid, and de-constructible.

Expressionism in *The Father* exposes the fragility of the social system by dramatizing characters’ internal perceptions—particularly Laura’s psychological manipulation and Adolf’s gradual decline. Adolf’s breakdown not only challenges the naturalistic representation of male authority but also gestures toward a more constructed, unstable form of power. This instability resonates with the principles of Social Darwinism, which interpret social and gender roles as survival-based hierarchies. In this context, Strindberg’s depiction of Adolf’s struggle to retain control over his household reflects a competitive model of masculinity—one rooted in strength and dominance. Such portrayals align with the Social Darwinist belief that societal roles are not fixed by morality or tradition, but rather by power dynamics and the will to dominate. As Kareem (2024) notes, *The Father* illustrates an ongoing battle for dominance between husband and wife, grounded in their conflicting worldviews. This dynamic highlights how perceived natural authority is, in fact, continuously contested and destabilized.

The collapse of patriarchal authority in *The Father* can be read in light of major social transformations, including the emergence of the women’s suffrage movement in the late 19th century. Strindberg’s depiction of the disintegrating father figure may reflect a cultural reaction to these evolving gender dynamics, expressing resistance to changing norms and anxiety over the destabilization of traditional male power (Strindberg, 1887; Alyousif & Sallehuddin, 2025).

Strindberg's female characters, particularly Laura, embody both the struggle against patriarchal oppression and the complexities of power within the domestic sphere. Laura's challenge to Adolf's authority highlights not only the fragility of male dominance but also the gendered nature of victimization within patriarchal structures. Through themes of misogyny, moral decay, and marital disintegration, Strindberg reveals the psychological and social pressures women face in a system designed to marginalize them (Strindberg, 1887; Alyousif & Sallehuddin, 2025, p. 11).

While these themes are rooted in broader socio-political movements, *The Father* can also be interpreted as a deeply personal narrative. Strindberg's own marital conflicts—particularly with his first wife, Siri von Essen—mirror the emotional tensions in the play. Ben-Aska (2016), in her article "Historical/Biographical Approach to August Strindberg's *The Father*," contends that the play is not merely fictional but a dramatized account of Strindberg's lived experiences, especially the breakdown of his marriage and the disputes over paternity.

Strindberg's relationships with women often followed a similar pattern. He was drawn to strong, independent, artistic figures—such as Siri von Essen, Frida Uhl, Harriet Bosse, and Fanny Falkner—who challenged traditional gender expectations (Martinus, 2012). Of these, his marriage to Siri had the most direct influence on *The Father*. Written during the deterioration of their relationship, the play reflects the couple's conflicts, particularly the issue of paternity uncertainty, which is central to the plot. In this way, Strindberg uses the stage as a site of both personal expression and social critique. Rumors of Siri von Essen's affair during her pregnancy with Strindberg's first child deeply unsettled the playwright, especially after her eventual admission of infidelity. This emotional trauma finds a striking parallel in *The Father*, where Laura hints at a past affair while pregnant with Bertha, yet withholds confirmation, leaving Adolf in a state of paralyzing doubt. The ambiguity functions as a strategic weapon—destabilizing Adolf's mental state and undermining his paternal authority. As Ben-Askar (2016) observes, Laura's manipulation is not incidental but deliberate, calculated to portray the Captain as mentally unfit and thereby strip him of his legal control over Bertha.

The blurring between Strindberg's life and his fiction is especially evident here. Just as Strindberg descended into paranoia and emotional collapse, Adolf's breakdown is enacted on stage. Sprigge (1949), in *The Strange Life of August Strindberg*, captures this fusion between the personal and the fictional: Laura became Siri, and Siri was lost in the woman who poisoned her husband's mind by suggesting that the child he loved was not his own and then tricked him into evidence of insanity, until at last, he was utterly helpless, her captive in a home where he could no longer assert his will. This was how Strindberg now saw himself and wrote out the agony of his uncertainty. (Sprigge, 1949, p. 174)



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Beyond dramatizing his anguish over uncertain paternity, Strindberg used *The Father* to reflect his lived experience of being perceived as unstable. During their marriage, Siri von Essen reportedly asked a family physician to evaluate Strindberg's sanity—an act directly mirrored in the play, where Laura convinces a doctor to certify Adolf as insane. Lamm (1971) reinforces this autobiographical link by referencing Karin Strindberg's account: "Siri, anxious over Strindberg's mental condition, told a Swiss doctor who knew him that she thought her husband was deranged."

