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Lesson: Henrik Ibsen; *Ghosts*
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Henrik Ibsen

Fig. 1 (Henrik Ibsen) <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11186659.0>

Introduction

Early Life: Henrik Ibsen was born to Marichen and Knud Ibsen on 20th March, 1828 in a house called Stockmannsgarden in the port town of Skien, Norway. The bustling port town, his father's merchant company and decline in fortunes would profoundly affect Ibsen's life and work. When Ibsen was eight, the family fell into misfortune and had to go and live in an old rundown farm near town. There he spent much of his time reading, painting and performing magic tricks. In 1843, at 15 years of age, Ibsen stopped school and began working as an apprentice with a chemist in Grimstad. Despite his unhappiness, Ibsen began to write in earnest in Grimstad. Inspired by the European revolutions of 1848, Ibsen wrote satire and elegant poetry.



Fig. 2. (Stockmannsgården)
<http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11143634.0>

Ibsen's Early Years in Theatre: Ibsen worked with the chemist for six years before going away to Christiania (Oslo) to fulfil his dream of studying medicine at the university. Though he passed his exams, Ibsen opted not to pursue his education, instead turning to playwriting and journalism. It was during this time that he wrote *Catiline* (1850), a tragedy in verse modelled after one of his great influences, William Shakespeare. However, his next play, *The Burial Mound* was his first play to be performed.

During this period he also had the chance to spend much more of his time on his writing, mainly poetry in these early years. It was also during this very period that Ibsen had a fateful encounter with violinist and theatre manager Ole Bull. Bull liked Ibsen and offered him a job as a writer and manager for the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen. This position helped Ibsen to acquaint himself with the craft of theatre, and develop as a dramatist. His job involved writing and staging plays for the theatre, mostly based on Scandinavian myths called *sagas*. By his early twenties he was completely immersed in the writing and direction of a number of successful dramatic productions throughout Norway.

Exile: Ibsen left Bergen in 1857 and moved back to Christiania to become the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre there. He married Suzannah Thoreson, the daughter of Magdalene Thoreson, leader of the feminist movement in Norway. The Norwegian Theatre went bankrupt in 1862. Ibsen's views on society and politics were very radical, and he made no effort to hide them. He was an atheist in a strongly repressive Protestant culture, a republican living under monarchy, and anti-patriarchy in a society where age and gender determined access to power. His resentment and anger about his own circumstances and the political and social conditions of Norway were articulated through his plays which dealt with the provincialism of Norway, the stagnant values systems of old and the lack of individual freedom bound by societal, religious and political pressures. The five years that he spent at Bergen learning the craft of theatre were frustrating and unhappy ones. It was during these years that he was filled with a sense of bitterness towards his native land from which he never seemed to recover. Ibsen had grown dissatisfied with Norwegian politics and his failure as a writer. He left his native country in 1864, taking his family along, and thus imposing on himself an exile for almost twenty-seven years.

The Norwegian Theatre or Det Norske Theater in Bergen, Norway, was the first Norwegian theatre that broke free from the Danish and French influences. It is regarded as the first pure Norwegian stage theatre. It was opened in 1850 by, violinist Ole Bull, and closed in 1863, after a bankruptcy. The theatre's first production was Holberg's comedy *Den Vægelsindede*, and the opening was on 2

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Fig3.SuzannahThoreson

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suzannah_Ibsen

Ibsen settled in Italy initially and then moved to Germany. Ibsen wrote his best works in exile, living between Italy and Germany. He struggled against financial crisis, while some of his plays received severe criticism all over Europe. But during these twenty-seven years of exile he also became well-known throughout Europe as the best Norwegian playwright of the modern period. Ibsen wrote his ground breaking realistic play, *A Doll's House* in 1879. He pursued his interest in realistic drama for the next decade, earning international acclaim; many of his works were published in translation and performed throughout Europe.

Return from Exile: Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891, a literary hero, basking in the spotlight that he received. He eventually turned to a new style of writing, abandoning his interest in realism for a series of symbolic dramas. *The Master Builder* (1892) was Ibsen's first play after his return from exile.

Ibsen suffered from a series of strokes during 1900-1901, after which, he had to stop writing. He died five years later on 23rd May, 1906 in his home at Arbins gade 1 in Christiania. When, on 22 May, his nurse assured a visitor that he was a little better, Ibsen is quoted to have uttered his last words "On the contrary!" Already considered a literary titan, and having received much reputation all over Europe, Ibsen received a state funeral from the Norwegian government.

Ibsen's Works

Ibsen's career can be divided into three phases. The years between 1848 and 1869 when he wrote plays like *Catiline* (1850), *The Burial Mound* (1850), *Love's Comedy* (1862) and *The Pretenders* (1863), as well as *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) can be called the first phase in Ibsen's career. These plays were mostly written in verse and modelled after romantic historical tragedy and Norse sagas. The years between 1864 and 1875, during his exile also can be termed as Ibsen's first phase of dramatic career, as he had not yet developed the severe indictment of social ills that we would see in his later realistic plays.

