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HENRIK IBSEN'S SOCIAL DRAMAS

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INTRODUCTION

The modern social drama -- or the problem play, as it is often called -- may be best classified as a modern type of tragedy. The theme of all drama is a struggle of human wills; and the special theme of tragic drama is a struggle necessarily foredoomed to failure because the individual human will is pitted against opposing forces stronger than itself. According to Clayton Hamilton,

"Tragedy presents the spectacle of a human being shattering himself against insuperable obstacles. Thereby it awakens pity, because the hero cannot win, and terror, because the forces arrayed against him cannot lose."¹

There are three types of tragedy, three varieties of struggle foredoomed to failure. The first type, discovered by Aeschylus and perfected by Sophocles, displays the individual in conflict with Fate. The second type represents the individual in a futile struggle, no

1 The Theory of the Theatre, 134

longer because of the preponderant power of destiny, but because of certain defects in his own nature. Christopher Marlowe was the first to use this type. Shakespeare elaborated and perfected it in such tragedies as Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear. The third type is represented by the modern social drama. In this the individual is in conflict with his environment; and the drama deals with the mighty war between personal character and social conditions. The Greek hero struggles with the superhuman; the Elizabethan hero struggles with himself; the modern hero struggles with the world. The supreme and the most typical writer of social dramas is Henrik Ibsen who perfected this modern type of tragedy.

Ibsen's literary works may, for the sake of convenience, be divided into the following classes:

I. Historical and romantic dramas: *Catiline* (1850), *The Feast at Solhoug* (1856), *Lady Inger of Østraat* (1857), *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1858), *The Pretenders* (1864), *Emperor and Galilean* (1873).

II. The rhymed satirical modern dramas: Love's Comedy (1862), Brand (1866), Peer Gynt (1867), The League of Youth (1869).

III. Modern prose dramas:

1. Social dramas: The Pillars of Society (1877), A Doll's House (1879), Ghosts (1881), An Enemy of the People (1882), The Wild Duck (1884), Rosmersholm (1886).

2. Psychological dramas: The Lady from the Sea (1888), Hedda Gabler (1890), The Master Builder (1892), Little Eyolf (1894), John Gabriel Borkman (1896), When We Dead Awaken (1899).

Some commentators include The League of Youth among the social dramas. It is, however, more of a political satire. Others, again, classify all the twelve plays from The Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken as social dramas. It seems preferable, however, to subdivide them into social and psychological dramas. The Pillars of Society, A Doll's House, Ghosts, An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, and Rosmersholm

are polemics against society. The Lady from the Sea, Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder, Little Eyolf, John Gabriel Borkman, and When We Dead Awaken are not polemic, but purely psychological. They are family tragedies and individual tragedies, losing sight of the state community. This is indicated in some even in the titles, which often are names of individuals: Hedda Gabler, Little Eyolf, John Gabriel Borkman. Rosmersholm marks the transition from the sociological to the psychological realm. Henceforth Ibsen's dramas concern themselves primarily with the inner life and conscience.

THE SOCIAL DRAMAS

The Pillars of Society

Among Ibsen's poems there is one, A Letter in Rhyme,¹ which may be considered as forming the introduction to the series of social dramas from his pen. In this rhymed epistle Ibsen compares the superstitious fear of sailors, when a corpse is aboard the ship, with the inertia of the world with its many corpses aboard which only retard the progress of civilization.

The Pillars of Society is Ibsen's first drama which amplifies this idea. The title of this play has in it a touch of irony. The characters that receive the appellation "pillars of society" are virtually the very antithesis of anything that goes to make up social solidarity. Society is viewed under the likeness of a rickety structure resting on props that are hollow with decay.

The drama tells the story of a life that has been

¹ Samlede Værker, IV: 417

erected upon a lie. Consul Bernick has for fifteen years been the leading citizen of a small Norwegian seaport town. He is a man of affairs, has a shipyard of his own, and stands in the forefront in matters of philanthropy and social service. With amiable generosity he gives four hundred crowns to a dinner for the poor. His home is open to the ladies' society which works for the uplift of the lapsed and the lost. In the eyes of his townfolk, Consul Bernick is, to use Adjunkt Rørlund's felicitous phrase, "in an eminent sense the pillar and corner stone of the community."

In reality, however, Bernick is a scoundrel par excellence in a gallery of rogues. He has had a disgraceful adventure with an actress, and has let an innocent man assume the blame. He has sacrificed the honest love of his youth for a mercenary marriage. He has saved the credit of the house of Bernick by a lie. Consul Bernick, the public-spirited citizen, has engineered his great railway project merely with a view to private gain. He, whose ostensible mission it is to be an example of integrity to his community, will send

the Indian Girl to sea with rotten timbers and sham repairs. He snubs his wife, and it is intimated that he has appropriated his sister's patrimony. Bernick, externally a stately and glittering pillar, becomes, upon closer examination, a mass of putrescent pulp.

Around this central pillar Ibsen has grouped a choice collection of other props of the same caliber. There is Rummel, the orator, who in an eloquent effusion says, "A Norseman's words stand firm as Dovrefjeld," but in the crucial hour, he is the first to break his word.

Another so-called pillar is Vigeland, a retired skipper who, because of his religious proclivities, is known also as Holy Michael. He can never open his mouth without a reference to Providence. It is Providence and the freight rates, Providence and insurance, Providence and repairs at Bernick's shipyard. Even the route of the proposed railroad, according to him, has been designated by the Almighty. What society is to Bernick, that religion is to Vigeland: a subterfuge

behind which he may conceal his flagitious practices. His true nature crops out when he interrupts Bernick's speech with a simple sailor's oath.

There is Hilmar Tønnesen, poet and hypochondriac, who ever declaims about "holding high the banner of the ideal," and who speaks of great exploits and deeds of valor, while he himself trembles at the mere sight of a toy bow that does not even contain an arrow.

Adjunkt Rørlund has appointed himself as a special guardian of local morality. He deprecates ever the rottenness which exists in the "depraved outer world."

Aune is a Bernick in miniature. Like his prototype, he, too, is the foremost man in his little community of workmen. When he is threatened with discharge from Bernick's shipyard, he engages in dishonest work.

The theme of *The Pillars of Society* is that the social lie leads to destruction. "Since Molière wrote his *Tartuffe*," says Henrik Jæger, "hypocrisy has not been treated so fully as by Ibsen in *The Pillars of Society*."¹ It is the hypocrisy which is perpetrated in the name of the common good and ostensibly for the good of the social order that Ibsen vigorously attacks.

1 Henrik Ibsen og hans Værker, 127

A Doll's House

In *The Pillars of Society* Ibsen had presented the egotist in his relation to the larger body politic. In *A Doll's House* he gives a pen picture of this same type as a husband in the home. This phase had been subsidiary in *The Pillars of Society*. Bernick ignored his wife and his sister and coerced his son. This secondary characterization in *The Pillars of Society* has become the nucleus of the plot in *A Doll's House*.

Torvald Helmer is a man who would be considered an eminent social pillar. He is a gentleman of excellent bearing, with an aesthetic personality and a finely developed taste. He is strongly opposed to everything that savors of deception and dishonesty. In his business he is so exceedingly scrupulous that he does not want to borrow money for fear something might happen which will prevent his meeting his obligations. And yet beneath this attractive surface veneer Ibsen finds a brutal egotism. Helmer is a man with circumscribed

vision and fixed ideas. He has learned to look upon himself as the center of the universe, and his preferences, his inclinations, his opinions are of paramount importance, while his wife is a mere pendant to his own important self.

The distinguishing feature of *A Doll's House* is the fact that Ibsen extends his claim,-- the insistence upon personality,-- and makes it apply also to woman. Woman, too, shall be herself, be a human being, not simply her husband's wife and her children's mother. Nora says,

"I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are -- or at least that I should try to become one."¹

Nora feels that she cannot realize her true self in marriage with Helmer. As Peer Gynt wanted to be Anitra's soul, so Helmer desires to be his wife's will and conscience. When she learns what sort of man he is, she has, according to her point of view, the alternatives: to give up her individuality completely, or to endeavor

1 Collected Works, VII: 147

to develop it. Ibsen makes her choose the latter. As the curtain falls, the reverberation is heard of a heavy door closing, and Nora leaves home, husband, and children.

