

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN HENRIK IBSEN'S PLAYS

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen, the creator of theatrical realism and modern prose drama as well as an important social critic, dealt with several contemporary issues in a realistic setting, which provoked public discussions in the nineteenth century in Norway. The subjects and themes he treated in his plays are still disputed today because they are considered taboo and inappropriate by societies worldwide. Ibsen reflected the social problems of his time in his plays, yet the audience and the critics of the time were not ready to hear about the realities. Therefore, they were scandalized by the impropriety of the plays. Additionally, some of his plays were banned from performance. People were being cautious about not mentioning them during social gatherings. Ibsen pointed out the undermined or covert social issues and revealed the real façade of the bourgeois, which made him a figure scorned by the public. The suppressed truth he revealed in his plays made the bourgeois uncomfortable as their hypocrisy was uncovered and laid bare. This study aims to deliberate on Ibsen's plays, *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, and *Ghosts*, in terms of the controversial social issues that were also present during his time, brought to light by Ibsen.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, realism, *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*.

INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen was a playwright whose plays raised much controversy at the time they were performed. His plays defied traditions both in style and content and dealt with issues that were accepted as taboos by societies during the nineteenth century. Some of the plays were even considered scandalous by the audience because the audience, as the representatives of the nineteenth-century society with strict moral rules, witnessed performances dealing with subjects that they never encountered, talked about, or discussed in real life: "Scandalous! This sonorous adjective has repeatedly been uttered in connection with the playwright Henrik Ibsen and his dramatic texts, above all his so-called contemporary plays. The word scandalous was used not only to defame the Norwegian dramatist in the wake of the appearance of *Ghosts* in 1881, by labelling both

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the play and its maker degenerate and immoral" (Mortensen, 2007, p. 169). Issues such as venereal disease, incest, euthanasia, and women walking out on their husbands and children challenged the gender and social norms of the time, and suppression of truth for political purposes and economic benefits at the expense of countless human lives was problematized: "His plays mainly attacked the nineteenth-century European middle-class belief, values, norms and morality that was for protective husband, submissive and obedient wife" (Ghimire, 2007, p. 12). His plays were harshly criticized as much as admired because he reflected the long-hidden aspects of the members of the European societies, specifically in Norway. These people who share the same social class as the characters in the plays were not pleased with the fact that the moral corruption, which people camouflaged with strict moral rules, was disclosed to the audience openly. This study aims to analyze Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, and *Ghosts* in terms of controversial issues that stirred criticism at the time.

The Ways of the Rich: *Pillars of Society*

Written in 1877, Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* is the first play to reflect his realistic attitude and it bears harsh social criticism. Although it is not as well-known as his other plays, it brought him a great reputation as one of the forerunners of revolutionary playwrights and social critics: "Pillars of Society is the most ignored of the dozen major Ibsen prose plays. Written between 1875 and 1877, it was an immediate success and made Ibsen the champion of radical artists and social reformers throughout Europe" (Cardullo, 2011, p. 359). Karsten Bernick, a dishonest and deceitful shipbuilder in a small coastal Norwegian town, appears to be a social benefactor, a good husband, and a devoted father on the outside. However, he seems to be just the opposite in reality. In the end, he is revealed to be an unethical capitalist that could do anything for material gain. He confesses it at the end of the play, yet he gets away with it without any punishment. This is the case because the members of the society in the play are passive recipients unable to react, especially when the person at fault is an affluent one, the "foremost citizen" of this society (Ibsen, 1947d, p. 420). He is a typical nineteenth-century middle-class man in Norway with a materialistic mind and a hypocritical social identity. He is a putative pillar of society. He builds up his marriage, his career, and his public image as a righteous and benevolent businessperson upon lies that are revealed after several years. He exploits his immediate family, his men, and the townspeople to get what he desires: money and respectability. He is a prototype or microcosm of the larger universe of a middle-class man who would lie, kill, and scheme for monetary gain or prestige. Ibsen reveals this invisible identity of such people as Bernick and his social criticism and realistic representation of these people in the play resulted in a public uproar: "... furious controversy broke out over 'the Pillars of Society' in 1877, ..." (Ruzevich, 1993, p. 4). There were ceaseless disputes over it after its performance.