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His first play in exile was *Brand*, a five-act tragedy about a clergyman whose feverish devotion to his faith costs him his family and ultimately his life. Ironically, this play made him famous in Scandinavia, encouraging him to create one of his masterworks, *Peer Gynt*, two years later. This fantastical verse drama became popular mainly because of the use of Norwegian fairy tales as inspiration for the story. By this time he had already begun to incorporate social satire into his work. Other works of this period includes *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) and the political comedy, *The League of Youth* (1869).

Norse sagas are stories about ancient Scandinavian and Germanic history, about early Viking voyages migrations written in the ancient Norse language.

The second phase in Ibsen's career was the most controversial of his life. This phase, 1877-1882 is also often called his Realist Cycle, when he wrote four plays beginning with *The Pillars of Society* (1877) and ending with *An Enemy of the People* (1882). The four plays that he wrote during this phase explored the inner surface of the so-called moral and respectable Victorian society. Each is connected to the other and Ibsen himself is quoted to have said that they must be read in the order they were written in.

The performance of his social drama *The Pillars of Society* in Munich launched his career. It was Ibsen's first play to be performed all over Europe. With this play, he left behind the influences of romanticism as well as the domination of the French technique. *The Pillars of Society* was soon followed by one of his most famous works, *A Doll's House*. This 1879 three-act play explores Nora Helmer's struggle with the traditional roles of wife and mother and her own need for self-exploration. By questioning the accepted social practices of the times, and by showing a woman who leaves her husband at the end, Ibsen had raised a controversy and stirred up a debate. After *A Doll's House*, Ibsen wrote his next masterpiece, *Ghosts* in 1881. By tackling issues like incest and venereal disease, *Ghosts* stirred up more controversy. The outcry against this play was so strong that it was not performed till two years later in 1882. His next play *An Enemy of the People*, a story of one man in conflict with his community may have been a response to the backlash he received for *Ghosts*.

When we dead awaken...we
see that we have never lived.

When We Dead
Awaken (Henrik

Few years after *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen wrote another of his most famous work *Hedda Gabler* in 1890. While many critics like to call Hedda a female Hamlet, in her, Ibsen also created theatre's one of the most notorious characters. Hedda Gabler, Mrs Alving and Nora Helmer are some of Ibsen's dominant and complex female characters who are trapped in unhappy situations by the constraints of strict Victorian traditions.

After his return to Norway in 1891, Ibsen began to write plays that seemed to have a more self-reflective quality. This transition could already be seen even in some of the plays he wrote before his return such as *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). His later plays have mature lead characters looking back and living with the consequences of their earlier life choices, each play ending on a dark note. The first play written after his return to Norway was *The Master Builder*. The title character encounters a woman from his past who encourages him to make good on a promise. In *When We Dead Awaken*, written in 1899, an old sculptor runs into one of his former models and tries to recapture his lost creative spark. It proved to be his final play.

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When We Dead Awaken in many ways seems to be a reflection on his own life as an artist. The world renowned sculptor, Professor Rubek, has returned to Norway after many years abroad, and in spite of his fame and success, he feels no happiness. In this play, Ibsen portrays the chill of art in contradiction to the warmth of life. There is a criticism of the egocentricity of the artist, the one who strives for a goal, for perfection in art, but only gains loneliness.

We see many such people in the later works of Ibsen. John Gabriel Borkman sacrifices his love for a dream of power and honour. Master builder Solness wrecks his family's lives in order to be regarded as an "artist" in his trade and Hedda Gabler resolutely changes the fates of others in order to fulfill her own dream of freedom and independence. These examples of people, who pursue their own goals, involuntarily trampling on the lives of others, are all drawn from the playwright's last decade of writing. In Ibsen's psychological analyses, he reveals the negative forces in the minds of these people. He calls these negative forces "demons" and "trolls". His human characterization in these latter dramas is extremely complex.

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0f/George Brandes cph.3b29701.jpg/170px-George Brandes cph.3b29701.jpg>



Fig. 4. George Brandes

Ibsen and Modern Drama

Largely responsible for the rise of Modernism in drama, Ibsen is referred to as the "father of modern drama." Stella Adler in her 1999 book *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov* calls him the pioneer of contemporary theatre. She recognises Ibsen as the playwright who brought human character on stage, wrote for the middle class and helped this class to face the modern world. A revolutionary, an anarchist

and a nihilist, Ibsen broke with everything in order to fulfill his main commitment to self-understanding. He was a central figure in the modern break-through in the intellectual life of Europe.

Ibsen had arrived at a crucial point in the history of Norwegian literature. By the early 19th century, Norway was eager to break free from the literary influences of France and Denmark. It was eager to move away from the French well-made plays and the sensational and sardonic comedies of the 18th century and establish an

Stella Adler (1901–1992) was an American actress and an acclaimed acting teacher. She founded the "Stella Adler Studio of Acting" in New York City in the year 1949, and "The Stella Adler Academy of Acting" in Los Angeles in 1985. The child of actors Sarah and Jacob Adler, Stella began her career in the Yiddish theatre at age four and dedicated her entire life in understanding theatre.

