

Ibsen's characters
are victims of
society's expectations



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The playwright Henrik Ibsen once stated, " Do you know what we are those of us who count as pillars of society? We are society's tools, neither more nor less." Ibsen was a great anti-idealistic writer of the mid to late nineteenth century. His plays were of a new breed, swaying away from the wholesomeness of the Victorian era, and instead attacking personal issues that he, and all those in his native Norway could relate to. This new writing style helped coin Ibsen as the father of modern drama. These modern dramas were very real, and the characters Ibsen created were in fact tools of society. Ibsen uses Halvard and Aline Solness of *The Master Builder* and Regine Engstrand and Mrs. Helene Alving of *Ghosts* to show how society's power to conform negatively influences others. Ibsen's characters in *The Master Builder* and *Ghosts* are victims of an idealistic society's unrealistic expectations. Aline Solness of *The Master Builder* is a character who well represents the dangers of trying to meet the expectations of an idealistic society. Aline is married to Halvard Solness, an architect also known as the Master Builder. Throughout the course of their relationship, she struggles to live for herself, instead she tries to fit the mold that society places upon her. Ibsen uses Aline to fit the role of the stereotypical housewife, one who caters to everyone else's needs and doesn't have a say in house matters. Although it is unfair, Ibsen is not far from creating the ideal housewife of that time period, since this play was written years before women's roles were expanded. Aline believes that she is expected to do whatever her husband needs, and in this case it is to stay out of his way and support him in his pursuit to become the most renown architect, or the Master Builder. Aline tries too hard to meet her husband's needs, and as a result falls into the trap of unrealistic expectations set for her. Society has such an impact on Aline

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that she completely forgets to live for herself. She has gone through many years with Halvard, and the only substance in their relationship was his career. Ibsen is trying to show that "Aline has nothing to live by but the categorical imperative of duty" (Morgan). Throughout the course of the play, Aline's obsession with duty becomes more apparent. A first example of this is when Halvard receives a visitor, Hilda. Halvard has not seen Hilda in ten years, and does not have even a slight remembrance of her, yet Aline vaguely does. She notices how Hilda and Halvard are engaged deep in conversation, and how this may be a threat to her relationship, yet she still goes out of her way to help her. Hilda asks if she could stay at their residence until she gets her life back in order, and without asking any questions, Aline responds, "I will do the best I can for you. It's no more than my duty" (The Master Builder, 111). Aline's false sense of duty causes her to stop whatever she is doing, and serve others. Several instances of this occur throughout the play, and each time Aline proclaims, "It's only my duty, and I am so very glad to do it" (The Master Builder, 130). This becomes so evident, that even the eccentric Hilda says, "Oh I can't bear that ugly, horrid word! It sounds so sharp and stinging. Duty- duty- duty"(The Master Builder, 131). From this, it is quite evident that everyone notices the effects of Aline's responsibility, yet she still gets nothing in return for it. Hilda's questioning helps show that something is missing in this so-called ideal husband and wife relationship. Ibsen is described as "deconstructing realism" (Hornby) in The Master Builder. The expectations that Ibsen tears to shreds are the idea that the stereotypical housewife takes care of the house and family, while the husband provides for the family and then comes home and the happiness is shared together. Ibsen is trying to show how this perfection cannot be met;

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yet Aline is pressured into working for no reward. Aline's lack of self need is lost in her drive to serve others, and eventually she has to sacrifice her personal freedoms as a result of being victimized by the expectations set upon her. One of the biggest things Aline loses is her desire to live. She may have seemed content, but Ibsen wanted to portray her as someone who was stripped of her livsglede, or joy of living (Morgan). From the moment of her introduction, Ibsen is trying to show that her quality of life has slowly been deteriorating. Ibsen says, " She looks thin and wasted with grief, but shows traces of bygone beauty. Blonde ringlets, dressed with good taste, wholly in black. Speaks somewhat slowly and in a plaintive voice" (The Master Builder, 99). From this initial description, Ibsen is trying to show the audience how far this once beautiful woman has fallen. Her black dress helps solidify the bleakness and gloom that surrounds her life, and the tone of her unassertive voice indicates that her word is of very little importance. Aline has gotten older over the years, but her aging is purely a numerical process. Because of her lack of inner progress, " Aline has grown old without growing up" (Morgan), and she never achieves anything during the later part of her life. Aline devotes herself to others but forgets herself, and thus she lets the unrealistic expectations cast upon her consume her life. Halvard Solness, Aline's Husband, is another character that struggles trying to meet the needs of an unrealistic idealistic society. Known as the Master Builder, Solness has developed a reputation for being one of the best architects around. Halvard is under constant pressure to be the best builder, and he will stop at nothing until that is the case. Unfortunately, his path to success involves many sacrifices, most importantly the well being of those around him. Halvard was very concerned with his standing in society, and it was his personal pride

