



MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

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IBSEN'S *GHOSTS* AS A DOMESTIC DRAMA

In 1882, Ibsen wrote in a letter to Sophie Adlersparre:

Ghosts had to be written; I couldn't remain standing at *A Doll's House*;
after Nora, Mrs Alving of necessity had to come...

Ghosts was a play that hit European society hard; almost the whole of Europe denounced the play with theatres refusing to stage it, and thousands of copies of the text were returned to the publishers. Only four people defended him: Georg Brandes in Denmark, Bjørnson in Norway, the feminists Camilla Collett and Amalie Skram. In this play, Ibsen adopted the classical analytic structure. The action spans only a few hours. The play concerns itself with past deeds and events leading up to the present crisis.

In the play, the characters are linked either by social relationships or by family ties. Mrs. Alving, the protagonist, is the widowed mistress of Rosenvold, a large country Estate. Oswald is her son and the only person she is related through purely family ties. However, with the progress of the play a complex mesh of relationship emerges between Mrs Alving and Regine (her maid), and her socially acknowledged father, Engstrand. The last is also the supervising Carpenter of an orphanage that Mrs. Alving is constructing in the name of her late husband, Captain Alving. The priest Manders is the person to whom the young Mrs. Alving had sought refuge to escape her disastrous marriage. Mrs Alving would never have run off to Manders had she not reason enough to believe that he loved her. However, Manders denied her any support and sent her back home. The audience will never know the



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private feelings of a character who will never risk adverse public opinion. Shortly, the play reveals Regine to be the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving by his wife's then chambermaid, Johanne. Later Engstrand agreed to take responsibility of that daughter without knowing the identity of the biological father, in return of the hefty sum of money he was provided.

The action of the play begins ten years after the death of Captain Alving. Pastor Manders is here at Rosenvold for the dedication of the orphanage built in memory of the Late Captain Alving. The young Oswald is also home, just back from Paris a day before. As the characters begin to interact, old memories open up old wounds caused by past unresolved conflicts.

The *Ghosts* is set in a Norwegian country house. As the curtain is removed the audience finds an elegant drawing room with aristocratic settings in dark colours. The furniture not only signifies upper-class status, but also fashionable taste of the Alvings as it contains "a hint of French verve and esprit". The darker colours indicate compatibility with local choice. Ibsen had specificities of the room in mind as he wrote in a letter to Duke George of Meiningen, in 1886:

The living-rooms of the oldest family seats of this type sometimes have dark coloured wall coverings. The lower halves of the walls are clad with simple wood panels. The ceilings, doors and window surrounds are treated in a similar fashion. The stoves are large, cumbersome and generally made of cast



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iron. The furniture is often empire in style; but the colours are consistently darker.

The stage direction of Ibsen is very meticulous in *Ghosts*, just as is characteristic of the playwright. He made marvellous use of theatre space. Emotive scenes, as the intense interaction between Mrs Alving and Oswald in Acts 2 and 3, necessitating closeness between audience and the actors, were planned for downstage enactment. In the centre of the stage was placed a circular table with chairs around it. Neutral scenes were scheduled for this space either at the table or somewhere near it. This facilitates characters to use the space in front when they get up from discussion and have to enact an agitated state of mind. Actions requiring special focus, as when Oswald enters smoking his father's pipe, or when Mrs. Alving hears her son attempting to kiss the maid in an adjoining room, made use of the upper-stage.

Visual symbolism is used extensively by Ibsen in the play. Often characters discuss the rains outside; a steady outpour accompanied with lightning ensures a heavy grey atmosphere that reflects the guilt-laden heaviness of the characters within. However, flowers and plants in the upstage conservatory holds out possibilities of hope. The flowers also inspire the characters to yearn for light. This space is most utilized by the two youngsters in the play, Oswald and Regine. When characters are enveloped in chilling misunderstandings the action engages in lighting of lamps. When the orphanage burns, at the end of Act 2, its fierce red glow reflects Oswald's state of mind. The beautiful sunrise at the denouement, a reflection of



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Mrs Alving's relief, is cruelly juxtaposed with Oswald lapsing to madness and slumping in his chair.

Mrs Alving was attempting to build the orphanage in memory of her late husband; it is an atonement of guilt for maintaining a respectable façade to a loveless marriage. Although never stated all in the audience knows that it must be Engstrand who set fire to the orphanage. He now persuades Manders to use what is left of Alving's estate in town to allow him build "a seaman's home"; he really wants to build a brothel for sailors. This is a great irony as it will be a more fitting memorial to the late Captain Alving than the orphanage could be.

Nearly all the major characters of the play are burdened with a heritage of guilt. All are imprisoned by their actions and thoughts overruled by dead and useless beliefs and ideals. The interactions between the major characters are majorly destructive in nature. Mrs Alving points to the truth when she comments that they are all afraid of change, of acting freely and decisively, they are all afraid of light. Mrs Alving married for purely economic reasons, and all through her life insisted on duty and order, only to keep together a broken marriage. She has never experienced "joie de vivre" since her marriage, and that is what Oswald always longed for in his relationship with his mother, failing which he has always tried to capture it in his paintings. This failed attempt juxtaposes and enhances the ghost like presence of a leaden past trying to subjugate the lives of all associated with the Alving family.