Modernist literature has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly in Europe and North America. It was born from a conscious desire to break free from traditional styles of literature, and express the new sensibilities of the time. The Modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial-technological revolution, democratic revolutions, and an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. As a result, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged.

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Romantic Nationalism is a form of nationalism that developed towards the end of 18th century, and is based on a monolithic identity derived from a belief in the unity of an organic entity of culture, race, language, ethnicity or a combination of all of these. Romantic nationalism inspired the processes whereby folk epics, retold legends and even fairy tales, published in existing dialects, were combined with a modern syntax to create a "revived" version of a language. Romantic nationalists expected patriots to then learn that language and raise their children speaking that language – as part of a general program to establish a unique identity. Norway was one of the first countries to adopt this program to establish a unique identity of its own. It broke free from French and Danish hegemonies, emphasised on the importance of using the Norwegian language, be it in the day-to-day life or in literature and theatre.

Some well-known names associated with romantic nationalism are Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Hegel (1770-1831) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-

independent dramatic literature and life. It was a period of emerging nationalism, as well as that of literary romanticism. Many Norwegian artists and writers, influenced by the fervour of nationalistic romanticism, began drawing from the medieval Norse *sagas*, and started writing in the spoken language of the Norwegians instead of Danish. Most of Ibsen's early works were influenced by the above nationalistic romanticism. It was in the same nationalistic fervour that the first Norwegian language theatre called Det Norske Theatre or the Norwegian Theatre was established at Bergen by Ole Bull in 1850. As mentioned above, Ibsen worked with this theatre for some years, till another such theatre came into existence at Christiania. Other Norwegian playwrights influenced mainly by nationalistic romanticism during this period were Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Alexander Kielland, and Jonas Lie. Through the works of Bjørnson and Ibsen, Norway emerged as a theatrical power in the nineteenth century.

After writing *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen began to gradually move away from romanticism and adopt European literature's move towards realism. He is quoted to have said to a friend that if he cannot be a playwright, then he would rather be a photographer, thus adopting the principle of realism. Though Ibsen had a long career in Norwegian romantic theatre, it was his later realistic plays that established him as a revolutionary in modern drama. During his stay in Germany around 1868, Ibsen began his correspondence with the Danish literary critic, Georg Brandes (1842–1927). It was in association with Brandes that Ibsen introduced Scandinavia to the modern movement. In his 1871 letter, Ibsen made an appeal to Brandes to head 'the revolution of the human spirit' which the age cried out for. In his response, Brandes declared 'Truth and Freedom are the one and the same.' This young Danish literary critic indeed became a great pioneer of the breakthrough of realism in Scandinavia. He emphasized on the need to bring forward a new form of literature in Europe that would be socio-critical and realistic. Ibsen was greatly influenced by Brandes's call. He gave up verse and began writing in prose. He rebelled against the old Romantic traditions and wrote his plays as a response to the realistic social problems of the modern times. He avoided the idealized heroes or stock characters as seen in the other plays of his day. Instead, he created fully developed, realistic characters with deep psychological motives.

Ibsen's drama is built upon his distrust of all institutions that rests upon a lie. He shook the very foundations of the bourgeoisie with its Victorian values such as duty and sacrifice, lack of joy and purpose in work that stifles all growth and turns life into one of misery and regret. The middle class made up of

the institutions of marriage, religion, civil life and law, populated Ibsen's drama. He explored each of these institutions in order to expose man's conflict with what he lives with and what he aspires to. He created the neologism *livslÖgner* (life-lie), often translated in English as 'illusion'. In Ibsen's 12 modern contemporary plays, from *Pillars of Society* (1877) to *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), we are led time and again into the same milieu. His characters are distinguished by their staunch, well-established bourgeois lives. Nevertheless, their world is threatened and threatening. An action, a memory, a trauma from a past life reveals to the characters that their world is not strong and standing. It is in motion, thus shaking up the life of the individual and jeopardizing established social orders. His characters talk from within; they reveal their

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inner selves and talk about things that the bourgeoisie would otherwise not talk about. Emma Goldman in *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (2005) calls him the 'uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy'.