Ghosts

The radical and unusual ending of A Doll's House evoked a violent criticism. People thought it was wrong that a wife should leave her husband. Ibsen's answer was Ghosts. The man Nora left was in many respects a model man. But suppose, says Ibsen, that he were a dissolute Captain Alving, and suppose that the wife were compelled to continue a union which is not a marriage, what would the result become?

When Helene Alving, after a year of married life, discovered the depravity of her husband, she went to a friend of the family, Pastor Manders, whom she secretly loved, and who loved her in return. This representative of narrow-mindedness and conventionality persuaded her that it was her duty to return to her husband. She was told that a wife is not set to be her husband's judge. She returned. Ghosts -- defined in the drama as "all sorts of dead ideals and lifeless old beliefs" -- had won the victory.

What does Helene Alving's sacrifice accomplish? Let the drama answer. Captain Alving dies "just as dissolute as he had lived." Oswald becomes the victim of a disease inherited from his father. In this drama the egotist is pictured in the rôle of father.

As in *The Pillars of Society*, there is also here a group of secondary characters to reenforce the main characters. Regina is the embodiment of selfishness. She is cordial and ingratiating to Pastor Manders because she thinks he might be able to help her get a position should her designs upon Oswald come to naught. When she learns that Oswald is her half brother, and that he is incurably sick, she at once throws off the mask she had worn before Mrs. Alving. She goes out into the world, and to her ruin.

Engstrand is a spiritual brother of Holy Michael in *The Pillars of Society*. He can associate skilfully his nefarious plans with Christian and humane motives. The fight in the dance hall, his marriage to Regina's mother, his lies to Manders, his plans with Regina, and his home for seamen,-- all these things, he fervently

maintains, have been inspired by a desire to glorify God and to promote the salvation of souls.

Manders, in his own eyes a veritable paragon of unselfishness, becomes, upon closer acquaintance, a member of the Ibsen gallery of deep-dyed egotists. He does not dare to insure the orphanage for fear that some good Christians might take offense. Public opinion determines his conduct. When Engstrand makes him believe that he,-- Manders,-- was the cause of the fire, and when Engstrand magnanimously promises to assume the responsibility, the pastor very generously rewards him,-- with the orphanage money!

Manders, furthermore, typifies another current social weakness closely allied to hypocrisy. It is the intellectual complacency which is satisfied with the god of things as they are and is not searching for the god of things as they ought to be. If this spirit were permitted to rule, the end would be spiritual stupor, and all development would cease.

An Enemy of the People

In *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* Ibsen had turned the searchlight upon the marriage institution,-- one aspect of social relations. In *An Enemy of the People* his criticism applies to society as a whole. Because of the storm of criticism aroused by *Ghosts* especially, Ibsen conceived the idea of Doctor Stockmann, a man who could tell his generation the unvarnished truth. As a doctor at the Baths, Stockmann has discovered that the waters come from filthy, unclean sources. There are infusoria in large numbers. Sickness and death have already resulted therefrom. In his naive way he believes that the citizens will be glad to learn about the discovery. Not so.

In his efforts at reform Stockmann first encounters crass ignorance in the person of Morten Kiil, to whom it appears to be a huge joke that there are organisms that nobody can see. Then there is the idolatrous reverence for authority and the worship of self, embodied in the

doctor's brother, Peter Stockmann. However, Doctor Stockmann is undismayed, for, as he says, he has the compact majority on his side, headed by Aslaksen, the man who carries moderation to cowardly excess. He also has the support of Hovstad, the editor of the local paper, Folkebudet. The doctor soon finds out that these men are actuated, not by motives for the common weal, but by desire for personal aggrandizement.

From now on Doctor Stockmann learns many things. He begins to lose faith in humanity. He sees that it is not only the Baths which are rotten, but that the whole social structure is built upon the "pestilential ground of falsehood." It becomes his desire to cleanse not only the Baths, but to remove all social rottenness. At the great public meeting he expounds his idea. The great discovery he has made is that the minority is always right and that the compact majority is always behind in the onward march of progress. Stockmann is the lonely individual struggling, in the name of freedom and truth, against society.

The Wild Duck

Ever since he entered upon the social dramas, Ibsen had emphasized truth and denounced the life founded upon a lie. Bernick, Nora, and Mrs. Alving had lived the social lie. Doctor Stockmann fought for the truth, and succeeded in making himself dreadfully unpopular. When the drama closes, he is just ready to begin his life work. What success he meets with we do not know.

In Ibsen's analytic mind it was but natural that the corollary questions should present themselves: Is truth always and under all conditions the supreme good? Does it not presuppose mature, enlightened, robust natures?

Gregers Werle is not a heaven stormer like Brand, not a challenger of the whole conventional society like Doctor Stockmann. He sets himself the mission to bring his friend Hjalmar Ekdal out of the lie. He says that he will rescue him from all the falsehood and deception that are bringing him to ruin. Gregers' wish at first appears to be to atone for his father's wrongdoing.

It is the older Werle's fault that Old Ekdal has been punished as a criminal, and that Hjalmar had been hoodwinked into marrying Werle's former mistress. Gregers wants to tell Hjalmar the truth in order "to lay the foundation of a true marriage." When Hjalmar has obtained this knowledge, Gregers feels certain he will "take a higher consecration, for surely nothing in the world can compare with the joy of forgiving one who has erred, and raising her up to oneself in love." This is what he calls attaining the "true, joyous, fearless spirit of sacrifice."

But instead of bringing Hjalmar Ekdal out of his miserable condition, Gregers Werle only gives him an opportunity to reveal clearly his weakness of character. The credulous Gregers has again presented his claim of the ideal in a cotter's cabin, just as he did in his younger days at the Høidal works. "Rob the average man of his life-illusion," says Doctor Relling, "and you rob him of his happiness at the same stroke."¹ In other words, no man, least of all a bungler like Gregers Werle, has any right to force an ideal upon people not prepared for it, or to create ideals for others.

1 Collected Works, VIII: 372

Rosmersholm

In his early social dramas, Ibsen had ever insisted upon a complete personality. He had always been the severe judge who had rejected everything that did not measure up to his standard. With intense fervor he had pursued hypocrisy and selfishness. With *The Wild Duck* a change came. Ibsen began to recognize merits in imperfect situations and relations. In *The Wild Duck* he sketched Gina Ekdal, according to conventional standards, a fallen woman, yet there is something admirable and likable about her in her practical management of the household and in her love for her husband. Who can deny that Hjalmar does not return her love in his fashion? From *Mora Helmer's* point of view their union is far from being a true marriage, and still Ibsen points out that there is something beautiful in their life. It is not void of love even if this love is weak and imperfect. The great champion of lofty idealism is becoming the humane spokesman of frail reality.

This charitable spirit appears still more clearly in Rosmersholm. Rebecca West has a shady past. She has not hesitated, by subtle insinuations, to bring about the suicide of Beate, Rosmer's wife, in order that she herself might fill the vacant place. At first Rebecca had a "wild, uncontrollable passion" for Rosmer. She has a liberated, modern view of life, while Rosmer still belongs to the old conservative order. She succeeds in converting him, but during the process she is herself transformed. A genuine, unselfish, sacrificing love is born in her. When she is at the goal of her ambition, her changed view does not permit her to accept Rosmer's offer of marriage. True love has exerted its ennobling influence.

In his first social dramas Ibsen exhibited the weaknesses of supposedly model personalities. In *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm* he shows that there may be redeeming features in people who are outside the pale of conventional respectability. In the process of time some of the extremes of Ibsen's radicalism were toned down.

MESSAGE

A survey of even a few of the numerous commentators on Ibsen impresses the student with the great diversities of opinion regarding the works of the Norwegian dramatist.

Georg Brandes does not hesitate to place him among the masters.¹ Another Danish critic, A. Schack, maintains

that Ibsen's literary work, considered as a whole, is a

dismal failure.² William Winter says that Ibsen obtruded as a sound leader of thought or an artist in drama

is a grotesque absurdity.³ Theodor Lasins says:

"Ibsen has been for me a 'schoolmaster unto Christ,' for he is the first man who has helped me to understand the law of conscience (la loi interieure). It is he who has opened for me the heaven of the gospel and consecrated me to the mystery of religious life, in that he has led me to appreciate the incomparable and the exalted greatness of the work of Christ."⁴

It is thus seen that critics, from a study of the same sources,-- Ibsen and his works,-- come to very different conclusions, conclusions sometimes entirely anti-

1 Henrik Ibsen Festschrift, 32

2 Henrik Ibsens Digtning, 196

3 Shadows of the Stage, III: 337

4 For Kirke og Kultur, 14: 326

thetical in nature. Literary historians, playwrights, socialists, journalists, physicians, and biologists have, from their particular viewpoints, discussed Ibsen's ideas pro and con in vociferous language. His ideas have been heralded as a social panacea. They have also been looked upon as thoroughly disintegrating to the social organism. His writings have been variously interpreted as idealism, realism, naturalism, socialism, and anarchism. His technique has been praised in choice superlatives or has been condemned with equal vehemence. In some quarters his admirers have formed Ibsen cults, and the terms "Ibsenism" and "Ibsenite" have come into use. To some he is an enigma, a sphinx, a mystery. Others claim deeper insight and furnish a key to the Ibsen secret and expatiate in learned terms upon the quintessence of Ibsenism.

