

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN

Henrik Ibsen

Overview

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright—he wrote in Danish, the culture language of Norway at the time—who spent most of his adult life living in Germany and Italy. He is widely considered the modern world's finest social dramatist, after Shakespeare; his courageous look at the social world of his time, in the 'new Europe,' woke consciousnesses, and continues to do so, having won him, in his time, the title of the 'Founder of Modernism.' His ground breaking plays—'A Doll's House,' 'Peer Gynt,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'The Master-BUILDER,' 'John Gabriel Borkman'--a dozen in all—exercised an intense influence on European cultural consciousness, and, though dealing in social and familial 'scandals' which might seem dated today, continue to raise global theatrical consciousness. The themes of disgrace and jealous envy are given a fascinatingly original presentation in 'John Gabriel Borkman' (1896), Ibsen's penultimate play.

Story

While Ibsen is best known as a dramatist of sharp social criticism, as in *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, or *Hedda Gabler*, he can create strong and isolated male figures: In *The Master Builder*, we find the drama of a greatness-haunted architect whom few can love; we see Ibsen reach to conceive a secretive but powerful man, who is incapable of evaluating himself realistically. In *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen portrays an idealistically minded social reformer, who falls victim to his inability to compromise with the truth.

John Gabriel Borkman has enjoyed a career as a respectable bank manager, until the time when, harassed by creditors, he defrauds his own bank of money he himself needs. He is apprehended, imprisoned for embezzlement, and at the onset of the play finds himself living essentially alone on the top floor of his family house. He is a dark and brooding presence, chiefly known to us by his restless steps, as he traces his way back and forth across his living quarters, where though free he is essentially a prisoner of his memories—think of the mind of Bernie Madoff, in a North Carolina prison--regrets, and of his ambition (quite plainly an empty dream) to create a brand new life for himself.

While Borkman paces up and down, there is other human activity in the Borkman household. Downstairs are both Gunhild, Borkman's wife, and Gunhild's sister, Ella, who escaped the bank scandal through the simple fact that she had once been Borkman's lover. There is little love lost between these two ladies, and not surprisingly their hostilities come to a head. They come to a head around the Borkmans' son, Erhart, a teen ager with little interest in the issues of generations before his own.

All of the conflictual combatants in the house have their own desires for Erhart—who unfortunately has desires of his own, which revolve around a Bohemian, pleasure-ready lady totally different in orientation from the women occupying the Borkman household. For John Gabriel Borkman, his son represents (alas) the hope for a scion who will join Dad in a vast financial recovery project. Gunhild, Borkman's wife, sees her son as a potential salvation for the disgraced name of the Borkman family. Ella sees Erhart as a companion, especially at a time when she discovers that she is dying of a fatal disease. In the fourth Act, which consists of intense in house dialogue, among the three competitors for Erhart's love and attention, it is finally Erhart who breaks the impasse, by returning from a night with Mrs. Wilton, his lover. The son,

who finds his home atmosphere intolerable, declares that he is a free spirit, and will have no more to do with the atmosphere of his home. He has had it.

The breakdown, of communications and morale in the Borkman entourage, segues into a final Act in which Borkman himself, having talked and fantasized himself out of existence, walks out into the snow to die, leaving behind him the two women who have vainly fought to possess him. The shame and emptiness of Borkman's life have deprived him of all but his dreams, and now, with Erhart's total rejection of him, he has no more to live for.

Themes

Shame. For all Borkman's defiance and determination, to create a new life for himself, he is hopelessly crushed by shame. He no longer has any life in the community, his son has rejected him, and he sees that his dreams are empty.

Jealousy. Borkman's wife and her sister, once his lover, vie for control over Borkman, as though he was a war prize.

Free love. Erhard represents the new Bohemian lifestyle of the day, and wishes to devote himself entirely to the liberated woman, Mrs. Wilton. He wants no more contact with his tortured father, or his possessive mother.

Characters

Borkman. John Gabriel Borkman is a shame-driven victim of his own fatal weakness. He sees no way out of the trap he has made for himself. The best escape he can find is his extravagant dreams of restoration, but he knows he is only fooling himself.