Ibsen believed strongly in the institution of marriage, almost to the point of reverence. But he believed that the foundations of marriage must be full confidence in one another; there must be no lies or untruth hidden underneath. However, in Ibsen's bourgeoisie world where people are restricted by false values, such a marriage was difficult to find. In 1879, he blew the façade of marriage bound by the values of duty and sacrifice in *A Doll's House*. The 1881 play *Ghosts* took this issue further and talked about incest and disease. Ibsen believed that serious drama must strive towards a psychological truth; and one important element of this truth was the idea of living for oneself, fulfilling one's duty towards oneself. For this, Ibsen perhaps can be called an individualist anarchist. He emphasized the need for the individual to remain truthful and loyal to oneself ignoring external determinants such as society, traditions and ideological systems. About the constraints of the State and political liberty, he wrote in a letter to George Brandes, shortly after the Paris Commune:

The State is the curse of the individual. How has the national strength of Prussia been purchased? By the sinking of the individual in a political and geographical formula. . . . The State must go! That will be a revolution which will find me on its side. Undermine the idea of the State, set up in its place spontaneous action, and the idea that spiritual relationship is the only thing that makes for unity, and you will start the elements of a liberty which will be something worth possessing. (cited Emma Goldman, 5)

However it was not political revolution that either Brandes or Ibsen wanted; it was rather an intellectual revolution. The liberty that they sought was from the shackles of political authority, from dogmatic religion and other so-called foundations of the middle-class society.

Mark H. Stone and Cheryl A. Wagner, in their book *Henrik Ibsen: Poet, Playwright and Psychologist* (2014) describe Ibsen's plots as beginning in a seemingly calm and peaceful atmosphere, which becomes more and more complex as events begin to unfold. As the past actions (deeds and misdeeds) of the characters are revealed the present become more and more fragile until the whole façade of the ordered atmosphere breaks down and forces them to confront the true nature of their situations.

Ibsen and Psychoanalysis

In the last fifteen years of his writing career Ibsen began to develop a complex dramatic form where realism, symbolism and deep psychological insights interact. It is this phase of his work that has gained him the name of being a "Freud of the theatre". Stone and Wagner used the term 'psychoanalytic theatre' to describe Ibsen's later plays.

Psychoanalysis is a comprehensive theory about human nature, motivation, behaviour, development and experience. The Austrian physician Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis and the psychodynamic approach to psychology. This school of thought emphasized the influence of the unconscious mind on behaviour. Many of Freud's observations and theories were based on clinical cases and case studies, making his findings difficult to generalize to a larger population. However, Freud's theories made a mark on psychology and culture, and on how we perceive the human mind and behaviour.

Chronologically Ibsen came much before Freud. He was born twenty-eight years before Freud, lived, wrote and died in 1906, six years after the publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. We can safely say that what Ibsen knew and wrote about were what he had discovered even before Freud's writings were available to him. Hence, instead of saying that Ibsen was influenced by Freud, let

us say that it was Freud, who borrowed from Ibsen's human portraits as a basis for character analysis or even to illustrate his own theories. Ibsen caught the attention of Freud by his portrayal of the human condition on stage. Such was Ibsen's influence on Freud's theory of psychoanalysis that he was cited by the later in at least four of his seminal books. The most remarkable example is Freud's analysis of Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* (1886), a portrayal he discussed in 1916 together with other character types "who collapse under the weight of success." Freud sees Rebecca as a tragic victim of the Oedipus complex and an incestuous past.



Fig. 5. A performance of *Rosmersholm* at Lessing Theatre, 1906
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fc/Rosmersholm.jpg/782px-Rosmersholm.jpg>

Even before Freud, Ibsen was able to represent characters such as Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler who are trapped in the unconscious states of their mind and feeling. It is an unconscious that cannot be acknowledged without a threat from within — an internal catastrophe, a self-

understanding, an exposure to the self's life of untruth. His characters always seem to live the outcome of their past. "He is a master of the unconscious dynamics of family history, of the unseen transmission that take place between one generation and another" (Rustin & Rustin, 119). In Ibsen's dramatic world, individuals and families are constrained by their pasts, especially with traumas that proved indigestible. For example, the repetition of oedipal entanglement in Rebecca West's life (*Rosmersholm*), the absence of mother in the memories of Hedda Gabler or John Gabriel Borkman, or Mrs. Alving who must now live the consequences of having sacrificed love for conformity.

Both Ibsen and Freud had to struggle against conventional authority. They were both influenced by the apparent freedom and sensuality of the south, compared to the cold and authoritarian qualities of the north. The deepest affinity between the two men was however, their commitment to understanding of the *self* as the core of their life-work. Just as, for Freud psychoanalysis was an act of archaeological dig, for Ibsen, drama was the peeling away at the individual's life level after level, to reveal the truth hidden at the core. In order to understand their situations of depression and anxiety, Freud often encouraged his patients to talk about their dreams and memories, which help in making the unconscious conscious. Through the act of talking, Freud helped his patients to bring

their hidden and repressed conflicts to the consciousness, thus arriving at an understanding of their life. In Ibsen's plays, we see a similar commitment to understanding the *self*. At first his characters' worlds appear to be calm. But soon a storm begins to rage as their repressed thoughts, anxieties and memories from past lives come out in the open, and they are compelled to confront them. Governed by set values and notions of the 19th century bourgeoisie world, Ibsen's characters are always seen to be struggling with truth, evading and engaging with it by turns. Ibsen constantly exposes the instability of untruth and falsity to self as the basis of their lives.

