

August Strindberg

"I am a devilish fellow, who has mastered many arts."

"And all the things I have tossed off! Though Sweden was as hard as a stone! Novels and verses, plays, good and bad, Swedish Histories and Chinese, and four kids, the fifth on its way, and two wives."

Strindberg, 1887 [Swedish please](#)

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"child of my greatest pain"

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"I have no wish at all to be a "great" writer, let alone a "great" man. It would just embarrass me and betray a false position. I want to go in nightgown and underwear and be known as a scandal-writer, **that** wouldn't embarrass me."



August Strindberg

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Strindberg, 1884

A short biography

"this long and boring walk through the shadow land of memory"



Strindberg 20 år webdesign JCK

August Strindberg was born in Stockholm in 1849. Strindberg was the third child of the shipping merchant Carl Oscar Strindberg and his former domestic servant Ulrika Eleonora Norling. Before he became a writer he studied at Uppsala university and worked as a librarian and journalist.

He was a very productive author. He wrote novels, plays, poetry and over 7,000 letters! The collected works consists of 55 volumes. August Strindberg was also a very good painter. But he failed to make gold in spite of hard efforts.

1874 Strindberg is appointed assistant librarian at the Royal Library in Stockholm. His first major work, the play **Master Olof**, was written in 1877, but was not recognized until 1881. Strindberg's

breakthrough as a writer came with the novel **The Red Room** (1879).

In 1886 Strindberg completes the biographical novel **The Son of a Servant**, "this long and boring walk through the shadow land of memory" as Strindberg wrote.

Siri von Essen



"Siri I loved the most"

Marriages

In 1877 he marries Baroness Siri von Essen. Siri was seven months pregnant at the time of the marriage, the child died and they later had three children, Karin, Greta and the son Hans. 1888, living in Denmark, Strindberg writes the play *Miss Julie*, which is staged 1889 with his wife Siri von Essen in the title role. In "A Madman's Defense" Strindberg wrote about his first marriage, torn between adoration and contempt. After twelve years they divorce and Strindberg, not feeling appreciated in Sweden, moves to central Europe. After a couple of years of "artist life" with people like [Edvard Munch](#) and [Gauguin](#) he marries the young Austrian Frieda Uhl. After a stormy year travelling in Europe they divorce.

Tears of Joy

In 1895 the Inferno period starts. Strindberg gets interested in occultism and alchemy. He reads the Swedish philosopher Swedenborg. These years are described in, or rather are the base for the novels **Inferno** and **Legends**.

1897 he moves back to Sweden, his recovery from the Inferno crisis is quick. After intensive work a few days in the spring of 1898 the first part of the play **To Damascus** is finished.

"**Burst into tears several times today, wrote the end of Act 3**", Strindberg notes in

his diary. He was satisfied, the scenes and words came together brilliantly.

"I got her with child immediately."

In the Occult Diary, which Strindberg kept between 1896 and 1908, he summarizes his relation with his third wife Harriet Bosse.

When I married Bosse I got her with child immediately. But she grudged me that great honour, and out of spite she went off with her unborn child. She alleged that I had deserted our bedroom, but the truth was that she had *begged me to move*, as pregnancy had given her a dislike for my person. She returned and the child was born. The next thing was that she did not want to have more children, but did want to continue "married life". This resulted in distaste and disgust. First we separated, then we got a divorce. After that we came together again and I became her lover, and still am. This then is the question, in what way have I failed? My reputation was restored, but is so no longer, for her lies are enduring, in spite of all there is to confute them! At 50 I was no good as a husband, but at 58 I am good enough to be a lover! It is sublime! Sublime !!!"

From the "Occult Diary"

Strindberg kept his "Occult Diary" for more than ten years. The extract below is from 1908. He has divorced Harriet Bosse and she is planning to remarry with another man. But in Strindberg's fantasy she still visits him, mostly at nighttime .



April 20th.

This evening she came again, like roses,
loving and full of longing.

Night came; she slept on my arm, but did
not desire me until towards
morning, then ...

April 21st.

The whole morning, solely as roses. Later
she disappeared! In the evening she
returned, but went again. At night
apathetic and calm until the morning, when
she sought me ...

April 23rd.

A heavy day, spent in idleness. Slept
much. Harriet away, but towards evening

could feel her stretching for me below the chest.

!!Went to bed, grew calmer. No contact with Harriet during the night. I sought her but did not find her until 5 o'clock, ...

April 24th.

A glorius morning. Harriet was with me all forenoon, gentle, loving, like flowers in my mouth!

Is she literally two persons? And do I possess one? The better one? That would seem to be the case, for when we meet or write we hate each other. Is this possible?

Death

Finally Strindberg released himself from Bosse, quit the Occult Diary and moved to a new apartment. Now followed some very productive years with highlights such as the plays Easter and The Dance of Death.

Strindberg died in May, 1912. His modest grave with just a wooden cross bears the Latin inscription: O Crux Ave Spes Unica! (O Cross, Be Greeted, Our Only Hope)



Last walk 1912.

Inferno.

Strindberg down and almost out in Paris

Strindberg's great novel *Inferno*, a story of human suffering and paranoia. The novel *Inferno* is mainly based on his strange experiences in Paris 1896. He wrote *Inferno* in French, some parts in the form of a diary. It can be said to be a story of human suffering and paranoia, that in the end leads to clarity and reconciliation. Strindberg sees himself haunted by misfortunes and hardships, much like [Job](#) in the bible. Strindberg was eager to emphasize that the book was autobiographical. At the end of *Inferno* he writes:

"The reader who believes this book is fiction is invited to read my diary which I have kept daily since 1895, and of which the above is only an expanded and organized extraction"



August Strindberg making gold.

Alone, completely alone I have my dinner on a tray in my room, and I eat so little that the goodnatured servant is inconsolable. I have not heard my own voice for a whole week, and due to lack of practise it is vanishing. I have not got a sou in my pockets, no tobacco or stamps either. Then I gather all my strength of will in a last effort. I want to make gold using the dry method with the aid of fire."

From *Inferno*



Deathwish

In July Strindberg's crisis reaches a peak. The heat in Paris is intense and Strindberg feels that life is unbearable. He expects a catastrophe. Death seems a solution and he writes:

I had been reading the precious little pamphlet *The Delight of Dying* and it aroused a longing to leave this world. In order to investigate the borderland between life and death I lie down on bed, uncork the bottle of cyanide and let its deadly fumes fill the room. He is coming closer, the Reaper, so mild and seductive, but at the last moment someone always appears or something happens that cuts everything off; The waiter has an errand, a wasp flies in through the window.

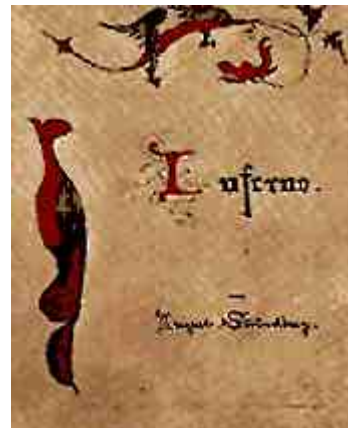
The Powers refuse me this one and only happiness, and I bow to their will.

What's real?

After "a night of horror" Strindberg fled from the Hotel Orfila in July 1896. The day before he wrote a letter about the reality of fantasy:

Cover by Strindberg, 1897

"If I see my pillow taking on human shapes, then those shapes are there, and if someone says that they are only (!) generated by imagination, I will reply: Only you say? - What my inner sees, is more to me! And what I see in that pillow is made out of the feathers of birds, which once were carriers of life, with a soul, with the power to create forms, and out of linen which once carried the life force in its fibres, reality, since I am able to draw these forms and show them to others. There are times when I hear a cricket singing inside that pillow. The sound made by the grasshopper has always seemed to me as if it came from some empty hall down below, underneath the surface of the earth. Now, assume that these once sang in a field of flax, do you not believe that Nature or the Creator could use the vegetable fibre as a phonograph, so that it plays to my inner ear which through suffering, deprivation and prayer has become willing to hear farther than before? But that is where natural explanations do not suffice, and I abandon them instantly!! "





The Infernopainting

Strindberg's favourite painting.

August Strindberg goes back to Sweden in the autumn of 1896 and next spring he writes *Inferno*, one of his masterpieces. My conviction is that he ever was really crazy, just put under a strain. Remember that he hardly ever stopped writing even during the critical weeks that hot July.

