

## The Haunting Taste of Henrik Ibsen's Ghosts

Kakila Singh

A new spirit entered the English Theatre from 1860 under the influence of foreign dramatists, the most famous of whom was Henrik Ibsen. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is generally credited with being the “father of modern drama” and most studies of modern theatre start with his works. He is credited with providing modern drama with realism, lyricism, masterful plot construction and discussion particularly of social issues in the “problem plays” for which he is best known.

Ibsen was known as one of our first modern “realistic” playwrights. He had taught men that drama; if it was to live a true life of its own must deal with human emotions, with things near and dear to ordinary men and women. He wrote plays in the late 19th century, which were attempts to deal with real social issues in a realistic manner- a manner which portrayed real people with real language in real settings. He wanted the audiences to believe in his characters and situations so they could not avoid what he had to say about it or the challenges to their values which his plays presented. His plays were usually volatile investigations into topical social problems. As a result Ibsen is commonly held to be: a social playwright. He is a man with a mission: *“to awaken the nation and to lead it to think great thoughts. Everyone must strive to improve the state world.”*

Ibsen’s plays were flayed and hissed on many occasions. The most flagrant instance of this was reaction to “Ghosts”. Ibsen wrote “Ghosts” in 1881. When first produced it created uproar from audiences and critics alike because of its uncompromising treatment of a taboo subject venereal disease. The play deals with family threads of sexual promiscuity, insanity and motherly suffocation, which, until Ibsen’s play, had been kept safely under wraps by the censor boards. So far from being a “problem play”, in which Ibsen exposes the social ills of his day, Ghosts has more in common with Greek tragedy, in the sense that it demonstrates the inexplicable workings of fate, which no course of antibiotic can reverse.

On its first presentation, more than 100years ago, Ghosts was considered an abomination, a gross obscenity. However, in the age of AIDS, it may have more relevance than ever, with its themes of disease as a moral judgment, and (secondarily) of euthanasia in the play shows remarkable resilience. On its publication in Scandinavia it was so vehemently attacked in the press that its sales in book form were seriously affected. Ibsen could not find a single theatre either in his native Norway or England that would agree to allow it on the stage. The stark, realistic material Ibsen addressed in “Ghosts” – dysfunctional marriage, adultery and even venereal disease ...was considered so scandalous that it was banned from stages in Norway for about fifteen years and from England’s stages for about five years, clearly, this was no ordinary play. It is one of the most vilified plays in the theatre history. The reaction of the press to the first London production on 13th march 1891 was memorably recorded by William Archer in the anthology of cuttings, which he compiled that occasion:

*"Ibsen's positively abominable play called Ghosts... an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publically; a lazar house with all its windows open... candid foulness... offensive cynicism... Ibsen's melancholy and malodorous world... absolutely loathsome and fetid... gross almost putrid indecorum... literary carrion ... crapulous stuff"*<sup>1</sup>. Ibsen anticipated such a reception. In 1881, he wrote a letter to Jacob Hegel in which he stated *"Ghosts will probably cause alarm in some circles; but that can't be helped. If it didn't, there would have been no necessity for me to have written it."* Ibsen's contemporaries saw Ghosts as a play about a physical illness and failed to see what it is really about. The play is truly about the *"devitalizing effect of a dumb acceptance of convention."*<sup>2</sup>

It stressed the importance of waging war against the past, the need for each individual to find freedom, and the danger of renouncing law in the name of duty. It attacked the hollowness of great reputations, provincialism of outlook, the narrow and inhibiting effect of small-town life, the suppression of individual freedom from within as well as from outside world, and the neglect of the significance of heredity, in fact Oswald's very illness could be a symbol of the dead customs and traditions, which cripple us and lay waste to our lives.

The play has been remarked by one of the actress who played the role of Regina, as *"it is only a very imperceptive person that sees in the Ghosts the presentation of a single social problem. The true ghosts of the play are a whole legion of outmoded beliefs and ideals. They are dead ideas of conduct with which we have been brought up, notions of duty and obligation, conceptions of law and order that, in the lines of the play, I characterize as the cause of all the unhappiness in the world."*<sup>3</sup>

For the characters in Ghosts, tomorrow is a big day. They are all convening on Rosenvold, the Alving estate, to dedicate the Captain Alving Memorial Orphanage. Mrs. Alving is the widow of Captain Alving a gentleman widely respected in his community. Mrs. Alving kept his true behavior – alcoholism, womanizing, and illness – secret for twenty years. She sent her son, Oswald, away at age of seven to protect him from the polluting influence of his father, who also had an illegitimate daughter by a maid servant. This daughter, Regina, was brought up by the carpenter Engstrand and now works in Mrs. Alving's house.