The sum and substance of all this would seem to indicate that Ibsen cannot be reduced to any one formula. He cannot be labeled, stuck into the pigeon-hole of a system of classification, and disposed of once and for all. He is a living entity. He is complex, inconsis-

ent, variable, like the life itself which he mirrors. Without insisting that Ibsen is as clear as desirable, is it not reasonable to maintain that his works are capable of such varied interpretations because of their virility? Does not the additional fact that so many commentators and critics have been attracted to grapple with him seem to indicate that there is something about him worth while?

In a letter to King Karl XV, in 1866, Ibsen wrote:

"It is not for a care-free existence I am fighting, but for the possibility of devoting myself to the task which I believe and know has been laid upon me by God -- the work which seems to me more important and needful in Norway than any other, that of arousing the nation and leading it to think great thoughts."¹

It was Matthew Arnold who said that literature should be a criticism of life. Ibsen's social dramas certainly conform to such a requisite. His daring presentation of current social problems has suggested themes for many a debate. Nora's startling "declaration of independence," for instance, afforded such an

1 Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 102

inexhaustible subject for animated discussions that at one time hostesses were wont to request their guests not to discuss *A Doll's House*.

To be sure, Ibsen does not often suggest a definite solution to the problem he sets up. As he says in *A Rhymed Letter*:

"Kræv ikke, ven, at jeg skal gåden klare;
jeg spørger helst; mit kald er ej at svare."¹

It was not his business as a dramatist to provide solutions of the strange enigmas of life, but rather to force us to exert ourselves to find each of us the best answer we could. In fact, any final solution, even if possible, would not be desirable. As Boyesen says,

"It would be a calamity. Humanity would stagnate, grow torpid and indolent; and its glorious evolution would be arrested, if each new generation were not confronted with urgent riddles, both abstract and concrete, clamoring for solution."²

However, if Ibsen does not,-- like Bjørnson, for instance in the second part of *Beyond Human Power*,-- suggest explicit remedies for the ills of society, we

1 *Samlede Værker*, IV: 417

2 *A Commentary on the Works of Henrik Ibsen*, 1

are not justified in assuming that he has no message to his age. Ibsen's own opinion concerning a writer's mission is found in a letter, written in 1870, to Laura Kieler:

"Is it your intention to pursue the career of an author? For this, something else and more is required than talent. One must have something to create from, some life-experience. The author who has not that, does not create; he only writes books."¹

If we grant that Ibsen has a message, how is it to be ascertained? Ibsen is an artist and he works through instruments. His instruments are of course the characters of the drama. However, it must not be inferred that the end to which any of these comes is Ibsen's conclusion any more than it is to be inferred that what any one of them says is Ibsen's opinion. You are not to take this thing or that as the point of the moral, but to consider the whole result left with you and use your reason in your logic upon it.

In considering the message of Ibsen's social dramas, the first principle to be noted is the unbiased attitude

1 Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 193

he assumes in approaching and in handling a subject. He rids himself of prejudice and endeavors to consider every case upon the basis of its intrinsic merits.

As already pointed out in the summaries of the social dramas, Ibsen criticizes existing social conditions. There are, in the main, four elements in society that do not measure up to Ibsen's standard of things as they ought to be. They are church, capital, press, and family.

Nearly all the clergymen in Ibsen are representatives of a bigoted, warped, pietistic Christianity. Pastor Manders is nothing but a pious fool. Regina's question to Engstrand, "What are you going to fool Pastor Manders into doing this time?" gives a very significant clue to the reverend gentleman's sagacity. Molvik shows the minister in a state of degeneracy. Johannes Rosmer is sketched with some sympathy and is endowed with considerable nobility of soul, but it is to be noted that Ibsen makes him a retired clergyman and an apostate. Rosmer's sincerity and mental acumen enable him to get away from the narrow bonds of ecclesiastical domination.

The characters of marked religious proclivities,-- not ministers,-- are insipid personalities. Vigeland and Engstrand are notorious figures in the Ibsen array of religious hypocrites.

This portrayal of the representatives of the church should not be interpreted as expressing Ibsen's personal regard for the clerical profession. John Paulsen records:

"For ministers, whether Catholic or Protestant, Ibsen had profound respect. He always greeted them. More than once have I seen him in Munich -- when he thought himself unobserved -- tip his hat to a plain clergyman passing by."¹

What Ibsen censures is not the profession as such, but the men in the ministry who do not follow the highest ideals, who compromise with iniquity, and who pretend to be what they are not. He criticizes the weaknesses, the shams, the abuses within the churchly fold. When it is recalled that Ibsen's home country has a state church, it is readily seen that the ministers may become mere puppets who lack the deeper spiritual initiative and the zeal of a free and independent personality.

¹ Mine Erindringer, 194

Under present conditions the capitalists and men in civic authority, Ibsen points out, are prone to become hypocrites, brutal egotists, and even outright criminals. Bernick is to all intents and purposes a murderer, inasmuch as he insists on sending a ship to sea that he knows is unfit to make the voyage. The fact that it does not sail is not due to Bernick, and does not exonerate him. Rummel, Vigeland, and Sandstad are his associates in the railway project, and they show symptoms of the same character, but they do not get a similar chance in the drama to develop their latent possibilities. Peter Stockmann as burgomaster is a man of authority and influence, but Doctor Stockmann says to him, "You are the most abominable plebeian I have ever known in all my born days," and we feel that that is a sentiment that has Ibsen's hearty approval. Werle, merchant and manufacturer, has acquired his wealth dishonestly. Technically, he was able to shift the blame to Old Ekdal who had to go to prison for pilfering from the forest. Werle's attitude to his wife and son and to the members of the Ekdal family is as vulgar and reprehensible as possible.

Journalists -- and Ibsen's journalists are politicians -- are held in low esteem by Ibsen. They are represented as self-seeking, shifty opportunists. Hovstad, who says he values an attitude of manly self-reliance, admits he has espoused Doctor Stockmann's cause for the sake of ingratiating himself with Petra Stockmann, the doctor's daughter. Aslaksen is willing to print Doctor Stockmann's article so long as he thinks the whole town agrees with the sentiments expressed therein. In a moment of inspiration he even calls Doctor Stockmann "a friend of society." But when he discovers that this alliance is going to mean a personal sacrifice, he forthwith turns to the other side. "That fellow Billing that writes for Aslaksen's paper" is a turncoat like his employer. Mortensgård is another editor whose principles follow the lines of least resistance, and who compromises with truth in order to further his own private ends. The press, according to Ibsen's logic, must be paltry and vacillating because the public to which it caters is on a low level ethically.

The family institution has been thoroughly treated by Ibsen. Heller says,

"The foundations of the social structure rest on the mutual relations of the sexes."¹

The family question becomes for Ibsen the woman question. In his speech to the workingmen of Trondhjem, in 1885, he said,

"It (nobility of character) will come to us from our women and from our workingmen."²

In a speech to the Norwegian Women's Rights League at Christiania, in 1898, he disclaims however, that he has written with any conscious thought of making a propaganda for woman's rights.³ Ibsen entered the ranks as woman's champion, not in a partisan spirit, but because he realized that the cause of woman was the cause of humanity. It was an evolutionary growth of his spirit from the days when he tragically pictured woman as under the necessity of self-sacrifice and service for others, as Solveig in Peer Gynt, and Agnes in Brand.