A Blue Book by Strindberg

A Blue Book is August Strindberg's largest book of prose (the final version runs over 1200 pages). Strindberg put in all kinds of material in A Blue Book. It consists of short essays, aphorisms, personal portraits and fictitious conversations between Swedenborg and himself. When the first part (4 in all) was published in 1907. Strindberg dedicated the book to Swedenborg "the master and leader" from the "disciple". A Blue Book is not translated to English, therefore I have tried to translate some pieces that I found interesting.

A woman-hater?

Strindberg was often accused of being a misogynist and he really did write some nasty pieces. One of his hate articles had the header "Woman's inferiority to Man"! In the following paragraph Strindberg tries to explain and defend himself: Lithograph by Edvard Munch paintings and a short biography

Cowards

The Disciple asked: What is a misogynist? The Master replied: I do not know; but it is used by cowards as a term of abuse for those who say what everybody thinks. Cowards are the men who cannot approach a woman without going out of their minds and becoming treacherous. They buy the woman's favour by serving their friends' heads on a silver plate; and they absorb so much femininity that they see with her eyes and feel with her feelings. Agreed: there are things you do not mention in everyday conversation, and you do not tell your woman what is

the essence of her gender; but one is sometimes allowed to write it. Schopenhauer put it best, Nietzsche not badly, Joséphin Péladan is the master; Thackeray wrote Men's Wives, but that was suppressed; Balzac unmasked Caroline in Physiologie du mariage, and Petites misères de la vie conjugale; Otto Weininger, having discovered the treachery when he was twenty, did not wait for the revenge but left the scene. I have said that the child is a criminal in the making that cannot control itself, but I love children nevertheless. I have also said that woman is what she is, but I have always been in love with a woman, and had children with her. Thus, he who calls me a misogynist is a fool, a liar, or a coward - or all three rolled into one!

Do not play with love

The disciple continued: When a man and a woman unite in love, a single being arises whose existence is in itself pleasurable as long as harmony reigns. But this being is such an extremely sensitive reception device, or coherer, that it is subject to interferences from the currents of others, near and far, a disadvantage that it shares with wireless telegraphy. Therefore, a disturbed relationship between spouses is the greatest suffering that exists, and unfaithfulness is a cosmic crime which leads one or the other party into a perverted relationship with their own sex. If the man casts his feelings towards another woman, the wife is exposed to terrible alternating currents which by turns make her hate and love the woman who is her rival. Often she may make friends with the man's lover, but more often she gets to hate her. And those who go between two lovers shall not go unpunished, for the hatred they generate is so terrible that they may be paralysed by the discharges and lose their energy and zest for life. Therefore it is said: Do not play with love.

Devastation and salvation

In the following paragraph Strindberg discuss the meaning of sufferings like paranoia and obsessions, seen as a way to salvation. The meaning is that a person that feels damned should receive it as a gift from God, a trial leading to salvation! Strindberg viewed his experiences during the inferno period as his necessary devastation, that opened his mind.

Imaginary punishments

The Master continued: Swedenborg speaks of being punished through imaginings. This is what the doctors vulgarly call obsessive ideas. He who suffers from paranoia is being persecuted; the simpletons maintain that he is persecuted by his own imaginations only, but if the wise man asks why he is persecuted by his imaginations, conscience answers by guessing indefinitely at the persecutor; and now the sick person goes through the list of the people he has wronged. And if there are really many wronged and their hatred is justified, it may well be that the sick person is being persecuted by their hatred, now recognised by his aroused conscience. In my mind, punishment through imagination has played the most important part, but after I discovered logic I always accepted it as punishment. The most difficult thing is suspicion, when I am forced to be suspicious of innocents; it is overpowering and my thoughts waver between trust and distrust; I struggle and gradually get the better of myself by admitting I am wrong, or in resignation accepting the breach of faith. But if I vent my suspicion, I have to ask to be forgiven; and then I accept humiliation as a receipt. Most of my misfortunes have been imaginary but they have had the same effect as real ones, for I was made aware of my own guilt. Incurable is the one who is hardened in the belief that he is being innocently persecuted - by other human beings.

Missing Mrs. Bosse

The next paragraph is a comment on what Strindberg wrote in the Occult Diary about imagined, but strongly felt, visits by his former wife Harriet Bosse. Harriet Bosse

Mirages

The Master continued: After living in solitude for some time, I begin to see my friends as mirages. Some of them gain by distance and are surrounded by peace and a kindly light. Others, whom I in fact like when they are close, lose and are felt to be hostile. Thus, I may hate a close friend in his absence, see him in an ugly and hostile light; but as soon as he turns up there is friendly contact. There is a woman whose proximity I cannot

stand but who is dear to me at a distance; we write letters, always considerate and friendly; when we have longed for each other and feel we must meet, we fall out at once, becoming common and unpleasant, and part in anger. We are fond of each other on a higher level, but we cannot be in the same room, and we dream of a reunion, dematerialized, on a verdant island with only the two of us, and possibly our child. I remember a halfhour when the three of us were actually walking hand in hand on the shore of a verdant island, and I had the impression that this was heaven. Then the dinner bell called and we were back on earth, and soon afterwards in hell.

Lust, hate and fear, or the religion of the heathen

The Master spoke: You know that one of my lifelong tasks has been the exposure of gynolatry, or the worship of woman, in life and history. I have called it the superstition of the heathen, for there is something exclusively pagan about it, and it is the religion of the heathen, but a religion of fear that has nothing to do with love. Lust, hate and fear, those are the ingredients. And as soon as a heathen approaches a woman, he becomes tame and cowardly and disloyal to his friends, his convictions and himself; immediately he wants the others to worship his idol whom he hates and fears. It is part of his animal self-love; and when he sometimes speaks well of his woman, it is only self-praise. Gynolatry is not of Christian but of pagan origin; all animals and savages fear their females, and when paganism reared its ugly head in the Graeco-Roman and Moorish colonies of southern France and Italy, along came gynolatry or the worship of the mistress, dishonestly mistaken for the Knights' awe of the Virgin Mother which was something entirely different. This religion of the heathen comes of fear and secret hatred; therefore every tyrant has a woman who oppresses and torments him. Swedenborg explains the reason for this.

August Strindberg A Dream Play "child of my greatest pain"

On April 17 1907 'A Dream Play' was performed for the first time. A note in his diary on the same day shows how he felt about the play: he calls it "my most beloved play, the child of my greatest pain". A Dream Play was written in the autumn of 1901, when Strindberg had recently married Harriet Bosse. But the dream of marital happiness is momentarily crushed

when Harriet leaves home "forever". Strindberg suffers alone for forty days, reaching the conclusion that life is an illusion that never fulfils our dreams. At the end of the year the play was finished.

A Dream Play was maybe the first drama to employ a dream-like reality as a genre-in-itself. Traditionally plays have incorporated scenes illustrating dreams or nightmares, but none have based an entire play around them. By doing this, Strindberg abandoned conventional perceptions of time and space. He had reduced his original theme, of the man waiting vainly at the theatre for his fiancée who never comes, to a sub plot; his chief character now was Indra's Daughter, the child of a god who is sent by her father to live among mortals. She meets and marries a poor man's lawyer, who spends his life vainly trying to right the wrongs of humanity; so she endures the agonies of human existence until, at last, she puts off mortal flesh and returns to her father.

The song of the winds

Earth is not clean
life is not good
men are not evil
nor are they good
they live as they can
a day at a time
The sons of dust
in dust must wander
Born of dust
To dust they return
they were given feet to plod
Not wings.
Is the fault theirs
or yours?

From A Dream Play

In a short foreword to A Dream Play, August Strindberg explained his intention with the play:

"In this dream play, the author has, as in his former dream play, To Damascus, attempted to imitate the inconsequent yet transparently logical shape of a dream. Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense,

disperse, assemble. But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer; for him there are no secrets, no scruples, no laws. He neither acquits nor condemns, but merely relates; and, just as a dream is more often painful than happy, so an undertone of melancholy and of pity for all mortal beings accompanies this flickering tale."

Below what Strindberg wrote in his Diary the day when *A Dream Play* appeared in the theatre.