Laura's manipulation of perception in the play serves not only as a dramatic device but also as a theoretical one. Her ability to withhold, defer, and distort meaning aligns with Derrida's concept of *différance*, whereby meaning is perpetually postponed and never fully present. Thus, the uncertainty surrounding Bertha's paternity transcends personal trauma and becomes a linguistic and epistemological crisis—destabilizing both authority and reality within the logic of the play. Throughout *The Father*, the Captain's mental deterioration is intricately tied to his growing anxiety over Bertha's paternity. This descent into madness reflects not only a fictional character arc but also Strindberg's own psychological instability during the period surrounding the play's production. As Ben-Askar (2016) notes, while Strindberg did question his sanity after completing *The Father*, he ultimately remained grounded by other compelling intellectual and artistic pursuits, despite the paranoia and existential dread that haunted him.

The depth of Strindberg's emotional turmoil is vividly illustrated in a letter he wrote to Swedish playwright Alex Lundegard, who translated *The Father* into Danish. As recorded by Sprinchorn (1982), Strindberg confessed:

I am walking in my sleep as if fiction and reality are mixed. I don't know if *The Father* is fiction or if my life has been fiction, but I have a feeling that in a moment not far off, I shall find out which is which, and then I'll crumble into dust either through insanity and a sick conscience or through suicide (pp. 16–17).

This confession blurs the boundary between art and life, underscoring the emotional intensity Strindberg poured into his work. The play also echoes specific elements from Strindberg's volatile relationship with Siri von Essen. The Captain's expressions of rage and desperation—particularly in his interactions with Laura—mirror Strindberg's own emotional outbursts during his failing marriage. One of the most violent scenes in the play reinforces this parallel: "The CAPTAIN goes over to the table, picks up the burning lamp, and throws it at LAURA, who has retreated backward through the door" (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 146).

According to literary critic Sue Prideaux, such an incident was not merely theatrical invention but may have been inspired by actual episodes of aggression between Strindberg and Siri. Nevertheless, while the biographical undercurrents

in *The Father* are undeniable, it is reductive to interpret the play solely as autobiographical confession. Strindberg transformed personal suffering into a layered dramatic narrative in which the lines between reality and illusion are deliberately obscured. In this respect, *The Father* enacts a Derridean model of *différance*, where meaning is perpetually deferred, and truth is elusive. Through this fragmentation of truth, Strindberg invites audiences to confront the instability of identity, authority, and perception itself.

Deconstructing *The Father*

The Father dramatizes a rare form of tragedy—one in which death results not from external violence, but from an internal collapse of meaning within a marriage that society perceives as secure and stable. Social expectations impose rigid roles upon men and women in the domestic sphere: the man is expected to lead and provide, while the woman is to nurture and obey. However, Strindberg exposes the disjunction between this public ideal and the private turmoil that festers behind closed doors. A deconstructive reading helps illuminate this disjunction by applying key Derridean concepts: logocentrism, binary oppositions, *différance*, and aporia.

At the heart of the play lies logocentrism, the belief that meaning is grounded in a central, authoritative presence. In *The Father*, this presence is embodied in the figure of the father—specifically, Captain Adolph—whose authority is upheld not through emotional legitimacy but by external legal and social frameworks. His dominance is reinforced by what Derrida describes as a phallogocentric structure, wherein masculine authority is equated with rationality, law, and power (Rine, 2010). This dynamic is evident in an early exchange:

Captain: As the law stands, children should be raised in their father's faith

Laura: And the mother has no say in the matter?

