

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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HENRIK IBSEN

(1828-1906)

Works (major dramatic works)

Brand. 1866
Peer Gynt. 1867
Pillars of Society. 1877
A Doll's House. 1879.
Ghosts. 1881
An Enemy of the People. 1882
The Wild Duck. 1884
Rosmersholm. 1886
Hedda Gabler. 1890
The Master Builder. 1892
John Gabriel Borkman. 1896

Biography

Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien, Norway, a port city known for the business of lumber shipping. His family background was affluent, on both parental sides, and had derived its wealth from shipping. Henrik was the eldest of five siblings. When Henrik was eight his father went bankrupt, a profound period of crisis for the family, and a personal milestone of which Henrik makes frequent use in his dramas. Henrik's own bouts of gloominess and ultimately depression seem to have had roots in the profound distress of the family bankruptcy.

At the age of fifteen, Ibsen was obliged to leave his school, thanks for the family's financial difficulties; he took a position in another town, as a pharmacist's assistant. It was at this time that Ibsen became aware of his artistic gifts, both as a writer and as a painter; in his rare times off, he took advantage of every opportunity to create.

In 1850 Ibsen moved to Christiania, today's Oslo, with the intention of acquiring a University education. Unfortunately, though, he was unable to pass all the necessary entrance exams, and he was obliged—now fortunately—to turn full time to his writing. He wrote and published *Catilina*, his first verse drama, with the help of a friend. The play was a flop, but by now Ibsen was determined to persist with a theatrical career. In 1851 he got a job with the National Theater of Bergen. In the next years he wrote a number of plays which failed to attract attention, and yet his career determination was firm, and he persisted in his writing.

In 1858 Ibsen returned to Christiania, to work at a local theater. In that same year he married, then in 1864, facing financial distress in his own family, he moved to Italy, where he would remain, in self-imposed exile from Norway, for the next twenty-seven years. With the play *Brand*, in 1866, he obtained his first public success. In 1867, with *Peer Gynt*, he consolidated his popularity in Italy; in 1868 he moved to Germany, where he would move into a new stage of socially conscious drama. Controversial and successful drama poured forth from this stay in Germany: *The Pillars of Society* (1877) and *A Doll's House* (1879). A return to Rome brought new inspiration, which he turned into *Ghosts* (1881), which dealt with the painfully contemporary topics of heredity, adultery, and syphilis, and an *Enemy of the People* (1882), that was concerned with social responsibility and the consequences of it in the life of a proud and wounded city

planner. In 1890, having once more returned to Germany, Ibsen wrote and produced his very successful *Hedda Gabler* (1890).

In 1891, as a well known but controversial author, Ibsen returned to Norway. The first drama he wrote upon return was *The Master Builder* (1892), a tragic study of lost love and vast architectonic ambition. His final major dramatic success, *John Gabriel Borkman*, followed *The Master Builder*—both plays concerned with the tragic ends of overweening men whose weaknesses finally did them in. In 1900 a series of strokes nearly did Ibsen in, but he was lucky enough to live a few more years. Ibsen passed away on May 23, 1906.

Achievements

Criticism. Ibsen had a sharp eye for the foibles, as well as for the serious weaknesses, of society. He could see the ways gender relations distorted female lives, ambition destroyed men with serious weaknesses, and even the way children, as in *The Wild Duck*, can be destroyed by the illusions and anxieties of adults. Plays like *An Enemy of the People* or *The Pillars of Society* directly attack social hypocrisy, making us think, for instance, of the critical attacks launched by Moliere in *Tartuffe* and *Alceste* more than a century earlier.

Equity. Ibsen achieved what was for his day a stunning insight into the inequality of gender roles in society. His play *A Doll's House* was a forerunner of feminist perspectives which by our time today, though still limited in scope, are struggling to catch up with our inherited prejudices about women's capacities. In *Hedda Gabler* Ibsen anatomizes the passions and ultimately imbalance, of a man-attracting woman married to a stuffy professor.

Daring. Ibsen was willing and able to take on forbidden topics of his time. In *The Pillars of Society* he takes on the dirty machinery of civil government, In *Ghosts* she takes on adultery, syphilis, and mental instability. In *The Wild Duck* he takes on adultery and illegitimacy. He is not a sensationalist, but an even-minded observer, who refuses to keep his eyes closed.

