

A mass of individuals:
a comparison of an
enemy of a people
and jaws



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Henry Ibsen's 1882 play *Enemy of the People* and Steven Spielberg's iconic film *Jaws* both address the same central theme: a power struggle between the needs of the individual and the needs of the majority. As Thomas attempts to persuade the citizens of the city to close the Baths, their economic livelihood, his argument evolves from a public-health plea to a barratment of a daft people, which he iconically labels "the tyranny of the majority." *Jaws*, based on this play, centers around Sheriff Brody, a character who, like Thomas, sympathizes with the victimized individual. Brody, however, goes through significantly more inner-turmoil related to his decision, evolving into his decisiveness. In *Enemy of the People*, Thomas stands as the sole advocate for the needs of the individual, using a technical and increasingly-disdainful tone to communicate his argument and express his contempt for the "tyranny of the majority." However, this style of argumentation, singular in its perspective and hostile in its appeal, simply alienates Thomas from his town and defeats his ultimate purpose of saving the people at risk. Conversely, in *Jaws* the champion of the individual is represented by Sheriff Martin Brody who derives his passion not from philosophical grudges, but sympathy for the shark-attack victims and obligation as the sheriff to save them. This multi-faceted, emotional, and protective approach by protagonist Brody, compounded by the presence of actual victims, effectively scares and, therefore convinces, the townspeople of the shark's danger. Unlike Thomas, Brody effectively appeals to each individual within the majority, allowing each person, as a part of the masses, to prioritize their individual safety.

As the play goes on, Thomas's language becomes increasingly technical, elitist, and accusatory, isolating him from the very people he is trying to convince and cementing his motives, ironically, as less about the victims and more about the principle. Brody, however, speaks less than Thomas and with more hesitance, empathy and awareness of the debate's complexity, making his plight seem more legitimate. Beginning hesitantly, Brody cowers to the pressure of Mayor Vaughn and his townspeople, mislabeling Chrissie's cause of death and opening the beaches. In the ferry-scene when the Mayor first makes his demands, the shot is taken from Brody's point of view, depicting Vaughn's clamoring, literally "in-your-face style" of persuasion (Spielberg). Then, after Brody has relented, the sheriff is shot from a high angle, portraying him as weak and vulnerable (Spielberg). This cowardice seems like it would make Brody ineffective and, originally, it does. However, somberly admitting days later that Alex's mother "is not [wrong]" to blame him for her son's death, this horror serves turning point for Brody's assertiveness (17, Benchley). This linguistic evolution establishes him as a true protagonist and demonstrates his significant internal debate which gives gravity to his strong opinions. Furthermore, the presence of victims adds urgency and realism to his claims; ironically, without death he would not be so empowered prevent death.

This, perhaps, is the largest hindrance to Dr. Stockman's argument: he has no victims. Unlike the shark, the danger of the baths still exists only in the hypothetical, making Thomas's plight less impactful. However, to Thomas's discredit, he fails to rebound from this ironic setback. Rather than using rhetoric to elicit the same fear for the baths that shark creates naturally, he

consistently favors “ I” and “ we” pronouns over “ you” — grouping the individuals separately from the masses (Ibsen). What Thomas doesn’t realize and doesn’t make the townspeople realize, though, is that the masses and the individuals aren’t separate. The people harmed by the baths will, inevitably, come from the masses. Too consumed by the one vs. many debate to recognize this, Thomas fails to appeal to the people’s individual fears and so his argument comes across as elitist and divided from the interests of the town.

Furthermore, as Thomas declares “ Let the [majority] perish! Let the People die,” he personalizes the town’s unwillingness to accept his findings and makes his motives less about the victimized individual and more about one particular individual: himself and his disdain for the decisions of the People (72, Ibsen). Essentially, he sways from his original earnest goal to ward off sickness and argues for his unachievable dream of toppling the majority. Brody, on the other hand, maintains his focus on the shark and victims throughout. He does not philosophize his argument, but relates it to the townspeople. Instead of “ calling for a lecture...about the facts” Brody speaks little and expresses his distress candidly as he solemnly listens to Mrs. Kintner and runs desperately to rescue his son (67, Ibsen; Spielberg). During both of these scenes, the wallah-wallah quiets, as though Brody’s heartfelt dedication to the individuals quiets the demands of the majority (Spielberg). This perceived sincerity protects him the accusations of false motives that inflict Thomas. More importantly, though Brody prioritizes the interests of the individual over the wealth of the masses, he recognizes that the masses are made up of individuals with fears as personal as his own; and

his signs of genuine, personal concern (perhaps inadvertently) appeal to these very fears, empowering his earnest goals.

Furthermore, Brody never loses his sight of his purpose: a desire to save the people from the shark. And, by sticking to this cause, he legitimizes it. Thomas Stockman, in contrast, quickly devolves into philosophical accusations, repudiating “ the People’s democracy” and ultimately destroying his original goal of saving the individuals (70, Ibsen). Brody begins with unassertive hesitancy, saying “ We’re gonna try and use, uh, shark spotters on the beach” rather than closing the beaches and only progresses to assertive passion as he witnesses more attacks (17, Benchley). Death is his motivation. As a shark jaw frames the scene of Brody sailing off to finally accomplish his goal of vindicating the victims and protecting others, so too does the shark jaw frame his ultimate purpose: he wants to help the individuals at risk without straying to larger, more hostile propositions (Spielberg). Thomas, however, fosters his passion through disdain for the majority, not concern for the individuals. He attempts to assert his elitist superiority and “ earned right to be called a [civilized] man” through his speech, rather than attempting to draw empathy or fear from the crowd (Ibsen, 69). Thomas may come to the conclusion that “ he is strongest...because he stands alone,” but his goals ultimately fail (98, Ibsen). Brody’s do not, because he appeals to the majority rather than dismissing them. Though we never see the town’s relenting to the closed beaches and shark hunt, Mayor Vaughn’s frenetic insistence “ that he was acting in the town’s best interest” suggests that he fears the people’s impending criticism (28, Benchley). In this turning-point the Mayor finally grants permission for

the shark hunt and Brody's emotional persistence — especially in the context of his own son's danger — proves effective.

Jaws and An Enemy of the People each address the power struggle between the individual and the majority. Foils who both advocate for the needs of the individual, Dr. Thomas Stockman and Sheriff Brody Martin take drastically different tacks. Dr. Stockman uses verbosity, technical science, and eventually, hostile accusations to make his case. The Sheriff, who rarely speaks politically, acts with more hesitance and emotional involvement that ultimately wins him the argument. It must be noted the presence of actual victims (and gruesome, bloody victims at that) significantly aids Brody's effectiveness in convincing the townspeople of the shark's danger. For him, the challenge is only to assure that his language does not undermine the fear created by actual events and simply let the horror speak for itself. Thomas, though, must instill this same convincing fear through language based only off hypothetical danger and technical details, which the people largely reject in the face of conceivable misfortune: the destruction of their economic livelihood. Thomas's language, however, remains divisive, dismissive, and generally unconvincing — as though his real goal is not closing the baths but asserting the supremacy of the individual. In the end, it may be Brody's style that wins out, but as the similarity between these two works shows, the overarching power struggle between the individual and the majority continues to persist.