

Mrs. Alving's
monologue on ghosts
in Henrik Ibsen's play
"Ghosts"



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Mrs. Alving: " But I'm inclined to think we're all ghosts, Pastor Manders; it's not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of that sort. They're not actually alive in us, but they're rooted there all the same, and we can't rid ourselves of them. I've only got to pick up a newspaper and when I read it I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. I should think there must be ghosts all over the country - as countless as grains of sand. And we are, all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light."

In this seminal passage from his play " Ghosts", playwright Henrik Ibsen utilizes the monologue of Mrs. Alving to vividly convey her growing dissent towards the traditions and social norms pervading Norway during the late nineteenth century. The play was written as a social commentary, and Ibsen foresaw some controversy upon its release, and was intent on expressing his views on the human condition at the time. Throughout the play, " Ghosts", and especially in Mrs. Alving's memorable monologue, he indicts the dominant ideology of society in Norway for its oppressive atmosphere and ideals.

The clearly obsolete and hypocritical social expectations are still perpetuated and strictly adhered to by the majority, ruining their integrity and morality. Throughout this scene, Mrs. Alving mentions her cowardice several times, emphasizing finally that it is the " ghosts" that make subdue her into hiding the truth from her son. Ibsen defines these ghosts as " all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs", using parallelism to stress that current traditions and norms are in fact archaic. The repetition of " dead" highlights the decay of these values, not only implying that these ideas are flawed, but also that

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they do not fit in the present. However, they continue to haunt and oppress the community. Ibsen extensively uses the binary opposition of “ dead” and “ alive” to blur the line between the characters and ghosts. Similar to the dominant ideals that are “ not actually alive...but...rooted there all the same”, the characters will live in the present, but remain trapped in a repetitive cycle of the past, unable to progress.

The social expectations upheld by the Norwegian public seem to restrict any possibility of freedom and personal contentment. They appear everywhere, as implied when Mrs. Alving states “ I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines” of the newspaper. The motif of the newspaper highlights the constant presence of the conventions in the media, and Ibsen uses the gentle-sounding alliteration of “ ghosts gliding” to further emphasize the subconscious oppression of the people. After the monologue, Pastor Manders criticizes any deviation from this restrictive and dominant ideology, exclaiming that Mrs. Alving's problems stem from the “ terrible, subversive, free-thinking books” she reads. Ibsen juxtaposes the harmful connotations of the first two adjectives with that of “ free-thinking”, clearly demonstrating that freedom of thought and expression was condemned, while the archaic ideals promoted in mass media are accepted. The gloom of the setting also reinforces the notion that this society is clinging to obsolete beliefs and traditions that discourage openness and change in the community, which leads to their fixation with reputation and lack of honesty.

Ibsen uses Mrs. Alving's monologue to highlight the gulf between truth and ideals, and the futility of aspiring to society's ideals. She laments, “ we are, all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light”, representing the scarcity of truth and <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-alvings-monologue-on-ghosts-in-henrik-ibsen-play-ghosts/>

joy through the symbolism of light, emphasized through the constantly gloomy and rainy setting. Ironically, the country is home to ghosts, or flawed ideals, that are "as countless as grains of sand"; Ibsen uses the simile to highlight the extent to which the well-kept yet false beliefs overshadow the people and cause the loss of their integrity and moral values. The highly emotive adjectival clause "pitifully afraid" at the close of the monologue draws attention to the intense pressure of maintaining a proper public reputation, which forces characters to uphold obligations and a righteous image, but sacrifice their integrity. The character's lamenting tone is reinforced by the author's rather scathing tone in this line, as they both criticize the cowardice of ostensibly virtuous people, who live in fear of society's opinion of them and in reality fall prey to many sins. Ibsen satirizes this notion further through the characterization of Pastor Manders, who reassures Mrs. Alving, "You've planted a beautiful illusion in your son's mind...and that's something to be proud of." Society seems to force filial piety and the belief in the infallible nature of one's parents, even though its leaders, including Pastor Manders, are aware of the impurity that afflicts numerous families. They turn a blind eye to reality and foster corrupted ideologies. Even after the truth is revealed and the sun finally starts to emerge, the "inherited" ghosts of the past are unforgiving and persistent, and Oswald dies.

It is evident that in the play and Mrs. Alving's monologue, Ibsen is criticizing Norwegian society in the late nineteenth century for upholding defunct ideologies, as they only lead to strife and dishonor for individuals and families. Much of the drama revolves around the haunting past that

influences the present, as Ibsen depicts the destructive cycle that continues because of the flawed societal beliefs and expectations. His play " Ghosts" is a microcosm for any society that attempts to defy reality and recede into comfortable ideals, which ultimately leads to hypocrisy and the loss of moral values.