Realism. Of course, Ibsen is a realist simply by the courage with which he addresses forbidden or hidden social topics. He is also a realist in a more down to earth sense. When his plays open they open onto regular middle or upper middle class folks, sitting or standing around in 'ordinary' nice living rooms, or seated in comfortable chairs. Many a gent is smoking his cigar, many a lady bustling anxiously through the house, making sure that 'everything is in order for the guests.'

Themes

Women. From *A Doll's House* on, Ibsen is sensitive to women's social roles and abilities, and is eager to give them the respect they deserve. Hedda Gabler is a sensitive flirt, trapped in a dull marriage, whom pressures ultimately force to destroy herself. Lovers, dotting mothers, housewives surprised by their husbands' misbehaviors, Ibsen creates his females straight out of reality, and we feel with them and for them.

Ambition. The excessively ambitious man—in *The Master Builder*, *Enemy of the People*, *The Pillars of Society*—comes off badly in Ibsen. He falls from the heights of the great building he has constructed, he falls victim to public opinion, when he tries to insist on social and political transparency, or he tries in vain to cover the tracks of a dubious personal past, which brings him down in the end.

Dark fates. Hedda Gabler returns from a long honeymoon to find herself surrounded with old lovers and implicating memories. She has to kill herself, to break loose from this web. Helen Alving, in *Ghosts*, struggles in vain to suppress the memory of her faithless husband. Halvard, the master builder in the play of that name, is driven off his life-course, by the reappearance of a forgotten flame.

Social madness. Apart from webs of fate, which can ensnare social actors, 'dark fates,' there are Ibsen characters who verge on social madness, psychiatric conditions. John Gabriel Borkman, pacing his

upstairs floor for years, trying to deal with the fall-out from disgrace; Hedda Gabler, thinking to herself about the impossible marriage into which she has trapped herself; Nora, in *A Doll's House*, constantly more aware of the intolerable patronizing she receives from her husband—and for a long time unable to act the situation away.

Characters

Among Ibsen's strongest characters are men of power and influence, who have been caught up in the fabrics of ambition, politics, truth seeking in the higher altitudes of artistic engagement or social commitment, and who have—for Ibsen is a tragedian as fully as Sophocles or Shakespeare—fallen hard to earth. Ibsen himself, we gather, was a rational and sober man whose stability was the rock from which he could look out on the ravages of fate awaiting moderns who were not careful of their destiny.

Among those reckless ones, who threw themselves headlong into the maul of society, were **Stockman**, the uncompromising defender of the truth and of people in his society who deserved to know the truth—in this case as it pertained to the local water supply, which was destined for large scale investment, in the form of municipal mineral baths. The ambitious architect, **Halvard**, dreamed of constructing huge and moving spires in the sky, yet when he had constructed such a monument, in the town where he lived, life-burdens like the omnipresence of his former lover, literally toppled him to his death. **Karsten**, a local businessman with ambitious plans for infrastructure recreation of his community, was nonetheless burdened with former misdeeds which he could not dismiss from his personal history, and which ultimately took a fatal toll on his mind and life. **John Gabriel Borkman**, a former bank president, who has let himself get trapped by urgent need for cash—for romantic reasons—ends up in prison, and then, after release, gradually suffers personal disintegration, as he walks back forth on a lonely floor of his house, and dreams big for a future which will never take place.

Ibsen shows equal mastery in dealing with women who have broken the bonds of expected behavior, made their points, and taken the consequences. **Hedda Gabler** finally gives up on her marriage to a boring professor, lives back into the world of her former lovers, and, as the conflictual plot toughens, shoots herself in the head. **Nora**, in *A Doll's House*, puts up as long as she can, with a patronizing businessman husband, who recognizes nothing of her needs, and in the end, with a loud slam, she shuts the door in his face and walks out into a new life.

As for **Oswald** and **Gregers**, these two young men, driven by demons from the past, reflect Ibsen's deepening sense that the past eventually swallows its survivors. Oswald is a sensitive painter, too fine for the bourgeois milieu he comes from, and happiest in Paris, but eventually gives in to the haunting destruction of syphilis, a dreadful family inheritance. Gregers is destroyed similarly, by discovering the truth of his own and his father's past, and by insisting on ramming that unwelcome truth down the throat of a friend for whom the information is fatal.