"Am reading about the teachings of Indian religions. The whole world is but an illusion (= Humbug or relative meaninglessness). The divine Primary Force (Maham-Atna, Tad, Aum, Brahma) let itself be seduced by Maya or the impulse of procreation. In this the Divine Primary Element sinned against itself. (Love is sin; that is why pangs of love are the greatest hell that exists.) Thus the world exists only through sin, if it exists at all, for it is only a dream picture (hence my *Dream Play* is a picture of life), a phantom the destruction of which is the mission of the ascetic. But this mission conflicts with the instinct of love, and the sum of it all is a ceaseless wavering between sensuality and the pangs of remorse. This seems to me the answer to the riddle of life . . . All day I read Buddhism."

August Strindberg asks himself

1. What is the main trait in your character?

This strange blending of the deepest melancholy and the most astonishing light heartedness.

2 Which characteristic do you prize most highly in a man?

Absence of narrow mindedness.

3. Which characteristic do you prize most highly in a woman?

Motherliness.

4. Which talent would you most like to possess?

To find the key to the world's mystery and the meaning of life.

5. Which fault would you least like to possess?

Narrow mindedness.

6. What is your favorite occupation?

To write dramas.

7. What would be the greatest happiness you could imagine?

To be nobody's enemy and to have no enemies.

8. What position would you most have liked to have?

To be a dramatist whose dramas were always being played.

9. What would you regard as the greatest misfortune?

To be without peace of mind and conscience.

10. Where would you most like to live?

In the Stockholm skerries.

11. Your favorite colour?

Zinc yellow and amethyst violet.

12. Your favorite flower?

Cyclamen.

13. Your favorite creature?

The butterfly.

14. Which books do you like most?

The Bible; Chateaubriand's *Genie du Christianisme*; Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia*; Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*; Dickens's *Little Dorrit*; Andersen's *Fairy Tales*; Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Harmonie de la Nature*. Kipling: various.

15. Which paintings do you like most?

Theodore Rousseau's "*Paysages Intimes*." Böcklin: various.

16. Which musical compositions do you like most?

Beethoven's Sonatas.

17. Which English writer do you admire most?

Charles Dickens.

18. Which English painter do you admire most?

Turner.

19. Which male historical personages do you admire most?

Henri IV of France and Bernard of Clairvaux. t

20. Which female historical personages do you admire most?

P; Elizabeth of Hungary and Marguerite de Provence (consort of Louis i.e. Holy). t

21. Which historical personage do you most despise?

One has no right to despise anybody.

22. Which fictitious male characters most attract you?

Balzac's Louis Lambert: and the Bishop in *Les Misérables* by Victor

Hugo.

23. Which fictitious female characters most attract you?
Margaretha in Faust and Florence in Dombey and Son.

24. Which name do you like best?
Margaretha.

25. Which fault in others do you find it easiest to forgive?
Extravagance.

26. Which social reform would you most like to see accomplished?
Disarmament.

27. Your favorite drink and your favorite food?
Beer and fish dishes.

28. Which season and which weather do you like best?
The height of summer after warm rain.

29. Your motto?
Speravit infestis.

August Strindberg - Works

In Rome (1870) *I Rom*

Strindberg's first staged play tells of "the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen dealing with art versus life."

The Red Room (1879) *Röda rummet*

A young idealistic civil servant leaves the drudgery of bureaucracy to become a journalist and author. In every social sphere he explores (politics, publishing, theatre, philanthropy, and business), he finds more hypocrisy and corruption than he thought possible. He takes refuge with a group of bohemians who meet in a red dining room to discuss these matters.

The Secret of the Guild (1880) *Gilletts hemlighet*

The play, set in fifteenth-century Uppsala, focuses on the conflict between two master builders who compete to finish building the cathedral of Uppsala.

The Outlaw (1880) *Den fredlöse*

"The play is set in thirteenth-century Iceland and tells the story of Earl Thorfinn, who wages a lone battle against Christianity and is punished by God."

Master Olof (1881) *Mäster Olof*

An idealistic young man attacks Catholicism to bring the Reformation to Sweden, with the King's backing. But he pushes his idealism too far, more concerned with dismantling Catholicism than erecting a replacement, and suffers the condemnation of the King, who fears political instability, and society, who doubt young man's sanity.

The Swedish People at Work and Play, in War and Peace, at Home and Abroad, or, One Thousand Years of the History of Swedish Education and Customs (1881)

Svenska folket, i helg och söcken, i krig och fred, hemma och ute, eller Ett tusen år av svenska bildningens och sedernas historia

A lengthy account of the life and habits of the common people of Sweden throughout the centuries.

Sir Bengt's Wife (1882) *Herr Bengts hustru*

Set in the 16th century, the play concerns a girl full of romantic dreams who painfully comes to discover the difficulties of marriage and thinks of leaving, but in the end accepts them and remains in her marriage.

The New Kingdom: Stories from the Age of Assassinations and Celebrations (1882)

Nya riket: Skildringar från attentatens och jubelfesternas tidevarf

A scandalous collection of short stories that satirizes the royal family, the learned academies, the nobility, and entrepreneurs in a similar vein as *The Red Room*.

Lucky Pehr (1883) *Lycko-Pers resa*

A fairy tale where a 15 year old is given a wishing ring by a fairy. The teenager leaves the room where his father has locked him up to discover that the world is filled with hypocrisy and that love is not attained simply by searching for it. When he stops loving only himself, he is reunited with his first love and devotes his life to work rather than wishing.

Married: Twenty Stories of Married Life (1884 - 86) *Giftas I*

A 2 volume work of short stories detailing Strindberg's torturous love-hate relationship with his first wife, Siri, who he felt emasculated and manipulated him maliciously. Published while the couple were still married.

The Son of Servant (1886) *Tjänstekvinnans son: En själs utvecklingshistoria*

An account of Strindberg's youth describing his uncomfortable family situation, and his feelings of misery, inadequacy and guilt. The title comes from his mother's occupation before her marriage, which Strindberg thought was symbolic of his low standing and inadequacy.

The Growth of a Soul (1886) *Jäsningstiden: En själs utveckningshistoria*

An autobiographical novel that details the beginning of Strindberg's writing career and involvement with the theater.

The Father (1887) *Fadren*

A retired military captain with an interest in science is tormented, emasculated and ultimately driven insane by his wife's manipulative attempts to control their daughter's destiny, sabotage his scientific career and have him locked up in an asylum.

The Bond (1887) *Bandet*

A courtroom drama where a husband and wife try to act respectably in order to get custody of their children, but they soon break down and begin indecently recriminating each other, proving they are both equally unfit for custody.

Natives of Hemsö (1887) *Hemsöborna*

A novel of pragmatic marriage, jealousy and ambition among farmers and fisherman of the island of Hemsö that evokes the rural lifestyle and natural surroundings of the island.

Den romantiske klockaren på Rånö (1888)

A short story about "a talented and idealistic musician who ends up as an organist on a small island in the archipelago outside of Stockholm and gradually loses touch with reality."

Miss Julie (1889) *Fröken Julie*

The frivolous and flirtatious daughter of a wealthy man has a dalliance with her father's servant who declares his loves and wants to run away with her in order to get her money. When he discovers the money is not available, the man turns on the girl callously and introduces her to the baser side of human nature so, in the end, her only option is suicide.

The Stronger (1889) *Den starkare*

One woman accuses another woman, who remains silent, of being her husband's mistress. The speaker, who initially thought the mistress was stronger because of her silence, discovers that the mistress simply has nothing to say, proving that the speaker is the stronger.

By the Open Sea (1890) *I havsbandet*

A Nietzschean fish commissioner relies on his own 'will to power' to improve the lot of rural fisherman by teaching them how to fish more effectively. However, his attempts are met with contempt and the ubermensch commissioner is eventually brought down by the petty resentments that the weak rural fisherman hold for the strong.

The Keys to Heaven or St. Peter Walks on Earth (1892) *Himmelrikets nycklar eller sankte Per vandrar på jorden*

A play that is "a peculiar mixture of fairy-tale play, contemporary satire, and disillusioned search for something meaningful in life."

Debit & Credit (1893) *Debet och kredit*

A one-act play about financial misery.

The First Warning (1893) *Första varningen*

A one-act play about jealousy.

Facing Death (1893) *Inför döden*

A one-act play about deserted fathers and suicide.

Motherlove (1893) *Moderskärlek*

A one-act play about egotistical mothers.

