

# Ibsen versus society: three breakthrough dramas



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Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 to a merchant family in the small Norwegian town of Skien. After his family fell into poverty, he was forced out of his education and, at 15, worked as an apprentice in a pharmacy. It was here that he began writing plays. Ibsen was by no means an instant success. He spent many years writing, working for a theatre company, and publishing to little attention. Cynical of the small-minded society he lived in, Ibsen sent himself into exile, writing the play that would give him traction, *Brand*. This and his next play (*Peer Gynt*) raised him to prominence and influence. At the “peak” of his career, Ibsen began exploring unspoken themes. In 1879, he published *A Doll’s House*, and scandalized Victorian society. His next several plays did not lighten in thematic content, either. *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler* struck against the wall of the late 18th century culture that Ibsen despised. His plays did receive stage attention, often selling out every performance. Nevertheless, they incited public outcry and critical infamy. He suffered a series of disabling strokes and died on May 23. His last words were to his nurse, who told a visitor that he was improving. In disagreement, he said “on the contrary!” and died the next day.

For all its piety, modesty, and political progression, the Victorian era was stifling to developing ethic issues. For instance, voting was not only a man’s privilege, but a rich man’s right. With an almost autonomous aristocracy, the social elite created for themselves a political clique, where all control circulated through them: this created a wide disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished. Literature at this time began shifting to a more sensational focus on human emotion. Notably, Ibsen’s contemporaries

included the Bronte Sisters, Victor Hugo, Arthur Conan Doyle and Henry David Thoreau. This era was also characterized by a preoccupation with chastity, which resulted in a constricted social construct in which a woman could move. *A Doll's House* in particular addresses the way women were treated and thought of. They were groomed for domesticity, trained to be fragile and delicate for their future husbands. They could not own property, businesses, or have a career outside a teaching profession.

Ibsen broke the ground of controversial drama with *A Doll's House*. The plot revolves around Nora, a wife and mother in late 19th century Norway. She comes to the realization that she is not a complete person, and that her husband, Torvald, has treated her as like a doll. Based on a true story, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* came to champion the burgeoning Women's Rights movement. Though we today regard Nora's self-discovery and empowerment with respect and encouragement, critics responded in fury. Nora was either viewed as moral poison or written off as silly and irresponsible. The original ending was so scandalous that Ibsen was asked to change it, and while he complied, the alternate endings were unsatisfactory. Strong themes of inherent power and the need to become your own self are the very fabric of this play, and while the action centers on a woman, it invites all people to contemplate their own growth and the encouragement they give to others to progress.

*Enemy of the People* has a political plot, but reflects Ibsen's dark grudge against a small town mentality. Fresh from the wounds he received from the backlash of *Ghosts*, Ibsen responded by creating a political parable to teach the world the dangers of mass hysteria and the need to cling to the majority.

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As Dr. Stockman alone desperately attempts to break through the manipulative cloud his brother (and the Mayor) has placed on the town, he represents Ibsen's relentless attempts to get the masses to think for themselves and stop avoiding "shameful" conflicts. It seems an exploration into the question "How far should one go for what he or she believes is 'right,' even if it causes other people to suffer?" Certainly, Ibsen never balked at the opposition he received. At what point should we?

Hedda Gabler is the story of another woman, a far cry from the sensitive Nora, who seeks control and influence through manipulative and abusive means. In her boredom, Hedda wishes "... for once in [her] life to have power to mold a human destiny," and rashly—but artfully—drives the destruction of her old flame and husband's academic competitor, Eilert Lovborg. It is only after her control over the situation has been taken away by Judge Brack that Hedda, in turn, destroys herself.

At the height of Ibsen's career, Ibsen's plays became almost exclusively auto-biographical, platforms from which to voice his concerns. Whereas *Doll's House* was based on an acquaintance's story and *Enemy* derived from his private rage, *Hedda Gabler* is a raw portrait of Ibsen's inner turmoil. Ibsen exhibited signs of emotional repression; his marriage was cold, his affairs—albeit many—were not physically realized. The pieces he published were often torn to shreds both by antiquated schools of thought and by those who parroted them. It is not hard to compare the characters of *Hedda Gabler* to Ibsen, his circumstances, or his emotional well-being.