Captain: None at all. She's sold her birthright in a legal exchange and relinquished all her rights; in return, her husband supports her and her children. (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 110)

This exchange exemplifies how paternal authority is constructed through legal discourse rather than biological or emotional truth. The phrase "as the law stands" underscores the assumed immutability of this authority, reflecting a logocentric worldview in which the father is positioned as the unquestioned center of meaning, while the mother's voice is systematically erased. However, deconstruction begins where this perception starts to fracture. Derrida's concept of *différance*—a neologism combining the ideas of "deferral" and "difference"—destabilizes fixed centers of meaning. *Différance* reveals that meaning is never fully present or self-contained; it is always deferred through a chain of signs and shaped by contrasts. As Derrida writes, "*Différance* makes it possible to 'constitute' meanings in a chain, but it also prevents us from grasping any meaning completely" (Derrida, 1976, p. 421). This concept becomes dramatized in Adolph's unraveling identity as a father. His authority, initially upheld by law and



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social norms, is shown to be dependent on perception rather than truth. His role as father is ultimately destabilized by Laura's manipulation of epistemological uncertainty—particularly around the issue of Bertha's paternity. The play's tragedy lies not in violence but in this aporia—a moment of irresolvable contradiction—wherein Adolph can neither confirm nor deny the basis of his identity. This uncertainty mirrors Derrida's assertion that meaning is always postponed, never fully accessible.

While Strindberg sets up the father as a natural and central figure of authority, his gradual collapse exposes the fragility of such constructs. Through Laura's calculated disruption, the logocentric illusion is deconstructed, revealing a void beneath the patriarchal order. In *The Father*, Strindberg presents fatherhood not as a stable identity but as a deferred signifier, circulating among conflicting voices—society, the self, and the maternal figure. Adolf's paternal authority is never verified; it is constantly challenged, turning what is socially presumed to be a natural and immutable truth into a matter of belief and interpretation. This dramatizes Derrida's concept of *Différance*, where meaning is not fully present but continuously postponed along a chain of signifiers.

Fatherhood, initially positioned as the central and natural sign of authority, quickly becomes a floating signifier—unmoored from certainty and passed between subjective interpretations. The Doctor reflects society's reliance on belief when he remarks, "Remember, Captain, a man must take his children on trust—isn't that what Goethe says?" (Strindberg, 1887/2008, p. 135). Adolf, consumed by uncertainty, articulates the instability of signification himself: "A man never knows anything, he only believes... If you believe, you're saved. But I know that what a man believes can damn him, too" (p. 154). Laura, in contrast, asserts biological ambiguity with calm authority: "Because a mother is closer to her child... no one can know who a child's father is" (p. 125). Each of these lines reflects a different link in the chain of signification, revealing that fatherhood is not a biological or legal truth, but a belief system suspended between law, doubt, and perception. This suspended state marks the beginning of Adolf's collapse. Derrida's assertion that "every sign is itself a reiteration of a difference that has already occurred" (Derrida, 1976, p. 412) underscores this deferral. In this light, fatherhood is not a fixed identity grounded in biology, but a reiteration of inherited signs—constructed and validated through language and institutions rather than empirical certainty.

Atkins (1985, p. 96) argues that Deconstruction does not negate Logocentrism, but rather exposes its reliance on the excluded. In *The Father*, Adolf's central position as paternal authority only exists because Laura is denied that same authority. She occupies what Derrida might call the "structural outside"—the marginal term that holds the system in place precisely by being excluded from it. Through her cunning use of language and insinuation, Laura dramatizes *Différance*, showing that even the seemingly stable figure of the father

is merely a perception, vulnerable to deconstruction. This fragility is revealed in a pivotal early conversation:

Laura: How extraordinary! Do not know who a child's father is?

Captain: So, they say.

Laura: Extraordinary! Then how can the father have all these rights over her child?

Captain: He has them only where he assumes responsibility or has responsibility forced upon him. And in marriage, of course, paternity is not in doubt.

Laura: Not in doubt?

Captain: I should hope not!

Laura: Suppose his wife has been unfaithful?

Captain: That isn't the case here! Do you have any more questions?

Laura: No. (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 111)

Laura does not explicitly challenge Adolf's authority; rather, she exposes its contradictions through seemingly innocent questions. This rhetorical technique—highlighting what is excluded or repressed—reveals the deep instability of patriarchal logic. The father's authority, built on the presumption of paternity, cannot withstand the introduction of doubt. As Derrida explains, *Différance* plays between presence and absence, and in this context, the father's role is defined not by what is known, but by what cannot be guaranteed: biological certainty. Laura unintentionally performs Deconstruction by exposing the rupture between the legal assumptions of patriarchal authority and the ambiguous realities of identity and lineage. In 19th-century Europe, paternity could not be biologically proven. Thus, a man's role as a father was not grounded in empirical fact but in social agreement—a belief system upheld by law, religion, and cultural norms. Strindberg, through Laura, dramatizes how this belief system can be deconstructed through doubt and language.