The start of Bernick's marriage and career rests on the first lie of many lies to follow. Lona Hessel, who is Johan Tønnesen's half-sister treating like a mother to him, and Bernick loved each other once. However, Bernick rejected her to get married to her half-sister, Betty, who brought him a rich dowry inherited from her aunt helping revive Bernick's family business. Furthermore, Bernick and Mrs. Dorf, an actress who was married at the time, had a love affair. However, Bernick is seen jumping through the window of her house to escape from her husband and Johan took the blame. Bernick thanks him when he comes from America after fifteen years as he owes his present social standing, money, power, and affluence to him: "My home and all the happiness that it means to me – my position here as a citizen – all these I owe to you" (Ibsen, 1947d, p. 428). Bernick tarnished Johan's name further after he went to America years earlier by spreading the

rumor that he stole his mother's money while escaping to America. However, his mother had no money, and his family business was about to go bankrupt. Numerous other lies followed, and Bernick built up a reputation for himself as a respectable man in the town. He wants to be sure of the respect and faith of the townspeople in him and he wants to keep it that way. He suppresses the truth to protect his reputation, which represents the hypocrisy of the time. Johan swears to him that he will keep his secret. Nevertheless, to get rid of his brother-in-law and his secret with him, and fearing that the truth about his past will come to light, he wants *The Indian Girl*, an American ship that is rotten, unfit to set sail, and in need of being repaired, to be ready in one day. He hurries his men to their death along with Johan:

At this particular moment I have need of all the respect and good-will my fellow citizens can give me. I have a big undertaking on the stocks, as you probably have heard; but if it should happen that evil-disposed persons succeeded in shaking the absolute confidence I enjoy, it might land me in the greatest difficulties. That is why I want, at any price, to avoid these shameful innuendoes in the papers, and that is why I name the day after tomorrow as the limit of the time I give you. (1947d, p. 419)

He acts as if he were a devout Christian, yet he is ready to sacrifice the jobs of his old workers as well as the lives of many for the sake of his interests, to keep his reputation intact. The play is an attack on the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century European society by means of Bernick as a representative of the middle-class men: "Like Ibsen's later works in general, *Pillars of Society* levels an all-out attack on the hypocrisy and repressiveness of late nineteenth-century bourgeois society" (Gulddal, 2012, p. 295). Bernick's real identity is revealed when he wants to send Johan to America along with the crew on a rotten ship and make their death seem accidental to maintain his reputation:

Posing as a true Christian, he even goes so far as to jeopardize human life. Because of business considerations he sends *The Indian Girl*, an unseaworthy, rotten vessel, on a voyage, although he is assured by one of his most capable and faithful workers that the ship cannot make the journey, that it is sure to go down. But Consul Bernick is a pillar of society; he needs the respect and good will of his fellow citizens. He must go from precipice to precipice, to keep up appearances. (Goldman, 1914, p. 15)

It is only Lona that sees who Bernick truly is. She knows the fact that he achieved a lot becoming the richest and the most powerful man in the town. Everybody in town looks up to him because he has a good reputation as a devout, religious, and moral man. Although he oppresses his wife and his son, his house is considered a model by the townspeople as he presents himself as a good husband and a loving father. On the other hand, Lona knows that all this is an illusion, and it will shatter under the influence of a word revealing his secret, and all his feigned qualities. Thus, his image as a model citizen will be ruined. She is aware of his hypocrisy and the fragility of his affluence, and she puts her views on it as follows:

True, you have achieved a great deal through your work, for yourself as well as for others. You are the richest and most influential man in the town; nobody in it dares do otherwise than defer to your will, because you are looked upon as a man without spot or blemish; your home is regarded as a model home, and your conduct as a model of conduct. But all this grandeur, and you with it, is founded on a treacherous morass. A moment may come and a word may be spoken – and you and all your grandeur will be engulfed in the morass, if you do not save yourself in time. (Ibsen, 1947, p. 441)

Bernick's plan to get rid of Johan does not work as he wishes. Olaf, his thirteen-year-old son whom he oppresses in contrast to the image of the devout father he draws, boards the ship while Johan boards another ship, a stouter one, along with Dina, the daughter of the actress adopted by Bernick's wife. Bernick finds out that his son's life is in danger and confesses the truth about himself although he does not confess the whole truth. He keeps the part about the attempted murder of his wife's half-brother along with *The Indian Girl's* crew. He feels refreshed when his son is saved.

