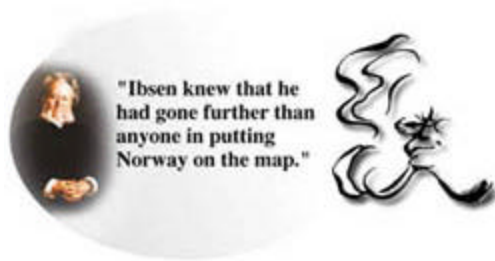


# H E N R I K I B S E N



Ibsen's childhood home Venstøp near Skien

## HENRIK IBSEN (1828-1906)

The dramatist Henrik Ibsen published his last drama, "When We Dead Awaken", in 1899, and he called it a dramatic epilogue. It was also destined to be the epilogue of his life's work, because illness prevented him from writing more. For half of a century he had devoted his life and his energies to the art of drama, and he had won international acclaim as the greatest and most influential dramatist of his time. He knew that he had gone further than anyone in putting Norway on the map.

Henrik Ibsen was also a major poet, and he published a collection of poems in 1871. However, drama was the focus of his real lyrical spirit. For a period of many hard years, he faced bitter opposition. But he finally triumphed over the conservatism and aesthetic prejudices of the contemporary critics and audiences. More than anyone, he gave theatrical art a new vitality by bringing into European bourgeois drama an ethical gravity, a psychological depth, and a social significance which the theatre had lacked since the days of Shakespeare. In this manner, Ibsen strongly contributed to giving European drama a vitality and artistic quality comparable to the ancient Greek tragedies.

It is from this perspective we view his contribution to theatrical history. His realistic contemporary drama was a continuation of the European tradition of tragic plays. In these works he portrays people from the middle class of his day. These are people whose routines are suddenly upset as they are confronted with a deep crisis in their lives. They have been blindly following a way of life leading to the troubles and are themselves responsible for the crisis. Looking back on their lives, they are forced to confront themselves. However, Ibsen created another type of drama as well. In fact, he had been writing for 25 years before he, in 1877, created his first contemporary drama, "Pillars of Society".

## LIFE and WRITING

Ibsen's biography is lacking in grand and momentous episodes. His life as an artist can be seen as a singularly long and hard struggle leading to victory and fame - a hard road from poverty to international success. He spent all of 27 years abroad, in Italy and Germany. He left his land of birth at the age of 36 in 1864. It was not until he was 63 that he moved home again, to Kristiania (now Oslo), where he would die in 1906 at the age of 78.

In Ibsen's last drama, "When We Dead Awaken", he describes the life of an artist that in many ways reflects on his own. The world renowned sculptor, Professor Rubek, has returned to Norway after many years abroad, and in spite of his fame and success, he feels no happiness. In the central work of his life, he has modelled a selfportrait titled "Remorse for a ruined life". During the play he is forced to admit that he has taken the pleasure out his own life as well as spoiling others". Everything has been sacrificed for his art he has forsaken the love of his youth and his earlier idealism as well. It follows that he has actually betrayed his art by relinquishing these essentials. It is none other than his old flame Irene, the model who posed for him in his youth, who goes to him in his moment of destiny and tells him the truth: it is first "When We Dead Awaken", that we see what is irremediable that we have never really lived.

It is the tragic life feeling itself that gives Ibsen's drama its special character, the experience of missing out on life and plodding along in a state of living death. The alternative is pictured as a utopian existence in freedom, truth and love in short a happy life. In Ibsen's world the main character strives toward a goal, but this struggle leads out into the cold, to loneliness. Yet the possibility of opting for another route is always there, one can choose human warmth and contact. The problem for Ibsen's protagonist is that both choices can appear to be good, and the individual does not see the consequences of the decision.

In "When We Dead Awaken" the chill of art is contrasted with life's warmth. In this perspective, art serves as a prison from which the artist neither can, nor wishes to escape. As Rubek says to Irene:

"I am an artist, Irene, and I take no shame to myself for the frailties that perhaps cling to me. For I was born to be an artist, you see. - And, do what I may, I shall never be anything else".