When Laura tells Adolf, "You don't know if you're Bertha's father" (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 125), she does not make a direct accusation—rather, she opens a space of absence, of non-presence. In Derridean terms, she withdraws presence from the signifier "father," converting it from a fixed, stable identity into a floating signifier. This is a direct illustration of Derrida's concept of *Différance*—the idea that meaning is never fully present but always deferred through time and differentiated from other signs.

As Rine (2007) points out, "The seemingly stable masculine identities constructed around the phallus are illusory." Adolf's sense of self—as man, husband, and father—is structured around a belief in logocentric authority, meaning that the "Father" is the central term in a binary system that privileges male over female, reason over emotion, presence over absence. Laura's use of



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doubt undoes this hierarchy. She does not need to prove he is not Bertha's father; she simply withholds confirmation, and that absence destabilizes the entire symbolic order Adolf has relied on. Adolf's existential collapse is framed in the following desperate exchange:

Captain [getting up]: Laura, save me and my sanity. You don't understand what I'm saying. If the child's not mine, I don't have any rights over it or want any. Isn't that what you're after? Well, isn't it? Or maybe you want something else? Power over the child, perhaps, but with me kept on as the breadwinner?

Laura: Power, yes. What has this whole life-and-death struggle been about if not power?

Captain: Since I don't believe in a future life, the child was my hereafter. She was the idea of immortality—perhaps the only one with any factual basis. Take that away, and you cut off my life. (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 140)

This moment is the dramatic realization of *Différance*. Adolf's identity has no biological or divine grounding—only language and social custom. When Laura challenges those signs, the meaning collapses. *The father* figure, once seen as a fixed center in the family structure, is now exposed as a linguistic illusion, a role maintained only by collective belief. Moreover, Laura's manipulation aligns with Atkins's (1985) view that Deconstruction does not destroy Logocentrism; rather, it reveals that central meaning depends on its margins, on what it excludes. In *The Father*, Laura is the marginal figure—the wife, the mother, the "other." Yet, she uses her marginality to undo the patriarchal system. She becomes the "structural outside" that holds the system in place while simultaneously revealing its contradictions.

Strindberg thus presents fatherhood as a deferred signifier, not a truth grounded in biology, but a position held through language, belief, and performance. Through Derrida's lens, we see that patriarchal authority in *The Father* is not merely under attack; it is shown to be inherently unstable—a construct that collapses under the pressure of its own assumptions. Bertha is the only element in Adolf's life that he believes gives his existence meaning—"the only one that has any basis in reality." And now that reality is placed in doubt. Derrida critiques Phallogocentrism precisely for this reason: it rests on the illusion of a masculine identity rooted in certainty, presence, and origin. Adolf's belief in his paternity forms the center of his logocentric worldview. Yet, as Deconstruction shows, this certainty is always an illusion, constructed and maintained by language and cultural norms—not biological truth. His role as father and provider, his control over the household, and even his conception of immortality—all collapse when Laura destabilizes the language that secures those roles. Rine (2010) notes that in this structure, "fatherhood is not a truth; it is a social perception dressed as fact." This is revealed in one of the most emotionally charged speeches in the play:

Adolf: I've worked and slaved for you, your child, your mother, and your servants; I've sacrificed my career and my prospects; I've been racked and scourged; I've gone without sleep; my hair has turned grey worrying about your future, all so you might lead an untroubled life and spend your old age enjoying it once again through your child. All this I've borne without complaint because I believed I was father to this child. This is the lowest form of theft, the cruelest slavery. I've served seventeen years of hard labor and was innocent. What can you give me in return?"

Laura: Now you are mad!(Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 141)

This moment lays bare Adolf's emotional and philosophical collapse. Everything he believed about himself—as a father, a husband, and a man—was built on a fragile assumption: that Bertha is his biological child. The loss of that belief is not merely personal; it undermines the symbolic order that structured his reality. His downfall illustrates what Derrida calls *Aporia*—a moment when meaning reaches a dead end, and interpretation becomes impossible. *Aporia*, in Derrida's sense, is not simply uncertainty—it is the paradoxical impasse where every possible interpretation leads to contradiction. It is the product of *Différance*, which exposes the deferral and instability of meaning. Adolf cannot determine whether his life has been meaningful or meaningless, whether his suffering was noble or foolish. He no longer has any ground to stand on—no truth to rely on, only suspended belief.

