

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
STOCKMANN

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Dr. Stockmann (in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*) open

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 consciences, 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,' 'Hedda Gabler,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'An Enemy of the People,' 'The Master-BUILDER,' 'Pillars of Society'—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. 'An Enemy of the People' concerns the conflict of the honest and unbending individual with the self-interested group will of society.

Character Dr. Thomas Stockmann is Medical Officer of the Municipal Baths in 'a coast town in southern Norway.' He is a family man in mid life, a staunch defender of the scientific truth, and a boisterously honest man, who will not allow the truth to be hidden. This trait of mind brings him into sharp conflict, as it turns out, with his brother, who is the Mayor of the town where they live, as well as being the Chief Constable directing the town's Baths' project. As the prosperity of the town seems to be about to depend on a flow of medical tourists, eager to take the healing waters which are now being promoted in the local baths, it is essential to generate good propaganda around the value of this cure. Unfortunately for the town, Dr. Thomas Stockmann discovers, in these waters, a dangerous parasite which renders them dangerous to health. He refuses to keep this information from the public! He is destroying prosperity, for truth. That is his character, and that the nucleus and problem of the play.

Parallels The contention that honesty is a value at any price is well known in world culture. The great religions prioritize honesty, as a step toward keeping the soul clean. (One can think of the case of Christian sects like Jehovah's Witnesses, or Quakers, for whom it is of highest importance to tell the truth, and especially to 'speak truth to power.') On the other hand, as with Dr. Stockman's brother, there are many for whom expediency takes priority over truth. One of those was Homer's Odysseus, for whom artful deception, as he learned it from his mentor, Athena, was useful and 'no problem, man.'

Illustrative moments

Jubilant The default position in life, for Dr. Stockmann, is jubilant. He loves his family, his wife and daughter especially, and he loves humanity, for which he has only good wishes; forever saluting the younger generation as our hope and salvation. He constantly presses this optimism on his rather grumpy brother, the town mayor, and is usually rebuffed. 'I think it is such an extraordinary piece of good fortune,' he tells his brother, 'to be in the middle of all this growing, germinating life.' His reference is to his new appointment, from a provincial backwater, to the town where his brother is mayor; but the attitude is authentic Stockmann, happy and full of life.

Generous Dr. Stockmann is by nature in conflict with his brother the mayor, who is a politician concerned with the town's commercial—and his own careerist—success. The doctor feels that the good of the people, rather than the commercial success of the people, is the highest value, and he forever throws this judgment in his brother's face. The doctor says to his wife: 'Peter is so confoundedly afraid of anyone's doing service to the town except himself.' He charges his brother even with doing good for the sake of personal advantage. Note: we are aware that there is an excess in the doctor's ebullient man-of-science joviality, and that it is at best on the path to complexity and conflict.

Truthful A headlong collision is inevitable between the two brothers, for the doctor will not yield, in his determination to declare the medical truth—publically, and in the town newspaper—while his brother insists on hiding the truth so the town will prosper. Doctor Stockmann plows headlong into his brother: 'Just think—water that is poisonous, whether you drink it or bathe in it! And this we offer to the poor sick folk who come to us trustfully, and pay us at an exorbitant rate to be made well again.' When his brother replies, with a complex temporizing compromise, the doctor repeats his accusation even more uncompromisingly.

Angry As the play unfolds, Dr. Stockmann must consider the consequences of his uncompromising honesty. The town elders, led by his brother, are bringing their power against the doctor, to make him shut up or face virtual banishment. (Attacks on his property have already begun.) Ultimately the doctor has had enough, and blows up: 'I ought to have flown out at him long ago!—shown my teeth—bitten! To have him call me an enemy to our community. Me! I shall not take that lying down, upon my soul!' The next step, in the pressure against the doctor, is the discovery that, in virtual community exile, he will barely be able to feed his family.

Discussion Questions

Where are Ibsen's sympathies in this play? Does he simply respect Dr. Stockmann's honesty, or does he think the man is too uncompromising?

What is the role of the doctor's daughter, Petra, in bringing our sympathies to her father's side?

How does Ibsen evaluate the argument—strongly presented in the play—that the little guy will prosper if the town prospers, and that commercial success is thus more important than the truth?