Playing with Fire (1893) *Leka med elden*

A one-act play about sexual passion and marriage.

The Link (1893) *Bandet*

A one-act play about sexual hatred and divorce.

The Confession of a Fool or A Madman's Defense (1895) *Playdoyer d'un fou*

A mixture of real events and wild imaginary episodes from Strindberg's marriage to Siri whereby he tried to 'expose' his wife's plan to have him locked up and prove his sanity to prevent it from happening. Unfortunately, his paranoid delusions of persecution and jealous suspicions only caused further doubts about his sanity.

Introduction to a Unitary Chemistry (1895) *Introduction à une Chimie Unitaire*

A book that reports Strindberg's alchemical experiments.

The Inferno (1897) *Inferno*

A partly fictionalized autobiographical account of Strindberg's harrowing stay in Paris where he drank heavily, experimented with science, alchemy and the occult, suffered paranoia and delusions, and suffered utter material and spiritual destitution. At last, he experienced a religious conversion influenced by the teachings of Swedenborg.

Jacob Wrestles (1898) *Jakob brottas*

A story fragment about religious struggle that follows the main character around Paris that is richly described until he meets an archangel-like figure in the Luxembourg gardens.

To Damascus (1898 - 1904) *Till Damaskus*

Three part saga of the Stranger who, defiant and hounded by beggars and priests, falls in love with wife of the doctor who is to care for him. The second part is about the couple's poverty and ultimate failure of their marriage. The third part concerns the Stranger's pilgrimage to a monastery after the dissolution of his marriage where he encounters various symbolic figures and people from his past on the way to his hoped for salvation.

The Saga of the Folkungs (1899) *Folkunga-Sagan*

Magnus, a medieval Swedish king, must travel the hard road that was prophesied for him in order to expiate the sins of the Folkungs.

Erik XIV (1899)

The play "portrays the moody, pleasure-seeking, and psychopathic king, who proposed to Queen Elizabeth of England and was rejected. Erik XIV takes out his revenge on the messengers, the Sture family, whom he orders stabbed to death in their prison cells."

Gustav Vasa (1899)

A play that focuses on a moment in the reign of Sweden's founding father when, at the peak of his power, he faced a rebellion.

Crimes and Crimes (1900) *Brott och Brott*

The realistic Parisian setting of the play is gradually transformed into a dream world where mere thoughts and desires become realities. The main characters become responsible for their thoughts and are punished accordingly. The dreamer eventually wakes up to find a realistic world where human morals are moderate and not absolute. A dark comedy that bridges Strindberg's naturalistic and expressionistic periods.

Gustav Adolf (1900)

A long play that details the Swedish King's involvement in the thirty years war between Protestants and Catholics.

Easter (1901) *Påsk*

A poor family must deal with the return of their angelic but mentally unstable daughter from a mental institution and the ominous presence of their creditor across the street who they live in fear of. The creditor comes to their home and eventually offers absolution. We learn that only their own fear and guilt prevented this from happening sooner. Takes place from Good Friday to Easter Sunday and makes significant use of Christian symbols.

Midsummer: A Serious Comedy in Six Scenes (1901) *Midsommar: Ett Allvarsamt Lustspel i Sex Tablåer*

A light, folksy comedy set in various outdoor settings that deals with various topics of social reform like welfare, democratization and education.

Charles XII (1901) *Carl XII*

The play portrays this Swedish king, traditionally revered for defending Swedish European civilization from the threat of Russian barbarism, as "a madman and a destroyer of Sweden, who had been envious of the more civilized Russian society."

The Bridal Crown (1902) *Kronbruden*

A young girl kills her baby from her premarital affair with a high born gentleman in order to be able to wear the crown at her wedding to the gentleman. At the wedding, she finally confesses and, while walking from prison to church, falls through the ice and dies.

Fair Haven and Foul Strand (1902) *Fagervik och Skamsund*

A collection of short stories and poetry set in a summer resort area favored by Stockholm's wealthy families.

Alone (1903) *Ensam*

An autobiographical novel "about an old author living his life alone, about his morning walks in turn-of-the-century Stockholm, and about what he reads and what he thinks."

Stories (1903) *Sagor*

A collection of fairy tales written in the style of Hans Christian Andersen.

Through Deserts to Ancestral Lands (1903) *Genom Öknar till Arvland*

An unfinished biblical drama about Moses and Alcibiades set in fifth century Athens that was part of a larger project about important historical figures entitled The Saga Man.

Queen Christina (1904) *Kristina*

A play about King Gustav Adolf's daughter who abdicated the throne and moved to Rome after becoming Catholic. The title character is a thinly disguised portrait of Strindberg's estranged wife Harriet Bosse.

Gustav III (1904)

The Swedish king is portrayed as a "master intriguer" whose life is surrounded by "treason, threats of murder, and gossip about his sexual prowess and preference."

Comrades (1905)

A play that attacks the equality of woman in marriage by showing how all marriages are doomed to failure because the woman becomes the rival to the man. A woman's pursuit of ambition without the chivalry so natural to men makes a wife ruthless and destructive.

A Dream Play (1907) *Ett drömspel*

A dreamlike play where the daughter of an Indian god descends to earth and becomes human. On earth, she discovers the misery, futility and base nature of human existence through a series of bizarre encounters with symbolic characters.

The Storm (1907) *Oväder*

The play opens with an old man peacefully awaiting the coming of a storm. His peace is disturbed by the discovery of his young wife's 'dirty dealings' with an illegal gambling club in the apartment above him.

After the Fire (1907) *Brända tomten*

"The Stranger returns to his childhood home after many years in the United States for a nostalgic visit and to pay respect to his deceased parents. The once respectable home has burned down, and evidence of crimes, secrets, and sins are exposed in the sifting of the rubble."

The Pelican (1907) *Pelikanen*

A chamber play that exposes the myth of motherhood and motherly sacrifice when two children, who previously had been unable to see the truth, discover their mother's evil secrets and decide to destroy her.

Black Banners (1907) *Svarta fanor*

A novel paired with a collection of essays that viciously satirize the turn of the century literary milieu of Sweden.

The Roofing Ceremony (1907) *Taklagsöl*

"A single long monologue by a dying man, reviewing his life as he drifts in and out of a morphine-induced sleep."

The Scapegoat (1907) *Syndabocken*

A story of provincial life that touches on the themes of guilt and atonement.

The Blue Books (1907-12) *En blå bok*

A four volume collection of short essays and aphorisms that range from religious edification, Swedenborgian commentary, polemics against modern science, absurd scientific hypotheses, thinly veiled personal attacks on the author's contemporaries and, of course, bitter commentary about marriage and the women's movement.

The Ghost Sonata (1908) *Spöksonaten*

A chamber play where a student accused in connection with a house fire becomes mixed up with the fate of an old man and his past. The old man's manipulations fail when he faces an old mummy woman who teaches him that there is only one way out of hell - through retribution and death.

The Last of the Knights (1908) *Siste riddaren*

A play set in the Swedish war of independence from Denmark.

Open Letters to the Intimate Theater (1908) *Öppna bref till intima teatern från A. Strindberg*

An essay that outlines the dramatic principles behind his approach to historical drama and the chamber plays, which he defined as "the idea of chamber music transferred to drama. An intimate method, an important theme treated with sophistication."

Swanwhite: A Fairy Drama (1909) *Svanevit*

A romantic fairy tale about a virginal princess who is able to save her drowned prince. With music written by Jean Sibelius.

Earl Birger of Bjälbo (1909) *Bjälbo-Jarlen*

A historical play set in medieval Sweden about the man who founded the Folkung dynasty by uniting Sweden's separate kingdoms in one strong country.

The Regent (1909) *Riksföreståndaren*

A play set in the Swedish war of independence from Denmark.

The Great Highway (1910)

A Hunter travels through 'seven stations of life' where he meets the confusing cruelty of humanity when he is driven from his forest home. In the end, his only happiness is

learning his own daughter no longer recognizes him and he returns to wandering the woods.

The Worship of Pharaoh (1910) *Faraon-dyrkan*

A divisive article severely critical of the "cult of King Charles XII" where Strindberg promotes his liberal and social ideas.

Casper's Shrove Tuesday (1916) *Kaspars Fet-Tisdag*

A short comedic play set in a carnival.