This is not an acceptable excuse for Irene, whom he has betrayed. She sees things from a different angle. She calls him a "poet", one who creates his own fictitious world, neglecting his humanity and that of the people who love him. Ella Rentheim, in "John Gabriel Borkman" (1896) makes the same complaint against the man who sacrificed her on the altar of his career. The tragic element in Ibsen's perspective is that for the type of people that concern him, this seems to be an insoluble conflict. Yet this fact does not exonerate them from the responsibility for their own decisions.

Although "When We Dead Awaken" criticizes the egocentricity of the artist, it would be going too far to view the drama as the writer's bitter selfexamination. Rubek is not a selfportrait. However, some Ibsen researchers have seen him as a spokesman for the author's standpoint on the question of art. At one point, Rubek says that the public only relates to the external realistic "truth" in his human portrayal. What people do not understand is the hidden dimension in these portraits, all the deceitful motives that hide behind the respectable bourgeois façades. In his youth, Rubek had been inspired by an idealistic vision of a higher form of human existence. Experience has turned him into a disillusioned exposé of people, a man who believes he portrays life as it really is. It is the animal governing man that dominates his vision; this is Rubek's version of Zola's "La bête humaine", and he explains the changes in his art in the following way:

"I imagined that which I saw with my eyes around me in the world. I had to include it (...)

and up from the fissures of the soil there now swarm men and women with dimly-suggested animal-faces. Women and men - as I knew them in real life".

Understandably, some students of Ibsen have fallen into the temptation of drawing a parallel between life and art, and see this work as a merciless self-denunciation. Once again, "When We Dead Awaken" is by no means autobiographical. Rubek's relationship with the writer has to be sought on a deeper level - in the conflicts that Ibsen, toward the end of his life, saw as a general and essential human problem.

## IBSEN THE PSYCHOLOGIST

In the work of the aging writer we meet a number of people who are experiencing similar conflicts. John Gabriel Borkman sacrifices his love for a dream of power and honour. Master builder Solness wrecks his family's lives in order to be regarded as an "artist" in his trade. And "Hedda Gabler" resolutely changes the fates of others in order to fulfil her own dream of freedom and independence. These examples of people who pursue their own goals, involuntarily trampling on the lives of others, are all drawn from the playwright's last decade of writing. In Ibsen's psychological analyses, he reveals the negative forces (he calls them "demons" and "trolls" in the minds of these people. His human characterization in these latter dramas is extremely complex, a common factor shared by all his last works, starting with "The Wild Duck" in 1884.

In his last 15 years of writing, Ibsen developed his dialectical supremacy and his distinctive dramatic form - where realism, symbolism, and deep-digging psychological insights interact. It is this phase of his work that has prompted people to call him rightly or wrongly a "Freud of the theatre". In any case, Freud and many other psychologists have made use of Ibsen's human portraits as a basis for character analysis or even to illustrate their own theories. Especially well known is Freud's analysis of Rebekka West in "Rosmersholm" (1886), a portrayal he discussed in 1916 together with other character types "who collapse under the weight of success". Freud sees Rebekka as a tragic victim of the Oedipus complex and an incestuous past. The analysis reveals perhaps more about Freud than about Ibsen. But Freud's influence, and the sway of psychoanalysis in general, have had a considerable effect on the way the Norwegian dramatist has been regarded.

Interest in Ibsen as a psychologist can too readily obscure other, equally important, sides of his art. His account of human life is from an acute social and conceptual perspective. Perhaps this is the essence of his art - that which turns it into existential drama exploring many facets of life. This concerns everything he wrote, even prior to his emergence as an international dramatist around 1880.

## A DESPERATE DRAMA

Ibsen's work as a writer represents a long poetic contemplation of people's need to live differently than they do. Thus there is always a deep undercurrent of desperation in his work. Benedetto Croce called these portrayals of people who live in constant expectation and who are consumed by their pursuit of "something else" in life, "a desperate drama".

