



## Heredity and environment in Henrik Ibsen's ghosts

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### Abstract

Henrik Ibsen, the believer of Naturalism and Darwinism has succeeded in presenting the social problems which are mostly least thought about in an appropriate manner. He turned the theatre from a place from which the audience emerged with a compulsive feeling to reconsider basic principles which they had never before seriously questioned. His enduring greatness as dramatist is not due to his technical innovation, but due to the depth and subtlety of his understanding human character. The approach, to the analysis of Ibsen's characters in his plays is indeed that of Naturalism that uses detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity and environment have inescapable forces in shaping human characters. In *Ghosts* he even managed to do without a plot in the conventional sense of the terms. Ibsen's contemporaries saw *Ghosts* as a play about physical illness and failed to see what it was really about. The play is about the devitalizing effect of dump acceptance of convention.

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. Thus, all human beings are presented as entrapped in their social milieu and determined by "inevitable laws of heredity and environment" in the plays of Ibsen.

**Keywords:** naturalisms, Darwinism, heredity and environment, dead customs and traditions, social milieu

### Introduction

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is often considered as one of the founders of Modern Realist or Naturalist Drama in revolt against the romantic drama and the well-made plays. In his hands the theatre began to move towards a naturalistic mode of performance and away from romanticism because it dealt with social issues, problems and realities of life. In this manner, he was the indisputable leader in the campaign of a modern radical and realistic literature in the culture of Scandinavia and of his age and he most powerfully challenged the nations and beliefs of his time and shattered the illusions of his audience. In his words Ibsen allows the individual to engage in a much more radical encounter with society, institutionalized authorities or in a community where people find happiness merely by virtue of existence.

Having himself suffered all his life under conservation of Norwegian provincialism, Ibsen found that such a society destroys the 'joy of life' in its creative intellects leaving bitterness and frustration. Ibsen's Chief interest from the beginning to the end of his career was not with the propagation of ethical ideas but with the solution of ethical problems. Ibsen's attention was, thus, chiefly drawn to those problems stemming from the inhibitions set upon individual freedom and self-realization by social and institutional forces: by commercial hypocrisy, religious intolerance, political expediency, and all the accumulated pressures of conventional morality and established authority. With the passing of time, he became more and more engrossed by the ways of the individual mind, by the clash of personal temperament, by the endless and tragic conflict between the calls of duty and search for happiness within the individual psyche.

Ibsen is supposed to be much influenced by Darwin's theories, which have several significant implications. The

first, heredity and environment are made the determinants of existence. The second, heredity and environment become explanations for all characters' traits and actions. Furthermore, since behaviour is determined by factors beyond the individual's control, he cannot be blamed for it. Then, this becomes the concept of modern drama, that is, however a man survives against the heredity and environment, it does not change anything. Everything is determined by social reality. This is completely different from the concept of previous works, of course, as it hold the characterisation of *Ghosts* and obviously described the society at the age of Ibsen.

Ibsen depicted the life of his time and made use of the ideas of his time, he had no desire to change those ideas, nor even in the main to criticize them. In *Ghosts*, he even managed to do without a plot in the conventional sense of the terms. Ibsen's contemporaries saw *Ghosts* as a play about physical illness and failed to see what it was really about. The play is truly about the "devitalizing effect of a dumb acceptance of convention". 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 main aim of the present paper is to deal with the concept of inherited conventions and old beliefs through inherited disease in *Ghosts*. It was written and published in 1881 and staged in 1882. Originally titled- 'Gengangere', it means 'the revenants', 'the again walker', or 'the ones who come back' in Norwegian language. Its English title - *Ghosts* suggests not just the continuing influence of a dead father over the son, discerning in his hereditary disease, but also those dead beliefs and ideas which continue to exert their impact on coming generation. This play deals with the issues like incest, sexuality transmitted disease, illegitimate pregnancy, marriage for the wrong reasons and the role of

women in the male-dominated society. Besides written on sociological and ideological planes, it also discusses problems on a metaphysical level. Ibsen believed that the roots of one's present sufferings lie in her or his past which determines and shapes her or his present. The continuing and crippling effects of the past are presented in the play in two forms- hereditary disease and the sway of old beliefs and ideas. They both are the two facets of same coin- the physical or biological aspect and psychological aspect, but the latter is given a great importance.

*Ghosts*, with the apparitions of past haunting Helen Alving is not a play about venereal disease, it is just a minor issue. Any other malady caused by parental excesses would have done almost as well; for instance, if Captain Alving had been a hopeless alcoholic. The essential point is that he was not the sort of man who should ever have had a son. And if Helen Alving had not let herself be cowed by convention that unhappy son would never have been born.

Thus, *Ghosts* is the classical story of a shameful secret whose repression destroys everything that the secrecy was supposed to protect. The central obsession of the play is *Ghosts*- revolve around the clash between repressive middle class morality and Ibsen's idea of truly moral life, in which people are freed of the personal lies and ideological blindness that trap and ultimately destroy them. Ibsen used the central story of a son who inherited the unreal disease of the father to explore the corruption and hypocrisy that he perceived in shifting mores of bourgeois ideology and to examine the sexual repression that lies at the heart of patriarchal authority.