In his social dramas Ibsen shows that the family life is on a low plane. In Love's Comedy he first

1 Plays and Problems, 136

2 Ibsen's Speeches and New Letters, 54

3 " " " " " 65

thrust his satiric shafts at the marriage institution. Peer Gynt has the traditional conception of woman as a mere pendant to man, a being that exists for the sole purpose of contributing to his welfare and happiness. Again, in *The League of Youth*, Selma, the forerunner of Nora, complains,

"You have dressed me up like a doll; you have played with me as you would play with a child."¹

Bernick maintains a very haughty and supercilious attitude to his wife. Their union, as Lona Hessel explains, is not marriage because it is not founded upon a basis of equality and a joint sharing of responsibilities. After his conversion, Bernick also changes his views with respect to woman. In his own words,

"I have learnt this, these days: it is you women who are the pillars of society."²

In *A Doll's House* the family is broken up because the wife's individuality and her rights as a human being are not respected.

"Helmer

Before all else you are a wife and a mother.

1 Collected Works, VI: 130
2 " " VI: 382

Nora

That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are --¹ or at least that I should try to become one."

In *Ghosts* there is a scathing denunciation of the profligate man who prostitutes the sacred relation in the most infamous manner conceivable and transmits the taint to his offspring. As the curtain falls, Mrs. Alving, with covered face, sits upon the ruins of her home, in the presence of death and dissolution. She represents the Ibsen woman in her deepest degradation. In like manner, the relation between man and woman plays a prominent part in the other social dramas: *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Rosmersholm*.

A genuine marriage, according to Ibsen's opinion, must be founded upon a basis of equality. Woman must not be a mere plaything, a lark, a doll. In his speech before the Norwegian Women's Rights League, Christiania, 1898, he said:

"The task always before my mind has been to advance our country and give the people a higher standard. To

1 *Collected Works*, VII: 147

obtain this, two factors are of importance: it is for the mothers by strenuous and sustained labor to awaken a conscious feeling of culture and discipline. This must be created in men before it will be possible to lift the people to a higher plane. It is the women who are to solve the social problem. As mothers they are to do it. And only as such can they do it. Here lies a great task for woman."¹

This means that woman must work. She must develop her personality which has been suppressed by generations of masculine domination. We may infer that Dina Dorf expresses Ibsen's idea when she conditions her promise to become Johan Tønnesen's wife by saying,

"But first I will work, and become something for myself, just as you are. I will give myself; I will not be simply taken."²

It should be distinctly understood that Ibsen does not find fault with marriage as such. What he attacks is the caricature of marriage, such as the union between Helmer and Nora which, as Nora intimates, has been a communion, but not a marriage.³

1 Speeches and New Letters, 66

2 Collected Works, VI: 375

3 " " VII: 155

Inasmuch as Ibsen finds the conventional home built on the "pestilential ground of falsehood," it must logically follow that the product of this home, the child, is without backbone, without initiative, and is the heir of the weaknesses and vices of his parents. Oswald Alving is the horrible example of inherited physical weakness,-- a living cry against the marriage of the unfit.

Church, capital, press, and family are the social aspects against which Ibsen directed his criticism particularly in the social dramas. The criticism is not directed against these per se, but they are singled out because their activities were so frequently abused in contemporary society. And so Ibsen, often with dramatic exaggeration, showed his country Norway in particular,-- and incidentally the civilized world,-- its failings.

In the foregoing discussion the negative aspect of Ibsen's message is predominant. He criticizes his age for its lukewarm attitude in matters of social concern. Another phase of Ibsen's message may be considered,

namely, the struggle between the old and the new,-- a conflict that goes on in science, politics, and religion.

Generally, these tendencies are represented by different persons, as in *An Enemy of the People*, where Doctor Stockmann represents the progressive view, while Peter Stockmann is the reactionist who clings to the old order of things. In *The Pillars of Society*, Bernick and his associates follow the old and conventional, and Lona Hessel,-- to some extent supported by Martha Bernick, Dina Dorf, and Johan Tønnesen,-- becomes the exponent of the new dispensation in business ethics and social relations.

Sometimes these two tendencies appear in the same person. Mrs. Alving shows ability to think unconventional thought, but she does not show ability to do unconventional things.¹ Rosmer announces that he has emancipated himself entirely from the past;² but Kroll points out, and the outcome of the drama proves his statement, that Rosmer cannot hope to cut himself adrift from all that has been handed down without a break from generation to generation.³ At first Rebecca West

1 Collected Works, VII: 224
 2 " " IX: 73
 3 " " IX: 114

possessed a fearless, free-born will, but the influence of the house of Rosmer sapped her strength and she was¹ torn between the old and the new.

Ibsen has no sympathy with the person who has become stereotyped in an order of ideas outworn by use and change, and cannot admit new ideas simply because they are new. He has no use for ancient formulas and ancient faiths when they have outlived their usefulness.

The revolution in thinking, particularly in science, that characterized the latter half of the nineteenth century,-- brought about by such men as Darwin, Huxley, John Stuart Mill, Taine, and Spencer,-- also influenced Ibsen. He is especially fond of dwelling upon heredity and environment. In *A Doll's House* we learn that Nora's father was not altogether unimpeachable.² Archibald Henderson maintains that Nora furnishes a striking illustration of the inheritance of acquired characteristics.³ Doctor Rank, in the same play, complains because his poor innocent spine must do penance for his father's wild oats.⁴ In *Ghosts* the problem of heredity reached its most horrible development in Ibsen. Oswald

- 1 Collected Works, IX: 141
 2 " " VII: 75
 3 *Interpreters of Life*, 209
 4 Collected Works, VII: 81

inherits a loathsome disease from his father which terminates in insanity. Regina, likewise, possesses the physical and moral depravity of her father. In *The Wild Duck*, Hedvig's approaching blindness is explained on the grounds of heredity.¹ Gregers Werle's sick conscience is a legacy from his mother, we are told.² In *Rosmersholm* Kroll explains Rebecca's whole conduct from her moral antecedents.³

Heredity does not include only the traits,-- physical, psychical, moral,-- which the individual receives from his ancestors. It also embraces what the race as such receives from the past. There are ghosts, shades of things that were, that stalk abroad in the land. They are opinions, ideas, and dogmas which the modern man cannot rid himself of, although he sees their untenableness. As Mrs. Alving says:

"But I almost think we are all of us ghosts. It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that 'walks' in us. It is all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and

1 Collected Works, VIII: 251
 2 " " VIII: 314
 3 " " IX: 115

we cannot shake them off. Whenever I take up a newspaper, I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. There must be ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light."¹

The complement of heredity, environment, also receives considerable attention at the hands of Ibsen. Bernick bemoans the fact that his environment has dwarfed his personality.² An explanation of Doctor Rank's "I see you're deeper than I thought"³ may be found in Nora's statement,

"But it always delighted me to steal into the servants' room. - - - It was such fun to hear them talk."⁴

Ibsen seems to show that Krogstad's experience,-- particularly with Mrs. Linden,-- has, to a considerable degree, made him the man he is.⁵ Even Alving,-- debauchee that he is,-- receives at the end a softening touch which explains, partially at least, why he became what he did. Mrs. Alving, speaking to Oswald, says:

"Your poor father found no outlet for the overpowering joy of life that was in him. And I brought no brightness into his home."⁶

1	Collected Works,	VII:	225
2	"	VI:	381
3	"	VII:	82
4	"	VII:	89
5	"	VII:	112
6	"	VII:	278

Peter Stockmann's attitude and disposition become more explicable in the light of his brother's statement:

"We must remember that Peter is a lonely bachelor, poor devil! He has no home to be happy in; only business, business. And then all that cursed tea that he goes and pours down his throat!"¹

It should be stated that Ibsen has not been, in every respect, faithful to the teachings of science. But it should also be noted that science itself has not yet ascertained the principles governing heredity and environment. Many of the problems in this field are still waiting for solution.

Politics receives merely incidental attention from Ibsen in the social dramas. At one period of his life Ibsen had ambitions to become a political leader of his people,-- just as Bjørnson was,-- although not in the capacity of agitator or platform orator, but in the sense of shaping the political ideals of his generation. His earliest effort in that direction is found in the poem *A Brother in Need*, written in 1863, in which he urges Norway to help Denmark in her approaching conflict

1 *Collected Works*, VIII: 19

with Prussia. How keenly Ibsen resented Norway's failure to come to the rescue in this instance we learn from his letter to Bjørnson, September 16, 1864:

"The political situation at home has grieved me very much, and embittered many a pleasure for me. So it was nothing but lies and dreams! The influence of recent events upon me, for one, will be great. We may now consign our ancient history to oblivion; for the Norwegians of the present age have clearly no more relation to their past than the Greek pirates of to-day have to the race that sailed to Troy and were helped by the gods."¹

In the poem written for the millennial celebration in 1872 Ibsen again voices his Scandinavianism, namely, that the Scandinavian countries should unite their forces and work for a "free, whole, and independent North." The League of Youth, 1869, handles the political situation in a satirical way. The general tenor of this is unfavorable to the radical element in politics, and so it was commonly interpreted as being a defense for the conservatives and an attack upon the radicals in general and upon Bjørnson in particular.

¹ Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 79

Later on, Ibsen changed somewhat in his attitude to politics, particularly Norwegian politics, and assumed a more distant bearing. In *The Pillars of Society* and in *An Enemy of the People*, Bernick and Peter Stockmann, with their followers, are political leaders as well, but that fact is not emphasized. In *Rosmersholm*, politics is more prominent, but even there it is subsidiary to the main story. As already indicated, Ibsen's journalists are politicians. They form one of the classes¹ against which he levels his attacks.

Ibsen is not to be regarded as a party politician. The conservatives in Norway hailed him as their spokesman after the publication of *The League of Youth*, but with the advent of *The Pillars of Society*, they forthwith repudiated him. Ibsen, then, pictures to some extent the struggle going on in politics between the old and the new views, but he cannot be set down as belonging to this or that particular party. He would apply his general view of life also to politics: that there must be no hypocrisy, that individual rights must be safeguarded, and that truth and freedom must be allowed free and unhampered expression.

In Ibsen's earlier works, notably *Brand* and *Emperor and Galilean*, the religious question looms large and imposing, but in the social plays it is rather casually treated. What has been said about politics applies also to Ibsen's presentation, in the social dramas, of the religious aspect. In the first place, it is treated incidentally. Again, Ibsen does not ally himself with any particular school of theology, but insists upon truth and freedom and the supremacy of the individual judgment in matters of religion. In the words of Lasins:

"For Ibsen authentic Christianity is neither a theological system nor a system of pietistic exercises, but it is above everything else life."¹

And now, what is Ibsen's philosophic view of life? Popularly he is called a pessimist. *The Wild Duck* is supposed to represent Ibsen at a point near the Schopenhauer level. The daring with which the dramatist in *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck* penetrates into the hidden recesses of the human mind, the distress and even horror pictured in some scenes have led to the conclusion that

1 For Kirke og Kultur, 14: 332

Ibsen is a pessimist. Let us inquire what pessimism is. It may be defined as "the doctrine which holds life to be fundamentally and irremediably evil, pleasure a fleeting dream, pain an enduring reality, and all efforts at the amelioration of human conditions a mere fostering of that illusion which nature has implanted in us to further her own inscrutably sinister ends."¹

Indeed, it would be difficult to bind Ibsen down to any positive assertion of the ultimate value of life. But at least he is sufficiently hopeful to have no doubt of its being worth while to correct such evils as are plainly corrigible.

In the first place, Ibsen shows by his choice of material that he is not a pessimist. Had he been, he would certainly at some time have showed the utter futility and the absolute hopelessness of life. He would have pointed out that the innocent and efficient person goes under, while the unworthy man is successful. But Ibsen has never done that. In *Ghosts*, Oswald dies on account of the sins of his father, to be sure, but the punishment also strikes Alving who lived the degraded

1 International Monthly, 3: 188

life of a sot and libertine and died a victim of his sensuality. But above all, the punishment strikes Mrs. Alving because, according to Ibsen's view, she might have prevented the calamity if she had followed her own better light instead of heeding Manders. Her awakening, unlike Nora's, arrived too late. Rebecca West goes to her death because, in the final analysis, Ibsen believes that "no cause ever triumphs that has its origin in sin."

Again, all of Ibsen's works are based upon the supposition that every man, no matter how deeply he may have fallen, possesses the ability to reform and to raise himself through an inner liberation, through the workings of the individual will. In the first four acts of *The Pillars of Society* Bernick is painted as black as he can be, but there is hope even for him when he changes his attitude and wills to do what is right. Indeed, we are inclined to believe that the dramatist has handled him with too much consideration. The door closes after Nora, but it does not lock itself. Torvald Helmer looks into the future and he seems to get a vision that the miracle of miracles will come true some time. Mrs.

Alving admits that her life might have been different. Doctor Stockmann has been stoned by his townfolk, but we are assured that he will receive support in his future work from his wife and children. Even in his deepest humiliation he sees the bright and beckoning star on the distant horizon.

Moreover, a writer who has created characters like Lona Hessel, brusque and blunt, but withal with very broad human sympathies; Doctor Stockmann, exulting in the mere joy of living; Petra, his splendid daughter, a most amiable and wholesome type of womanhood; Relling, erratic and erratic, but intensely human and likable,-- the creator of such types cannot be classified as a misanthrope. To be sure, Gregers Werle, at the close of *The Wild Duck*, says that life is not worth living,¹ but we must remember that Gregers is one of Ibsen's pseudo-idealists, and Ibsen does not necessarily approve the statement, or wish it to be interpreted as his personal opinion concerning life in general. If life was not worth living for Gregers Werle, that is one thing. But it is a very different matter to assert that life is not worth living

1 Collected Works, VIII: 400

for anybody. In discussing Ibsen's view of life, Georg Brandes says:

"The pessimistic philosopher dwells with predilection on the thought of the unattainableness of happiness, alike for the individual and the race. - - - Life itself is not evil. Existence itself is not joyless. No, some one is to blame, or rather many are to blame, when a life is lost to the joy of life; and Norwegian society, depressing, coarse in its pleasures, enslaved to conventional ideas of duty, is pointed out as the culprit. - - - Ibsen's pessimism is not of a metaphysical, but of a moral nature, and is based on a conviction of the possibility of realizing ideals."¹

Ibsen imposes more rigorous standards than the ordinary for judging human conduct. Not only the outward behavior of the individual is thoroughly examined, but his motives even are scrutinized. And yet, in spite of that advanced norm by which he measures values, the burden of Ibsen's message is that good must ultimately prevail, else he would not urge upon his fellow men the necessity of willing and doing.

1 Critical Studies, 52

In a letter to Brandes, 1870, Ibsen explains how he views the present and points out what is needed:

"Up till now we have been living on nothing but the crumbs from the revolutionary table of last century, a food out of which all nutriment has long been chewed. The old terms require to have a new meaning infused into them. Liberty, equality, and fraternity are no longer the things they were in the days of the late-lamented guillotine. This is what the politicians will not understand; and therefore I hate them. They want their own special revolutions -- revolutions in externals, in politics, etc. But all this is mere trifling. What is all-important is the revolution of the spirit of man."¹

The words "revolution of the spirit of man" are most significant. Ibsen was not a pessimist in the sense that he believed that all things were bad. On the contrary, he believed that a higher order of life was possible, and it was in the interest of this higher order, as he saw it in his mind, that he fought with stubborn and terrible restlessness.

1 Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 205

Ibsen was an agitator in literature, not a statesman. In his letter to Brandes, in 1871, he said:

"The state has its root in Time; it will have its culmination in Time. Greater things than it will fall; all religion will fall. Neither the conception of morality nor those of art are eternal. To how much are we really obliged to pin our faith? Who will vouch for it that two and two do not make five up in Jupiter?"¹

Ibsen saw a few sides of life at a time, and these he saw with remarkable distinctness. So when he wanted to bring out the fact of the transience of human institutions and the operation of the "law of change" in the universe, he would make an outburst like the foregoing. It should not be regarded as an anarchistic or atheistic doctrine, for it is merely Ibsen's way of making emphatic that there must be a revolution of the human spirit, and that this revolution must not be superficial, but must be very thorough and extensive. He believes that to change the outward systems,-- political, social, religious,-- is not sufficient. He is a thorough radical in the sense that he goes to the root of things. Not this or that

1 Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 209

system or organization needs to be revised, but fundamentally man's way of thinking, man's attitude to the institutions made and developed by man,-- these need to be revolutionized. "The revolt of the spirit of man," says Gerhard Gran, "means to dissolve (opløse) society in the human mind, to drive out the ghosts, to throw the corpse overboard, so that personality can develop freely without subjection to inherited outworn thoughts and feelings."¹

Such a revolution was necessary to prepare the way for the coming of the aristocracy Ibsen speaks of in his address to the workingmen of Trondhjem, in 1885:

"An element of nobility must enter into our political life, our administration, our representation, and our press. Of course I am not thinking of the nobility of birth, nor of that of wealth, nor of that of knowledge, neither of that of ability or intelligence. But I think of the nobility of character, of the nobility of will and mind. That alone it is which can make us free."²

1 Norge i det Nittende Aarhundrede, I: 328

2 Speeches and New Letters, 53

In order to attain this nobility of character it is necessary to dethrone the social lie. Ibsen has presented this thought in many forms and with many variations. When he wants to make people think great thoughts, to dispel the ghosts from the minds of men, to throw the corpse overboard, he has in mind this aristocracy of character as the ultimate consummation. According to Doctor Stockmann, a man is a plebeian who thinks others' thoughts, while a nobleman, according to Rosmer, is a man who thinks his own thoughts.

In this combat against the lies of the ages truth is to be the principal weapon. Ibsen himself told his generation the plain unvarnished truth. He pictured what he saw in contemporary life of sham, weakness, and hypocrisy with faithful realism, regardless of whether it pleased himself or others. He looked upon his mission seriously. If his attitude has destroyed many idols people liked to worship, it has in return fostered the great reverence, the deep and humble reverence for truth and its ennobling function in human relations.

But, say some, you are going to get into trouble with your preaching of the gospel of truth if you insist on it always and under all conditions. Yes, I know, says Ibsen in effect, that bunglers like Gregers Werle will work mischief with it, but that does not prove that truth is undesirable. If it proves anything at all, it is that Gregers Werle cannot deal with it. The attraction of the earth for bodies is a very necessary factor in the scheme of nature, yet for the aviator it is a disastrous principle when he comes in too sudden contact with the earth. Still the thing to do in such a case is not to endeavor to abolish the law, but to bring the aviation into conformity with the principles of the law. Similarly, when there is a conflict between truth and the individual or the race, the proper thing to do is not to obscure the truth, but to bring human relations into conformity with its operation.

Any compromise with truth, according to Ibsen, is fundamentally wrong. Even sacrifice, when operative in opposition to it, is useless. From one point of view, Mrs. Alving is a model of fortitude and self-sacrifice,--

a veritable heroine, but Ibsen shows that her efforts to suppress the truth are absolutely futile. She compromised with her better self when, at the behest of Manders, she went back to her culpable and corrupt husband. As Doctor Stockmann says,

"A free man has no right to wallow in filth like a cur; he has no right to act so that he ought to spit in his own face."¹

The concluding speech in *The Pillars of Society* is,

"The spirits of truth and freedom -- these are the pillars of society."²

With truth, then, goes freedom. Freedom is very essential for Ibsen. But as Paulsen says,

"The conception of freedom is for Ibsen less civil than individual. What avails it, for example, if a man gets the franchise, if his personality is not liberated?"³

This freedom is to be attained by work. When Mrs. Alving wants to get away from insincerity and restraint, she says,

"I must work my own way out to freedom."⁴

1 Collected Works, VIII: 165
 2 " " VI: 409
 3 *Mine Erindringer*, 192
 4 Collected Works, VII: 220

Nora gives expression to a similar thought,

"I must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them."¹

That brings us to another of Ibsen's cardinal principles: work. Dina Dorf wants to work in order that she may become something for herself.² Mrs. Linden says,

"I must have work or I can't bear to live. All my life, as long as I can remember, I have worked; work has been my one great joy."³

In *Ghosts* the thing sought by all people is the joy of work. Oswald's plaintive "Oh, not to be able to work" casts its gloom upon the already dismal spectacle.⁴ Doctor Stockmann exclaims,

"But there's life here -- there's promise -- there's an infinity of things to work and strive for; and that is the main point."⁵

Of *Rosmersholm* Ibsen himself says in a letter to Bjørn Kristensen, 1887,

"The call to work is, undoubtedly, distinguishable throughout *Rosmersholm*."⁶

1 Collected Works, VII: 148
 2 " " VI: 375
 3 " " VII: 115
 4 " " VII: 242
 5 " " VIII: 13
 6 Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 412

It is thus seen that work forms an integral part of a life worth while, according to Ibsen's idea.

We come now to what is virtually the capstone of the Ibsen message: the emphasis upon individualism. The most far-reaching movement in the nineteenth century was doubtless the one based upon the economic development. The universal adoption of machinery, due mainly to the general introduction of steam and electricity, effected a very marked and wide-spread division of labor. This in turn brought about the specialized workman and the overthrow of the man of all trades, with the result that mutual interdependence developed and the individual responsibility was lessened. In this grouping of activities the individual as such was frequently submerged. He became merely a cog in a wheel of a great machine. Ibsen rebelled against this order of things. Hence, his long list of characters, from Catiline to Rubek, who rise in revolt against the established order. In his letter to Bjørnson, 1879, Ibsen says concerning this point:

"It is quite unessential for our politicians to

give society more liberties so long as they do not provide individuals with liberty. It is said that Norway is a free and independent state, but I do not value much this liberty and independence so long as I know that the individuals are neither free nor independent. And they are surely not so with us. There do not exist in the whole country of Norway twenty-five free and independent personalities. It is impossible for such ones to exist. - - - I do not think it is our task to take charge of the state's liberty and independence, but certainly to awaken into liberty and independence the individual, and as many as possible."¹

Ibsen desires the individual to realize himself, to fit himself for his mission: the work of making people think great thoughts, or, to make people think for themselves and not to have their opinions manufactured for them in wholesale fashion by some machine-like system. There is no use in having a mission unless a man fit himself for its fulfilment. Consequently, the very first duty of an individual is to develop and strengthen his personality in order to make of it

1 Speeches and New Letters, 84

the most effective agency for the shaping of the lives of others. It is a cardinal doctrine of Ibsen that we alone can free ourselves. "We cannot be ennobled from without,"¹ says Rosmer. The self-realization Ibsen speaks of must be the individual's own work. Nora frees herself. Mrs. Alving's liberation, had she acted, would have come in the same manner. Ibsen does not go into details to explain how this self-realization is to be accomplished. Probably no definite method can be prescribed. It may vary with different persons and with different circumstances.

Such, in rough outline, is the message one gleans from Ibsen's social dramas. What, one may well ask, is the effect, the influence, the importance, of Ibsen's social philosophy? First, it is to be noted that Ibsen has appealed to the more intellectual portion of society. As Gerhard Gran shows, Ibsen has not attained his distinction by appealing to the masses. On the other hand, he has gotten a hearing among the élite. In that way his influence is greatly intensified inasmuch as he has helped to mold the ideals of the leaders in the domain

1 Collected Works, IX: 148

of thought who in turn influence their respective ad-
¹
 herents.

Many critics contend that Ibsen's influence has been harmful, that he is not a safe leader in thought,-- in short, that his message is immoral. Lorentz Dietrichson suggests that this conception is based upon a confusion of the author with his characters. He says;

"The readers are carried away by the dramas and become anxious to solve problems, problems that cannot be solved, not because they do not exist, but because the problem and its solution cannot be separated from each other, because both are endless, are life itself. That is why Ibsen's dramas are discussed as if they were real happenings. In life people do not make the Creator of life responsible for the individual man's moral faults, but Ibsen is made responsible for the sympathies, statements, and acts of his characters. - - - People seem to think that what the poet makes Macbeth and his Lady do and say, that he must himself be capable of doing and saying,-- that he must himself be responsible for."²

1 Norge i det Nittende Aarhundrede, I: 327

2 Svundne Tider, I: 367

Another reason for this interpretation may be the tendency to universalize the conduct of any one of Ibsen's characters. To illustrate: The question in *A Doll's House* is not whether any woman should forsake her husband and children when she happens to feel like it, but whether a particular woman, Nora, living under special conditions with a certain kind of husband, Torvald, really did deem herself justified in leaving her doll's home. Gosse says,

"Nora's departure was only the symbol of her liberty, the gesture of a newly-awakened individuality."¹

Ibsen did not argue that woman must throw overboard her duties. One might with equal justice rightly maintain that the example of Othello must set jealous husbands smothering their wives. In *A Doll's House* Ibsen presents also Mrs. Linden who is the very antithesis of Nora. While Nora finds that she must leave her home in order to realize herself, Mrs. Linden seeks the duties of a home. Her personality craves that sort of a stimulus for its expression. Those who insist on criticizing Ibsen for the creation of Nora forget that in

1 *The Life of Henrik Ibsen*, 275

the same play he has, with equal fairness and impartiality, sketched Mrs. Linden who is a type of woman that belongs to the conservative order,-- the very type for which these same critics are clamoring.