The Nightingale of Wittenberg (1918) *Näktergalen i Wittenberg*

A unfinished historical play about Martin Luther that was part of a larger project about important historical figures entitled The Saga Man,

Hellas (1918)

An unfinished drama about Socrates and Alcibiades set in fifth century Athens that was part of a larger project about important historical figures entitled The Saga Man.

August Strindberg - Quotes

I loathe people who keep dogs. They are cowards who haven't got the guts to bite people themselves.

-

Antipathy, dissimilarity of views, hate, contempt, can accompany true love.

-

Why is it so painful to watch a person sink? Because there is something unnatural in it, for nature demands personal progress, evolution, and every backward step means wasted energy.

-

Happiness consumes itself like a flame. It cannot burn for ever, it must go out, and the presentiment of its end destroys it at its very peak.

-

I hated her now with a hatred more fatal than indifference because it was the other side of love.

-

That is the thankless position of the father in the family-the provider for all, and the enemy of all.

-

I dream, therefore I exist.

-

Oh, I loved him too much to feel no hate for him.

-

I love her and she loves me, and we hate each other with a wild hatred born of love.

-

I find my joy of living in the fierce and ruthless battles of life.

-

There comes a moment... When imagination gives out and Reality leaps forth. It is frightful!

- **Dance of Death**

Some people seem to be born to suffer.

- **Easter**

I'm everywhere now, in the sea which is my blood, in the hills which are my bones, in the trees, in the flowers. My head reaches as high as the heavens and I look out over the whole universe, which is all me, and I feel all the strength and power of the creator in me, for he and I are one. I want to take it all into my hands and knead it into something more nearly perfect, more enduring, more beautiful. I want to see it all created anew and every created being happy—born without pain, living without sorrow, dying in silent contentment.

- **To Damascus**

The hood-winked husband shows his anger, and the word jealous is flung in his face. Jealous husband equals betrayed husband. And there are women who look upon jealousy as synonymous with impotence, so that the betrayed husband can only shut his eyes, powerless in the face of such accusations.

-

I always disliked dogs, those protectors of cowards who lack the courage to fight an assailant themselves.

-

Happiness consumes itself like a flame. It cannot burn for ever, it must go out, and the presentiment of its end destroys it at its very peak.

-

Friendship can only exist between persons with similar interests and points of view. Man and woman by the conventions of society are born with different interests and different points of view.

-

Family... the home of all social evil, a charitable institution for comfortable women, an anchorage for house-fathers, and a hell for children.

-

A man with a so-called character is often a simple piece of mechanism; he has often only one point of view for the extremely complicated relationships of life.

Biography

Born January 22, 1849 in Stockholm, Sweden

Ethnicity Swedish

Residences Stockholm, Lund, Sweden Paris, France Berlin, Germany, Austria, Switzerland

Died May 14, 1912 in Stockholm, Sweden

Nationality Swedish

Language Swedish, French

Other occupations Tutor, Journalist, Insurance Newsletter Editor, Library Clerk, Theatre Administrator, Primary School Teacher, Actor, Theatre Owner, Alchemist, Scientist.

August Strindberg was born January 22, 1849 was the third of seven children in the large well-to-do family of a Carl Strindberg, a maritime shipping magnate, and his religious wife Ulrika. Though both were devout, the couple had two sons before they were married. Their marriage was strained occasionally by the difference between their social backgrounds; the father raised upper-class and the mother, a former tavern waitress. Both parents possessed a love of music they passed on to their children. The first great tragedy of August's life was the death of his mother in 1862 when he was 13. His father's subsequent marriage to the much younger governess further strained the familial relationships. The young Strindberg was shy, reserved and felt so miserably inadequate that he first attempted suicide at age eight (his last attempt despite countless suicide threats throughout his life). Though he was an average student, August possessed a special facility with language and interest in science that led him to tutor well-to-do children after he graduated high school in 1867. Yet, he also developed a rebellious streak toward religious and social conventions in adolescence that would strengthen throughout his life. He attended the University of Uppsala for two years, but after failing his chemistry entrance examination in 1869, Strindberg gradually lost interest in school and floated between the university and various jobs with the city library, a number of newspapers, and tutoring gigs. About this time Strindberg became interested in the theater, and began working as an accountant in a couple of the local theaters. August finally got up the nerve to audition as an actor in minor role. When he was rejected, Strindberg went on a drinking binge that nearly drove him to suicide. While recovering, a fully formed idea for a play emerged in a matter of hours and he set to work - Strindberg had found his calling. In 1870, Strindberg's first play was produced by the Royal Theater and was followed by other, mostly historical plays. The critical reception of these early works was mixed. Strindberg began to carouse with various artistic and socialist groups though he was very poor. Financial instability would plague Strindberg his entire life. During the early 1870's, Strindberg continued living a very unsettled existence, working a variety of jobs and evading his creditors. In 1875, he met Siri Wrangel, an officer's wife who was avidly interested in the theater and harbored aspirations to become an actress despite her husband's disapproval. The officer allowed

Strindberg to seduce his Siri, mainly because the officer had a mistress of his own. Siri divorced in 1876 and married Strindberg the following year, with the hope of becoming an actress and living a life of artistic freedom. Siri made her acting debut shortly before the marriage and her resulting success put an immediate strain on the marriage. The couple had children but the marriage quickly broke down - Strindberg became jealous, suspicious and cruel when Siri wanted to be more than a wife and mother. Strindberg hoped his wife would reconcile him to life at last, but her own independent streak smashed these dreams. Strindberg had his first great literary success in 1879 with the novel *The Red Room*, a social satire that brought scandal to Stockholm and literary notoriety to Strindberg. The couple welcomed their first child, Karin, in 1880, but joy of motherhood did not quell Siri's ambition as Strindberg had hoped. A mere three months after giving birth, Siri starred in her husband's play, *The Secret of the Guild*. The following year the couple had another daughter while Strindberg was writing a 1,000 page history of everyday people in Sweden. Strindberg supported his wife's career on the stage, writing several roles for her and even stated that he only worked in the theater to help further Siri's career. The 1882 publication of the short story collection *The New Kingdom*, which satirized the royal family and other powerful institutions, truly scandalize all of Stockholm and eventually drove Strindberg into exile. In 1883, Strindberg moved his family to Paris, which they disliked because of the noise and pollution. The move effectively ended Siri's acting career, which in turn put severe strains on an already rocky relationship. The success of Strindberg's play *Lucky Pehr* back home, allowed Strindberg to move his family to a village near Lake Geneva, Switzerland in late 1883. The couple had a third child while Strindberg was working on *Married: Twenty Stories of Married Life*, a controversial work about the role of women in society that eventually got banned in Sweden. Strindberg was forced to briefly return to Stockholm in 1884 to defend himself at trial, where he was acquitted. In April 1885, Strindberg moved the family to Paris where *Married* had just been published in French to a favorable reviews. However, Strindberg's own relationship his wife was not as rosy as he had previously depicted in the book. Strindberg was becoming increasingly bitter and resentful toward his wife, an attitude reflected in the second volume of *Married* he was working on at the time. By the summer, Strindberg moved his family again, this time to Grez, a Scandinavian artists colony just outside Paris, where, at the age of 37, he began working on his own autobiography using the latest scientific theories of psychology to examine his childhood and early adulthood. After nearly a year, the Strindberg's returned to Switzerland where they led a nomadic existence while August completed his first major play, *The Father*, which examines how the weaker sex can psychologically destroy the stronger. The play, which was the beginning of Strindberg's Naturalistic period, had difficulty finding a publisher, but it was eventually printed 1887. The extremely pessimistic view women seen in the play was a breaking point in Strindberg's marriage and couple decided to divorce in August 1887. Strindberg then enjoyed a burst of creativity and wrote the charmingly comic *People of Hemso*, considered his most accessible work. He also wrote *The Confessions of a Fool*, a thinly disguised bitter account of his marriage, but it would five years before it appeared in print. In the fall of 1887, Strindberg moved to Denmark, still accompanied by his family, to help with the production of *The Father* in Copenhagen's Casino Theater. The production was success and the Strindberg's moved to the run-down castle Skovlyst. There, Strindberg wrote his