Pastor Manders is a clergyman in town and the executor of the Alving Estate. He's an old friend of the family. In fact, Mrs. Alving was in love with him and once fled to him from her husband. Pastor Manders sent her home, citing her duty and his need to protect his reputation. She tells Pastor Manders the truth about her husband, but still wants to keep it hidden from Oswald. Oswald has secrets of his own. He's terminally ill with syphilis (the same illness his father had) and has come home. In a private talk with his mother, Oswald, confesses that he has an incurable disease which the doctors thinks was inherited. Oswald however believes his father to have been a perfect man. Mrs Alving, then must confess that Mr Alving had indeed been a degenerated man and that Oswald caught this disease from his father. Oswald knows that he is dying he wanted to marry Regina. He wanted her to take care of him, and will give poison when he is next struck by the disease. Mrs. Alving then explains that this can't happen – they don't know they're brother and sister. This does not bother Oswald, but

Regina refuses to stay. Oswald and Mrs. Alving are left alone, and Oswald asks his mother to put him to death. She agrees, but doesn't realize it will come so soon. As the play ends, the sun is rising, Oswald is slumped in a vegetative state, and Mrs. Alving stands with the morphine, trying to decide what to do.

The Alving's family unhappiness stems from the sacrifices and the "secrets that kill",<sup>4</sup> which the ghosts of outmoded ideas of patriarchy and social propriety threaten to entrap all. Mrs Alving struggles against the ghosts of the past that 'sit' in her brain. Her attempts to keep the image of propriety in a society that demands her perfection and "duty" toward her husband and her church contrast sharply with her desires to learn and exorcise the ghosts that control her life. Her duty to her son Oswald is admirable, but Mrs Alving struggle to protect her son ends in vain as the sins of the father visit upon her son in the form of a debilitating disease, syphilis.

Considering the fact that Ibsen wrote his play over 100 years ago, *Ghosts* still confront issues that are contemporary today as they were in 1881. The venereal disease syphilis, (although its presence in the play is merely suggested) is an illness that is both deadly and contagious as AIDS. The social stigma and horror surrounding syphilis bares an eerie resemblance to some people's attitudes towards sufferers of AIDS, and the subject issue of euthanasia confronts the characters as syphilis takes its hold on Oswald life.

Behind the surfaces of the savage story *Ghosts* is Ibsen's more serious and disinterested brooding upon the human condition in general, where it underlines the myopic rebellions and empty clichés of the time. In accordance with the principles of the thesis play, it is plotted as a series of debate on conventional morality.

There are two basic themes in *Ghosts*. In the first place, it is a violent attack on conventional morality. Pastor Mander embodies everything Ibsen hated in those conventions; therefore, whatever we are told about Manders and his relations with the world around him applies to the conventions-the "ghost" of the title. Manders is for example, an unconscious hypocrite.

Though he sees himself as a moral and ethical leader, he is motivated almost exclusively by fear of what others think of him, this is very much clear in his discussion with Mrs Alving regarding the insurance of the orphanage. Pastor fears that if the orphanage is insured, his wealthier patrons may insist that he is showing less reliance than he should on divine providence. The decision not to insure the orphanage is, then, based neither on an interpretation of God's will nor on a concern for the orphans, but on a fear of public opinion. To Ibsen, therefore, the conventional moral code is itself hypocritical, and those who adhere to it are neither morally nor spiritually motivated.

In the closing act, fear of – what others may think proves to be Manders undoing. After the orphanage has burned to the ground, the unscrupulous, consciously hypocritical Engstrand convinces the Pastor that he, Manders, caused the fire. Since Manders sole concern is with his reputation, when Engstrand "accepts" the blame for the fire (and it is clear that he set it), the greatly relieved Manders agrees to provide financial support for Engstrand's "Sailor's Home"- a "home" that will clearly be little more than a brothel. To save his own skin, the spiritual mentor agrees to underwrite immorality.