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that played the largest role in him becoming The Master Builder. Halvard is a supposed master at building homes, yet the home he lives in is hardly a home for people. Instead, his home houses his workroom and his office. These details are found in the opening stage directions, and immediately help the audience identify that there will be a struggle for Halvard to separate his work from his personal life. Halvard is influenced by society into thinking that a man will provide for his wife, and thus be loved in return. The problem is that while Halvard may be a symbol of love and provide for Aline financially, there is no real love exchanged between the two of them. Society inflates Halvard's ego, and leads him to believe he is someone he is not. Unfortunately for Halvard, things do not work out the way he has planned. Unforeseen events that he cannot account for haunt his past, and new problems arise each day. These miniature roadblocks accumulate over time and prove to him that his dream of being the best and living in a perfect world is not going to come true. Trouble arises for Halvard when Hilda arrives at their home. Hilda is a distortion of reality. She arrives during a time of gloom. Before this, Halvard is quoted, " Oh, but this is hopeless, hopeless! Never a ray of sunlight! Not so much a gleam of brightness to light up our home!" (The Master Builder, 127). Halvard is beginning to experience troubles, but her far-fetched ideas fascinate him and give him a false sense of hope. Ibsen uses Hilda to push Halvard to his limits, making sure that he never feels comfortable. Throughout the play, Hilda influences Halvard into doing things that are beyond his capabilities, forcing him to make tough choices. Of course, when put in these situations, Halvard makes all the wrong decisions, showing that he cannot handle society's great idea of perfection. In his pursuit of the perfect life, Halvard is forced to sacrifice

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things that were once important to him, and as a result he becomes a victim of society. Richard Hornby sums up Halvard by saying, "perfection of the work seems to have blocked perfection of the life." One single mistake he made that ended up having the largest ramifications involved a fire in the Solness's first home. Halvard had noticed a crack in the chimney of the house, but did nothing to fix it. Selfishly, "he sensed, even then, that if the house were to burn down, he would be given a wonderful opportunity to advance his career" (Hornby). He thought if the house burnt down he could subdivide the land and build houses on it, and this move would end up establishing him as an architect. Thanks to this thought process, he never fixed the crack, and this is where the fire allegedly started. Tragically, the couple's two infant sons died as a result of the fire. The whole family escaped the fire safely, but Aline became ill and the sickness affected her milk. Driven to duty, Aline insisted on nursing them, and unfortunately both children died. Despite this tragic situation, Halvard, who believes that society expects him to be the best, says, "Thanks to the fire... I laid out almost the whole garden [into new lots]; and there I was able to build my own heart. So I came to the front with a rush" (The Master Builder, 136). Sadly, in the midst of such terrible events, Halvard feels compelled to be making a personal gain. Halvard's ego is so inflated that he considered the happiness people get from his work more important than the joy of human life. He says, "I have to make up for, to pay for- not in money, but in human happiness. And not in my own happiness, but with other people's too... That is the price, which my position as an artist has cost me- and others. And every single day I have to look on while the price is paid for me anew. Over again, and over again- and over again for ever!" (The Master Builder, 138). He thinks that he