most popular work, *Miss Julie*, and became involved in a scandal with the caretaker's family. The caretaker, Ludvig Hansen, accused Strindberg of raping his 16 year old sister and August retaliated by having Hansen thrown in jail for theft. Strindberg briefly traveled to Berlin, leaving his wife to clean up the mess. Upon his return, Strindberg attempted to establish an experimental Scandinavian theater in Copenhagen, hoping that it would help his financial position and make it easier to stage his plays. Strindberg raised money and appointed his wife artistic director of the new theater, modeled on Theater Libre in Paris which produced short Naturalistic plays. Unfortunately, the Danish censors banned the theater's first production, *Miss Julie* and the theater failed, leaving Strindberg financially ruined. In 1889, Strindberg returned to Sweden, living in house on the Island of Kymmendö while working on *By the Open Sea*, a Nietzschean tale of a scientist's tempestuous relationship with the local villagers and nature itself. The advance for the novel allowed Strindberg to bring his family back to Stockholm, where he finally filed divorced in 1890. August was so scarred from his experience with the experimental theater that he did not write another play for three years. His divorce was finalized in 1892, leaving him almost broke. Having burned too many bridges with Swedish publishers, Strindberg accepted Ola Hanson's invitation to move to Berlin. Nine days after his divorce, Strindberg set out for Berlin with financial assistance from Hanson, a fellow writer who promoted Strindberg's works in Germany. In Berlin, Strindberg found a group admirers among Berlin's artists and writers and theater producers willing to stage his plays. Strindberg began to lead a life of debauchery centered around the tavern *Zum schwarzen Ferkel*, an important bohemian meeting place. There, he enjoyed the recognition and esteem he always thought he deserved while socializing with the likes of Edvard Munch, Paul Gauguin and Frederich Nietzsche (who was a fan). During this period, Strindberg met Frida Uhl, a young theater critic, and became involved in a love triangle with her and another artist. Frida was ambitious, the Ibsenian 'emancipated woman', and exactly the type Strindberg despised and railed against in his plays. Though she hardly lived up the ideal of womanhood Strindberg seemed to desire, he nevertheless married her in May of 1893. She tried to direct his career and had literary ambitions of her own, refusing to play the wife and mother role Strindberg had always sought in a woman. Financial constraints forced the couple to live with her grandparents in Austria after she failed to launch Strindberg's career in London. Strindberg again became bitter, jealous and domineering, accusing Frida of being opportunistic and a whore. Strindberg felt humiliated being in a such a position of dependence and again turned his attention to Paris, where he hoped to use the recent Parisian interest in Scandinavian literature to alleviate his financial difficulties. By the time he left for Paris in 1894, his marriage was over. In Paris, Strindberg wrote a number of articles to ingratiate himself with the Parisian literati while leading a life of debauchery, destitution, and paranoia. He enjoyed a brief theatrical success when the Théâtre de l'oeuvre produced *The Father* in 1895, but his personal life was rapidly spinning out of control. He began to conduct pseudo scientific experiments and became obsessed with the occult. Combined with his utter destitution, these pursuits threatened his health and sanity. In 1896, while visiting Frida's relatives in Lund, Sweden, Strindberg was plucked from the Inferno he had been living in Paris. This lifelong atheist underwent a 'religious conversion' influenced by the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, the great Swedish Christian mystic/theologian who was still popular at the time. Strindberg wrote about his hellish experiences in Paris and

subsequent conversion in the book *Inferno* and then traveled to Paris in 1898 to have it published. While in Paris, he wrote *Legends*, a sequel to *Inferno* mainly about his Lund, and then return to drama with *To Damascus*, an experimental work that deals with the internal struggles surrounding the writer's recent conversion to what he termed a 'creedless Christianity.' After the play was completed, Strindberg returned to Sweden in the spring of 1898. He stayed in Lund for a year before settling permanently in Stockholm, where he embarked upon an extremely productive five year period that produced no less than 22 plays. In addition to a number of Christian themed plays, the most notable of which was *Easter*, Strindberg also wrote eleven historical dramas during this period, which, due a resurgent Swedish nationalism, made them lucrative. He also continued to write in an expressionistic style, producing the harrowing *Dance of Death* in 1901 and *Dreamplay* in 1902. In 1900, August, then in his fifties, met Harriet Bosse, a 22-year-old actress, who he carefully seduced by having her cast in the lead female role of *To Damascus*. In March of 1901, Strindberg proposed with these words: 'Would you like to have a little child with me, Miss Bosse?' She responded, 'Yes, please,' and the couple married in May. She starred in his plays, but Strindberg had once again married another woman ill suited to him - strong-willed and bent on an artistic career rather than family life. The marriage soon faltered under all the jealousy, domination, cruel accusations, and a clash of wills. By the time the couple's daughter was born in 1902, they were living apart. The couple divorced but continued to occasionally live together and 'enjoy' each other's company. Strindberg claimed that he maintained a 'telepathic' communication with her until she remarried. The pain of this relationship fueled some of Strindberg's best work, including the autobiographical novel *Alone*. In 1906, Strindberg began working on establishing his own experimental theater in Stockholm that would be used to stage 'chamber plays,' one act plays that were to become the dramatic equivalent of chamber music, focusing on the character's internal development rather than plot. The Intimate Theater opened in November of 1907 and for which Strindberg wrote four chamber plays. He now favored symbolist and expressionist techniques rather than the naturalism of his early career. The theater had a short but successful run. Strindberg was a very active letter writer and went through several special male correspondents who he confessed everything to. Yet, as with his wives, he would soon become suspicious of anyone he was close to and end up alienating them with rude accusations and callous treatment. In 1904, Strindberg then wrote *Black Banners*, a satire about the Swedish literary establishment, which again brought controversy and popularity his way. By this time, Strindberg's plays were being successfully produced throughout Europe, especially in Paris and Germany. His literary reputation spread throughout the world, though he was still a bit of pariah in his native Sweden. By this time, Strindberg was a financially secure confirmed bachelor. He sought out companionship with Fanny Falkner, a 17-year-old actress, and moved in with her family in 1908. There, he finally experienced the family life he always sought without the responsibilities that he had failed to shoulder in previous relationships. At last, Strindberg became a respected figure in his native Sweden. After he failed to win the Nobel Prize in 1909, he was awarded a government pension due to a grass roots campaign led by a socialist dockworker. At this point, Strindberg had begun to suffer stomach pains that were probably the onset of cancer. In his last days, many visitors came to pay respect to a man who always thought he was despised by both God and man. Strindberg died peacefully May 14, 1912 and had a large,



Strindberg
Lithograph by Edvard Munch, 1896

well attended, government sponsored funeral . According to his wishes, Strindberg's tombstone reads "O Crux Ave Spes Unica" (O Cross, Be Greeted, Our Only Hope).

Absinthe & alchemy

Writers have often accessed a level of visionary experience beyond that of everyday consciousness, but what happens when that vision, fuelled by occultism, alcohol and a nervous breakdown, begins to cross over into madness. GARY LACHMAN examines the case of August Strindberg.

In 1894, after years of painful struggle and almost universal rejection by his countrymen, the Swedish playwright August Strindberg suffered a spiritual collapse, an emotional breakdown that left him incapable of creative work. That Strindberg had reached a dead end isn't surprising. Vilified in his homeland for naturalistic works like *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, he had already been through two divorces – a third was yet to come – as well as many years of impoverishment and the loss of his three children from his first marriage. His second marriage, to the Austrian journalist Frida Uhl, had just ended bitterly. This meant estrangement from yet another child and the loss of Frida's considerable dowry. At 45, penniless and alone, it's unsurprising that Strindberg questioned the point of going on. Yet he was a man who possessed demonic persistence, and the route out of his impasse led through one of the strangest episodes in the turbulent life of a master of modern literature.

After his failure in Sweden and a stint in Berlin, Strindberg looked to Paris for a last assault on fame. Paris was the cultural capital of the 19th century, and by 1893, some of Strindberg's works had already been performed there. But it wasn't just literary glory that attracted him to Paris. Like London, St Petersburg and other European capitals, the Paris of the fin-de-siecle had been bitten by the bug of occultism. Ever since 1856, when the renegade Catholic priest Alphonse Louis Constant – better known by his pen name of Eliphas Levi – invented modern 'occultism' with the publication of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Paris had been a haven for the esoterically inclined. Although a founder of naturalism, Strindberg had a deep interest in magic, mysticism and other forms of 'the occult'. He was also fascinated by science, and considered himself equal to its professionals. In 1893 he published his first work of speculative natural history, *Antibarbarus*, "Anti-barbarian," a work that pitted the man of genius against the academic plodders, arguing that the poet's eye saw more deeply than the professor's methodical squint.



