

Ibsens ghosts vs. aristotles poetics

Profession, Poet



Ibsen's Ghosts, although a relatively modern drama, maintains many classical elements of tragedy as defined by Aristotle and championed by the ancient Greek playwrights and poets. One element displayed prominently in this case is character. Aristotle believed that there were four main elements to a good tragic hero:

1) the character must be good, 2) decorum, 3) the character must be true to life, and 4) constancy within the character's demeanor and actions. The tragic hero in Ibsen's Ghosts, Mrs. Alving, fits into these criteria, yet Ibsen also strays from Aristotle's conventions.

"The character will be good if the purpose is good." (pg. 27), according to Poetics. Ibsen attempts to create a good character in Mrs. Alving. Although she makes many mistakes and her judgments lead to the ultimate tragedy her intentions are good. "Yes, I was swayed by duty and consideration for others; that was why I lied to my son day in and day out." (Ghosts; pg. 29) She loves and wants to protect her son and to do so she feels she must shelter him from the truths of his father. "I

want my boy to be happy, that is all I want. Mrs. Alving's goal is to purge herself and her loved one's from the past and the guilt which she feels for hiding the sins of her husband and therefore her family name. " I had been taught about duty, and the sort of thing that I believed in so long here. Everything seemed to turn upon duty-- my duty, or his duty-- and I am afraid I made your poor father's home unbearable for him Oswald." (ghosts pd. 53)

Ibsen takes on a very modernistic' attitude in his creation of Mrs. Alving. The fact that she is female, intelligent and not at all portrayed as inferior to men, makes her character and role as a tragic hero unique and impressive. She is insightful and open to questioning the conventional thinking; " by praising as right and just what my whole soul revolted against, as it would against something abominable. That was what led me examine your teachings critically. I only wanted to unravel one point in them; but as soon as I had got unraveled, the whole fabric came to pieces. And then I realized that it was only machine-made." (Ghosts; pg. 31) He not only allows

a

woman to be the heroine, but he exposes emotions and situations which were not

necessarily acceptable at his time. Aristotle felt that " even a woman may be

good,.... though a woman may be said to be an inferior being." Here it is seen that

although Aristotle acknowledges that a dramatist could use a female as a tragic hero,

he advises against it. He certainly would not have approved of the strong and

complex character Ibsen invented in Mrs. Alving. Ibsen's apparent separation from

the traditional idea of tragedy seems to highlight the already controversial themes.

Aristotle believed that the second element to a satisfactory character is propriety. He

defines propriety as " a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous

cleverness, is inappropriate." Although somewhat unconventional, Ibsen gives Mrs.

Alving admirable behavior and being. " I had always before me the fear that it was

impossible that the truth should not come out and be believed. That is why the

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Orphanage is to exist, to silence all the rumors and clear away all doubt... " I had another very good reason. I did not wish Oswald, my own son, to inherit a penny that belonged to his father." (Ghosts; Pg. 24) This meaning that Mrs. Alving was a courteous respectable part of her society, and despite her problems, she remained composed and her motives once again, were appropriate in her time and society.

Mrs. Alving is a character created by Ibsen, but he created her in a way that made the audience believe that she was real. Her personality was true to traits of humanity and her emotions touched those of the audience. Mrs. Alving is a risk character as part of Ghosts, which was risk in its examination of society. The final element that Aristotle outlined as a necessity to a good character is consistency within the personality of the character. Mrs. Alving's actions and feelings are " by rule either of necessity or probability." (Poetics; pg. 28) Poetics outlines the elements which Aristotle felt were necessary to a tragic drama; these included plot, character, time, and feeling, namely inspiration of pity and/or fear in the observers.