Ghosts revolves around the mother-son relationship; Mrs Alving really wants to make up for bundling away little Oswald away from home, by now being a real mother to him: 'I could almost bless this illness that drove you home to me'. (Act 3). She wants to give back the motherhood Oswald missed and craved for ten long years, away from home. But the



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mother can only do it by treating the young man as a dependent child and not an adult. That is what she tries to revert Oswald to, a little boy she can play the perfect mother to; smothering him and forcing him to a set pattern of behaviour she can effectively handle. That is the reason she reveals the truth about Regine's true parentage, thus effectively stubbing out the possibly blossoming relationship between Oswald and Regine. She yearns for the motherhood that she once despised; in the process, almost forcing her son to become a baby:

All these upsets have been too much for you. But now you'll be able to have a good long rest. At home, with your mother beside you, my darling. Anything you want you shall have, just like when you were a little boy. There now....

(Act 3)

Oswald feels threatened and imprisoned by his mother. The mother-son relationship never provides him security; he never feels wanted and yet fails to be free of her emotively. This ultimately takes the ugly form of deep resentment culminating in the fierce argument in Act 3, where he taunts her, "with images of his impending brain seizure and hysterically insists that his mother should take his life":

I never asked you for life. And what sort of a life is this you've given me? I don't want it! Take it back! (Act 3)

Finally, Oswald succumbs to brain seizure before his mother. This was a fall out of the syphilitic infection he had inherited from his father, the late Captain Alving. Mrs Alving is driven by her guilt at her past compromises. An alternative reading suggests that the mother



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ultimately drove the son to madness by constantly undermining Oswald's sense of insecurity and fragile individuality. Repeatedly she ignores what Oswald tries to tell her. She insists on imposing her views on her son that only succeed in further exacerbating anguish, his plummeting him into a state of frenzy, and he ultimately withdraws to a zombie like existence. Mrs Alving is left with a sense of absolute loss, "facing the dreadful consequences of her willingness to conform, and of her life-long attempt to impose order on disorder at whatever cost."

Ghosts give the audience and readers a profound insight into how much the norms of contemporary society affected the lives of individuals. The major characters are victims of social pressures and succumb to deeds that raise a chain of events essentially destructive in nature. They are creators of their own prisons. Mrs Alving decides to marry for economic reasons; she seeks escape with Manders who refuses majorly for the sake of social acceptability; she returns to her unfaithful husband and now loveless marriage and keeps up social appearances. All these individual decisions made considering social norms, and social pressures result in the final destruction. Ibsen once commented: 'Nemesis is invited upon the offspring by marrying for extrinsic reasons, even when they are religious or moral'. The characters are forced to live like islands who fail to break the chain of destruction once it begins rolling.

Change may be difficult but not impossible. Mrs Alving herself changes in spite of living all alone in Rosenvold for years, although it does not suffice to mend her relationship with Oswald. She attempts to acknowledge her past mistakes, her mistake in marrying for



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money; her mistake in her amant rejection of Alving, which may have led him to his worst. Manders, she accepts, has always remained a willing supplicatory of social conventions. The one thing she cannot accept is that she is the cause of her son's disaster; she has forced emotional confusion up on him, since he was a child, by disallowing him to 'keep up an acceptable facade at home'.

Ghosts answers Ibsen's quest as to what can be the result when women are deprived of education to match their talents, prevented from following their mission, deprived of inheritance mistreated as wives and daughters, left feeling embittered and lonely. Alienation and madness sprout from the depths of patriarchal society. This play is no tragedy and Ibsen call it a Domestic Drama. There is no sense of reconciliation at the end, nor is there any moment of realization (anagnorisis). Oswald's lapse into madness and Mrs. Alving's terror when she fails to decide whether to give her son the lethal morphine tablets he has requested, or to nurse him in his child-like state of madness, provides no catharsis, but provokes the readers / audience to think. This was the play that Ibsen was using to encounter society and its conventions.



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There is no moment of *anagnorisis* or recognition. Oswald has lapsed into madness, arguably the protective madness of catatonic withdrawal. Mrs Alving, in speechless terror, is confronted by the choice of giving her son the lethal morphine tablets he has requested or nursing him in his child-like state of madness. In this final silent tableau Ibsen provocatively expects his audience to supply the insight that has so far eluded the major characters. It is not a cathartic experience he offers but an emotional and intellectual challenge. (That is why he himself called the play, not a tragedy but a domestic drama.) *Ghosts* was written to provoke people into thought. As Ibsen commented in a letter to Otto Borchsenius in January 1882: 'It may very well be that this play is in a number of respects rather daring. But I thought the time had come when a few frontier posts ought to be moved' [v, p. 476].