But Oswald is not the hero of the play; he is merely a pathetic victim. The central figure is his mother Helen Alving. The central theme is the clash between moral courage and convention, between respectability and happiness. Here is the story of a woman who did not slam the door- who bowed to society and came back. With a heroic effort she refrained from breaking the rules; in return, they broke both her son and her; until in the end she rises up too late, and flings them all bitterly aside. Respectability told Helen Alving to go back from the man she loved, to the man she loathed and Oswald was born. Respectability bribed Engstrand with three hundred dollars to marry Regina's mother, Johanna and lie was piled on life. Respectability would have forced Oswald to live on as a mindless animal, burdening others and himself. Respectability made life in many a corner of Norway a vale of tears as dank and foggy as the hills of Bergen.

Thus, the happiness of Alving's family stems from the sacrifice and the secret that kill which, the ghosts of outmoded ideas of patriarchy and social property 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 property in a society that demands her perfection and duty towards her husband and her church, contrast sharply with her desires to learn and exercise the ghosts that control her life. Her duty to her son Oswald is admirable but Mrs. Alving's 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. Unfortunately at the end of the story, Oswald finally was defeated by the social reality. All human beings are presented as entrapped in their social milieu and determined by the "inevitable laws of heredity and environment" in the plays of Ibsen. Mrs. Alving's speech on ghosts is the play's key metaphor. She says;

"I am haunted by ghosts. When I heard Regina and Oswald out there, it was just as if there were ghosts before my very Eyes...it's not the things that we have inherited from our father's and mother's that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of the sort. They are rooted there all the same, and we cannot rid ourselves of them. I have only to pick up a newspaper, and when I read it, I see Ghosts gliding between the lines. I should think there must be ghosts all over the country- as countless as grains of sand. And we are all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light."(Ibsen, Henrik. *Ghosts*. Act II, 61)

The ghosts of duty and public opinion come to dominate and ruin generations of lives. Mrs. Alving feels that all people are haunted not only by their inheritance from specific people, but by general superstition that exists within a community. The idea of final piety, or duty to family members above all else, is such a ghost. Mrs. Alving makes the theme of ghosts explicit in this speech where she confronts Manders with the concept after she has witnessed Oswald and Regina's near incestuous relations, the ghosts of past visit her.

Symbolically, the analogy between syphilis as an inherited disease and deception as a social disease is obvious in the sense that deception is like peeling away layers of onion skin. One is left with only a sad remnant of transparent chops by the end. The most thematic structure of the play is built on the concept of deception which is presented in Mrs. Alving's marriage, the orphanage, Pastor Manders-Mrs. Alving relationship, Oswald-Regina relationship and Regina-Alving relationship. The best example is Pastor Manders, who is a local priest from the morality and religion. He believes that Mrs. Alving should not have sent her son into the world at such an early age. He has supervised the official business of constructing the orphanage and who will dedicate it the following day, the orphanage which Mrs. Alving financially supports in the tenth anniversary of her husband's death, Captain Alving. Mrs. Alving plans to raise this one great memorial to him so that she will not have to ever again speak of him. She wants to avoid the terrible truth that he was a cheater, immoral philanderer whose public reputation was a shame. Thus, ghosts scandalized Victorian double standards of society.

One of the consequences of the Victorian double standards of sexual morality was that the man could very easily bring disease into family and pass them on to their wives or children but no respectable woman could even admit to knowledge of sexual matters. Let her alone seek help because of her husband's indiscretions. If she did, the blame would be placed on her (of course, much of this still sounds very familiar, if not in all social contexts and parts of the world, then at least in some).

In conclusion, the ghosts of the past rise to choke Mrs. Alving, the hypocritical Pastor Manders, and even the innocent victims of their parents' sins (inheritance). Ibsen is said to have portrayed Mrs. Alving with the idea of what would have happened if Nora had returned home instead of leaving her husband and children. The fact that Mrs. Alving takes the charge of the family, the finance, the business and even goes so far as to send her son away shows that she is rebelling against what society expects from her. She has her own ideas of right and wrong but she still worries about society a large and her reputation as well as that of her family. The fact that she left her husband to go to seek the man whom she really loved shows great strength and

character as well as her rebellion. Because she was turned away, she went to home and tried to make the best of a bad situation. After all, she had no alternative or any other place to go. Ibsen wants to show that the situation is worse than Nora's in the end. The fact that Mrs. Alving was unable to save her son from his father's sins and everything from her past, just came back to haunt her. Had she made a different choice before she got married, her life might have turned out alright, but she let her mother take her into marriage. She also comes to some pretty amazing conclusions about life as a woman and what is considered right and wrong according to Pastor. She reads material from different points of view and takes the position that she will come to her own conclusions about what she thinks concerning issues of importance.

Once again, Ibsen uses his story and dialogues to make the audience think about social norms and their consequences to real life people and is trying to bring women's issues to forefront in order to bring about change. He dealt with the consequences of such relationships in his life and saw how wrong was this arrangement as well as the pain and suffering that was brought on by these societal norms-inherited conventions and old beliefs. Thus a restrictive unjust social structure undermines both the individuals and social institutions.

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