"It is precisely this distance between what they can achieve and what they want to achieve that is the cause of the tragic (and in many cases the comic) aspect of these people's lives. Ibsen felt that this contradiction between will and real prospects was at

the root of his art. Looking back on 25 years of writing in 1875, he declared that most of what he had written involved «the contradiction between ability and aspiration, between will and possibility". In this conflict he saw "humanity's and the individual's tragedy and comedy simultaneously". A decade later, he created the tragicomic constellation of the priest Rosmer and his scruffy teacher Ulrik Brendel. These two men, who are reflections of each other, both end up on the brink of an abyss where all they see is life's total emptiness and insignificance.

In Ibsen's 12 modern contemporary plays, from "Pillars of Society" (1877) to "When We Dead Awaken" (1899), we are led time and again into the same milieu. His characters' are distinguished by their staunch, well-established bourgeois lives. Nevertheless, their world is threatened - and threatening. It turns out that the world is in motion; old values and previous conceptions are adrift. The movement shakes up the life of the individual and jeopardises the established social order. Here we see how the process has a psychological as well as a conceptual and social aspect. Yet what starts the whole process is the need for change, something springing forth from the individual's volition.

In this sense, Ibsen is a powerful conceptual writer. This does not mean that his main concern as a dramatist was the didactical use of theatre, or the waging of an abstract ideological debate. (Some of his critics, contemporary and later, have made this accusation - and it is fairly obvious that Ibsen was drawn towards the didactic.) However, the basis of Ibsen's human portrayal is his characters' conceptions of what makes life worth living - their values and their understanding of existence. The concepts they use to describe their position may be unclear; their self-understanding may be intuitive and deficient. A good example of this is Ellida Wangel's description of her ambivalent attraction to the sea in "The Lady from the Sea" (1888). But for a long time, in Ellida's consciousness, a desire has grown for a freer life coupled with a need for other moral and social values than those dominating Dr. Wangel's bourgeois existence. And this discovery within her creates shockwaves on the psychological and the social plane.

## THE HUMAN CONFLICT'S

Ibsen himself has given the best characteristic of his approach to drama. This was as early as 1857 in a theatre review: "It is not the conscious strife between ideas parading before us, nor is this the situation in real life. What we see are human conflicts, and enwrapped in these, deep inside, lay ideas at battle - being defeated, or charged with victory". This undoubtedly touches upon something essential in Ibsen's demands to dramatic art: it should as realistically as possible unify three elements: the psychological, the ideological and the social. At its best, the organic synthesis of these three elements is at the heart of Ibsen's drama. Perhaps he only succeeds completely in a few of his plays, such as "Ghosts", "The Wild Duck", and "Hedda Gabler".

Interestingly, he considered his major work to be "Emperor and Galilean" (1873), contrary to everyone else. This could indicate how much emphasis he put on ideology, not overt, but as a conflict between opposing views toward life. Ibsen believed that he had created a fully "realistic" rendering of the inner conflict in the abandoned Julian. The truth is, however, that Julian is too marked by the dramatist's own thoughts - what he calls his "positive philosophy of life". Ibsen first succeeded as a theatrical writer when he seriously took another approach - the one he described in connection with "Hedda Gabler" (1890):

"My main goal has been to depict people, human moods and human fates, on the basis of certain pre-dominant social conditions and perceptions".

Ibsen took many years, after "Emperor and Galilean", to orient himself in this direction. Five years after that great historical dramatization of ideas came "Pillars of Society", the starting point for Ibsen's reputation as a European theatrical writer.

## INTERNATIONAL BREAKTHROUGH

In 1879, Ibsen sent Nora Helmer out into the world with a demand that a woman too must have the freedom to develop as an adult, independent, and responsible person. The playwright was now over 50, and had finally been recognized outside of the Nordic countries. "Pillars of Society" had admittedly opened the German borders for him, but it was "A Doll's House" and "Ghosts" (1881) which in the 1880s led him into the European avant-garde.