Ibsen and Strindberg

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) described Ibsen and August Strindberg as "the giants of the theatre of our time". True enough, though they stood as antithetical to one another, together they laid the foundation of Modern drama in Europe. Ibsen was considered to be sane while Strindberg was remarkable for his 'madness'. While one despite looking like a quasi-biblical patriarch was progressive and rational, the other was religious and reactionary. While one, inspired by his feminist mother-in-law presented strong women characters on stage, the other was considered to be a misogynist, especially with his representation of characters such as Miss Julie. Ibsen feels women should be emancipated to find their own voices while Strindberg rather focuses on the evil women are capable of.

A well-known story about what Ibsen thought of Strindberg is that, he hung a portrait of the later in his study, and has been quoted as saying that he could not write a line without having that "madman staring down at him with his crazy eyes." Ibsen's words



Fig. 6. August Strindberg

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0c/AugustStrindberg.jpg/485px-AugustStrindberg.jpg>>

could be a left-handed compliment for Strindberg. Though he considered Strindberg to be his mortal enemy, he may have wanted that portrait hanging there to inspire in him a spirit of competition. Strindberg for his part had no portrait of Ibsen. But he seemed to have formed an image of Ibsen in his mind, which seemed to have had a considerable influence in his life. He admired Ibsen's genius when he saw the ruthless idealism of *Brand*. However, *A Doll's House* changed his earlier opinion and he condemned Ibsen of

August Strindberg (1849 – 1912) was a Swedish playwright, novelist, poet, essayist and painter. A prolific writer, his career spanned four decades, during which time he wrote over 60 plays and more than 30 works of fiction, autobiography, history, cultural analysis, and politics. He explored a wide range of dramatic methods and purposes, from naturalistic tragedy, monodrama, and history plays, to his anticipations of expressionist and surrealist dramatic techniques. He is considered the "father" of modern Swedish literature and his *The Red Room* (1879) has frequently been described as the first modern Swedish novel.

10-year war against Ibsen "cost me my wife, children, fortune and career".

Yet, it is well-known that both playwrights struggled to find sympathetic audiences and that both received severe attacks from the critical establishment when their works first appeared. If Ibsen's *Ghosts* was attacked as "An open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly," in London in 1891, Strindberg's Swedish premiere of *The Father* in 1888 was attacked as "the awful imaginings of a sick brain."

Ibsen and Realism

Realism in theatre is believed to have begun in the early 1870s with Ibsen's middle-period plays. It developed a set of dramatic and theatrical conventions with the purpose of bringing greater fidelity of real life to texts and performances. Part of a broader artistic movement, it shared many stylistic choices with naturalism, including a focus on the everyday drama of a middle-class life, ordinary speech, and dull settings. Realism and naturalism diverge chiefly on the degree of choice that characters have. While naturalism believes in the overall strength of external forces over internal decisions, where the individual has no power over his fate, realism asserts the power of the

Realism, in literature, is an approach that attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity. It is chiefly concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character is a product of social factors. Although realism is not limited to any one century or group of writers, it is most often associated with the literary movement in 19th-century France, specifically with the French novelists Flaubert and Balzac. In drama, realism is most closely associated with Ibsen's social plays. Later writers felt that realism laid too much emphasis on external reality. Many, notably Henry James, turned to a psychological realism that closely examined the complex workings of the mind, while Émile Zola turned to naturalism by using detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity, and environment had inescapable force in shaping human character. It is following the footsteps of Zola that Strindberg would write *Miss Julie* and write his remarkable preface to the play, which is often considered the manifesto for naturalistic drama.

individual to choose. The well-known practitioners of realism in theatre are Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov. Ibsen is called the father of modern realistic drama. He perfected the old well-made play formula, and by using this familiar formula he made the shocking subject matter of his plays acceptable. He became a model for later realistic writers.

The four dramas Ibsen published in the years 1877-82, *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People* are characterised as realistic contemporary dramas or problem dramas. Four main aspects in the above mentioned plays that justify such a description are:

- They make problems in society the subject of debate.
- They have a socio-critical perspective.
- The action is in a contemporary setting.
- They present everyday people and situations.

Ibsen, in association with Georg Brandes upheld "truth and freedom" as the central watch-words for his drama. The necessity for truth in order to live life in freedom was the ideological basis of the above-mentioned four plays. The relationship between the sexes governed by false notions of duty and sacrifice is the subject of debate in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. Problematic features of prevailing conditions in society are debated in *Pillars of Society* and *An Enemy of the People*. Marriage, religion, property rights, relationship between the sexes, social conditions and the dichotomy between the bourgeois individual's private and public life were the main concerns of Ibsen's drama.

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If realism in literature is the depiction of contemporary life and society as it is, then Ibsen portrayed the real picture of his contemporary society, sans all pretences. Ibsen showed that behind the façade of a perfect Victorian family, there was an ugly reality; the ones who seem to be the upholders of strong values of old, the 'pillars of society', are the ones who are leading a life of sham. In *Ghosts*, we see that Pastor Manders, Capt. Alving and Mrs. Alving have all lived hypocritical lives. Ibsen shines a critical light on these three pillars that support Christianity, bourgeois society, and marriage, and he takes up typical taboos like free love outside marriage, incest, venereal disease and euthanasia. This made him into a controversial figure.

