



HENRIK IBSEN (1828-1906)

He left Norway for Italy in April, and traveled abroad for the next 27 years, returning to Norway only for brief visits. During this time, when he lived in Rome, Munich and Dresden, Ibsen wrote most of his best-known works, among others *Brand*, inspired by Kierkegaard's idea of subjectivity as truth. The symbolic tragedy tells about a priest, who follows his high principles at the cost of the lives of his child and his wife. Its theme, an individual with his God-given mission pitted against society, reflected Ibsen's disappointment in weak and spineless politicians. Brand's firm belief is "No compromise!". At the end Brand admits his own weakness and is buried by an avalanche. *Peer Gynt* (1867), written mostly in Southern Italy, in Ischia and in Sorrento, was a satiric fantasy about a boastful egoist, irresponsible young man, an Ulyssean figure from Norwegian folklore. In both of these works the romantic hero is destroyed and their "ideal demands" are crushed. No doubt the themes also rose from Ibsen's disillusionment with his countrymen.

Ibsen himself considered *The Emperor and the Galilean* (1873) his most important play. However, this heavy drama about Christianity and paganism is generally not included among his most important achievements. *Pillars of Society* (1877) deals with a wealthy and hypocritical businessman, whose perilous course almost results in the death of his son. *A Doll's House* (1879) is a social drama, which caused a sensation and toured Europe and America. In the play a woman refuses to obey her husband and walks out from her apparently perfect marriage, her life in the "doll's house". At the turn-of-the-century, physicians used Nora, whose mood changes from joy to depression in short cycles of time, as an example of "female hysteria". Later Havelock Ellis, inspired by Nora's character, saw in her "the promise of a new social order."

In *An Enemy of the People* (1882) Ibsen attacked "the compact liberal majority" and the mass opinion. Arthur Miller's adaptation from 1950 was a clear statement of resistance to conformity. "The majority," says the honest and brave Dr. Stockmann, "is never right until it does right." *Ghosts* (1881) touches the forbidden subject of hereditary venereal disease. The *London Daily Telegraph* called the play "an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly; a lazaret house with all its doors and windows open." Again a bourgeois façade hides moral decay and guilt. Mrs. Alving, the widow of the respected Captain Alving, has to reveal to her son Oswald the ugly truth about his disease. Eventually she has to decide whether or not to euthanize her son, whose mind has disintegrated.

Hedda Gabler (1890) is a study of a neurotic woman. Oscar Wilde, after attending the play, wrote: "I felt pity and terror, as though the play had been Greek." Hedda, twenty-nine years old, has married down, is pregnant with an unwanted child, and bored by her husband. Before marriage she has flirted with the drunken poet Loevborg, a portrait of the playwright Strindberg, who hated Ibsen. She plots to the ruin of Loevborg by burning his manuscript on the future of civilization. Judge Brack, who lusts after Hedda, discovers that Hedda has instigated Loevborg's accidental suicide - he has died in a bordello. Hedda cries: "Oh, why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous? It's like a curse!" Brack gives her the choice either of public exposure or of becoming his mistress. But Hedda chooses suicide when she falls into his power.

Ibsen's Works

Henrik Ibsen's plays anticipate major developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries:

- * the individual's feelings of alienation and actual alienation from society,
- * the pressures by which society insures conformity to its values and suppresses individuality,
- * the barriers which modern life sets up against living heroically.

Ibsen exposed other stresses of modern life by showing the inner pressures and conflicts that inhibit and even destroy the individual. Some of these pressures stem from conditioning, i.e., from the individual's internalizing society's values. John Northam distinguishes the opposing elements within the individual as the *social self* and the *essential self*. The social self is the persona which conforms to the demands of family, friends, community, and society and which an individual generally develops for acceptance or as a protection. The essential self is an individual's true Self and expresses the individual's thoughts, feelings, desires, needs, etc.

A primary value for Ibsen is *freedom*, which he believed to be essential for self-fulfillment. Of the "many things" which his later writings were concerned with, Ibsen specifically identified "contradictions between ability and desire, or between will and circumstance, the mingled tragedy and comedy of humanity and the individual."

Ibsen was constantly experimenting and pushing boundaries in his writing. This habit of exploration often made him and his plays controversial and shocked conservative critics and audiences. Of this habit, he said, "Where I stood then, when I wrote my various books, there is now a fairly compact crowd, but I myself am no longer there; I am somewhere else, I hope in front." His constant changing often confused contemporary theater-goers and critics, who had to keep adjusting their expectations of an Ibsen play. His repeated changes and experimenting also make it difficult to place Ibsen and his plays in neat categories. Adding to the difficulty of classifying him is the complexity with which he presents his heroes and themes. The resulting ambiguity has enabled readers to find support for their own beliefs and to claim him as a member of their movements. This is true today, as it was in the nineteenth century. Over the years, Ibsen has been called a revolutionary, a nationalist, a romantic, a poet, an idealist, a realist, a socialist, a naturalist, a symbolist, a feminist, and a forerunner of psychoanalysis.

Ibsen had a profound effect on the drama both of his own time and in the twentieth century. His plays stimulated the avant-garde theater in Germany and France, and only the plays of George Bernard Shaw had a greater impact in England. The demands of his plays caused directors to find new ways of staging plays and actors to develop new ways of acting. The declamatory style of acting in vogue during Ibsen's day could not, for example, convincingly present the natural dialogue of Ibsen's later plays, with its sentence fragments, exclamations, and short statements. (Such dialogue is commonplace in plays, movies, and TV dramas today, and we take it for granted; however, in Ibsen's day it was an innovation which confused and upset many theater-goers.)

Adapted from information found at: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/ibsen.html>