

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

GREGERS*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Gregers** (in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, 1884) conscientious

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,' '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 Wild Duck,' however, tweaks the Ibsen pattern. In a sense, as the watcher discovers, the play in part argues for the importance of life-lies, illusions that make social happiness possible.

Character The first act finds Gregers Werle at a dinner party held by his father, from whom he is estranged, and whom he has not seen for a long time. At the party, Gregers meets an old classmate, Hjalmar Ekdal; each of the men suspects the other of hostility, but neither is quite right, and that very evening Gregers pays a visit to his 'old buddy.' They swap old tales, get reacquainted, and Gregers reacquaints himself again with Gina, now the wife of Hjalmar, and formerly a servant in the household of Gregers' dad. From the play's beginning, we have seen Gregers putting together the pieces of a puzzle in his mind; what he is gradually to realize is that Gina was the mistress of his father—and a terrible thorn in the side of his mother—and that Dad had married Gina off to Hjalmar, setting the proxy husband up as a photographer. A bad realization for Gregers? You bet. But what is the *character* with which he reacts? He makes Hjalmar aware of the whole story, disturbs (destroys) the tranquility of Hjalmar's family, and puts truth before that kind of ignorance (life-lie) that can often give us happiness.

Parallels Idealists shun or fear the 'life lie,' for they tend to be innocent and to revel in innocence. We see something of these traits already in Odysseus' son Telemachus, who is both naïve and hopeful. Modern literature offers parallels in such complex idealists as Hamlet, who knows and wants the whole truth to be out, but trembles through the process of achieving this: Pip, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, 1881, begins life in the humblest of circumstances but with a positive and hopeful optic onto the challenging new events the narrative forces on him; while Jude the obscure, in Hardy's novel of the same name, 1894, rides the stuff of dreams to make of himself his ideal, a classical scholar, and though setbacks finally become the name of his game, he remains at heart a positive man trusting in the truth.

Illustrative moments

Encounter Gregers is genuinely startled to meet his old classmate, Hjalmar, at the opening dinner party at Gregers' father's home. We are, of course, only at the outset of discovering what Gregers is about to discover—that fate and personal history have trapped the two guys in a complex and finally deadly weave. Gregers has been isolated from his family for the 'sixteen or seventeen years' since he and Hjalmar met, and is innocently pleased to see how good his old friend looks. 'Well how goes it with you? You look well. You have put on flesh, and grown almost stout.' Little does Gregers know at this point—nor do we—what Gregers is about to learn, concerning his own mother, Gina, or Hjalmar's life-sized disappointments.

Bitterness Gregers is bitter toward his father, for his father's mistreatment of Gregers' mother, whom Dad had eventually replaced with a mistress, Gina, the now wife of Hjalmar. (Gregers is just beginning to put these details together in the First Act.) Learning that his Father is

remarrying, Gregers accuses the old man of having invited him (Gregers) back to the house for dinner, in order to create a show of family unity. 'So this is what made it absolutely essential that I should come to town in person. For the sake of Mrs. Sorby (Dad's new bride) we are to get up a pretence of family life in the house...'

Counsel As Gregers realizes the relative impoverishment of Hjalmar—eking out a living as a photographer, dreaming pipe dreams of a great invention he is working on—and the 'life-lie' on which Hjalmar exists, not knowing who his wife really is, and that his child may not be his—as Gregers, the idealist, realizes all this he decides he must truth-tell and advise his friend. 'I don't say that your wing has been broken, but you have strayed into a poisonous marsh, Hjalmar; an insidious disease has taken hold of you.' Not surprisingly, Hjalmar rejects this characterization of his condition, but from now on Gregers will not be deterred from his 'helpful' path.

Confrontation As the play develops—and the expansion of Gregers' mind becomes the basic narrative—the young idealist increasingly blames his father for the woes of the life situations of himself, Hjalmar, Gina, and Hedwig, the eyesight-impaired daughter of Gina and Hjalmar. 'You have crippled my whole life,' he tells his father...it's thanks to you that I am continually haunted and harassed by a guilty conscience...' Gregers' dad urges his son to join him as a business partner, but is rebuffed, as he is when he tells Gregers that his inheritance is awaiting him. The idealist will hear nothing of it.

Discussion questions

Does Ibsen admire Gregers for his 'idealism,' his 'desire for complete transparency in human relations'? Or does Ibsen side with the 'life lie,' as a necessary survival tactic?

Is Gregers the idealist also a great friend to humanity? Does he want to improve Hjalmar's life? Or does he just want to promote honesty and understanding?

Does Gregers take sufficient responsibility for the bad blood between him and his father? Or does Gregers see himself almost entirely as victim of his father's bad actions?