Laura, notably, never confirms nor denies the truth. She doesn't need to. Her power lies not in assertion, but in suggestion. She weaponizes ambiguity, not to clarify, but to unsettle. Her earlier line—"You don't know if you're Bertha's father" (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 134)- is not just cruel; it echoes a deeper structural instability, paralleled by the subplot involving Nöjd, another character uncertain about paternity. This is not coincidence—it is repetition as Derrida understands it: the re-inscription of doubt through language. Laura thus embodies Deconstruction in action. She exposes that fatherhood, once seen as an ontological fact, is instead a function of language, law, and perception. Through her questions—not her answers—she opens the *aporia* that swallows Adolf's reality. Laura's manipulation does not rely on direct confrontation—it relies on uncertainty. She understands that certainty grants Adolf power, so she dismantles it, not with force, but with ambiguity, word by word. Deconstruction, as Derrida articulates it, uses *Aporia* to expose the internal contradictions of a system of thought. *Aporia* is not mere confusion; it is the point at which logic breaks down—not because of a lack of information, but because meaning itself collapses under its own weight. Derrida writes: "The *aporia* is not a problem to be solved; it is the very structure of thought that causes the contradiction to arise, calling into question the possibility of resolution" (Derrida, 1976, p. 415). He further observes that "In the margins of every text, there is an *aporia* that calls for a reconsideration of the binary oppositions that have thus far structured



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interpretation” (p. 417). Adolf reaches precisely this threshold. He finds himself suspended in a space where power and knowledge are no longer accessible, and meaning cannot be stabilized. Pleading, he says:

“I ask only the pity you would show a sick man; I lay down the tokens of my power, and beg for mercy, for my life!” (Strindberg, 1887/2008, p. 142).

Here, the once-dominant patriarch is reduced to a supplicant, his former identity dissolved. Yet Laura offers no resolution. Instead, she deepens the uncertainty:

“If I say it isn't true, you still won't know for sure; but if I say it is, then you will. So you'd rather it was” (p. 140).

This moment embodies Derrida's Aporia—language's refusal to yield closure. Adolf is trapped in a paradox where neither affirmation nor denial provides certainty. The structure of his reality is now based on unresolvable contradiction, not clarity. This aporetic impasse leads us back to *Différance*: meaning is not just unclear, but perpetually deferred. The truth of fatherhood—central to Adolf's identity—remains elusive, unreachable. It has been delayed for seventeen years, and still, it evades confirmation. Adolf recognizes this erosion when he confesses: “I've given away the best parts of myself” (p. 155),

laying bare the emotional cost of inhabiting a social system that cannot guarantee the foundation of his role. In the end, he is not undone by madness or crime—but by language, ambiguity, and the slow deconstruction of belief. Derrida (1976) explains that “meaning is always deferred, never fully present; this oscillation creates aporia, as meaning is perpetually in tension with itself” (p. 412). Adolf's unraveling precisely dramatizes this interplay between *Différance* and Aporia. What he once believed to be stable—his name, paternal role, and family—gradually disintegrates under the weight of linguistic instability. His descent from confident authority to helpless surrender is not a psychological breakdown alone; it is a philosophical disintegration. At the beginning of the play, Adolf proclaims, “I won't let anyone usurp my rights” (p. 123), clinging to the logocentric ideal of paternal authority. But Laura's subtle, calculated intervention—“You don't know if you're Bertha's father!” (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 134)—fractures the illusion of certainty and sets his identity adrift. His complete collapse follows: “I lay down the tokens of my power and beg for mercy” (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 142). This is not merely a man in doubt; it is a subject dissolved by Deconstruction. The language that once secured Adolf's identity now dismantles it, revealing a truth that cannot be spoken—only deferred.