Bernick is a representative of a middle-class man who puts his personal interests before others'. Yet, his ambition to become affluent and the lies he told for his ambition's sake elevated the society in which he lives as well. In addition to ambitious people who lack morals represented by Bernick, the ending of the play is criticized because Bernick confesses some of his crimes or attempted crimes and is forgiven by his wife, at least. Although his wife learns that he marries her for her dowry, she becomes happy that she can save her marriage. Additionally, he is guilty of attempted mass murder, but he evades the confession and the punishment. Through such characters as Bernick, Ibsen satirizes the moral corruption and hypocrisy of society, and he portrays the rich as morally corrupt and blinded by ambition which caused bitter criticism. "The world of the play creates a microcosm of Norwegian society, and, appropriately for the first play in a prose cycle that will explore the nature of human consciousness, the inhabitants of this society operate on the most primitive level of social and ethical consciousness. It is not that people here do not have good intentions, or that they never take moral action. This is not so much an immoral world as an amoral one; and before there can be morality, there must be the consciousness of morality" (Cardullo, 2011, 365).

The New Woman: *A Doll's House*

A Doll's House (1879) is one of the most controversial plays by Ibsen. The play centers around the female protagonist, Nora Helmer's discovery of her husband Torvald Helmer's control over her and her search for freedom and individualism. Through the examples of Nora and Torvald, the play dwells on social issues such as marriage. The play was likewise criticized for many aspects that the viewers of the time were not familiar with. In the nineteenth century, societies in Europe, including "Scandinavian societies," did not grant any rights to women who "were constantly subjugated and marginalized by the members of the patriarchal society" (Hosseini, 2016, p. 1). They were expected to get married and have children and function as dutiful wives of their husbands. They were neither allowed nor expected to transgress these norms that were established by the patriarchal society they lived in. Nora, on the other hand, seems to stay in these limitations of society at first, but, in fact, she transgresses these roles without the knowledge of her husband. She completely defies these norms at the end of the play becoming one of the most iconic characters of Ibsen that act this way: "The main female characters in the play reject the conventional roles that women are supposed to fulfill in patriarchal countries and oppose the dominating nature of the system" (Varma and Singh, 2021, 2949). She goes beyond these restrictions further by leaving her home, her husband, and her children in the course of the play. Nora's actions were not received well by the nineteenth-century audience and resulted in disputes and harsh criticism: "*A Doll's House* was published in 1879. It discusses issues like marriage, femininity, gender roles, family, morality, lies and deceit, forgery, hypocrisy, etc. It was the play which made him one of the most famous and controversial playwrights throughout the western world" (Mangang, 2017, p. 1128).

A Doll's House focuses on the main character, Nora. At the beginning of the play, she is a typical middle-class woman who fulfills her domestic duties. She plays her part as a subservient wife. She is dependent on Torvald in terms of monetary issues. She does not work outside the house. She demands and accepts money from her husband as she is very fond of buying expensive things such as Christmas presents. She is always inside and cares for her children. She talks and acts like a child to appeal to her husband and because society expects her to be pure and naïve as a child which can be gathered from her dialogue with her husband:

NORA: Torvald.

TORVALD: Yes.

NORA: If your little squirrel were to ask you for something very, very prettily _?

TORVALD: What then?

NORA: Would you do it?

TORVALD: I should like to hear what it is first.

NORA: Your squirrel would run about and do all her tricks if you be nice, and do what she wants. (Ibsen, 1947a, p. 44)

Nora accepts the subservient role of an obedient wife. However, she does not totally obey the rules set by Torvald. Although her husband does not want her to eat macaroons because they are bad for her teeth, Nora carries them in her pocket and eats them in secret. Moreover, she commits forgery by imitating her father's signature to take a loan even though her father died a few days ago. It was the duty of men to control the financial issues of the household at the time. Let alone committing forgery, a married woman's dealing with the economy of the household, and taking a loan was unheard of. Therefore, Nora's illegal conduct and her provision of money are among the reasons that received much criticism from the audience and the critics. As the story unfolds, Nora's secret becomes known to Torvald through Krogstad's letter and he gets very angry with her and threatens to divorce her in contrast to Nora's expectations to be forgiven. Torvald chooses his honor over Nora. She realizes that they did not have a serious conversation as long as they remained married until Torvald discovered her forgery. In addition, Nora comes to the realization that Torvald treated her as his "doll-wife" as her father treated her as his "doll-child" never taking her seriously or regarding her as an individual, but a doll to be played with or admired:

... And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it a great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald. (Ibsen, 1947a, p. 86)