Eliphas Levi, inventor of modern occultism
Image: Fortean Picture Library

When it came to 'the occult', Strindberg's pet practice was alchemy.

According to one account, by 1894, there were an estimated 50,000 alchemists in Paris. Exaggeration or not, in the last years of the 19th century, Paris was undoubtedly a place where occultism mixed with the avant garde. In 1891, JK Huysmans, one time follower of Zola and author of the decadent classic *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*), had shocked the literary public with his graphic depiction of a Black Mass in his satanic novel, *La-Bas* (*Down There*). Huysmans' involvement with the Parisian occult underground popularised what was already a well-tenanted demi-monde; it also fuelled a growing fad for returning to the safe embrace of the Church, after a titillating walk on the dark side. After finding himself in the middle of an occult feud between the notorious Abbé Boullan and the self-styled Rosicrucian Josephin Sar Peladan – full of astral attacks and, as Huysmans called them, 'fluidic fisticuffs' – the man who kicked off the Yellow Decade ended his days at a Benedictine monastery.

Such Rosicrucian roistering wasn't unusual. A few years before, the decadent poet Stanislas de Guaita, a devotee of Baudelaire, morphine addict (he would die of an overdose in 1897) and one-time student of Sar Peladan, fought an extended battle with his ex-master. Most of the fighting took place in print, but the recognition that magical warfare was not uncommon in fin-de-siecle Paris adds a depth to

Strindberg's uncanny adventures, one that commentators sometimes miss. Undoubtedly, between 1894 and 1896, Strindberg came close to, and probably did experience, a schizoid episode. But it is just possible that the weird experiences he recounts in his obsessive record *Inferno* – based, in part, on his even more bizarre *Occult Diary* – did not originate solely in a great mind's pitiable crackup. Without doubt, all the ingredients for a complete mental breakdown are there: intense stress, loneliness, poverty, and an uncertain future, abetted in no small part by Strindberg's devotion to a popular magical elixir of the day – absinthe. But the strange events that make up Strindberg's *Inferno*, are precisely the sort that fuelled one of the burning questions of the age: the thin line between genius and madness. A line, by all accounts, Strindberg passed over frequently.

Throughout his career, Strindberg had periodic bouts of revulsion against literature. His artistic credo practically ensured this. "I regard it as my dreadful duty to be truthful," he wrote, "and life is indescribably ugly." Such sentiments prompted his plunge into alchemy. It may seem strange that, considering himself a scientist, Strindberg chose alchemy as his path to immortality. But his approach to science was anything but orthodox. His aim in *Antibarbarus* was to 'explain' the nature of sulphur, the 'transmutation' of carbon and other elements, and the composition of water and air. Claiming to be a 'transformist' like Darwin and a monist like the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, Strindberg declared: "I have committed myself to the assumption that all elements and all forces are related. And if they derive from one source, then they sprang into existence by means of condensation and attenuation, of copulation and crossbreeding, of heredity and transformation... and whatever else one cares to suggest."

This cavalier attitude didn't win critics' approval. When the book appeared, Strindberg's pretensions to science were dismissed as a sign of monomania, its author lambasted for his lack of logic and incapacity for experiment. But for the alchemist, transformation is the key, and Strindberg's speculative approach is in the great magical tradition. Writing to his young botanist friend Bengt Lindfors, Strindberg said: "I doubt all experiments... I believe rather in the depth of my conscious thought, or more correctly, my unconscious thought." His method was to put himself "into a state of unconsciousness, not with drink, but by distractions, games, cards, sleep, novels... without bothering about results, or acceptability, and something emerges that I can believe in..."



Joseph-Antoine Boullan, renegade priest and occultist.
Mary Evans Picture Library

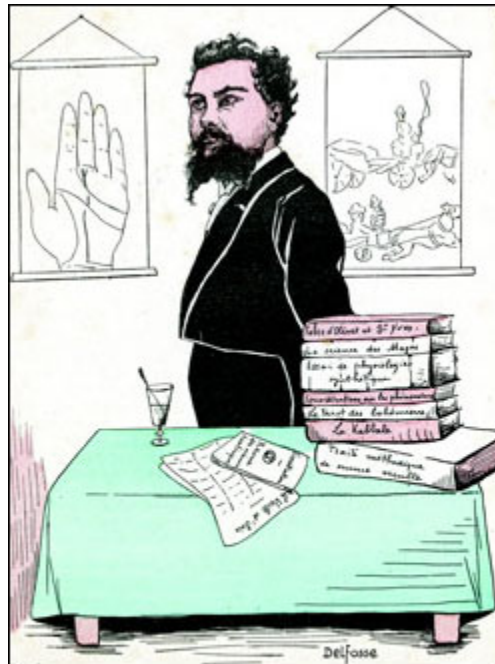
Weird as it seems, Strindberg's 'science' was right in line with the latest developments in art. Before his descent on Paris, he had published an essay on "The New Arts, or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation." This, along with another article on "Deranged Sense Impressions," deals with the curious power of the mind to alter its perceptions; in a word, to 're-create' reality. Like many other artists and poets, Strindberg rebelled against the neat, orderly 'objective' Universe being revealed by an increasingly triumphant rationalist science. In its place, he argued for a world open to strange forces, and the influence of consciousness itself – a position made commonplace decades later with the rise of quantum physics. In "The New Arts", he describes the "oscillations of his sense impressions", and recounts how, seen from a certain angle, a cow becomes two peasants embracing each other, then a tree trunk, and then something else, and how the figures at a picnic are really a ploughman's coat and knapsack thrown over his cart. Strindberg would later describe his own method of writing as something like a trance state. It begins, he said, "with fermentation or some sort of agreeable fever which passes into ecstasy or intoxication." His considerable absinthe intake surely had a hand in this. Nevertheless, by the next century, with Dada and Surrealism, the notion that 'reality' is plastic, and that consciousness and chance affect what we experience, would become standard components of æsthetic theory.

But Strindberg was interested in more than a new approach to art. He took his alchemy seriously and soon after his arrival in Paris, he turned his back on the literary world and got to work on the archetypal alchemical project: making gold.

His first step was to obtain experimental proof of his ideas of transformation. He set out to prove the presence of carbon in sulphur. "Back once more in my miserable student's room," he writes, "I delved into my trunk and drew forth from their hiding place six crucibles of fine porcelain which I had robbed myself to buy. A pair of tongs and a packet of pure sulphur completed the apparatus of my laboratory. All that remained was to make a fire of furnace heat in the stove..." He did. The flame from his makeshift furnace was so great he soon suffered appalling burns, the skin on his hands "peeling off in scales." After more experiments, the burns worsened, and his chapped, cracked hands, irritated by coke dust, oozed blood. The pain was intolerable, yet, convinced of his success, Strindberg continued. The next step was to show the presence of hydrogen and oxygen. But his apparatus was inadequate and his funds were dwindling. Destitute and in agony, Strindberg had reached another dead end. When the veins in his arms started to swell from blood-poisoning, friends collected money and put him in the Hôpital de Saint-Louis.

There, Strindberg made friends with a pharmacist who took an interest in his pursuits and allowed him to work in his laboratory. Urged on, he sent the results of his experiments to a firm of chemists to be analysed. Their tests proved positive: the sulphur he submitted did indeed contain carbon. More encouragement followed. A summary of Strindberg's scientific work appeared in *Le Petit Temps*, followed by long articles on 'Strindberg the scientist' in the highly respected periodical *La Science Française* and the widely read *Le Figaro*. On the strength of these, Strindberg petitioned to conduct further experiments using the laboratory at the Sorbonne. Although the faculty thought little of his work, he was granted permission, and he carried out his tests. Further signs of success appeared. An engineer at a chemical factory in Rouen who read of his experiments wrote to him saying that they threw light on "hitherto unexplained phenomena in the manufacture of sulphuric acid and sulphides." At the same time, a correspondence with the distinguished chemist Marcellin Berthelot suggested to Strindberg he was on the right track.