Gunhild. Borkman's wife, Gunhild, has her own dream, which is all she has to hold onto—the dream that her son will restore the family name. She is forced to live with the refusal of the son to have any part of that dream.

Ella. This fatally ill sister in law of Borkman has nothing to live for except the hope of companionship with her former lover, but even that is more than Borkman is able to offer.

MAJOR CHARACTER

John Gabriel Borkman (introvert)

Character John Gabriel Borkman is a former bank manager, who was caught performing fraudulent practices with customers' money from his bank, was sentenced to several years in prison, and has subsequently—for eight years at the time of the play—been in virtual self-imposed house arrest. Borkman is by this time a deeply introverted dreamer, with a delusional faith in his power to mine and generate the wealth of the world. His own childhood, as a miner's son, has left a deep mark on his sense of the mineral richness of the world, and the potential power of human beings to exploit that richness. What was previously a visional slant to Borkman's professional energy has gradually become the material of paranoia, withdrawal, and neurosis.

Parallels Shame and disgrace come in many colors. A man like Borkman, caught in the act, in mid-career, knows that he will ever after be labeled a crook; a lifetime stain. Menelaus, home again with a naughty and gorgeous wife, who sparked a war, is just plain quietly embarrassed—what a fool I was!—and rightly so. Prince Vronsky in *Anna Karenina* (1873) transitions almost overnight from being an all conquering lover in the bed to a state of virtual rejection by his ultimately scandalized military peer group. In *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) Stephen Crane builds a complex shame-structure into the mindset of Henry Fielding, a young recruit to the Union

forces in the Civil War. Secretly guilty of desertion, under enemy fire, Fielding keeps the shame to himself, anxiously, and by the end of his service, which he completes suitably, he has half-convinced himself that he was basically not a coward.

Illustrative moments

Confidante In his upstairs isolation, through the years, Borkman has become friends with Frida, the teen age daughter of a government clerk who is the main adult companion of Borkman. (She performs on the piano for Borkman.) Borkman tells Frida that he has first heard such tones—the tones she is playing--down in the mines. When she asks him to explain, he tells her he was miner's son, and deep in the mines he could hear the metals singing such a tune as Frida's, as they declared their longing to be free from their deep imprisonment, free to 'come up into the light of day and serve mankind.'

Grandeur Borkman and Frida's father often engage in long discussions, in which Foldal tries to draw attention to his sadly unrecognized talents as a poet, while Borkman, with much more bravado, develops the theme of his own potential—still active, he insists—to be a globally powerful captain of industry. He envisions: 'All the mines I should have controlled! New veins innumerable! And the water-falls! And the quarries! And the trade routes and steamship lines all the wide world over!' He concedes that in fact, though, he sits in his room 'like a wounded eagle,' and 'look on while others pass me in the race.'

Explanation Borkman makes an effort to explain to his wife's twin sister, Ella, what drove him to the fraudulent bank move which in turn led to his downfall. He was simply taking a chance, borrowing against a very short term loan with which he could make a stunning quick yielding investment which would lead him to vast power. 'For the love of power is uncontrollable in me...So I struck the bargain...I had to.' We are not sure whether Borkman has come to terms with his megalomania, or is simply learning what to call it. Ibsen maintains great tension around such explanations as Borkman's.

Transition Even as he approaches his death, Borkman fantasizes that the power of nature is essentially under his control, and that it testifies to his greatness. Just before expiring he sits with his former lover, Ella, and watches the snowy winter mountains, surrounded as they are in blasts of icy wind. Borkman expostulates: 'That blast is the breath of life to me. That blast comes to me like a greeting from subject spirits! I seem to touch them, the prisoned millions...' Borkman harks back to his youth in the environment of the mines, and can only think of the earth as the source of precious, liberty-loving minerals, which long to serve mankind—or is it to serve his power lust?

Discussion questions

Does Ibsen admire something about Borkman? Is Borkman a fascinating Lear type? Or is he a deranged loser?

Is Borkman the main character of this play? Or are the sisters or even the young boy they fight over central figures in the play? Is the play unified?

This play is Ibsen's penultimate. Is he growing aged and poetic here? Is Borkman the author's self-portrait?