Derrida often invokes the figure of the woman as a site of undecidability, one capable of subverting phallogocentric logic (Derrida, 1979). Laura becomes this figure. She neither confirms nor denies Adolf's fatherhood; rather, she withholds closure, using the signifier “father” not to affirm power, but to expose its emptiness. In doing so, she reveals that the entire symbolic order—law, authority, lineage—rests not on biological fact, but on belief. As Sarah Dillon (2017) observes, Derrida's deconstruction proceeds in two phases: first, the engagement

with logocentric structures; second, the exposure of their reliance on perception over truth. Laura performs both. She enacts the socially constructed roles of wife and mother, only to dismantle them from within.

This echoes Judith Butler's (1990) argument that gender and authority are not natural facts but performative constructs, sustained through repetition and always vulnerable to disruption. When interrogated, these performances—like Adolf's identity as father and husband—begin to unravel. This single utterance dismantles the symbolic order upon which Adolf's authority rests. If paternity is unstable, so too is his power. Yet does Laura actually gain agency after destabilizing him? Deconstruction suggests otherwise. Adolf accuses her: "Yes, you have a truly satanic power when it comes to getting your way, but someone who doesn't care about the means always does" (p. 124). Laura herself proclaims, "It's strange, but I've never been able to look at a man without feeling I'm his superior" (p. 126). However, this perceived superiority does not translate into true autonomy. From a deconstructive standpoint, Laura's power is performative, not foundational—it exists only within the patriarchal logic she seeks to subvert.

In this way, Laura emerges as a key agent of Deconstruction in the play. She dismantles the logocentric perception of fatherhood, gender roles, and symbolic authority embedded in phallogocentric discourse. Yet her agency is paradoxical. As Spivak (1997) contends, "Derrida's attempt to dislodge masculine privilege fails... his use of the term 'woman' as a deconstructive trope reiterates rather than undermines the marginalization of the feminine." This critique is crucial. Even as Laura appears to subvert patriarchal structures, her power remains inscribed within the very system she destabilizes. She becomes an undecidable figure—central to the deconstructive process, but not liberated from its structural boundaries. According to Spivak, women in such narratives are not true subjects of power; they are figures of disruption, operating at the margins of male collapse rather than occupying independent positions of authority.

Thus, Laura's manipulation is not an act of emancipation but a reaction—a strategic inversion within the system, not a departure from it. Her dominance is relational, dependent on Adolf's disintegration. She moves beyond the patriarchal family structure, but her position remains anchored within its logic. Were that structure to fully dissolve, her agency too would unravel. This is the paradox Deconstruction confronts: it exposes the fragility of foundational systems, but often cannot escape the binary logics it critiques.

Sociologist Sylvia Walby (1990) identifies six interconnected structures that sustain patriarchy: the family, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, culture, and ideology. Laura's tactics may undermine the familial sphere, but the wider patriarchal matrix remains untouched. Her control over Bertha's future feels decisive, yet outside the domestic context, the broader cultural logic continues to uphold male authority. This is the central illusion *The Father* deconstructs: the belief that perception can fully align with reality. What begins as



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a dispute over a child's upbringing becomes a profound philosophical investigation into the nature of power itself.

Through Derridean analysis, Strindberg reveals that a rupture in a logocentric system—such as the questioning of paternity—can induce total symbolic collapse. Meaning, identity, and authority are not fixed truths but are deferred, constructed, and undone by systems of language, law, and belief. In this play, neither reason nor faith offers resolution. The gap between perception and reality is permanent, and *The Father* plunges its characters into that abyss. Laura's triumph is not based on facts but on her control of perception. She manufactures Adolf's madness not through evidence but through suggestion—a manipulation of language that requires societal validation. When she questions, "But is it reasonable for a man to see through a microscope what's happening on another planet?" (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 130). The statement is absurd. Yet the Doctor, representing scientific authority and social reason, accepts it without hesitation. Is Adolf truly mad, or is he reacting to the violence of imposed narrative? Laura's accusation alone is insufficient—she must enlist a male figure, the Doctor, to institutionalize her version of reality. Thus:

Doctor: Does he say he can do that?

Laura: That's what he says.

Doctor: Through a microscope?

Laura: Yes! A microscope!

Doctor: If so, it is very worrying. (Strindberg, 1887/2000, p. 114)

This exchange reveals how language authorizes truth. Adolf is not defeated by reason but by a performance of reason, one that reasserts patriarchal control under the guise of objectivity. Ironically, even Laura's victory must be authenticated by the very structures she seeks to undermine.