She thinks that she has been married to a stranger for eight years and bore him three children. After her discussion with Torvald and stating that she will never see her children as she knows they are in better hands than hers, she goes out and slams the door behind her. Nora's leaving her household, deserting her husband and her children stirred great public outrage: "The slamming of the door by Nora at the end of the play shocked the whole western world. Every night, people left the theatre questioning, arguing and quarreling" (Mangang, 2017, p. 1128). It sparked discussions and the play was banned until new endings were written. The harsh social criticism it contained on gender inequality and the challenge against the social norms imposed upon the women of the time shocked the audience: "*A Doll's House* exploded like a bomb into contemporary life" (Meyer, 1967: 476). Alternative endings were written for the play to prevent the impact it will create in society. Even Ibsen himself was forced to write an alternative ending which he considered a "barbaric act of violence against the play" (Østved, 1976, p. 181). In this alternative ending, Torvald takes Nora to the nursery where the children are

asleep, and they look at the children. Nora reconsiders leaving home while watching her children (Räthel, 2020, p.4). Ibsen's aim in writing *A Doll's House* was not to advocate women's rights or bring social changes through this play. His aim was simply to describe and reflect the lives of the people:

I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. ... True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (Ibsen, 1964, p. 337)

Nora's struggle to gain her own voice and her own identity has led her to be stigmatization since the day it was performed. She acts against the social conventions that impose the role of a dutiful mother and an obedient wife to women by walking out on her children and her husband. Moreover, she is deemed irrational, abnormal, hysteric, egoist, and selfish: a character like Medea from classical mythology who killed her children to torture her husband emotionally as Templeton argues:

But for over a hundred years, Nora has been under direct siege as exhibiting the most perfidious characteristics of her sex; the original outcry of the 1880s is swollen now to a mighty chorus of blame. She is denounced as an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an "abnormal" woman, a "hysteric"; a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness. The proponents of the last view would seem to think Ibsen had in mind a housewife Medea, whose cruelty to husband and children he tailored down to fit the framed, domestic world of realist drama. (Ibsen, 1947a, p. 29)

Nora starts as a female that complies with the feminine ideals of the time when the play was written. She was obedient to his father when she was not married and she seems to be obeying her husband's directions during her married life. However, she performs small acts of disobedience such as eating macaroons, which is a deceitful and manipulative act, in addition to her bigger disobedience, forgery of her father's signature to receive a loan. Some critics believed that her forgery to get a loan without the knowledge or consent of her husband was irresponsible, irrational, and egotistical. She is deemed unfeminine and abnormal because of the decisions she made independently from her husband: "The Madwoman in the Attic posits as central to nineteenth-century women's literature. As metaphorical women writers, Ibsen's female characters are engaged in the project of attempting to author their own lives within a patriarchal context. In the process, they too, like their real-life counterparts, find themselves without precedent and encouragement but with a lurking intuition that their desire for authority over their own lives is abnormal, unfeminine, or both. Consequently, compelled to seem to abide by patriarchal standards of womanhood while actually necessarily subverting and redefining them" (Farfan, 1988, 48). She walks out on her husband and children, forsaking all the duties imposed on her by the patriarchal society in which she lives, and it is the most scandalous part of the play. Although, at the time, the play was met with much controversy, "little by little the topical controversy died away; what remained was the work of art, with its demand for truth in every human relation" (Kohlt, 1971, p. 323).

The Sins of Fathers: *Ghosts*

Ghosts is published in 1881 by Ibsen as a sequel to *A Doll's House* as a reply to the criticisms it received. In the latter play, the protagonist leaves her husband and her children after she discovers that the man whom she is married to for eight years was a stranger to her and her individuality is repressed by him. *Ghosts* explores the idea that how things would turn out if this protagonist returned home. Helene Alving, the

protagonist of the play who returns to her husband upon the persuasion of Pastor Manders whom she once loved, proves to be a more scandalous character than Nora by giving her consent to an incestuous relationship. The play presents various social ills of the time. Furthermore, it touches upon the issues of venereal diseases, such as syphilis which ravaged at the time, incest, free love relationships, and euthanasia. As in the case of *A Doll's House*, the themes dealt with in *Ghosts* sparked a great public debate because they both clashed with nineteenth-century morality, and showed the ugly side of the societies at the time which disturbed the audience and the critics.