"A Doll's House" has a plot which he repeated in many subsequent works, in the phase when he cultivated "critical realism". We experience the individual in opposition to the majority, society's oppressive authority. Nora puts it this way: "I will have to find out who is right, society or myself".

As noted earlier, when the individual intellectually frees himself from traditional ways of thinking, serious conflicts arise. For a short period around 1880, it appears that Ibsen was relatively optimistic about the individual's chances of succeeding on his own. Although her future is insecure in many ways, Nora seems to have a real chance of finding the freedom and independence she is seeking. Ibsen can be criticised for his somewhat superficial treatment of the problems a divorced woman without means would face in contemporary society. But it was the moral problems that concerned him as a writer, not the practical and economic ones

## A SINGULAR SUCCESS

In spite of Nora's uncertain future prospects, she has served in a number of countries as a symbol for women fighting for liberation and equality. In this connection, she is the most "international" of Ibsen's characters. Yet this is a rather singular success. The middle-class public has enthusiastically applauded a woman who leaves her children and husband, completely breaking off with the most important institution in the bourgeois society - the family!

This points to the basis of Ibsen's international success. He took deep schisms and acute problems that afflicted the bourgeois family and placed them on the stage. On the surface, the middle-class homes gave an impression of success - and appeared to reflect a picture of a healthy and stable society. But Ibsen dramatizes the hidden conflicts in this society by opening the doors to the private, and secret rooms of the bourgeois homes. He shows what can be hiding behind the beautiful facades: moral duplicity, confinement, betrayal, and fraud not to mention a constant insecurity. These were the aspects of the middle-class life one was not supposed to mention in public, as Pastor Manders wished Mrs. Alving to keep secret her reading and everything else that threatened the atmosphere at Rosenvold in "Ghosts." In the same manner, the social leaders in "Rosmersholm" put pressure on Rosmer to keep him from telling that he, the priest, had given up the Christian faith.

But Ibsen did not remain silent, and the spotlights of his plays made contemporary aspects of life highly visible. He disrupted the peace of the lives of the bourgeoisie by reminding them that they had climbed to their position of social power by mastering quite different ideals than tranquillity, order and stability. The bourgeoisie had betrayed its own motto of "freedom, equality, and brotherhood," and especially after the revolutionary year 1848 they had become defenders of the status quo. There was, of course, a liberal opposition within their class, and Ibsen openly joins these ranks in his first modern contemporary drama. He considered this movement for freedom and progress to be the true "European" point of view. As early as 1870, he wrote to the Danish critic Georg Brandes that it was imperative to return to the ideas of the French revolution, freedom, equality, and brotherhood. The words need a new meaning in keeping with the times, he claimed. In 1875 he writes, again to Brandes:

"Why are you, and the rest of us who hold the European view point, so isolated at home?"

Eventually, as Ibsen grew older, he had trouble accepting certain extreme forms of liberalism which overemphasized the individual's sovereign right to self-realization and to some extent radically departed from past norms and values. In "Rosmersholm," he points out the dangers of radicalism built solely on individual moral norms. It is obvious here that Ibsen is concerned with European culture's basis in a Christian inspired moral tradition. One has to build on this, he indicates, even though one has given up the Christian faith. This is certainly the conclusion that Rebekka West reaches.

Simultaneously, this drama, like "Ghosts" is a painful clash with the melancholic, killjoy aspects of the Christian bourgeois tradition which subdues the human spirit. Both these works contain, for all their despair, a warm defence of happiness and the joy of life - pitted against the bourgeois society's emphasis on duty, law, and order.



Ibsen's youth home in Grimstad.