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is being a noble person, and that it is his duty to contribute to society through his art. In reality, his carelessness and selfishness contributed to the death of two young children, and sent his wife into a derangement that she never could recover from. On the outside, it appears as if Halvard's struggle is quite different from his wives; for he has too much pride, and she suffers from an abundance of humility. This may be true upon first glance, but after delving deeper into their lives, it is obvious that they both are dragged down by unrealistic expectations that neither can live up to. Ibsen uses another play, *Ghosts*, to show how society victimizes people by placing unrealistic expectations upon them. Regine Engstrand is a character who struggles with her identity, is forced to make difficult choices, and eventually has her life ruined because of society's burdens. Regine is the Alving family maid, and is believed to be the daughter of Jakob Engstrand, a carpenter, and the Alving's previous maid, the late Johanna. Unknown to Regine, and a fact that is not revealed until the end of the play, is that Engstrand is not her father. Her father is the late Captain Alving, the deceased husband of Mrs. Helene Alving. This information is important, because it shapes the way Regine is raised as a child, and it is an influence in many of the choices that she makes. Regine embraces her position as maid because she considers it a chance for her to mix with the upper class. Considered a "social displacement" (Taylor), she has first hand experience with both ends of the social spectrum. Of course, the upscale life of the Alving family is much more appealing than a lower class life with her alcoholic and deceptive father. This puts Regine in a difficult spot, for she wants to pursue the best life possible, but in the back of her mind she feels the guilt that she cannot leave her father behind. When her father asks her to come home with him, Regine tells

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him with attitude that it will never happen. " You'll see all right! After being brought up here by Mrs. Alving- treated almost like one of the family- do you suppose I'd go home with you- back to that kind of house? You're crazy!" (Ghosts, 63). Regine is trying to forge a new identity, looking for a chance to start over because she knows that if she goes with him, she will end up similar to him. She is influenced by society, for she has seen how the upper class lives, and how they are viewed in such high regard, and she does not want to relinquish that feeling. Because of these expectations, Regine puts pressure on herself to be someone that she is not. As hard as Regine tries to succeed, the odds are stacked against her since the expectations are so unrealistic that they are insurmountable. Society is asking Regine to be two different people. Regine feels the need to please everyone, and thus she is pressured into acting one way around the Alvings and their Pastor, and another around her father. Desperate to leave her life of necessity, she will do anything to find a place to fit in with the upper class. She tells Pastor Manders, I'd gladly live in town again- for I'm very often very lonely here- and you know yourself, Mr. Manders, what it is to be alone in the world. And I'm capable and willing- though I say it myself as shouldn't. Mr. Manders - I suppose you couldn't find me a position of that sort? (65). She knows there are many possibilities for her, but she does not have a clue where she fits in. In a final attempt to find her place, Regine tries to form a relationship with the Alving's son, Oswald. Oswald was sent to France as a child, and Regine is filled with the hope that one day she will move off to Paris with him. In order to impress him, she learns small bits of French because she believes in his childish promise to take her to Paris with him. Once again, Regine makes choices that are influenced by the expectations on her. Despite doing

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everything in her power, Regine still cannot meet the expectations she believes she must meet. Regine's stubbornness and inability to accept her place in society end up leaving her with nothing, becoming a true victim of unrealistic expectations. Throughout the play, she is in constant pursuit of happiness, and to achieve happiness, she believes that she needs to be viewed as a member of the highest social class. Unfortunately, she finds herself in trouble as the play unfolds. In a terrible turn of events, Regine finds out who her real father is. This adds to the legend of Captain Alving and is a black eye for the Alving family, but more importantly it crushes any hopes Regine has with Oswald, since they would be half brother and sister. As the play ends, Regine finds herself with no place to go. She can no longer live a life of luxury with Oswald in Paris, and she wonders what could have been of her childhood. She cries to Mrs. Alving, "It seems to me I also had the right to a decent upbringing- one suited to a gentleman's daughter" (Ghosts, 84). Mrs. Alving feels the guilt too, and extends the message that she is welcome in their home anytime. Regine tells her that she would feel more welcome working as a prostitute than she would returning to the Alving household. The recognition of her fall lets the audience know that Regine has been victimized, and the fact that there are no options for her shows that she has been overwhelmed by society's expectations. Mrs. Alving is Ibsen's final victim of an idealistic society's unrealistic expectations. From the onset of the play, Mrs. Alving is constantly covering things up to protect the family's image, and making choices because she is afraid of what others may think, not ones from her heart. The first example of this is Mrs. Alving marrying Captain Alving. She was not attracted to the free-spirited sailor, but she did it at the suggestion of her family members. To an outsider, it looked like Mrs.