When all has been said and done, we must conclude that Ibsen has succeeded in making, not only his own people, the Norwegians, but the people of the whole world of letters, think great thoughts,-- think for themselves, in other words. People may not agree with Ibsen in what he says, or what they think he says, but he makes them think nevertheless. Perhaps this thinking process has been just as salutary to those who do not agree with him as to those who hold him in unmitigated admiration.

It may be, too, that his influence has been detrimental to some people. The fact that he ruthlessly criticizes everything, that he has the courage to doubt the validity of even the most hallowed traditions, and the fact that his views sometimes are not definite and positive may work harm to certain types of mind. Ibsen is an intellectual giant, and what he presents is not

food for weaklings. He requires strong personalities and mature judgments for his following. To people who are robust and vigorous enough to do their own thinking he is a stimulus and an inspiration,-- to them he points "the way to the stars, to the great stillness."

ART

In the preceding chapter primary consideration has been given to what Ibsen says in his social dramas,-- the contents. In the following discussion an effort will be made to show how he says it,-- his form, workmanship, art. It must be born in mind that there are no strict and infallible rules for play-writing, although certain general principles may be followed. Dramatic art may be effective or the reverse from two points of view: the stage or the closet. A play intended for the stage should ordinarily possess action; one designed for the closet, literature. A few plays are good to act and also good to read because they possess both action and literature. It is not possible at this time to judge with absolute certainty concerning Ibsen's theatrical effectiveness because he is too near our own time, and because his dramas have not been produced often enough before disinterested audiences. In the present treatment, therefore, the remarks anent Ibsen's art must primarily be based upon a study of the dramas themselves.

Ibsen's technique has in it elements of newness, but it also retains many of the old principles of dramatic workmanship. In the beginning Ibsen was no innovator. So far at least as its external form is concerned, the kind of play he proffered at first was very much what actors and audiences alike had been accustomed to,-- a kind of play perfectly adjusted to the existing customs of the stage. What he did was to take over the theater as a going concern, holding himself free to modify the accepted formula only after he had mastered it satisfactorily.

Ibsen respects the classical unities of time and place in the social dramas. *Ghosts*, for instance, occupies one day; *A Doll's House*, two days; the others, only a few days each. In *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, and *Ghosts* practically the entire action takes place in one room. Whatever occurs outside is reported by means of messengers and conversation. In *Rosmersholm* the action takes place in the sitting-room and study of the same house. *The Wild Duck* uses two homes in the same town. The setting in *An Enemy of the People* occurs in two homes and one public assembly hall.

In one of his earliest plays, *Lady Inger of Østraat*, Ibsen uses the soliloquy very freely to convey information to the audience as to the facts of the intrigue. In the earlier social dramas soliloquy occurs. It is often used in *A Doll's House*, but it is always used to unveil the soul of the speaker -- its eternally legitimate use, according to Brander Matthews.¹ The later social dramas of Ibsen have neither soliloquies nor asides. The objection to these time-honored expedients has been brought about by Ibsen, and their consequent relinquishment in recent drama is very largely a result of his rigid dramaturgic structure.

In his early period of dramatic apprenticeship Ibsen was under the influence of Scribe. This method of workmanship was characterized by all sorts of technological dramatic tricks and artificialities. Ibsen abolished these more and more as he progressed in executive efficiency. *The Pillars of Society* is a "well made" play, patterned after the French master. *A Doll's House* sets out on new paths. There are certain touches of dramatic irony, however, that Ibsen likes to retain.

1 *The Bookman*, 22: 573

When Nora is enjoying her domestic happiness to the fullest extent in playing with her children, Krogstad,¹ the man who brings her life to a crisis, arrives.

Just after Manders has been told of the dissolute life of Mrs. Alving's husband, he receives the ceremonial ode² written in honor of Alving. No sooner has Peter Stock-

mann said that there is a fine spirit of mutual tolerance prevailing in the town than we have a reference to the Baths,-- something which showed that mutual tolerance³ did not exist. Hjalmar Ekdal is talking about the

happiness of his home when Gregers enters and, with his claim of the ideal and his mission of reform, begins to stir up trouble in the household.⁴ Just as Kroll has

told Rosmer that he has no conception of the overwhelming storm that will burst upon him, Mortensgård, the harbinger of the coming disturbance, puts in an appearance.⁵

There is another structural device that Ibsen employs very effectively, namely, the creation of interest through suspense. Just as Mrs. Alving is getting ready to tell Regina and Oswald the story of their relation-

1 Collected Works, VII: 41
 2 " " VII: 213
 3 " " VIII: 8
 4 " " VIII: 248
 5 " " IX: 69

ship, Pastor Manders enters, and the telling of the story is delayed.¹ A second time Mrs. Alving is on the point of giving the information, and then the report of the orphanage fire comes, and again there is a delay.² Similarly, in Rosmersholm the clearing up of the relations between Rebecca and Rosmer is postponed time and again. The object of this expedient is to retain and intensify the interest of the audience.

The one most prominent factor in the structure of the Ibsen drama is the extended use made of retrospect. Obviously, it is the duty of the playwright to acquaint the audience with the antecedent circumstances upon which the plot is based, to inform the spectators fully as to the part of the story which has gone before and which is not going to be shown in action on the stage. Most dramatists have some of this, but the striking and unique thing about Ibsen is that he has so much of it. He has a fondness for dealing with the results of deeds which took place before the opening of his play. This explanation of the past is introduced very skilfully, not all in a mass, but it is dexterously woven into the

1 Collected Works, VII: 261
2 " " VII: 263

exposition throughout the first act. Sometimes it even extends into the later acts. But Ibsen is always careful to supply the information before it is needed, letting out in the first scene what is required for the understanding of the second scene, and revealing in the second scene what must be known before the third scene can be appreciated.

In the unraveling of past events Ibsen generally first removes an outer layer, as it were, delicately suggesting and foreshadowing what is to come. The gossiping of the women in the first act of *The Pillars of Society*, Nora's boastful speech to Mrs. Linden, Manders' admonitory sermonet before Mrs. Alving, the dialog between Gregers and Hjalmar in *The Wild Duck*, and the conversation of Kroll and Rebecca in *Rosmersholm* may be cited as typical instances of this method of approach.

An Enemy of the People has comparatively little of the element of retrospect. *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *The Wild Duck* are a combination of retrospect and action in the present. *The Pillars of Society* and *Rosmersholm* consist largely of a series of revelations of earlier events.

The employment of retrospect results in a closeness of articulation and a swiftness and directness delightful to all who relish a mastery of form. It is one factor that enables Ibsen to concentrate his plays in space and time as he does. Its inherent weakness lies in the fact that things reported on the stage are not so effective as things enacted. In *Ghosts* the knowledge of what had happened in the past is skilfully communicated to the audience at the very moment when the information is felt to be most significant,-- towards the close of the first act. But in *Rosmersholm*, strong as the drama is and fine as its technique is, Ibsen's method seems to be in fault, in that we do not learn until the last act about the transformation of Rebecca West. The lack of this information in the early part of the play causes confusion in the mind of the spectator.

Another innovation of Ibsen is his type of dialog. Its distinguishing feature is its naturalness. It is like people's daily speech, and yet it is neither trivial nor vulgar, but is very dignified in tone and in language. It mirrors actuality to the extent of presenting half-

uttered sentences, broken phrases, and exclamations. Word follows word as if by logic. One idea leads to the next in the most natural manner. Through what appears matter-of-fact conversation one gets glimpses into the souls of the characters. Ibsen's dialog is succinct and animated. Henrik Jøger, in speaking of it, has very truly said:

"Most dramatists are guilty of the great mistake of making their characters speak, in a greater or less degree, the language of the author. With Ibsen each character speaks his own language; and they do this so consistently that the peculiarities of each appear in the least details. He who has once read *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, or *Rosmersholm*, will recognize one of the lines of Doctor Stockmann, or Gina Ekdal, or Ulrik Brendel, among a hundred others."¹

One characteristic of the Ibsen dialog is the use of catchwords. These incorporate a recurrent mood of character or situation and are repeated over and over again throughout the course of the dialog. The device is so delicately utilized in the social plays that a

1 Henrik Ibsen, 269

very strong effect is produced by this simple means. By the "miracle of miracles" Nora simply means that her husband, when he learns that she has forged a check to save his life, will chivalrously assume the responsibility and the blame. But Ibsen manipulates this phrase in such a way throughout the play that the reader feels as if it really signifies something very wonderful. "The spirits of truth and freedom," "the joy of life," "the compact majority," "the life-illusion," "the certainty of innocence" are similarly employed in the other dramas of the series.