Ibsen's realism is seen not only in the characters and the problems explored, but also in the environment the characters occupied as well as in the way they spoke. Instead of speaking in verse and heightened language, characters spoke in natural rhythms and broken trains of thought, interrupting each other and themselves as people do naturally. In his 1883 letter to August Lindberg, the theatre man who premiered *Ghosts* for the first time in Europe, Ibsen had written:

The language must sound natural and the form of expression must be characteristic of each individual person in the play; one person certainly does not express himself like another. In this respect a great deal can be put right during the rehearsals; that is when one easily hears what does not strike one as natural and unforced, and what must therefore be changed and changed again until the lines achieve full credibility and realistic form. The effect of the play depends in large measure on the audience's feeling that they are sitting listening to something that is going on in actual real life.

Ibsen's realistic plays take place in three-dimensional rooms, rather than against flat painted or architectural backdrops. Instead of the old two-dimensional backdrop, Ibsen introduced on stage the fully furnished living room, or the view of a garden from the living room window, rooms darkened with heavy curtains and tapestries. The detailed and specific props and scenery were not devices to sweep the audience away to exotic foreign locations or distant historical eras. Through such a stage-setting, Ibsen encouraged the viewers to contemplate the petty possessions, the furniture and bric-a-brac, which an acquisitive middle class accumulated in order to stake its claim in the modern world.

Ibsen's stage directions are unusually precise and richly detailed, almost 'like a painting'. Ibsen's use of the actual stage space never involves needless background or decor, but the detailed descriptions communicate a series of meaning-bearing visual suggestions. As an example, we only have to read the stage direction for the first act in *Ghosts*. It says:

[A spacious garden-room, with one door to the left, and two doors to the right. In the middle of the room a round table, with chairs about it. On the table lie books, periodicals, and newspapers. In the foreground to the left a window, and by it a small sofa, with a worktable in front of it. In the background, the room is continued into a somewhat narrower conservatory, the walls of which are formed by large panes of glass. In the right-hand wall of the conservatory is a door leading down into the garden. Through the glass wall a gloomy fjord landscape is faintly visible, veiled by steady rain.]

***Ghosts* (1881)**

Fig. 7. Promo Video for Ensemble Theatre's production Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tyIESNSuoo>

The Significance of the Title: *Gengangere* is a Danish word which can be translated into English as 'again walkers', or refer to those who are seen to haunt the same place again and again. It was in its first premiere at Chicago that it got the English title *Ghosts*. Though *Ghosts* may not be the exact translation of the original title, it nevertheless aptly describes what Ibsen meant to talk about in the play. The ghosts of society's beliefs and values and their effect on the individual are central to the play. *Ghosts* is a play where fading memories continue to live, where the dead past continues to haunt people's lives. The ghosts within the play represent the metaphorical haunting with which each character grapples. It is the presence of past misdeeds pursuing the present. It tells the story of a living son haunted by his dead father's life, and a mother who is haunted by ghosts of all kinds. Helene Alving continued to live with her depraved husband upholding the society's ghosts of duty and sacrifice. She thought she did right in keeping her son away from the father, and after her husband's death donated all his money to build an orphanage. But, to her horror, she realises that her husband walks again in her son Oswald; like his father, Oswald too suffers from syphilis and loves the maid, who, it turns out is his half-sister.

Theme: Taking the theme of *A Doll's House* a step further, this play was a scathing commentary on the 19th century bourgeoisie morality. *A Doll's House* met with severe criticism for the portrayal of a woman who leaves her husband. As if in response, Ibsen shows in *Ghosts* what would have happened to her life and children had Nora returned to her husband. Mrs. Helen Alving returns to her profligate husband at the advice of her friend Pastor Manders who is bent on saving people's souls. She puts up a show of a perfect bourgeoisie family for the sake of her son. But she tragically realises that all her sacrifice and duty was futile. For, she could not prevent the sins of the father from visiting her precious son. Her son was in a state of advanced syphilis, loved his half-sister and venerated the father from whose influence Mrs. Alving wanted to keep him away. In G.B.Shaw's words, she sees in her son's conduct "her injustice to the unfortunate father, and the cowardice of the monstrous fabric of lies and false appearances she has wasted her life in manufacturing" (Shaw, 69). Oswald's condition reveals to Mrs. Alving her *livslÖgnen*, the façade of lies with which she built her life. She is bound to conclude:

I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind. They are not actually alive in us; but there they are dormant, all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts all over the world. They

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must be as countless as the grains of the sands, it seems to me. And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us.