Mrs. Alving left her husband for Pastor Manders with whom she was in love when she was young. In his dialogue with Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders reveals that he persuaded her to return to her husband because, as he said, it was her sacred duty assigned by God to attend to her husband and her household. As their dialogue goes on, Mr. Manders's views on Mrs. Alving's husband are revealed. He thinks that after Mrs. Alving returned home, her husband fulfilled her duties as a husband and the patriarch of the house as he predicted:

...
Did things not turn out as I foretold you? Did not your husband turn from straying in the wrong path as a man should? Did he not, after all, live a life of love and good report with you all his days? Did he not so raise you up to his level, so that by degrees you became his fellow-worker in all his undertakings – and a noble fellow-worker, too, I know, Mrs. Alving; that praise I will give you. (Ibsen, 1947b, p. 95)

However, Mrs. Alving reveals a shocking truth about her husband. She is a dutiful wife as Pastor Manders and the society of the time bid her to be. She struggles to keep her husband's reputation intact by building an orphanage in her husband's name, yet her husband does not deserve the public image created by his wife. Her husband was a drunkard and he, as Mrs. Alving puts it, "... had will of [the maid of the house] and that intimacy had consequences, ..." (Ibsen, 1947b: 124). The consequence of this intimacy is Regina, the maid of the house who is also Mr. Alving's daughter born out of wedlock. While Mrs. Alving played her part as a faithful and obedient wife, her husband enjoyed the freedom of being a male. This social injustice allowed men "to seek sexual gratification outside the home" while imposing a set of social norms that forced women to be "the angels in the house" (Mortensen, 2007, pp. 175-176). Mrs. Alving's husband as the absent father figure is another point that sparked a debate because it is a social reality hidden behind the genteel veneer of society.

Another reason for *Ghosts* to receive a negative reaction is Mrs. Alving's son, Oswald's defense of his artist friends who lives in the same house as couples and have children out of wedlock which Pastor Manders, a conveyor of Christian teachings, condemns. The critics and the audience showed big reaction to the play because "they also thought that through this play, Ibsen endorses the idea of incest and free-living" and "The German middle classes considered Ibsen as a preacher of free love" (Mangang, 2017, pp.1128-1129). Ibsen's attacks on the sanctity of marriage through Oswald defending the way of life his artist friends live which is another point that caused public anger.

Oswald inherited syphilis from his father and he is aware that he is going to die, soon. Therefore, he wants to get married to Regina, his half-sister on his father's side so that she will look after him or kill him if she must. Oswald attacks religion as he defends that all humanity is a product of incest according to Biblical stories and he defends his decision to get married to his half-sister. He also tries to persuade his mother to

euthanize him or let him marry Regina and she will do it in her stead. Eventually, Mrs. Alving gives her consent to the incestuous relationship between Oswald and Regina. Considering the information above and the public reaction against the issues tackled in the play, it would not be wrong to claim that "this play was, in 1881, moral dynamite" and it is "... the play's references (if not by name) to venereal disease, its defense of 'free love' and its contemplation of incestuous relationships" that stirred public debates and made it one of Ibsen's most controversial plays (Ledger, 2008, pp. 20). It showed how society can be hypocritical and deceitful. Although it was not his aim, Ibsen became a social reformer through his plays that revealed the reality behind the façade of nineteenth-century Norwegian society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ibsen's plays *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* are plays that aroused much controversy and they continue to stir debates on the issues that are still considered taboos today such as extramarital relationships, venereal diseases, euthanasia, and incest. *Pillars of Society* criticizes the hypocrisy of the rich who seem to be moral and decent on the outside while they are, in fact, corrupt and ready to sacrifice their fellows for their interests. *A Doll's House* presents a woman challenging patriarchal conventions by making independent decisions and forsaking her domestic duties assigned to her by patriarchy. *Ghosts* introduces another female protagonist, Mrs Alving, who chooses to return to her husband and resume her duties, yet she oscillates between maintaining the illusion she created to protect her family name and fulfilling her son's dying wish. The plays aptly discuss social issues that were never handled before and they got reactions and were even been banned for many years. They had a big role in reshaping the function of drama that was formerly regarded as a source of entertainment. Instead, drama became the medium for social criticism or the mirror of social conditions by virtue of realism Ibsen introduced to drama. Therefore, they contributed a lot to the social debates of the time. Showing that there are different alternatives to the oppressed and questioning the morality of the people of the time, they also transformed the societies of the time into the ones today.

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