Another strong point of Ibsen's dramatic structure is his ingenious manner of giving exposition throughout the dialog. One splendid example of this may be found in the first part of Ghosts. In a few pages of plain and natural dialog the information is conveyed that Engstrand is a crafty schemer and an outwardly religious plebeian with a strong appetite for intoxicants; that Regina, reckless and unprincipled, has been brought up by Mrs. Alving and that she has designs upon Oswald. There are subtle suggestions of the stupidity and cupid-

ity of Manders. The great love of Mrs. Alving for Oswald is alluded to, as is the life of Chamberlain Alving and Engstrand's wife. All this is introduced very artistically, without any apparent effort, and without any violence done to good dramatic structure.

Throughout his dramas Ibsen manages to give very effectively what we may call atmosphere. One may not be able to point to any one thing in the drama which causes this, but rather it is the totality of impressions which produces it. A Doll's House begins as prittle-prattle idyl and gradually intensifies until it ends with a clash. The atmosphere in Ghosts is always gray and gloomy with mist that lies heavy over the landscape, illustrative of the crushing fear, the unspeakable horror, and the absolute hopelessness of the play. An Enemy of the People has a spirit of cheerful optimism, acrimonious hatred, and wild abandon. The Wild Duck presents a peculiar conglomeration of lithesome gaiety, tender compassion, and bitter irony. Rosmersholm gives an impression of quiet dignity and fantastic remoteness from actuality.

We notice, then, that the early plays exhibit the earmarks of Ibsen's apprenticeship in the school of Scribe. Eventually Ibsen acquired for himself marked independence and originality,-- in the realistic coloring of the dialog, the prosaic naturalness of the conversation, and the omission of monologs and asides. Ibsen possessed, in a marked degree, the ability to use the right word in the right place at the right time, or, in other words, he has a good style. It is somewhat difficult to discuss Ibsen's literary style in English, for,-- although the social dramas translate admirably well,-- there is unquestionably a great loss through the translation. William Archer, Ibsen's translator, confesses that

"Ibsen's dialog is incredibly difficult to render with any justice. Its beauty,-- its real and often remarkable beauty,-- is almost as elusive as the charm of verse. Its simplicity is apt to come out as commonness, its high-lights of imagination are too often transmuted into mere flashes of eccentricity."¹

No one who can read Norwegian doubts for a moment

1 International Monthly, 3: 184

that Ibsen is a consummate master of language. His style has a sharp contour and a chiseled form. It has no stiff and stilted phrases, no long and involved sentences, no high-flown and cumbersome medieval verbosity. Ibsen possesses, according to Johan Storm,

"A fine and discriminating art, a keen feeling in the matter of choice of language, and a perfect idiomatic form, which are the criteria of classic expression."¹

Ibsen's success in dramaturgic mechanics was made possible, in the first place, by his rigorous schooling as a theatrical director in Bergen and Christiania. It is significant that some of the most eminent dramatists have been educated in the theater itself. That was true of Shakespeare and Molière, for example. It is reasonable to suppose that Ibsen would never have become such an expert craftsman had he not been compelled to devote several arduous years to the actual work of putting on plays in the theater. That taught him to work for essentials and to eliminate irrelevancies.

To this practical experience Ibsen added deep insight into human nature, keen power of observation,

1 Henrik Ibsen Festschrift, 173

scrupulous attention to details, and a serious conception of his mission.

Ibsen is a profound psychologist. First, he reveals a clear knowledge of the intimate relation existing between mind and body, psychosis and neurosis. As an explanation of Hedvig's strange behavior we are told that she is at a critical age.¹ Likewise, there are suggestions of interrelations between the physical and psychic states in Peter Stockmann.² In the second place, Ibsen usually succeeds well in portraying the psychological process throughout its course until it results in action. The first time the thought occurs to Bernick that by letting the Indian Girl go out to sea he might get rid of Johan Tønnesen, it startles and shocks him. Each succeeding time the idea gets stronger possession of him and his resistance becomes less and less until he yields and finally insists that the ship shall go out to sea. In *An Enemy of the People*, too, there is an interesting and suggestive touch. Doctor Stockmann sternly rejects every advance at compromise, but he wavers a little when, by Morten Kiil's action,

¹ Collected Works, VIII: 336
² " " VIII: 19

the welfare of his wife and children is at stake. This makes Doctor Stockmann more human, and he becomes as a result a stronger and a more likable character. On the other hand, Regina is so consistently hard that she becomes repellent.

Nora's statement that she does not care if she is in debt if Helmer should die is a fine bit of psychology. In such an event the greater sorrow would overshadow the lesser. Another instance of similar insight is Nora's remark concerning the presents she has bought for her little girl,

"They're only common; but they're good enough for her to pull to pieces."¹

That the busy Doctor Stockmann, absorbed in his social reforms, cannot remember the name of the maid is a masterly stroke in characterization. Again, another felicitous touch is Gina's naive statement, after Hjalmar has found out about her past life,

"I'd come to care for you so much, you see; and I couldn't go and make myself utterly miserable."²

1 Collected Works, VII: 7
2 " " VIII: 328

There are instances, however, when Ibsen's psychology seems to be at fault. The sudden transformation of Consul Bernick, for example, does not seem amply motivated. Bernick "turns from sinner to saint with a swiftness that exceeds the usual speed limit of moral regeneration."¹ Nora goes into that wonderful other room and picks up a character and an intelligence. To have such a transition occur as occurs in Nora in so short a time is a violation of our notions of probability. Moreover, it is psychologically inexplicable why Rosmer commits suicide, since he is not an accomplice in Rebecca West's wrong-doing.

While Ibsen read considerably and promiscuously, it cannot be said that he was in any way a man of culture in the academic sense. But he was endowed with an intuitive power that drew information from events and from the spirit of the time. He went through the world a student of men, keenly observing the living flow of life. Ibsen maintained his connection with the outer world in three ways. He kept his eyes wide open and avoided dreaminess while walking. He took up his position

1 Plays and Problems, 121

regularly in restaurants (Cafe Maximilian in Munich and Grand Hotel in Christiania) near the door and preferably before mirrors where he could study the passing individuals who represented to him the nation. Finally, he read the Norwegian newspapers, advertisements and all, from the top of the first page to the bottom of the last.

Ibsen's scrupulous attention to details has become well-nigh proverbial. There has perhaps never been an author who could answer so many questions about his characters. John Paulsen relates that on one occasion he asked Ibsen why he had given the leading character in *A Doll's House* such a common name as Nora. Ibsen replied instantly that her real name was Leonore, but that everybody called her Nora, for she was the spoilt child of the family.¹

Ibsen wrote his plays three times. After the first draft, his degree of acquaintance with his characters was like that a traveler gets of his companions on a journey. After the second writing, he knew them more intimately, as one knows people after having been with them four weeks at a summer resort. He had gotten

1 Nye Erindringer, 130

hold of the fundamental traits and their individual peculiarities. After the final revision, his characters became like old friends he had learned to know from intimate and extended association.

Ibsen believed he had a mission and he consecrated himself to its realization with unswerving devotion and loyalty. For the sake of realizing himself and achieving his great purpose,-- that of making people think great thoughts,-- he went into a voluntary exile for twenty-seven years. For the accomplishment of his ideal he felt that he must free himself from every sort of bond that might hamper his liberty of thought and action. He denied himself friends, for, as he wrote to Brandes:

"Friends are an expensive luxury; and when a man's whole capital is invested in a calling and a mission in life, he cannot afford to keep them. The costliness of keeping friends does not lie in what one does for them, but in what one, out of consideration for them, refrains from doing."¹

1 Letters of Henrik Ibsen, 182

Niels Møller very aptly says:

"I know no man in all history who has administered his genius with greater seriousness than Henrik Ibsen. His authorship was everything to him."¹

As one considers the message and the art of the Norwegian prophet and poet, Henrik Ibsen, one is deeply impressed with the fact that he was a man who lived and wrought with loyal devotion to the best light that he knew. There may be disagreement about the tenets of his philosophy and the enduring strength of his technique, but all fair critics will unite in giving homage to the man who labored so faithfully and so well to rear his structure of thought into a monument of truth and beauty for the children of men.

1 Nordisk Tidskrift, 1906: 392

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