



MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

SOMA DEBRAY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

HENRIK IBSEN AND HIS DRAMATIC WORKS

Henrik Ibsen was recognised as a modern classic only posthumously, after 1906. His influence is beyond comparison up on dramatists as diverse as Harold Pinter and Arthur Miller. His contemporaries failed to completely and correctly comprehend Ibsen's complexities. He sent shock waves down the spine of contemporary society. His vision of life was often overshadowed by the sombre tone of his works. Popular with directors for the scope of explorations, Ibsen's plays have always sold well.

Ibsen's works cannot be wholly understood without a deep understanding of his life. He wrote to his German translator Ludwig Passarge,

"Everything I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through, even if it has not been my actual experience; every piece of writing has for me served the function of acting as a means of finding spiritual release and purification"

We know very little of his early childhood, and especially the formative years. Ibsen often returned to his experiences from those years especially in his mature plays. What we know is that Ibsen had a disturbed family life. His relationship with his father was bitter. With his mother who converted to pietism in the late 1940s, he fared little better. In most of his plays and in the notes to his plays, it is common to come across an 'emotionally domineering mother who expects her son to compensate for the inadequacies of his father'.

While in Grimstad, Ibsen got sexually involved with one of the apothecary's (Ibsen was his apprentice) maid. This led to the birth of an illegitimate son; and, also to a life-time fear of sexual liaisons. Just like him, a number of major characters created by him suffer from erotic angst and thwarted sexuality.

In his notes for the second edition of *Caliline* (1875), Ibsen delineated themes he considered important for his later work:

'Much that my later work has dealt with - the conflict between aspiration and capacity, between will and ability, the overlapping of tragedy and comedy, whether on a general or an individual scale ...'



MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

SOMA DEBRAY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

Ibsen was left unsatisfied by the romantic melodramatic styles in vogue. His intellect was looking for something far richer, more complex, and deep. It was only long after, in the 1870s that Ibsen converted to a writer of prose dialogue from the romantic poet that he was earlier.

His 1869 play *The League of the Youth* was a scathing attack on the opportunism and “empty rhetoric” of the left-wing. *The Emperor and Galilean* followed in 1873. This work was more problematic and charted the complications of the world historical process while retaining the essentially romantic characteristic of “the individual’s quest for enlightenment”. *Pillars of Society* (1877) established Ibsen as a naturalistic playwright in spite of it being a well-made play. In 1879 came *A Doll’s House* in the second half of which there is an explosion that leaves the audience with a new fragmentary experience.

Finally in 1881 *Ghosts* was born. This play is an adaptation of the Greek technique of the layered past merging into and shaping the present; the past assaulting the present. It is the story of a blighted marriage that spares no one --- the father, mother, or the son. The past and present are ruled by a causal relationship. *Ghosts* reveals Ibsen as a master of naturalism. Social existence of the characters are of prime importance, shaping their consciousness. The environment in which the characters are placed shape their behaviour. Dialogue is dependent on characterisation. In questioning the sanctity of marriage, Ibsen sent shock waves through the spine of society and welcomed abuse. *Hedda Gabler* (1890), *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkmam* (1896), and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) followed. In 1906 Ibsen was honoured with a State funeral.