As Karil Nixon explains in "Science is a Perception According to Different Characters", Nietzsche's perspectivism profoundly influenced Strindberg—the idea that truth is not objective but filtered through the individual's perceptions. This influence reverberates through *The Father*, as well as in Strindberg's personal life. Notoriously misogynistic, Strindberg nevertheless married women who embodied the very feminist ideals he publicly condemned. As noted in *The Theatre of Revolt*, he divided women into two opposing categories: the "Third Sex"—independent, intellectual, and emotionally distant women he resented—and the "Motherly Women"—nurturing, submissive figures he idealized. Yet despite this binary, he repeatedly fell in love with members of the "Third Sex," unable to reconcile his desire with the roles he wished to impose (Nixon, 2016).

Elaine Showalter (1987), in her essay "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year", explores this contradiction. She argues that male scholars can participate in feminist discourse while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal structures—a phenomenon she terms "critical cross-dressing." This

perfectly applies to Strindberg. Though he deeply engaged with female psychology and experience, his worldview remained tethered to structures that marginalized women. He did not seek equality; he sought stability—women who fulfilled his imagined roles. Like Adolf, what Strindberg longed for was not truth, but order. Love became a fiction constructed through perception, because reality—messy, autonomous, and unpredictable—resisted control. This fictionalized perception ultimately unraveled Strindberg’s grasp on reality. He imagined women who embodied conflicting roles: idealized yet unattainable, powerful yet punished. His inability to resolve this paradox is precisely what gives *The Father* its tragic force. What he desired could not exist in the world he inhabited; what existed, he could not accept. In this impasse lies the essence of naturalistic tragedy: the failure of a mind to reconcile fiction with fact, order with chaos.

Even Strindberg himself is not exempt from the forces of Deconstruction. He becomes a subject of *Différance*—a writer shaped by a language he cannot fully master. In his 1987 seminar *Women in the Beehive*, Derrida observes that language is “always already” gendered—that Western writing privileges the masculine voice and speaks from within a binary framework. Strindberg, as a male author, inevitably writes from within that system. And yet, he cannot fully control what Laura becomes. Just as Laura destabilizes Adolf, Siri von Essen, Strindberg’s wife and muse, may have disrupted the symbolic order within Strindberg’s own psyche. As with Adolf, the full extent of the rupture Siri caused cannot be measured. The distance between what Strindberg writes and what Laura embodies is *Différance*: always different from what was intended, always deferred beyond the text’s control.

That *Différance* crystallizes in the play’s final scene. Adolf dies before the Doctor and the Priest—the official agents of social and moral judgment—can pronounce their verdict. He dies before the Nurse, a maternal figure who cannot restore order, and before Laura—his wife, adversary, and perhaps the only person who fully understood him. The meaning of his death remains suspended. Is it a defeat? A liberation? A warning? No answer is offered. Laura’s victory, too, is incomplete. There is no triumphant declaration, no resolution—only silence. What remains is not a conclusion, but an absence: a symbolic void left in the wake of collapsed identity, unraveled truth, and fragmented language. It is a Derridean silence—echoing through the text, never closed, never conclusive. *The Father* ends not with certainty, but with unresolved meaning—the purest form of Deconstruction.

Conclusion

In *The Father*, Strindberg explores the fragile relationship between perception and reality, showing how language, authority, and identity are interdependent and inherently unstable. From a deconstructive



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perspective, Captain Adolf's downfall is not simply the result of external manipulation, but a consequence of the inherent contradictions within the patriarchal and symbolic structures he depends on. Laura's strategic use of language dismantles the binary oppositions—reason/emotion, authority/submission, father/mother—that underpin familial and societal order. Once these binaries collapse, both Adolf's identity and the legitimacy of social hierarchies are thrown into crisis.

By applying Derrida's theory of deconstruction, this study reframes *The Father* as not only a domestic tragedy but also a philosophical drama that interrogates the possibility of stable meaning, truth, and identity. Strindberg anticipates modernist and post-structuralist concerns, suggesting that language no longer guarantees access to reality, and that the systems shaping family and gender roles are subject to disruption and reinterpretation.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that *The Father* serves as a critical milestone in the evolution of literary modernism. It highlights how deconstruction remains a vital tool for examining the complex interplay of power, language, and identity—making Strindberg's work profoundly relevant to contemporary literary theory.

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