Pastor Manders is an upholder of "all sorts of old dead ideas" and "old dead beliefs". He was the one who burdened Mrs. Alving with the yoke of duty and sacrifice. He never misses an opportunity to remind Mrs. Alving that she did not fulfil her duties of a wife and a mother. The venereal disease that Oswald suffers from becomes, in this light a metaphor of external forces represented by Manders that blight the lives of Mrs. Alving and Oswald. The way society invades personal lives, is the main theme of this play. The fact that Oswald asks for the sun towards the end is significant. For, in asking for the sun, he seems to be asking for illumination on the truth of his father and for freedom from the suffocating provincialism from which he tried to escape by living in Paris.

Apart from the Alving family's *livslögnen*, Ibsen also deals with two controversial themes in *Ghosts*. These themes are that of syphilis, a venereal disease and of incest. While Mrs. Alving does all she can to keep her son away from his father's influence, Oswald inherits his father's venereal disease. Mrs. Alving's tragedy is heightened when she realises that Oswald is not only suffering from syphilis, but also is in love with Regina, his father's illegitimate daughter. These were the two themes that created uproar in Victorian society, and which made it difficult for the play to be staged.

Portrayal of Women: One remarkable element in Ibsen's plays is the creation of some very powerful roles for women. It must have been the influence of his feminist mother-in-law, which was reflected in the characters of Nora, Hedda, Helene Alving and Rebecca West. These powerful representations of women lie at the heart of Ibsen's modern realistic drama. In Scandinavia, realism appeared as a social and political need. The Scandinavian realists wanted to debate social issues not only for aesthetic reasons, but in order to bring about social change. The women's question is a good example. Ibsen's plays raising crucial debates about the Victorian values of marriage, family life and society, along with other historical factors, helped stir the movement for women's rights. It is very easy to identify Ibsen with the feminist movement of the turn of the century. However, Ibsen himself often linked the women's cause to other areas in need of reform, arguing for example that 'all the unprivileged' (including women) should form a strong progressive party to



Fig. 8. A performance of Ghosts in Berlin, 1983.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghosts_\(play\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghosts_(play))

fight for the improvement of women's position and of education. Ibsen is rather, the humanist who empathises, actually identifies with women both as social victims and as people. While writing *Ghosts*, Ibsen had written to a friend, "Everything that I have written is most minutely connected with what I have lived through, if not personally experienced ... for every man shares the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which he belongs. To live is to war with trolls in heart and soul. To write is to sit in judgment on oneself." In that sense Helene Alving, the protagonist of *Ghosts*, is as much an autobiographical portrait as Hedda, yearning for emotional and sexual freedom but too timid to achieve it, a rebel who fears rebellion, a scourge who longs for approbation and love. Having said that, we also have to remember that Ibsen's father Knud Ibsen took to alcohol and became abusive towards Henrik's mother after the family fell into

Henrik Ibsen; *Ghosts*

bad times. Marichen Ibsen's suffering and her endurance of her husband's abuse year in and year out seems to echo in Ibsen's portrayal of suffering women. In fact, Helene Alving in *Ghosts* has a close resemblance with Marichen Ibsen, Ibsen's mother.

So powerful is the portrayal of Mrs. Alving that even Clement Scott, English theatre critic for *The Daily Telegraph*, who had severe criticism for the play itself couldn't help but say, "It was Mrs. Alving, and Mrs. Alving alone, who held the audience last night, because she was a bit of human nature, and not a monstrosity...The misery of the woman's life had been locked up in her own heart, and when the overcharged heart was unlocked it was done simply, deliberately, without effort, and like a woman. Hateful as the play is as a whole, we can recall few scenes made so impressive by an artist as that one scene where Mrs. Alving, so delightfully and naturally rendered by Mrs. Theodore Wright, tells the story of her life to the worldly and Scripture-wise Pastor Manders."

Mrs. Alving, a middle-aged woman trapped by her past and the ideas that have been imposed upon her continue to be the most important element in the play. Like *A Doll's House* it is an indictment of the traditional Victorian notions that kept women in their place during Ibsen's time. More heart-breaking than



[Winterhjelm och Lindberg.jpg](#)

Ghosts on Stage

Ibsen wrote *Gengangere* or *Ghosts* in the summer of 1881 and published it in December of the same year. It created a bigger uproar than *A Doll's House* by talking about taboos that the middle-class doesn't like to talk about. He knew that it would take time for this play to find acceptance on stage. He wrote to Ludwig Passarge, his German translator on December 22, 1881, "My new play has now appeared, and has occasioned a terrible uproar in the Scandinavian press; every day I receive letters and newspaper articles decrying or praising it. ... I consider it utterly impossible that any German theatre will accept the play at present. I hardly believe that they will dare to play it in the Scandinavian countries for some time to come." It was staged only in 1882 by some amateurs in Chicago for an audience of Scandinavian immigrants. Only after that, the

Theatre Libre was founded in 1887 in Paris by André Antoine, a French actor, theatre manager, film director, author, and critic. The Theatre Libre combined realism with naturalism, and emphasized on ensemble acting. It was exempt from censorship and put on many plays that other theatres would not, the most significant one being Ibsen's *Ghosts*. It was the first of its kind and inspired similar theatres in other places such as the Independent Theatre in London and The Freie

Nora who is able to leave her husband, *Ghosts* portrays a mother and a widow, who fights against society's preconceptions and bigotries in order to do the best for her son, and yet fails. In a society where people do not want to see the light, Mrs. Alving's transformation is remarkable. From a woman strictly upholding stagnant values of duty and sacrifice, living a life that is founded on lies and pretences, she is able to confront the truth of her situation when she sees the harm she unwittingly does to Oswald.