It was in the 1870s that Ibsen oriented himself toward his «European» point of view. Even though he lived abroad, he continually chose a Norwegian setting for his contemporary dramas. As a rule, we find ourselves in a small Norwegian coastal town, the kind Ibsen knew so well from his childhood in Skien and his youth in Grimstad. The background of the young Ibsen certainly gave him a sharp eye for social forces and conflicts arising from differing viewpoints. In small societies, such as the typical Norwegian coastal town, these social and ideological conflicts are more exposed than

they would be in a larger city. Ibsen's first painful experiences came from such a small community. He had seen how conventions, traditions, and norms could exercise a negative control over the individual, create anxiety, and inhibit a natural and joyful lifestyle. This is the atmosphere of the "ghosts" as Mrs. Alving experiences it. According to her, it makes people "afraid of the light."

This was the atmosphere of his youth that formed the basis for his writing and world fame. As an insecure writer and man of the theatre in a stifling Norwegian milieu, he set out to create a new Norwegian drama. He began with this national perspective. At the same time, from his first journey abroad, he oriented himself toward the European tradition of theatre.

## YEARS of LEARNING

In the history of drama, early in the 1850s Ibsen carried on the traditions of two highly dissimilar writers, the Frenchman Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) and the German Friedrich Hebbel (1813-63). For 11 years the young Ibsen was occupied with day to day practical stagework, and it follows that he had to keep himself well informed about the latest contemporary European theatrical art. He worked with rehearsals of new plays and was committed to writing for the theatre.

Scribe could teach him how a drama's plot should be structured in a logically motivated progression of scenes. Hebbel provided him with an example of the way drama could be based on life's contemporary dialectics, creating a modern conceptual drama. Hebbel's pioneering work was his conveyance of the ideological conflicts of his day into the theatre where he created «a drama of issues» pointing forward. He also knew how the Greek tragedy's retrospective technique could be used by a modern dramatist.

In other words, Ibsen was in close contact with the art of the stage for a long uninterrupted period. His six years at the theatre in Bergen (1851-57) and the following four or five years at the theatre in Kristiania from 1857 were not easy. But he acquired a sharp eye for theatrical techniques and possibilities.

During a study tour to Copenhagen and Dresden in 1852, he came across a dramaturgical work newly released in Germany. It was Hermann Hettner's "Das moderne Drama" (1852). This programmatic treatise for a new topical theatre deeply affected Ibsen's development as a dramatist. In Hettner too, we see the strong influence of Scribe and Hebbel, combined with a passionate interest for Shakespeare. Ibsen also gleaned knowledge from other writers, most notably Schiller and the two Danes Adam Oehlenschläger (1779-1850) and John Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860).

Ibsen's apprenticeship was long, lasting about 15 years, and included theatre work he later would claim to be as difficult as "having an abortion every day." There was a strong pressure to produce hanging over him; one that led to fumbling attempts in many directions. He experienced a few minor artistic victories - and numerous defeats. Very few believed that he had the necessary gift to become more than a minor theatrical writer with a modicum of talent.

In spite of this insecurity, it is a determined young writer we see during these years. His goal was clearly national. Together with his friend and colleague Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), he founded "The Norwegian Company" in 1859, an organ for Norwegian

art and culture. They had a joint programme for their activities. Ibsen was especially concerned with the role of theatre in the young Norwegian nation's search for its own identity. In these "nation-building" pursuits, he gathered his material from the country's medieval history and perfected his art as a dramatist. This is prominent in the work that caps Ibsen's period of apprenticeship, "The Pretenders" from 1863. The story takes place in Norway in the 1200s, a period marked by destructive strife. But Ibsen's perspective is Norway of the 1860s when he has the king, Haakon Haakonsson, express his thoughts on national unity:

"Norway was a kingdom, now it will be a nation (...) all shall be as one hereafter, and all shall know in themselves that they are one!"

"The Pretenders" was Ibsen's breakthrough, yet he had to wait a few years before being recognized as one of the country's leading writers. This honour came in 1866 with "Brand". "The Pretenders" constitutes the end of his close relationship with Norwegian theatre. It was also his farewell performance - he now started his long exile. In the years that followed, he turned away from the stage and sought a reading public.