Hypocrisy and opportunism, in fact, pervade the moral landscape of the play. Engstrand is an obvious and open hypocrite, a confident man who has persuaded Manders that he is a worthy soul. Regina sets her cap for Oswald, not because she loves him but because she wants to be taken to Paris and, as a second string to her bow, makes advances to Pastor Manders. And, though Mrs Alving is a thoroughly sympathetic character, she too has played the hypocrite in the past, hiding the life-long philandering of her husband behind a wall of public respectability: the last stone in that wall was to have been the orphanage named in Captain Alving's honor, but, ironically, his real, and more fitting, memorial is to be Engstrand's "Sailor's Home."

To Ibsen, the moral code enforces hypocrisy, and it ranges far beyond the reach of Mrs Alving's house. When Manders suggests that men of means might object to insuring the orphanage, he suggests also (without understanding the implications of his statement) that these men, while speaking in spiritual terms, are interested in the orphanage solely for financial reasons; it will reduce the taxes they pay for charitable purposes. In an intense confrontation with Oswald (one of the scenes the audience of Ibsen's time found objectionable because Oswald defends unmarried cohabitation), Manders accuses Oswald of having moved in openly immoral circles in Paris, only to be told that Oswald has indeed seen a good deal of immorality abroad – when some of Manders respectable parishioners have come to Paris to have their fling, *"then we had a chance of learning something, I can tell you"*

The exposure of the conventional code in itself might have created a comedy – Engstrand and Manders are in many ways comic figures. Or it might have led to a serious problem play. But there is a second, more subtly stated them, and in lies the play's tragic momentum. For an understanding and exposure of the conventions does not destroy them of their power to harm; the truth does not make one free in Ibsen's worst of all possible worlds.

Mrs Alving is quite contemptuous of the conventional code. She herself as an emancipated women who has freed herself of her past and, by recalling Oswald from Paris, ensured her future happiness. In Act I, she seems in complete control of the situation; she is tranquil, confident, and certain of herself. *"I shall be free at last... I shall forget that such a person as Alving ever lived in this house – there'll be no one here but my son and me."* But at that point, the conclusion of Act I, she and Manders hear Oswald running after the servant (and, unknown to him, his half-sister) Regina, an echo of the affair between Captain Alving and the servant who was Regina's mother. In the sad and bitter discussion that opens Act ii, Mrs Alving, no longer certain that the past can be shunted aside, states the second theme of the play explicitly: *"We're all haunted in this world ... by the ghosts of innumerable old prejudices and beliefs-half-forgotten cruelties and betrayals...and we can't get rid of them"*.

She does, however, make several more efforts to "get rid of them". When Oswald, telling her guilty that he has acquired a venereal disease, speaks of the "joy of life" and the "joy of work", Mrs Alving sees a pattern in the past that she had not discerned before. To Oswald and to Regina, both of whom have been kept in the dark, she reveals the full truth about Captain Alving- that he was a drunkard and a philanderer all his life. But at long last she manages to understand and excuse him, insisting that he had "joy of life" in him for which

his conventional environment could provide no outlet. The Captain's wasted life, she goes on to declare, was her own responsibility, because, instead of offering him "joy", she judged him by society's standards, thus driving him elsewhere – to one of the servants, among others. Mrs Alving's final effort to face and, hopefully, undo the past, fails. Regina, learning that she should have been a daughter, not a servant, in Mrs Alving's house, reacts with bitterness, and leaves. Oswald, facing mental oblivion, is more alone than ever. And, as the curtain comes down, Captain Alving's legacy to Oswald, the last stage of venereal disease, strikes the boy as Mrs Alving stares at the horror that is her life. Physically, as well as spiritually, the past has destroyed both present and future.

The "sins of the father": applied as an abbreviation for the play's theme is literally a misnomer: it is Mrs Alving, the mother, who committed the initial sin. To preserve the sanctity of her marriage, and to assure the purity of her son, she has created a fiction, making the world believe that her dissolute husband was a paragon of virtue. It is Mrs Alving's awakening to the hollowness of blind duty that provides the main dramatic thrust.

It has been said that the play *Ghosts* written directly after "A Doll's House" represents the reverse side of the Ibsenian coin, posing the question: what would have happened if Nora had not slammed the door, but had remained victimized within her oppressive marriage? The author's answer is that she would have turned into Mrs Alving, a woman who has dedicated herself to false ideal and wasted her life. It dramatizes the answer Nora had left home to find: society's ideals are a harmful, rotten façade. The failure of this wife, Mrs Alving, to defy convention is immoral: her conventional ideals and her loveless marriage become retributive "Ghosts" as much as do the profligacy and disease of her late husband.