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Alving provided the perfect balance for the captain, changing him from a sailor to husband, but that was not the case. Because of the captain's wild life, Mrs. Alving had to "lock herself up in the house in the country, giving in to the captain's 'secret orgies' and preserving his bogus reputation, in quest for the truth" (Kelly). One of the efforts she makes is creating an Orphanage in Captain Alving's name. She hopes that "Captain's false image as a humanitarian [takes] on a life of its own, so that it can leave her alone to pursue her own interests; instead, her acceptance of this fraud destroys her, proving that a future of truthfulness cannot be built upon a past of lies" (Kelly). The events earlier in Mrs. Alving's life surface as ghosts, and haunt her throughout the rest of the play. Concerned with the image of herself and her family, Mrs. Alving is forced to create the illusion that they are the happy family that everyone perceives them to be. Unfortunately for Mrs. Alving, there is no way she can overcome these expectations, because they are unrealistic. The outside world thinks that the Alving family is perfect, but Mrs. Alving is aware that once you go beyond the surface, the family is far from perfect. The expectations set upon her are also unfair because some things are out of her control. Troubles with Oswald could have been avoided had he not been sick from complications of syphilis, a disease he contracted at birth from his father. Once again, the so-called ghosts are coming back to haunt her, and there is little she can do about it. Thanks to external factors and the fact that she recognizes the family's lies, the expectations become even harder to escape. Most importantly, *Ghosts* shows what sacrifices must be made when one tries to mold to the unrealistic expectations of an idealistic society. Besides facing her own everyday issues, Mrs. Alving is also plagued with the horrors of her husband's past. These horrors, also referred

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to as ghosts, are responsible for victimizing the Alving family, in a manner in which they never recover from. The orphanage mysteriously burns down just before its opening, and it is the first sign of many hardships that strike Mrs. Alving and her family. The family is under much stress, when finally they believe they have hope. Before any healing can take place, they find out that the orphanage is ablaze, and before they can do anything to save it, the orphanage has turned to ash. The idea that is that it "reduces to ash, the very foundations upon which Mrs. Alving has maintained appearances of happy family life" (Taylor). Once again, the only source of happiness found in the Alving household falls back to its true state of nothingness. The final blow, from which Mrs. Alving can never recover, is realizing that her son has come to terms with his illness. Oswald has been suffering his inherited syphilis, and the tremors he experiences begin to increase in intensity. His next attack is expected to be his last, so he gives his mother 12 morphine capsules, a lethal dose. Mrs. Alving is thrown into the most desperate situation a parent can face. She wants her son to live, but she also knows that shall he survive, he will live the rest of his life in agony. Before the predicament can eat away at her conscience any longer, Oswald asks for the pills. Ibsen leaves the audience to wonder whether the pills were administered, but either way it is obvious that Mrs. Alving has crumbled under the pressure placed upon her. Overall, the characters in Ibsen's plays *Ghosts* and *The Master Builder* do an excellent job showing how an idealistic society with unrealistic expectations can victimize a person. Aline and Halvard Solness let society impact them in the ways of duty and arrogance, respectively, while Regine and Mrs. Alving are influenced by the luxuries of upper class life and self-image. All of these characters have their own hopes

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and dreams, but unfortunately they let society re-shape them. The idealistic society of their time skews the dreams so that they are not attainable, and thus the characters become victims. Ibsen had the ability to manipulate his characters into doing whatever he wanted, similarly to how society uses us as tools to create whatever it may like. Works CitedHornby, Richard, " Deconstructing Realism in Ibsen's The Master Builder." Essays in Theatre 21. 1 (1984): 34-40. Kelly, David, " Critical Essay on Ghosts." Drama for Students 11 (2001)Morgan, Margery, " The Master Builder." International Dictionary of Theatre-1: Plays. 15 (1992): 493-494. Taylor, Anna-Marie, " Ghosts: Overview." Reference Guide to World Literature. (1995). Taylor, Anna-Marie, " The Master Builder: Overview." Reference Guide to World Literature. (1995).