## THE GREAT TOPICAL DRAMAS

Both the great dramas for reading, "Brand" (1866) and "Peer Gynt" (1867), were based on Ibsen's problematic relationship with his country of birth. Political developments in 1864 led him to lose his optimistic belief in his country's future. He even began to doubt whether his countrymen had a historical *raison d'être* as a nation.

What he had earlier treated as a national problem of identity, now became a question of the individual's personal integrity. It was no longer sufficient to dwell on an earlier historical era of greatness and focus on the continuity of the nation's life. Ibsen turned away from history, and confronted what he considered the main contemporary problem - a nation can only rise up culturally by means of the individual's exertion of will. "Brand" is mainly a drama with a message that the individual must follow the path of volition in order to achieve true humanity. In addition, this is the only way to real freedom - for the individual, and it follows, for society as a whole.

In the two rather different twin works "Brand" and "Peer Gynt", the focus is on the problem of personality. Ibsen dramatizes the conflict between an opportunistic acting out of an unnatural role, and a dedication to a demanding lifelong quest. In "Peer Gynt", the dramatist created a scene which artistically illustrates this situation of conflict. The ageing Peer, on his way back to his Norwegian roots is forced to come to terms with himself. As he looks back upon his wasted life, he peels an onion. He lets each layer represent a different role he has played. But he finds no core. He has to face the fact that he has become "no one," that he has no «self».

"So unspeakably poor, then, a soul can go back to nothingness, in the misty grey. You beautiful earth, don't be annoyed that I left no sign when I walked your grass. You beautiful sun, in vain you've shed your glorious light on an empty house. There was no one within to cheer and warm; - The owner, they tell me, was never at home."

Peer is the weak, spineless person - Brand's antithesis. But it is precisely in Ibsen's living portrayal of a personality's "dissolution" in changing roles, that some historians of the theatre see the harbinger of a modernistic perception of the individual. The British



drama researcher Ronald Gaskell puts it this way: "Peer Gynt inaugurates the drama of the modern mind", and he continues: "Indeed, if Surrealism and Expressionism in the theatre can be said to have any single source, the source is undoubtedly Peer Gynt".

Thus does this early Ibsen drama though very "Norwegian" and romantic claim a central position in theatrical history, even though it was not written for the stage. In fact, it is "Peer Gynt" that in modern times has helped Ibsen to retain his position as a vital and relevant writer. Thus it was not only his contemporary plays that have made him one of the most towering figures in the history of the theatre. Although it was mainly these works the well-known Swedish researcher in drama, Martin Lamm, had in mind when he claimed - "Ibsen's drama is the Rome of modern drama: all roads lead to it - and from it".

Even though Ibsen withdrew from his Norwegian starting point in the 1870s and became "a European", he was always deeply marked by the country he left in 1864, and to which he first returned as an ageing celebrity. It was not easy for him to return. The many years abroad, and the long struggle for recognition, had left their indelible stamp. Towards the end of his career, he said that he really was not happy with the fantastic life he had lived. He felt homeless - even in his mother country.

But it is precisely this tension between the Norwegian and the foreign (an element of freer European culture) in Ibsen that characterized him more than anything else as an individual and a writer. His independent position in what he called «the great, free, cultural situation» provided him with the broad perspective of distance, and freedom. Simultaneously, the Norwegian in him created a longing for a more liberated and happier life. This is the longing for the sun in the grave writer's poetic world. He never denied his distinctive Norwegian character. Toward the end of his life, he said to a German friend:

"He who wishes to understand me, must know Norway. The magnificent, but severe, natural environment surrounding people up there in the north, the lonely, secluded life - the farms are miles apart - forces them to be unconcerned with others, to keep to their own. That is why they become introspective and serious, they brood and doubt - and they often lose faith. At home every other person is a philosopher! There, the long, dark, winters come with their thick fogs enveloping the houses - oh, how they long for the sun!"

By professor Bjørn Hemmer

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