Ibsen directs a blistering criticism at society and its annihilating forces. It was not only the subject of inherited venereal disease that offended but Ibsen's broad-fronted assault on bourgeois hypocrisy, smugness and deceptions. It is a criticism which targets the most agreeable representative of that milieu and who is its one rebellious element. It is precisely the presentation of Mrs Alving's battle against the reactionary forces within herself that demonstrates Ibsen's insight into the psyche of the bourgeois rebel. The rebel too bears a share of responsibility in this respect of the society which denies the new "The truth and freedom", and which thereby resists change, Mrs Alving is a rebel who fears rebellion.

The situations in which Nora Helmer and Helene Alving have for many years found themselves show clear points of similarity. Both women have elected to play a game of deceit, "*that long ghastly force*" 5, as Mrs Alving calls it. They felt compelled into it in the interests of those they loved: in the one case the husband Torvald, and in the other the son Oswald. But they were also under social pressure, and this was the reason they had to have recourse to "devious ways", they lived the whole time in fear that the masquerade would be exposed. In her fear Nora constructed a dream in which the man would spring forth as her strong protector, as the knight protecting his loved one. Mrs Alving's defense is more down to earth: first, a period of hard and exemplary work carried out in the

man's name, followed by the endowment of a building in the public interest which would forever ensure on unspotted reputation for the Alving family.

Mrs. Alving is anti-Nora; succumbing to the fearful advice of the spineless Manders, she refused to leave her debauched husband, and is... as the play begins...about to open an orphanage to his memory. Unlike Nora and with much more provocation she did not slam the door! The consequence was the inherited ailment of which Oswald becomes the victim. In her conversations with Manders, Mrs Alving advances progressively ideas that make her sound like Nora, but Ibsen's point is that her tragedy is precisely that she lacked Nora's courage to pursue a radically unpopular path. The two women are forced to see their lives in a new merciless light-both of them, incited by men they have loved but can now neither love nor respect any longer (Torvald and Manders) whilst Mrs Alving is also urged towards her new insights by what Oswald tells her.

This revaluation of their own inner lives also becomes for them a showdown with the society, which has created the pre-conditions of their lives. Thus it is that Ibsen here chooses the "woman" to lead the battle for "the revolution of the human spirit" under the rallying-cry of "truth and freedom".

This 19th century play may be seen as a classic example of a superbly written tragedy portraying behavior of typical mankind, over the ages. Mrs Alving and Pastor Manders are deeply sympathetic characters, coming to terms with the hollow truths that they have devoted their lives to protecting, and their defeat is magnified in a vast glass wall keeping out reality and casting mirrored shadows, the ghosts from the past subverting the present. All the characters in the play are seeking some social or material advantage. Engstrand Regina's "father" wants money; the Pastor would like respectability, and Mrs Alving is searching for her human condition. *"She tests everything ... in the light of her true human unsophisticated moral sensibility: by direct perception and not by ideas at all... she is tragically seeking."* 6

The similarity between Ghosts and Greek tragedy, with its single fated action moving to an unmistakable catastrophe, has been felt by many critics, of Ibsen. Mrs Alving like Oedipus, is engaged in a quest for her true human condition; and Ibsen, like Sophocles, shows on-stage only the end of this quest, when the past is being brought up again in the light of the present action and its fated outcome. From this point of view Ibsen is a plot-maker in the first sense: by means of his selection and arrangement of incidents he defines an action underlying many particular events and realized in various modes of intelligible purpose, of suffering, and of new insight. What Mrs Alving sees changes in the course of the play, just as what Oedipus sees changes as one veil after another is removed from the past and the present *"The underlying form of Ghosts is that of the tragic rhythm as one finds it in Oedipus Rex."* 7

Ghosts have been described by many critics...*"As the most classically constructed of Ibsen's plays, not merely in its obedience to the Aristotelean unities but in the economy of its construction."* Unlike A Doll's House, where there are servants and a sub-plot between Krogstad and Mrs. Linde, only five characters appear in Ghosts. No one is included who has not a place in the main action itself. All the three acts occur in Mrs Alving's house. The play takes place between one morning and the next, concentrated to a period of twenty-four hours.