Fig. 9. 1883 Swedish performance of *Ghosts*

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6d/Winterhjelm_och_Lindberg.jpg/220px-](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6d/Winterhjelm_och_Lindberg.jpg/220px-Winterhjelm_och_Lindberg.jpg)

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play received its first European performance in Sweden at Helsingborg on 22 August 1883. *Ghosts*, then achieved a single private London performance on 13 March 1891 at the Royalty Theatre. It was the first play staged by the Independent Theatre Society, London, headed by Jack Thomas Grein and which included members such as George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy and Henry James among its members. Despite the harsh criticisms it had to meet with, with supporters like Shaw, Hardy and Henry James, *Ghosts* survived. Soon after its London performance, the play received another performance in 1894 at New York. It was performed at the Independent Theatre, New York in 1899. *Ghosts* was also chosen as the inaugural performance in 1889 at Freie Bühne, Germany's own version of Theatre Libre. It is interesting to note that Ibsen's *Ghosts* continued to be a favourite of all the Independent Theatres that came up in Europe and America during the 19th century.

By the time of Ibsen's death in 1906, his plays seemed to have stopped becoming such a scandal. *Ghosts* and other plays of Ibsen are still performed today all over the world. Richard Eyre's production of *Ghosts* for London's Almeida Theatre ran for two months in 2013, and has met with excellent reviews. *Ghosts* also has been adapted into film versions. Kenneth Branagh, who has made many film adaptations of Shakespearean plays, also made one based on *Ghosts* in 1987. Today, Ibsen is considered to be the most performed playwright after Shakespeare.



Fig. 10 http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=VSb3IFpwLvs

Ibsen's *Ghosts*: Reception

The publication and later performance of *Ghosts* scandalised the middle-class society of the day and Ibsen was strongly criticised. Clement Scott expressed surprise that so many men and women even attended the performance of *Ghosts* in London. In his 14 March, 1891 review about the play in *The Daily Telegraph*, he said, "It is a wretched, deplorable, loathsome history, as all must admit. It might have been a tragedy had it been treated by a man of genius. Handled by an egotist and a bungler, it is only a deplorably dull play. There are ideas in "Ghosts" that would have inspired a tragic poet. They are vulgarised and debased by the suburban Ibsen." Albeit praising Mrs. Theodore Wright for her remarkable acting, Scott finds the play dull and uninteresting. Scott's review was supplemented by another leading article which compared the play to an open drain, a dirty act done publicly, etc.. Criticism of *Ghosts* and the writer of *Ghosts* were also accompanied by demands to revoke the licence of the theatre house that allowed such a performance. However, Clement Scott's contemporary A.B.Walkley wrote in the London evening newspaper *The Star*, "One wonders whether these hysterical protestants have ever read anything, observed anything, pondered anything. Have they no eyes for what stares them in the face: the plain, simple fact that *Ghosts* is a great spiritual drama?" (Cited in Milling, Thomson and Donohue, pp- 415)

Ibsen had anticipated the kind of reception his play would receive and said so in a number of letters he wrote to his friends after its publication in 1881. Two friends who stood by him during this time were Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Georg Brandes. Bjørnson considered *Ghosts* to be Ibsen's greatest work. Brandes published an article where he claimed *Ghosts* to be Ibsen's greatest deed. Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House* were the much performed plays in the new theatres that developed as a part of the Independent Theatre Movement all over Europe. So influenced was Otto Brahm (President of Freie Bühne) by Ibsen's ideas that his preface to the new Freie Bühne journal echoed one of Ibsen's 1871 letters to Brandes. "The banner slogan of the new art, written up in golden

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letters by the leading spirits, is the single word Truth", Brahm wrote. He chose *Ghosts* as its first play probably because it symbolised his own aim for the new theatre.

Conclusion

Henrik Ibsen was also a major poet, and he published a collection of poems in 1871. However, drama was the focus of his real lyrical spirit. Having faced bitter opposition for years, he finally triumphed over the conservatism and aesthetic prejudices of the contemporary critics and audiences and contributed to the creation of a new theatre. He made his mark in the works of significant men of the modern period such as W.B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, Henry James and James Joyce and most importantly, the prominent Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. This forerunner of the expressionist movement was intrigued by Ibsen's *Ghosts*, its realism and the exposure of a taboo subject such as syphilis. Munch painted a series of works based on *Ghosts*. One of his paintings called "Inheritance", believed to have been created after he saw the performance of *Ghosts* in Christiania, has unmistakable resemblance to the play. Munch also went on to painting a number of stage designs for the later performances of *Ghosts*.

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