

Life of Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien, a tiny coastal town in the south of Norway. His father, Knud Ibsen, was a prosperous merchant, whose financial failure changed the family's social position. Later Ibsen bitterly recalled how his father's friends broke all connections with him and the "Altenburg Manor", earlier known for its dinners and festivities. In disgrace the family moved to Venstøp farmhouse, provided to them by the creditors.

As a child Ibsen dreamed of becoming an artist. His mother, Marichen Cornelia Martine Altenburg, was an avid painter, and she loved theatre. Ibsen's education was interrupted by poverty and at the age of 15 he was apprenticed to a pharmacist in Grimstad. In 1846 he was compelled to support an illegitimate child born to a servant girl. Ibsen moved in 1850 to Christiania (now Oslo), where he attended Heltberg's "student factory", an irregular school for university candidates, and occasionally earned money from his journalistic writings. In the same year he wrote two plays, *Cataline*, a tragedy, which reflected the atmosphere of the revolutionary year of 1848, and *The Burial Mound*, written under the pseudonym of Brynjolf Bjarme. Ibsen hoped to become a physician, but failed university entrance examinations.

Cataline sold only a few copies but *The Burial Mound* was performed three times in 1850. The first performance of *Cataline* did not take place until 1881. After successfully performing a poem glorifying Norway's past, Ibsen was appointed in 1851 by Ole Bull as "stage poet" of Den Nationale Scene, a small theater in Bergen. During this period Ibsen staged more than 150 plays, becoming thoroughly acquainted with the techniques of professional theatrical performances. In addition to his managerial work he also wrote four plays based on Norwegian folklore and history. In 1852 his theater sent him on a study tour to Denmark and Germany.

Ibsen returned in 1857 to Christiania to continue as artistic director of the new Norwegian (Norske) Theatre. In 1858 he married Suzannah Thoresen, the stepchild of the novelist Magdalene Thoresen. Their only child, Sigurd, was born next year. After many productions, the theater went bankrupt, and Ibsen was appointed to the Christiania Theatre...Several of Ibsen's plays failed to attract audience. These drawbacks contributed to his decision to move abroad.

In 1864 Ibsen received an award for foreign travel from the government, and also had financial help from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson*. 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...In 1865 he wrote to Bjørnson: "If I were to tell at this moment what has been the chief result of my stay abroad, I should say that it consisted in my having driven out of myself the aestheticism which had a great power over me--an isolated aestheticism with a claim to independent existence. Aestheticism of this kind seems to me now as a great curse to poetry as theology is to religion."

In 1866 Ibsen received poet's annual stipend. He also had royalties from his dramatic poem *Brand*, his first financially successful drama. With the receipt of a new grant, he visited Stockholm, dined with the King, and later represented Norway at the opening of the Suez Canal. In the 1870s he worked with the composer Edward Grieg on the premiere of *Peer Gynt*. When he spent a couple months in Norway during the summer of 1874, Norwegian students marched in procession to his home to greet him. In

*Another Norwegian writer, winner of the 1903 Nobel Prize in literature. He was also a spokesman for the Norwegian Left-wing political movement.

reply Ibsen said: "For a student has essentially the same task as the poet: to make clear to himself, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions which are astir in the age and in the community to which he belongs." (from *Speeches and New Letters*)

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 and continued to write until a stroke in 1900. His marriage was joyless, but he had a few episodes of friendship with young women. In 1898 Ibsen received the world's homage on the occasion of his 70th birthday. George Bernard Shaw called him the greatest living dramatist in a lecture entitled 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism'. Ibsen's son married Bjørnson's daughter Bergliot. The marriage built a bridge of friendship between the two writers. Their relationship had broken after Ibsen's play *The League of Youth* (1869), where the central character resembled Bjørnson. Ibsen died in Christiania on May 23, 1906. The final years of his life were clouded by mental illness. *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), Ibsen's last dramatic effort, showed the influence of Strindberg. James Joyce, who was from his student days a great admirer of Ibsen's work, published a laudatory essay on the play in the 1 April 1900 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*. It was Joyce's first published piece.

Ibsen wrote for and about the middle class and life in the suburbs and small towns. He focused on characters and psychological conflicts rather than dramatic situations. His central theme was the duty of the individual towards himself, not the out-of-date conventions of bourgeois society. "I have really never had a strong feeling for solidarity," Ibsen said to Brandes in 1871. Ibsen's anarchistic individualism made a deep impression on the younger generation outside Norway, where he was considered a progressive writer. In his home country, however, Ibsen was seen as a moral preacher and more conservative than Bjørnson. Ibsen's disciple or successor was George Bernard Shaw, who dramatized with flair and wit generally accepted ideas into uncompromising plays.