Through the night, the characters confess, deny and defend until everything unravels and the truth can be seen. The morning breaks, as the sun rises, the horrid truth is unveiled. In this way, an atmosphere of austere grandeur is given to the whole drama providing it with intensity suggestive of classical plays. Professor Koht describes the play's further relationship to ancient drama, shows a tragic flaw inherited through the generations. *Ghosts* is also a "family tragedy", he writes, "but it is also a social drama the ancient tragedy resurrected on modern soil".<sup>8</sup>

Captain Alving's character bears this out. The source of the hereditary flaw, which destroys his children, his presence pervades each scene of *Ghosts*. As each living character illuminates the nature of the diseased profligate, he finally stands as clearly and as well drawn to the audience as if he were constantly active on stage. Almost as a "secondary" protagonist, Alving undergoes a change of character until he is presented to the spectator as an individual whom society has wronged. Finally, when Mrs Alving recognizes how she destroyed his "joy of life", the dead husband is no longer a ghost, but a humanized victim of the social conventions.

Ibsen's poetic ability enables him to enrich the prose plays with symbol broad as well as narrow meanings, especially allusive in Ibsen's concept of light and darkness. In *Ghosts* we find so many symbols. The first is rain outside of Mrs Alving's home it remains stormy until the truth is faced and the sun begins to rise on a cloudless new day. In *Ghosts*, rain is used as a symbol of the cleansing of evil and impurities. It washes away the facades so that the truth may be seen and the "ghosts" may be finally put to rest. When this takes place the sun, another symbol rises, revealing reality.

The fire that destroys the orphanage is another symbol of truth. The truth, like the fire, is rising quickly, devouring the illusions. The orphanage represents the illusion Mrs Alving has created while the brothel is the reality of her husband's life. With characteristic irony, Ibsen implies that there is no deceit in raising a brothel to the memory of the late Captain Alving. When the fire was extinguished, the fantasy world has gone up in smoke and all that remains are the painful ashes of the past. Ibsen wished us to see the conflagration as the inevitable and desirable distractions of all the institutions based on falsity and deceit.

Engstrand is also a symbol. He represents society as a whole. He has a crippled leg and yet says about the ethics, he has "two good legs to stand on". Society is very much like this. It seems to be solid and stable but has weak foundations. It will never completely heal or lose its flaws.

Oswald could be interpreted as a major symbol in the play. "Mrs Alving makes him the symbol of all she is seeking: freedom, innocence, joy and truth". The notion of "the joy of life" is introduced by Oswald. He first understood it when he saw Regina and noticed her beauty, confidence, and energy. He then applies the term backward to all that he values in life; specifically, to all the things he ever painted, such as sunny days and smiling faces. He contrasts the joy of life with the gloom of Norway. It is implied that a belief in this joy of life allows one to see a certain morality in the choice of an unmarried couple to live together and that the Pastor, therefore, must not see the joy of life. Mrs. Alving seizes on the

idea that Norwegian society and climate suppresses the joy of life, convincing herself and trying to convince others that her husband was not an evil man but simply a man deprived of a proper outlet for his boundless energy.

The most pervasive symbol, of course, is that of ghosts. The ghosts are worn ideals and principles of law and order so misapplied that they have no actual significance. All the untested maxims and abstract dogma that Manders maintains are ghosts; all the sources of personal cowardice in Mrs Alving are ghosts. Ghosts are also the lies about the past, perpetrated to the present, which will haunt the future. Finally, Ghosts are the actual and symbolic diseases of heredity, which destroy the joy of life in the younger, freer generations.

Brilliant, vital and enormously intelligent, *Ghosts* is one of the most memorable plays in modern literature. It is really the tragic story of a woman who has stayed in a horrific marriage she has made some very poor choices in her life, and she has caused events to take place in her son's life as a result. Although what was considered scandalous in 1881 may seem dated by today's standards, the play still has a good deal of relevance in a modern context. The play deals with even more universal and timeless theme: finding a way to live with the choices we make. We are empowered by the choices we make, and we have to live with them forever. The play *Ghosts* is the reminder that our future is always affected by the choices we make in the past.

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**Dr.Kakila Singh,P.hD**  
**Assistant Professor of English**  
**IPEC college, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA**