



## **MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA**

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### **Ghosts and Ibsen's Reality**

Ibsen was never bound to any literary movement, in fact refused adherence to any kind of doctrinarism; but, has always dived to the depths of the human heart to look for the lonely pearls that lay ensconced in the tight clasps of social conventions, norms, and beliefs. The perfection of his dramatic art has never been eulogised; nor have his characters impressed as exemplary; but, his works, as a whole have endured the ravages of time and changing trends to be still upheld as examples of Realistic drama.

Most of Ibsen's plays are set in Norway and have features that cannot be separated from the local culture and tradition. In each of his plays the setting is of utmost importance lending it a unique flavour. Ibsen touches the chords of the human soul just like Cervantes did. Don Quixote fighting the windmills still retain its significance long after the world has moved beyond aristocracy. Similarly, Ibsen's plays, set in Norway are defined by characteristics that travel beyond his time and space.

The then incurable syphilis in no way affects the primary dilemma of the play; the disease is but a metaphor suggesting that generations carrying forward the sins of the father cannot remain innocent. *Ghosts* dealt with controversial issues like incest, euthanasia, and adultery with a straightforwardness that shocked people out of complacency and was born a general sense of outrage. Ibsen was always much more than a playwright adhering only to the



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tradition of dry Realism, or flagging off the “well-made play”; he was a poet singing the songs of the free human spirit, in spite of being a director himself and having sound knowledge about the nitty-gritty of production and stage requirements.

*Ghosts* remains symbolic to the core. Mrs. Alving prepares to commemorate her late sinful husband, with whom she was locked in an estranged marriage, by building an orphanage which burns down just prior to its opening. Manders is the pastor to whom she had once fled to escape the marriage gone wrong, but he failed to recognise or address her needs as a human being. Rather, Manders pushed her down the nadir of conjugal life with his insistence that she return to Rosenvold. Now, years after, he repeats his stubborn denial of all practical economic considerations, leaning heavily on blind faith, insisting that an orphanage, a place under the protection of God, needs no insurance. Bound by the chains of blind faith and strong beliefs in empty social and moral conventions, he, like thousands of others, is unable to comprehend the failure of marriage as an institution, nor the fact that children of such marriages are forced to bear the burden of the fathers’ sins.

The return of syphilis in the son cannot, scientifically, be hereditary; but, behavioural patterns can. The son is prone to repeat the sins of the father. The disease becomes the ghost from the past haunting the present lives of the mother and the son. The drama is a fearless confrontation of the past by the playwright. The original title of the play in Norwegian was *Gjengangere* meaning ‘one who returns’. As much as Mrs Alving may have tried to keep the



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son away from his corrupt father, corruption returns to rot the son. The moment Oswald enters the stage smoking the pipe of his father the inevitability of fate is firmly established. Mrs Alving is forced to shed her appearances that she has insisted up on for so long, that had forced her to send away her son, deprive him of mother's love that he craved for as a child, when like his father, Oswald tries to make love to the maid Regine, his half-sister in reality. Bitterness increases and culminates in the final slumping of the now crazy Oswald pleading for the deadly morphine tablets his mother fail to give him. There is no poetic, romantic reunion of mother and son. The final scream of Mrs Alving reverberates along the dark corridors of social subversions until new laws are enacted that will renovate the prison, never demolish. That is the realism of Ibsen; a realism that becomes a critique of bourgeois realism meant to have a cathartic effect. Ibsen offers no relief from the realities of existence, but questions the very purpose of existence.