

Henrik ibsen



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Henrik Ibsen is often referred to as the “father of modern drama” because he played an important role in the birth of Modernism theatre (Moi 17). His plays were considered scandalous because he refused to shy away from controversial topics that brought political discussion into the public domain. Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People* in 1882 as a response to the criticism he endured when his play *Ghosts*, written in 1881, was first performed.

The characters in both plays are representations of citizens with flawed morals. Stockmann protests against the views of the vast majority, arguing that they are morally corrupt. Through the voice of protagonist Dr. Stockmann, Ibsen responds to the public’s criticism by portraying the flawed ethical views of the members in positions of authority. His characters reflected the modern families and citizens he saw in his own community and his response was an attempt to enlighten the audience of the current morality issues in the community.

Ibsen himself insisted his works be interpreted as a whole, because “only by grasping and comprehending my entire production as a continuous and coherent whole will the reader be able to perceive the precise impression I sought to convey in the individual parts of it (Machiraju 135)”. If we were to observe *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People* as a whole production we would see consistent modern themes of “idealism” and “truth”, topics Ibsen is known for discussing. In these two plays and Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck* we see idealist characters who cannot grasp truth so they create reasons for concealing it. The characters’ morals and ethical views were put into question and forced to face the truth.

When *Ghosts* was first performed it was greatly criticized for the subject matter. Mrs. Alving was the wife of Captain Alving, who had passed a year before. Over the course of the play the family's secrets are revealed, also revealing the flawed morals of the family members and community members. It was scandalous enough talking openly about a venereal disease, but to also show how it could degrade the members of a respectable family was not tolerated by viewers. Mrs. Alving's character represents a modern wife who hid the evils of her marriage, and despite her husband's philandering, stayed with him until death. Her spiritual advisor Pastor Manders had insisted she carry out her duty as a wife and mother and remain married, despite her morals and the truth.

Dimitris Vardoulakis examines Ibsen's *Ghosts* through the focus of duty in *Spectres of Duty*. Pastor Manders was an idealist with rigid conventional views who held forth an "idealized notion of duty that must be upheld always by everyone (Vardoulakis 51)." Ibsen's characters compare the two different types of duty from the view of Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving. The one commonality the types share is silence. Both characters remain silent about secrets in order to fulfill their ideas about duty. The entire play revolves around the unspoken transmission of syphilis from Captain Alving to Oswald, and the revealing of the Captain's illegitimate daughter, Regina.

Pastor Manders criticized the coping mechanisms of Mrs. Alving, and challenged that ideals and duties outweighed the truth. She believed that leaving her husband was in the best interest of herself and her son, but she feared that the community would shun her and consider her own actions immoral. She had sent her son away, so his morals would not be inflicted

upon by his debauched father, and yet Pastor Manders accuses her of denying her duty as a wife, and as a mother. The two clashing views symbolize Ibsen's criticism of idealists, who doesn't believe in a connection between the two (Machiraju 136). " MRS. ALVING: But what about the truth? PASTOR MANDERS: But what about the ideals? MRS. ALVING: Oh! Ideals! Ideals! If only I weren't such a coward. (Ibsen 42)."

According to Pastor Manders there are principles an individual must follow, but the principles themselves are " just a manifestation of what is essentially human, and hence they follow- or haunt- the individuality of the every singular person (Vardoulakis 53)". It is clear that Ibsen is focusing on the morality issues in government and community systems, and aiming to target each individual. He implies that every person has a conscious and understands their responsibilities and duties, and is reminded of this by their morals and standards. Many of Ibsen's plays present an unfortunate dilemma that questions the characters morals, ethics and beliefs. His plays also challenge the discussion topics presented in to the public domain, encouraging a sense of enlightenment.

In Immanuel Kant's " What is Enlightenment?" he defines Enlightenment as " the freedom from self-incurred tutelage, the freedom to exercise one's mind unhindered by prejudices and the authority of others (Kant 53)". This sense of enlightenment is prevalent throughout Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. The same issues of morals, ethics and authority discussed in *Ghosts* are also presented in *An Enemy of the People*.