Soon Strindberg believed he had succeeded in extracting gold from iron. It was around this time that he came into contact with the Parisian alchemical underground. A young man named François Jollivet-Castelot, the author of *La Vie et l'âme de la matière* (*The Life and Spirit of Matter*), which Strindberg had read with enthusiasm, had heard of Strindberg's work, and approached him, convinced the great playwright had actually succeeded in the alchemical dream. Jollivet-Castelot later became editor of an alchemical journal, *L'Hyperchimie*, and published Strindberg's account of his alchemical work, "The Synthesis of Gold." A rising star in the alchemical subculture, Strindberg's celebrity was assured when Gerard Encausse – better known under his occult pseudonym Papus – published an account of his work in his periodical *L'Initiation*. "August Strindberg," Papus wrote, "who combines vast knowledge with his great talent as a writer, has just achieved a synthesis of gold from iron." His work, Papus continued, "confirms all the assertions of the alchemists."



Gerard Encausse, better known under his occult pseudonym of Papus, helped publicise Strindberg's alchemical experiments.

Image: Mary Evans Picture Library

This was high praise. The author of several influential works, as leader of the Groupe Independent d'Études Esoterique and Grand Master of the Martinist Order, Papus was a powerful figure in the Parisian occult underground. He was also indirectly involved in the magical feud between Huysmans, Sar Peladan and De Guaita. When Papus elected Strindberg an honorary Master of La Societé Alchimique de France, it's understandable the accolade went to his head. After years of obscurity, rejection and accusations of madness, to be accepted as a genius by men whose intelligence he respected must have given he some satisfaction.

Yet his alchemical adventure wasn't purely benign. Nurtured by his occult obsessions, his 'deranged sense impressions' began to get out of hand. At first he chalked his weird perceptual mutations up to chance and the vagaries of his unconscious, but increasingly he recognised in them the hands of an occult intelligence which he called 'the Powers' and 'the Unseen.' The world these occult forces led him through soon turned into a kind of waking dream – or nightmare.

On a walk to the Luxembourg Gardens, he spied his initials, A S, painted on a shop window, rising out of a silver-white cloud, surmounted by a rainbow. He took this as a positive omen. At a stall on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, 'by chance' he picked up an old chemistry text by the Franco-Spanish toxicologist Mateo Orfila. Opening it at random, he hit on a passage that confirmed his alchemical intuition. "Sulphur has been included among the elements," Orfila wrote, and certain experiments "seem to prove that it contains hydrogen and oxygen". Later, after his experiments at the Sorbonne, during a walk in the Montparnasse Cemetery, 'chance' drew Strindberg to Orfila's grave, which he didn't know was there, and a later walk down the Rue d'Assas found him oddly drawn to a monastery-like building. It turned out to be the Hotel Orfila. Strindberg soon settled in for a short stay in Purgatory.

Never easy on himself, Strindberg felt he was being tested. He talked to 'the Powers', thanked them, asked them advice. He saw their work everywhere. Money appeared 'miraculously', allowing him to buy instruments. Observing the embryo of a walnut under a microscope, Strindberg was convinced he could see two tiny hands, clasped in prayer, emerging from the seed. Another sign. On a 'chance' trip to the country, a stone was transformed into a statue of a Roman knight. Pleased with this effect, he looked in the direction the 'statue' was pointing. On a wall he saw the initials F and S. He first thought of his second wife, Frida Strindberg. But then he realised that it was really the chemical symbols for iron and sulphur (Fe and S), the ingredients, he believed, for alchemical gold (alternatively, the ingredients of iron pyrites, or 'Fool's Gold'). The weirdness continued. A crumpled pillow became a Michelangelo bust, then a likeness of the Devil. A shadow in his room became a statue of Zeus. He had precognitive dreams. A dead friend appeared, offering a large American coin. When Strindberg reached for it, the friend disappeared. The next morning he received a letter from America. Arriving months late, it informed him of an offer of 12,000 francs to write something for the Chicago Exhibition. But the deadline had passed, and the money, a fortune for Strindberg, was lost.

A host of strange fortean simulacra followed, of which I can mention only a few. In a zinc bath that he used for making gold by the 'wet method', he saw a remarkable 'landscape'. There were "small hills covered with conifers... plains, with orchards and cornfields... a river... the ruins of a castle," all formed by the evaporation of salts of iron. It was only months later, during a visit to his daughter, who he hadn't seen for two years, that he recognised his vision as the landscape around his mother-in-law's house. Making gold by the 'dry method' produced its own terrors. Destitute once again, Strindberg felt he had to succeed. But 'the Powers' decreed otherwise. After melting borax in terrific heat, all he found was a skull with two glistening eyes. On another occasion a chunk of charred coal revealed a bizarre formation: a body with a rooster's head, a human trunk, and distorted limbs. It looked, he remarked, "like one of the demons that used to perform in the witches' sabbaths of the Middle Ages." Later discoveries included two gnomes in billowing garments embracing each other, and a Madonna and Child, done up in Byzantine style.

A reading of the Scandanavian mystic Swedenborg convinced Strindberg that his alchemical experiments were unholy, and that for his 'salvation', 'the Powers' had consigned him to Hell. His torments took the form of various magical attacks. Strindberg was undoubtedly highly-strung and thin-skinned, and some of his 'tortures' – such as finding that his hotel room window opened on the toilets of a neighbouring building – smack more of inconvenience and discomfort than anything else. But some are more in line with the magical goings-on familiar to the time. Strindberg began to feel there was an occult conspiracy against him. Letters he discovered in the Hotel Orfila convinced him someone was spying on his alchemical activities. The sound of pianos playing eerie, disturbing music followed him everywhere. He was convinced that the Polish decadent writer Stanislaw Przybyszewski had come from Berlin to kill him.



J K Huysmans, literary chronicler of the Paris occult scene.

Image: Mary Evans Picture Library

Something like a persecution complex developed. His 'supersensitive nerves' detected strange subterranean vibrations. The idea that he was the target of evil emanations obsessed him. Baffling 'coincidences' appeared everywhere. Mysterious noises from the rooms next door tormented him, and he was convinced that someone was trying to kill him using an 'electrical machine.' He walked around Paris in a state of tense expectancy, awaiting "an eruption, an earthquake, or a thunderbolt." Friends and acquaintances now became demons, sent by 'the Powers' to show him the error of his ways, and each night he suffered anxiety attacks in which he endured the recurrent onslaughts of his torturers. For some time, because he had rejected the teachings of Madame Blavatsky, he was convinced his assailants were a group of theosophists. As with his numerous simulacra, once the restraints of reason were lifted – "I no longer try to find a motive for my actions. I act extempore" – he saw signs of his persecution everywhere.

Eventually, through Swedenborg's philosophy, Strindberg passed through his ordeal,

convinced 'the Powers' had put him through the mill in order to aid his spiritual evolution. By 1897, his interest in alchemy abated, and the urge to write had returned, one product of which was *Inferno*. In 1898 he began work on *To Damascus*, perhaps his greatest play. His belief in 'the Powers', however, remained for the rest of his life.

It's possible that Strindberg's taste for absinthe was the real reason for his strange experiences. As drunk in his day, absinthe contained oil of thuja, a powerful and addictive hallucinogen. Habitual use resulted in anxiety, fear, hallucinations, a sense of paralysis and paranoia – all symptoms clearly experienced by Strindberg. And yet, his 'occult' episodes included periods when he apparently went without drink.

So what happened? Strindberg was an enormously creative individual, with incredible powers of imagination, a terrific will, and an ability to withstand blows that would destroy most people. Like many other creative individuals, he at times gained access to hitherto unknown potentials – for lack of a better word, 'hidden powers'. Yet, for a variety of reasons, he was also plagued by a paralysing sense of guilt. My own belief is that, dammed up as they were by his perpetual self-revulsion, Strindberg's creative energies emerged in other ways – some simply mad, some paranormal – and the 'persecution' he endured was the work of his own unconscious, rebelling against the abandonment of his real task. As he himself wrote, "In the great crises of life, when existence itself is threatened, the soul attains transcendent powers."

This is not to say Strindberg's alchemical experiences were worthless, merely a distraction from his real work. I'm inclined to think Strindberg himself knew this. Without the artist's hand to guide them, Strindberg's 'deranged sense impressions' became eerie, oppressive fantasies aided, if not actually created, by a powerful intoxicant. 'The Powers', however, knew better, and the 'Unseen hand' – Strindberg's own – showed him the error of his ways.