In *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen attempts to enlighten the audience on the controversial topics people refused to talk about. Dr. Stockmann represented a free thinking character that was struggling to do the right thing while all the authorities of the town were against him. Ibsen's meaning of this production can be interpreted from various approaches. His issues with government and political figures are clearly represented, and his characters reflect his view on the system.

An Enemy of the People is constructed into five acts. The first act presents the town's dilemma of the polluted water pipes, and by the end of it Dr. Stockmann is assured by Hovstad that he has the support of the liberal journal *People's Messenger* and of the Chairman of the Householder's Association. "By Jove, it's a fine thing to feel this bond of brotherhood between oneself and one's fellow citizens! (Ibsen 13)". Satisfied by his discovery and his ability to contribute something good and useful to his native town, Dr. Stockmann's remark foreshadows what is to come in the preceding acts.

In Act II the first climax happens when Dr. Stockmann and his brother, Peter, also the Mayor are discussing the report on the contaminated pipes. Act III takes place at the editorial office of the *People's Messenger*. Dr. Stockmann discusses the publication of his article with the editor Hovstad who believes he will have every enlightened man on his side (Ibsen 35). Stockmann cares little about his own prestige; his concern is aimed at the contamination of the baths, and the replacement of the pipe system.

However, Dr. Stockmann's older brother Peter is a prominent citizen in the town as the Mayor, Chief Constable and the Chairman of the Bath's Committee. He represents the authority in the community and uses this as a guiding force to ostracize and alienate his brother's political views. As mayor, Peter refused to relay the pipes for cost reasons and the lengthy two-year construction period. Dr. Stockmann continued to protest for his cause because he believed he was "doing it in the name of truth and for the sake of my conscience (Ibsen 24)".

As an idealist Dr. Stockmann is determined to keep to his morals even when all his support is gone. His struggle to do right was overcome by the corrupted authority figures that manipulated the citizens in an attempt to protect their own reputation. During his speech Dr. Stockmann addresses the issues of truth and falsehood, honesty and deception and moral principles. He claims his great discovery is that "all the sources of our moral life are poisoned and that the whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood (Ibsen 67)".

In addition to the issues he addressed, the doctor also blames the "damned compact Liberal majority...for it is the majority in our community that denies me my freedom and seeks to prevent my speaking the truth (Ibsen 68)". Dr. Stockmann also believed that majority had might on its side, but the minority was always right. Ibsen is obviously attacking democracy through the views of the protagonist. Because of his views he was eventually deemed "an enemy of the people" and was ostracized by the entire town.

Dr. Stockmann became an alienated moralist in the midst of corrupt authoritative figures and foolish citizens. Ibsen exposed his “hero” to temptations that tested his morals. The adoptive father of his wife bought shares to the Baths and urged Dr. Stockmann to recant his report, to increase the value of the shares. The doctor refused to veer off his road to moral capitulation, and continued on that path till the end of the play even after his family is exiled from the town. In the final scene Ibsen’s hero stood alone, rejected from a community he had loved.

Despite his alienation he asserted himself with dignity and conviction and remained steadfast in his beliefs. He embodied the defiant moralist views Ibsen wanted his audience to be exposed to. Stockmann and Ibsen share similar qualities in views in that rather than turning their back on the people, they choose to confront them: “not merely out of defiance, but perhaps entertaining the hope of their eventual moral improvement (Roshwald 233)”.

Ibsen used dramatic irony and moral tension to enlighten the audience about the underlying issues within the characters. His plays were based off of new ideas and concepts that shocked the audience. Ibsen uses the majority vs. the minority to show that some people pay attention to their own personal benefits rather than listening to the truth and reasoning behind an issue. He shows the importance of compromise, honesty, morality, knowledge, intelligence and teamwork that is required to create a successful government system.

His attempts to teach the audience on the corrupt political systems are based heavily off his own opinions about democracy. His views on society

are classical reflections of modern society. The incorporation of his beliefs into the beliefs of the characters allows readers and audience members to be enlightened on the flaws of government system.